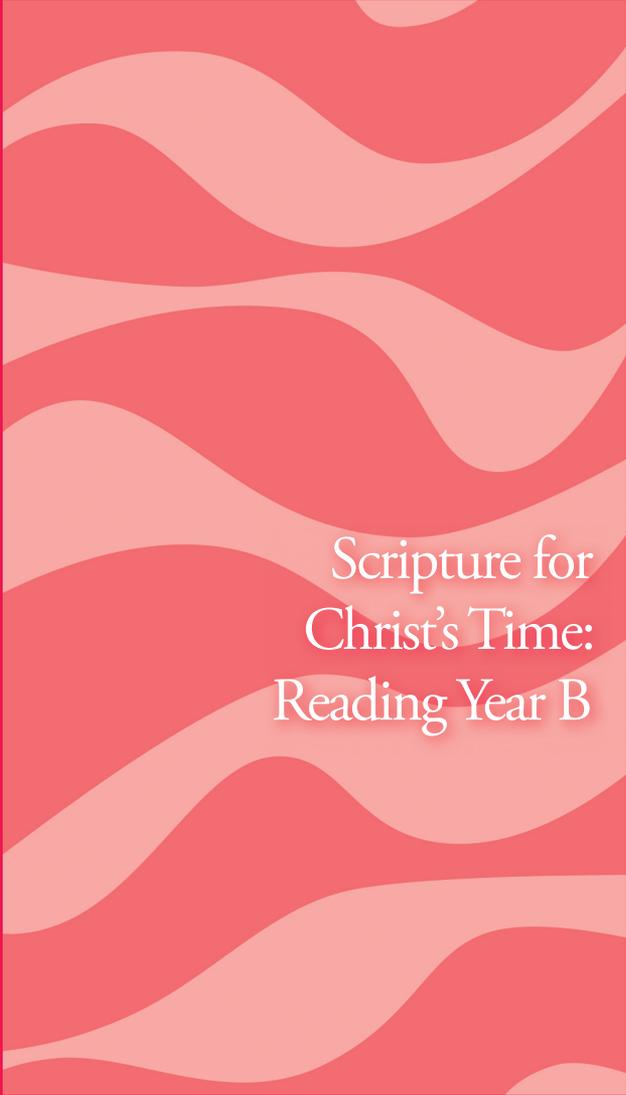


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Scripture for
Christ's Time:
Reading Year B

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in Theology and Mission

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Contents

- Scripture for Christ's Time: Reading Year B** 370
S.D. Giere
- Rethinking the Gospel of Mark:
Resurrection Narrative as Epic** 373
Peter T. Heide
- Apocalyptic Hues in the Eschatological Rainbow
Arcing Over the Final Lessons of the Church Year** 381
Gwen Sayler
- The Christology of Israel's Psalter** 390
Don Collett
- Speaking God's Language:
The "Word of Life" in 1 John 1:1–2:2** 396
Craig F. Simenson
- Reading James in Oslo:
Reflections on Text, Mission, and Preaching** 404
Sunniva Gylver
- Multivalent Readings of Multivalent Texts:
1 Samuel 10:27 and the Problem of Textual Variants
in the Interpretation of Scripture** 412
Aaron Decker
- Book Reviews** 418
-

Preaching Helps

- Changing Seasons** 427
Kathleen D. Billman
- Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Fourth Sunday in Lent** 429
Craig L. Nesson, Kim L. Beckmann,
James F. Galuhn, S. D. Giere

Scripture for Christ's Time: Reading Year B

By God's grace we find ourselves on the cusp of yet another new year — a new liturgical year, that is.

The Christian life is lived within Christ's time. Centered by the weekly Lord's Day, resurrection gathering, wherein we are met by the crucified and risen Christ, the whole of the year exists within the horizon of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. From Advent through Christ the King Sunday, the liturgical calendar makes the claim upon the individual and the cosmos that the crucified and risen Christ reigns over all time and space. All time is lived in Jesus Christ—his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

It is also true that Christians around the globe and across the different expressions of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church live in more than one calendar, not least of which are our civic and natural calendars. We move within the framework of our national holidays that massage our civic memories in terms of independence, the service and sacrifice of veterans, the contribution of workers. We also live within the dance of the celestial bodies, with sun, moon, and earth shaping tides and seasons and the length of days and nights. Living within multiple calendars is not to be lamented. It simply is. While these many calendars can and, in some times and places, do converge with one another, there are other times and places when they diverge and are in conflict.

The invaluable witness of the liturgical calendar is that Christ's time encompasses and in some sense orders all other measures of time.

Christian Scripture serves as both guide and companion as we move together in and through Christ's time. Scripture shapes and languages and forms our prayer, our reading, our hearing, our study, our preaching.

This issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, like most of the December issues in recent years, focuses on the texts that shape the new liturgical year. With Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary in view, the following essays accompany the church, its teachers and preachers, through Year B providing questions, ponderings, proddings, and insights for the journey.

While the moniker often ascribed to Year B is the "Year of Mark," the gospel lessons wander throughout both Mark and John, with the latter playing quite a significant role on feast days and other places where there are lacunae in Mark's telling of the Jesus story.

In a refreshing look at Mark's gospel, the **Rev. Peter Heide** invites readers and preachers to re-envision Mark's spartan beginning and fear-wrought ending in light of insights from genre analysis, in particular reading Mark as epic. Heide, also a poet, provides an Advent hymn text, "**Stir Up,**" which you are invited and commended to include in your parish's Advent worship.

In the interest of encouraging homiletical engagement with Scripture outside the four evangelists, the bulk of this issue focuses on non-gospel texts that play significant roles at points during Year B.

Professor Gwen Sayler invites her readers to embrace the "apocalyptic hues in the eschatological rainbow" that forms over the final Sundays of the church year. These often misunderstood and at times misused texts are rooted in the historical contexts out of which they came. Sayler's definition of apocalyptic grounds the interpretation of these complicated and rich texts in ways that are historically conscious.

The psalms, the one consistent weekly feature of the church's Scriptural line-up, are undervalued for the church's proclamation. **Dr. Donald Collett** invites the Christian interpreter, and in particular the Christian preacher, to consider the Christology of Israel's psalter. Collett recognizes that the church's proclamation of Old Testament texts has "fallen on hard times" in large part because the church's and its preachers' unease with the relationship between the Old Testament and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. In response to these hard times, he invites readers to reconsider this relationship of Christ and the psalms.

While the Gospel of John serves to complement the Gospel of Mark in Year B, it is a happy synergy that the First Epistle of John is read throughout the Easter Season. Not unlike the psalter, 1 John is underplayed and under preached in many pulpits. **Craig Simenson** explores the communal nature of the community that produced the Johannine corpus, and encourages wrestling with the call to confession that is at the heart of 1 John.

It is a happy coincidence that the Epistle of James plays a significant role in the readings during Year B, specifically in late August and September 2015. While James is not the only portion of Scripture condescendingly ignored by Lutherans, it is no accident that many a Lutheran seminarian and pastor will know that Luther called James the "strawy epistle." Consider, then, exploring James in earnest this year. The **Rev. Sunniva Gylver** is a companion for this adventure. Among other things, a pastor in the Church of Norway and a personality on Norwegian national television, Gylver explores James in relation to her pastoral ministry in a multi-religious, multiethnic inner-city area of Oslo.

The final essay in the issue is the **Rev. Aaron Decker's** examination of the textual difficulties of 1 Samuel 10:27 within the broader hermeneutical horizon of thinking about multiple readings and multivalence. In one of the cases where

a textual variant does play a supporting role in the text (by way of a footnote in the New Revised Standard Version), 1 Samuel 10:27 presents an interesting test case. Decker points out that the variant readings of this text lead to quite different narrative and theological conclusions.

I am grateful for the contributions that these authors here offer.

May they be a blessing to you and to the church as they accompany you in your reading, studying, praying, listening, and preaching throughout Christ's time.

S.D. Giere

Issue Editor

Rethinking the Gospel of Mark: Resurrection Narrative as Epic

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It is more than twenty years since I took the class “Resurrection Narratives” with Dr. Gwen Saylor¹ in which we discussed the Gospel record and whether the bodily resurrection was necessary for Christianity to have meaning. After vigorous debate, we concluded that the necessity of the bodily resurrection was, and continues to be, a matter of faith.

The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John not only reported the resurrection, they included reports of the risen Christ interacting with the disciples for a period of time afterwards. Although the Gospel of Mark reports Jesus’ resurrection, the end is so unsatisfactory that more than one inexpert addition has been attempted. As we discussed Mark’s narrative of the empty tomb, I had an epiphany moment when I put the end of Mark and the end of the movie “The NeverEnding Story”² together.

In “TNES,” Bastian reads a story about Atreyu, the young hero, who must travel to the Empress’s palace in Fantasia to find whatever has caused her to fall ill. If he fails, Fantasia will end and the world will be without imagination. Atreyu arrives at the palace as Fantasia is collapsing, and the Princess calls upon Bastian, who has

come with Atreyu, to give the Empress a new name. There are a few terrifying moments when Bastian cannot do so. When he succeeds in naming the Empress, the history of Fantasia is rewritten.

As Bastian must name the Empress in “TNES,” so we are called upon in Mark to name our Lord in every generation in order to maintain the health of Christ’s ministry and dominion. Claiming Christ’s name, we enter into the Markan narrative, not only as readers and observers, but as participants with Christ in his resurrection ministries, that is, reaching out in Christ’s name to the socially dead of our time and raising them into the new life in Christ that we share.

We are more easily able to understand this ministry of resurrection when we are able to catalog who the social dead of Jesus’ time were. In knowing the dead, we can witness those who are raised. In Jesus’ time the dead included the blind, the deaf, the lame, the maimed, the diseased, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor. Today this list remains much the same.

This catalog is important in Mark’s narrative because these are the people who are recorded as being saved/healed (σώζω-ed). It is the leper and the lame, the possessed and the powerless, the grieving and the dying, the chronically ill and the outsider, the deaf and the blind, who are saved/healed, made whole in Christ. And although Jesus commands many to tell no one, their very change in status from

1. Professor of Bible, Wartburg Theological Seminary. Cf. Prof. Saylor’s article in *Currents*, 381.

2. “The NeverEnding Story” (Wolfgang Petersen, 1984). Referenced hereafter as “TNES.”

outside to inside the household of God is apparent just by their existence.

In the world of resurrection re-creation, the disabled community (women and men) is gathered into Christ's body as living members. Conversely, the temporarily able-bodied, including Jesus' disciples and all who live in privilege, seem to be the ones who have the greatest difficulty believing.

The crisis of salvation within the Markan narrative is so great that, at the end of the crucifixion/resurrection narrative, we hear no naming, we see no confidence, we feel no assurance. Why not? What was Mark thinking? The answer is to start Mark again. The Easter proclamation is Mark 1:1 "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This must be the Easter proclamation. It is necessarily predicated on the empty tomb. Indeed, this statement cannot be other than the Easter proclamation, or it would not claim Jesus Christ "the Son of God" but only the person, Jesus the man.

If Mark 1:1 is the Easter proclamation, then we need to rethink the structure of Mark. It is not a linear narrative that moves from beginning to end. The Markan narrative is circular, like all epic literature, a form at least as old as Homer's *Iliad*. Mark begins *in medias res*, in the middle of the story. The culmination of events is then followed by the precipitating crisis. In other words, the beginning is the "middle" of the story, the middle is the "end," and the end is the "beginning."³

This circular narrative understanding of Mark means Mark is not a passion narrative with an extended preface. Instead, Mark is an extended resurrection story with

a realistic understanding of ministry tied to the passion narrative. Mark calls us all to rethink and rewrite the narratives of life with the truly human and the truly divine Jesus before us going to Galilee and going with us in our walks together in ministry.

Like other epic literature, Mark begins in the "middle" with the resurrection proclamation (1:1) and moves through the feeding of the 4000 (8:21). The stories of healing the blind (8:22-26 and 10:46-52) bookmark the "end" of the narrative. The concluding statement is "Immediately, he regained his sight and followed [Christ] on the way."⁴ Thus the end of Mark is a statement of "faith and following" rather than the perplexing "fear and silence." Within the framework of epic, the "beginning" of the narrative then is the road to Jerusalem and the cross told in Mark 11:1-16:8.

As others have noted, the tearing of the temple curtain⁵ cannot be the only tearing for there is not one but two curtains, פרכת and גִּשְׁטָן.⁶ In the structure of "middle/end/beginning," the first curtain is torn at the time of Christ's death, the second curtain at Jesus' baptism.⁷ These tearings, through which the holy of holies is revealed and the boundary between the earthly kingdom and God's kingdom is ruptured, lead us to the transfiguration.⁸

Although it may be counterintuitive, these tearings support an epic narrative style that begins in chapter 11 with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. This means it is not the last tearing that reveals an empty

4. Mark 10:52.

5. Mark 15:38.

6. Friedman, R. E. (1992). Tabernacle. In (D. N. Freedman, ed.) *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. (New York: Doubleday), 6.292-300.

7. Mark 1:10.

8. Mark 9:3.

3. The editors of Encyclopædia Britannica (2014). *in medias res*. In Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 1 August 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/284369/in-medias-res>.

tomb with only a few who flee with fear and trembling, telling no one. Read as epic, the account moves from fear and trembling at the tearing in Mark 15:38 to the confidence of Mark 1:1 and the more positive baptismal tearing. Following this epic trajectory the movement is from the baptismal tearing to the building of a new community, raised from social death to life in the new community of Christ.

Mark is written between the earlier writings of Paul who declares his active calling by a post-resurrection, spiritually encountered Jesus (which will be described in Acts 9) and Matthew and Luke, whose birth narratives were written in answer to the need of the church for a historical, human Jesus. Mark presents an incarnate, resurrected Christ who leads the ministry of those who will follow. This resurrected Jesus continues to walk among us, calling us to discipleship and leading us into ministry. Together we are about building up the body of Christ.

As the Hebrew people were led out of slavery into the wilderness to become a new people living in a covenantal relationship with God, so we enter into the wilderness time with Jesus to learn a new covenantal relationship with Christ. This new covenantal relationship is based on the Eucharistic meal the disciples received (14:22–25) and leads to the feedings of the many (6:34–44 and 8:1–8).

The shift in these feeding stories where Jesus presides leads us from the new covenantal meal into meals of ministry. Christ's ability to create the great sign event, whether found in his resurrected power to do so or through the generosity of those gathered, proclaims continually that God is concerned for the hungry and works in ways that the hungry might be fed.

How is this understanding expressed in the Mark readings for the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany?

First Sunday of Advent— Mark 13:24–37

The Advent readings begin with Mark's little apocalypse. Pointing to the "middle" of Mark, this passage becomes a key for understanding Mark's gospel as a whole: the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars points to the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection world of gathering the elect. The example of the fig tree is no longer a sign of Day of Judgment closure, but a sign of anticipated harvest. The parable of the man going on a journey points more to the tomb and resurrection world than the *parousia*. And the admonition to "keep awake" calls us to watch for the continued presence and works of Christ as he leads us into resurrection living.

This text demands active engagement with Christ in raising up the social dead into active, integrated participation. Separate but equal treatment is not the object. Homeless shelters and food pantries are worthwhile ministries, but here we are challenged to go further. We are called to care for the household of God in ways that raise those whom we serve into partnership, into ways of living which proclaim that not only do those in need need us, but we need those who are needy.

In creedal speech, we do not say "He will come to judge the living and the dead," as-much-as "he comes to judge the living and the dead." That is, those of us who are privileged to be the living are judged *now* alongside of and with those who do not share our privilege and are therefore outside life. Yet if we are able to be the slaves of God's household, we will find ways of hospitality for those who would enter. As doorkeepers, we will find ways to open those doors with welcome to those who are outside. It is not our responsibility to polish and maintain what we have. Rather, we prepare a community of believers who wait to celebrate the life we have together

in Christ, to be raised up from the waters of baptism into new ways of living and eat together at the table of Christ's presence and forgiveness. And then, "His kingdom will have no end."

Second Sunday of Advent—Mark 1:1–8

Like none of the other Gospels, Mark, by starting in the middle, meets us where we are. We are not the beginning of the faith story, nor are we the end of the story. We stand firmly in the middle. We enter into the Gospel narrative whenever we are able to proclaim the words of new resurrection living. As we enter into the "middle" of Mark's story, the resurrection narrative bids us to enter into God's new creation, justified in Christ.

"The beginning of..." (ἀρχὴ τοῦ—Mark 1:1) echoes the ancient "In the beginning..." (בראשית—Gen 1:1). Both are the words of creation, but, unlike the genitive clause of Genesis that has no real answer to what is beginning, Mark insists on us knowing. The new creation begins with "the good news of Jesus Christ," and a later emphasis, "the Son of God."

As Genesis describes the created universe, Mark invites us into the resurrection re-creation. Having witnessed humanity's willingness to kill God, Christ comes to re-establish God's relationship with creation. From the darkness of the tomb, the light of Christ shines anew and reshapes our consciousness of God's continued activity of grace and forgiveness. We are confronted with the need to confess our sin, to turn our lives around, and to reorient our lives to the vision of Christ's new ways of resurrection living.

In order to do this, we must separate ourselves from the old world. John comes calling us to repentance of the old world and points us to the one who will drown us, cleanse us, renew us in the Holy Spirit raising us up into the new creation. Like

Moses, John cries out against the powers of the world to let God's people go, to release them from the tyranny of sin in order to live for God alone.

The reference to Jesus' sandals reminds us not only of rules of hospitality, but also of God's command at the burning bush to Moses to remove his sandals because he, Moses, is standing on holy ground. Certainly, God has the right to command humanity, but it would be inappropriate for humanity to remove God's sandals. Here we find that John is unworthy of commanding Christ to remove his sandals. He is unworthy of even untying the thong of those sandals.

In the resurrection world, holy ground is no longer site-specific. Wherever God's liberating word is preached, wherever Christ stands, wherever Christ's presence is recognized, *there* is the locus of the holy. So now, on the shores of the Jordan, from the whole Judean countryside and from all of Jerusalem, the people gather for the exodus from the old and move into the new.

The Baptism of our Lord—Mark 1:4-11

We back up a little to pick up where we last left Mark, with the preaching of John and the baptism of Jesus. In his baptism, we recognize Christ's humanity and witness the conferring of the Holy Spirit. In this event, the curtain between heaven and earth is torn apart.

All pictures I have seen depicting this event show a pretty, blue sky and a beautiful dove either in flight descending or sitting on Jesus' shoulder. Curious, I have interviewed a number of totally blind people concerning this text (although it was not a scientific study). When those who have been totally blind from birth think about this day, they commonly describe it as a day when there was a terrible, cataclysmic, incredible, amazing, awesome storm. One said, "It must have

been something. I wish I had been there with a recorder.”

Seeing and hearing “the heavens torn apart,” the veil between God’s kingdom and earth, at least deserves some consideration on this day. As the voice of God brings creation into being in Genesis, so now God’s breath/Spirit (רוח) speaks and identifies Jesus as God’s Son. Although this passage does not have the flare of the Pentecost event of Acts 2, certainly this is a Pentecost moment in Mark.

Including v. 12 in the pericope moves the conversation from the event to the locus of community formation. As Moses and the Hebrew people escape Egypt and are formed in the wilderness with its many temptations to turn back and turn away from God, so Jesus is driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he, and we, will be tempted. Out of this wilderness time, we too will become a new community in a new covenantal relationship with God. We will revisit his new formation time as we move into Lent.

Second Sunday in Epiphany—Mark 1:14-20

Leaving the wilderness, Jesus enters into Galilee where he had promised to meet his disciples (16:7), and begins the gathering of the new resurrection community. The proclamation here is resurrection-world vocabulary. Jesus comes “proclaiming the good news of God...Repent and believe in the good news.” The good news is, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” The heavens are torn apart and God’s kingdom has interfaced with creation as one amazing app, and it is free! He has come to lead his disciples into new ways of living. The witness is there before us. He is the Word of God incarnate, walking among his people.

Indeed, we have witnessed the words of new creation in Jesus Christ and the conference of the Holy Spirit. Now the

truly human and the truly divine Christ begins the gathering.

As in John 21, the disciples do not immediately know him, but hearing his voice calling them to greater work, they leave what they are doing and follow without question. In Mark, this is the first calling of the disciples, but we, as reader/hearers, see not only the human Jesus recruiting his disciples, we also witness the divine Jesus commissioning us to fish for people. It reminds us that we are not called only once. Jesus continues to arrive in our lives calling us again and again in the midst of our mundane work to fellowship and following. If we fish, we will fish for people. If we are farmers, we will plant kingdom seeds. Whatever we do is needed for the gathering of God’s people.

Indeed the kingdom of God has drawn near. We have witnessed the tearing of the veil that separates us from God’s kingdom and heard the words of our risen Lord calling us into ministry. We too are called to follow in these new ways of disciple living.

Third Sunday in Epiphany—Mark 1:21-28

Jesus now travels with his disciples to Capernaum continuing the gathering. In the synagogue, he teaches with the authority of the one who has overcome the grave, approved by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit. He does not teach as a student of another rabbi but as a teacher with God’s Trinity testimony.

What the people see before them is the person of Jesus, but what the unclean spirit sees is the cosmic Christ. In the cosmic battle between God’s good and evil, the unclean spirit claims the knowledge of the transcendent Christ. The unclean spirit, using the *royal we*, asks, “Have you come to destroy us?”

Although the unclean spirit using royal language may refer to a Roman sympathizer, it is enough to consider how the powers of the world tempt us away from following Christ. Jesus commands the unclean spirit to be silent and come out, and immediately it leaves, although not without agony, convulsions, and loud protests.

Similarly, whenever we try new ways of teaching and worshipping, we continue to witness and hear the complaints of change. The convulsions can be strong enough to split our worshipping communities, and voices of discontent can be heard. With the people of Capernaum, we wonder, “What is this new teaching? By what authority is this new teaching given? Who is this that continues to cast out unclean spirits among us?”

Through our continued faithful following, Jesus’ fame continues to spread.

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany—Mark 1:29–39

Simon’s mother-in-law is in bed with a fever serious enough for Jesus to lift (raise) her up. In this raised-up life she enters into serving.

Whether the news of her healing spreads throughout the town or the expulsion of the unclean spirit earlier is the cause, the town gathers around the door of the house in the evening. Here we see that the doorkeeper has flung the doors open to those who would be in relationship with Christ.

In creation terms, this is the time of creation. Out of darkness, light is given. In the darkness of our lives, God continues to speak. In the times of despair, Christ’s victory over the grave continues to give us hope. Now Jesus heals the sick and casts out demons.

