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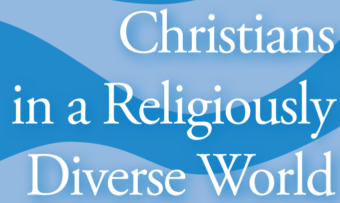

Christians in a Religiously Diverse World

CURRENTS in Theology and Mission

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Christians in a Religiously Diverse World

Many of our readers will know that the 2009–2010 academic year was designated "Earth Year" at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, as through lecture, study, hard work in apartments and gardens, intensive conversation, and liturgy we explored what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ in a world that is broken and breaking in historically unprecedented ways.[1] In the midst of Earth Year activities, however, another anniversary was quietly marked: 25 years since then-missionary Harold Vogelaar came to LSTC and spent a year's furlough in intensive interreligious activity. We recalled Harold's first LSTC courses in Christian-Muslim relations; the development of a partnership with Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi of the American Islamic College; and their work, with many others, that early in 1985 resulted in the formation of a Chicago-based Commission for Improved Christian-Muslim Relations. For LSTC, and indeed for the wider Christian community in Chicago, the 1984–1985 academic year was a time when many were seriously asking what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ *in a world shared with people of other faiths*.

This issue of *Currents* continues the celebration of this anniversary in interfaith relations with four major articles that explore biblical, ritual, theological, and historical-institutional aspects of our interfaith challenges and learning. Furthermore, this issue provides one small way of paying tribute to the Henry Luce Foundation for a generous grant that has enabled LSTC, through its Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice (CCME), to imagine, implement, and support programs in the areas of interfaith pedagogy, student projects, and community outreach in ways that would not otherwise have been possible. Recent examples of such programs include an interfaith conference on the environment in March 2010 entitled "Shared Earth" (where Ellen Bernstein's essay, published in these pages, was first presented); and an LSTC Faculty Conference in May 2010 (where Harold Vogelaar presented the paper that likewise is published here). Indeed, the publication of this issue of *Currents* is supported from the Luce Grant. As the period of that grant now runs to its close, all of us at LSTC express our gratitude to the Henry Luce

1. Our observance of Earth Year was in part a way to honor our beloved colleague David Rhoads as he prepared to retire from full-time teaching. See *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37:2 (April 2010), entitled "Faith and Earthkeeping: A Tribute to the Environmental Ministry of David Rhoads."

Foundation for its generous help in exploring what we *mean* when we at LSTC claim "interfaith" as one of the six "marks of the seminary" (alongside its urban, ecumenical, university-related, multicultural, and global "marks").

At the time that this editorial is being written (September 2010), Islamophobia as well as a variety of other phobias regarding "outsiders" appear to be on the rise in the United States. Many of us suspect that this is in large part due to calculation in the worlds of politics and the media: fear has a remarkable power to motivate potential voters, and the generalized anger that fear can arouse (but that we seem to enjoy so much) is extremely effective in attracting viewers and listeners. In the midst of all this, Christians seek guidance in Scripture—which has some helpful things to say about fear and anger![2] Furthermore, as **Fredrick C. Holmgren** points out, in Scripture we find stories where we experience "a reversal of expectations" with regard to the roles of those inside and outside the immediate community of faith. Indeed, "outsiders" in the Bible regularly bring blessing and gifts, speak (true) words of judgment, serve as exemplars of mercy and of faith, and carry out the mysterious work of God. Think of Melchizedek, the Magi, the Samaritans of the Gospels, the Canaanite woman…and, as Holmgren points out, King Abimelech in Genesis 20. Here is a strange story, one that does not portray "father" Abraham in a particularly favorable light (and that does not make it into children's Bibles!); Origen of Alexandria insisted that Christians could *only* understand the story by means of allegory![3] But Holmgren, who is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Literature at North Park University, holds firmly to a literal interpretation of the text, and draws lessons from it for our present-day interfaith encounters.

Part of the beauty of the "Shared Earth" conference last March was the fact that our four keynote speakers, representing four different religious traditions, each said profound things that *only someone from that tradition could say*, but that *all* could understand and from which *all* could profit. Philip Clayton (Ingraham professor at Claremont School of Theology) spoke truth to the assembly with a gospel-undergirded directness and fearlessness.[4] Saleem H. Ali (associate professor of environmental studies at the Rubenstein School of Natural Resources, University of Vermont) brought the deeply qur'anic notion of *balance* to the discussion, and reminded well-to-do environmental activists not to forget

2. E.g., 1 John 4:18; Eph 4:26.

3. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 121–123. Origen's solution is that, in this story, Sarah represents *aretê*, "virtue." Naturally, Abraham as a righteous man would not want to keep virtue to himself!

4. His presentation was titled "This Sacred Earth: Why Interreligious Partnerships are Indispensible in Addressing the Global Environmental Crisis."

or trample on the aspirations of the poor.[5] Sensei Sevan Ross (director of the Chicago Zen Center, now serving in Rochester, New York) invited the assembly into a time of attuning our *hearts*, without which all our activity could be mere busy-ness.[6] As for the beautiful reflection titled "Celebrating God, Celebrating Earth: Psalms, Sabbath, and Holy Days" by **Ellen Bernstein (**independent scholar and founder of the Jewish environmental organization Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth),[7] it is printed here. She has changed the way I pray the psalms about which she speaks, as well as the way I understand Sabbath.

Why should the encounter with the world's religions be taken seriously at a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, where our primary calling is to prepare leaders for *Christian* communities? One can approach this question in a variety of ways, but one possible response (for which experiences such as "Shared Earth" provide examples) is this: the encounter can be *theologically creative*. Christian theology is generated and enhanced by the encounter, and those who aspire to be Christian theologians are honed in their skills (and not infrequently shaken out of lethargy). In the Christian-Muslim dialogue, for example, our goal at LSTC is not to restrict our conversation to those things that we can say in common (as extensive and interesting as those things might be), but rather to *hear the challenges* that each faith poses to the other, and to go down deep into the resources of each faith in order to address those challenges and continue the conversation.

Much of my own work for publication has focused on the works of Middle Eastern Christians who wrote in Arabic, and who therefore were directly faced with the task of responding to Islamic challenges to Christian teachings—and that in a language that itself was not religiously neutral, but rather the language of the qur'anic revelation. In this issue of *Currents* we include a paper, an earlier draft of which I (**Mark Swanson**) read at a conference on "Christian Theology and Islam: Towards a Faithful Response" (Loyola College, Baltimore, June 2008), sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. In this paper we meet some creative Middle Eastern theologians of the ninth century who developed a rather odd set of arguments for Christianity's truth. I attempt to show that while their arguments may have failed as "systematic theology," these writers were able to pass on from their own experience of interfaith encounter one of the greatest gifts that Christian theologians receive from that encounter: that familiar teachings and practices, often taken for granted, again become *strange*.

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5. His presentation was titled "Need, Greed and a Sustainable Future." This is also the subtitle of his recent book *Treasures of the Earth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

6. His presentation was titled "An Intimate Truth: Selling Water by the River."

7. See her book *The Splendor of Creation:A Biblical Ecology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), and www.ellenbernstein.org.

Last May, shortly after classes had finished for the year, the LSTC faculty gathered with special guests, partly to mark the anniversary of 25 years of Christian-Muslim studies at LSTC, but, more than that, to learn more about the visions, motivations, relationships, and decisions that have resulted in a school where "interfaith" can be embraced as one of its marks. **Harold Vogelaar** (with additions and comments by **Mark Thomsen** and **Ghulam Haider Aasi**)[8] presented the personal and historical reflection printed below. It reminds us of the deep roots of our programs in the missionary endeavors of the church, in attempts to bear Christian witness in places shared with Muslims—in Palestine, for example, or Egypt, or Nigeria. While our senior LSTC colleagues have learned much over the past half century, they have long been aware of the need in Christian-Muslim encounter "to be present, to learn, to listen, and to engage in deep conversation on a variety of levels and in several disciplines."[9] Christians (like Vogelaar, Thomsen, and others) brought such awareness from various parts of the world to the United States, where they met Muslims (like Aasi and others) who held similar commitments. Working together, they have accomplished some marvelous things.

Finally, we include in this issue of *Currents* the sermon preached by Pastor **Susan Ericsson** at LSTC's 150th Commencement on May 16th. Pastor Ericsson, preaching on the story of Paul and Silas in Philippi (Acts 16), powerfully exhorted our graduates to "go out among God's people," not to go alone, and to go with the promise that "God gives songs in the night." I was moved by the sermon on the day of Commencement, and I am so moved again as I read this sermon (with its focus on Christian congregational ministry) and reflect on it in the context of our interfaith work. This work *also* requires that we get away from our computers and "go out among God's people" (and "drink tea," Harold Vogelaar might add). It requires that we build networks of friends and partners. And the sheer joy of it is this: as we meet with friends from other faith traditions, we do not simply sing rudimentary scales together; we listen to one another's richest songs.

Mark N. Swanson, Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations, LSTC

Editor for the October 2010 issue

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8. Vogelaar retired as Professor of World Religions at LSTC in 2006. See the *Festschrift* for him (to which Thomsen and Aasi contributed): "Harold Vogelaar: Interfaith Pioneer," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33:3 (June 2006).

9. So Bruce Schein. See Vogelaar's paper below.

Looking Back on Abraham's Encounter with a Canaanite King: A Reversal of Expectations (Genesis 20:1–18)[1]

Fredrick C. Holmgren
Professor of Biblical Literature (emeritus)
North Park Theological Seminary

The patriarchs encounter Egyptian and Canaanite culture

The narratives in Genesis 12–50, which depict the remarkable openness of the patriarchs to the Egyptian and Canaanite populations of the ancient world, set these chapters apart from the remaining books of the Pentateuch. Further, this openness and acceptance of foreigners is frequently reciprocated by the peoples they meet. When one considers the antagonism frequently expressed toward both the Egyptians and Canaanites elsewhere in the Pentateuch, it is surprising to find that in Genesis the patriarchs are depicted as traveling, for the most part freely and without danger, among these two peoples. Although the patriarchs have their own views of God and the life to be lived before the Divine One, they do not draw a hard line between themselves and those among whom they travel and live. The patriarchal narratives in Genesis appear to be free of any denunciations of Egyptian or Canaanite religion.

An example of patriarchal openness to the Egyptians, and that of the Egyptians to the patriarchs, comes to view in Joseph's rise to power in Egypt. He was second only to the Pharaoh, with whom he apparently had a good personal relationship (Gen 41:37–57). In fact, so cordial was this relationship that Joseph brought his father, Jacob, to Egypt and introduced him to the Pharaoh, which resulted in a friendly talk between the two. Jacob, both upon arriving and departing to return home, blesses the Pharaoh (47:7–12).[2] Further, at the Pharaoh's bidding, Jacob and his clan settle in "the best areas of the land." There, in the land of Goshen, they could live out their lives, and "capable men" among Jacob's clan members were invited by the Pharaoh to be "in charge of [his] livestock" (47:6). Further deepening Joseph's relationship to Egypt was his

1. Professorial colleagues, Drs. Paul Koptak and Elder Lindahl, have read this essay and offered suggestions that have been gratefully accepted.

2. We do not, however, make too much of this act of blessing; it appears to have been simply a courteous gesture. On the other hand, it reflects the friendliness of the relationship between the Pharaoh and Jacob.

marriage to Asenath, the daughter of the local priest of On, a city known for the worship of the Sun (41:50)! Nowhere in the Bible is Joseph criticized for such behavior, rather he is honored and blessed by no less a person than Moses with "the favor of the one who dwells on Sinai" (Heb. "in the bush"; Deut 33:13–17).

As the patriarchs at times moved freely among the Egyptians, so also among the Canaanites. Concerning the Canaanites, there exists little in Genesis that is comparable to the texts in Exodus and Joshua that seek their full elimination from the land.[3] Rather, the Genesis patriarchal texts, for the most part, depict the Canaanites as neighbors, and in some cases they prove to be honorable and upright, as is depicted in the following narrative from Genesis 20.[4]

Abimelech takes Sarah into his household

Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their clan once "sojourned" for a time in Gerar, a city-state ruled by the Canaanite king, Abimelech.[5] During their stay in Gerar, Abimelech exercises a "kingly prerogative" and takes Sarah into his household! He felt free to take this step because Abraham had led him to believe that Sarah was his sister, not his wife. Abimelech's action is certainly not approved today, but in that ancient world it was not uncommon for rulers or the royal court to think that this was their prerogative.[6] Even in Israel, both the king and the people surrounding him in the court believed that they had rights not available to the common person.[7] If, in terms of ethical practice today, we cannot excuse Abimelech, so also must we hold Abraham responsible for his less than honorable actions in his relationship with Abimelech.

There is much to which we are not privy in this story. We are not given any

3. For example: Exod 33:2; Josh 3:10; 6:21; and cf. Deut 7:1–5, which forbids any interaction with the Canaanites.

4. It is true that in Gen 28:1 and 6 Isaac counsels Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman but to go to his family home in Paddan Aram to take a wife from his clan there. Even though Isaac had his reasons to forbid a Canaanite wife for Jacob, harsh polemic against Canaanite women is absent. The case regarding Dinah, Hamor, and Shechem in Gen 34 is complicated by an act of rape that is followed by an expression of true love. See the excellent analysis of this chapter by J. Gerald Janzen, *All the Families of the Earth: Genesis 12–50*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 135–138.

5. Abimelech is never called a "Canaanite" in this text, but a number of scholars view Gerar as "a Canaanite city-state," e.g., Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 92. Claus Westermann identifies Abimelech as a Canaanite and points out that Abimelech's name ("my father is king") is a typical Canaanite name that appears in the El Amarna Tablets designating the king of Tyre. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 392. In Gen 26:1, Abimelech is identified as a "Philistine," but this may be a reading back into previous history what happened at a later time. However we choose to label Abimelech, it is clear that he must have been influenced by ancient Near Eastern and Canaanite culture and religion.

6. It is worth noting that Abimelech is *not* criticized for taking away Abraham's *sister*.

7. See 1 Kgs 1:2–4, which illustrates that even in Israel, actions taken by the royal court conflict with the democratic ideas of today. King David himself broke the laws of his own day and slept with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah whom later he had murdered (2 Sam 11).

details, for example, regarding the relationship between the patriarchal couple and Abimelech. Further, we do not know any particulars about the conversations that took place between Abraham and Sarah. It appears that Sarah went along with Abraham's deception, because when asked she said, "He is my brother" (v. 2). Abraham, later in the story, admits that when he and his clan began to move from place to place he requested Sarah to represent herself as his sister as he feared for his life when leaving his home community (v. 13). We do not, however, know anything about what went on between Sarah and Abraham. How did she feel when Abimelech's men approached her and she knew she was going into Abimelech's household? What did Abraham say to her as she was leaving? Did she willingly agree to cooperate with Abraham's request that they represent her as his sister or did she strongly protest this act of deception? In the narrative following this one (Gen 21:8–10), Sarah was hardly the obliging wife. Viewing Hagar and her son as a threat to the position she and Isaac hold in the promise of God to Abraham, she tells Abraham to send them away to almost certain death in the desert. Abraham agrees—at the bidding of God to do so! From this narrative, we learn that Sarah is a strong woman; she has her own mind. It is hard to believe then that she readily agreed with Abraham's demand that she leave him and her people in order to go to live in Abimelech's Canaanite household. The whole affair was Abraham's idea, and he was the one who set it into motion. In at least this one affair, one loses a measure of respect for the Father of Faith. John Calvin defends Abraham from the charge of cowardice, declaring that Abraham "did not, for the sake of providing for his own safety, prostitute his wife (as impious men cavil) [!]." Nevertheless he does admit that he "ought to have been more courageous and resolute in fulfilling the duty of a husband by vindicating the honour of his wife."[8]

Abimelech in shock

God comes to Abimelech in a dream and reveals to the stunned king that he and his people stand under the divine sentence of death because he has taken Abraham's wife into his household (Gen 20:7). Curiously, this threatened judgment comes about as a result of the lies of Abraham and Sarah (vv. 2, 5). Had Abimelech known the true facts of the case he might never have taken Sarah away, because taking another man's wife was considered a crime throughout the ancient Near East.[9] This dream meeting with God became a nightmare for Abimelech! It had its good side, however, because God, already aware of the conspiracy hatched by Abraham, gave him this warning out of concern to protect him from judgment. Further, Abimelech is informed that it was God who restrained him from sleeping with Abraham's wife (v. 6). He was told, however, that he must restore Sarah once again to Abraham, if he is to avoid God's judgment. When Abimelech does so, Abraham, who is here designated a "prophet," will intercede on his behalf (v. 7).

The king's despair and outrage at being deceived by Abraham and Sarah is evident in what follows. Not only did Abraham give him his word that Sarah was

8. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, Vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 521, 529.

9. See the law codes in James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: University Press, 1969), Eshnunna (26), p. 162; Hammurabi (130), p. 171; Middle-Assyrian (55–56), p. 185.

his sister, but Sarah also fell in lockstep with this lie. Abimelech explodes: "*She, she too* said, 'he is my brother'" (v. 5, Heb.). He protests that he is an innocent person who has been deceived by assurances that Sarah was Abraham's sister (vv. 4–5). Addressing God with a question similar to the one that Abraham had once posed (v. 4 and Gen 18:23), he asks: "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people?" He believes that this is a proper question to ask of God, because he insists he did not know that Abraham and Sarah were married, and maintains that in this whole affair-gone-wrong he acted honorably, declaring: "I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands" (v. 5).[10] God agrees with him (v. 6)! A reading of this narrative surely confirms that in *this* affair, Abraham is in the wrong and Abimelech is the aggrieved person.

Responding to justified anger with excuses

Following Abimelech's exchange with God, he meets with Abraham and bluntly confronts the patriarch with a series of edged questions and assertions (vv. 9–10):

> What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done. What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?"

Robert Alter weighs the significance of this interchange correctly. He comments, following the Hebrew text:

> The repetition of the formula for introducing direct speech [i.e., 'Abimelech … said…and Abimelech said'] with no intervening response from Abraham, is pointedly expressive. Abimelech vehemently castigates Abraham (with good reason), and Abraham stands silent, not knowing what to say (verse 9). And so Abimelech repeats his upbraiding in shorter form (verse 10).[11]

Following this verbal pummeling, Abraham finally attempts a response. After all that had happened, one might expect he would offer some form of an apology and ask Abimilech for forgiveness. The patriarch, however, does neither. Rather, he does what so many of us do when caught in our deceptions: he makes excuses that he hopes will provide him escape from responsibility. He presents two "explanations" attempting to justify the action he took. (1) Upon entering this Canaanite city, Abraham says, he was fearful of the people living there. He was prepared for the worst. "Surely," he said, "there is no fear of God at all in this place" (v. 11). Coming to this place, which the patriarch believed lacked the high moral standards he knew among his own people, he is greatly concerned about his own safety. He believed that Abimelech, upon seeing Sarah, would have designs on her and feared that "they [i.e., Abimelech's servants] will kill me because of my wife" (v. 11). (2) It was due to this fear of foreigners that, whenever he traveled outside of his own territory and clan relationships, including living as an alien in Gerar, he and Sarah agreed that they should travel as brother and sister.

Although one may understand Abraham's anxiety while traveling in foreign territory, when he says that Sarah is his

10. Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman), the famous medieval scholar, holds that this foreign king stood apart from other immoral foreigners and describes Abimelech as "perfect and upright, and his people were likewise good." See his *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo House, 1971), 263.

11. Alter, *Genesis*, 94.

sister, he is telling a lie. Or is it a lie? Abraham does not want his sister-brother story to be seen as deception. He makes an attempt to justify his claim by observing that Sarah was not only his wife, she was in reality also his sister, that is, half-sister (v. 12). This argument is unconvincing, however, because it was intended to deceive Abimelech; it concealed their primary relationship, which was that of husband and wife.[12] In any case, Abraham's feeble effort to defend his purposeful deception in no way justifies his willingness to sacrifice Sarah's freedom based on the fear that his own life was in danger. Admittedly, this deception was created as protection for him when "God caused [him] to wander" in foreign territory (v. 13)[13] and was not aimed therefore especially at Abimelech. Nevertheless, we cannot imagine that it would have appeased the disgust and anger that Abimelech held toward Abraham. No doubt Abimelech viewed this "explanation" (vv. 11–13) as slanderous because it depicts all people living outside of the Hebrew community as completely devoid of good character.

Excuses masked as "explanations" rarely satisfy those to whom we are offering them. In addition, very often such excuses do not even give inner satisfaction to those of us who put them forward because we know that they are cover-ups for our inability to take responsibility for the truth of the matter. This story of Abraham and Abimelech offers no clues as to whether Abraham experienced a sense of personal failure due to his deceptive behavior. If, however, the secrets of all human hearts were fully revealed, one may be confident that within the human family, of which Abraham is a member, the sense of inward failure is a common experience when "explanations" are offered.

Generosity replacing anger

Abimelech's sharp questioning of Abraham is followed by an unexpected reaction from Abimelech. Even though it is doubtful that he was persuaded by Abraham's "explanations," he brings his anger under control and presents him with gifts of cattle and slaves (v. 14). Further, he restores Sarah to Abraham and thus gives heed to the divine threat of death if he did not do so (v. 7). In addition, Abimelech shows concern for Sarah's reputation. He addresses her, with a trace of a smile (?), saying that the money he was giving her "brother" (!) served to witness that "you are completely vindicated," that is, in the eyes her people as well as the people of the land of Gerar (v.16). As if these acts were not enough, Abimelech allowed Abraham and Sarah to remain in the land (vv. 14–16) and to "settle where it pleases you."[14] How different was this response of Abimelech from the rage of the Egyptian pharaoh in the broadly parallel passage in Genesis 12, who after suffering a plague following Abraham's deception, drove Abraham and

12. Rabbi Moses ben Nachman also believes, along with a number of modern commentators, that Abraham was dissembling when he let the king believe that Sarah was his sister and concealed the fact she was his wife. He declares that Abraham committed a "sin towards them [i.e., the king and his people] by bringing upon them a *great sin*." See his comments in *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 264.

13. See James Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 181. Bruckner thinks that by this reference to *God causing* him to wander, Abraham is implying that God is to blame for calling him to travel into foreign territory, thereby exposing both Sarah and himself to danger.