Again, we witness that the people encounter the truly human Jesus while

the demons enter into contention with the cosmic resurrected Christ. Again, the demons are silenced. The one who has conquered death has authority over evil.

Jesus’ gathering ministry includes women, the sick, and those who are possessed by those things that draw us away from Christ. We may not be able to find wholeness and health within ourselves, but in Christ’s presence and the relationship we have with one another in Christ, wholeness and healing are possible.

In the morning, Jesus goes out to pray in a deserted creation-place, not unlike the formless void (תהו ובהו) of Gen 1:2. We read that Simon and the others follow him into this place from which creation comes. When his disciples find him, they report, “Everyone is seeking you.” The seeking they report tends to refer to those with whom Jesus has just been. In this deserted creation-place, however, Jesus hears it as creation’s longing. He enthusiastically calls his disciples to go to new places of gathering, to enter into relationship with those who will live in new ways of wholeness. Jesus continues to meet, teach, and lead throughout the place where he promised to encounter his disciples—Galilee.

It is tempting to make Galilee geographically specific, but for us, Galilee is the place of ministry and manifests its reality whenever we recognize Christ in our midst.

Transfiguration Sunday—Mark 9:2–9

Thus far in Mark, Jesus has gathered the people: the sick, the possessed, the leper, the lame, the old and the young, women and men; he has fed the hungry (the 5000 and the 4000) and healed both Jews and gentiles. Jesus has taught and people have listened so that the deaf can hear and proclaim the good news. Now we begin seeing the way of faith.

This new resurrection way of living will be in conflict with the powers of the

world. The blind see that this new way of living is seeing “people like trees [crosses]⁹ walking.”¹⁰ Even Peter has a momentary glimpse of the importance of what this resurrected Jesus means. Thus Peter declares, “You are the Christ/Messiah.”¹¹ This revelation should prepare the disciples for the transfiguration, but Peter loses the vision within the next three verses and within the week, the disciples will only be able to see the one who stands before them.

For the disciples, the glimpse of life in the resurrected world leaves them desiring life without suffering. There is the hope of victory without consequences. As the resurrection narrative begins to look to its “end” and “beginning,” Jesus reminds his disciples of the price paid for this resurrection world and calls us to take up our crosses and follow.

Although Jesus takes up his cross on a Friday, the cross of Christian faith is a first day, resurrection commitment. Our cross is not Christ’s cross of crucifixion. The cross we bear gives witness to the one we follow. We receive our crosses in Baptism and bear them with hope for the present and future of God’s resurrection kingdom.

The Transfiguration occurs “and six days after...” (καὶ μετὰ ἡμέρας ἕξ—Mark 9:2a); i.e., it is into the seventh day of something. Mark does not tell us what day it is after. From the words of Mark 9:1 it appears to be six days after a first day, the

day God’s kingdom comes with the power to overcome death and the grave because the promise that “some...will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” is a first day, Sunday, statement. It follows that promises based on this power claim that day for its happening. Six days later would then place us in the seventh day, Sabbath.

In creation language this puts us in the time of sabbath completion of the new creation. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain “apart, by themselves” where Jesus is transfigured. Since we have witnessed the tearing of the heavens in chapter 1, we should not be surprised to see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus, nor should we be surprised that the disciples should be invited into this sabbath time.

What surprises us is that Peter and the others still either cannot or do not appreciate the revelation of the risen Christ. They continue to see the human Jesus before them. They are not ready to proclaim the good news yet. Peter, wishing to commemorate the moment, wants to build dwellings as if adding shrines for worship and veneration has anything to do with the resurrection way.

At this nexus moment of God’s kingdom and God’s creation when one would expect worship and praise, we witness fear and paralysis. Overshadowed by God’s presence, the disciples hear the words that will send them to the end of their internship: “This is my son; the beloved. Listen to him.” When all is said and done, instead of being transformed, they see only Jesus. The disciples still do not fully understand who Jesus is beyond their favored status of discipleship. So they are charged to tell no one of this time until they witness the resurrection of the son of man from the dead.

Considering also v. 10, the disciples’ questions echo Mark 16:8, and challenge

9. The metaphor of tree being associated with cross is mentioned in Gal 3:13: “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” Also as one who has lost his sight and regained it several times, I can say that seeing people praying in the *orans* position looks like the trunk of trees with branches outstretched. In a worship setting, if the congregation uses the *orans* position, arms will overlap creating X crosses.

10. Mark 8:24.

11. Mark 8:29.

us to ponder within ourselves, “What does this rising from the dead mean? Will we remain terrified and silent, or are we able to proclaim God’s good news for God’s people?”

In this time of resurrection ministry, is the rising from the dead a transfer in membership from the world to God’s kingdom in heaven? Or, is God’s kingdom creation inclusive? In resurrection living, do we work as harvesters gathering in those whom we meet? Do we actively seek the social dead around us and find ways to raise them up into Christ’s resurrection living?

Of course, Jesus’ leading takes us back down the mountain into greater works of gathering.

Conclusion

In reading Mark as epic, the Messianic secret is Christ’s extended life among us after

the resurrection in a world that is not yet ready to know him. Those who experience and hear his teaching see God’s kingdom in the world that surrounds them.

This post-resurrection understanding acts as a bridge between Paul’s knowledge of Christ received on the Damascus road and the later need for an historical personage. Mark’s gospel also presents a unified Trinity relationship at Jesus’ baptism which sets the stage for the truly human and truly divine Christ. As such, Mark is not so much an account of the historical Jesus as it is an account of Christ’s continued presence among us, leading us to the cross and the mystery of the empty tomb, challenging us to name Christ in every generation.

Stir Up to CAROL or FOREST GREEN by Peter Heide, 2011

Stir up your power, O Christ, and come.
 Arise and show your face
 In ways the humble blind can see,
 The deaf can hear your grace.
 Wake us, O God. With mercy speak
 The dangers of our sins.
 Then blameless hold and teach the meek
 Your new ways to begin.

Stir up our hearts, Lord God, that we
 Make straight, prepare his way.
 And for his coming, strengthen us
 To serve Christ in this day.
 With pure, true lives washed in his blood,
 In holiness, we wait
 His righteousness that paves our road
 And saves us from our fate.

Stir up our wills, Lord God, we pray.
 Your people long to hear
 The words of prophets, old, fulfilled,
 Love’s testament of cheer.
 You lift the lowly and the poor;
 A table you prepare,
 Providing food, forgiveness, hope,
 Abundance, light, and care.

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come.
 With healing, grace, and might,
 Free us from sin; your mercy give
 And, in death’s darkness, light.
 For we, your vessels, bear your love,
 Redeeming Word proclaim,
 to people all around the world,
 Your precious holy name.

Apocalyptic Hues in the Eschatological Rainbow Arcing Over the Final Lessons of the Church Year

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Introduction: the popular appeal of apocalyptic imagery

The kaleidoscope of apocalyptic images swirling through the lectionary texts for the final weeks of the church year have seemingly never-ending power to inspire great hope and engender equally great fear. The mysteriousness of the coded language of the apocalyptic literature in which they are embedded fascinates and offers fertile ground for great varieties of interpretations, many of which have wide popular appeal.

From a socio-scientific perspective, the “target audience” for typical popularized interpretations tends to be individuals perceiving themselves as left behind in the swirling vortex of change precipitated by massive social transition, economic dislocation, and shifting cultural values. Claiming that apocalyptic texts directly prophesy contemporary events, these interpretations offer adherents “biblical grounding” to demonize the forces they feel are responsible for their discomfort while affirming the worldview and values they hold dear.

One of these popular contemporary interpretations, the Left Behind series, is the subject of a fascinating critique by

evangelical scholar Ronald Clark.¹ Clark argues convincingly that while the books are disguised as spiritual texts, their function is quite different. Creating a crisis by demonizing the European Market and the United Nations, the series offers Americans feeling left behind by the rapid changes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries a way both to transfer their anxieties about cultural change and the global economy onto the demonized “Other” and also to affirm themselves as agents in defeating these foes.

Throughout the books, heroic true believers—usually white men holding to a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible—lead the charge against institutions challenging American greed and capitalism in their work for global peace and justice. God, while supportive of the heroes’ activities, is portrayed as conspicuously absent from the action. Throughout the series, hope and consolation seem to come only in death or at Armageddon.

1. Ronald Clark Jr. “Sent Ahead or Left Behind? War and Peace in the Apocalypse, Eschatology, and the Left Behind Series,” in Dereck Daschke & Andrew Kille, eds., *A Cry Instead of Justice: The Bible and Cultures of Violence in Psychological Perspective* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 182-194.

Clark argues that by painting the world in these colors, adherents gain a sense of control, agency, and comfort, as well as a vicarious release of what seems to be a basic human fascination with blood, gore, and vengeance. Their world is reduced from a complex, confusing, technicolor nightmare to a controllable monochromatic landscape in which they alone are “in the know” about what is and what needs to be. With lines between good and evil, “winners and losers” clearly drawn, true believers can take their place as gallant leaders in the pre-determined unfolding events of the final times.

Although one might want to quibble with some of the support Clark adduces, his thesis and its potential implications for the communities among whom we serve needs to be taken seriously. Many of the people filling our pews will have seen the “Left Behind” movie, read the books, or become fascinated with similar interpretations. As they and we hear again the apocalyptic and eschatologically oriented texts that guide us toward the Reign of Christ Sunday, it is helpful to review what apocalyptic is, how it came to be, and how it functioned in the communities for whom it was composed. Doing so will provide a foundation both to respond to contemporary popular interpretations and also to deepen and broaden our awareness of the potential of biblical apocalyptic as a resource for our contemporary discipleship.

Clarification of terms: what is apocalyptic?

The Greek word translated “apocalyptic” means simply “to reveal, disclose.” John J. Collins notes that scholarship now distinguishes three separate but inter-related ways in which the term is used. “Apocalypse” denotes a literary genre, “apocalypticism” a social ideology, and “apocalyptic eschatology” a set of ideals

and motifs.² He further defines “apocalypse” as follows:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.³

The Daniel and Revelation texts scattered throughout the lectionary readings for the final weeks of the church year are “apocalyptic” in the three-fold sense described above. Additionally, although the Isaiah 25 and Mark 13 readings are not strictly apocalypses, they contain significant apocalyptic elements. Situating these texts within the matrix of thought from which they emerged is a helpful first step in taking them seriously in their original contexts before assessing their implications for our contexts.

Where it all began—the emergence of apocalyptic thought

Jewish apocalyptic thought developed within a particular historical, social, political, and religious matrix. The unexpected death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE) in the midst of his military campaign triggered bloody wars of succession throughout the conquered Ancient Near Eastern lands. As Alexander’s generals battled each other for territory, they wreaked havoc wherever they went. Advances in military technology allowed competing forces to devastate territories and peoples on a level hitherto unknown. Since major trade

2. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

routes and highways ran through Judah,⁴ its land and people suffered greatly as the combatants kept marching through the countryside in a seeming unending procession. It was a time of trauma threatening Jewish identity and survival on an almost unprecedented level.⁵

In this volatile context, groups of Jews, firmly believing that God's Word is a living word, responded by reaching back into biblical traditions and re-casting those traditions to speak a new word applicable to their day. Melding language particularly from prophetic and wisdom traditions with imagery from Ancient Near Eastern myths, these communities composed what we now know as apocalyptic literature.

Within this literature, the coded use of Ancient Near Eastern mythological images and themes provided a safe platform to address concrete historical crises of a given author's time. Despite the variety of historical crises prompting individual writings, a number of themes are consistent throughout the corpus of historical apocalypses. Typically, a faithful seer (e.g., Enoch, Daniel, John) receives visionary revelation from an angelic figure clarifying the current historical situation and announcing when and how present turbulence will conclude in final judgment against the wicked and permanent vindication for the faithful.

Normally, these apocalypses portray a two-level universe, with God outside of

and in control of both levels. Using the language of myth, authors portray historical oppressive imperial powers as chaos monsters who mistakenly believe they are in control as they tyrannize populations on earth. Unbeknown to them, what happens on earth is but a pale shadow of decisive events unfolding on the heavenly level. There, where the action really is, angelic forces of the nations gird for final battle (e.g., Daniel) or celebrate victory already won but not yet fully effective on earth (e.g., Revelation). In either instance, history is moving toward the imminent end pre-determined by God.

When the pre-set time is complete, God will intervene in final judgment. Faithful communities suffering so deeply in the present will be vindicated forever and their oppressors held accountable forever. Descriptions of final judgment are replete with various pictures of post-judgment destinies of the vindicated and the damned.

The specific timelines provided by Daniel and similar apocalypses function to situate seers' visions within the eschatological horizon of promised deliverance and vindication for the suffering faithful communities. For apocalyptic authors, power lies in the vision, not the timeline. God's Word is a living word. While timelines come and timelines go, the vision lives on and is transferable to new historical crises with ever re-castable power.⁶

With this as background, we turn now to the increasing intense apocalyptic hues coloring the lectionary readings for the final weeks of the church year. This will prepare us to assess their value as a resource for contemporary ministry.

4. Although it had several names throughout the periods of colonization by various imperial powers, for the purpose of this essay that geographical area encompassing Jerusalem and the surrounding area will be referred to simply as "Judah."

5. For a detailed historical overview see George Nickelsburg, *Jewish and Christian Literature Between the Exile and the Mishnah*, 2nd Edition. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 41–43.

6. We witness the same dynamic in the New Testament, where the expectation of Christ's imminent return gives way to the time of the church in Luke-Acts.

Apocalyptic hues and visions in the Hebrew Bible readings

Isaiah 25:6–9—All Saints Sunday

Although technically not an apocalyptic text, the eschatological vision of Isa 25:6–9 is replete with apocalyptic images of the new reality God will bring into being following the cosmic destruction described in vivid detail in Isaiah 24. The promised great banquet feast, forerunner of images of the messianic feast we anticipate in the Eucharistic liturgy, culminates in the defeat of Death itself.

Throughout the Ancient Near East, Death was regarded as the god of the underworld who swallowed up the dead into his own realm of nothingness. Tipping this myth on its head, the prophet envisions Yahweh first releasing the dead from Death's swallowing by destroying the shroud and covering over them and then swallowing up Death forever. On that great day, when all things have come to fulfillment, tears will be wiped away and the reproach of God's people removed. In this text, the scope of God's action is universal. There is no distinction between the "saved" and the "damned."

A major appeal of this text as a resource over the centuries is its ability to speak to a wide variety of historical situations, including those we address on All Saints Day. The comfort, consolation, and courage its imagery engenders in the midst of present distress also makes it a powerful funeral text.

Daniel 12:1–3; 7:9–10, 13–14—Pentecost 25 and Reign of Christ Sundays

The Hebrew Bible lessons for the last two Sundays of the church year turn our attention to the apocalypse of Daniel 7–12. Written in Judah, the historical crisis precipitating this apocalypse was the prohibition of the practice of the Jewish faith. In 198 BCE, Judah had come under Greek

Seleucid rule. A contentious colonized folk, Jews struggled with each other and with their overlords politically, economically, and religiously. Matters came to a head in 168–166 BCE when the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes issued a series of decrees outlawing the practice of the Jewish faith, defiled the Temple with the "abomination that makes desolate," and installed a permanent military garrison in Jerusalem. Those Jews who refused to "go with the new flow" faced almost certain death.⁷

This crisis threatened the survival of Jewish identity and faith as never before. Under the pressure of the decrees and of the allure of Greek culture, many Jews collaborated with the Seleucids or made compromises they believed necessary for survival. Other Jews—Daniel's community included—resisted the decrees, some through military action and others through non-violent means.

Modeling themselves after the Suffering Servant figure of Second Isaiah, Daniel's community were teachers of the Torah. Their calling, they believed, was to keep teaching the Torah even though doing so quite possibly would lead to their death. The willingness of these teachers to court martyrdom through active non-violent resistance to Antiochus' decrees was grounded in confidence that God soon would act. Final ultimate vindication of the faithful was at hand.⁸

Dan 12:1–3, the text for Pentecost 25, culminates the angelic description and interpretation of historical events concurrent with the author's time (Daniel 10–11). The reading begins on the heavenly level where Michael, the patron angel ("prince")

7. Nickelsburg, 67–69, 77–83; Collins, 78–92.

8. The crucial verses identifying Daniel's community are Dan 11:33–35; 12:3. See also Isa 50:4ff.

of Israel gets ready for action. The Hebrew of the verb translated “will arise” in the NRSV (Dan 12:1) has military connotations. Thus, expectations are raised that a battle will follow. This, however, does not happen. Instead, the final stages of tribulation—the actual time of Daniel’s suffering community—are announced, together with the promise that the faithful community will be delivered.

The further description of this community as “all those written in the book of life” functions as confirmation that the whole community—living and dead—of those standing fast in their faith despite the cost will be delivered. Unfortunately, the phrase often has been interpreted as a literal book of names of every one of every time detailing who will and will not be saved. Thus, it is important to clarify the function of the phrase as addressing the concrete situation of Daniel’s community rather than providing a blueprint for all future generations.

The opening of the books is followed by the first clear reference in the Hebrew Bible to the resurrection of individual (Dan 12:2–3). This is not a universal resurrection. Only “some” of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will be raised. With resurrection comes separation, the faithful to everlasting life and the others to everlasting shame and contempt. The wise, those who lead many to righteousness, are Daniel’s community. They will shine like stars, joining the angelic host forever.

Belief in resurrection of the individual, then, emerges in a context of unprecedented suffering and martyrdom. It functions to give comfort and courage to Daniel’s persecuted community. They who have suffered so much and perhaps lost their lives for their faith will be vindicated and their oppressors held accountable. Emboldened by this blessed assurance,

Daniel’s community can take courage to continue boldly in their active non-violent resistance to the imperial decrees by continuing to teach the Torah even at the cost of martyrdom.⁹

For all those victims of injustice who have suffered violence in the depths of their being and know the need for vindication and healing, the message of Daniel 12 is a profound source of comfort and courage. For those who oppress or collaborate with oppressors, it is a warning. They will be held accountable.

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9. For an in-depth analysis of the development of resurrection imagery, see George Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (HTS 26; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

While the 25th Sunday after Pentecost focuses on the final vision of Daniel 7–12, the Hebrew Bible reading for the Reign of Christ Sunday spotlights portions of the first. In the verses prior to the lectionary reading (Dan 7:1–8), Daniel dreams of a series of terrible beastly chaos monsters overpowering the earthly level of the cosmos. Suddenly, action switches to the heavenly level, where, unbeknown to the forces on earth, judgment is ready to begin. This scene is the focus of the lectionary text.

Dan 7:9–10 is a creative re-casting of an Ancient Near Eastern myth. Throughout the ancient world, the god El was revered as the great Ancient One administering justice as he presided over the heavenly council of the gods. Tipping the myth on its head, the Daniel text ascribes El's attributes to Israel's God. The picture is that of the heavenly law court where Israel's God sits enthroned, served by hosts of attending heavenly angels. The opening of the books signals that court is in session; judgment is about to begin.

In verses omitted from the lectionary reading (Dan 7:11–12), the series of oppressive imperial powers represented by chaos monsters in verses 1–8 are destroyed or rendered impotent until the remaining time of tribulation is complete. For the apocalyptic author, these verses are important. Contrary to their own expectations, oppressors will be held accountable. Justice will be done.

Picking up after the omitted verses, the lectionary reading continues with the exaltation on the clouds of one “like a human being” to whom is given dominion, kingship, and glory forever (Dan 7:13–14). As the subsequent angelic interpretation reveals (Dan 7:23–27), this figure quite plausibly is Michael, the patron angel of Israel. The kingdom given to the “people of the holy ones of the Most High” (Dan

7:27) most likely is a reference to Daniel's faithful community.

In the Aramaic language in which Daniel 7 was written, “son of man” is synonymous with “human being.”¹⁰ Through an on-going process of re-casting of older traditions, by New Testament times the phrase is transformed into the title “Son of Man” and is one of the many images used to articulate Jesus' identity. In the Gospels, Jesus' role as Son of Man coming on the clouds heralds the final judgment that he will execute (e.g., Matt 13:37–43).

Apocalyptic visions in the second readings

All Saints Day and Reign of Christ Sunday—Revelation 21:1-6a; 1:4b-8

The second reading for the Sundays bracketing the final weeks of the church year turns our attention to Revelation, the Apocalypse of John. Addressed to Christian communities in Asia Minor, the historical crisis precipitating the text was the sporadic persecution of early Christians by imperial Rome. Probably composed around 90-100 CE, the apocalypse challenges imperial cultic claims and economic practices. God, not the emperor, is the source of salvation; to God alone belongs all glory, honor, and dominion.¹¹

Likely, there was an economic dimension to the apocalypse's repeated admonitions to the early Christians to persevere in the faith by resisting accommodation with competing imperial demands. The

10. This helps to clarify the identity of “one like a son of man” as the angel Michael, neither human nor divine.

11. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*. Proclamation Commentaries. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). Throughout her rhetorical interpretation of Revelation, Fiorenza is concerned particularly with its theo-ethical implications.

coins necessary for monetary transactions in lands conquered by the empire bore the image of the emperor or the goddess Roma (quite possibly the enigmatic “mark of the beast”). To touch the coin was to make a statement giving ultimate allegiance to the imperial cult. Caught between a rock and a hard place economically, suffering persecution and sometimes death for their refusal to participate in the imperial cult, the Christians addressed in Revelation cried out to God for justice and vindication.¹²

Like Daniel 7–12, the visions of Revelation portray a two-level universe. In Revelation, however, the exaltation of the now reigning Lamb heralds celebration of victory already won on the heavenly level. As the Lamb opens the sealed scroll, the process of final judgment on the earthly level begins. In an escalating series of actions, God exacts disaster and then defeat upon the cosmic forces of evil and their imperial human operatives. That judgment culminates in the defeat of Satan, final judgment, and the casting of Death and Hades into the lake of fire (Rev 20:7–15). This is followed by visions of the new heaven and new earth that God will bring into being. In the new Jerusalem, all the faithful—those present to the end and those previously martyred—will enjoy shalom in its fullest forever.

God through the Lamb remains the primary actor throughout Revelation. Christians are called to respond by persevering in non-violent resistance, trusting that God is in control and will grant them ultimate vindication. Their oppressors and those who collaborate with them will be held accountable forever.

Rev 21:1–6a, the second reading for All Saints Sunday, offers a powerful, emotive apocalyptic picture of the new reality God will bring into being for God’s faithful people past and present after the final

judgment. In this picture, the first heaven and earth plus the sea (ancient symbol of chaos) disappear and the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven. Later verses (Rev 21:9–22:5) will detail the glory of this universal city where inhabitants will live and reign forever.