14. Gen 20:15. See Abraham's similarly generous offer to Lot.

Sarah from his land (Gen 12:19–20). He showed little fear of Abraham's God and saw no reason to do Abraham any favors. Many commentators point out that this pharaoh is a foreshadowing of the later Egyptian pharaoh who persecuted the Hebrews until Moses finally delivered them in the Exodus. Perhaps then the Canaanite Abimelech foreshadows the grace and goodness of the pharaoh who befriended Joseph!

What accounts for the difference between these two rulers? Why was Abimelech so generous-hearted toward the Hebrew couple? Perhaps he was really afraid of God, because he knew that if he did not restore Sarah to Abraham, the divine judgment set upon him and his people would not be lifted. It was, after all, only following this reuniting of Sarah and Abraham and Abraham's prayer for the king that God healed Abimelech and made his wife and female slaves fertile once again. However, could there be other elements affecting the generosity of his action? Could it be that Abimelech simply better reflected the "fear [reverence] of God" that Abraham believed was missing in Gerar—but that was really missing with Abraham? It is possible Abimelech felt truly sorry for what was done and wanted to honor God by his acts of reconciliation. Even though God had agreed that Abimelech was an innocent person in this affair, he may have been more sensitive to the deeper moral implications of what he had unknowingly done than was the Egyptian pharaoh.

The picture painted of Abimelech in this narrative speaks of one who is guided by high moral standards. Though he was deceived by both Abraham and Sarah when he took Sarah into his household, he knows that his action inflicted a serious wound upon Sarah and her marriage. *Something happened that should not have taken place*.[15] There must be public recognition of this act and action taken to provide healing. As we mentioned above, the taking of a wife from someone was a serious crime in the ancient world, for she was not only property, she was a sexual partner who would bear children and give future to her husband. The author of this story has given us a portrait of one who, with some generosity, has done the "right thing." A part of the restoration of Sarah to Abraham included providing for her public vindication by paying Abraham, the "victimized" husband, a sum of money (v. 16). In addition, however, the king went far beyond what was necessary and demonstrated great generosity by allowing the Hebrew couple to settle wherever they pleased in his land and giving sheep, oxen, and slaves to Abraham.

Abraham the intercessor

An addition to the surprising, unexpected occurrences of Genesis 20 is Abraham's prayer to God on behalf of Abimelech. Should Abraham be the one to offer a prayer of intercession for Abimelech? True, he is God's prophet—but he is also guilty of the deviousness that contributed to Abimelech's decision to take Sarah to himself. It was only God's concern for Sarah—and for Abimelech!—that saved him from committing the crime of adultery. We have no clue as to the content of Abraham's prayer. It appears, however, from a later narrative concerning Abraham's meeting with Abimelech (Gen 21:22–24), which is closely related to the narrative in Genesis 20, that

15. See James Bruckner's discussion of objective guilt in *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative*, 192–198. Bruckner's whole inquiry into the "Legal Referents in Genesis 20:1–18," 171–198, is insightful and very informative for the understanding of this text.

the patriarch had some sense of his own involvement in this shameful episode.[16] The king at first compliments but then challenges Abraham with the following words: "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien" (v. 23). Abraham does not contest Abimelech's assertion that he has acted loyally to Abraham and Sarah, nor does he object to the king's demand that he take an oath before God to be loyal to Abimelech and his people. He knows very well why Abimelech is calling him to account before the God of the Hebrews, the One who "is with you in all that you do."[17] The king wants a clear, straightforward response that will completely exclude any of the previous deviousness or wiggle-room that would provide an escape from the truth. As he takes the oath before God, Abraham finally says it, clearly and plainly: "I swear it" (v. 24). His response is both an affirmation of the king's character and an admission of his failure to tell the truth at the beginning of their relationship. This admission of the patriarch may give us some indication of what his prayer for Abimelech *should* have been about. A prayer from one standing on the moral high ground would not have been appropriate, considering Abraham's own very questionable conduct. But a prayer from Abraham, God's flawed prophet, interceding for himself as well as for Abimelech, who unwittingly incited God to anger, would have been one befitting the character we associate with Abraham.

In this later confrontation, it is important to observe that once again Abimelech proves himself to be a person of character. At the time, Abraham had protested to Abimelech that the latter's servants had taken over a well belonging to him. The king denied knowing anything about this seizure (Gen 21:26). We are not given any details about this dispute, but if Abimelech had been a typical tyrant, he could have simply taken ownership of this well by force. It says something significant about him that he entered into negotiation with Abraham, out of which came a treaty that brought this dispute peacefully to an end (vv. 25–34). We do not know the full story about Abimelech, but in this narrative we are once again viewing a Canaanite king who expresses good-will toward a couple who had deceived him and placed him in danger of his life. We do not wish to praise him too much, but in the light of his generous spirit and of God's affirmation of Abimelech's integrity, we must ask how it is that this kind of "goodness" is reflected in a Canaanite ruler. As we observed above, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman declared that Abimelech and his people were exceptions in the ancient world. But were he or his people that different from all other Canaanites living in Palestine? Let us look more intently at the biblical and ancient Near Eastern witness concerning morality among the Canaanites and other foreign peoples.

Good Canaanites

Canaanites, according to a number of passages in the book of Joshua, were to be fully defeated and driven from the land (Josh 3:10; 10:28–43). However, we know from the book of Judges that many Canaanites survived the assault of Joshua's army and lived out their lives

16. It is a puzzling aspect to this story that God does not criticize or bring into judgment Abraham's double-dealing.

17. This statement does not indicate that Abimelech converted to Abraham's faith. It is but an admission that it is apparent that Abraham's success and power is due to the "god" whom he worships.

in the land with Israelites. According to passages in Judges, the Israelites allowed them to live in the land even though they were still regarded as an evil people who contaminated Israel.[18] Why then, was this Canaanite remnant permitted to live on in the land? They were allowed to share the land with the Israelites, declares Judges, *in order to test* the devotion of the Israelites to the commandments of God (Judg 3:4). This was a test that the Israelites frequently failed because they intermarried with the Canaanites and "worshiped their gods" (Judg 3:5–6).

There are several texts in Genesis, however, in addition to the narrative regarding Abimelech, which indicate not all Canaanites were an evil temptation for Israel. For example, in Genesis 38 the patriarch Judah, father of the tribe of David, settled near the Canaanite Hirah (v. 1) who is later called his "friend" (v. 12). While living there he married the Canaanite Shua (v. 2), concerning which there are no negative comments.[19] We are not given any information about this marriage, but we are left to assume that Judah was pleased with his wife because he went to the Canaanite community once again to find a wife for his son Er (v. 6). The woman he chose was Tamar, who possessed astonishing loyalty to her "wicked" husband following his death. She undertook a very risky action to force Judah and his sons to honor her husband by obeying the "brother-in-law" (Levirate) tradition. This stipulated that when a woman's husband died, her brother-in-law should honor the dead husband by owning the responsibility to unite with the wife to produce an heir (v. 8).[20] Because Onan, the brother-in-law, would not undertake this responsibility and because Judah, the father, did not admonish Onan's brothers to obey this ancient obligation, Tamar took it upon herself to act. Pretending to be a roadside prostitute, she invited the unknowing Judah to come in to her and in this way became pregnant and could finally bear a child to honor her husband. For this offense she was about to be burned to death at the command of Judah, but when Judah became aware of his part in all of this, he recognized the higher code under which she acted and interceded on her behalf, declaring: "*She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son, Shelah*" (v. 26).

On reading the above stories regarding Hebrew marriages with Canaanite and Egyptian women, the reader may conclude that this is not remarkable because they occur in Genesis and therefore they precede the law given by Moses at Mt. Sinai that is recorded and interpreted in the follow-

18. This view of the Canaanites has lived on in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Even today, a search on the Internet under the heading "Canaanite Morality" yields numerous expressions regarding the evil character of the Canaanites, even to the extent of saying that they were utterly wicked, totally corrupt. Did this tradition live on in Matt 15:21–28, where the disciples are depicted as wanting to send away a Canaanite woman who sought help from Jesus? Did it influence Jesus' own reluctance to receive her before he finally healed her daughter? See Glenna S. Jackson's interesting monograph, '*Have Mercy on Me': The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15. 21–28* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 83–84.

19. It may be noted that there is no specific criticism of the patriarch Simeon who married a Canaanite woman (Exod 6:15) even though some disapproval may be seen in the listing of the six sons of Simeon, where Shaul is identified as "the son of a Canaanite woman."

20. This "law" which is spoken of in Genesis 38 is differently represented in Deut 25:5–10.

ing books of the Pentateuch, and which forbids such unions.[21] Two responses may be made to this observation. First, the Law Giver, Moses himself, at least once, disregarded this law and married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1). Miriam and Aaron, who criticized him for this action, were harshly rebuked by God and Miriam was punished with leprosy! Moses, on the other hand, not only escaped divine criticism, he found his leadership reaffirmed! Aaron later confessed that the two of them had acted foolishly and Miriam was only healed of her leprosy after Moses interceded on her behalf (Num 12:1–15).[22] Second, the Genesis patriarchal narratives were probably written down many years after Moses, probably sometime during the reigns of David and Solomon or even a bit later. Some scholars of a more conservative bent will grant the probability that these stories were edited and finalized many years after the time of Moses.[23] These stories, which at times appear to conflict with the Mosaic tradition, were heard or read by an Israelite community fully familiar with the Mosaic law code and were allowed to pass on in tradition not only *without criticism of* but *with praise for* such Canaanites as Abimelech and Tamar. It is not Tamar but Er who is declared to be "wicked in the sight of the Lord" (Gen 38:7).

Living to the higher values of Canaanite religion

King Abimelech and Tamar, especially, are examples of Canaanites of good character. What makes these two the remarkable individuals they are? Are they "good" people *despite* their Canaanite background *or* is there *something in the Canaanite culture and religion* that explains Abimelech's integrity, generosity, and fairness as well as Tamar's unusual devotion to her husband and family? Further, can we believe that besides Abimelech and Tamar there are other "good" Canaanites, or are they the only two honorable individuals in the Canaanite community? References to Canaanites in the Jewish and Christian traditions, as we have mentioned, are of a very negative sort. They reflect the influence of the narratives in Joshua, Deuteronomy, and elsewhere in the First Testament, which depict Canaanites as a threat to Israel's faithfulness. Nevertheless, Abimelech and Tamar give us pause against making a hasty decision concerning the character of *all* Canaanites.[24] Israelites and Canaanites lived side by side in Israel and a number of Israelites married Canaanites, including two patriarchs, Simeon and Judah. The book of Judges sees this closeness as being a severe temptation for

21. For example, Deut 7:1–8.

22. Many scholars have puzzled over this narrative in Numbers 12, which states that Moses married a Cushite woman. One important question concerning this text is: Was v. 1, which speaks of Moses' marriage to this Cushite woman, connected at one time to a different context? In any case, it has been taken up in tradition as a unit with vv. 2–16 and so must be interpreted in this context today.

23. See, e.g., Kenneth Kitchen's article "Pentateuch" in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Intervarsity Press, 1962), 963 where he observes: "[I]t is difficult to date the final redaction of the Pentateuch." He then refers to the respected conservative author, G. Ch. Aalders, observing: "Aalders' suggestion that it took place some time within the reigns of Saul and David is credible, although some further allowance should be made for the modernizing of vocabulary and style."

24. John Calvin (*Genesis*, 529) declares that it was "unjust [of Abraham] to form a judgment so unfavorable of a people he had not known; for he supposes them all to be homicides."

Israelites, as it must have been. However, had the Canaanites been thoroughly evil, one doubts if such closeness, let alone marriage, could have existed.

The witness of ancient Near Eastern texts

For many years now, a great amount of evidence has accumulated that has brought about a change in our view of Israel's relationship to other peoples in the ancient Near East. One can no longer describe the cultures and religions of this ancient world, including those of the Canaanites, as being devoid of ethical sensibilities. Israelite religion and culture was greatly influenced by these more ancient cultures that existed in, and surrounded, the land of Canaan. One thinks immediately of the rich discoveries of Wisdom literature in the ancient Near East, which reveals so many similarities with that of Israel, as well as of the many law codes from the ancient world that reveal striking correspondence with the laws of Israel.[25] Let us be clear: Israelite culture and religion is not identical with what existed before Israel came into being. At the same time, we need to affirm that Israelite religion and culture did not spring up suddenly out of nothingness. Writing in 1973, Patrick Miller declared, "Scholars began to realize more and more that Israel did not have its origins in the misty past of man's historical beginnings. Civilizations representing a significant cultural level had risen and fallen before the entity Israel appeared on the stage of history."[26] It is clear today that there is a newness and difference in Israel that cannot be explained by viewing it as standing in full continuity with its surrounding neighbors. Nevertheless, even though Israelite religion moved out and beyond these cultures and gave its own gifts to the world, it must be admitted that it benefited greatly from the influence of the older surrounding cultures.

The evidence from Canaanite texts

The Canaanites certainly played an important role in the life of Israelites, but is it only to be seen as a negative one?[27] Is there any evidence that Canaanites could affirm an ethical response to life? The answer is "Yes." At the present time there have been unearthed several Canaanite texts that contain exhortations to mercy and calls for justice. In two texts from Ugarit, for example, King Dan'il is depicted as a righteous ruler who grants justice to the widow and orphan. In another text, King Keret is sharply criticized for failing to protect these same ones who need the intervention of a just king.[28] In addition, a

25. See e.g., Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 159–199.

26. Patrick D. Miller, "God and the Gods: History of Religion as an Approach and Context for Bible and Theology," in *Affirmation* 1, no. 5 (September 1973): 37–62, here p. 39.

27. Regarding Canaanite influence, see Isa 19:18 and the observation of Lester L. Grabbe: "Thus, one people who spoke the Canaanite language, who preserved Canaanite culture, and who carried on Canaanite traditions and literary forms was Israel." Lester L. Grabbe, "Ugaritic and 'Canaanite': Some Methodological Observations," in *Ugarit and the Bible* , ed. George J. Brooke et al (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1994), 119.

28. See CTA (Corpus de tablettes en cunéiforme alphabétique) Aqhat: 17. V. 4–8; 19. 1. 19–25 and Keret: 16. VI. 33–34, 45–50. Cited by John Day, "The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel and the Hero of the Book of Daniel," *Vetus Testamentum*, 30 (1980): 174–184. Regarding the Aqhat text above, see also Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 151: Aqhat V. 7–8. The protection of vulnerable members of society was also the great concern of the law and prophets in the

number of scholars identify the righteous Daniel, who is mentioned with Noah and Job in Ezekiel 14:14, 20, with the just ruler, Dan'il, of the Ugaritic texts.[29]

Although what the Canaanites meant exactly by justice and mercy may not be identical with that represented by the Hebrew/Israelite tradition reflected in the patriarchal narratives, such beliefs must have stood in some relationship to Israel in order for these peoples to be living in relative peace with each other. The above texts, when taken together with the actions of Abimelech and Tamar, should invite caution before making blanket judgments concerning the Canaanites.

Faith and reality in the First Testament

It is surprising to find in the pages of the First Testament a figure like this foreign king, Abimelech. He is a Canaanite but also a man of integrity who, after expressing rage at what was done to him, proves to be a fair and generous ruler. Sometimes we believe that a person who stands outside of our faith will lack the qualities revealed in this man. Further, we generally hold that a person who shares our faith commitment will prove to be honest and upright. In this story of Abimelech and Abraham we experience a reversal of our expectations, for it turns out that Abimelech, not Abraham, is the person of integrity. There are numerous examples of Israelites recorded in the First Testament who disappoint as did Abraham. In addition to Abraham, for example, there are Jacob, tricking Esau; David, conspiring to have Uriah killed because he had impregnated Bathsheba; and Judah, visiting a prostitute. To some people these actions are the scandal of the First Testament; it is easy to understand why such a view is expressed, because these acts are disgraceful and cruel. That the Scripture reports these events, however, testifies to the honor and honesty of the narratives recorded there. The reality of life is not hidden from us.

Pre-judgment ruins relationships and reputations

At the end of our discussion, let us look once again at Abimelech's meeting with Abraham. The patriarch blind-sided Abimelech with a sly, self-serving lie with which Sarah reluctantly or willingly played along. When Abraham meets Abimelech, it becomes clear, as the story progresses, that Abraham has already prejudged him to be a dangerous and unethical ruler. No doubt Abraham was aware of the tyrannical acts of some Canaanite rulers. He believed he had enough information to make him very cautious concerning the Canaanite ruler of Gerar, therefore perhaps we should not judge him too severely. Nevertheless, this kind of prejudice—pre-judgment—that initiated Abraham's devious action and put the innocent king under divine threat, has often stirred up antagonism that has brought about widespread cruelty and even death far beyond his day to our own time.

Although one may not take relationships from the ancient world and apply

First Testament (e.g., Isa 1:17). F. Charles Fensham points out, however, that: "The protection of the widow, orphan and the poor was a common policy of the ancient Near East. It was not started by the spirit of Israelite propheticism. . . . From the earliest times on a strong king promulgated stipulations in connection with protection of this group." See his "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21 (1962): 129.

29. So e.g., Day, "The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel," 174–178.

them directly and exactly to our day, we believe that there is much to learn from the Abraham-Abimelech episode regarding those who are foreign to our community. Martin Buber, somewhere in his writings, commented that problems in human relationships often take place because many of us live in houses in which there are windows but no doors. We look at people from a distance but do not go out to meet and talk with those we see through the windows. Simply watching or knowing people from afar frequently leads to unfair and false judgments. White Protestant Christians in this country have certainly been guilty of this with regard to people of color, Catholics, and Jews—and at times have indulged in misrepresentations so outrageous as to create great chasms between people.

Bridges have been built, however, due to the efforts of many who have gone outside of their "houses" to engage in honest interaction with those once considered to be suspect outsiders. We rejoice wherever relationships have improved, but see with sadness the damage done by irresponsible insinuations and outright accusations. Hopefully we can learn from past experiences, because urgent in the present day is the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Most Christians and Muslims "know" something about the culture and religion of the other, but such knowing is often limited to the shadow areas of the other's religion, and is often grossly distorted. Once again, thankfully, as in the earlier conflicts mentioned above, there are people on both sides who, while recognizing the genuine differences between Christianity and Islam, approach one another with respect, discover and explore the ethical teachings that we have in common, and take our differences as occasions to learn. While such an approach will not, of course, solve all our problems, it is clearly preferable to unthinking, wholesale rejection.

Abraham's pre-judgment and misjudgment of Abimelech rested on rumors and stories that he had heard and on some experiences that he may have had. Following Abraham's face to face meeting with Abimelech and his continued residence in the land of Gerar, he must have corrected his views of Abimelech and his people. What now would have been his thoughts of this foreign land and its ruler? He could not say, of course, that this was a land where Abraham's God, the God of Israel was worshiped, or that all differences between this Canaanite people and his clan had been erased. But he surely had significantly changed his first impression that this land was a threat to him. True, it was still a place where devotion to Abraham's God was absent and worship of the Canaanite gods continued, but Abraham and his clan decided to reside in this land because they now knew that not all Canaanites posed a threat to them. Differences, and the problems that arose because of these differences, continued, but still Abraham and his people now had a better understanding of their neighbors. They could live peacefully side by side with them—as we can today when we understand people who differ from us.

Celebrating God, Celebrating Earth: Psalms, Sabbath, and Holy Days

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Introduction

Many environmentalists will tell you that ultimately the source of the environmental crisis is people and the way that we think and behave. We imagine that we human creatures are the center of the universe and that the universe and all of nature revolves around us and our needs. In environmental jargon, we are too anthropocentric, too concerned about the human species to really notice the other species and the rest of the natural world, and because we don't really see nature we are able to desecrate her.

In other words, climate change, loss of biodiversity, the polluting of rivers and oceans, mountaintop removal, sprawl…is a result of our own self- aggrandizement and our inability to see. Like the soldier who claims that killing is possible when he can't see the enemy's face, we tend to ruin nature—or let nature be ruined—because we don't recognize her.

In the midst of the environmental crisis, the greatest spiritual challenge to a religious person is to remember the existence of the infinite and eternal presence—that is God—and behave as if God's presence infuses the whole world. That God is invisible and intangible makes this challenge all the more compelling. This challenge is akin to, yet the *opposite* of, the one that vexes environmentalists: because the earth is completely visible and tangible, we have difficulty remembering her too. God is vast and eternal and so, seemingly, is the earth; in her constant presence, she all but disappears to us.

Seventy years ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel despaired of the fact that in our age, we value nature only for her usefulness. Rather than seeing nature as a source of wonder and beauty, rather than seeing nature as God's creation, we see nature as a toolbox. We think nature exists for our sake, not for her own sake. We understand nature's value practically, in terms of its utility, not in terms of awe. We are interested in efficiencies: in getting the most out of nature for the least time expended. In Heschel's words, we "use time to exploit space."

Psalms

Prayer in general

If our society inculcates us with the attitude that creation exists for us to control and manipulate, how do we overcome the me-centeredness at the root of the present crisis? How do we learn to see?

One religious response to this question is *prayer*. Much of Jewish prayer involves recitation of *psalms*. Indeed psalms constitute the bulk of the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book. The Hebrew word for psalms is *tehilla*; translated literally, *tehilla* means "praise"—it shares the same Hebrew root as "Hallelujah." In our songs of praise,

it is God to whom we direct our minds, God who is the source of all. Over and over we turn our attention away from the follies of humankind to the majesty and mystery of God. The psalms pull us out of a human-centered reality and plant us in a God-centered one. "Praising God is our true calling," said Robert Alter, Bible translator extraordinaire.[1] The psalms are an effort to use the resources of human language to celebrate God's greatness and express gratitude for God's beneficence.

The Kabbalat Shabbat psalms

In the Jewish liturgy, we have a special service created by the Kabbalists, the mystics of Safed who lived in the 1600s, that serves as a kind of preamble to the Friday night worship service itself. The Kabbalists strung together six psalms to set just the right atmosphere for Shabbat. The psalms they used were 95–99 and 29.

It took me a while before I actually noticed what the psalms of the Kabbalat Shabbat service were saying, because for years before I had any real command of the Hebrew, I read flat and stiff translations of the prayerbook in which I could barely discern one psalm from the next. They seemed colorless and monotonous, routinized to me. But now that I am more facile with the Hebrew and having spent numerous hours chewing on these psalms, what is blatantly obvious is that these psalms are like a cycle of mystical nature poems.[2] In Psalm 96 and the five others of the Kabbalat Shabbat service, the habitats, and in particular earth, mountains, fields, sky, and water, take center stage. We also encounter the trees, islands, fire, lightning, clouds, fog and rivers, flocks, and deer.

The biblical poet calls on creation in these psalms because it is the creatures who bear witness to God's work and God's very existence. The earth and sky and all who inhabit them are not passive and inert, existing for humankind to put to use; they are vital and dynamic participants in the life of God's world. They sing, praise, and tremble to honor the One who made them. This is not necessarily symbolic or merely pretty language. In these psalms, creation and Creator are interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. God is the source of all of the creature's life and the creatures are a testament to God's presence.

The primary metaphor of the Kabbalat Shabbat psalms, God as *King* (which shows up in Psalms 95, 96, 98, and 29) reflects this interdependence. King and kingdom are bound up together as one. In Psalm 93—which is actually part of the Friday night service proper—the King is robed in splendor; God is clothed in the majesty of the mountains, the rivers, the forests. The King's robes are the diverse landscapes and creatures of the earth. All the members of the kingdom are the brave and loyal *subjects*—but never *objects*, as a secular understanding of nature would have it. Some people squirm at the vivid language of kingship that we find in our liturgy; they don't like the idea of a male authoritative figure perched at the top of a hierarchy—but I think that may be reading the text too literally. It seems to me that the notion of the interdependence of Kingship and kingdom teaches a critical lesson: when we diminish nature, we diminish God, and we diminish ourselves.

These psalms are also a poignant reminder that God's reign and creation's very existence are precarious. As in ancient times, evil, sometimes in the form of watery

1. See Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

2. [At the Shared Earth conference, we paused at this point to read Psalm 96 and other psalms together from a prepared handout. –Ed.]

chaos, might rise up and challenge the King's authority, threatening to overtake the earth. In Psalm 29, verse 3 makes the message clear: "the voice of God is over the waters"—keeping the waters at bay. In verse 10, we hear that "the earth will be firm and secure" only as long as God remains enthroned. God can only manage and scatter the forces of evil when God can see the whole picture, seated securely on high. As loyal subjects, it is our job to insure that God is in God's place, assuring the King's sovereignty.

Today the metaphor of God as Supreme King, struggling to keep the watery chaos at bay, is particularly disquieting as we reflect on the chaotic waters and weather associated with climate change, and all the destruction, pain, and suffering that our ecosystems and people around the earth must endure because of our arrogance. Our injustices, our mindlessness, our obliviousness to the consequences of our acts all endanger both God's dominion and nature, God's household.

Prostration

So far we've been talking about God and the creatures in these Friday night kabbalat psalms. What about us human creatures? How does the psalmist imagine *our* response to the revelation that the earth's very existence depends on God? In almost all of these psalms, we are called to surrender to God: to bow down, kneel, and prostrate ourselves in honor of the Creator. Our ability to experience God and the splendor of God's creation requires an act of surrender on our part. We simply are unable to really see God or the Creation if we are too full of ourselves.

I love the vertical language in Psalm 29 and also in Psalm 96: "Give up to God glory and might; give up to God the glory of his name; Bow down to God in the beauty of holiness" (Ps 29:1b–2; cf. 96:7–8). As we lower our heads down beneath our hearts, we are reminded that our heads (our egos) are not in control of our destiny; that we are not masters of the universe. We bow down to a greater power and mystery. And as we bow down we receive the *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness.

The few times in my life when the idea that the whole world—all of this diversity and abundance and extravagance!—is a *gift from God* actually penetrates beyond my mind and into my guts, I am overwhelmed. I imagine that I am tasting what the psalmist must have been feeling when writing these songs. At times like these my body is so relaxed I am like putty; I have to hold myself up to keep from dropping to my knees in gratitude. Prostration—falling on our faces in humility—seems like the most natural response to the deep knowledge that it is God who is master of the universe.

Celebration and newness

While the psalms are encouraging our humility—they are also enjoining us to celebrate. We are compelled to sing. Psalms 95, 96, and 98 bid us to accompany the fields in exulting, the rivers in clapping hands, the mountains in reveling, the earth in quaking, the animals in bellowing, the trees in bursting into song. This joyful praise is contagious. Singing is irresistible. We sing and the creatures sing and together in the polyphony of praise, we help make God manifest in the world.

It is remarkable actually to stop and think about what is going on here. The water clapping and sea roaring and mountain singing? Is this simply metaphor? Or do we entertain this as a real possibility? Are grass and mountain sentient beings? Might they have their own way of expression that we human creatures simply cannot register? It is known that we hear and see just a

limited range of what is possible—that dogs, bats, and even mice are sensitive to sound frequencies that human creatures cannot discern, and that many birds see whole ranges of color that are inaccessible to people. We are clearly deaf to much of the world's self-expression. What if we experienced the sentience of all beings? Would that change how we live in the world?

Whatever is going on in these psalms, it is fantastic.

If we are to stand a chance of experiencing the kind of radical amazement the psalmist is suggesting here, we must change the way we approach the world. We simply will not hear the mountain's song if during our prayers our eyes have glazed over with indifference or if we are calculating our next business deal or creative project or anticipating what's for dinner. Indeed the psalmist insists in Psalms 96 and 98 that we sing, not just any song, but a *new* song. If we want to experience the full vitality of the world, we need to approach it *anew*. We need to engage with it with eyes wide open, with the eyes of a child.

For me, one of the tragedies of modern Jewish life is that we don't perform the movements of prostration any more, nor do we bang the cymbals or blow the trumpet or the shofar to herald the Sabbath Queen. I imagine that if we did, we might have a deeper experience of humility and grace, and a renewed appreciation of Creator and creation and—by the way—attract lots more people to both religious and environmental causes.

Practice

I am not claiming here that if we do not have a transcendent experience after reciting the psalms, we have failed in our prayers. Plenty of times I come to *shul* and am in no mood for singing or relating to anyone or even reflecting on what the words I am saying actually mean. But I view the recitation of the psalms, of the songs of praise as a *practice*, like playing an instrument or learning a language. In Hebrew, the form of the verb for pray, *hitpalel*, hints at its meaning; *hitpalel* is a reflexive verb indicating an action directed back on the self: we wash ourselves, we dress ourselves, and…we pray ourselves.

I murmur the words, sometime mindlessly, regardless of the state I am in. I imagine that the recitation has a subliminal effect on me. Even if I feel nothing in the moment that I say them, I suspect that, over time with regular repetition, the words are beating down a path in my brain. Maybe one day they will have a cumulative effect on me and I will see what the psalmist sees. Or at the very least, I am developing a new vocabulary as the words and ideas are seeping into my mind and my speech. They invest my language with possibility. They challenge me to open to other realities and perspectives. They instill in me a sense of gratitude for all that we receive, for all that we are given freely every day: air, water, earth, the sun and the moon, plants and photosynthesis, circulation, transpiration. Some have described the recitation of the psalms as the first gratitude practice.

That we *sing* our psalms, that they are meant to be *chanted*, encourages our practice. Singing, as the neurologist Oliver Sacks tells us, employs different pathways in the brain than speaking. The mind remembers the words better when they are set to music, and of course, it is fun to sing; singing lifts our spirits and joins us together as one community. The songs run through our minds. Even when we are not intentionally praying, they organically become a part of our literary repertoire, our emotional reserve. In addition, the words offer me a sense of connection to my ancestors who have been reciting

them over 2000 years. They bind me to a tradition, a people, and a vision of the world.

Many Jews (and, I suspect, many Christians) have turned to meditation to fulfill their spiritual needs, failing to find a comparable practice in the western biblical traditions. The Buddhist meditative practice requires quieting the mind because thinking, which can be our greatest gift, can also be our greatest nemesis. We over-think, we revisit the same situation in our minds time and again; we are too preoccupied with our lives to notice anything else and see the world as it is. The Buddhist practice of emptying the mind and focusing on an object of attention such as the breath nurtures a sense of spaciousness and peace within in order to gain deeper insight. In Judaism, we accomplish the same goal—of transcending busy and cluttered mind and cultivating a heart of wisdom—by concentrating on lines of psalms. We give the mind something to fix itself on. We fill the mind with images of nature and holiness instead of images from the marketplace or the workplace. We harness the mind, by settling it on these songs of praise.

We began our discussion by speaking about how psalms can be a "gratitude practice" to help us appreciate creation, how they can foster in us a God's eye view of the world. From a spiritual perspective, gratitude and celebration is not an option; it is a necessity. We cannot continually take from nature and from God without giving back. This is the natural law. The cycle of giving and receiving must be complete. The gratitude of our prayers completes the cycle; it is an essential way of giving back.

The Talmud reminds us that it is forbidden to enjoy anything without blessing it first. If you eat a fruit and neglect to make a *bracha*, blessing, to express your gratitude, you are like a robber. The plant needs your energy to bring forth a new generation of fruit, and if you do not offer a blessing in return for what you have eaten, you rob it of its energy. You have broken the cycle of giving and receiving.

Similarly, our prayers provide an opportunity for us to give back to the Creator and creation, to express our gratitude for the all the gifts of nature that we enjoy, moment to moment. Through prayer, we are returning something of what has been given to us.

Sabbath

While prayer and the recitation of psalms is one way to encourage us to live a way of life that honors nature and all of creation, the *Sabbath* (*Shabbat*) is another.

We can begin to grasp the fundamental meaning of Shabbat by looking back at Genesis 1: on the seventh day God ceased; God rested; in the Hebrew, *va yishbot*. You can hear the word Shabbat in the word *yishbot*. *Yishbot* is also related to the words seven, *sheva* and sit, *yoshev.* Each of these words points to the meaning of the seventh day. On the seventh day, after six days of the work of creating, God ceased work, sat down, contemplated, and received. On the seventh day, God stepped off the Director's throne and fell in love with the world. On the seventh day God dwelled in the creation, engaged with all the creatures, and found pleasure and contentment in everything.

Rest, like the other creations, requires its own day. Rest is not a negative concept; it is not the *absence* of work, but is inherently positive. While God's work yields tangible gifts on the first six days (earth, water, planets, fish), God's rest on the seventh day yields intangible gifts: time and rest to enjoy the creation.

We human creatures and even all the animal creatures are charged by the

Bible to live in tune with creation's cycle by observing the Sabbath: "Six days you shall work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord: you shall do no work—neither you nor your children, nor your slaves, nor your animals" (Exod 20:8–10).

The existence of Shabbat alone is not enough to insure that we will receive its gifts. It's up to us to create space for it in our lives; we must build what Jewish philosopher A.J. Heschel called a "palace in time."

> Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.[3]

The rabbis said that all the days existed for the sake of the Sabbath. Just because there is one day for rest and six for work does not mean that the day of rest is less important than the others. The receptive quality of Sabbath rest balances the active quality of the six working days. Conversely, when we infuse the week with the Sabbath vision, we can lift up the other days to a holy purpose. Work becomes more meaningful in the context of rest.

From God's point of view, the Sabbath is so important that it occupies a hallowed place in our moral system as one of the Ten Commandments. Keeping the Sabbath—making time for ourselves, for love, relationship, and community; making time for the creation—is necessary for a good and just society. Keeping the Sabbath is a requirement for an ethical life—just as important as not killing, stealing, or committing adultery. Violating the Sabbath, like breaking any of the commandments, leads to the unraveling of the fabric of our culture. It's just that the effects of the violation of the Sabbath are more insidious.

In one version of the Sabbath commandment, we are told: "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy" (Exod 20:8). The Sabbath commandment is the only one of the ten that bids us to "remember," as if God knows we will forget. Remember to take the time to honor all the gifts of creation that the Sabbath commemorates; remember to delight in life and all of its fruits; remember to rest and replenish and nourish yourself.

In the second version of the Ten Commandments, we are told to "observe" the Sabbath (Lev 23:3). Observe, as if we're seeing for the first time. Witness the day. Watch all the creatures; become intimate with your surroundings; take walks in the woods; care for them. Observe the Sabbath; keep it holy by insuring its integrity, its wholeness.

The rabbis elaborated on the meaning of Shabbat-keeping and rest by examining work in all of its forms. Many of us think of "work" as what we do to make a living; the exertion of mental or physical effort. Physical labor such as carpentry is clearly "work." But "work," according to the rabbis, also includes other more subtle forms of effort like boiling water, writing, or weeding a garden. The rabbis enumerated 39 categories of work, which scholar Robert Goldenberg teaches that you can divide into four broad groups: preparing *food* (the first eleven) making *clothing* (the next eleven) producing parchment for *writing* (the next eleven), and constructing *shelter* (the last six).[4] Work, then, is

3. A.J. Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 10.

4. Robert Goldenberg, "The Place of the Sabbath in Rabbinic Judaism," in *A Shabbat Reader: Universe of Cosmic Joy*, ed. Dov Peretz Elkins (New York: UAHC Press,

defined broadly as anything that derives from these four fundamental dimensions of daily life, namely: cooking, sewing, writing, and building.

If you examine the rabbis' list closely, work literally refers to any activity that "uses" nature. For example, on the Sabbath, we're asked to refrain from any activities that use fire, either directly or indirectly. This means no cooking, no driving (burns gasoline), no electricity (burns fuels at source), no human generated fire, period. When we use fire we are "using" nature. Any human use of fire, no matter how indirect, violates nature and the spirit of the Sabbath.

> Through its inviolability, the Sabbath becomes the centerpiece of an ecologically sound life, a weekly reminder of how to live in a way that honors the creation and ourselves.

According to the rabbis, we're not supposed to build on the Sabbath; that means no repairs. Nor are we supposed to carry. Carrying anything, even if it is an umbrella or some wood, can intervene with our direct experience of nature or can lead to our use of nature. The same is true of writing and sewing.

We are asked to refrain from exchanging money on the Sabbath. Using money to buy things assumes that nature is a commodity that can be divided up and purchased. No money exchange means no counting, no breaking things apart.

In our workday lives, we use nature as a matter of course. As we use nature, we behave as if nature revolves around us, as if nature is ours to master and control. Carrying wood implies ownership of wood. Kindling fire implies ownership of fuel and all of the energy it provides. "The function of the Sabbath," wrote Mordechai Kaplan, "is to prohibit humans from engaging in work which in any way alters the environment so that we should not delude ourselves into the belief that we are complete masters of our destiny."[5]

Shabbat-consciousness discourages us from seeing nature's produce in terms of ourselves and therefore helps us overcome our sense of power over it and separation from it. When we give up a sense of ownership of nature, we can enter into a more conscious and intimate relationship with nature and with God. This is what is being asked of us on the Sabbath: to carry nothing, to build nothing, to write nothing, to burn nothing, to do nothing, only to "be" with God and God's creation.

The Sabbath teaches us to care for something we can never possess. It bids us to re-inhabit the world, to play in creation. It encourages us to delight in all of life's visible and invisible treasures. On the Sabbath, we are a part of, not apart from, creation. On the Sabbath nature is whole, indivisible, one.

The Sabbath demonstrates the power of limits inherent in the creation's design.

1998), 12–26.

5. Mordechai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1981), 443-444

Through its inviolability, the Sabbath becomes the centerpiece of an ecologically sound life, a weekly reminder of how to live in a way that honors the creation and ourselves.

People unfamiliar with the Sabbath often interpret its boundaries—no fire, no electricity, no commerce—as restrictions, but for anyone who observes the Shabbat, these boundaries insure a kind of freedom; the day is so rich and full that there is nowhere to drive, nothing to buy, nothing to do. Using the products of nature would only interfere with our total enjoyment of it; the day is whole and perfect as it is. The Sabbath re-sanctifies the creation, protecting it from human use and abuse for twenty-five hours.

It has always interested me that many environmentalists advocate abstaining from "using" nature one day a week in order to heighten our appreciation of it. They say: turn off the phone; turn out the lights; put away your electrical gadgets; don't drive; don't interfere with life's natural processes; keep one day as an island in time. They believe that a ritual practice can help teach people how to live lives that honor nature. They say that without a practice that teaches us to stop, we will inevitably succumb to the societal pressures that promote faster, consumer-driven lives that exploit nature. It seems to me that these environmentalists are re-inventing the Sabbath.

The Midrash, the Jewish compendium of exegetical material, says that keeping the Sabbath is more important than all the other *mitzvoth*, good deeds. It says that if all of Israel would keep just one Sabbath, the Messiah would come and peace would reign throughout the land. If we take the Sabbath seriously by meditating on creation, refraining from the use of nature, nurturing ourselves and our communities, loving our friends and family, we would be better able to sustain an ecologically sound world.

Environmentalists have made a slogan of Thoreau's words, "In wild[er]ness is the preservation of the world." But it seems to me, wilderness alone can't preserve the world; wilderness-preservation needs an army of earth citizens to do the real work of caring and preserving. What rings true to me is a complementary slogan: In the Sabbath is the preservation of the world.

Holidays

While prayer and Shabbat can help save the world, I believe that so too can our holidays. It took me quite a while to arrive at this idea.

About thirty years ago, before I was actively involved in Jewish life, I asked my friend Jeffrey Dekro, a pretty serious guy who went on to become a leader in the Jewish Funds for Justice, "What's so great about Judaism? Why bother with it?" He answered me with two simple words: "It's fun." I couldn't believe my ears. Judaism, fun? Meaningful, I could understand; transformative, maybe; but fun? I realized that he was talking about the holidays, but I had never had any fun on a Jewish holiday before; I had known them as solemn, mournful or boring occasions. Still, I thought he might be on to something, and I began to explore for myself.

One reason the holidays were no fun for me was because I simply could not relate to the historical events they commemorated. What was the liberation from Egypt, the receiving of the Ten Commandments, the Maccabean victory to me? Mine was the attitude of the *rasha* (the wicked child of the Passover seder), the one who sees oneself as an outsider and holds back in judgment. However as my attitude toward Judaism evolved from condescension to curiosity and as I

began to dig beneath the surface, I realized that the holidays were not, as I had once thought, isolated moments that fell randomly throughout the year, memorializing Jewish triumphs and tragedies. Rather, the festivals marked the seasons—the joy of rain at its proper time, the harvests of wheat and vegetables and fruit, and the birthing of the lambs—long before they were invested with historical significance. The holidays were bound to each other and to the world in a grand seasonal tapestry. While we are not connected to nature in the way our ancestors were, and few of us depend on the agricultural cycle for our livelihood, I understood that the holidays were indeed *holy days* that could capture the moods of the different seasons and connect us to nature and our souls.

I began to see the holidays like a double helix: the two strands of history *and* nature are bound up together to create a rich, complex, and wise tradition. For someone who went to the woods—not the synagogue—for spiritual sustenance, this was a powerful recognition. It meant that I might be able to find a home for myself in Judaism.

While each of the Jewish holidays offers some natural dimension, I am going to focus on the two which most honor and celebrate the natural world.

The first is *Sukkot.* Sukkot follows on the heels of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah in early autumn; it is the harvest fest and the beginning of the rainy season in Israel, the time to gather in the fruits and vegetables of the year's labors. Observant Jews build wobbly little huts called *sukkot* to commemorate the Israelite wandering in the wilderness.

To me, Sukkot always seemed to rival Christmas for pure pleasure and joy. With its minimalist design and open-air ventilation, the *sukkah* is like an adult tree house rooted on the ground. It is a *mitzvah* to make the *sukkah* beautiful, and in Philadelphia, where I lived for 20 years, we enjoyed a friendly *sukkah*-decorating competition. Many folks string twinkly lights and cranberry strands across the rafters. My friend Anna fancies herself a Jewish Martha Stewart and decorates her *sukkah* with makeshift window dressings of cheery fabrics she finds hidden away in the back of a closet. One year I grew a garden full of gourds just to have exotic decorations for my *sukkah*. Another time I grew and tended many late blooming perennials all summer: cleome, Mexican sunflower, zinnias, goldenrod, boltonia, and asters. I collected seedpods—the best are blackberry lilies— as well as grasses, and spent yarrow, and made lavish bouquets to hang upside down from the rafters of my *sukkah*.

In my old neighborhood on the Saturday afternoon of Sukkot (Sukkot lasts eight days), you'll see hundreds of people enjoying the annual *sukkah* walk, strolling, biking, and pushing carriages up and down the streets, admiring the simple beauty of each *sukkah*, and enjoying the pleasure of one another's company. We all delight in the bounty, cooking up harvest favorites (my standard is sweet potato soup and my friend Anna is always concocting new Sukkot recipes using green beans, squash, potatoes, and fresh herbs from her garden). On Sukkot, you're actually *commanded* to be joyful. I love this idea. It is as if we have forgotten how to be happy and must be taught. True joy comes by inviting all of your friends (including your long-departed ancestors) and a few strangers to squeeze into your open-air hut for a big picnic and star-gazing fest, rain or shine.

I've often thought of Sukkot as Judaism's premier naturalist holiday—a paean to simplicity. By practicing Sukkot, we experience the joy of living in nature's embrace, and we gain an appreciation for appropriate

technology, appropriate consumption, local foods, and sustainability.

The second holiday I want to share with you may be less familiar because it is not mentioned in the Bible, but rather was instituted by the rabbis 2,000 years ago. It is called *Tu B'Sh'vat*, the new year of the trees, and it began as a day to pay taxes on the fruit trees. Tu B'sh'vat has particular significance for me because it provided me with an entry point into Judaism.

Throughout its history Tu B'Sh'vat has not been a particularly significant holiday; on it, Jews traditionally recited Psalm 104 (the most beautiful creation psalm) during worship services, and practiced many fruit-related customs, depending on the culture. Some Jews would taste a multitude of fruits on this day; others would make fruit baskets as gifts and lower them down the chimneys of their friends and neighbors.

In the 1600s Tu B'Sh'vat was re-invigorated by the kabbalists, the mystics of Safed. They created a Seder, a special ritual following a particular order, to celebrate the day. You can imagine a Tu B'Sh'vat Seder as a four-course ritual meal organized around the kabbalistic four worlds of *Atzilut* (spirit), *Briyah* (thought), *Yetzirah* (emotion), and *Assiyah* (doing). Each meal consisted of biblical and mystical readings about nature, garnished with fruits, wines, and blessings. The more fruit you taste and the more wine you drink, the more blessings you're required to say, the more the earth is healed.