The verses selected for the lectionary reading emphasize God’s “dwelling” (NRSV “home”) among humans forever. Throughout the Hebrew Bible the image of God “dwelling” (*shekinah*) with God’s people first in the tabernacle and then in the Temple is a prominent theme. Here, it culminates in the New Jerusalem. As in Isaiah 25, the new reality God brings into being brings tears and Death to an end. All will be new and wonderful—and it will be through God’s action alone.

While All Saints Day features the closing vision of Revelation, the second reading for the Reign of Christ Sunday (Rev 1:4b–8) focuses on the opening verses of the pastoral letter marking the beginning of the apocalypse. John’s greeting to the seven churches of Asia Minor sets the tone for all that follows. Challenging imperial claims that the emperor is the Almighty and the ruler of kings of the earth, John’s opening salvo makes it clear that these attributes belong to God and the risen and exalted Christ alone. Through Jesus’ death for sins, Christians now enjoy the status of kingdom of priests previously limited to Israel (Ex 19:6). And there’s more. Re-casting language from Dan 7:11–14, the risen and exalted Christ is portrayed as coming with the clouds in final judgment. As in Daniel, oppressors and those who collaborate with them will be held accountable.

Apocalyptic echoes hues in the Gospels

Pentecost 25—Mark 13:1–8

The only Gospel reading with explicitly apocalyptic overtones, Mark 13:1–8

12. Ibid., 84–87.

(Pentecost 25), balances the Dan 12:1–3 proclamation of impending resurrection following present tribulations with a focus on impending tribulations preceding the resurrected Christ's return in final judgment. The historical crisis precipitating the text was the Jewish revolt and subsequent Roman destruction of the Temple and devastation of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In the midst of the chaotic situation prompting or following the revolt, the gospel author uses vivid language to encourage the beleaguered, discouraged, Christian community to remain watchful and aware lest they lose heart in their times of turbulence or get carried away by convincing speakers claiming to be or know more than they do. As is consistent in historical apocalypses, the focus of the entire chapter, often referred to Mark's "Little Apocalypse," is exhortation to wise discipleship rather than provision of a literal timeline to the final judgment.

Unfortunately, the lectionary reading stops at verse 8, thereby omitting the punch line of the whole chapter's description of the final times. Far from prophesying twentieth and twenty-first century events, the purpose of the colorful imagery is to encourage Mark's community to continue boldly in their calling no matter what the personal cost. They can do so confident that God holds the future and that the tribulations they experience in the present are not God's final word for them or for all creation.

Apocalyptic hues within the eschatological horizon of lectionary readings marking the end of the church year

Like a sweeping rainbow announcing the calm after the storm, the eschatological horizon arcing from All Saints Day to the Reign of Christ Sunday begins and ends with the proclamation that present

reality is not God's final word for creation. Under this rainbow, each week's lesson takes its place.

Setting the eschatological stage on All Saints Day, the lofty promises of Isa 25:6–9 and Rev 21:1–6a find penultimate fulfillment in the gospel account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:32–44). Although none of the texts for Pentecost 24 is apocalyptic, the abundance of the widow's food supply during the drought (1 Kgs 17:8–16) echoes the abundance of the feast proclaimed in Isaiah 25. Then, in the Gospel reading, Jesus' praise of the widow whom he sees contributing a tiny monetary amount to the Temple because "she has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mark 14:41–44) resonates with the apocalyptic emphasis on total commitment to one's calling and with the economic dimensions of situations addressed in many apocalyptic writings.

Building on previous weeks' lessons, the Daniel 7, Revelation 21, and Mark 13 lectionary readings for Pentecost 25 contribute their own coloring to the rising apocalyptic and eschatological crescendo. Finally, beginning with the exaltation of the one like a son of man (Dan 7:9–10, 11–14) and concluding with the Johannine Jesus' confession that he is the king of a kingdom not of this world (John 18:33–37), the lessons for the Reign of Christ Sunday complete the rainbow arc. The God of Israel is indeed the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega as proclaimed in Rev 1:4–8.

Implications for ministry

Visualizing both the stormy times precipitating apocalyptic literature and the peaceful calm yet to come in colorful, coded imagery, the apocalyptic hues of the lectionary readings marking final weeks of the church year invite us into a literary worldview foreign to us, yet rich in resources for us.

Contrary to many popular interpretations, apocalyptic texts neither prophesy twentieth and twenty-first century events nor create crises to which those texts supposedly respond. Moreover, rather than focusing on the actions of heroic human characters, apocalyptic texts focus on God's control, agency, and commitment to vindicate the oppressed while holding their oppressors accountable. To be sure, apocalyptic texts are replete with re-cast mythological images of monstrous beasts and bloody impending battles. Actual battles of the type envisioned in many popular interpretations, however, do not take place. Instead, God speaks and judgment occurs, culminating in visions of the new reality God is preparing for God's presently suffering people. For the powerless who suffer deeply in their depths, be they communities or individuals, apocalyptic texts provide a cathartic way to visualize their pain and to take courage to move toward healing, confident that the present reality is not God's final word to them.

Rooted in concrete historical situations, apocalyptic writing is good news for communities oppressed by imperial powers. Conversely, it serves as a warning to the powerful that God holds them accountable for their use and misuse of power. Its vivid portrayal of the ugly side

of imperial power challenges the privileged of every time to see their privilege for what it is, rather than living in the illusion that they are the victims in need of vindication.

As we seek to be faithful disciples in our complex, often troubling times, the apocalyptic hues swirling through the final lessons of the church year present us with at least three imperatives: hang-on, hand-over, have hope. Hang-on, they exhort us. Hang-on to the conviction that God's living word continues to sustain, empower, and equip God's people to persevere in discipleship even when faithfulness seems fruitless. Hand-over, they encourage us. Hand-over judgment to God. Life is lived in the gray, not divided into neat, exclusive categories of black and white. God is the judge, not us. Finally, have hope. Hope in the God who assures us that present reality is not God's final word for us and for all creation.

The colorful images permeating apocalyptic texts allow us to visualize what is and what will be in language foreign yet accessible to us. Hearing carefully the message of apocalyptic writing and harnessing its creative energy, we are enriched and further equipped to take our place as disciples within the eschatological horizon of God's living, liberating Word for all creation.

The Christology of Israel's Psalter

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Is the Old Testament a Christian book?

Although the catholic tradition of the church typically answers this question in the affirmative, a study of church history reveals the presence of occasional dissenters, some of whom were quite vociferous in their rejection of the Christian character of the Old Testament (e.g., Marcion). In our own day, negative responses to this question are typically understated, often assuming the form of neglect rather than outright hostility. This is especially evident in the worship life of the contemporary church, where New Testament readings from the lectionary, whether gospel or epistle, typically form the basis for Sunday morning homilies or sermons. It is not too much to say that Old Testament preaching has fallen upon hard times, and this is due in no small part to the church's uncertainty when it comes to affirming the Old Testament's relationship to Jesus Christ. Can one say that the Old Testament not only *points* to Christ, but that it also *mediates* Christ, both to us and to the Israel of its own day? For many in our day, Christianity begins with the incarnation; *ergo*, reading the Old Testament as Christian scripture is little more than a hopelessly anachronistic exercise, grounded in a form of uncontrolled allegory or "spiritualizing." After all, there were not multiple incarnations, but one (John 1:14).

But to acknowledge, along with John, that the Word is not yet made flesh in the Old Testament economy is not the same as saying that the Word is not yet made visible, for Christ the eternal Word revealed himself to Israel "at many times and in diverse ways," through the figural

form and Christ-shaped witness of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, prior to his revelation as the incarnate Son (Luke 24:44; cf. Heb 1:1). Not only the individual psalms of the Psalter, but also its larger shape and message, may therefore be rightly construed as "christomorphic" in character. Just what does it mean to say that the Psalter is *christomorphic* in character? The answer is not overly complicated. The Greek term μορφή is often glossed in English as *form*, and a form is something visible.¹ To say that the Psalter is christomorphic is to say that there is a morphological fit between the literary shape and theological message of the Psalter, on the one hand, and the earthly life and ministry of the incarnate and risen Christ, on the other. By virtue of this "accordance" or morphological fit between Christ and the witness of Israel's Psalter,² Jesus the Christ is made visible to Israel in a time of promise.

1. In Phil 2:6, Paul speaks of the pre-incarnate Christ as One who exists as μορφή θεοῦ, or the 'form' of God. The early fathers understood this to be a statement about Christ's eternal identity as the 'visibility' or true 'image' of God, that is, the One who reveals or makes 'visible' the invisible God (cf. Col 1:15), first in the Old Testament economy of creation and Israel's redemption, and then in the New Testament economy of his bodily incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

2. In 1 Cor 15:3-4, Paul argues that the Christian message of Christ's death and resurrection is "in accordance with" the entirety of Israel's scriptures (cf. also Rom 1:1-2; 2 Tim 2:14-15).

In light of these preliminary reflections, one may perhaps comprehend more fully the interpretive guidelines offered by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians. There Paul exhorts the church at Colossae: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16). While it is clear from his other letters that "the word of Christ" includes more than the book of Psalms, and in fact encompasses the entirety of Israel's scriptures, in this verse Paul clearly links "the word of Christ" with the book of Psalms. The Greek terms Paul uses to speak of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" are all used as titles for psalms in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Psalter.³ In addition, many of the psalms make use of words and phrases drawn from Old Testament wisdom traditions.⁴ When we keep in mind that Israel's scriptures formed the authorizing matrix for his teaching on the gospel of Christ, it becomes clear that for Paul, the "wisdom" embodied in the teaching or instruction (תורה) of the psalms is nothing less than "the word of Christ" he speaks of in Col 3:16.

But just what does this say about Paul's understanding of the Psalter? In what sense may the psalms be said to be "the word of Christ"?

3. See for example Ps 3:1 (ψαλμός), Ps 6:1 (ὑμνος), and Ps 4:1 (ὕμνη).

4. Standard 'themes' from Israel's wisdom traditions include contrasts between the way of the wicked and the righteous, the wise and the foolish, as well as exhortations to practice the fear of the Lord. These themes, as well as others associated with Israel's wisdom traditions, manifest themselves from the outset of Psalter and continue throughout its larger structure (see Psalms 1, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 128).

Some have interpreted this phrase in terms of what grammarians refer to as a subjective genitive, which is a rather technical way of expressing the simple observation that Christ is the speaker of the psalms. Others take the phrase as an objective genitive, suggesting that Paul wishes to teach the church that Christ is the one to whom the Psalter bears witness, that is, the one the Psalter is speaking about. Both nuances are probably in view, which is to say that as the Word or speaking voice of God in the Old Testament, Christ is the one who speaks the psalms, as well as the one to whom the Psalter bears witness. With these introductory hermeneutical reflections offered by way of preface, we may now focus more closely upon the question of *how* Christ the eternal Word is *imaged* or made visible in the psalms, in an economy or time prior to the incarnation. Although there are many angles of figural vision from which one might pursue this question, it is helpful to begin by reflecting upon the structural relationship between Israel's Torah and the larger shape of the Psalter, then focus upon the theological significance of that relationship in the interpretation of Psalms 1–2, especially the combined perspective they offer on wisdom.

Israel's Torah, the psalms, and wisdom

The Psalter has sometimes been called "the second Torah" because its fivefold structure: Book I: 1–41; Book II: 42–72; Book III: 73–89; Book IV: 90–106; Book V: 107–150. This fivefold structure mirrors the fivefold structure of Israel's Torah, the Pentateuch. Although Ps 1:2 speaks of the "law of the LORD" rather than Moses, that the Law or Torah of Moses is in view is clear. This is evident from the way in which this phrase is used in post-exilic literature, that is, the period when the

larger structure and matrices in which the individual psalms are now contained were probably constructed. This may be seen from the fact that 2 Chr 17:9; 34:14, Ezra 7:6, and Neh 8:1 all suggest that at the time of the writing of Chronicles and Ezra, the “law of the LORD” and the “law of Moses” were identical in meaning, and that both phrases were used interchangeably to refer to Israel’s Torah.

The final book of the Law of Moses, which functions as a hermeneutical guide for interpreting the teachings of Israel’s Torah, identifies the teachings of Torah with wisdom (Deut 4:5–8). The structure of the Psalter is modeled upon the fivefold division of the Pentateuch in order to underscore the fact that, like the Mosaic Torah, the teachings inherent in the Psalter *also* embody the LORD’s wisdom. Like the five books of Moses, the Psalter is also “instruction” or תורה worthy of our meditation if we would be made wise, since Israel’s Torah and Israel’s Psalter both function as witnesses to the embodiment of LORD’s wisdom in the midst of Israel. Because the structure and wisdom of the Torah is replicated and expanded in the structure and wisdom of the Psalter, the call to engage in the practice of meditation upon the Torah also extends to the practice of meditation upon the Psalter. Thus when interpreted in terms of the larger structure of the Psalter, the call to meditate upon the Torah in Ps 1:2 *also* functions as an invitation to later readers to meditate upon the teachings of the Psalter.

Psalms 1–2

The parallel structures of Torah and Psalter serve to teach us, then, that just as the instruction of Mosaic Torah embodies the LORD’s wisdom in the midst of Israel, so also the Psalter embodies that wisdom. But just what does wisdom look like? How is it *imaged* in the witness to the LORD’s wisdom

rendered by the Psalter? While time and space do not allow for a comprehensive study of the Psalter in this regard, the hermeneutical guidelines for interpreting the Psalter provided by Psalms 1–2 offer the reader a christological lens for making sense of its larger message.

As many Christian readers of the Psalter have recognized, the christological vista provided by the book of Psalms opens with Psalms 1–2, for these two psalms serve as an introduction, not only to Book I of the Psalter, but also to the entire Psalter. Their introductory function is seen in the fact that, unlike all other psalms in Book I, they lack titles. Both psalms are also closely connected to one another on a literary level, with the Hebrew term “Blessed” (אַשְׁרֵי) forming an *inclusio* or bracket that links the beginning of Psalm 1 (1:1) with the end of Psalm 2 (2:12). The interpretive effect of this bracketing is to link the source of Israel’s *blessing*, both to instruction in and meditation upon the Torah (Psalm 1), as well as to the LORD’s gift of kingship to Israel (Psalm 2).⁵ The blessing of this gift is especially manifest in the protection the LORD offers to all who take *refuge* in that kingship (2:12). The teaching of Psalm 2 is the LORD’s Messianic Son who mediates the LORD’s blessing by providing refuge for all those who submit to his rule.

This *inclusio* structure of Psalms 1 and 2 also has implications for our reading of verses Ps 1:6 and 2:12, both of which

5. See Deut 17:14–20; cf. 1 Sam 16:1. In this essay I will follow the convention used by the NASB and gloss the tetragrammaton as LORD in small caps. Whatever else its problems, adopting LORD as an English gloss for the tetragrammaton may be said to have a certain precedent in the Hebrew practice of vocalizing the tetragrammaton as *Adonai*, as well as the LXX practice of translating the tetragrammaton as *kyrios*.

speak of perishing (נָפַח) in the way (דַּרְבָּי). In the case of 1:6, we learn that the “way” of the wicked will “perish.” The same two terms reoccur in 2:12, but what it means to “perish” in the “way” is now further specified in terms of failing to “Kiss the Son,” which in the context of Psalm 2 means failing to offer the proper homage to the LORD’s Anointed (מָשִׁיחַ) or Christ (Χριστός), who is also identified as the King the LORD has appointed in Zion (2:6) and the LORD’s Son (2:7). Finally, the relation between wisdom and the combined teaching of Psalms 1–2 is specified in terms of fearing the LORD and offering proper homage to the Son whom the LORD has anointed as King (2:10–12). The kings of the nations are invited to a life of wisdom (2:10), which includes living in the fear of the LORD (2:11) and in submission to David and his descendants (2:12).

David and Christ

The question now arises: *who* is the LORD’s anointed? On one level, the answer would seem to be straight forward. David the king of Israel is the LORD’s anointed. Though in keeping with its introductory function in the Psalter, Psalm 2 has no title. It seems clear that it originally referred to David (Acts 4:25–28), who was installed as king on Mt. Zion in the face of opposition (2 Samuel 5) and promised the nations as his inheritance (2 Samuel 7). However, Ps 2:8 never found any more than a partial fulfillment in David’s kingship, for there never was a time David ruled all the known nations of the earth. The text itself, therefore, encourages the reader to interpret David as the earthly *figure* of a greater King who blesses all those who take refuge in him, while also bringing judgment upon those who resist his rule and the offer of refuge in him. Here David’s kingship offers us an Old Testament image or figure of Jesus Christ’s kingship.

David was a son of God by grace; Jesus Christ is the Son of God by nature. However, while David was a figure of Christ, and not the incarnate Son, he nevertheless functioned as an instrument by which the LORD mediated the blessings of Christ’s eternal kingship to Israel in a time of promise. The teaching of Psalm 2 is that it was the LORD’s intention that the office of Israel’s kingship serve as the messianic mediator of the blessing of refuge and protection. David’s reign as the LORD’s anointed is therefore a down payment on the shape the future will take, a *chromorphic* shape already intruding itself within Israel’s present through David. The nations will be brought into submission (2:9), and for this reason they are warned about the futility of their present rebellion (2:10), which will be met with anger and judgment, rather than blessing (2:11–12). In sum, if we grant that Psalms 1–2 establish a christological frame of reference for reading the Psalter as a whole, then the shape that “wisdom” takes in the Psalter is that of embracing the LORD’s Anointed, or Messiah, for only in so doing does one escape the LORD’s judgment. The military protection from Israel’s enemies offered by David is thus an Old Testament image or “making visible” of the refuge that Jesus Christ provides from sin and death, the true enemies of God’s people.

The message of Psalm 2 is thus not primarily about the reign of the Davidic monarchy, but about the reign of the LORD in the midst of the Davidic monarchy. The LORD reigns through his Anointed of whom David was a figure. David’s installation as king was therefore an image or a “making visible” of Christ’s installation to an eternal session and rule at his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation. What David realized through his kingship in a limited, temporal way, Christ consummated in an eternal way,

The message of Psalm 2 is thus not primarily about the reign of the Davidic monarchy, but about the reign of the LORD in the midst of the Davidic monarchy.

for Christ's resurrection was his coronation day, the day when he gave the promises of David an eternal fulfillment (Acts 13:26–34; cf. Acts 2:29–36). At Christ's resurrection and coronation the inheritance of the nations begins (Matt 28:18–20), and the promise of Ps 2:8 finds its ultimate fulfillment.

The christomorphic shape of the fivefold psalter

Though the Psalms open with wonderful promises of blessing to Israel through Torah mediation and obedience (Psalm 1), as well as the exercise of messianic kingship over the nations (Psalm 2), the psalms immediately following this introduction make us wonder whether these promises will be fulfilled.⁶ Where is the Davidic king who is supposed to be taking possession of the nations as his inheritance? In fact, as many students of

the macrostructure of the Psalter have observed, the movement of the first three books of Psalms traces the breakdown of the Davidic monarchy as it moves from David at the end of Book I (41), to Solomon at the end of Book II (72), climaxing in Rehoboam's division of the kingdom and the Babylonian exile eventually fostered by that division at the end of Book III (89), which results in the loss of Davidic kingship.

In sum, Book I inaugurates the Davidic kingship. By the end of Book II it is clear that this kingship has been transferred to Solomon. While the first "blessed man" and "king" described in the introduction to the Psalter was David, by the end of Book II the "blessed man" and "king" is Solomon. The end of Book III sees the breakdown of this kingship, probably referring to both the advent of the divided kingdom and the Babylonian exile. The promises to David of blessedness and kingship rendered by Psalms 1–2 seem to have failed. The writer of Psalm 89 therefore asks "LORD, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" (89:49). The answer to this question is found in Book IV.

The people have become focused upon David's temporal kingship and stand in need of an eternal perspective on kingship. They have lost the focus of Psalm 2, which was not on David, but on the LORD who installs the king. The opening psalm of Book IV, therefore, focuses on the eternal kingship of the LORD (90:1–4). This theme is then carried forward with emphasis in Book IV.⁷ This focus on the LORD's kingship also forms the culminating note of Book V in Ps 145:1–3, 13. We may summarize this movement as follows:

6. Cf., for example, the questions raised in Ps 3:1, 4:1, 5:1-2, 6:1-3, 7:1-2, 10:1, 11:1-3, 12:1, 13:1-2.

7. See Ps 93:1, 95:3, 96:10, 97:1, 98:6, 99:1.

Book I	Davidic kingship inaugurated	Davidic king is absent. Thus the overall structure of Psalms teaches a people living in the bodily absence of a king how to live under LORD's eternal reign and to trust in his promises. But it also teaches them to live under the LORD's reign in anticipation of the coming Messianic King who will finally fulfill the promise that the LORD's Anointed will inherit the nations. In this way, the larger shape and structure of the Psalter also proclaims the christomorphic shape and hope of the gospel in a time of promise, thereby linking up with the christological lens for reading wisdom provided by Psalms 1–2.
Book II	Transferred to Solomon	
Book III	Davidic kingship in doubt	
Book IV	Eternal kingship	
Book V	Living under the LORD's reign without an earthly king	

The post-exilic community that returned from Babylon had no visible Davidic king, did not rule the nations, but was ruled by Persia. In the face of this reality, Books IV and V of the Psalter remind them that the LORD still rules by his eternal kingship, and that because of this, the promises given in Psalms 1–2 have not failed. Psalm 2:8 *will be* fulfilled, for the LORD reigns and is faithful when a visible

Truly, the destiny of those who take refuge in Christ is blessing. This is the message of the Psalter, “the word of Christ” (Col 3:16).

Speaking God's Language: The "Word of Life" in 1 John 1:1–2:2

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"[First John] is an outstanding epistle. It can buoy up afflicted hearts. Furthermore, it has John's style and manner of expression, so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us." – Martin Luther¹

Introduction

The three Epistles of John have a distinctive voice within New Testament theology. It is a voice that is likely familiar to many Christians though most may have never actually read them. As part of the greater "Johannine corpus," they tend to get lost in the light of the Gospel of John. Still, the First Letter of John does receive some attention in the Revised Common Lectionary. A series of readings from the letter appears during the Easter season of Year B. On the second Sunday of Easter, we hear the first in the series: 1 John 1:1–2:2. A portion of this pericope is familiar to many Christians because of its incorporation into liturgies of confession and forgiveness ("If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness," vv. 8–9).²

1. From the forward to Martin Luther's "Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John" (1527) in *LW* 30: 219.

2. As found in "Corporate Confession and Forgiveness," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 239.

What is at stake for preachers who choose to engage 1 John in their sermons is nothing less than how we as a Christian community continue to proclaim "the word of life" that 1 John tells us "was from the beginning" (1.1).

Some may find the epistle lacking a strong christological center. First John, for example, makes no mention of a crucified and resurrected Jesus. Its lectionary placement in the Easter cycle thus is a ripe opportunity for preachers to bring 1 John into conversation with the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel who so boldly declares, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

When heard together with the Fourth Gospel and other Johannine letters, 1 John helps illumine for us a circle of fellowship, a "we" almost wholly beyond individual personality, spiraling around and centered on God: Father and Son. Within this fellowship, Jesus is not a personality or character so much as he is mediator of life in the light of God. In so far as life in Johannine community is life in God, it is eternal life—proclaimed from the beginning by Jesus and still proclaimed and embodied in the living community that follows him. First John 1:1–2:2 serves as an apt point from which to consider the themes of the whole because it sets the tone for much of what is developed throughout the remainder of the letter. The first chapter (commonly referred to

as the letter's "prologue") prefaces not only what immediately follows in 2:1–2 but also the whole letter by putting out in front God's word of eternal life revealed in the Son, Jesus Christ; the same word by which the truth of life in the community is both discerned and confessed.

“What was from the beginning”—Jesus’ word on life in the Father

The letter begins abruptly with a kind of title or heading for what follows. This is obscured by English translations that commonly insert an extra verb in 1:1 where there is none. Accordingly, 1:1 is rendered as, “We announce to you what existed from the beginning...” (CEB) or “We declare to you what was from the beginning...” (NRSV). Yet the Greek text begins more plainly:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and with our hands touched, concerning the word of life—

According to Judith M. Lieu, the promise and assurance of “eternal life” forms the basic framework of 1 John.³ It frames the letter both in its opening verses (1:1–2) and conclusion (5:13, 20). Though the exact phrase does not appear in 1:1, the revelation of eternal life in v. 2 is merely another way of expressing the “word of life” that v. 1 tells us was from the beginning. The phrase “eternal life” next appears at what Lieu calls the “focal point” of the letter in 2:25, after the initial introduction of the antichrists and the reiterated importance of remaining in the Son and the Father. Like with 1:1–2, the promise of “eternal

life” in 2:25 seems to be the same word spoken of in v. 24 that the community heard from Jesus (who is presumably the “he” here) since the beginning and that remains with them:

²⁴You all—what you heard from the beginning—let it remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning remains in you, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵This also is the promise that he himself announced to us—eternal life.

If we are to follow Lieu's argument, eternal life in the Son and in the Father is itself—like the double helix of DNA—the spiraling frame upon which the writers put together the composite pieces that make up 1 John. This life is beyond the person or personality of the writers. It is life with the Father that has been revealed to “us” through Jesus the Son (1:2) and that remains with us in the Son. As such, it holds together the past and present, both the beginnings of the community and its continued vitality in God and in the kind of love that sticks around.

Jesus is left unnamed at several points (note the anonymous “he/him” of 1:5, 2:25, and 4:21), but 1 John implicitly understands him to be the community's “beginning” witness to the “word of life.”⁴ At the community's inception, Jesus first makes tangible the word of life. But 1 John never elevates the word or *logos* to divine status. In the framework of the letter, eternal life in God—not merely the word that announces it—is preminent. In John's Gospel, it is the Word that was turned toward God (*ho logos en pros ton theon*, 1:1). Yet in 1 John it is eternal life that was turned toward the Father (*tēn zōēn tēn aiōnion hētis en pros ton patera*,

3. Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 24.

4. Judith Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 50.

1:2). As the revelation of eternal life, the *logos* of 1 John emerges in and from life turned to God the Father. Not the other way around as the Gospel would have it, where life itself comes into being in the Word (John 1:3–4). The letter's "word of life" is not Jesus as much as it is continued witness to and proclamation of the eternal life first revealed to the community by Jesus. Though 1 John still seems a step away from equating Jesus with the Word, this does not make him any less significant in the letter. Jesus is after all, like the eternal life in 1 John 1:2 or the Word in John 1:1, described as "turned toward the Father" (*pros tov patera*, 1 John 2:1). Hence, though the various phraseologies at play in 1 John and the Gospel do not exactly match up, there is enough resonance among them to suggest a common albeit complicated Johannine lineage that (if anything is clear) begins with Jesus and his message.

Widening circles: 1 John, the other two, and the Gospel

Though many scholars commonly still read 1 John as a later work than the Gospel, there is scant historical evidence to actually suggest this. According to Georg Strecker, 1 John is the first Johannine text attested to by an independent source, Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 156 AD) who indirectly cites 4:2–3 in his letter to the Philippian.⁵ It is perhaps only due to a ninth-century Byzantine tradition that identified 1 John as "[t]he first epistle of John the Evangelist, Theologian, and Apostle" that we assume the Gospel had to come first.

Rather than making the Gospel any

kind of source document for the Letters, Raymond Brown suggests a common Johannine tradition shared between these texts yet distinct from any one text in itself.⁶ Brown dates the composition of the Letters later than the Gospel. Subsequent scholarship, however, increasingly situates the Gospel and 1 John as roughly contemporaneous with each other, with 2 and 3 John actually representing earlier marks of the Johannine tradition. Despite Brown and many others who link 2 John with 1 John, Strecker suggests that differences in form and content make identical authorship unlikely. Instead, 1 John represents a writer in the Johannine school tradition independent from 2 and 3 John.

Building in part on Strecker's scholarship, Callahan argues for a complete reversal of the canonical order of the Johannine tradition in terms of chronology: with 3 John written first, then 2 John, 1 John and finally the Gospel of John.⁷ Importantly, Callahan suggests that we do not encounter an author in the Johannine texts. Instead, more properly speaking, we have in these texts a writer or writers. For Callahan, the designation "the Elder" or "the Presbyter" (*ho presbyteros*) in 3 and 2 John is not a proper name but rather the title of the writer. As such, neither letter is limited in the way that named authorship typically limits. Without an author and the imposed personality of authorship, the edges of the text are left imaginatively open. Hence, the freedom of the "writers' collective" that after the Elder's composition of 3 and 2 John later

6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 106–107.

7. Allen Dwight Callahan, *A Love Supreme: A History of the Johannine Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 2–3.

5. Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John*, tr. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold Attridge. Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), xxix, xxxv n51.

compiles a series of occasional theological discourses written by the Elder in 1 John 2–5. The anonymity of the Elder moreover frees up the collective to compose 1 John 1 as a prologue for the Elder's writings. It is possible, then, that 1 John thus has multiple writers, a widening circle writing in continuity with the Elder.

The spiraling circles of "we" in 1 John

Leaving debates over chronological order aside, scholarship as diverse as that of Brown and Callahan together suggests a Johannine tradition developing within the context of widening yet ever interconnected circles. This is how 1 John is often imaged, likened to a spiral that again and again returns to a point where it has been before while at the same time progressing a step further.⁸ R. Alan Culpepper's notion of a "Johannine school" has held favor among many modern exegetes to help explain the many parallels of thought and language in the Johannine texts. But the spiral with its widening, progressive circles is more flexible and free-form an image than that of the "school" today, an image that might bog us down in more hierarchical notions of a teacherly authority passing on knowledge from on high to waiting pupils.

Alternative to Culpepper's notion of school, Oscar Cullmann used the notion of a "Johannine circle" to explain the simultaneous connection between Johannine writings and their seeming independence one from one another. The picture of a Johannine circle gives us a view that more humbly reflects the egalitarian arc of the Johannine tradition. The sender's self-designation as the Elder in 3 and 2 John in some ways suggests a "school" in which there is a teacher-leader with more

or less decisive authority. However, this kind of singular authority becomes less clear when looking at 1 John and its initial dexterity between "we" and "I" language in addressing its hearers. The letter opens with language that is clearly plural in vv. 1–4 and yet just as quickly shifts to the singular. Contrast 1 John 1:4—"we write these things"—with what follows in 2:1—"I write these things." After 1:5, the writer of 1 John consistently writes with

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a pen that is singular (e.g., 2:1, 12–14). Hence, Callahan asserts that the writers' collective of 1 John is responsible for writing the letter's first chapter as a prologue to the collected writings of the Elder that follow in chapters 2–5.

But even the Elder's discourses in 1 John 2–5 suggest one who writes not with overly possessive or proprietary language. Rather the Elder writes with a sense that he belongs also to the communities to whom he writes. Along this arc, Lieu asserts that

8. Lieu, *Theology*, 22.

the writer's individual identity through the course of the letter increasingly "becomes absorbed in that of the community as a whole and of each member."⁹ For Lieu, the relationship between writer and community in 1 John is not "that of spiritual founder and infant church, or of disciplining teacher responsible for an erring congregation."¹⁰ Rather, authority of both writer and audience likely have a common source in the life of the community as "we." Even if the Elder in chapters 2–5 at times assumes the voice of wisdom teacher, the authority at play between writer and community is far richer than any simple hierarchy.

Judith Lieu sheds light on the complex texture of authority within 1 John and a dynamic Johannine community in which some may have distinct teaching or writing roles but each member's experience must ultimately give way to the life of the whole and common share with God. Thus, even when addressing the hearers as "little children," the author writes that they have no need for a teacher because they have received a *chrisma* or "anointing" from God that teaches from within (2:27). Thus, as Brown observed, this is a community that seems to give "little attention to defined structure."¹¹ From time to time, one from out of the circle may step in to speak or teach but this same one must always ultimately return to and remain in the circle.

This absorption of authority into the "we" of community seems to describe well the apparent arc of the Johannine literary tradition that may well culminate in the Fourth Gospel. As many commentators observe, Jesus' "call" of the disciples in

John's Gospel (1:35–42) contrasts sharply with that found in the synoptic gospels (Matt 4:18–22, Mark 1:16–20, Luke 5:1–11). In the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptizer's disciples choose to follow Jesus not because of Jesus' direct invitation but because of John's proclamation in 1:36: "See, the Lamb of God!" and the disciples' own dogged curiosity. Martin Luther in a 1537 sermon on the Fourth Gospel commented that John focuses not on the calling of the apostles but on the "friendly intercourse" between Jesus and his followers that drew others in.¹² Luther highlights the kind of intimacy that distinguishes John's Jesus from depictions found in the other gospels. There is no formal roll call for the Twelve. Broader, looser, and less formal, John's gospel instead portrays what Luther described in the same sermon as "the circle of Christ's friends."

Confessing Jesus, confessing sins

This circle of intimate relationship also figures prominently in the communities to whom the Johannine epistles are addressed. Within the Johannine tradition, one's experience of abiding fellowship with the Father and the Son is significant. This is not to say that the kind of "religious experience" commended in Johannine community should be equated with the modern idea of having a "personal relationship with Jesus." To remain in the Father, one must remain in both Christ and community. The three are irrevocably intertwined. Those who leave the community leave behind their common share with God. First John 2:19 attests that the antichrists are those who do not remain in fellowship, those who "went out from us." Callahan notes

9. Ibid., 25.

10. Ibid., 27.

11. Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 100.

12. Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 1–4" (1537–1540), *LW* 22: 182.

that the "most egregious transgression of community is desertion."¹³ Thus, the characterization of Judas in the Gospel—the one who "went out" (John 13:30)—and his departure into spiritual darkness. As both Lieu and Callahan argue, however, 1 John is not primarily polemical debate as some like Brown surmise. The writers use the letter not to sway their audience to one side or another but instead to, in Luther's words, "buoy up afflicted hearts" and lift up a struggling community. First John is not debate but a rhetorical reiteration of the eternal life that remains in the Father and the Son for those who maintain relationship with each other. To announce this life is to speak both theologically and relationally. This is most explicitly spelled out in 1:6–7:

"If we say that we have common share with him while walking in the darkness, we lie and do not do the truth; ⁷if in the light we are walking as he is in the light, we have common share with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sins.

Confession figures prominently in 1 John 1:1–2:2. This perhaps comes as no surprise in a series of discourses so focused on the common life. What makes 1 John unique is the shared significance given to both confessing sins and confessing Jesus. Affirming our relationship with the Son is not a reality abstracted from life here and now or how we relate to our brothers or sisters. First John ties this confession of Christ together with the confession of our sins in community. It uses the same verb, *homologeō*, (related to *homologos*, "of one mind") to talk about both confessing sins in 1:9 and confessing Jesus in 2:23 and 4:2–3, 15.

To "confess" (*homologeō*) etymologically means, "to say the same thing." In

the context of the New Testament, it generally implies acknowledging one's sinfulness before God and thereby assenting to God's pronounced word on sin.¹⁴ In each instance in the New Testament, it also generally describes public or at least verbal declaration. Confession then is not just inner assent but it means to literally say the same thing God says, to speak God's language on sin. We might more aptly translate *homologeō* then as "acknowledge" or "admit to." This helps make clear that confession begins not with our willful action but rather with our willing response to God's truth.

That "God is light" (1 John 1:5) is significant for the discussion of confession and community that follows in 1:6–2:2. Confession is the means by which we stay in the community. It is the means by which we know our path and safe passage. Thus, the related concern in 1 John that those in communion "ought to likewise walk also in the very way that [Jesus] walked" (2:6). The Greek verb *planaō*, "deceive, lead astray, mislead, (lead to) wander," and its cognates are frequent in 1 John (1:8; 2:26; 3:7; 4:6). Confession is how we discern who abides in the truth of fellowship with God and with each other. Confession is how God leads us to walk in the light. The "deceivers" or "frauds" (*planoi*) of 2 John 1:7 are those who lead the community astray. They are the ones who mislead their brothers and sisters to go out and wander away from the circle. We deceive or mislead ourselves as well if we deny the presence of our own sin (1 John 1:8). Likewise, acknowledging our faults and mistakes with each keeps us in relationship to the light of God that gives direction in community. By such light, God keeps us from wandering or being

14. Ed Glasscock, "Forgiveness and Cleansing according to 1 John 1:9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (2009): 220.

13. Callahan, *Love Supreme*, 78.

led astray from fellowship with others, unlike the one who does “not understand where to go because the darkness blinds his eyes” (2:11).

Although Jesus is not the light itself in 1 John, the writers assure their audience that we have an advocate (*paraklētōn*) for our sin in Jesus Christ who is turned toward the Father (2:1). Dating the composition of the letter before John's gospel helps make sense of Jesus' promise of “another advocate” (*allon paraklētōn*) in John 14:16. In subsequent verses, the gospel clarifies that

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this other advocate will be the Holy Spirit (14:26) or Spirit of truth (15:26). It does not explain, however, the odd modifier *allon*. This would seem to suggest that the community already has an advocate, but nowhere in the gospel is Jesus explicitly described as *paraklētōs*. He is designated as such only in 1 John 2:1.

The language of Jesus as advocate in 1 John has generally been understood in legal terms, to mean the one who pleads our case before God. The precision inherent in the term *paraklētōs*, however, lends itself

to a sharper vision of how the Johannine community might have understood Jesus' distinctive role in the forgiveness of sins. The Greek term designates not merely a fellow citizen who offers assistance in the courtroom but one who lends special prestige to his client's defense because he speaks from a “decidedly higher status.”¹⁵ The *paraklētōs* has special influence—like the Latin *patronus* or, in the Roman Empire, the *advocatus*. That the Johannine community used Roman legal metaphor to describe Jesus suggests a subtle challenge to Rome's supposed supremacy. They give Jesus the crucial role of influence in a system and community not under the reign of Rome but under the reign of God the Father.

Preaching 1 John: The word of eternal life in the Easter Christ

From the beginning, 1 John 1:1–2:2 pictures Jesus as the key to common life with the Father and the Son, and with each other. Jesus first announces God's word of life, and in him this word is made good in the flesh. Moreover Jesus points the community to the eternal life beyond words that is turned toward the Father. His teachings about God and his life's example are what the community continues to gather around. Jesus reveals that life in God is always tangibly experienced in community with each other—heard with our ears, seen with our eyes, touched with our hands.

Confession or “speaking the same word as God” then becomes twofold in 1 John's sense of Christian community. Confession means acknowledging Jesus' elevated role in the community. It also

15. Lochlan Shelfer, “The Legal Precision of the Term ‘*paraklētōs*,’” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32.2 (2009): 141. Accessed December 11, 2012.

means acknowledging our sins, faults and limitations with each other. Talking about confession of sin is a difficult task in many congregations today. The truth is we inhabit a culture in the United States where "confessing" anything—even confessing Jesus—seems to immediately put us on trial. Moreover this is a trial where the verdict is already decided—and we are the losers. This kind of "tell me again how bad you are and how wrong you've been" culture tends to be just as rampant in our church communities as it is in the world "out there." More often than not (and ironically so) we are likely to react not with truthfulness but defensively, either attacking back or quietly stepping away. Both of these reactions require that we keep our most vulnerable parts hidden and out of view. In the spiritual language of the Johannine community, this means that we are prone to continue walking "in the darkness."

Against our current cultural backdrop, preaching 1 John 1:1–2:2 can become a chance to hear God's decidedly different language on community and confession. During the Easter season, many churches make frequent confession: "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" Preaching 1 John in the Easter lectionary becomes a ripe chance to show that our confession of sin with each other begins with this same Jesus. The news that Jesus announces is that God is light (1:5). This means that the light is not ours to manipulate or selectively shine only on those things with which we are comfortable. The risen Jesus shows us in wounded flesh that God is the light, light shining

on all of us and every part of us. In Jesus, we hear the Father who speaks the same word of love and forgiveness to each of us so that we might be called God's children (3:1).

First John deserves a place in the church's preaching life today because, as in Luther's day, it remains a word of comfort and restoration. It continues to be nothing less than a powerful confession of God's word of life spoken within the church. Jesus, the love of God made good in word and flesh, makes confession nothing other than a simple expression of faith and the spiritual life. Confession of sin becomes a response to what Jesus has already done as our "advocate turned toward the Father" who raises not only us but the whole world to eternal life in God (2:1–2).

First John 1:1–2:2 is a great place for a preacher to start with the letter in the Easter lectionary. First John's spiraling structure however commends any part of the letter for further attention from the pulpit. Because the themes in any one pericope of 1 John are picked up and developed elsewhere, attention to one is likely to open congregations to the message of the whole. The "word of life" revealed from start to finish in 1 John is that we belong to each other in community. To participate in the common life of the church is to participate in eternal life. First John speaks to life that is ever and always here and now, life that is the church's common DNA, a double helix of Father and Son made flesh and spirit in us. As such, eternal life is the basic building block of a church that following Jesus—and in Jesus—cannot stay dead.

Reading James in Oslo: Reflections on Text, Mission, and Preaching

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I serve as a pastor in the Church of Norway (Den Norske Kirke),¹ an evangelical Lutheran folk church, present throughout Norway and embracing all mainline conservative, liberal, radical theologies.

The parish that I served the last ten years, the parish of Grønland located in what is known as Gamle (Old) Oslo, is situated in an area where Christians are a minority and where the socio-economic status is generally low. Living conditions relative to the rest of Norway are quite harsh. Few of the most vulnerable in the parish attend worship. Those coming to church are a mix of more traditional labor-class people and young families with academic or creative arts background normally ranging in age from 20 to 93. Most Sunday morning worship services have present the multilayered folk-church: “the core” who attend regularly, another portion who participate once in a while, and a significant group who participate when there is a baptism for a child to whom they are related. We are called to preach the good news, addressing all of them.

In general, I am convinced of the following guides about preaching: 1. Preaching is and should be contextual, consequently all of us have to keep a lasting, scrutinizing, loving look on our

context, our congregation and ourselves as we prepare our sermon. 2. Be aware of the outsider-perspective. 3. Never jump over the difficult parts of the text, theology, or life experience. 4. Comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable. 5. Pray a lot, look at Jesus, and be 100 percent present.

Preaching James

In our generally privileged, post(post) modern, and quite individualistic Norwegian society, James has an important voice to “fill out” the Pauline language about the relationship between faith and deeds. James encourages an integrated faith in action and challenges us to keep worship, theology and daily life together, anchored in God’s own action and in a communal perspective for both church and society.

Gift (James 1:17a)²

I grew up in a rich, affluent area of Oslo with not so well-off but very solidarity-conscious parents. I grew up with an ambiguity: on the one hand I wished for the gifts the other children received, and on the other hand I was proud of and agreed with my parents and their priorities. One Christmas Eve when I was a child I was given the boots I wished for so strongly, and I went to bed fully happy sleeping with the boots on. Today, I proudly wear

1. Approximately 76 percent of Norway’s five million citizens are members of the Church of Norway.

2. The pericope for Year B, Proper 22 (Sunday, August 30, 2015) is James 1:17–27.

the homemade jewelry I received from my youngest son.

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...³

God is good and generous. We have different images of God. Our images are heavily influenced by the “significant others” in our childhood as well as by those who are on the roles of our parish. We might even have several images of God: perhaps one for our emotions, another driven by our intellect, a third implicit in our prayer practice, and maybe more. Too many people still have a picture of God as a critical judge, who gives nothing without expecting more in return. Others might rest upon an image of God as a shrewd accountant who expects the believer to make their payments of strong faith only then receiving gifts and miracles in return.

We live in a consumer-driven society. Every day we experience, whether consciously or unconsciously, about 3000 adverts, all of which are telling us what we lack (properties, status, experiences, success, etc.) and how by buying their product we will make up for this deficit. This triggers our envy, complexities, greed, and shame. There is a Norwegian proverb: *Mye vil ha mer og Fanden vil ha fler* [Much will have more, and the Devil will have more (people)]. Similarly my great uncle is fond of saying: The comparative is the conjugation of the Devil. In our contemporary world, we need to count our blessings, nurture our thankfulness, and cultivating a culture of unconditional affirmation—to be loved to be good—not to good to be loved.

Of course it may be that we have experienced too many losses, griefs and difficulties, or too much turmoil in our life just now to do this blessing-counting

all the time. Or perhaps we have been fed an overdose of imposed gratefulness: “Eat your food even if you despise it. Remember the starving children in Africa.” Our own problems or pains are never acknowledged in this perspective. We were raised to use our “indoor voice” that is soft and mild and to never complain or protest. Even when we sing the Kyrie Eleison in worship, we very often sound nice and mild. But the prayerbook of our Bible, Psalms, is full of complaining, accusing, utterances of revenge, protest, and questions. The Gospels tell us stories about how people are curious, mad, desperate, and stubborn approaching Jesus with their needs. Among these the Kyrie Eleison of our liturgy is quoted from the blind beggar, as he shouts, desperately getting louder and louder as Jesus passes by.

God wants us to be honest about our (troubled) lives and faith, our pains and anger, our questions and protest. And God challenges us to count our blessings, and to help one another by sharing God’s gifts with each other.