When I first encountered Tu B'Sh'vat 25 years ago, it was still considered an obscure or quaint holiday, but given its focus on trees and nature, I believed that Tu B'Sh'vat had the potential to become Judaism's annual environmental festival; a time to appreciate nature, and rededicate ourselves to her. I was eager to develop a Tu B'Sh'vat ritual that could evoke the kind of mystical experience of soul and nature envisioned by the kabbalists, and at the same time lift Tu B'Sh'vat out of obscurity and give it the visibility it deserves.[6]

I first grasped the possibilities of Tu B'Sh'vat after encountering the work of artist and teacher Chris Wells of Santa Fe, New Mexico, who developed the All Species Project. The staff of the All Species Project spent several months working with participating individuals and school groups in Santa Fe, helping them to choose species or habitats or ecosystems, guiding them to learn all they could about their chosen creature(s), and showing them how to develop costumes and floats to represent them. Then, come spring, the residents of Santa Fe, old and young alike, would don their home-made environmentally friendly creature costumes, and gather together on foot, in carriages, on stilts, in wheelbarrows, on roller blades, on bicycle or horseback to proudly march in the All Species Parade.

Chris taught me about the power of holiday festivals to pull a community together and transmit a serious ecological message. Holiday celebrations, when conceived and executed sensitively, have the power to capture the imagination of an entire community and the ability to change peoples' attitudes and behaviors because they engage people in a full-bodied—not just a mental—experience. Participants are so subtly changed that they often do not realize that anything is happening to them. Contrast this with the kind of standard top-down moral religious education that often yields a negative reaction.

Chris's All Species work inspired me to re-think Tu B'Sh'vat.

I wanted to create, in ecophilosopher

6. See my little book, *The Trees' Birthday: A Celebration of Nature* (Philadelphia: Turtle River Press, 1988). [Now available from the author at www.ellenbernstein.org –Ed.]

David Abram's words, a "spell of the sensuous,"[7] that could open peoples' hearts and minds to nature. I developed my own Seder based on the kabbalistic one in which the four worlds translate naturally into the elements of earth, water, air, and fire. Because a sense of place is such a subtle but vital aspect of ecological (and I might add religious) education, I chose to set my Seder in one of Philadelphia's boathouses on the banks of the Schuylkill River. I invited an artist to decorate the space and create a virtual Garden of Eden, a garden of earthly and heavenly delights. The event was open to the public and people from all faiths attended. This was important to me, as I believe our religious traditions are gifts to the world. The two hundred guests at the Seder chose to represent creatures from the worlds of earth, water, air, or fire and dressed accordingly.

People entered the space, silently admired each other and the paradisiacal setting, and took their places on the floor. World-by-world, we read offerings from the *haggadah*—biblical passages juxtaposed with contemporary nature readings and environmentalist critiques. Then we ate fruit and drank wine, listened to musical offerings composed by local musicians, and sang. World-by-world, we sat in silence, contemplated our place in nature, and expressed our gratitude for all the diverse fruits we have been given. Integrating pageantry, art, and theatre along with religious insights and ecological understandings, we created a beautiful and evocative new ritual.

According to the kabbalists, the point of the Seder is to repair the world. Repair of the world begins with repair of our minds. On Tu B'Sh'vat we are asked to overcome the fundamental flaw of our consciousness (that began when Adam ate the apple): our belief that we are the masters of creation and that the earth belongs to us to do with what we want. "The earth belongs to God," sang the psalmist. We are all part of one interwoven system and we all belong to God. The Seder provides the context for us to recognize our utter dependence on the Creator for all the fruits of creation. Through our blessings and our humility we give back in gratitude to the Maker of all, and so participate in the process of the repair of our earth and of our souls.

Conclusion

Here we conclude our whirlwind tour of Jewish prayer, the Sabbath, and holidays. As religious individuals, I imagine we all feel that one of our greatest challenges is to stay true to our individual spiritual paths. We must all remember that a true spiritual path is nothing if it is not committed to honoring and saving creation, God's greatest gift to us. We can take advantage of holidays, the Sabbath, and prayer to help us stay the course.

7. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

Apology or its Evasion? Some Ninth-Century Arabic Christian Texts on Discerning the True Religion

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Introduction

As a historical phenomenon, Islam is a post-Christian religion, one that sought to honor previous revelations of God, including those vouchsafed to the prophets and apostles Moses and Jesus, but which also claimed to bring correctives to the doctrines of existing religious communities. In the light of Islam's passionate insistence on the unicity (*tawhid*) of God, Christian teachings such as the divinity of Christ and the Trinity of the Godhead were called into question. Jesus the Messiah, son of Mary was venerated, and yet interpreted not as the Word-made-flesh of the Gospel of John but rather as a prominent member of a prophetic history that had a consistent pattern and that found its culmination in the life and ministry of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). This pattern did not allow for claims to divinity, nor did it have a place for the unique event of Christ's death by crucifixion for the sake of human redemption.

Clearly, Islam brought a set of sharp challenges to central Christian teachings. However, much of the Christian literature that has dealt with Islam over the past fourteen centuries does *not* take the challenges of Islam to Christian faith seriously. From John Damascene's description of Islam as the "still-prevailing deceptive superstition of the Ishmaelites, the forerunner of the Antichrist"[1] to polemical Web sites today, the Christian church does not have a particularly good record of measured theological engagement with Muslims; more often than not, ways are sought simply to dismiss Islamic challenges. There are exceptions—as I shall mention below. But creative encounters are easy to miss among the polemics, eagerly repeated but utterly mendacious legends about the Muslims' Prophet, or neo-martyr accounts in which Muslim characters are portrayed as ferocious and immoral.[2] To these one may add apocalyptic texts, in which events involving Muslims—their building of the Dome of the Rock, for example—are interpreted as signs of the End of Time, and in which Muslims figure into the interpretation of the Bible's cast of apocalyptic characters: Gog and Magog, the Abomination of Desolation, the fourth

1. Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 133.

2. Helpful guides to this material include R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962); Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997); and John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

beast of Daniel 7, the locusts of Revelation 9, the seven-headed dragon of Revelation 12, or the Beast whose number is 666 in Revelation 13.[3] The Christian literature occasioned by the encounter with Islam is full of ways of dismissing or even demonizing it, and certainly of evading its challenges to Christian doctrine and practice.

A good place to look for the exceptions—that is, attempts by Christian theologians to take Islamic challenges *seriously*—is the *Arabic-language* literature of Christian communities in the Middle East. Not much more than a century after the rapid Arab conquests of the mid-seventh century, in which Christian communities from North Africa to Persia rather suddenly found themselves within what came to be called the *Dar al-Islam*, many members of those communities were adopting the Arabic language. Leaders of Christian communities reacted, sometimes with alarm, but also by translating the scriptures and other Christian books into Arabic and by writing apologetic treatises directly in the Arabic language.[4]

In what follows, I would like to describe a very popular apologetic strategy that we find already in the writings of three Arabic-speaking theologians, from different regions of Mesopotamia and from different theological communities or "denominations," who all flourished in the first third of the ninth century: Theodore Abu Qurrah, bishop of Harran (a "Melkite" or Chalcedonian "two-natures-in-Christ" theologian); Habib Abu Ra'itah of Tikrit (a "Jacobite" or anti-Chalcedonian "one-nature-in-Christ" theologian); and 'Ammar al-Basri (i.e., of Basrah, a theologian of the "Nestorian" Church of the East).[5] The strategy they develop is a curious one and may at first seem to be a sophisticated addition to the list of ways in which Christians have *evaded* Islamic challenges to Christian teachings. In order to get a sense of this, however, we must turn to some texts.

On the True Religion

One of the most important loci in the controversial literature arising from the Christian-Muslim encounters of the late eighth and ninth centuries is one that we might label "On the True Religion." Christian apologists adopted a variety of approaches to this topic. From the time of the very earliest Christian-Muslim debates, as far as the available evidence suggests, they identified fulfilled prophecy and evidentiary miracles as positive signs by means of which the true religion might be discerned—and tacitly or explicitly called the prophethood of Muhammad into question because of their presumed absence in his career.[6] That the Christian argument was not without effect is clear from the response of Muslim apologists,

3. There is a huge literature on this topic. In addition to the works by Hoyland and Tolan in the previous note, it may be interesting to note Luther's participation in this tradition: John T. Baldwin, "Luther's Eschatological Appraisal of the Turkish Threat in *Eine Heerpredigt wider den Türken*," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 33 (1995): 185–202, and Gregory J. Miller, "Luther on the Turks and Islam," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 79–97.

4. We now have an excellent introduction to this material in Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

5. The label "Nestorian" is understood today to be pejorative, although it was widely used in medieval Arabic texts, both Christian and Islamic.

6. Already John of Damascus makes the charge that there are no prophecies of the coming of Muhammad; Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 135.

who sought out prophecies of Muhammad in the Christian scriptures, worked out their own sets of criteria for discerning the true prophet, and developed the doctrine of *i'jaz al-Qur'an*, the sublime inimitability of the Qur'anic speech, which they proposed as Islam's distinctive and unsurpassable evidentiary miracle.[7]

Theodore Abu Qurrah on the True Religion

Positive criteria for discerning the True Religion *in addition to* fulfilled prophecy and evidentiary miracles are advanced in what may be one of Theodore Abu Qurrah's earliest writings, *On the Existence of the Creator, and the True Religion*.[8] In the heart of this treatise,[9] Theodore claims that the true religion is the one that possesses doctrines in accordance with what human reason can perceive about the nature of God, the moral life, and reward and punishment in the afterlife. Arguing on the basis of analogy with human beings—or at one point even more specifically with pre-lapsarian Adam, created "in the image of God" (and so making the analogy possible)—Theodore concludes that human mind can perceive the inner-communal nature of God, the imperative of love in this life, and the incorporeal sublimity of reward in the next life. Comparing these conclusions to existing religions (with some unsubtle criticisms of Islamic teaching and practice along the way), Theodore unsurprisingly concludes that of all the candidates in the world for the title of True Religion, Christianity fits best.[10]

A surprising feature of this material is that it is immediately followed by a kind of Appendix, which John Lamoreaux, in his excellent collection of English translations of Theodore's works, treats as a separate treatise and gives the title *That Christianity is from God*.[11] It begins as follows: "We *also* report that there is *another* way in which our minds can infer that the religion of Christianity is from God…."[12] With these words, Theodore introduces an argument for discerning the True Religion that is entirely different from the one just concluded: rather than presenting the positive criteria that indicate the True Religion, he instead presents an analysis of the motives for which a person might decide to choose a religion *other* than the true one.

Theodore's argument goes like this. After reminding the reader that he is arguing on the basis of *reason*, he summarizes the humanly comprehensible motives for which people might decide to adopt a religion: they might be constrained to do so by the sword; they might embrace the new religion in the hope of gaining wealth, power and status; they might embrace a religion that gives scope to their fleshly passions; or they might find in the new

7. For an excellent example of a ninth-century defense of Islam as the true religion (with a collection of biblical prophecies of Muhammad), see A. Mingana, *'Ali Tabari: The Book of Religion and Empire* (Manchester: University Press, 1922).

8. Edition of the Arabic text: Ignace Dick, ed., *Théodore Abuqurra: Traité de l'existence du Créateur et de la vraie religion*, Patrimoine Arabe Chrétien, 3 (Jounieh and Rome, 1982). English translation: John C. Lamoreaux, ed., *Theodore Abu Qurrah* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 165–174, 1–25, 41–47.

9. Or set of treatises. Note that Lamoreaux treats the work, which circulates as a unity in the known manuscripts, as three separate treatises.

10. Dick, *Traité*, 199–258; Lamoreaux, *Theodore*, 1–25.

11. Dick, *Traité*, 259–70; Lamoreaux, *Theodore*, 41–47.

12. Dick, *Traité*, 259 (par. #1). All English translations in this essay are the author's, from the published Arabic texts.

religion theological teachings of which the minds of ordinary people can approve, perhaps because of their simplicity or familiarity. Theodore goes on to argue that *none* of these reasons can account for the acceptance of Christianity at the hands of the apostles, who coerced no one; who were without status, possessions, strength, or learning; and who called their hearers to lives of asceticism. As for Christianity's theological teachings, the apostles "did not at all call them to faith in a matter about which they had heard, or of which their human minds could approve, or to which anyone had previously called, but rather to a matter that was *new* and *strange*": namely, the Incarnation of the Son of God; his virgin birth and human growth; his rejection, suffering, crucifixion, death and burial; his resurrection after three days and ascension into heaven; and that salvation is solely through faith in him, who is God and Son of God.[13] It is striking that, in describing this "new and strange matter," Theodore comes very close to reciting the second article of the Creed.

But now (moving to the next step of Theodore's argument), if Christianity was not accepted for any of the reasons just mentioned (coercion, worldly gain, license, or easy and familiar doctrines), the secret of Christianity's undisputed spread in the world must lie elsewhere: namely, in the *evidentiary miracles* that accompanied its preaching. For an archetypical example, Theodore recalls a scene from the *Acts* of the Apostle Thomas: the apostle raised a man from the dead "in the name of Jesus Christ, crucified in Jerusalem"—at which point the kings of India, who had previously been mocking the apostle's preaching, came to faith in the crucified and risen Christ.[14]

This is an appropriate place to pause and make some observations about Theodore's argument. On the one hand, it is not particularly convincing. Each item in Theodore's list of humanly comprehensible reasons for accepting a religion—coercion by the sword, worldly gain, license with regard to fleshly appetites, simplified doctrine—corresponds to well-known Christian charges against Islam, and so it appears that Theodore's argument is circular from the outset, assuming what it sets out to demonstrate.[15] On the other hand, however, one can admire the sheer audacity of Theodore's argument. He was keenly aware that Muslims found Christian teaching, especially that of the crucifixion of the one confessed to be Lord and God, to be scandalous. But in his little appendix/treatise *That Christianity is from God*, Theodore *incorporates* the sense of scandal and repulsion aroused by this teaching into an argument for its *truth*: this folly is such a stumbling-block for the human mind that only divine authentication can account for the observable fact that people throughout the world actually came to believe it! And, to give this dialectic one final twist, Theodore points out that it is not just *any* sort of divine demonstration that authenticates the Christian religion but specifically the miracle of raising the dead *in the name of the Crucified*. Thus, Theodore builds Christian faith's great paradox, the crucifixion of the one confessed as Lord and God, into both the

13. Ibid., 259–264. The translated matter is at p. 263 (par. #20).

14. Ibid., 264–270. The story of the Apostle Thomas is at p. 269 (pars #45–48).

15. In addition, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), written with the assumption that the early growth of the Christian movement *is* humanly (sociologically) comprehensible. People *did* become Christians because of solidarity within networks of family and friends, and out of hope for material well-being and greater social status in this world, as well as felicity in the world to come.

negative and the positive moments of his argument.

In a similar little text, *On the Confirmation of the Gospel*,[16] Theodore offers a list of humanly comprehensible motives for adopting a religion that is only slightly different from that of *That Christianity is from God*. In the first place, Theodore lists license or permissiveness; then, might or power; next, ethnic or tribal solidarity; and finally, what he calls "the satisfaction of the mercantile mind." Again, Theodore makes a case that Christianity did *not* spread for any of these reasons: the apostles offered no license to fleshly desires; had no status or might with which to appeal to the worldly ambitious; and attracted a community that developed a new solidarity beyond that of ethnicity, nation or tribe.[17] Furthermore:

> As for the satisfaction of the fleshly, mercantile mind, it is altogether excluded from the Gospel. That is because the Gospel recalls that Christ, the Son of God, was born of the Father before the ages, and that the Father is not more eternal than he. It recalls that this Son, at the end of time, came down and took up residence in the belly of a woman and was born from her as a human being, while remaining God as he had been from eternity. He was a child in the manger; he nursed and grew through eating food until he reached maturity. The Gospel recalls that this eternal Son made offerings to God in the Temple; that Herod sought him, and that he fled from him into Egypt. It recalls that he fasted, was tempted by Satan, and prayed. He hungered, thirsted, and became weary. Fear came upon him, so that he sweated perspiration viscous like blood. His enemies overcame him, insulted him, and put him to shame to the point of spitting in his face. They struck him around his head, scourged him with whips, and crowned him with thorns. They mocked him, nailed his hands and his feet, and hung him from the wood [of the cross]. They gave him vinegar and gall to drink. They stabbed him with a lance, and blood and water burst forth from him. In the course of all that, he called out and said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[18]

If in *That Christianity is from God* Theodore had come close to reciting the Creed at this point in the argument, here in *On the Confirmation of the Gospel* he assembles a whole series of Christ's acts of human weakness, many of which were being used by Muslim controversialists in questions that took the form, "How can you claim for someone who did *this* [fill in the blank], that he is God?"[19] Later Christian apologists would have to write at length about the meaning of Christ's deeds of human weakness, and, in particular, about his prayers, including his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, or the cry of dereliction from the cross. Theodore, however, boldly and almost preemptively gathers this material into his argument for Christianity's truth.

Up until this point in the argument, Theodore appears to have left open the

16. Edition: Constantine Bacha, ed., *Mayamir Thawudurus Abi Qurrah usquf Harran, aqdam ta'lif 'arabi nasrani* (Beirut: Matba'at al-Fawa'id, 1904), 71–75. English translation: Lamoreaux, *Theodore*, Ch. 4, 49–53.

17. Bacha, *Mayamir*, 71–73; Lamoreaux, *Theodore*, 49–51.

18. Bacha, *Mayamir*, 73.

19. This is the fundamental question of a text by the ninth-century convert to Islam, 'Ali al-Tabari: his *Refutation of the Christians*. Watch for the new edition and translation of Rifaat Ebied and David Thomas in the Brill series "The History of Christian-Muslim Relations."

possibility of saying that, while the "fleshly, mercantile mind" may not find Christian teachings persuasive, the minds of the *wise* may find otherwise. But Theodore now slams that door shut: "There is *no one* among the people whose mind can be convinced that God is properly described in such fashion!" And a bit later on, we read: "*No one* is convinced by this or accepts it, not the wise, nor the ignorant, nor the one in between."[20]

Similar analyses

We do not know whether Theodore Abu Qurrah was the first to formulate this procedure for discerning the true religion through an analysis of the natural human motives for adopting a religion, and an examination of the available religions in the light of this analysis (a procedure that, for the remainder of this essay, I will simply call "the True Religion apology"). He may well deserve this distinction. Whatever its origins, the procedure quickly became part of the standard apologetic arsenal of Arabic-speaking Christians of every confessional community—as we may see from its use in the writings of Theodore's contemporaries Habib Abu Ra'itah and 'Ammar al-Basri.[21]

Habib Abu Ra'itah begins his treatise *On the Proof of the Christian Religion and the Proof of the Holy Trinity*[22] with the assertion that there are seven reasons for the spread of any religion. The first six are: (1) desire with respect to the things of this world; (2) craving for the (corporeal) delights of the world to come; (3) coercing fear; (4) license with respect to desired but forbidden things; (5) what Habib calls approval, *al-istihsan* (to which we shall return in a moment); and (6) collusion and ethnic or tribal solidarity for the purpose of group advancement.[23] Habib comments that these six reasons for the spread of a religion "deviate from the religion of God, have nothing to do with his obedience, and part ways from his religion."[24] But as for the seventh reason for the spread of a religion, it consists in (7) the evidentiary miracles by which God himself establishes the proof of his religion.

Habib's list will now be familiar to us: as in Theodore's lists, we find coercion; desire for worldly gain; permissiveness or license (to which Habib adds the hopes of carnal delights in the world to come); and ethnic or tribal solidarity. And as in Theodore, we find a category that has to do with the religion's doctrines. Theodore, in *That Christianity is from God*, had spoken of "theological doctrines of which the minds of ordinary people can *approve*" (*tastahsinuha*, the verbal noun of which is *al-istihsan*);[25] we remember that he had stressed that people would approve *simple* and *familiar* doctrines, but encountered in Christianity matters that were *new* and *strange*. Habib Abu Ra'itah uses the same language of "approval," *al-istihsan*, but in an interestingly different way: he speaks of "approval because of [the doctrines'] elegance and ornamentation."[26] In fact,

20. Bacha, *Mayamir*, 73–74.

21. The pioneering study of this material is Sidney H. Griffith, "Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians," in *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic* (Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Variorum, 2002), Chapter I.

22. Arabic text and English translation: Sandra Toenies Keating, *Defending the 'People of Truth' in the Early Islamic Period: The Christian Apologies of Abu Ra'itah* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 73–145.

23. Ibid., 82–95 (pars #1–10).

24. Ibid., 84 (par. #2).

25. Dick, *Traité*, 260 (par. #7).

26. Keating, *Defending the 'People of*

Habib seems to be thinking not so much of one's own approval of doctrines as of the approval that one seeks *for oneself from others* by "putting on" those doctrines, almost as if one were putting on fancy dress clothes in the hope of compliments on one's refined taste and aesthetic flourishes. But Habib goes on to make it clear that central Christian teachings are *not* such as to give an air of debonair elegance to those who show them off:

> As for the fifth category, which is the approval [of a belief system] because of its elegance and ornamentation, this is also inconceivable for the religion of the Gospel. That is because the one who is intended in worship and sought in religious observance; who is the stored-up treasure of the End and hoped-for reward; upon whom is reliance in this world and in the next; is a *crucified man*: weak in appearance and despicable to view among his crucifiers, who received him with every maltreatment, inexorably culminating in his death and burial. What sort of "approval" clings to the one who accepts *this*? What ornamentation or elegance attaches to the one who is firmly convinced of *this*?[27]

We move on to our third author, probably the youngest of the three we are considering here, ʿAmmar al-Basri. Two works of his are preserved, *The Book of the Proof* and *The Book of Questions and Answers*.[28] ʿAmmar's discourse about the True Religion in *The Book of the Proof* largely follows the pattern we have met in Theodore and Habib, but with some interesting twists. In the first place, while ʿAmmar believes as firmly as Theodore and Habib that the true religion was established by evidentiary miracles, he acknowledges that such miracles had *not* continued down to his own day: once God's true religion was established through God-given signs, they came to an end.[29] Thus there is a historical aspect to ʿAmmar's inquiry: not which of the religions *is* established by evidentiary miracles, but which one *was* so established. He also, later on, will be concerned to alert his readers to the possibility of *counterfeit* signs: for him, one of the "worldly motives" for accepting a religion is what he calls "the illusions and specious proofs of sorcery."[30]

Evidentiary miracles, therefore, are vouchsafed only for a limited period of time, and one must watch out for pale imitations. All the same, they remain central to ʿAmmar's proof for the discernment of the True Religion. He specifically *excludes* the possibility of discerning the True Religion through any capacity of human reason, with all its subtlety and finesse, to scrutinize the teachings and books of the religions, in order to distinguish which of them has the truest doctrines. For ʿAmmar, any such attempt goes beyond the limits of what is possible and lands people "in the sea of God's knowledge: God has not given them any instrument with which to cross it, and has not commissioned them to plunge into it."[31]

What the human mind can and must do is to examine the religions for the presence of "worldly" or "earthly" motives for their acceptance; one of ʿAmmar's lists includes: (1) collusion; (2) the sword; (3) bribes and flattery; (4) ethnic/tribal solidarity; (5) *al-istihsan*, [reasoned] approval; (6) license with respect to the

Truth', 88–89 (par. #7).