Images of God and our prayer (James 1:17)

On InterRail this summer I came across an old Daily Mail article about Angela Buttolph, a Christian fashionista, expressing how important faith is in her daily and professional life. She expresses that she even prays to God for help in choosing the right outfit for an important event. “Jesus is my stylist...I really don’t pray about my clothes that often. But I don’t see fashion as something I can’t pray about. I think God cares about what I care about.”⁴ I do believe

4. Angela Buttolph, “Living on a Prayer: Can God help you survive a slump or pick a party dress? More women believe the answer is yes...,” in *Daily Mail Online*, 9 February 2009. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1139164/Living-prayer-Can-God-help-survive-slump-pick-perfect-party->

3. James 1:17a, NRSV.

that our prayers can address all kinds of both minor and more vital issues. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he gave them the Lord's Prayer, which is quite simple and straightforward. It welcomes the kingdom of God, and addresses food and forgiveness, temptations and protection against evil. I would not guess Jesus was very worried about his outfit during his earthly life, but I suppose God will listen to Angela Buttolph and her dressing prayer with the same divine interest and attention as to everyone else.

The Bible is full of prayers of all kinds. There are several Gospel accounts that recall how the Son of God needed time by himself to pray. It is quite possible that we have this need as well.

Christian (even more Lutheran?) prayer is very simple. Where, when, how doesn't matter. Sitting, laying, dancing, walking, kneeling. Shouting, singing, silent, conversing. Complaining, accusing, praising, confessing, asking for help. Philip Yancey suggests that prayer is a most common, everyday activity (on a random day more Americans pray than those going to work, having sex, driving a car...). At the same time, prayer opens the Christian to address some of the most complicated theological questions about our lives, our relationship to God, the problem of evil. Such an everyday thing that gets at the heart of our lives is both exciting and challenging.

Images of God and prayer (James 1:17b)

...coming down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."⁵

dress--More-women-believe-answer-yes-.html. Accessed 30 September 2014.

5. James 1:17, which also resonates with 1 John 1:5.

Scripture portrays God in many different ways. The fullness of God cannot be captured in human thinking and metaphors, but our God-talk takes advantage of what we have. James here talks about God as unchanging. The Bible embraces contradictions by conveying images of God as the uplifted, perfect, unchangeable, everlasting, faithful, predictable—but also emotional, compassionate, involved, and changed by the encounter with human lives.⁶

In his book about the problem of evil and human suffering, Yancey finds comfort in realizing the very human aspects of God: how God plunges into our lives and suffers with us, is vulnerable and disappointed, betrayed and let down, and listens to all our prayers full of whatever concerns and issues.⁷ I agree. Nevertheless I realize I don't want God to be too human, too negotiable, too emotional, too unpredictable. James expresses something similar as he emphasizes God's trustworthy goodness and salvation.

Prayer changes the one praying and the one prayed for, but what about God?

The Danish hospital chaplain Preben Kok wrote a book titled, *Skæld ud på Gud*, which translates, *Yelling at God*.⁸ He shares how his own and his patients' serious illnesses and sufferings have exposed him to a God who does not fix everything, does not protect us against all sorts of trial and evil. Kok, rather, witnesses to a God who never walks away. He argues that we need to acknowledge our own vulnerability and dependence, surrender to God and share the

6. For example in Hosea where God is pictured as the despised, suffering, grieving lover.

7. Cf. Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). Norwegian title: *Bønn: Har det noen hensikt?*

8. Preben Kok, *Skæld ud på Gud* (Copenhagen: Informations Forlag, 2008).

responsibility for our life and wellbeing with God. Where we have power, we should be accountable, but where we do not, we should be children of God similar to the way we (if we were lucky) have been children to our own parents: cry out, scream, surrender, protest.

Scripture is promising concerning prayer. For example: “Pray...and you will receive.”⁹ “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”¹⁰ Quite a few of us, however, have experienced that it is not at all that easy. Sometimes we do not actually receive an answer at all or at least something very different from that for which we had hoped.

My experience is quite often that prayer changes me. Prayer transforms the one praying. Prayer transforms people knowing that others are praying for them. To me it comes as a form of inner peace, a renewed life perspective, a source of power and strength, a sign of comfort or hope in my surroundings.

But what about God? Like when Abraham is negotiating the fate of Sodom and Gomorra with God,¹¹ does prayer change God? Does such an image of God place too much power in human agency or not?

A world filled to the brim with prayer might help to fashion a different world, but God is unconditionally capable of doing whatever God wants, irrespective of our prayers.

To listen and to act (James 1:19–27)

In Norwegian this is the passage title. The words for “listen” (*høre*) and “act” (*gjøre*) are phonetically quite similar and rhyme. Not so in English, unfortunately.¹²

Listening is challenging enough in our fragmented, noisy, consumer-oriented culture. My husband is a really good listener; very attentive, always asking further questions, capturing a lot of stories. He might return home without having uttered a word about himself. People are starving for good listeners. Danish missionary researcher Mogens S. Mogensen talks about “theology of listening,” sharing how the Danish Lutheran Church organized encounters with neighbors of other faiths and life-views simply to listen.¹³ The church representatives received valuable knowledge about people and their context and about how they looked upon the Danish church. These meetings increased the goodwill toward the majority church and nurtured people’s own faith, as participants were encouraged to express it—to speak it into being.

There can be serious ambiguity in how our “acting” corresponds with our listening and talking.

On the one hand we long for authenticity. We respect people who act upon what they hear and say, conveying a contingent expression. On the other hand, we find a charming solidarity when people fall into temptation, such as talking about a penchant for chocolate, drinking or dropping out on jogging. That is, it is not desirable to be too perfect. Our Facebook-lives encourage us to uncommitted “liking,” wherein acting is reduced to a click or screen-touch. But true acting

of the Bible has a slightly different subtitle, “hearing and obeying,” which emphasizes obedience more than action. A subtle difference.

13. Mogens S. Mogensen, “A Missiology of Listening for a Folk Church in a Postmodern Context” in *Foundations for Mission*, Emma Wild-Wood and Peniel Rajkumar, eds. (Oxford: Regnum, 2012), 190–204.

9. Matt 21:22.

10. John 14:14.

11. Gen 18:16–33.

12. The Contemporary English Version

speaks louder than words, and we remember much more profoundly things we do than things we just hear or “like.”

The first person in the Bible to give God a name is Hagar. An Egyptian slave woman in a desperate situation escapes from her owners. She encounters God in the desert. From then on, she called him “the God who sees me.”¹⁴ In the Exodus story, God repeatedly states of God’s self: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians. . . .”¹⁵ God sees and listens and acts upon it.

The same pattern is apparent in the life of Jesus. He asks people questions, listens to them, and transforms their lives. Shane Claiborne has written a book *The Irresistible Radical: Living as an Ordinary Radical*¹⁶ wherein he reflects upon the power of the gospel when turned toward everyday life. In Norway, it is interesting to acknowledge how our main diaconal organizations enjoy great respect independent of their quite different theological profile and reflection. This is likely because they listen to the most marginalized and excluded in our society, and they also act upon it. People find this utterly trustworthy.

The law of liberty (James 1:25)

Freedom and freedoms—liberals, conservatives, radicals, all emphasize different perspectives as they fight about the ideological ownership to the word “freedom.” Commercial, cultural, religious, ideological powers do this as well.

14. El-roi. Gen 16:13.

15. Exod 3:7–8a, NRSV.

16. Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

What is freedom about? Fewer restrictions on alcohol and jet-skis, increased tax-free quotes and reduced tax on fortune and inheritance? Freedom of expression? If so, to what extent? Freedom to beg in the street? Our government wants to criminalize that. Freedom is a core concept to most people on many different levels. Freedom expressed in basic human rights is about the freedom to life, providing for basic needs, safety, love, education, justice, religion, expression. It implies freedom from poverty, violence, oppression, exclusion, starvation, etc.

A challenge comes when your freedom collides with mine. Who is to surrender? Is there a hierarchy of freedoms? If so, who decides? Is it about power, or about the significance of a particular freedom? Which has priority: my right to drive faster or your right to walk safely in the street? My right to increased ease of access to alcohol or your right to be less exposed to the negative effects of increased ease of access and consumption of alcohol? My right to a comfortable and consuming lifestyle or your right to a more sustainable and green society? My freedom to use niqāb without stigma or yours to see my face and encourage “oppressed” women to stand up against this practice?

From a liberal standpoint, freedom is often said to be about individual choice, to have different consumer options. On a certain welfare level, of course, that might be partially true. But the many poor people in Norwegian society do not have these choices. To a significant group, namely the poor and marginalized, freedom is about basic needs.

From another perspective, when people, for different reasons, make life choices that are destructive for themselves and others, what are the limits of freedom?

And another, recall how Thomas

Merton, when entering his new little monastery cell, talked about “the four walls of his new freedom.” Freedom can also be about fewer choices, fewer expectations, less stress, more focus. It can be exhausting to get up every day and continually make new assessments about hair color, study, partner, hobbies, work, how to realize myself even better. Recall Janis Joplin’s “Me and Bobby Mcgee: Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” Freedom can be about not being owned by material stuff and property. Recall the Chinese proverb: “If you own more than three things, they own you.” On the other hand, in a different meaning—a life with nothing left to loose, nothing worth fighting for, might be poor.

James talks about “the perfect law, the law of liberty.”¹⁷ Law and freedom, at least in a Norwegian context, very often will be perceived as opposites. Freedom is a core concept in Christian theology. The Bible tells us that that we were chosen to be free and that Christ has set us free,¹⁸ but people outside (and quite often inside) the church relate Christianity to law, to commandment and restrictions. When my eldest son chose social-humanistic, academic confirmation last year,¹⁹ the organizers asked me to be one of ten lecturers on the concept of freedom, myself from the perspective of Christian faith and others from the disciplines of, for example, biology, anthropology, psychology, history, etc. A friend asked me: How could they ask you as a theologian to lecture on freedom? Isn’t your expertise more about rules and commandments?

In James’ anthropology, humans are

17. James 1:25a.

18. Galatians 5.

19. Confirmation age youth in Norway have the option of taking Confirmation in the church from the standpoint of Christian faith or outside the church from a social-humanistic standpoint.

created in God’s image with a certain freedom and corresponding responsibility, though heavily influenced by the battle between evil and good.

Why do people associate Christianity not with freedom but with commandments and restrictions? I have to guess. We have a history of being more able and willing to communicate judgment than grace. We ought to tune more carefully into the Christian freedom as different: freedom FROM guilt, death, and the fear of not being loved, and a freedom TO receive grace, do good, be unconditionally loved, eternally.

The tongue is a fire (James 3:5–6)²⁰

Is gossip the most common sin of all? How devastating its consequences can be! “A good lie might walk from Bagdad all the way to Constantinople, while truth is still looking for its sandals...” How much more is this true in our times! Facebook, the lunchroom, etc... There are so many questions to consider: How do I deal with gossip? What is gossip? What is a lie? What about the little white ones? Are we supposed to say the truth always, even when it hurts? What are our motivation for lying, gossiping, or for telling the truth?

With all our channels of communication, both praising and cursing have reached a threatening level. James states that with the same tongue we are praising God and cursing humans created in the image of God. He offers several metaphors, which are useful in our times as well, e.g., how we manage a big horse by putting a bit in its mouth,²¹ or how we maneuver a big boat with a small rudder.²²

20. The pericope for Year B, Proper 24 (September 13, 2015) is James 3:1–12.

21. James 3:3.

22. James 3:4.

The tongue has great power. In today's world we stand in the tension between the Christian ideal of self-control, which some understand as preventing people from being straightforward and honest and standing up when needed, and the ideal of fully expressing all your thoughts and emotions irrespective of how they can limit, dominate, or hurt other people.²³ How we admire self-discipline related to training and weight loss but not so much with respect to talking and gossiping! James challenges us. How can fresh and bitter water run from the same source?²⁴ Jesus says that it is not what comes into the mouth that causes uncleanness, but what comes out.²⁵

Rather, the Christian is called to speak truth in love. It seems simple. The Eighth Commandment is basically, "Don't lie."²⁶ How much more so when lying is covering up for evil, transgressions, cowardliness, injustice. Still we need to say more. The Bible tells us to "speak truth in love."²⁷ Tell the truth, generally speaking. Avoid it when it damages more than it heals (after a thorough power analysis of the case). What we say should be true, but we do not always have to say all that is true. Scrutinize your own intentions for lying—and for telling the truth. The golden rule might help us on the way: "Do unto others as you want others to do unto you."²⁸ Remember that this is not always black and white. Consider

23. Consider the many debates and discussions on the Internet that are rough and so full of harassment and hate speech that they silence the more sensitive participants and threaten the freedom of expression.

24. James 3:11.

25. Matt 15:11.

26. Exod 20:16.

27. Eph 4:15.

28. Matt 7:12; Luke 6:31.

the woman who has to lie about being busy, because she actually is not able to say "no" without an explanation. Consider your friend who has finally spent some money on herself and her hair, and asks you what you think. The children ask us about "bad men" or the suffering of other kids. The simple answer is "don't lie." The more difficult answer is "don't lie, only sometimes."

Truth without love can be brutality. Love without truth can be a lie.

Suffering, prayer and anointing, community (James 5:13–20)²⁹

James says: "If somebody is suffering, then pray." It sounds a bit easy. It is a profound truth though to bring all our life to God in prayer and to remember God's presence in all aspects of our everyday life. We confess a suffering, crucified, and resurrected God with a blood-stained, tortured, and slaughtered body and a throne in heaven. We believe in a God who is present in all Creation—suffering, crying, fighting, comforting, healing, triumphing. This God is accessible in prayer whenever, wherever.

The practice of anointing the sick is scarcely described elsewhere in the Bible. As far as I know, it is not a very common practice in the Church of Norway, but it is in Pentecostal or Roman Catholic churches. Nevertheless preaching gives way to practice, and this text provides an opportunity to highlight and elaborate the practice of anointing the sick—a bodily, concrete, and physical (less verbal) expression of Christian care. Consider reflecting upon the blessings and challenges connected to the practice of anointing the sick.

29. The pericope for Year B, Proper 26 (September 27, 2015).

Another important aspect of this text is the relationship of sin and illness. It is not uncommon in the Old Testament to understand illness as a punishment for sin. Jesus explicitly rejects this, but very often keeps the healing and the forgiveness of sins together. James in this lecture supports this way of thinking; it is very important to state clearly that people who suffer from illness should not feel more or less a sinner than anyone else.

James challenges our understanding and practice of community. Are we building trust in a way that opens up for confessing our sins to each other? Are we ready to show the less successful dimensions of our lives, speaking honestly about life and faith?

When I started practicing judo at the age of 20, the first thing I learned was how to fall—to fall in a way that reduces the risk of injury and makes it easier to get up again. To fall and get up again is sort of the Christian core pattern, and Christian congregations should be experts on that. More often, I think, we are so afraid of

falling or of having others see us fall, that we pretend not to fall at all, ever. Instead we pretend to be honest about our daily dependence on God's grace.

“...if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”³⁰ Church history tells us how the clergy in power have frequently tried to forcibly convert people. It is an ugly, recurring aspect of the church's story. Confessing and conversion processes should be analyzed in power-perspective with the speck and the log story always in mind.³¹ That said, to comfort and to trouble each other in a healthy way, nurturing faith and lives and community is a good thing. James is a significant guide on that road.

30. James 3:19.

31. Luke 6:41ff.

Multivalent Readings of Multivalent Texts: 1 Samuel 10:27 and the Problem of Textual Variants in the Interpretation of Scripture

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At a recent Bible study, a congregation member expressed frustration at the multiple Bible versions used by the group. “I wish,” he said, “that there was just one English version.” After a discussion about functional and dynamic equivalence, I assured him that we could trust all our Bibles to be the same whenever it mattered. While the spirit of such a sentiment is quite true, the reality is something different.

Take, for example, the case of the transition between 1 Samuel 10 and 11. Many older translations, including the KJV, end chapter 10 with simply, “But he kept his peace.” The NRSV contains an entire additional paragraph at this point, while the NIV relegates this paragraph to a footnote.¹ Moreover, both the Good News Translation and NRSV begin chapter 11 with, “About a month later,” which seems

1. “Now Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and had entered Jabesh-gilead” (1 Samuel 10:27 NRSV).

to be missing from most other versions.

The textual problem with the ending of 1 Samuel 10 is well-attested.² The issue revolves around the verse’s final two Hebrew words, *waybhiy kəmačariyś* (“and he was like one who is silent”) and the possibility of correcting this somewhat strange Hebrew form to *kəmačadaś* or even *kəməw čadaś* (“and it was about a month”) and prepending it to the following verse. The difference in the consonantal text between the two options can be explained by scribal error giving a *resh* for a *dalet*.

2. See, for example, the discussion in Frank Moore Cross, “The Ammonite Oppression of the Tribes of Gad and Reuben: Missing Verses in 1 Samuel 11 found in 4QSamuel^a,” in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*, H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld, eds. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 148–158; Alexander Rofé, “The Acts of Nahash according to 4QSam^a,” in *Israel Exploration Journal* 32 (1982): 129–133; and the excellent treatment in Edward D. Herbert, “4QSam^a and its Relationship to the LXX: An Exploration in Stemmatological Analysis,” in *IX Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies*, Bernard A. Taylor, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 37–55.

The Septuagint suggests this correction, reading “and it was as after a month” at this place. The issue is further complicated by the Dead Sea discovery of a scroll known as 4QSam^a which adds the additional paragraph introducing chapter eleven. The information contained in this paragraph found at Qumran was also known to Josephus, though in *Antiquities of the Jews* he presents it in a slightly different order.³

How we resolve this issue has ramifications for our understanding of both pericopes, for the character of Saul, and even for our view of David, one of the most important figures of the Hebrew Bible. This paper discusses the results of each choice and suggests that rather than coming to a resolution, we allow the paradoxical choice of multiple readings to stand, so that the reader can enter into dialogue with the variant interpretations.

Interpreting the textual revision and Qumran addition

Reading “and it was about a month” at the beginning of chapter 11 places the account of Nahash the Ammonite’s siege of Jabesh-gilead firmly in the earliest days of Saul’s kingship. This placement is satisfying in a few ways. The account takes place before the summary of Saul’s reign that begins chapter 13, suggesting an earlier date for the Ammonite campaign. It also places the success against Nahash long before Saul’s decline. The powerful reaction of Saul toward the Ammonites—his message sent with a piece of the divided yoke of oxen to all of Israel⁴—may be a hint of the madness that is to come, as may be the comments about his prophetic ecstasy in chapter 10.⁵

All this taken together foreshadows Saul’s eventual descent.

The insertion given in 4QSam^a gives additional background information for the account of the Ammonite campaign against Jabesh-gilead. Frank Moore Cross suggests that the addition helps to explain the severity of Nahash’s behavior toward the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, gouging out their right eye, by explaining that they were harboring fugitives.⁶ This explanation, however, is unsatisfactory, since it simply transfers the question. Why, then, was Nahash originally gouging out the right eye of the Gadites and the Reubenites?

Instead, the Qumran material serves to intensify the horror of Nahash’s attack on Jabesh-gilead. Not only was he threatening to take the region of Gilead, but he had already devastated all the Israelites who had settled on the far side of the Jordan and left no one there with both eyes. It may surprise us, if this is so, that no action was taken against the Ammonites prior to the campaign of Saul.

What should not surprise us, if the intensity of Nahash’s cruelty is increased, is the strength with which Saul responded. In the verses that follow,⁷ we are told that the spirit of God came to Saul, and some 370,000 men were mustered to battle against the Ammonites. This divine power and vast army is certainly excessive if only for the siege of a single city. It is a more appropriate reply to the subjugation of two entire Israelite tribes.

Such power given to Saul’s command can be read as widespread approval of him as king by the vast majority of Israelites. With hundreds of thousands of men at his command, nearly the whole population of Israel would have been involved;

3. Cf. *Antiquities* VI.v.1.

4. 1 Sam 11:7.

5. 1 Sam 10:9–13.

6. Cross, 156.

7. 1 Sam 11:8ff.

even taking this to be the Bible's typical hyperbolic style in describing military might, we still have a massive army that involved the response of the entirety of Israel. After the counter-siege against the Ammonites, the Israelites who rejected Saul initially⁸ seem to have come around to his side. This helps to give reason for the final comments on Saul's ascent to the throne in 1 Sam 11:12ff.

This assists the reader in shaping an understanding of Saul as a biblical character. He is the one who, though accepted as king by the people, was rejected by God. This is concomitant with Samuel's words in 1 Sam 10:19, where he interprets the Hebrews' demand for a king to be a sign of their distrust of God as their leader. Although Saul is selected to be king by God, it is clear that God would prefer no king at all. The choice of Saul, approved by all despite his evident insanity from the first, is consequence of the Israelites' distrust of God.

Interpreting the Masoretic Text

If, however, we read the words in question as, "And he kept his peace," we have no additional information about Nahash at all—not even when his campaign took place. We may guess that the battle happened early in Saul's career from its placement in the book, but how early remains in question. We cannot, then, read in the Nahash story as an early and wide acceptance of Saul on the part of Israel.

Instead, the report of Saul's election by lot to the kingship ends with his reaction to the "sons of worthlessness" who despised him and presented no gift for his coronation. The inclusion of this response softens the previous words. Without it, the account ends by saying that "they brought

him no gift," a rejection that resounds in the listener's ear. The clear point of the verse is to let the reader know that not everyone in Israel approved of Saul as king. This begins to prepare us for his eventual replacement. By adding the two words, attention is shifted from the repudiation of the king by "some worthless fellows" to Saul's response to their repudiation, a response that moderates his rejection.

With this shift, we learn more about Saul's character. In 1 Samuel 10, we find Saul speaking with the spirit of prophecy. In 1 Sam 11:6, the Spirit of God inspires him in his campaign against the Ammonites. If this is not insanity, it is clear that God has chosen Saul for the kingship, not just through the circumstances of his election, but also through the presence of the Spirit and deeds of power.

The inclusion of Saul's response to his detractors in 10:27 helps the reader to understand God's choice. At the start of his reign, Saul behaves thoughtfully and compassionately. Rather than retaliating against those who reject him, Saul remains quiet. Perhaps he hopes that they will come to appreciate his leadership after some time passes; perhaps he simply understands his calling to kingship as leader over even those who dislike him. In any case, this behavior is described using a participle, indicating ongoing action.⁹ This may be a hint that his reaction is in line with his personality more generally understood. The man we meet here is a far cry from the character we will come to know in the depths of his madness later in the book. A king who knows how to be silent is in line with the ideal found in Israel's wisdom tradition.¹⁰

9. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed., E. Kautzsch, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 360.

10. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962), 432.

8. Cf. 1 Sam 10:27.

By keeping the received text in 10:27, we have evidence that Saul is not mad at the beginning of his story. This draws Samuel's pronouncement against him in 1 Sam 13:13ff into even starker relief. When Saul improperly offers a sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel to appear, God rejects him. With this, Saul's downfall begins—a downfall that will eventually lead to the anointing of David and Saul's insanity directed at David. It is worth noting that this reading fits nicely with the cultic goals of the Deuteronomist author.

This reading also strengthens the character of David. Gerhard von Rad suggests that “the stories of Saul and David are really stories about David.”¹¹ If Saul is simply a foil for David, the bad king to David's good, then we can see this development in Saul's character as a reflection on David as well. David is, of course, not unscarred by error. His behavior toward Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, is certainly deplorable to God,¹² and yet his reign is marked by an eternal covenant. Saul's kingly character in 1 Samuel 10 contrasted with his later failing gives us further evidence for the interpretation that David, while imperfect, behaved rightly *with respect to the cult* and, thus, in the eyes of the author, was the ideal king.

Implications for interpretation

We see, then, that our choice of text will affect the character of Saul put forward by the text as well as his place in the larger biblical account. With the received text, Saul is a good choice as king whose slow descent into madness and ugly death are the cause of cultic impropriety. Emending the text gives us a Saul who is a poor

choice from the start, a clear sign that all of Israel has spurned God's protection by demanding a king.

Of course, we should not argue for one interpretation over another from its

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results. Neither is there clarity over which version of the text is more original, given that new evidence in the debate continues to come to light. For that matter, one might wonder whether the question of originality truly should dictate our choice. Both textual variants are attested to by authentic witnesses to the Jewish tradition—Josephus and the community at Qumran favored one reading (“it was about a month”), the Masoretic Text the other (“he held his peace”). We could easily argue that the longer usage period of the received text gives it an authority on par with divine inspiration, even if it is a textual innovation. And yet our choice over

11. Ibid., 324.

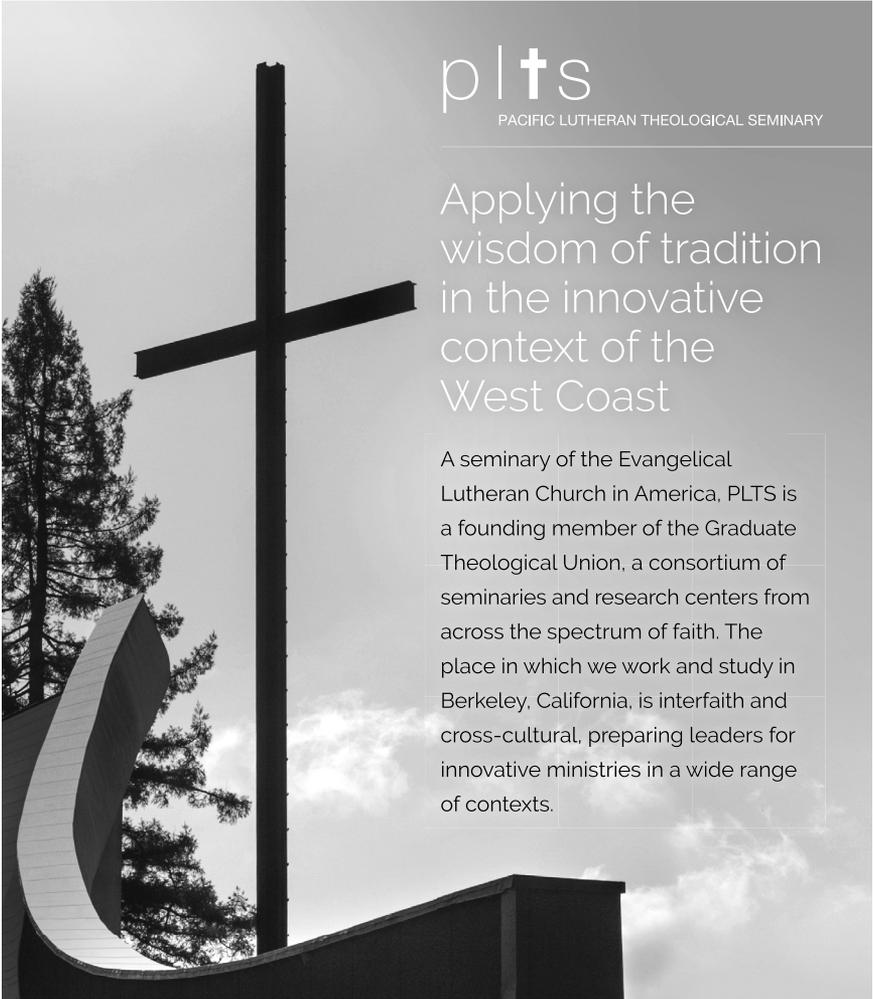
12. Cf. 2 Samuel 12.

such a small matter—between a *resh* and a *dalet* in this case—makes a significant difference in the portrayal of one of the most important characters in our scriptures!

The scholarly tradition has always striven for exactness. When faced with a choice, we make a decision based on the best evidence we can. But perhaps we would benefit, in some instances, with holding multiple possibilities in tension. As we interpret our texts, we could record the possible implications of *both* readings, allowing the reader to make her own choice as she encounters the text and listens to God through it. Instead of choosing *dalet* or *resh*, why not suggest *dalet* and *resh*?

This may be difficult to reconcile with the needs of scientific inquiry, but it is authentic to both Jewish and Christian tradition. The medieval rabbis, even when

coming down clearly on a particular issue, tend to record minority opinions; for example, the differing viewpoints of the schools of Hillel and Shammai pervade the Tannaitic literature. Christianity also understands that one text can have multiple meanings; the medieval scholastics codified the fourfold sense of scripture as one way of acknowledging this. We, too, must be able to recognize, even in the rational setting of our interpretive work, the multivalence of textual meaning, particularly when, as people of faith, we assert that the Spirit of God is at work in and through the texts. If we allow it, interpretative problems like textual variants may become one more way we can discover the rich diversity of God's word speaking through the biblical corpus.



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Book Reviews

Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God. By Eric A. Seibert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. ISBN-13: 978-0-8006-6344-5. xii and 347 pages. Paper. \$25.00.

This book examines troubling passages about the image and behavior of God in Old Testament narrative in order to consider their use for our understanding of who God really is, and whether we should use such images of God as a ruthless executioner, mass murderer, divine warrior, deceiver, and instigator of genocide to shape our own beliefs and practices. Seibert's proposal for responsible use of these texts advocates a christo-centric hermeneutic grounded in the understanding of God that Jesus reveals in the Gospels. Emerging from his teaching at Messiah College and designed for undergraduates, this is a well-organized and fully accessible text addressing the needs of those non-specialists throughout the church who would be discerning readers of the Bible.

In Part 1, Seibert presents "disturbing divine behavior" by reviewing several stories that portray God in problematic ways, then assessing the solutions of those who have been troubled by these divine images from the early church to the present—all of which Seibert finds inadequate. In Part 2, Seibert analyzes the genre of biblical narrative and asks whether biblical narrative always intended to preserve "what really happened." His negative conclusion opens the way for alternative explanations of biblical texts as political propaganda, justification of failures and disasters, support for partisan policies and ideas, and encouragement of specific beliefs and practices. In Part 3, Seibert highlights the important distinction between the "textual God and the actual God," and concludes that Jesus in the Gospels reveals God as God really is (regardless of what the texts suggest): nonviolent, kind to the wicked, does not use disease or natural disaster to punish people,

and essentially loving. There are two appendices on violence related to Jesus in New Testament books, and on ideas about inspiration and biblical authority.

This book will strike some readers as superficial and unsophisticated, and others will be dissatisfied with his handling of the important issue of the reliability of the depiction of Jesus in the Gospels. Yet throughout, Seibert is sensitive to the "control belief" that God actually said and did what the Bible claims of his intended audience who tend toward the "maximalist" position on matters of the historicity and reliability of the Bible. Especially among newcomers to the study of disturbing divine images and behavior in the Old Testament, and to the critical study of the Bible more generally, this book deserves a wide reading.

Mark W. Bartusch
Valparaiso University

Empowering Couples: A Narrative Approach to Spiritual Care. By Duane R. Bidwell. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. ISBN-13: 978-0-8006-6342-1. viii and 144 pages. Paper. \$15.00.

Duane Bidwell's book highlights the resilience of covenant relationships, the power of narratives and the help of spiritual symbols in dealing with marital problems. Drawing from existing theories in the field of counseling, Bidwell proposes a three-dimensional SMART approach which is empowering to the couples, narrative in approach, and spiritual in focus.

In the first chapter, Bidwell highlights the theological norms of mutuality and partnership in family. Relational justice, equal regard, mutual empowerment, respect for embodiment, and resistance to colonization characterize healthy covenant partnerships. In the second chapter, the author correlates Gottman's four horsemen of apocalypse, i.e., common behaviors detrimental to marriage, with the destructive passions (and the ways to resist them) identified by the early desert fathers in the Christian tradition. The fol-



lowing five chapters adapt David Nylund's five-step SMART approach to address relationship problems between couples. Bidwell explicates strategies to: 1) separate people from problems; 2) map mutual influence; 3) attend to teamwork; 4) reclaim partnerships; and 5) tell a new story. A master story-teller himself, Bidwell introduces each step with a case analysis, identifies its passions, and highlights the relevance of the step in care-giving contexts.

Bidwell's insightful and practical approach is a valuable tool to ministers and counselors working with couples in need of help. It respects couples and helps them to find resilience in their relationships. It empowers couples to overcome destructive passions and narrate their stories with new hope, purpose, and direction. Bidwell should be commended for yet another valuable and accessible contribution to the field of pastoral care.

James Taneti
Campbell University Divinity School

From the Big Bang to God: Our Awe-Inspiring Journey of Evolution. By Lloyd Geering. Salem, Ore.: Polebridge Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-5981-5139-8. 195 pages. Paper. \$20.00.

The central premise of this book is that we need a common story of human identity in order to address adequately the problems of the world. The Great Story told by science now provides this needed unified account. We have entered a new era in which science has replaced religion as the framing narrative of human life.

The bulk of this book is an accessible account of the universe's evolution from the origin of the cosmos in the Big Bang to the development of the solar system, life on earth, and humanity. From there, Geering traces the origin of human language and thought, the genesis of the many gods as primitive attempts to explain nature, the emergence of the monotheistic religions, and then the rise of modern science 250 years ago, where his

story ends. The attempts of the great world religions to give an "account of everything" and thus overcome cultural divisions have now been superseded by the success of science in actually accomplishing this. Evolution has brought the world beyond the age of religion, and non-theistic evolution is the metanarrative that lets us understand the cosmos and our place in it.

Living thoughtfully in our time surely includes taking account of the universe's long story uncovered by science. However, this book exhibits a remarkably limited cultural perspective in its assumption that science is the pinnacle of truth and meaning, and thus traditional religion is to be left behind as obsolete. We cannot ignore the evolutionary story that science has told with increasing clarity, and Geering's book is a provocative account of why "the idea of God no longer functions as it used to in the collective mind of Western society" (127). However, readers of this book will need to do their own work if they want to weave these new perspectives together with any continuing role for faith that is recognizably Christian or even theist.

Brian Peterson
Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary

What Christianity Is Not: An Exercise in 'Negative' Theology. By Douglas John Hall. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2013. ISBN-13: 978-1-6109-7671-8. xvii and 175 pages. Paper. \$18.00.

This final book of Douglas John Hall (emeritus professor of theology at McGill University), dedicated to his grandchildren, functions as a repository of wisdom of one of the most important theologians of the church of our day.

As the title suggests, Hall argues that before we can say *what Christianity is* (the work of *kataphatic* theology) we need to be clear about what Christianity is *not* (an exercise in *apophatic* theology). His goal is to create space for the essence of Christianity to make itself known by first decentering those ele-



ments of the Christian tradition that anyone in our North American context will be familiar with, but which Hall argues only masquerade as the heart of the Christian faith. While culture, text (the Bible), doctrine, ethics, the church, and some understanding of truth are all part of the Christian tradition, neither is the essence of this faith.

By clarifying “what Christianity is not,” Hall effectively (and in a balanced way) creates an open, “unlabeled space...where the reality under discussion may be allowed to speak, as it were, for itself.” Hall concludes that the heart of Christianity is a name, the Name, whose face is not that of the glorious, triumphalistic Jesus of Christendom, but the disfigured and brutalized face of the crucified Christ (Endo, *Silence*). This Jesus calls for a new form of Christianity.

This is a small but important book, given the church’s frequent lament about the loss of its status in the world today. Here is, perhaps, a minority view (written from the perspective of Luther’s theology of the cross) that calls readers to see in the demise of Christendom (establishment religion) among us not an occasion for nervous hand-wringing but for becoming a more authentic community of faith.

Mark W. Bartusch

Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary. By Arland J. Hultgren. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN-10: 0802826091. ISBN-13: 978-0-8028-2609-1. xxvii & 804 pages. Cloth. \$60.00.

Lutherans tend to think of Paul’s letter to the Romans as their book, but a “Lutheran” reading of Romans has been under attack in recent years from the “new perspective on Paul” and the emphasis on reading Romans in the light of social issues in the Roman house churches. The seasoned Lutheran scholar Arland Hultgren in this major new commentary seeks to recover a fully theological reading, one very congenial to Martin Luther’s the-

ology. In debates about the meaning of Romans, much depends on whether you think Paul wrote primarily to address actual issues among the Roman believers or primarily out of his own concerns. Hultgren takes the latter approach; Romans is a discourse on Paul’s theology intended to overcome any worries the Roman Christians might have about supporting an apostle with a bad reputation in some quarters of the church. The result, although deeply engaging and often persuasive, cannot do justice to chapters 9–11 as an integral part of the letter’s purpose and does not account adequately for the specificity of the situation addressed in 14:1–15:13. Nevertheless, Hultgren’s patient grappling with the text, especially in dealing with chapters 1–8, shows that much in a “Lutheran” reading is still on target. This is a full commentary on the Greek text, and Hultgren’s section by section analysis, with lengthy bibliographies, notes on the text and translation, general comment, and detailed comment, is a goldmine of information and fruitful interpretation. He includes 8 appendices covering 100 pages that deal with special issues of interpretation. Pastors who want an up-to-date detailed commentary that is also easy to use and helpful for teaching and preaching will find this to be just what they are looking for.

David Kuck
United Theological College, Jamaica

The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart. By Mark Achtemeier. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-6642-3990-9. xv and 137 pages. Paper. \$17.00.

It requires a great deal of courage to write such a book. Christians remain deeply divided about the place of gay and lesbian individuals in the church, especially about same-gender marriages for clergy in their denominations. At the same time the U.S. seems to be in the midst of a tidal shift regarding the legality of same-sex marriages among the states. For this



reason an increasing number of congregations are going to be faced with moral deliberation about whether to authorize same-sex marriage ceremonies. In such an environment it is extremely challenging for a church leader to have to articulate one's biblical and theological reasoning about such questions. It is even more difficult, as with this author, to say you changed your mind about your previous conclusions.

Achtemeier explains his point of departure as deriving from his growing awareness that anti-gay teaching in the church has caused serious spiritual alienation and psychological harm to gay and lesbian individuals, especially to those trying to conform their own sexual orientation to such teaching. By contrast, he argues that the Bible overwhelmingly testifies that it is God's will that human beings flourish spiritually. This basic contradiction created for him cognitive and emotional disequilibrium. As the author examined more closely the seven passages that are regularly cited in opposition to same-sex relationships, he "discovered that the social and cultural settings of the biblical writers did not allow for the possibility of the sort of covenanted, faithful, egalitarian, gay partnerships and marriages that are available today" (129). Instead these texts are directed at particular types of sexual activity (violent or exploitative) that are not really pertinent to the current consideration of loving, committed, and mutual same-sex marriages.

The author furthermore claims that the Bible discloses that God's intention for Christian marriage involves "the complete gift of body, life, and spirit in a relationship of mutual love and commitment with a beloved partner" in accordance with Christ's self-giving love (128). Such an understanding of marriage can apply as much in the case of same-gender marriages as with heterosexual ones. This conclusion was not attenuated by the possibility of procreation insofar as there are many marriages that offer blessing apart from the bearing of children. God's purposes of establishing fulfillment and Christ-like love in the marital bond should not exclude same-sex couples. Achtemeier concludes: "I

find myself longing for the day when all who condemn and all who suffer will once again hear the clear voice of the gospel reaching out to bring healing and redemption in the midst of heartbreak and spiritual devastation" (131).

The pastoral tone, biblical arguments, and theological reasoning of this book make it a timely contribution to the ongoing discussions needful in the church. It is recommended for reflection by those whose views are on all sides of this question.

Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Ethics: A Liberative Approach. Edited by Miguel A. De La Torre. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9787-7. xi and 264 pages. Paper. \$35.00.

Miguel De La Torre has edited a fine resource which can aid in sensitively growing our awareness of the various ethics of marginalized people. The book itself is divided into three main sections. Part one explores the larger global context from which liberative ethics is being written. The first three chapters describe major themes, issues, and voices within Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The global economic challenges that the majority world nations face is considered in the fourth chapter. In part two, the focus turns explicitly toward the United States. Chapters five through eight offer key perspectives from various ethnic and racial groups that have been historically marginalized. Each chapter, whether Hispanic, African American, Asian American, or American Indian, will expose the reader to key developments in thought, people, and themes. In the final section, a more thorough treatment of gender, sexual identity, and disability is developed. In every chapter of the book you will learn key people and themes and will end with some study questions to consider and suggested reading lists for further reading if desired.

The introduction explains that the book



is not liberationist but rather a liberative ethics approach. The difference is that liberationist approaches are explicitly Christian in theological orientation, while liberative ethics are broader than just Christian voices; however, both of these emerge from marginalized religious communities. Nonetheless the book is dominated by Christian voices, although it does include portraits of people like Malcom X.

There is a slight inconsistency from chapter to chapter in terms of style and focus. Do not expect each chapter to follow the exact same pattern. At times one might also wish for a corresponding “reader” to immediately engage some of the resources mentioned. No such book exists right now. Nonetheless, this book is an excellent resource as an entry-level survey into a wide variety of marginalized groups. If you do not already own a similar type of resource, then I highly recommend this for personal reference libraries of all clergy and pastors.

Drew Hart
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life. By Walter Kasper. New York: Paulist Press, 2014. Translated by William Madges. ISBN: 978-0-8091-0609-7. xvi and 270 pages. Cloth. \$29.95.

Jesus means divine mercy. How encouraging that Cardinal Walter Kasper acknowledges the centrality of God’s mercy in Jesus Christ with reference to the *Joint Declaration* (12-13, 79)! As testimony to the achievements of ecumenical rapprochement, the references to Luther are appreciative, whether regarding his Reformation breakthrough (100) or for his interpretation of Mary (209, 217).

Kasper undertakes a comprehensive, systematic treatment of the meaning of mercy, retrospective, and prospective. He grounds his examination deeply in biblical sources, Old and New Testaments, with special attention to the message of Jesus. God’s very name reveals God’s mercy, as do God’s option for life and for the poor. Jesus’ birth brought near God’s

mercy to the little ones, even as his beatitudes and parables resound with merciful promises. Jesus’ existence for others culminates with his taking upon himself the sins of all people, revealing on the cross the depths and costliness of God’s own mercy.

Cardinal Kasper is at his most eloquent in his systematic reflections: “For love entails becoming so one with the other that, as a result, neither the beloved nor the lover is absorbed in the other. ...The paradox of love is that it is a unity that includes otherness and difference” (92). The author advocates the way of mercy as the meaning of the Christian life. The value of the church in the world is to be measured by an ecclesial practice of mercy, which is undermined wherever the church contradicts its own identity. The church is called to foster a culture of mercy in the world, including addressing the contradictions of economic globalization (184-186). Kasper draws upon Roman Catholic social teaching and concludes his book by highlighting Mary as “the mother of mercy” in accord with the dogmatic traditions of his church.

In this inspiring book, Kasper appeals to the breadth of Roman Catholicism in service of the evangelical heart of the Christian message: “Mercy is the reflection of God’s glory in this world and the epitome of the message of Jesus Christ, which was given to us as a gift and which we are to further bestow on others” (218).

Craig L. Nesson

Mediating Faith: Faith Formation in a Trans-media Era. By Clint Schnekloth. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-4514-7229-5. xv and 135 pages. Paper. \$20.60.

Mediating Faith is the published D.Min. dissertation (Fuller Seminary) of Clint Schnekloth, who is an ordained pastor in the ELCA, an online blogger, and an unofficial expert on digital social media and ministry. The book has a foreword by Will Willimon and praise from several authors, and for good reason: it



asks important philosophical questions in an informed manner about the use of emerging media for ministry.

Schneklath challenges the common contradistinction between “the real” and “the virtual,” since media forms are constantly evolving and layering (e.g., screen images), without necessarily abandoning earlier forms (e.g., books). He addresses three common critiques of using emerging media in ministry: they create distraction, foster hope in technological progress, and isolate. Using interesting observations from studies of photography, the catechumenate, role-playing video games, and social digital ministry, Schneklath argues that new forms of media may enhance faith formation in ways frequently overlooked. Finally, in response to the critiques named earlier, Schneklath proposes that emerging media may contribute positively on three related fronts: they may create beauty and justice in the world, they foster spaces for Spirit-centered cultures of possibility, and they open up doors for “leading connectively” in unprecedented ways.

The greatest strengths of *Mediating Faith* are its informed reflections, insights from new vantage points (e.g., video games), considerations of questions critical to our day, and critical appreciation for both the blessings and curses of emerging media. Not a simple “how to” book on media and ministry, the book’s greatest drawback is the occasional technicality of its content, which will prove difficult for novice readers. Outside the bindings of the book, it is to the author’s credit that he embodies authentically his proposals by his active engagement in social media, approaches to spirituality, and facilitation of the ELCA clergy Facebook group. In view of these things, Schneklath is rightly regarded as a significant voice on the cutting edge of an evolving ministry field. This book is a most welcome expression of his on questions that merit ongoing deliberation.

Troy M. Troftgruben
Wartburg Theological Seminary

The Sistine Chapel: A Biblical Tour. By

Christine M. Panyard. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8091-0593-9. xi and 96 pages. Cloth. \$19.95.

It was a little over 500 years ago, in 1513, that Michelangelo finished his magnificent paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Panyard tells the story of this achievement that was accomplished despite many obstacles. Major restorations of these frescoes were undertaken in 1568 and again in the 1980s.