27. Ibid., 88–91(par. #7).

28. Edition of Arabic text: Michel Hayek, *ʿAmmar al-Basri: Apologie et controverses* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1977). The section on the True Religion in *The Book of the Proof* is at pp. 24–41.

29. Hayek, *ʿAmmar*, 27.

30. Ibid., 39.

31. Ibid., 27.

laws; and (7) the illusions and specious proofs of sorcery, mentioned earlier.[32] By now, such a list should be familiar. Once again, we find the word *al-istihisan* used in connection with the *doctrines* of any particular religion; what ʿAmmar appears to mean by it is the "reasoned approval" of a religion's teachings because of their conformity with notions that human reason can devise and deem acceptable. ʿAmmar writes:

> As for *al-istihsan*, and that which reasoned opinion devises, that arises in thought, and that the mind accepts, with the result that it imagines that this [approval] is a motive for accepting [a religion] apart from evidentiary miracles, I believe that the religion of Christianity is entirely at variance with that. That is because those who called [people] to it called [them] to things and narrated reports that reasoned opinion does *not* devise, that do *not* arise in thought, that do *not* come to mind, and that reason does *not* imagine.[33]

What are these reports? ʿAmmar provides a list of ten: (1) the virginal conception; (2) the virgin birth; (3) that the child that was born was Son of God; (4) that this Son of God was crucified, died, and was buried; (5) that he rose from the grave; (6) that he ascended into heaven; and (7) that he will come again to raise the dead and judge the righteous and the unrighteous. Following these seven creedal points, ʿAmmar mentions (8) that the apostles called people to the worship of the Crucified one, to the bearing of heavy burdens, to distributing their wealth to the poor, to giving their lives over to death for his sake; and (9) to lives of asceticism, without looking for the pleasures of food, drink, and sex either in this life or in the life to come.[34] But ʿAmmar is saving his biggest reason for last:

> The tenth, and it is the summation, perfection and completion of all of this, is that [the Apostles] called [their hearers] to belief in a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *This* is something that does not arise in thought and that reasoned opinion does not devise. Reasoned opinion may devise Good and Evil on the basis of what people observe of good and evil in the world; or it may devise the One on the basis of what they observe of the order of things, and their witness to One. But as for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that is *not* something that reasoned opinion devises….[35]

When ʿAmmar says that "reasoned opinion may devise Good and Evil on the basis of what people observe of good and evil in the world," he means that reasoned opinion may devise the concept of Good and Evil *principles* or *deities*; in other words, it is not surprising that rational people should come up with dualistic religions—and, in a parallel passage in his other book, he mentions the teachings of Zoroaster, Mani, Bardaisan, and Marcion.[36] When ʿAmmar says that "reasoned opinion may devise the One on the basis of what they observe of the order of things," he means the One, non-trinitarian, *God*; his claim is that it is not surprising that rational people should develop non-trinitarian monotheisms—and in the parallel passage, he explicitly mentions *al-tawhid*, the Islamic term for God's unicity.[37] Human rational analysis

32. Ibid., 32–41.

33. Ibid., 36.

34. Ibid., 36–37.

35. Ibid., 37.

36. In *The Book of Questions and Answers*, Part 2, Question 6: Hayek, *ʿAmmar*, 136.

37. Ibid.

may devise and approve of a sheer monotheism, or a dualism, or (as ʿAmmar says in the parallel passage) the subtleties of the ancient Greek philosophers, or the doctrines of those who believe in the eternity of the world.[38] ʿAmmar suggests that these are religious ideas that plausibly conform in some way to what people observe in the world, and so they may arise in thought, and the mind may give them its approval. But the doctrine of the Trinity is something else again!

Once again we note that there are slight differences in emphasis between Theodore's, Habib's, and ʿAmmar's speech about *al-istihsan* with regard to a religion's doctrines. Theodore emphasizes a person's ready approval of easy and familiar doctrines—in contrast to which Christianity came with doctrines that were new and strange. Habib's emphasis is on the aesthetic: a person may accept doctrines that gain her approval as a person of elegance and refined taste—but Christianity offers a crucified God. ʿAmmar emphasizes the mind's reasoned approval of plausible doctrines—and Christianity offers a triune God. In all three cases, the treatment of *al-istihsan* offered the Christian apologist an opportunity to list Christian teachings quite unapologetically, with the paradoxes of the Incarnation on vivid display.

Lessons for today?

It is, of course, not a straightforward matter to move from a set of ancient texts to "lessons" for Christians today. Still, I believe that three sets of comments may be justified.

Making a defense (1 Peter 3:15)?

In 1 Peter 3:15, readers are famously exhorted to be prepared to "make your defense [*apologia*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." The "defense" offered by what we have been calling the True Religion apology is a rather odd one: Christian doctrines are utterly repugnant to reason, and there are no earthly reasons why anyone should believe in them, but people *did* believe in them, and so they must have believed them not for earthly but for heavenly reasons (as confirmed by miracles), and so they must be true! This summary may be a bit of a caricature, but it expresses a nagging suspicion that I have long harbored: that this is, in fact, no "defense" at all; rather, here we find yet *another* way—in addition to the polemics, legends, martyrdoms, and apocalypses mentioned in the introduction—in which Christians have managed to *evade* the specifically doctrinal challenges of Islam. The True Religion discourse presented here appears to be an apology that undermines apologetics. One does not need to *explain* Christian belief in God the Holy Trinity or the confession that the Son of God was crucified for us. It is enough to exult in the sheer paradoxical nature of the teachings. As Tertullian is alleged to have said, *credo quia absurdum*, "I believe because it is absurd."[39]

It is important to note that all three of the theologians considered here, Theodore, Habib, and ʿAmmar, in addition to their treatments of the True Religion apology, did in fact devote a huge amount of intellectual energy to attempts to *explain* the central doctrines of the Christian faith.[40]

38. Ibid.

39. For what Tertullian actually *did* say, see his *On the Flesh of Christ*, 5, translated by Ernest Evans, ed., *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation* (London: SPCK, 1956), 18–19.

40. E.g., for explanations of the Trinity by Theodore and Habib, see Mark N. Swanson, "The Trinity in Christian-Muslim Conversation," *Dialog* 44 (2005): 256–263. For ʿAmmar's discussion of the significance of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, see

While some of us may find it difficult to see how a True Religion apology (such as those described above) and a rational argument for the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity can appear in the same writer's collected works—and sometimes in the very same treatise—it may be that those of us who have been trained in the discipline

> Christian theologians *need* the questions from outside the assembly: "What do you *mean* by the Trinity of God?" "Why do you worship a crucified man?"

of "systematic" theology are tempted to judge the work of these ninth-century theologians with the wrong standards. They appear to have been concerned not so much with strict theological consistency as with fashioning arguments that were pastorally *useful* in conversations with various audiences, at a time and in regions in which rates of conversion to Islam were accelerating, in part because of the pro-conversion policies of the Abbasid rulers who had come to power in 750.[41] These theologians' apologies, and other Arabic Christian texts of the period, were intended at least in part to convince Christians who had adopted the Arabs' *language* not to take the further (and some might think, logical) step of adopting their *religion*. One can readily imagine that the theologians who crafted True Religion apologies intended especially to urge Christians who may have been wavering in their allegiance to *examine their motives* for considering a change.[42] Rather than looking in the preserved Arabic writings of thinkers such as Theodore, Habib, and ʿAmmar for systematic theologies, we should expect to find "apologetic dossiers" of arguments that had proved their worth in the difficult work of community preservation. Whether or not these arguments formed an internally consistent set is perhaps not an issue about which these apologists were overly concerned.

Christian life as a witness to its truth

If the True Religion apology as described above fails to *explain* central Christian teachings, it did allow Theodore, Habib, and ʿAmmar to say something about what it means for Christians to *live according to* Christian teachings, that is, to embody the commitments they espouse. The Christian life, they remind us, has a particular shape: not of reliance on violence, but of turning the other cheek; not the pursuit of wealth and status, but of self-giving and content-

Mark N. Swanson, "Resurrection Debates: Qur'anic Discourse and Arabic Christian Apology," *Dialog* 48 (2009): 248–256.

41. The classic study is Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

42. We may also note that the apologies examined above all pack a great deal of Christian doctrinal and moral teaching into a few pages and may well have provided a kind of emergency catechesis for under-catechized, wavering Christians.

ment; not of license, but of discipline of the appetites; not of zeal for tribe, but of embrace of all nations. This is certainly a "lesson for today"—in which too many self-identified Christians confront those with whom they differ with verbal violence, inhospitality, undisciplined indulgence in anger and resentment, and a kind of neo-tribalism. Theodore, Habib, and 'Ammar remind us that in the encounter with the religious Other, the actual *behavior* of Christians cannot be separated from their witness.

The genuine oddity of Christian belief

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the arguments of Theodore, Habib, and 'Ammar that have been surveyed here is this: they provide a salutary reminder to their readers—including Christian readers today—of the genuine oddity of Christian belief. Even in a day in which Christians are increasingly aware of religious plurality all around them, it is a great temptation for Christian believers, gathering together in specifically Christian spaces and institutions—and often in the *absence* of people of other faith-traditions—to regard Christian doctrine as something quite obvious. How could anyone actually believe otherwise? As an antidote to this, Christian theologians *need* the questions from outside the assembly: "What do you *mean* by the Trinity of God?" "Why do you worship a crucified man?" And so on.

It is a gift of the religious Other to make the familiar again strange—and in these texts of the True Religion apology, forged in long experience of conversation with Muslims, Theodore, Habib, and 'Ammar have distilled that gift to a terrific degree of potency. Christian teachings are *not* easy and familiar; they do *not* ooze elegance and refinement; they do *not* conform readily to what we observe in the world. We are reminded that faith is not our intellectual achievement, but God's extraordinary gift. We are reminded of our need for humility.

And so, perhaps ironically, texts that may fail the test of 1 Peter 3:15 can still provide Christians some wisdom for interreligious encounters today—as we approach those whom we meet humbly, and seek to live our lives consistently with the truly extraordinary teachings of the faith that we confess and cherish.

Twenty-Five Years of Christian-Muslim Work at LSTC, 1985–2010

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(with Mark Thomsen and Ghulam Haider Aasi)

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Cor 4:5)

I want to thank the organizers of this Faculty Conference for inviting us to join in this time of remembering and reflecting on Christian-Muslim work begun at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 1984–85. Thinking back to those humble beginnings the names of quite a few colleagues come to mind without whose support little would have been accomplished. Several have passed away, others couldn't be here, but some are present, and for that I am deeply grateful. My good friends and colleagues Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi and Dr. Mark Thomsen are with us, and I've asked them to share in these reflections.[1]

The context

Thinking back to that first year at LSTC, I am reminded of the context. Weather-wise it was cold in Chicago. I recall that during our conference in February of 1985 we had the coldest weekend ever recorded for the city, 26 below zero. I wouldn't say it was indicative of the state of Christian-Muslim relations then, but certainly they were anything but warm. The Iranian revolution was still sparking fear in people's minds and we were engaged in two proxy wars: one supporting the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, the other in Iraq supporting Saddam Hussein against Iran. A quote from Graham Fuller, a Middle East specialist with the CIA during the 1980s, helps illumine the political landscape. Testifying before the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1991, he said:

> There was a genuine visceral fear of Islam in Washington as a force that was utterly alien to American thinking, and that really scared us. Senior people at the Pentagon and elsewhere were much more concerned about Islam than communism. It was an almost obsessive fear, leading to a mentality on our part that you should use any stick to beat a dog to stop the advance of Islamic fundamentalism.[2] [The "stick," of course, was Iraq, and Iran the "dog."]

According to this, Islam was a force "utterly alien to American thinking," creating

1. Some of their remarks, originally responses to this paper, have now been incorporated into it. We look forward to a more extensive reflection from Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi in a future issue of this journal.

2. Quoted in Ted Gup, "A Man You Could Do Business With," *Time*, 11 March 1991. The title of the article refers to Saddam Hussein.

a “visceral” and “obsessive fear” on the part of Americans. A rosy picture it was not, the challenge was great (just as it is now)! Thank goodness there were people at LSTC willing then, as now, to take up the challenge and to work at improving Christian-Muslim relations.

LCA background

How did we happen to come to LSTC in 1984? Allow me a brief historical excursus as background to our work here. My first wife Neva and I had gone out as missionaries with the Reformed Church in America in 1963 to work in the Arabian Gulf, in Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman. It was there in 1971 that Dr. Fred Neudoerffer[3] came to interview us about working in a new project that the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) was planning: to engage Muslim youth, primarily in Palestine/Israel. The ideologue behind this new venture was a scholar by the name of Bruce Schein who had been working with the LCA for some years in Jerusalem. He was a dynamic young man, single, with boundless creative energy and strong persuasive powers. It was his idea, after three years of intense research, to bring together a team of people who would engage a whole generation of Muslim youth, living under occupation, disenchanted and disillusioned with the past, but straining for a better future, and open to new ideas and possibilities.

Let me quote a few sentences from Schein’s final report, entitled “The Mission,”[4] which may help clarify the background. It is 52 pages long, single spaced! In it he quotes approvingly from Dr. Denis Baly of Kenyon College who, in a personal letter to Bruce, wrote:

> I am myself convinced that the great days of direct Evangelism are, in the providence of God, over, and that a new era is opening which I would characterize by the phrase “conversation not conversion”.... [We must be] ready to learn before we begin to teach.... [W]e must come with much greater humility [than in the past] and seek to learn for the sake of learning. I am impressed by the fact that reconciliation can come about only when someone is fully a member of each opposing community. In theological terms God and man can be reconciled only when there is someone who is truly God and truly man. We are, as of a thousand years, in conflict and struggle between Christendom and Islam during which each saw the other as the great enemy. This cannot be overcome in a moment, nor is it any good pretending that it has not happened and trying to start with a clean slate. In view of all this, I think that the Christian function in the Islamic world at the present time is to set up centers of conversation.[5]

This is so far challenging, yet not too provocative. But Schein goes on to say, after detailing a variety of interviews that he had conducted, that:

> Although many...might cry nonsense, one is able to say that Islam in many ways is dead. This is concurred upon by almost all of the religious leaders that I have discussed or studied with.... The impossibility of even having a world meeting of Muslims, as has been evident in the failures during the

3. Dr. Fred Neudoerffer was Area Secretary for the Board of World Mission of the Lutheran Church in America, with responsibility for Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East.

4. A copy of this report can be found at the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

5. Bruce Schein, “The Mission,” 3.

> past three years at such attempts, only underlines the demise of the Umma and the Islamic reality.[6]

As I said, this was written around 1970, three years after the 1967 war, a conflict that many Muslims called "the catastrophe." Schein interpreted it differently. He saw it as marking the end of an Islamic way of life that at one time had been strong, dynamic, life-giving, totally God-centered, even offering a solid Semitic critique of a fractured Hellenistic Christology, but which in modern times had become backward-looking, inward-focused, moribund, medieval in its approach to education and the sciences, and unable to cope with the questions and challenges posed by modernity. The war of 1967 had broken Islam's façade of piety and strength and clearly exposed, at least to the young people and in particular to Palestinian youth, an inner spiritual weakness that deprived them of the strength needed to cope. Muslims needed to be healed and Islam, for many, was found wanting. Schein believed that Islam was unreformed and, certainly in its fundamentalistic approach, could have no discussion or dialogue with the modern world. The time was ripe for renewal. The Spirit of God was at work among young Arab Muslims, and Lutherans with their dynamic understanding of biblical faith, theology, and grace—which he saw as open and ready for the challenges of modernity—could play a significant part in this movement of God's Spirit—*if* they would actually take the time to be present, to learn, to listen, and to engage in deep conversation on a variety of levels and in several disciplines. Schein referred often to Buber's beloved phrase "I–Thou," and was eager for heart-to-heart conversation, for meaningful engagement. Theoretically, Christians already living or working in the Middle East should have been engaged in this challenge; but the following excerpts highlight Schein's thinking on how the church in the Middle East, including some missionaries, had missed the challenge of creatively engaging Islam and Muslims.

> Surprisingly most of those speaking for the church in the [Middle East]…had turned Christianity into a force quite similar in makeup to Islam. The [Old Testament], as with Islam, was turned into a second rate book with a second rate idea of God. More than Islam, it entirely cut off its link with the past mighty acts of God.…The church had completely lost the sense of Israel as God's people through the ages and like the Koran could see only Jews who had once been blessed, but who now were passed by in God's grace.…The church rather continued in its fight over dogmas. The New Testament was crystallized into a Credo and the Credo was given out to the infidel. The complete sense of monotheism was lost in looking at Islam. It was the antichrist, the pagan with a false god. Here, as with the treatment of later Judaism, the missionary effort lost sight of the very power of Islam's holy writings and its basic agreement with the faith. Islam was not to be enriched and thus given clearer depth to the truth it already had locked in itself. It was to be overcome with the truth, i.e., the proper dogmatic faith. There was no effort such as Paul had made with Judaism, to incorporate the Christ into the system of Islam so as to recreate it. The accent was placed on the name "Christian" and on the act of taking the name, baptism.… Christianity for the missionaries was not a faith that became part of the world in order to transform the world, but a force that stood apart and condemned the world.… A missionary in effect came to give his life for a particular dogmatic

6. Ibid., 7.

> position, not first and foremost for the Christ. . . . No matter how confusing this [denominationalism] might be to the Muslim, the missionary did not come with one basic Christianity, but with many religions under the Christian name.[7]

This mentality, Schein opines, has led missionaries in the past to translate particular creeds and dogmas, hymns, and even theological writings into Arabic, thinking they have done something when in fact the terms translated are so western they have no meaning to the Muslim ear. He writes:

> Because he [the missionary] has the truth in capsule-form, his main effort is not getting into the heart of the society, but spreading his dogma. Missionaries are to be trained in production of radio or television, not in intensive understanding of Islamic theological and philosophical possibilities. Gimmicks are worked at with much effort to get people to take the message as it is given in correspondence courses or in conferences. The missionary is basically to be a retailer, advertiser or salesman, not one who is working hard to get the basic thought across to the people he wants to reach. The missionaries are right when they say they are not interested in dialogue. They never have been. They are interested in talking at people, not with them. . . . Thus, for all its effort, outlay of talent and money, the Protestant mission, after a hundred years of trial, has been a failure. . . . Missions then have been thrown into a crisis today.[8]

These notes on failure within Islam and on a crisis in the way Christianity had been represented in the Middle East, as Schein saw it back in the late 1960s, set the stage for his vision of what Lutherans can and need to do. The church, he believed, had the means to offer something to Middle East youth, Muslim and Christian, if it could only "get out of its Islamic, Judaistic traps." It was time for the wine of the good news of God in Christ to acquire new wine skins! To achieve this there needed to be a team of qualified people working over a long period of time.

This team, assembled by the LCA, came to include people trained in education, social services, archeology, biblical studies, pastoral ministry with a focus on youth and someone who knew Arabic and Islam, i.e., an Islamicist. This emphasis on Islam and Muslims, as I said, was paramount in Schein's thinking. At that time, the LCA had no one in this last category, and since I was working on my PhD in Islamic studies at Columbia University, Fred Neudoerffer contacted his counterpart in the Reformed Church in America (RCA), John Butyn, and we were selected to join the team, sponsored and supported by both the RCA and the LCA. Some other early members were Chas and Karla Moline, Peter and Kathy Kapenga, Al and Lois Glock, and Evelyn Guss. LCA Board of World Mission executives Dave Vikner and John Mangum made it abundantly clear to all of us that we were not to start any new Lutheran institutions, but to work our way into the fabric of what was already in place. Neudoerffer always reminded us that this was to be, by its very nature, a long-term undertaking.[9]

It was decided in 1972 that we (Vogelaars) should first go to Egypt to

7. Ibid., 29.

8. Ibid., 29–31.

9. David D. Grafton has now written a detailed account of this whole venture in his book *Piety, Politics, and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

finish writing my dissertation and later join the group in Jerusalem, which, in Schein's thinking, was to be the center of all our work. Once in Egypt, however, we discovered that, to be close to the heart of Islam and Muslim thinking, there was no better place than Cairo. Schein eventually agreed, and so Cairo became a second locus of our work.

During our years in Cairo many good things happened. We formed close ties with three significant Christian communities which continue until now: The Coptic Orthodox Church,[10] the Evangelical Theological Seminary,[11] and St. Andrew's United Church.[12] It was also ripe ground for overseas internships, and four people now at LSTC served there: Mark Swanson, Rosanne Swanson, Michael Shelley, and John Hubers.[13] When asked by the respective seminaries if we were doing enough to train them, Presbyterian missionary Jack Lorimer famously said: "Our challenge is to stay out of their way. They are doing just fine. We have no desire to corrupt them!"

We were most fortunate that during those years the LCA sponsored groups of church leaders, usually between 12 and 15, and mostly from countries where Muslims and Christians lived together, to come to Egypt for study tours of four weeks—two weeks on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations and two on Egypt and the Bible. Dr. Willem Bijlefeld (of Hartford Seminary) almost always came for the first two weeks to lead us in our study of Islam. Needless to say, we spent much of our time visiting mosques and interacting with religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian. Those who know Dr. Bijlefeld are aware of the wisdom and passion he brings to the study of Christian-Muslim relations.