Full-page pictures are followed by one-page commentaries and include the nine scenes from Genesis, four stories from the Old Testament, seven prophets, and fourteen pages of the ancestors of Jesus from Aminadab to Joseph (33 men from the genealogy of Jesus). There are also five pictures of the Last Judgment, painted by Michelangelo from 1536-1541. The Vatican Museum supplied the photographs. Clever diagrams indicate the locations of the pictures on the chapel’s ceiling.

Panyard identifies the various figures in the paintings and describes their roles in salvation history or other interesting details. A picture of a bare breast of Ruth brings up this anecdote: Michelangelo used to joke that his wet nurse was the wife of a stone carver, and the marble dust in her milk set Michelangelo on the path to become a great sculptor. Panyard wonders whether the worried look on David’s face indicates that he knew “at some level” what would happen to his most famous descendant. Michelangelo should not be faulted for having Daniel write in a book rather than on a scroll, but Panyard errs in having Ganaan walk in on his naked grandfather instead of Ham walking in on his father.

This is a beautiful book at a very attractive price.

Ralph W. Klein
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



Briefly Noted

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Non-canonical Scriptures, Volume 1. Edited by Richard Bauckham, James R. Davila, and Alexander Panayotov (Eerdmans, \$90). In 1983-1986 James H. Charlesworth edited two massive volumes with a similar title, and its documents provide valuable background for Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament and early Christianity. Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, we need to remember, are fictional writings that claim to be written by a character in the Old Testament or set in the same time period but not included in Jewish or Christian canons. The present volume does not duplicate the items included in the Charlesworth edition, and it is the first of a two-volume set. This volume alone has 808 pages. While Pseudepigrapha provide priceless information, they also can be on the esoteric side, with such titles as *The Eighth Book of Moses*, *The Dialogue between David and Goliath*, *Questions of the Queen of Sheba* and *Answers by King Solomon*, and *Quotations from the Lost Books in the Hebrew Bible*. Eerdmans has performed a great service to our knowledge of antiquity by publishing this volume.

Ralph W. Klein

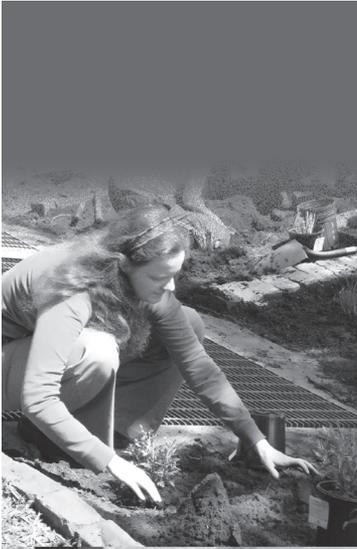
The so-called hymns in Luke 1-2 fascinate. No where else in the Synoptic Gospels do such hymns occur. That makes Richard J. Dillon's *The Hymns of Saint Luke: Lyricism and Narrative in Luke 1-2* (The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 50, \$15.00; ISBN 0-9151-7049-3) welcome. He carefully interprets the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria in Excelsis, and the Nunc Dimittist. He sets the Magnificat into the context of Luke's beatitudes and similar motifs in Luke, while he interprets the Nunc Dimittis in its immediate subsequent context. Rich in detail, pastors will find this work helpful in preaching during the Christmas season.

Edgar Krentz

The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel: Moving Beyond a Diversionary Debate by Richard Horsley (Eerdmans, \$20.00, ISBN 978-0-8028-6807-7) is a revisionist interpretation of Jesus' role and message in first-century Palestine. Horsley first argues that the apocalyptic preacher Jesus is a misreading of his teaching. Jesus is rather a prophetic figure who works for the renewal of Israel against its (Roman) political rulers. It is a brilliant *tour de force* for the position long argued by Horsley in a work that is a good read, intelligible, clearly argued, and challenging. It deserves a read.

Edgar Krentz

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Preaching Helps

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Changing Seasons

The December issue of Preaching Helps begins deep in the season of Epiphany and concludes over halfway into the season of Lent. Leading us into this change of seasons (in order of their commentaries) are four faithful guides:

The **Rev. Dr. Craig L. Nesson** serves as Academic Dean and Professor of Contextual Theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary, and is one of the general editors of *Currents in Theology and Mission*. Dr. Nesson wrote the commentaries for the fourth and fifth Sundays after the Epiphany.

The **Rev. Dr. Kim L. Beckmann** has been a past commentator for *Currents* as well as *The Proclamation Commentary* series. She is twice a graduate of LSTC, (M.Div. 1984, D.Min. in Preaching 1999) and is the author of *Prepare a Road: Preaching Vocation, Community Voice, Marketplace Vision* (Cowley, 2002). Dr. Beckmann wrote the commentaries for Transfiguration Sunday and the first Sunday in Lent.

The **Rev. James F. Galuhn** serves as the pastor of the East Side United Methodist Church, where he participates in the church's music ministry, revels in Tuesday night Bible studies, and works for environmental justice in a neighborhood some have called the "toxic waste dump" of Chicago. Rev. Galuhn wrote the commentaries for Ash Wednesday and the second Sunday in Lent.

The **Rev. Dr. S. D. Giere** serves as Associate Professor of Homiletics and Biblical Interpretation at Wartburg Theological Seminary, and is one of the general editors of *Currents in Theology and Mission* and the lead editor for the whole December issue. Dr. Giere wrote the commentaries for the third and fourth Sundays in Lent.

Each colleague contributed reflections written in a unique style, and each style is so valuable that I made no effort to conform them to a single rubric. There are many riches here, and I am grateful for each voice these fine commentators bring to the December issue of Preaching Helps.

This issue, which is the last issue of 2014, marks a long-awaited transition in Preaching Helps. At long last my interim role is at an end and the next iteration of Preaching Helps will be under the leadership of the **Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad**, who recently retired from serving as the Joe R. Engle Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York. It is a pleasure to introduce her to our readers. Dr. Lundblad has published several sermons in the journal *Lectionary Homiletics* and also in *Women's Voices and Visions of the Church: Reflections from North America* (2005);

her essays on “Narrative Theory” and “Feminism” were accepted for publication by *The New Interpreter’s Bible Encyclopedia of Preaching*. She is the author of two books: *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* and most recently, *Marking Time: Preaching Biblical Stories in Present Tense*.

For over twenty years she has been one of the preachers on the radio program “Day 1” (formerly “The Protestant Hour”). She has preached in hundreds of congregations across the United States and has given lectures at many seminaries in this country and Canada, as well as a Lutheran World Federation conference in Buenos Aires.

She is an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. While teaching at Union, she served as a member of the pastoral team at Advent Lutheran Church on 93rd and Broadway, leading worship and preaching on a regular basis. With roots deep in the local parish and in the academy, she is a wonderful new addition to the editorial team of *Currents in Theology and Mission*.

This “changing season” on our staff marks the end of a long stretch between the departure of Bishop Craig A. Satterlee and the arrival of our new Preaching Helps editor. As I gratefully step away from the duties of the past few months, I give thanks for the many wonderful pastors I “met” or re-established a connection with through the work of putting Preaching Helps together. It is inspiring to see the love and effort that goes into preparing to preach good news faithfully each Sunday, through every season.

Grace and peace to all our readers.

Kathleen Billman, Interim Editor, Preaching Helps

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 1, 2015

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Mark 1:21–28

First Reading

“Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now...” (1 Cor 8:7b)! Idols claim authority over our lives. The question of authority runs through the lectionary this week. Where does authority come from? How does one recognize legitimate authority? Does authority reside in an established office? Or, does it fall upon God’s servant like the wind? At stake in Deuteronomy 18 is a contest between the signs of the false prophets—diviners, soothsayers, sorcerers—and the marks of the prophet whom God has raised up. There is a bold promise that God is the One who anoints the true prophet, like unto Moses, who mediates the living voice of God to the assembly of the people. The word of the prophet is the very word of God, “who shall speak to them everything that I command” (18:18b). Woe to those who are called to prophesy and do not speak! And woe to those who hear the words of the prophet and do not heed!

Paul’s admonitions to the Corinthian congregation also probe at the question of authority. Some claim a knowledge that lends them authority to eat the foods sacrificed to idols, while the “weak” are offended by the eating of food so defiled. While idols have no ontological reality for those who believe in the “one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (8:6), Paul

cautions not to allow one’s own liberty to become a stumbling block to the consciences of those in the community, whose faith would be undermined by my own exercise of freedom.

In the Gospel reading, the people were astounded at Jesus’ teaching, for he spoke with an inherent authority unlike that of the official teachers. Even more, the unclean spirits responded to the authority of Jesus to cast them out from people possessed. As Jesus liberates the man with an unclean spirit, again the crowds were amazed by his authority, so much that his fame began to spread throughout the region. Psalm 111 makes decisively clear the ultimate source of all legitimate authority: “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord” (111:1–2a).

Pastoral Reflection

Whether we like it or not, February 1 is Super Bowl Sunday, one of the highest, holiest days in the calendar of our civil religion. As crowds of people gather this day to feast together, or at least to watch commercials, God’s little ones remain either marginalized from the mainstream through isolation or lack the very means to enter into the festive rituals observed by the cheering fans, with their libations, halftime gaiety in the coliseum, and, most of all, the lure of the advertisements, the real reason for the show. Paul’s words about meat sacrificed to idols resonate with many facets of our ritualizing as epitomized on Super Bowl day: the preoccupation with winning, the temptations to gluttony and drunkenness, and fascination with the sophisticated and incredibly expensive commercials that capture the public imagination. In many ways the sorcerers of advertising

understand humanity's spiritual longing and hungers better than the church. The flickering images planted in our brains from our omnipresent screens stir up longings for status, identity, consumption, and pleasure that are portrayed as the real meaning of our lives. While one has been freed by Christ for freedom to enjoy the game, at what point do our loyalties and ritualistic displays disclose the worship of other gods and idols?

It would take a prophet like unto Moses to dare to challenge the outlay of time, energy, and money spent not only on the game itself but on all the accoutrements now firmly scripted for our culture's ritual observance. To what degree are we summoned to raise a prophetic voice about our captivity to the dictates of culture and to what degree are we simply free to join the fun? There remain unclean spirits that take possession over our lives and, when they do, these demonic powers distort our priorities to the disfigurement of our lives. How can it be possible that after the holocaust rent against the indigenous people of this continent that we continue to tolerate the logo of a football team named for the taking of Indian scalps as bounty, "the Redskins"? God sent a prophet in Jesus, filled with unprecedented authority, to teach the way of God's kingdom and to cast out the unclean spirits that take possession of our lives, all that turns us from God and neighbor. Jesus claims still today the authority to teach us the things that make for life in the midst of a culture preoccupied with the things of death. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have good understanding." The praise of the winning team does not last; only God's "praise endures forever" (Ps 111:10).

Craig L. Nesson

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 8, 2015

Isaiah 40:21–31

Psalms 147:1–11, 20c

1 Corinthians 9:16–23

Mark 1:29–39

First Reading

"In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Jesus found himself engaged in relentless battle with the principalities and powers at every turn: fever, illness, demons. Still his disciples searched him out in the wilderness, making the appeal, "Everyone is searching for you" (1:37). At Corinth Paul also faced exceeding demands on his energy, both the forces from within that would debilitate his calling to proclaim the gospel and the forces from without that challenged his authority to transgress against the dictates of the law. For Jesus and for Paul in these texts, it was the needs of their neighbors that compelled them into service. "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (Mark 1:38). In a parallel way Paul declared the necessity "to become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22b).

Jesus and Paul were both finite, human vessels. Exceeding demands were placed upon their time and energy, day after day, season after season. Opponents challenged authority and mission from without; exhaustion and doubts threatened from within. To them as faithful Jews, there was only one to preserve their strength, the God about whom the psalmist declares: "God heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... The Lord lifts up the downtrodden and casts

the wicked to the ground (Ps 147:3, 6). The same God who as Creator “stretches out the heavens like a curtain” and for whom the earth’s “inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isa 40:22), also “gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless” (40:29). God gathers the scattered “outcasts of Israel” back into God’s holy city, Jeru-shalom (147:2–3), where they again may raise their voices in resounding praise (147:20c).

Trust in God’s power was the only source of strength to people oppressed by their opponents, bound as captives in exile, and thereby facing exhaustion and despair. As lovers of Scripture, surely the words of the prophet Isaiah also renewed the spirits of Jesus and Paul: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa 40:31). Paul is led to testify: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:23). Jesus draws deeply from the well of the psalter and prophets as he emerges from the desert to go “throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (Mark 1:39).

Pastoral Reflection

While we sing about the bleak midwinter at Christmas, toward the end of Epiphany in early February and as another season of Lent draws nigh, many of us in the northern hemisphere find ourselves adversely affected by the shortness of daylight and exhausted by the relentlessness of winter. The rhythm of short days and long nights begins to take its toll. Moreover, the demands of life in our contemporary world often leave little time to breath well, exercise well, eat well,

play well, sleep well, or pray well. Both the preacher and the people of God need Sabbath time to renew their spirits in the midst of too many demands, too much winter of the soul.

Where are the deserted places in your life, where you can retreat for a time to dwell with God? How can you structure your days to be a good steward of your own finite life? Even more, how can you give permission to the people who hear you preach to take time for Sabbath as part of the regular rhythm of their lives, each day and each week? How can congregations truly serve as sanctuaries for our dwelling in the presence of God, who is the only source of renewable energy for the spiritual life of the world and its people? If Jesus, himself, time and again needed solitude and prayer in order to gather strength for the journey in serving the needs of the crowds, how might you schedule time during these days before Lent to center yourself in God’s presence? And how might you as spiritual leader of the people where you serve grant permission to others in their weariness to go out to a deserted place?

Surely it was God’s word that spoke to God’s people of old to see them through the brevity of the light and darkness of the night. If exiles, apostles, and even the Savior of the world withdrew to a quiet place to receive ministry by listening to God’s promises in prayer, so the texts for this Sunday invite you to dwell in God’s renewing presence, thereby modeling the practice of Sabbath and encouraging God’s people of now to do likewise. Only “the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth...does not faint or grow weary.” Only this God “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” (Isa 40:28–29). Proclaim the promises of

divine renewal to God's weary people and take time to listen to those same promises for the renewal of your own life!

Craig L. Nesson

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 15, 2015

2 Kings 2:1–12

Psalm 50:1–6

2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Mark 9:2–9

Like most of us, Elisha doesn't want to hear about it. Change is coming. He knows that. But it doesn't help that everywhere he goes fellow prophets feel they have to keep reminding him today is the day Elijah will leave them.

When Elijah had tossed his mantle to Elisha for a wild ride as prophet of God, Elisha had invested everything; liquidating his assets in the ox-stew and fire of his own going-away party. So he really doesn't want to hear about it, doesn't think they should be talking about change and what it might mean. Until they have to.

Truth is, Elijah and Elisha were already on their transitional tour. They arrived at Gilgal, base camp for the arrival of the people of God at the promised land. Gilgal was the separating place, the going-out and coming-in place of twelve stones from the Jordan where God had parted the waters, just like the Red Sea, so they arrived sure and dry footed.

"No need to take this journey with me," Elijah tests. But Elisha isn't budging: "Not on your life."

Elijah and Elisha set out from this going-out-from-what-we've-known to the something-new place of Bethel, where God's promise and presence dwells, at the threshold between heaven and earth

where Jacob saw angels ascending and descending. Bethel's prophets come out to say, "You know, today's the day." Elijah says, "No need for you to hang around... God's called me to Jericho." "Not on your life, or mine," says Elisha.

Jericho is the place in the promised land where things weren't clear for the people of God. It's a murky story of conquest of a people already inhabiting the city. A story of not knowing who to trust after Moses passed on the mantle to Joshua and was taken from their sight. A story of some walking around and blowing of horns that was supposed to get them somewhere but seemed pretty wacky and time consuming as a strategy. Days and days of this. Until walls fell down and they knew Joshua was their new leader and that who they should trust was God.

You know the pattern: the prophets of Jericho come out to say, you know..., Elisha still saying, don't talk about it. Elijah still testing Elisha. The two of them going on.

On the way to Jordan, the company of prophets walks with them. This is the crossing over, stepping into freedom out of bondage place. The "you never walk into the same river twice" place of change. The death and resurrection place where Jesus will be baptized, the Spirit will rain down and the voice will say, "This is my beloved."

Elijah takes his mantle, like Moses took his rod. The waters part. They cross over. Elisha goes for the gold: the inheritor's portion of Elijah's anointed Spirit. Elijah says that it is God's to give. But if Elisha can bear up to what's next... eyes wide open... he'll have what he prays for. Elisha gets chariots and horses of fire, the whirlwind, Elijah whirling away. A cry is ripped from him in the midst of weighty glory. But he doesn't

look away. When Elisha can no longer see his beloved leader—and realizes he's it, the embodiment of that spirit now—he gives in to grief.

Who hasn't been there, in this time of rapid change in all its grief and glory?

In the transfiguration of Jesus we experience with the disciples the disorienting light of God's dynamic, unchanging love. The company of prophets come up on craggy peaks to tell us something about following Jesus, who has just announced to his disciples he is going to Jerusalem. If they are going with him they are going to the cross.

In the icons, the disciples are wrapped in mantles like sleeping bags. In other gospels, they have not wanted to talk about changes coming, have not been able to keep their eyes open for what God is doing in their lives. They wake up at the last minute, bowled over in a parting glimpse of the bright show. Peter offers tents to shelter this glory but God's cloud lets him know that God's got this journey covered, up and down mountains, to the cross and the new life of resurrection. In places where the landscape is so changed we can't find our bearings, we listen to the voice of Jesus calling the way forward.

We trace a spiritual geography of leading in times of transfiguring change: Gilgals of thresholds for going out and coming in.

- Bethels of presence, promise, and cloud. Because God is, God has this covered.
- Jerichos where God's call is crazy. Where we march in circles, or to the cross, or cross town and eat with tax collectors and sinners, not always sure who is on the right side or of the right thing, but walls come down and God is revealed.
- Jordans passing with Jesus through the valley of shadows and waters of baptism

to die to sin and rise to the freedom of life forever, set apart for service as kings, priests and prophets with an inheritance of Jesus' spirit to share.

- Mountaintops of vision to see Jesus only through the wilderness of Lent and loss, Easter's new creation, the fiery whirlwind and Spirit's power filling our churches, this world, this life. Jesus' transfiguration in glory as the first wave of what is to come, the transformation God imagines for us and this world.

Elisha picks up his mentor's mantle and carries on the ministry with the company of prophets who want to look for Elijah's body. Elisha knows it's not there. The body is us! They have to take time to look, and see it for themselves. With confident eyes wide open for God's glory.

Kim Beckmann

Ash Wednesday February 18, 2015

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12

Psalms 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Another Ash Wednesday, another Lent. If you are just starting out in pastoral ministry you will be living with these passages for many years to come, if you have been doing this for several years you are wondering how to keep these texts fresh. We are all in the same boat. Indeed, what other message could there be, other than we have all fallen to the forces of destruction and “Yet even now,” as Joel puts it, there is hope, there is a chance that the power of creation's fulfillment will stop for a moment in this little corner of time, in this speck of space, and “Sanctify the congregation,” that is,

make us holy, good, clean, renewed, dare we say, born anew?

Novice preacher or one full of practiced wisdom, the struggle of speaking about how all this works for the people, the “congregation” our society, our culture, our tribe, how it works for a bunch of us, must be set alongside how it works with each one of us as an individual. People want to know how it works for them, how they can come to church and feel better. “What do I get out of going to church?” The effort to widen the circle is risky. Unless preaching to the choir is your calling, we speak with those who, like ourselves, sometimes have difficulty seeing how God calls us into community to be the church together for the sake of others and not just ourselves. It isn’t so easy to go from speaking to individuals to speaking of how it makes sense only when we keep “the congregation” in mind. Will the call to change, to repentance, to transformation ever be one of comfort? Will it ever help us “feel better”?

The minister may have tattoos or a roman collar, or both, who cares, we have all come, Pastor, because somehow we know or sense that we are broken and we just want to get fixed, get our bounce back, our “new and right spirit,” as the psalmist turns the phrase. Someone may ask, “Can you do that? Can you do that for me? For us?” Can you? And then there are those who are pretty sure that they are OK with God, and your job is to fix it for those other poor, suffering, unspiritual, sinful folks. “Can you do that, Pastor? They need your help a lot more than I do. Can you fix this mess?”

Out of a natural and ecological disaster Joel offers a way ahead. The locust infestation, the disaster of the moment, hits everyone in the community. Such disasters have also hit our communities. Lost jobs,

disappearing water, gun violence, fearing the loss of our “way of life” to foreigners, diseases we don’t understand, a world that seems out of control. Let me vote for the one who talks the toughest about keeping things as they are, or let me stay home fearful of the inevitable changes yet to come. Joel asks us to pick up our angry, fearful, and broken hearts to offer them to God. “Return to the Lord your God who is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive” (13b). Joel reminds us that each of us is called to respond to such troubles out of the strength that comes from God’s never failing mercy. Stop what you are doing. After all, it isn’t working. Just, stop it! Turn in a different direction, turn toward a different vision of life. Seek that new direction, pray for that so that it is clear in your mind and heart just how it is you need to live so you can truly live.

Isaiah reminds us that merely attending worship services is not substitute for social justice. What we do in a service is not just meant to make us look good to others, nor meant just to make us feel better about ourselves. Worship, studying scripture, fasting, practicing our piety are not ends in themselves. Rather, they can become opportunities for us to learn to render our service. Look at the mess all around you—you can begin to make it better. This is the partnership I choose, God says. This is what would be an acceptable offering.

Psalm 51 speaks directly to one who is self-aware enough to know both what one’s own transgression is and against whom that broken heart has betrayed the hope of faithfulness. This self-awareness of what and how we disappoint ourselves, others, and God is a shared condition. We confess such common and disturbing troubles together as a household of faith,

finding in our common brokenness our common resource for renewal.

Paul endures the criticism of those who say that the trouble he gets into is evidence of his failed apostleship. He counters such “feel good” prophets by celebrating the gift of God’s grace today, as if this day of trouble was God’s great day of giving us what is essential to live in communion with God and one another. “It may look like I have nothing,” Paul says, “but I have everything.”

“No, I can’t fix this mess,” the pastor replies. But I can help us confess the mess. I can point to the same place that Joel, and Paul, the psalmist, and even Matthew pointed to. I can remind myself and all of us here that others have been where we are, others wondered what is the point of this life that turns to ashes, to dust, to nothing. It is certainly not to pretend that we are better than we are, closer to God than some others, less sinful, better loved, better informed, better fed and watered, better organized, better invested. Jesus warns: “Beware practicing your piety before others . . .” The point of life is, evidently, not to look better than others, either in our own eyes or in the eyes of God. The point of life must surely be to connect with others with our true selves, as risky and terrifying as that may be. It is hard to be the first to admit to a mistake. It is hard to be the first one who says, “I love you.” Or, even more difficult, “I love you, still.” It is hard for us not to put on a show for others or for God, but to offer that life, the life inside, the one you hear at night and see in the mirror, to offer THAT life to God’s glory, to God’s service, to God’s children in humble service, in honorable service, in service made worthy by God’s own heart changing love.

James Galuhn

First Sunday in Lent February 22, 2015

Genesis 9:8–17

Psalm 25:1–10

1 Peter 3:18–22

Mark 1:9–15

One Ash Wednesday we tried the Word and just the dust. No sweet communion wine on my lips to take the edge off the grittiness, off that fairly burnt, dry, feel of the day with ashes drifting down my nose like sands through an hourglass. Nothing companioning me while I peered into the abyss and pondered mortality, but the tantalizing smell of Shrove Tuesday pancakes still lingering in the church air.

In one of my past congregations we actually poured sand into the baptismal font. A “dry Lent” we called it. But it was painfully dry. Abrasive. A shock. A cruel joke. What father, Jesus once asked, when their child asked for an egg would give them a snake instead?

It’s harsh, this landscape of early Lent. Stark, in contrast to the dark intimacy of the candlelit birth cave and the starshine of Epiphany. It’s gritty here. We feel the dust and ashes on our lips and already long for something to cut the isolation and terror.

In the gospel of Mark there are no gentle transitions. There is no birth story, except for God breaking water in Jesus’ baptism, the heavens tearing and God going through the claiming ritual of the newborn, the one who can say, “Yep. That’s the one. That’s the very bowling ball, the big fish I’ve been carrying around inside me. That’s the one. This one that has torn through me now. It’s mine.” As Jesus comes up out of the Jordan, the Spirit showers Jesus while a voice bathes him in love and affirmation.

Then, just as immediately, the Spirit

that has torn the heavens apart in his baptismal birth casts Jesus out into the dry, cruel wilderness of the world. The word translated “drove out” means to take someone by the scruff of the neck and give them a toss. Now, that’s harsh.

So Jesus, still dripping wet from rebirth, is in the desert wilderness for 40 days. The same amount of time the world was once covered with water, smothering all life not safe in the womb of the ark. Weather persistence that leads to cracked earth droughts or ravaging floods is a sign of creation, of life, an ecology, seriously out of balance. Into this chaos and distortion Jesus goes, from flood to parched wilderness to the grim foreshadowing of the passion in just 60 seconds in this first chapter of the gospel of Mark.

Was Jesus thinking, as everyone does at some point: “What am I doing in this god-forsaken place?”

We get this story every First Sunday in Lent. It’s where we start the 40 days of practicing discipline, resisting that which separates us from God’s heart, creation, and our interrelatedness with all flesh, drawing us into a renewed basis and balance for our life and the life of this world. Through prayer. Through unflinching self-examination. Through the sobering realization of the shortness of days. Through opening our eyes to the other, and our place with them in the scheme of God’s plan for justice, peace, redemption of all creation. In this wilderness with Jesus we encounter God in our testing. And Satan and temptation. And ourselves.

Anyone with a little life experience knows temptation comes in lots of guises. Looking for all the world like the promised land, the answer to everything, just what we need to take the edge off the dread and dustiness of our lives—or with the grime of a long slog in a lonely wilderness writ-

ten all over it. Temptation comes as the abandonment of confidence in ourselves and God’s call. It comes as the creeping or sweeping doubt that life is intended to be a gift and good. Or as the suspicion we are at the end of the road and might as well give up.

Just as Jesus comes up out of the Jordan, the heavens are torn apart, the Spirit rains down and a voice bathes him in affirmation: You are mine. You’re a good child. I love you.

It is that confident message with Jesus in the wilderness. While he does without, while he slogs through the grit and dust, while he fasts and prays, takes the test, faces temptation and the wild beasts... this Word is materialized and Jesus comes to know of what he is made. Water and the Spirit of Life. God’s good pleasure.

Jesus comes to know it so deep into his bones he comes out of the desert proclaiming it. He has been so tested, is so convicted by this realm and his call to live and bear witness to its presence, that the news of the arrest of John and its underlying drum beats only spurs him on to urgency that the world needs this news.

When Jesus finally comes to the cross, its violence and injustice; and then when he comes to the dust of the grave; when he descends to the dead, harrows hell and redeems the prisoners, the ones God has waited patiently to awaken, the formerly willfully disobedient of God; when Jesus goes to these places in order to bring us back to God—he knows of the stuff of which he is made: God’s own Word, and the eternal power of God’s love that sustains him.

God’s rule has burst through the heavens to claim us. It has grabbed us by the scruff of the neck and is letting us see of what stuff we are made: the stardust of creation; Water and the Spirit; God’s good pleasure to call us children; the sweet

blood of Christ in our veins and on our lips with a word to share.

Kim Beckmann

Second Sunday in Lent March 1, 2015

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

Psalms 22:23–31

Romans 4:13–25

Mark 8:31–38

First Reading

Last week's Old Testament lesson centered on the covenant made with Noah and with "every living being." This week we have the covenant made with the newly renamed Abraham and Sarah that together they shall be the ancestors of "many nations." Looking ahead, next week will highlight the covenant made at Mt. Sinai with the soon-to-be nation, Israel, focusing on the Decalogue. This is followed by the raising of the serpent from Numbers 21 in concert with that Sunday's reading from John. The fifth Sunday returns to the covenant theme with Jeremiah's prophetic introduction of a "new covenant" that will be written on the heart. Notice that the focus narrows with each successive covenant, as the Priestly writer has envisioned the scope of history between God and creature. We move from "every living being" to "many nations" to those brought out of Egypt, "out of the house of slavery" to this particular house, the house of Jacob, known as Israel; and finally to a covenant made within each heart.

The psalm reiterates the Abraham-Sarah promise reminding us that from this family "every family among the nations will worship you. Because the right to rule belongs to the Lord, he rules all nations"

(27b–28). The psalmist remembers the promise in the context of remembering the pain of the exile, holding out hope for "future descendants [who] will serve him, generations to come... those not yet born (30–31).

The passage from Romans refers specifically to the Genesis 17 text and is the basis for Paul's argument in favor of the inclusion and acceptance into the church of the gentiles, those from outside the household of faith, outside the nation. The argument is critical. Abraham was credited with righteousness because of the faith with which he and Sarah responded to God's call rather than because they obeyed the Law of God, which, would have been an anachronism in that there was as yet no Law, no Moses, no Mt. Sinai, no Decalogue. God's crediting Abraham and Sarah with righteousness could not be because of obedience to the Law which did not yet exist, but because of their obedience of the call to faith that Abraham and Sarah followed which was counted as righteousness by God. So too, Paul argues, it is because of their obedience of faith to the call of God to follow Jesus that the gentiles should be included and accepted as those who fall under the righteousness of God without regard to obedience to the Law, specifically the requirement for men to be circumcised. As descendants of Abraham and Sarah (who parented "many nations") gentiles will inherit what the other children of the covenant inherit. Verse 16: "That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace." (CEB)

The lectionary context for the Gospel passage is one of "promises made, promises kept" in so far as God's covenantal relationship with us endures and trumps all our attempts to control or limit the depth of God's grace. Peter rebukes Jesus. And why would he not? Peter clearly believes that following God

will not lead to destruction but to God's ultimate triumph. What Peter fails to remember about the triumph of God is that God's triumph is a victory for the broken, the lowly, the oppressed. God will not proclaim a victory while human suffering, indeed while creation, groans in pain. The kenotic exchange of glory for humiliation is intrinsic to this gospel where suffering and rejection "must" take place if God is to be revealed for who God really is. This is the God of every living being, many nations, and every heart that longs for justice and mercy. This is the God who is revealed on the cross.

This is what Jesus "began to teach his disciples." This is what they could as yet not understand. Thinking human thoughts instead of God's thoughts, they think of victory and triumph as beating down the Roman oppressor, humiliating the legalistic hypocrites of the temple, and entering the City of God on a white horse with a golden sword and shield to the call of "Son of David," dashing the liberals or the conservatives into the dust of history. Jesus will have none of it. Instead he begins to teach both the disciples and the crowd that to follow him means to make the same kenotic exchange of denying one's own glory for the sake of lifting God's vision of solidarity, lifting one's own cross as we are given the vision of faith to see it, the courage of faith to carry it, and the hope of faith to plant it firmly in the ground where we stand day in and day out.

Verse 37 openly asks, "What will people give in exchange for their lives?" What illusions of power and control will we exchange for valuing others as worthy as ourselves, as worthy as those of us who count themselves among the righteous of God and need not concern ourselves with those from other "nations"? And if we are instead among those who believe we are not inheritors of such covenantal

love because we don't look like, or act like, or think like those who seem to have all the benefits of life, the gospel calls out to you not to be ashamed of where you come from, or where you are, or, most pointedly, not ashamed of the one who is with you now and calling you into God's glory of life made whole and good for each of us and all of us. It seems we are all, all of us, out of excuses. It seems we are all, all of us, called to righteousness through grace and grace alone.

James F. Galuhn

Third Sunday in Lent March 8, 2015

Exodus 20:1–17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18–25

John 2:13–22

Textual Horizons

The Lenten movement toward the church's celebration of the Paschal Mystery is a time of both repentance and catechesis. The teaching of the church, traditionally for those preparing for baptism at the Great Vigil, focuses on central aspects of the Christian faith. This week's lections draw the church into a rich encounter with the Decalogue, the broader scope of the Torah, and the centrality of the cross of Christ in God's self-revelation.

"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple." (Ps 19:7) In English there is no verb for "making wise," whereas both Hebrew (דָּבַר) and Greek (σοφίζω) have the rich capacity to speak succinctly about the gain of wisdom. Psalm 19 draws its singer into a cosmic choir. Imagining ourselves standing in this choir alongside

the heavens and the firmament, the day and the night, the cosmos rings forth telling the glory of God, proclaiming God's handiwork. At the heart of this cosmic worship is the world-orienting nature of the Torah of the Lord, which revives the soul and makes wise the simple (v.7) and which is more desired than gold and sweeter than honey (v.10).

So, how do we understand this Torah that makes wise the simple?

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: you shall have no other gods before me." (Exod 20:2-3) The first move of wise-ifying the simple is this first person speech of the Lord. The teaching of the Lord begins with the most profound of God's self-revelations: "I am the Lord your God."¹ The fullness of the Ten Commandments flows from God's self-revealing declaration, and God anchors this self-revelation with the deliverance of Israel from slavery into freedom. God ties God's being to God's action in history, in particular God's act of emancipation. God cannot be defined by abstractions like justice and love. Rather God attaches God's self to the world in history. The Torah, signified here by the Decalogue, is not a shackle but a way of life by which God invites Israel to live in the covenant. Torah, then, serves as a

movement from foolishness into wisdom.

Paul in his first letter for the church in Corinth plays with the dichotomy of foolishness and wisdom. For Paul, Jesus Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor 1:24) Who is this God who would turn the wisdom of the world upside-down? This selfsame God who declares, "I am the Lord your God," is the God who reveals God's self in the hiddenness of suffering and death on a cross. It is the proclamation of this particular message of the cross of Christ that re-centers our understanding of who God is and what God does. As the wisdom of the Decalogue opens with a statement about who God is (I am the Lord your God—Exod 20:2a) together with a statement about what God does (who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery—Exod 20:2b), so the proclamation of Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23) declares who God is and what God does. Not erasing but accentuating the cosmic paradox of all of this, Paul writes, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor 1:25) As with God's self-revelation in the Decalogue (deliverance from slavery in Egypt), so God's saving activity for the cosmos is historically rooted in the crucified Christ.

1. There is a Jewish midrash on this verse which relates this to the creation of the cosmos: God created the world with א the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet (the opening word of the Torah אלהים begins with it). When the first letter, א, complained, God consoled it saying, "I will start the Decalogue with you (אָנֹכִי). For I am One and you are 'one.'" Midrash Aseret ha-Dibrot, Introduction. Quoted in W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 544.

Homiletical Horizons

As Christians, when we think about this movement from foolishness to wisdom, our gaze is constantly being reoriented toward the cross of Christ. There are so many things/relationships/pursuits/ideologies calling for the Christian's devotion. As Luther writes in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, "to have a god is to have something in

which the heart trusts completely.”² The clarion call of the Decalogue and of the cross draws our attention away from all the gods which demand our devotion and toward Christ crucified—the God who emancipated the Israelites from bondage and who emancipates the world from the bondage of sin and death. Such is the song we sing among the cosmic choir. Such is the song that sings the Christian and the community of faith from foolishness into wisdom.

A prayer frequently heard at the outset of the Christian sermon, echoes from the final verse of Psalm 19: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” (v.14). Perhaps a reflection on this, what is best attended to by the preacher as a silent prayer, would be beneficial for the hearer in this Lenten time, especially in light of the making wise of the First Commandment and the foolishness of Christ crucified.

S.D. Giere

Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 15, 2015

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

Textual Horizons

The texts for this week place our fingers on the pulse of the church: faith in Jesus Christ. Numbers 21, Psalm 107, and John 3 work in concert to draw the gaze of the

reader to God’s gracious healing activity in Christ—an activity that bespeaks God’s trustworthiness and invites our trust. Ephesians ices the cake.

Psalm 107 begins the final book of the Psalter with a call to worship: “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed from the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south” (Ps 107:1-2). The psalmist is calling fellow children of Adam to return the Creator’s declarations of good-ness (פִּי-טוֹב) in Genesis 1.³ Those whom, with the rest of creation, God called good in the first creation story now offer their thanks to the one who is good ultimately. This goodness coupled with God’s steadfast love, which has no “sell by” date, is the foundation for thanksgiving. The psalm then proceeds with four situational vignettes⁴ wherein God displays this goodness and steadfast love *in spite of* the decisions of the creatures. More specifically, the rhythm of the relationship is that when the people cry to the Lord from the midst of their trouble, the Lord delivers. It is the third section that serves as our song this Sunday—a section that focuses on God’s healing. The people, from the midst of their own foolishness,⁵ are suffering. They

3. Cf. Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25.

4. They are: vv.4-9, 10-16, 17-22, 23-32. The psalm concludes with a reiteration of God’s goodness and steadfast love (vv.33-43) and a summative statement that reinforces that this invitation to thanksgiving is also a movement toward wisdom: “Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the LORD” (v.43).

5. The Hebrew here is אִיִּים, the foolish ones. Both the RSV and the NRSV

2. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 387.10. [Hereafter BC.]

cry to the Lord, and the Lord saves (נָשָׂא)⁶ them.

“... and the people became impatient on the way... ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.’” (Exod. 21:4-5, RSV) Consonant with the foolishness about which the psalmist sings, the Israelites in their foolish impatience complain in the wilderness. Against God and against Moses, they direct their “sickness.” In one of the (many!) texts that can challenge safe constructs for the Lord that we might cherish, the Israelites’ foolishness conjures the ire of God. Fiery serpents⁷ bite many of the people “so that many of the Israelites died” (Num 21:6). Human folly and God’s resulting wrath leads to death. From the midst of the carnage, the people come to Moses and repent. Moses intercedes to the Lord on their behalf. What results is a divine fix—a serpent of bronze upon a pole. The snake-bitten Israelite need only look upon the bronze snake and live.

The life of this story from Numbers 21 goes a couple of different directions within Scripture.

What was a divinely instructed instrument of healing⁸ at the beginning

correct this to “sick.” Insofar as foolishness is a sickness, this may work, though the correction obscures as much as it clarifies, especially given the wisdom horizon of the whole psalm, cf. Ps 117:43.

6. Also Ps 117:13.

7. The NRSV’s move to translate “poisonous serpents” here flattens the text unnecessarily. It is unclear exactly what the (rather woodenly translated) seraph serpents were. It may have been a poisonous snake whose bite caused burning. It may also be a more mythic reference.

8. Note the general resonance between

becomes an idol to which the people of Israel burn incense.⁹ What was an instrument of healing morphed into an object of worship. King Hezekiah, who “held fast to the LORD,” re-centered Judean piety on the Lord and, among other things, shattered the serpent of bronze “that Moses made.”¹⁰

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14–15). The life of this wild little story from the wilderness takes on a different accent here in John’s gospel. The emphasis here is on the analogy with Moses’ lifting up of the serpent so that those who had earned God’s wrath might live by looking upon God’s mercy. The power of the adverb καθώς ought not to be underestimated. John goes on to interpret Numbers 21, which in turn helps us to interpret John 3. This lifting up of the Son of Man is God’s love for the world...the whole world. The extent of this love does not exclude Israel, but it does extend beyond Israel to the fullness of the world.

Faith is trusting participation in God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ lifted up for the healing and salvation of the world. Such is the ultimate goodness and steadfast love of the Lord.

Consider the rather spartan narrative of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, and its resonances with the story of the bronze serpent in the wilderness: “All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and

the bronze serpent of Numbers 21 and the Rod of Asclepius, often used as a symbol for medicine and/or physicians, as symbols of healing in the ancient world.

9. Cf. 1 Kgs 14:15 and 2 Kgs 18:4.

10. 2 Kgs 18:4.

senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the results of works so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:3–5, 8–9).

Homiletical Horizons

Within the Lenten catechetical movement toward the Great Vigil of Easter and marking of the Great Paschal mystery, there is a richness in these texts that encourages the church to reflect upon the heartbeat of the church: faith. Faith in Christ orients the believer toward God’s goodness and steadfast love, which come in spite of our idolatries whereby we seek life in that which can only bring death.

With Melancthon in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, we consider

that “...faith that justifies is not only a knowledge of history; it is to assent to the promise of God, in which forgiveness of sins and justification are bestowed freely on account of Christ. To avoid suspicion that it is merely knowledge, we will add further that to have faith is to desire and to receive the offered promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification.”¹¹ And again, “...whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice. The promise is received by faith...For faith does not justify or save because it is a worth work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy.”¹²

S.D. Giere

11. Apology IV. BC 128.48.

12. BC 128.53, 56.



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Volume 41 Index

- Agee, Jennifer. "And All the Tribes Fear Him" (February) 45
- Aleshire, Daniel O. "Diversity in Theological Education and the Life of the Church" (August) 232
- Allen, Amy Lindeman. "Captivity, Turning, and Renewal: Three Liturgical Readings of Romans 7:15–8:13" (April) 102
- Anderson, Delbert. "Lutheran Mission in the China Area: Giving and Receiving" (April) 85
- Anderson, Herbert E. "Honoring Phyllis Anderson" (August) 227
- Angalet, Michelle. "Our Book of Faith: God's Invitation to God's Mission in the World" (June) 186
- Billman, Kathleen D. "Holy Faces, Public Places: Transgressing and Treasuring" (August) 266
- Bloomquist, Karen L. "The Connectedness of Ecclesial Formation" (August) 240
- Collett, Don. "The Christology of Israel's Psalter" (December) 390
- Decker, Aaron. "Multivalent Readings of Multivalent Texts: 1 Samuel 10:27 and the Problem of Textual Variants in the Interpretation of Scripture" (December) 412
- Dietterich, Inagrace T. "Sing to The Lord a New Song: Theology As Doxology" (February) 23
- Fjeld, Roger W. "A Tribute to the Rev. Dr. Duane Priebe" (February) 7
- Fritschel, Ann. "Exodus 16 as an Alternative Social Paradigm" (February) 35
"The Quest for Identity: Evolutionary Roots of Consumerism and Stewardship" (April) 96
- Giere, S.D. "'As a Bee Gathers Honey': The Rule of Faith in Luther's Interpretation of the Old Testament" (February) 39
"'It shall not return to me empty" (Isaiah 55:11): Interpreting Scripture in Christ for Proclamation" (October) 326
- Gylver, Sunniva. "Reading James in Oslo: Reflections on Text, Mission, and Preaching" (December) 404
- Hannan, Shauna Kay. "Lutheran Preachers and the Third Use of the Law: A Homiletical Approach to Overcome the Impasse" (October) 319
- Heide, Peter T. "Rethinking the Gospel of Mark: Resurrection Narrative as Epic" (December) 373
- Howson, Jana L. "Fruits of Engagement: A Congregation's Encounter with the Book of Faith Initiative" (June) 195
- Jacobson, Diane L. "Book of Faith: Retrospective and Prospective" (June) 159
- Jensen, Bonnie L.; Jensen, Richard A. "Welcome to the Club! Phyllis Anderson at Wartburg Theological Seminary" (August) 273
- Johnson, Curtis. "The Earth's Ethos, Logos, and Pathos: An Ecological Reading of Revelation" (April) 119
- Kaufmann, Gregory P. "From Resolution to Reality: A Synod's Engagement with the Book of Faith Initiative" (June) 180
- Kibble, David G. "On Preaching the Need for Repentance" (October) 340
- Kleinhans, Kathryn A. "Coming of Age as (a) Lutheran" (October) 309
- Largen, Kristin Johnston. "A Walk on the Dark Side: A Christian Reflection on Kāli" (February) 17
- Lewis, Bob. "Story Matters: One Congregation's Perspective" (June) 191
- Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia D. "A Haunting Contradiction, Hope, and Moral-Spiritual Power" (August) 256
- Murphy, George L. "Science-Technology Dialogue and Tillich's Second Form of Anxiety" (February) 29
- Nessan, Craig L. "Law, Righteousness, Reason, Will, and Works: Civil and Theological Uses" (February) 51
- Olson, Stanley N. "Duane Priebe Tribute: At His Eightieth Birthday and for Forty Years Teaching at Wartburg Theological Seminary" (February) 57
- Pedersen, Vicki L. "Restoration and Celebration: A Call for Inclusion in Luke 15:1–10" (April) 110
- Persaud, Winston D. "The Theology of the Cross as Christian Witness: A Theological Essay" (February) 11
- Sayler, Gwen. "Apocalyptic Hues in the Eschatological Rainbow Arcing Over the Final Lessons of the Church Year" (December) 381
- Shipman, Emily Lynn; Shipman, Zachariah. "Scripture and Life in Kuala Lumpur" (June) 198
- Simenson, Craig F. "Speaking God's Language: The 'Word of Life' in 1 John 1:1–2:2" (December) 396
- Strandjord, Jonathan P. "For the Sake of Liberating Wisdom: The Near-Future of Theological Education" (August) 247
- Vásquez-Levy, David. "Biblical Fluency: Living under God's Influence" (June) 173
- Wilhelm, Mark. "A Perspective on the Establishment of the Book of Faith Initiative" (June) 166

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