Initial visit to Chicago

It was from Egypt that we came home for our furlough. We arrived in Chicago in the summer of 1984 to spend a year's leave. We had been invited to LSTC by Prof. James Scherer and President Bill Lesher, and thanks to LCA and RCA mission executives like Fred Neudoerffer, David Vikner, John Buteyn and others we were able to come. President Lesher, supported by Prof. Yoshiro Ishida, encouraged us to research the local Muslim communities, to visit them in order to build bridges of mutual trust and friendship. He and others at the seminary had spent years in Christian ecumenical work and were eager to explore what ecumenism might look like in an interfaith context. We too were keen on this, since I had spent much of my time in Cairo sipping countless cups of tea with Muslims, conversing with numerous *shaikhs* and *ulama* in their often small but comfortable little cubicles in dusty old mosques. I was privileged at times to have my seminary students accompany me; often this was the first time they had ever been inside a mosque, let alone in serious conversation with Muslim leaders.

So, in addition to teaching a course or two at LSTC, we spent much of that year attending Friday prayers, becoming acquainted with as many Muslims as we

10. For some of the learning that came out of this engagement, see Mark N. Swanson, *The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt*, The Popes of Egypt, 2 (Cairo: AUC Press, 2010).

11. Vogelaar, M. Swanson, and Shelley taught at this seminary for a cumulative total of more than thirty years.

12. Lutherans have furnished pastors and workers since 1973. In the beginning, the pastor also served as pastor at St. John's Parish in Maadi, Egypt.

13. Since this talk was given, Hubers, a PhD candidate at LSTC, has joined the religion faculty at Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa.

could, discovering who they were, where they came from, the kinds of mosques and centers they had built, and the challenges they faced living in Chicago. I and my colleagues were astounded that there were so many and such a variety of Muslims throughout the Chicago area. With the help and encouragement of Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi from the American Islamic College, and later Dr. Asad Husain, we learned there were close to fifty places of prayer in the city, many just simple rooms but some built as mosques and five significant community centers. We found, as I recall, no ghetto-like communities, unlike in the United Kingdom.[14]

Generally speaking there was positive response from the Muslim communities. I say communities because, true to form, ethnic groups often started their own gatherings and mosques though nearly all were inclusive of others. Not unlike my experience in the Middle East, most drew on their rich Islamic tradition of showing hospitality, even to strangers. Invariably they would engage us in conversation and invite us to return, something we tried to do often. We also made close ties to the African-American Muslim community; Lionel Abdul Haqq and Ayesha Mustafaa, both converts to Islam, were especially helpful in facilitating this.[15]

We also visited pastors and Christian leaders in churches near Muslim community centers. Some were aware of their Muslim neighbors, and a few had come to know them. I remember attending one meeting where a pastor said to his Muslim friend: "Ahmad, before I got to know you I thought you were my enemy; now I can't image how I could ever have thought of you that way!" My reaction was: this is exactly the kind of engagement we want to promote at the seminary, turning perceived enemies into genuine and heartfelt friends, not turning potential friends into perceived and real enemies. Most Christians, however, had little or no experience of how to meet and greet their Muslim neighbors, even if they desired to do so (and many did not). I remember one Christian asking: "How do we meet Muslims and where? Can we just walk into a mosque and introduce ourselves?" Another said: "So long as they leave us alone and don't bother us, it'll be fine." Looking back, we had the privilege of introducing a lot of Christians and Muslims to one another, and happily a number of those relationships continue.

It is important to note here that once friendships are made and trust established, there is freedom to share one's faith and to answer and ask every kind of difficult and sensitive question. Jesus and Muhammad, the Bible and the Qur'an, are always real and very present in these relationships. Often when new, different, and sometimes difficult questions are asked by others of our sacred texts and beliefs, the Spirit is able to make them come alive in new, creative, and surprising ways.[16] Such learning *from* others, what I call Spirit-led learning, rather than simply *about* or even *with* others, has a way of drawing us into relationships that can be challenging, deep, and often fruitful. Deep calls to deep. I remember one Muslim asking whether a shepherd who leaves the 99 and goes in search of one lost sheep is acting justly. To him it didn't seem fair that

14. Garbi Schmidt from the University of Lund in Sweden would write her PhD dissertation on the Muslim communities in Chicago. See Garbi Schmidt, *American Medina: A Study of the Sunni Muslim Immigrant Communities in Chicago*, Lund Studies in History of Religions, 8 (Lund: Dept. of History of Religions, University of Lund, 1998).

15. Dr. Aasi will fill in the gaps in this presentation, and say more about Muslims' responses to our initiative, in a later essay.

16. Matt 13:52.

one sheep, who in his mind had willfully gone astray, should receive more attention than the 99 who were obedient and faithful. Besides, while out looking for the one something bad might happen to the 99! His take on that familiar parable told by Jesus led into serious conversation on God's perfect justice, something Muslims prize, and God's extravagant grace, something Christians hold dear, and the tension he saw between them.

At that time there were almost no organized groups doing this kind of dialogue in Chicago, so we began what we called the Conference for Improved Muslim-Christian Relations. Prof. David Lindberg of LSTC, Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi, Mr. Kaiseruddin Khan from the Muslim Community Center, Lionel Abdul Haqq and later Dr. Abdul Salaam from the African-American Muslim community, and others worked hard on this. We formed a board, wrote a constitution including a statement of purpose and several bylaws. David reminded me that among our earliest discussions was the issue of whether or not to include the word "dialogue" in the name of our organization, which we decided against because that word made it sound as if we were getting into a debate rather than actively promoting mutual understanding. Also, rather than being a primarily academic body, we thought we should address common social problems such as bigotry and issues such as addiction and materialism. One of our early projects was having Muslim speakers visit and make presentations at Christian churches and, vice versa, Christians going to mosques.

The jumping-off point for much of this work in Chicago was a major conference on Christian-Muslim relations in February 1985. It began with Friday prayers at the American Islamic College and ended with a church service on Sunday morning at the United Church of Hyde Park on 53rd Street. The theme of the conference was "The Faith and Practice of Muslims and Christians: Seeking Mutual Understanding." Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi was the Muslim keynote speaker and Dr. Willem Bijlefeld the Christian keynote presenter. Bijlefeld also preached the Sunday sermon. His text was from Isaiah 64 and 65. In chapter 64 (vv. 1-2) the people are clamoring for a display of God's power similar to that on Mt. Sinai:

> O that you would rend the heavens and come down…as when fire kindles brushwood and causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries and that the nation might tremble at your presence!

In chapter 65 (v. 1), the Lord replies:

> I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here am I, here am I," to a nation that did not call on my name.

I like to think that this set the tone for the kind of work that followed. We were not wanting or expecting anything earthshaking like a Sinai experience. Our desire was simply to be among those eager to call on God's name—so we came together often, seeking to be attentive to the God who patiently waits to be found, hoping, in so doing, that the desolate regions in our relationships could become places "for flocks to find pasture" (Isa 65:10). Each had ample opportunity to share understandings of how God comes, and the meaning that this "divine presence" (and our awareness of it) has for us and for the world. We determined early on not to think of ourselves as engaged in a game of chess, where if one wins the other loses. We had seen too much of that over the years. We knew that each community is distinct with its own style

of worship, but we also knew that the object of our worship is the one and only God, thus making us one family. This, I think, is how we progressively felt about ourselves. We knew that we would bicker and even fight, but we also understood that we are on the same team and that a family divided against itself cannot stand. Our "game," if any, was to be defined as one of grace and mercy where, when one wins, all benefit.

ALC background

In 1988, the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) came together to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). So far I have spoken mostly about the LCA and its engagement in the Middle East; but it's important to remember that Dr. Mark Thomsen had already become involved in Christian-Muslim relationships while serving with the ALC as a theological instructor at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria from 1957 to 1966. He was fortunate to be present in Africa when the first creative initiatives were being made to transform Christian-Muslim struggles into genuine engagements of friendship and cooperation as nations gained their independence. Nigeria became the early center of that initiative when the Islam in Africa Project was located in Northern Nigeria in 1960. The charismatic Pierre Benignus of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society, the most powerful representative of this vision, became the chair of this new program, and Dr. Willem Bijlefeld was called as the first director. A vision of listening, learning, understanding, and friendship slowly began to permeate the African Christian community. The project's first educational event was held in 1961 at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria located near Jos (the center, unfortunately, of recent Christian-Muslim conflict). When Dr. Thomsen was called in 1981 to become executive director of the Division for World Mission and Inter-church Cooperation of the ALC, he soon made Christian-Muslim relations a priority of the division's work. He invited Dr. Bijlefeld, his friend and colleague from Africa, to lead a theological discussion dealing with interfaith dialogue.[17]

When the ELCA was formed in 1988, it was Dr. Thomsen who became the executive director of its new Division for Global Mission (DGM). With that, a whole fresh burst of energy flowed into the venture of US American Lutheran engagement with Muslims. Under Dr. Thomsen's leadership, Dr. Roland Miller, who had Christian-Muslim experience from 23 years in India and academic credentials as professor of Islam and World Religions at Luther College in Regina, Canada, was called as a consultant for the future planning of the ELCA as it developed programs to more positively and creatively engage the Muslim world. As a consequence of Dr. Miller's insightful and compelling study,[18] several things happened. For example, a new hospital and community health center was established in Bangladesh, staffed by Christian, Muslim, and Hindu personnel. Inter-faith Christian-Muslim educational programs were initiated or strengthened in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Tanzania, and northern Madagascar. Many church leaders and mission staff were sent for advanced degree

17. They produced a document entitled *God and Jesus: Theological Reflection for Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Division for World Mission and Inter-Church Cooperation, American Lutheran Church, December 1986).

18. The study was called "Planning Proposal for a Focus on Islam." It was submitted to the Division for Global Mission of the ELCA in January 1991.

programs in Islam and Christian-Muslim Studies; Michael Shelley and Mark Swanson received support for their PhD work through this program. Sixty-five ELCA mission personnel went through intense summer training programs primarily staffed by myself and Dr. Aasi.

One of the major initiatives envisioned by the new "Focus on Islam" was to have two centers for advanced studies in ELCA seminaries. With DGM continuing to place special emphasis on the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, Luther Seminary in St. Paul and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago were designated as places where students could go for special training in this field. It was Luther's good fortune to have Roland Miller as the founding director of its Islamic Studies Program, and my good fortune to be assigned to LSTC in the summer of 1990.

Establishing the work at LSTC

Fortified by DGM's renewed commitment to Christian-Muslim relations and remembering what we did in 1984-85 and the continuing work of David Lindberg, Ghulam Haider Aasi, Fr. Thomas Baima and Sr. Joan McGuire (representing the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago), Mr. Lionel Abdul Haqq (of the American Muslim Mission), and many others with the Conference for Improved Christian-Muslim Relations,[19] it was not difficult to fit in again at LSTC. Situated as we are in an academic community and working closely with the cluster seminaries in Hyde Park, including the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, we concentrated much of our energy on designing and teaching courses on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. In this, we also worked closely with the American Islamic College, with Dr. Asad Hussain, its long-time president, and especially with Dr. Ghulam Haider Aasi, whose keen interest in and strong commitment to the advancement of Christian-Muslim understanding through academic cooperation and direct knowledge of one another was key to the work. Dr. Aasi strengthened his friendship with the seminary and became a regular part of our teaching team. In addition to the seminary's offerings on World Religions, taught by Profs. Lindberg and Ishida, we designed courses such as "Towards Understanding Islam," "A History of Christian-Muslim Relations," "The History of Religious Thought in Islam," "Jesus and Muhammad: Rumor and Reality,"[20] "The Bible and the Qur'an,"[21] "Contemporary Trends in Islam," and so on. These courses were always team-taught by a Muslim and a Christian. In one course titled "Towards Understanding the Israel-Palestine Conflict," Jewish scholars were included. Another course was called "Religions in Dialogue: Buddhists, Christians and Muslims Reflecting on Major Themes." At first it was taught by Dr. Yosh Ishida, who took the Christian perspective; Dr. Khew Than, a visiting professor from Burma, who took the Buddhist perspective; while I taught the

19. This Conference soon got swallowed up in the preparations for the Centennial of the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago in 1993. That event gave rise to many other interfaith groupings.

20. For this we invited New Testament scholars to speak on Jesus in the Gospels and later Christological formulations. There was always lively discussion on the passion and death by crucifixion of Jesus and, of course, on the doctrine of the Trinity, two teachings which the Qur'an denies.

21. During this study considerable attention focused on our respective, very distinct, concepts of revelation.

Muslim perspective. Later it was taught by a Buddhist, a Christian, and a Muslim. Rather quickly, we came to believe that in all our courses each faith needed its own interpreters. Richard Bliese and Mark Thomsen developed a course with Dirk Ficca, executive director of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, called "World Religions and Christian Mission." Many of these courses are still offered today. Of course, we also continued to visit mosques and sip lots of tea. There is no better way to extend friendship and break down barriers of all kinds.[22]

Our students came primarily from LSTC but also from the other cluster seminaries. Early on we enrolled—in co-operation with Dr. Aasi and the American Islamic College—a Muslim student who went on to graduate with an MDiv degree and who became the first Muslim chaplain in the US Navy, where he still serves with distinction. His name is Lieutenant Malak Abd al-Muta'ali ibn Noel. Later, the ELCA sponsored three Muslim students from Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand, to study at LSTC, two Indonesians and a Thai. One of them, the Thai, is with us today—my wife Pisamai. Once here she earned her DMin degree in cross-cultural studies. Another Muslim student, again sponsored by the ELCA, came from Indonesia and earned her PhD degree. As part of a growing friendship with the Niagara Foundation,[23] we welcomed a significant number of Muslim students from Turkey into our MA program; some of them have gone on to do PhD study

Early on we enrolled a Muslim student who went on to graduate with an MDiv degree and who became the first Muslim chaplain in the US Navy

at the University of Chicago, while one is presently completing her ThM degree here at LSTC. This was an interfaith venture which took courage on the part of both communities, and thanks to the wise leadership of President Echols and the welcoming spirit of faculty and staff, the Muslim students found a warm reception and the experiment, I believe, proved to be enlightening and beneficial for all concerned, academically, spiritually, and in many other ways.[24]

Over the years we sponsored and

22. For a good example of what tea drinking can accomplish, read Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace…One School at a Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007). Greg himself grew up in Tanzania; his parents were Lutheran missionaries.

23. A word of special thanks to Mr. Kemal K. Oksuz, the program's executive director, who facilitated this connection and made it possible for several students to come. He also arranged for two or three study tours to Turkey in which several of our faculty participated.

24. It is important to note that many of the courses in which the Muslim students participated were in the standard Christian theological disciplines. Dr. Aasi served as resident Muslim scholar, though other Muslims participated.

participated in numerous interfaith conferences and gatherings, travel seminars, research projects, and so on. We began an annual conference centering on "Our Sacred Texts," which continues (the latest was held in April 2010 at the Islamic Foundation North in Libertyville, where there was a grand gathering). Dr. Aasi, Mark Thomsen, and I, as mentioned above, organized several summer two-weeklong study sessions on Islam for furloughing missionaries; we also conducted "free university" courses at numerous ELCA Global Mission Events. In the wake of the first Gulf War we received scores of invitations to conduct workshops on Islam and to answer people's questions, in the Chicago area and beyond. There was a real hunger for reliable information. We were also invited to make a series of videos on Islam by Select Video Resources: "Lutheran Voices for Leadership" (still available). Gradually we developed a mission statement and spelled out our goals; these are available at the Center, in brochures, and in the archives. The aim always was to integrate our interfaith work into the total program of the seminary and to do so ecumenically. We did not want our work to be thought of as an appendage or addendum to the main curriculum. To achieve this we worked especially closely with McCormick Theological Seminary and the Catholic Theological Union. When Dr. Mark Thomsen joined us full time in the fall of 1996, he became a strong advocate for the ecumenical nature of our venture. Behind all our endeavors was a fervent hope that someday LSTC would become known as and be seen to be a center of Christian-Muslim engagement for peace and justice.

This desire, long felt and gradually articulated, took on a whole new dimension when good friends of the seminary, Gerald and Karen Kolschowsky, saw the need, caught the vision and, with the strong encouragement of President Echols and others in the development office, most graciously and generously undertook to fully endow what we now call our Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice in addition to a chair in Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations. Their keen interest provided us with fresh hope and inspired a renewed commitment to move forward in this much needed field of interfaith endeavor. We had a wonderful Gala Event to celebrate the inauguration of the Center and the new chair in September 2006.[25] Michael Shelley now serves as the Center's director, while Mark Swanson serves as the Center's associate director and occupies the new chair. Sara Trumm is currently program coordinator for the Center. We offer our profound thanks to all the above and to so many others for their friendship, unwavering support, and hard work. Without their efforts, and especially the steady leadership of Dr. James Echols and the support of those in the development office, faculty, and staff, all our endeavors might have come to naught. Recent budget crunches could well have relegated past accomplishments to pleasant but mere memories. Instead the program today has become a strong, vibrant, and exciting resource for the entire seminary community, the church at large, and the long term work of Christian-Muslim engagement for peace and justice. To God be the glory!

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25. The keynote addresses by Willem Bijlefeld and Vincent J. Cornell were published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35:2 (April 2008).

Sing It!

Susan K. Ericsson

Senior Pastor, St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church, Devon, Penn.

Sermon from the 150th commencement of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
May 16, 2010
Text: Acts 16:16–34

Giving honor and glory to God who is the head of my life…

Dr. Echols, members of the Board, Faculty and Staff, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation for allowing me to be here today. But most of all, to you, esteemed graduates, *thank you* for granting me the privilege of standing with you—as you say goodbye to this place where you have learned and struggled and celebrated, and go forward to the holy ground of congregations, communities, and institutions where you will name the name of Jesus.

It truly is an honor to be here, although, frankly, it's a little overwhelming. Do you know who's preaching for commencement at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia? In this year marked by horrendous natural disasters, they scored the CEO of Lutheran World Relief. Southern Seminary has a member of the South Carolina Senate, while Trinity's class of 2010 will sit at the feet of a former bishop, now director of the Global Mission unit of the ELCA. When I told my thirteen-year-old son Amani how humbled I am to find myself in such company, his eyes widened and he said with urgency, "Mom! Wait! Maybe they think you're someone else."

Perhaps.

But I prefer to believe that on this, the 150th anniversary of this great institution, the powers that be chose to give an intentional shout-out to parish ministry. (Amen?) I'd like to think that my presence is a reminder that there is no such thing as "just" a parish pastor. Those saints gathering weekly around Word and Sacrament in congregations large and small are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, *God's own people*" (1 Pet 2:9). Equipping those saints to be God's partners in the divine mission to love and transform this aching world is a high and holy calling.

Besides, parish ministry rocks! There's always something going on; it's never boring.

You don't have to take my word for it. We have St. Luke's testimony in the 16th chapter of Acts, read just a few moments ago. That rollicking account of exorcism, outrage, mob scenes, violence, lockdown, liberation, and celebration—in other words, just a typical day in the parish. But seriously, whether lay or ordained, whatever our context, this text has a lot to teach us about ministry.

First, notice that everything happens because Paul and Silas accept Lydia's invitation to "come on over and pray." If they had stayed at their desks, sent Lydia a message on Facebook that they were too busy for home communions but that she could make a prayer request on their Web site, the day would have had a completely different ending. True, they wouldn't have been beaten black and blue and thrown in jail. But neither would the slave girl

have been liberated from possession, nor the prisioners in the jail exposed to the liberating love and power of God, and the jailer and his family would never have been brought into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ! This text reminds us that the gospel calls us to leave the safety and security of our offices, and go out among the people of God!

Now, I realize at this moment, when you are chomping at the bit to get started using your hard-earned degree, you probably think this is a no-brainer. But I assure you, your time will come. Pastor, administrator, professor, or director of youth ministry, there will be days, even weeks, when you do not want to leave your office. This *may* be because you are lazy—but it is more likely that you will suddenly realize that you are crazy to think that God called you to ministry. You aren't equipped to deal with what's out there! Maybe if that seminary education (that you'll be paying for for the rest of your life) had taught you something that was actually *useful*—like how to fix the boiler before the Christmas Eve service…. Besides it's a lot more efficient to just e-mail people about how sorry you are that they lost their job or got a frightening diagnosis than to sit there and watch them cry and not to be able to *do* anything about anything….

> It is Paul and Silas the night singers, bruised and misused, who are the clay jars holding the treasure of salvation.

Well, you get the idea. Eventually we all become immobilized. When this happens, there is only one thing to do (repeat after me): Get out of the office! Go on! Rub shoulders with God's people. I promise you, just like Paul and Silas, you will find that God has gone on ahead and is waiting there to meet you and do amazing things.

Now, if the first lesson of this text is to *go out among God's people*, the second is: Don't go alone!

Ministry is, by definition, a collaborative effort. You can't do it by yourself. You're good, but you're not that good. We need partners and we have a responsibility to *be* partners. To be partners with lay leaders, our bishop, global and community leaders, this seminary. We also need to find one colleague whom we can trust with our life; someone who will take a bullet for us, or at least answer our phone call at 2 a.m.; one who will always tell us the truth, who will be there when we need to be reminded who we are and Whose we are. I bet Paul was pretty glad to have Silas with him throughout that long day and night. Find that one who can be Silas to your Paul, or, in the wonderful words of Maya Angelou, the "ah" to your "choo." Because there *are* days in ministry that leave you locked down, shackeled, beat up, black and blue in the midnight hour. It comes with the territory. Martin Luther once said, "If I wanted to write about the burdens of a minister as I know and have experienced them, I would frighten all away from the office."[1] But having that one colleague who gets the gospel *and gets you*, makes a world of difference.

1. Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says:A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 950 (no. 2891).

Finally there is a wonderful word of grace and promise in this text: "God gives songs in the night."

The biggest mistake the guards made that night was leaving Paul and Silas together. That turned a cell into a church! "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them"… especially in those nights when it appears that everything is lost. To quote the great preacher Charles Spurgeon,

> Many a night do we have—nights of sorrow, nights of persecution, nights of doubt, nights of bewilderment, nights of anxiety, nights of oppression, nights of ignorance, nights of all kinds, which press upon our spirits and terrify our souls, but blessed be God, the *Christian* can say, "My God giveth me songs in the night."[2]

I can't preach these words on this occasion without thinking of Ben Larsen. Ben should be graduating from Wartburg Seminary this month. He died during the earthquake in Haiti while working at the St. Joseph's Home for Boys with his wife Renee and cousin Jonathan.

I'm guessing you know the story. After the orphanage collapsed, Ben lay buried beneath large chunks of concrete. His wife heard his voice; he was singing. Frantic to find him, she urged, "Keep singing," but the song stopped after he sang the words, "God's peace to us we pray." "If he was alive, he would have been calling for help desperately," Renee said. "Ben spent his last breath singing."[3]

If you think about it, Ben lived the lessons of our text. He went out among God's people.

He didn't go alone. And when ministry left him black and blue, shackled by pain, imprisoned in concrete, he held fast to Christ and found the promise true: God gives songs in the night.

That's not the end of the story. Ben's song lives on, going 'round the world, touching untold numbers of people, giving hope, comfort, and inspiration in the name of Jesus. Because that's exactly what happens when we sing the song God gives in the night.

Here is the gospel, Church: We break, and God uses our brokenness to show power and love. Our singing in the night becomes a living legacy of faith and hope, opening up places for salvation in ways we could never imagine.[4]

Look at Paul and Silas. They eventually make that pastoral visit they'd started out for at the beginning of this very long day—only not to Lydia and her household of believers, but to the home of their jailer! Think of it, Church! The one responsible for keeping shackles on has his *own* removed, as he and his family are marked with the cross of Christ forever. But it is not the Paul and Silas of the morning, storming out with the energy and focus of great leaders, who do this. It is Paul and Silas the night singers, bruised and misused, who are the clay jars holding the treasure of salvation.

I love how Luke tells us that, after he is baptized, the jailer tenderly washes

2. "Songs in the Night: A Sermon Intended for Reading on Lord's-Day, February 27th, 1898, Delivered by C. H. Spurgeon, at New Park Street Chapel, Southwark," in *The Spurgeon Archive*, http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/2558.htm (accessed May 2010).

3. "He Spent His Last Breath Singing," in *ELCA News Service, News Releases* (January 18, 2010), http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx?a=4403 (accessed January 2010).

4. Thanks to my good friend and colleague Pr. Cindy Krommes for helping me make this move in the sermon.

Paul's and Silas' wounds, and feeds them. See how the line blurs between giving and receiving? This is ministry at its best.

And notice: where does all this talk of washing wounds, eating, and baptism take us?[5] Right back to where we started: our congregations, where God is doing remarkable things! No wonder Luther said,

> Let every one of us stay each in his own parish, where he will discover more useful work than in all the making of pilgrimages, even if they were all combined into one. Here, at home, you will find baptism, sacrament, preaching, and your neighbor; these are more important to you than all the saints in heaven.[6]

Listen, graduates: We don't know what your future holds, but we know who holds your future. Your ministry is going to touch thousands and thousands of people. When those dark nights come when you have messed up or the world has messed you up so badly you can't find a way out, God will give you a song. It will be the same song that God gave to Paul and Silas and to Ben Larsen, a song first sung from a cross on a hill called Calvary.

Sing it!

This song has a power that blasts open locked doors and prison walls.

Sing it!

It has a sweetness that softens hardened hearts.

Sing it!

Its melody turns despair to hope, mourning to dancing, death to life.

Sing it!

It is *the* song this world is aching to hear.

Sing it!

You know how it goes:

> What though my joys and comforts die,
> The Lord my Savior liveth,
>
> What though the darkness gathers round, songs in the night he giveth.
>
> No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging,
>
> Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,
>
> How can I keep from singing?"[7]

We will never sing God's song in vain.

Sing it, graduates!

Sing it, people of God.

Sing it! Sing it! Sing it!

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5. Kate Huey, "Breaking Chains (May 10–16): Reflection and Focus Questions," in *Feed Your Spirit: Weekly Seeds* (May 7, 2010), http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/480/Breaking-Chains-May-10-16.aspx (accessed May 2010).

6. Gary Dorsey, *Congregation: The Journey Back to the Church* (New York: Viking, 1995), 8.

7. "My Life Flows On," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #763.

Luther Lecture
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Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

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Book Reviews

Luther and the Hungry Poor: Gathered Fragments. By Samuel Torvend. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. xiii and 177 pages. Cloth. $29.00

The cross? Yes! Justification? Yes! But…a theology of bread? A theology for the hungry poor? Although Luther never presented a document explicitly asserting just such a claim, Samuel Torvend culls fragments of Luther's writings between 1517 (*95 Theses*) and 1523 (preface to the *Leisnig Agreement*) in order to convincingly appropriate Luther's theology under just such a rubric.

If Baptism consecrates one as an instrument "extending the advance of God's rule" into all dimensions of this world (54), then the reformed Mass "possessed an ethical trajectory that moves from eating and drinking with Christ to sharing food and drink with the hungry poor" (127). Indeed, a theology of Word and Sacrament properly formulated finds its fulfillment in a social ethic whose service sanctifies the economic, political, and social fabric of society through the satisfaction of basic human needs. With this said, Part I, which outlines the foundations for Torvend's insights, develops the centrifugal trajectory of "justification at baptism" (34) against the background of the incurvature of sin and its expression through the spiritual economy of the late Middle Ages. Part II both grounds the priority of the hungry poor in Luther's theology by reference to Luther's fragments and convincingly articulates the feeding of the hungry poor as the Christological consequence—the sending movement—of the Lord's Supper.

Torvend makes explicit what many readers of Luther may have long suspected: that justification and justice, sacrament and service, word and embodied witness all form a "seamless garment" in the one, continuous advance of God toward humanity in Jesus Christ. Torvend's ability to articulate this reality and its implications, especially against the centripetal dynamics of both the late-Medieval "spiritual-economic system" in which the "poor were *absolutely necessary* to the dispenser of charity" (22) and sin, understood as being "curved in on oneself," is concise and clear.

Readers will benefit from Torvend's ability to clearly align "alien" and "social" righteousness as two sequential moments in God's one continuous movement toward the world's need. It is my hope that readers attend closely to his presentation of the Leisnig Agreement of 1523. Here we find public policy initiative, especially with regard to the hungry poor, "shaped by biblical, sacramental, and theological convictions" (100).

I highly recommend this book to pastors, students, and teachers, both as an accessible outline of Luther's theology (a fantastic introduction to his theology!) and as a much needed articulation of an embodied social ethic flowing necessarily and abundantly from that same theology of Word and Sacrament.

Neal Anthony
Salem Lutheran Church
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Looking Anxiety in the Face: Wisdom for All Who Worry. By Herbert Brokering. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2009. ISBN: 974-0-8066-7059-1. 98 pages. Paper. $12.99.

The late Herbert Brokering was a well-known pastor, author, poet, playwright, hymn writer, and popular speaker. He authored more than fifty books and several of his hymns have become beloved by Lutherans. This book is a kind of "guide for the perplexed" for those who deal with worry. It especially brings scripture and hymnody to bear on anxiety. Each short chapter ends with a practical, take-home "idea to practice," a specific suggestion to help people face down their worry. Likewise, the book includes several of the

author's own poems, prayers, and hymns to help aid meditation.

Brokering's book is markedly personal; it is one beggar (if you will) telling another where to find bread. Brokering is refreshingly unguarded. Perhaps the fact that he published this book in his eighties gave him the courage to speak his mind freely. It appears that Brokering's own anxiety was shaped by the challenges of being raised on a farm where livelihood is so vulnerable to the chances of weather and good fortune and by the loss of his brother at a young age (76). At times, Brokering's writing is almost surrealistic since he interweaves images from the past with the present without obvious clues that he is so doing. Clearly, he found much comfort in the scriptures and traditional hymnody as he dealt with his own anxiety.

The book is filled with gems of practical wisdom. Referring to the serenity to be had from God's ever steady stream of care, he writes, "When anxiety sends unconnected thoughts and feelings racing through your mind and soul, slow them down, bring them back to some shape and order through a single word—*loved*" (27). When worries overwhelm, do something different: "Plant a flower, ride a roller coaster, sing, whistle, walk around with a half smile on your face, laugh for no reason…" (34-35).

Those who deal with anxiety often deal with depression. Brokering is no exception, and he candidly describes his own clinical depression (44). In this, he discovered the power of lamentation, so important in the Psalms, to help externalize feelings (46). Likewise, the truth of the gospel puts our fears of failure into perspective. In God's grace we are not failures (61). More than anything, the secret to life is to give: "At eighty-two it is not too late to quiet anger, enjoy fullness of time, slow down, ride the tide of time, and make time a best friend. It is not too late to study the skies, learn astronomy, build a clock, give a grandson his first watch. At eighty-two it is the right time to memorize a hymn that sings and celebrates the time and space of God" (77).

It has been well said that the flipside of anxiety is adventure. Brokering helps us catch that in his book. Much current research urges that the best way to deal with anxiety is not to avoid but to expose yourself to what makes you anxious. The anxiety will not necessary disappear but you can learn new skills with how to handle your anxiety, and even embrace it, not struggle with it.

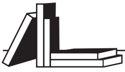
Given that anxiety is on the rise among Americans, this is a helpful, valuable volume.

Mark Mattes
Grand View University

Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community. By Craig L. Nessan. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. vii and 232 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Craig L. Nessan, academic dean and professor of contextual theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary at Dubuque, Iowa, undertakes an important study of ecclesiology and ethics to address the religious, social, and political situation both in North America and globally, re-envisioning the body of Christ as "shalom church." This book articulates a new and major contribution to what it means to be public church by vitalizing the ethical dimension of ecclesiology (especially by references to St. Paul, Luther, and Bonhoeffer) and by integrating contemporary prophetic voices for God's shalom through social justice and peacemaking ministry (including Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Wendell Berry, and Desmond Tutu).

Nessan's heuristic interpretation of the two kingdoms model offers a major corrective to the malfunction of infamous Lutheran quietism and puts scholars, church leaders, and lay people in the position to construct public church for God's shalom and social ministry (or *diakonia*). He uniquely locates the place of social ministry in the mission of God as God's two strategies for the mending of creation (*Tikkun Olam*). Here Nessan overcomes the perilous legacy of an interpretation of separation of church and state seen notably in Nazi Germany, with implications also for the North American context. The author retrieves Luther himself as a trenchant critic in



the religious area as well as a counterproposal to public quietism. This forgotten prophetic side of Luther comes again to life in a vision for the "parenesis" of the gospel, which is classically expressed in his *Large Catechism* concerning the relationship between the first commandment (confession to God) and the seventh commandment (economic justice). This perspective is actualized in Nessan's creative reinterpretation of two kingdoms (or strategies) model. The author's claim for shalom church as public church is convincing and well articulated.

Readers will benefit from *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* as a contemporary explication of the nature of the church and its ministry, grounded in the biblical narrative of faith lived out in the praxis of peacemaking, social justice, care for creation, and respect for human dignity. The book includes both sound theological foundations and clear directions for church practice. Each of four central chapters includes proposals for congregational implementation. A study guide also makes the book accessible for individual and group study.

Paul S. Chung
Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minn.

***Bound and Free: A Theologian's Journey*.**
By Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. ISBN-0-8006-3773-9. xii and 156 pages. Paper. $18.00.

I begin with advice: If one is unfamiliar with Hall's thought, then one should read chapter two, "A Theologian's Journey" first. Here Hall not only outlines the progression of his theological journey, but he crisply outlines the concepts by which he has prophetically addressed an "officially optimistic [North American] society" with a contextually-derived theology of the cross in the tradition of Luther. This chapter provides a wonderful entry into Hall's program while also arming the reader with key concepts, which help to navigate the body of his work. Subsequently, in chapter three, Hall invites the reader to consider "six paramount emphases of the Protestant tradition that we are called to steward" (109) lest the Protestant tradition flourish according to "religious and moral assumptions antithetical to that [same] heritage." (108)

Continuing to move backward through his book, Hall employs chapter one to articulate the demand and freedom of theology as discipline: The freedom to "do" Christian theology "presupposes the [long] apprenticeship of Christian tradition." (21) This freedom culminates in daring to comprehend that "long tradition" in all its profundity while simultaneously grasping one's own "zeitgeist." (22) Hall then employs his introduction for the purpose of describing theology as a vocation situated within the community of faith. Hall convincingly argues, contrary to those who equate academia with a vacuum of confessional commitment, that academic integrity and commitment to faith community are not mutually exclusive realities. Chapters four, "Words," and five, "De Profundis: On Going 'Right Deep Down into Life," operate as appendices which sermonically illustrate how the word "leads toward light only those whom it first conducts into deep darkness" (132).

Within the wrappings of a concise theological autobiography Hall has simultaneously provided a highly readable entry into, and overview of, his *theology for a North American context*. I highly recommend this book both as an introduction for those unacquainted with Hall's work, and as a succinct summary of his theological program for his veteran readers.

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52 Ways to Create an AIDS-Free World.
By Donald E. Messer. Nashville: Fresh Air Books, 2009. ISBN-10: 1-935205048. ISBN-13: 978-1935205043. 136 pages. Paper. $9.95.

On a recent visit to Tanzania, I had the privilege of accompanying a physician who is also

an ELCA missionary in making home visits on HIV/AIDS patients in rural Arusha. The ELCA supports a life-giving ministry of healing through a network of outpatient services organized through local Tanzanian hospitals. Three of the people we visited—Innocence, Scholastica, and Grace—were beneficiaries of relatively inexpensive antiretroviral drugs that were treating their disease with some degree of effectiveness. But even more importantly, I witnessed how this team of healers worked together to bring God's presence to those who might easily consider themselves abandoned by God. The combination of medical and spiritual care is making a tremendous difference in the lives of many through this ministry. Moreover, I learned that U.S. foreign aid was helping in large measure to underwrite the cost of this program.

I begin this review with personal testimony to the effectiveness of U.S. government funding of HIV/AIDS treatment programs as administered in partnership with ELCA missionary staff. Advocacy efforts that have supported increased foreign aid for combating HIV/AIDS can make a difference. Support for ELCA Global Mission in its partnership with international churches touches human lives with God's healing power.

Donald Messer is an articulate and prophetic voice calling the church of Jesus Christ to faithfulness in the face of the AIDS pandemic. An earlier book, *Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Christian Churches and the Global AIDS Crisis* (Fortress, 2004), set forth the central issues confronting the churches in responding to the scale and complexities of this challenge. In this book, Messer continues his educational and advocacy efforts by articulating 52 concrete and practical ideas for fighting AIDS, one for every week of the year. The proposals range from the general ("Hate the disease, not the people infected" or "Observe World AIDS Day") to the more specific ("Befriend persons living with AIDS" or "Get checked regularly for STDs"). Taken cumulatively, the 52 prescripts provide a comprehensive agenda for the church to consider in addressing the AIDS pandemic. The book concludes with a listing of resources for action/information and a glossary of key terms.

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book goes to The Global Fund to Fight AIDS. Donald E. Messer is currently serving as Executive Director of the Center for the Church and Global AIDS.

Craig L. Nessan,
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Briefly Noted

1 & 2 Kings. By Marvin A. Sweeney (Westminster, $49.95). The principal contribution of this commentary is the attempt to discover its message in one of three editions of the Deuteronomistic History: the exilic edition, the Josianic edition, and the Hezekian edition. Sweeney further attempts to discover the sense of other documents embedded in 1 and 2 Kings, an earlier Jehu Dynastic History and an even earlier history that culminates in the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 3—10), written during the reign of Solomon himself. While I am not persuaded that we have the ability to distinguish all of these editions, I am even less persuaded by Sweeney's often very brief assignment of the meaning of a given king's accounts to three or more of these editions (for the significance of Amaziah in the Jehu, Hezekian, Josianic, and exilic editions, see p. 363; for the significance of Ahaz for the Hezekian, Jolsianic, and exilic editions, see pp. 380–381; for the significance of multiple editions of the Hezekiah story, see pp. 399–401). Particularly unconvincing to me is the claim that the narrative of Manasseh's reign in 2 Chr 33:1–20 represents an earlier form of the narrative about this king in the Josianic edition of the book of Kings (p. 399). I would prefer a commentary that gave more attention to historical questions and/or the Deuteronomistic meaning of the present text of 1 and 2 Kings. It surely is undue caution when Sweeney writes: "It is unlikely that all forty-two of Ahaziah's brothers would have been born to Athaliah" (p. 337).

Ralph W. Klein

Wartburg Theological Seminary

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Preaching Helps

First Sunday of Advent – Third Sunday after Epiphany

Advent Preaching

As I prepare to lecture and preach on the readings appointed for Advent, I find myself repeatedly drawn to an introductory essay by Mary Lin Hudson, who teaches homiletics and liturgics at Memphis Theological Seminary. Professor Hudson observes that the "waiting time" of Advent evokes in us the desire for life to be more just, more merciful, and more peaceful than it is. Professor Hudson observes that the business of warfare and violence often steps to the forefront during Advent and dominates the consciousness of people living in the United States. "Somehow, the contrast between the policies of nations and the vision of the peaceable kingdom stands in sharper relief because of the themes of the Advent season. When the lectionary texts are read and preached during worship, we sense the revolutionary nature of our expectancy as Christians. We anticipate that God will see to it that the earth is judged, turned right-side-up, and governed by truth and compassion."[1]

Professor Hudson asserts that preaching during Advent "raises the question of whether we have so overinvested in the security of earthly 'empires' that we have lost sight of a God whose intentions for creation exceed our limited vision of a 'new earth.'"[2] Advent preaching questions the amount of control we have over the powers and principalities within and around us, frees us to admit that we doubt the unseen power of Emmanuel, God-with-us, and expresses the deeper longings of the communities where we live and serve, "until faith emerges in people who risk stepping into the unknown for the sake of God's future."[3]

I find myself reflecting on how my Advent preaching has changed in the last quarter century. Once upon a time, I sat in study groups in upstate New York and we talked about how to make the end of the world and Christ's second coming relevant to people's lives. I suspect that this is no longer an obstacle or "block" in preaching. With two wars, sagging financial institutions, and an oil-soaked gulf, people wonder aloud if the world—or at least life as we know it—is coming to an end. The message of Advent that the future is in God's hands and the Christmas promise that God is with us are especially poignant and relevant.

Pastor David Coffin guides us through the readings for Advent-Christmas and into the Sundays after Epiphany, as well. Pastor Coffin fashions himself as a practical theologian in the parish who was raised in a blue-collar home near Flint, Mich. He started his education in a vocational skill center in Flint, then went on to earn his AAS and BS degrees in Graphic Arts Management at Ferris State University in Big

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1. Mary Lin Hudson, "Advent," in *New Proclamation Year A 2011, Advent through Holy Week*, ed. David B. Lott (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 2–3.

2. Ibid., 3.

3. Ibid.

Rapids, Mich. David attended Trinity Lutheran Seminary as a second career student, and graduated with his MDiv in 1987. Later he earned his Doctor of Ministry degree in Pastoral Leadership at Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Findlay, Ohio.

Pastor Coffin has served the congregations of Trinity Lutheran Church in Malinta, Ohio, and St. John Lutheran Church in Montpelier, Ohio. Currently, he is a part-time pastor or worker-priest at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Ada, Ohio, and is on staff at the Learning and Writing Center at Owens Community College in Findlay.

St. Mark is in the same community as Ohio Northern University (United Methodist affiliated), as well as the Wilson sports equipment factory. This small Lutheran church offers a Thursday elementary-aged after-school ministry program, summer "Day Camp" ministry, and hosts 12 Step support groups. They have sponsored fundraisers for people in the community, and are active with the Ada Food Pantry. Despite struggles with budgets and attendance, St. Mark Lutheran Church seeks to be faithful as it lives a life under the cross of cultural changes along the I-75 corridor, between Toledo and Dayton-Cincinnati, Ohio, where, Pastor Coffin writes, "there is still the promise of new life." Lutheran college students attend St. Mark as their church home away from home during the school year.

The Writing Center at Owens Community College offers tutoring to students who are challenged with basic grammar issues and computer set-up concerns. Many students have been out of school for 10 to 20 years! The Writing Center's goal is to equip students to be able to write English and other course papers on the second year of college level. Pastor Coffin writes numerous "Letters to editors" in church magazines. He still believes the ELCA has a bright future.

This Advent, I am particularly mindful that, to paraphrase Professor Hudson, God's intentions far exceed our limited vision of the church, because I was honored to write the homily notes for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I am occasionally asked about resources for this annual time of prayer in the church's life. I invite you to visit the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute at http://www.geii.org/.

As you wait, watch, and prepare this Advent, I pray that you will sense God already waiting on you, watching over you, and preparing a better, more just, more peaceful future for you, for those you love and serve, for all of us, and for all creation.

> O Lord, teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me when I seek you. For I cannot seek you unless you first teach me, nor find you unless you first reveal yourself to me. Let me seek you in longing, and long for you in seeking. Let me find you in love, and love you in finding."—attributed to Ambrose of Milan, c. 340–397

Joyful Advent and Blessed Christmas!

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

First Sunday of Advent November 28, 2010

Isaiah 2:1–5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11–14
Matthew 24:36–44

Isaiah 2:1–5—How does one announce good news for Jerusalem and Zion without suggesting that God has superseded the covenant with Israel for the sake of the Christian church? This question raises an even larger one: "Is God good for God's promises?" Instruction and judgment through just arbitration are two criteria the prophet offers for any nation that stakes the claim of being the "Zion" of God. There are two main points the prophet wants to advance. First, God is a God of salvation or new life, regardless of what calamities or judgments fall upon the community. Second, God intends to have a universal outreach to all people. God continues to be the creator of the whole world.

"Readiness" seems to be one theme that holds the texts together on this Sunday in Advent. Regardless of the name on the building or outdoor sign of the house of worship, does the instruction, preaching, and ministry of the congregation point to new life that includes all people? The season of Advent is one of "hope." As the church lights the first candle on the Advent wreath, we pause to consider how the ministry is experienced, or affected, by those who are outside the four walls of the church.

Psalm 122—In a time when many church leaders are tempted to equate being "glad" to go to church with a consumer-driven program agenda, verse 7 suggests another idea. "Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers," suggests that our deepest yearnings are fulfilled in the God who created us and later came as Immanuel. All other attempts to seek gladness elsewhere are examples of *concupiscence*, as authors including theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr argue.

Romans 13:11–14 is an invitation to practice a spirituality similar to Lent. What are we to lay aside? What are we to put on? Paul uses the metaphor of dark and light, rather than good and evil. All Christians are to be ready for their day of reckoning, be it a near-death experience or if the second coming would occur in our lifetime.

Those who read or write about America or corporate America as "Empire" might see this text as an invitation to *reframe the battle or war imagery* from profit/loss to light/darkness. If one does not accept the "Empire" theory, then there is a suggestion that people of faith should put on the armor of light every day as our sinful desires are drowned out daily (*Luther's Small Catechism*, "Baptism").

Matthew 24:36–44 is an apocalyptic text in Advent. It is futile to try to predict the second coming in any form; no one knows, not even the Son (Matt 24:36). Regarding the sudden disappearances of some people described in this text, sudden death could be one explanation, as mortality rates were fairly high then (Robert H. Smith, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989). This would discount the modern "Rapture" theory.

Readiness and vigilance are the major themes of the readings throughout the Advent season. Regardless of whether people in our congregations are going through good or difficult times, this reading is a reminder that the Son of Man will return. God is with the church (Matt 1:23; 28:20). Those who are faithful

and diligent in their faith journey will be prepared, regardless of whether natural disasters, death, or any cataclysmic event occurs in their lives. Advent is the season to remind all people that the day of reckoning for any one individual could occur in the winter, spring, summer, or fall.

Preaching Directions

A degree of readiness during some sort of day of reckoning ties all three of these readings together. What promises are we holding onto as a congregation, community, and people? The year is soon coming to a close on the calendar, but the liturgical year has just begun. Walter Brueggemann argues that the people of faith are in a perpetual state of waiting and expectation. This can occur during the wintry blizzards, warm spring, summer, or fall. God keeps God's promises. However, this same God can operate in unexpected or differing ways (Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986).

Is there a "Zion" or land that we believe God's judgment would never touch within our communities or states? Any given state with a lost industry, commercial strip that is closing down, or school closings realizes that those buildings that were considered "untouchable" are gone. Isaiah reminds us that God is still there and is prepared to do a new thing.

Psalm 122 invites us to consider which advertising or catchy consumer shopping slogans tend to lure us into decisions we probably ought not to be making now.

Romans 13 provides an opportunity to ask, "What time is it in the lives of our congregations, broader communities, and spiritual lives as Christians?" I am not beyond inserting some hints of ongoing stewardship suggestions during this time in my sermons.

My internship supervisor used to say that readings like Matthew 24 are "good news in bad news situations." Calamity may come in all forms, but God is still with us and has declared final victory on the cross. What crises are people experiencing in our congregations? A sermon on the traits of apocalyptic writings might be in order for this Sunday. DC

Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2010

Isaiah 11:1–10
Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19
Romans 15:4–13
Matthew 3:1–12

Isaiah 11:1–10—Restoration is the main theme of this text. It remains contested as to how this will occur. The "shoot of Jesse" could be a metaphor for new vegetation after the deforestation of conquest, reduction of the kingdom that is restored, or a new holy seed of a ruler in the aftermath of a fallen monarchy. The new king will have full authority as a just and righteous monarch. He will have a universal influence, which differs from the plundering and military conquest of the past with the Philistines (vv. 1–5, cf. Joshua, Judges).

The second part of this text (vv. 6–10) points to a time when natural predators do not seek to destroy each other, but rather live in peace. This would include the powerful and weak people who are often adversaries. There is ample food and water for all creation. An underlying assumption is that international forces are no longer attacking Israel. Israel does not lose its special chosen status, but it is extended in both definition and universal blessing to all (cf. Gen 12:3). As is true

throughout the Isaiah texts, there is no definite timeline as to when these prophecies are to be fulfilled. The only certitude is future hope, which raises the question for all people of faith, "Is the hope in God's promises reliable when those promises do not immediately come to fruition?" This is a good Advent reflection.

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19—No king in Israel's history has ever matched the ideal description in this psalm. The king's use of justice, life, and power is in right relationship with God and humanity. Themes in this psalm include: bringing justice and deliverance to the poor; the king may give life to the land; and the just reign of this king will go forth throughout the earth.

While no political monarch has lived up to this ideal, the hope for such a king still exists in this psalm. Psalm 72 complements the hope in the reading from Isaiah. For Christians, could Jesus fullfill these words of hope and promise? This is what makes this a hopeful psalm in the Advent season.

Romans 15:4–13 is a reminder that the scriptures are written so that by steadfastness and encouragement people of faith might have hope in all times. Paul describes how Jesus Christ's activity as servant was written about in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Deut 32). Christ's activity as servant fulfills the promises found in the writings of the prophets and early patriarchs. One such text is Psalm 69. God is revealed as a truthful servant who keeps promises. Paul believes that the Isaiah 11 text with the "stump of Jesse" has applicability in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the hope of the Gentiles. The theme of "hope" makes this an Advent text that one might attempt to work in tandem with Isaiah 11.

Matthew 3:1–12 might seem to break the rhythm of "hope" in this set of readings. However, if one considers that Jesus' baptism is unlike John's in that "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire," there is hope that includes baptism in the Holy Spirit. Thirty years separates the end of Matthew 2 and chapter 3. John the Baptist is calling for people of faith to re-think and re-order their lives. In this sense, the Advent theme of preparedness is present. Matthew identifies the reign of Christ as the "kingdom of heaven." One can either go back into the above readings to "mine" themes, or go forward to discover what Jesus will mean by "the kingdom of heaven."

In times when government and corporate powers impact major dimensions of peoples' lives, the possibility of juxtaposing the kingdom of God with that of the world exists. Matthew believes the kingdom is associated with repentance and righteousness. Being born into the right family or existing as a spiritual couch potato as the world goes by do not translate into ushering in the kingdom, according to John's sermon in Matthew. John's harsh words—calling the Pharisees a "brood of vipers"—merely emphasize the core value of Matthew: being a disciple is not having the right credentials, but acting upon one's faith (Matt 5–7, Sermon on the Mount).

Preaching Directions

The reading from Isaiah invites the preacher to consider what "spirits" are guiding our communities these days. In his book *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), Michael Scott Horton suggests that those who practice American religion have become gnostic deists who define "spirituality" in terms of what feels good and makes us happy. This might describe the populist "name and claim" voices of today.

The psalm reminds us that it is always easy to be the opposition. What would the ideal leader look like? Would this leader be able to make everybody happy? The classic book by Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), argues that leadership is easier when it is a matter of divvying up the "pie." When the pie decreases, hard choices and priorities must be made and people will be angered. The psalmist is one of such leaders.

Romans 15 might invite us to explore what hospitality looks like during Advent. Matthew 3 reminds us that Jesus' baptism is in the Spirit, not a mere conversion baptism. What would we want for our infants and adults who are baptized? DC

Third Sunday in Advent December 12, 2010

Isaiah 35:1–10
Psalm 146:5–10
James 5:7–10
Matthew 11:2–11

Isaiah 35:1–10 reminds the community of faith that God is good for God's promises! Contrasted to the judgment of Edom (Isa 34), restoration for Israel entails both personal and universal outcomes. Renewal from geographical drought as well as physical challenges are examples of God's promises being kept. The challenge of this text is to be restored beyond simply deliverance, rather, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God" (v. 4). Even amid judgment, the prophet sees hope for the people. This differentiates Isaiah from being simply the prophet of doom. His messages are always bracketed with hope and possible restoration for all (not just a certain group of people at the expense of another group of people). One difference between "prophetic" and "apocalyptic" images in Scripture is that the former believes the community can be reformed from within, whereas the "apocalyptic" often writes of intervention and destruction before new life can occur.

Psalm 146:5–10 is a song that praises God for God's providence. God "executes justice," "opens the eyes of the blind," "lifts up those who are bowed down," and "watches over strangers while upholding widows and orphans." The wicked are ruined, but God's reign is forever. This psalm is generally assigned to the postexilic period. Therefore, the writer and recipients are no strangers to adversity, exile, and alienation. Still, the community can affirm God's providence. During Advent, does God have to perform in a spectacular way to be viewed as "providential"? The task of preaching this psalm is to discover how to refuel praise in God during times of low morale. This is tied into the reading from Isaiah, as it is a song to remind the community that God has been good for God's promises in the past, and will not let us down in the present.

James 5:7–10 is a call to be patient until the *parousia* or second coming of the Lord. As a farmer waits for the crop to grow, Christians are to use this time of waiting to strengthen their faith. Scholars have pointed out that the belief in the imminent second coming of Christ did not materialize. Yet, in the season of Advent, patient waiting remains a counter-cultural posture during a season when the corporate advertisers are bombarding people with reasons to hurry up and spend money—now! God's will is found in waiting, according to this text.

Such Advent spirituality need not occur only during the winter. It can happen

while one awaits test results from a doctor, the verdict on the costs of a car repair, or how a child performs either academically or athletically in school. James is a book that many Lutherans and Reformation Christians do not like to preach on, as we tend to gravitate toward God's grace and mercy. But James is still in the Bible!

Matthew 11:2–11 relates reports to John the Baptist that Jesus is more than a prophet. With reference to Isa 35:3–6, the life, words, and deeds of Jesus are ushering in a new age for the people of faith. Mal 3:1 is applied to John's ministry. Jesus does not diminish the importance of John's words of preparation. In fact, John's ministry of preparation is necessary. This text is appropriate to Advent in that someone must do the ministry that establishes foundations, groundwork, or a base before the Savior would arrive.

John is not a king's court prophet, but one who does ministry in the wilderness. Which voices in the wildernesses of our lives are difficult for us to hear? Possibly, the change or emerging of church movements, or a change in the *status quo,* are cues that a new era is emerging. With that said, Matthew still uses the word "church" in his gospel (Matt 16:18). He also provides a "Sermon on the Mount." This keeps the community of faith grounded in the ancient tradition of the people of God since the Hebrew Bible. Not all modern movements and eras of religious transition are consistent with the biblical witness. In fact, this text suggests that John the Baptist is pointing people toward repentance, a simpler lifestyle (from the past!), and less than designer-named clothing. This message continues to be counter-cultural in the Advent season. It ties into the rest of the readings by suggesting that God is still good for God's promises, but they will come to fruition on God's terms.

Preaching Directions

A sermon from Isaiah might consider the difference between "in house" reform and apocalyptic destruction so that new life can occur. These are two different theological approaches used today.

The reading from James prompts us to wonder where "works" fit into the discipleship journey. I always struggle with the distinction between "cheap grace" (Bonhoeffer) and "works righteousness." A helpful book is by N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

The gospel reading prompts the question of who is called to be the "transition" person in any community. Many students and workers are reminded that the only constant in life is change and transition. John reminds us that not all change is for the better. Also, the cry often goes out for strong leaders who provide direction. Are the "Elijahs and John the Baptists" really welcomed when they arrive? The movie *Patton* reminds me of this idea. DC

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 19, 2010

Isaiah 7:10–16
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19
Romans 1:1–7
Matthew 1:18–25

Isaiah 7:10–16—If God called any person's bluff—"Answer me!" or "What do you say to me now, God?"—how would that person respond? This is the situation of King Ahaz. The prophet gives the king a sign in the child "Immanuel." Scholars have debated for centuries whether this is Hezekiah or any other Davidic king. Possibly it is a metaphor for a future leader. This question will not

be resolved on this Sunday of Advent. The "Immanuel" title, "God with us," can serve as an interpretative lens for any issue confronting the church at this given time. God is with us during any financial, ecological, health, or family crisis. The point of the text is that God did answer King Ahaz. Though Ahaz did not want to follow the prophet's sign, the king still had God's sign. The gospel reading will flesh out this sign in fuller detail from the Christian church's perspective. Isaiah 7 is part of the uncontested section of the prophet's words. An argument of an editorial insertion is thereby weaker. The text has to be addressed.

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19—This psalm is a communal lament of implied backsliders who seek protection and new life from God (vv. 18–19). A broken relationship exists. It is generally assigned to the Assyrian conquest period of Northern Israel (732–722 BCE). The Shiloh worship center tradition is implied in verses 1–2 with the "enthroned Cherubim" mentioned. This suggests certain legitimacy to the Northern Kingdom worship traditions. Two metaphors are found in the psalm: a shepherd and a vine. The shepherd metaphor is part of this assigned text. The people have cried for years. This is applicable to Advent because it meets those who are in the anxious waiting period of their lives with a prayer that points to the possibility that God is capable and willing to reverse their loss and alienation. One interpretative lens to use in this text for the rest of the psalm is: "give us life, and we will call on your name" (v. 18).

Romans 1:1–7—This text relates to Advent in that Paul believes that God had planned the birth, teachings, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, from "beforehand" (v. 2). God's plan includes the prophets and other holy writings, which became part of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Also, reference to the Davidic linage is made in verse 3.

This salutation of Paul is a reminder that he is set aside for the gospel. This is one definition of being an apostle. One could identify some creedal language in this text with such words as "descended," "spirit of holiness," and "resurrection from the dead" (vv. 3–4). Other themes include grace and peace in this season of Advent. What were the "holy scriptures" at the writing of Romans 1? How is power being redefined in this text (v. 4)? How do grace and apostleship relate to one another (v. 5)? What does it mean to "belong" to Jesus Christ (v. 6)? What does "Lord Jesus Christ" mean in a time when the Roman Empire staked claims of divinity (v. 7)? In reference to the Isaiah and Matthew texts, how is the divine rule of the universe being redefined in this season of Advent and soon Christmas?

Matthew 1:18–25—The commercial trend is to conflate this account with Luke's version of the preparation for Jesus' birth. I tend not to fight that battle. Mary was with child without marital relations but from the Holy Spirit. This might be a good creedal reference. The story of the potential scandal is unique to Matthew's gospel. Joseph is identified as a "righteous man." Joseph tried to follow the protocol of his faith by trying to avoid public scandal. God uses dreams to speak to Joseph (as Joseph in Genesis interpreted dreams).

When the angel appears to Joseph, he is told, "he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21). It is possible to use this text as an interpretative lens for defining Jesus' entire ministry in the event one draws a "blank" for theme ideas throughout the year of Matthew. One could ask, "How does this given text relate to Matthew

1:21 (he will save his people from their sins)?

The "Emmanuel" word can serve as a bookend with the entire gospel (Matthew 28:16–20 being the other bookend). In Advent, we can note how Jesus' presence is what the text promises. It does not promise "new life," as of yet. Advent is a time of preparation, which could entail confusion and "unprecedented circumstances" as Joseph experienced with a pregnant woman, whom he married. There is no mention of the nature of the wedding or if Mary was a Bridezilla. They were simply married. They did not twist the pastor's arm to rent the Temple for a party for their friends.

Preaching Directions

Preaching topics for both Isaiah and Matthew point to a "God being with us" sermon. In a post modern, consumerist society, is this good enough for most people? In the book, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), Charles Taylor suggests that many of us are really more like Ahaz. We want to keep away from any divine being.

In the readings from Psalms and Romans, God's plans for creation are full of grace, not consumption and competition. DC.

The Nativity of Our Lord, Proper 1 December 25, 2010

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

Isaiah 9:2–7—The text is known as a "Royal Oracle." Assyria has crushed the Northern Kingdom and their allies during the Syro-Ephriamic wars. The "darkness" is in reference to the exiled Northern Kingdom people of God. To such a people, a light has come (v. 2). The cause for joy is not found in a military victory. There have been a number of texts that scholars have associated with this text. They include Psalm 2:7 (You are my son...), Isaiah 7:14–16 (A young woman will conceive a son), and Isaiah 8:18 (signs and portents in Israel from the Lord). It is reasonable to tie this text into the broader context of Isaiah 7–9:7: a great king of God will rule without violence.

The ongoing discussion of whether this is King Hezekiah or a Davidic king to come will not be solved this day. However, the theme of God breaking through the darkness of any period of people's lives fits well within this text regardless of dating and authorship theories. Also, any military power will have a term to its life. This could be Assyria, Babylon, or any great powerful empire that believes it is beyond God's reign.

Psalm 96 celebrates the greatness of God with a new song. The reason for praise is ambiguous. Some writers view it as a military victory. Others locate it within a worship setting. Brueggemann views it as a new song that breaks through the restraints of present circumstances. There is a newness of life. This could be one reason why the lectionary appoints it for the new life of Christmas. The text says God is greater than other "gods," the latter being mere idols. Other qualities of God in this psalm include divine kingship, immovable or fixed deity, and a righteous judge. The child who is born on Christmas will one day be the judge over all people. The psalmist wants to promote a God of stability, sovereignty, and equity among all nations. Yet, God can do new actions that benefit all people. This is good news

from the text.

Titus 2:11–14 brings the theology of the Pastoral Epistles to the Christmas story. The grace of God has a universal outreach, just as the good news of Jesus' birth is for all people (v. 11). Regardless of what one believes about the authorship of Titus (Pauline or not), the Christ event is a result of prevenient grace (this grace precedes human decision). This is to result in correct doctrine and right living. "Hope" is not wishful thinking in the Pastoral Epistles, but is based on promises kept by God. The one who is born on this day will one day give "himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). God has kept God's promises! This is to argue against a heretical view that holds that salvation is only for certain enlightened people, based on speculative philosophy.

Luke 2:1–14, (15–20) tells the story of the birth of the Christ child as a sign of God's gracious rule. It is told against the backdrop of Roman history. Luke's intent was to document the Christ's birth within the context of secular history. Luke uses the best literary or communication technology of his times. Therefore, any minor historical inaccuracies should be read in this context. It was Luke's intent to work with information. Judging Luke negatively is similar to judging earlier eras of law enforcement that did their work before DNA technology and the World Wide Web.

The small town theme from Micah 5:2 is present in this text for congregations who feel marginalized by larger communities and their corporate entities [and larger churches!]. So this text can be seen as a protest against global powers of all times who seek to dominate smaller communities and diminish the value of remnants of faithful people.

There are references to the kingly line of David within this text. Power in the monarch is now redefined in the form of a working-class home having a baby whom God chose to make God's self present. How is "power" defined among young people in certain families of wealth or among the "working poor" today? God is capable of turning all definitions on their heads.

The "Savior" theme is also present. N.T. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) is among the modern authors who argue that Jesus was indeed seen as a political threat in his time with the use of (coded) "red button" words like "Messiah" or "Christ." What "red button" words would the church need to attract such attention today?

Preaching Directions

Birth in humble circumstances is a theme one might want to pursue for those families who are anxious regarding the future of their children and grandchildren. All things are possible with God during Christmas. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, God is full of potential reversals and surprises. This applies to both the Isaiah and Luke readings. At this writing I do not know what the newest Christmas toy or game will be. However, it will prove to be a false god compared to the child who is born on this day (Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). DC

First Sunday after Christmas December 26, 2010

Isaiah 63:7–9
Psalm 148
Hebrews 2:10–18
Matthew 2:13–23

Isaiah 63:7–9 is a text written by the Isaiah of the return (Trito-Isaiah). The community finds economic and legal problems and resistance from neighbors. The nation still is under the rule of Persia. The text is a song to remember the greatness of God. It tells people of all times that God is good for God's promises. The writer recalls God's past times of deliverance and uses these memories to sustain him and the community in a time of numerous let downs during the period of return to Israel after exile. How does one sustain hope when the past "golden era" is gone, but the prophet declares that God is at work within the community?

Psalm 148 is a concert of voices praising God as creator. Humanity is indebted to God for the wonders of the universe. God's power is seen through creation, not might or strength. Any life force that has any power has received it from God. Some scholars suggest this psalm was used for the re-establishment of community after exile. The logic of the psalmist's cosmology would not be consistent with scientific categories. God as creator may use any method or cosmology God chooses.

Hebrews 2:10–18—In the ongoing sermon to a lethargic, tired Christian community, Hebrews wants to make the point that this high priest, or Jesus as Christ, did take on human form and suffered as humans do even today (vv. 17–18). Much has been written regarding the extent to which this is an anti-gnostic polemic. Today, the temptation might be a form of doceticism, or that Jesus was superhuman because of the miracles he performed. During Christmas, the text reminds us how this high priest did indeed take on the human form of a baby (vv. 14, 6–18). This text could be connected to the reading from Matthew 2 and the suffering of the women of Bethlehem. This form of high Christology is not to be taken lightly, and is indeed costly, according to the author of Hebrews. Other themes include Jesus as a pioneer of the faith who experiences our sufferings (v. 10). Sanctification, praise, and trust in Jesus as the great high priest are also present in this text.

Matthew 2:13–23 can be divided into three sections of flight to Egypt (2:13–17), slaying of children (2:16–18), and raised as a Nazarene (2:19–23). Any one section could entail a sermon. A dream is sent again by God to Joseph. The flight from Egypt is a reminder that God's people do have to flee to that Empire-like city at times. However, this is not the permanent home, as the book of Exodus described. How does one flee a murderer such as Herod? Go to a power that is greater than Herod, in Egypt. But do not get too comfortable in Egypt. The irony here is that the Gentile magi who bow toward baby Jesus are juxtaposed to the Judean King Herod, who views the child as a threat. Already, we see strands of a universal mission to those outside of the immediate community.

Walter Brueggemann (*The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) suggests that Rachel's weeping is warranted after the exile (Jer 31:5), as is the weeping of the mothers of Bethlehem, who cannot be comforted by the therapists of the day. People need to take time to lament and cry before they can move ahead with

their lives. The loss of a child changes a person permanently.

After Herod died, the family returned to Israel, but to Nazareth (not Bethlehem) to raise their son. This was in the Galilee, a location further from the Judean strongholds in the south.

Samson in the Hebrew Bible was a “Nazarite” (Judg 16:17). Jesus was a “Nazarene.” There is a difference between the two that could be explored. The use of the word or etymology of “Nazareth” has possibilities in this text. Exploring what it means to be a “branch of David” is one option to follow here. If one is so inclined, the possibility of God’s design and rule is seen here. Implicitly, the “theodicy” question arises when looking at the death of innocent children. In the Christmas season, new life comes after much pain.

Preaching Directions

A sermon on the reading from Isaiah and the psalm might include cleaning up the mess when one returns from a long absence. Also, the question of downsizing the past dream or vision of a community project, or simply starting all over with a new vision and new project, is a concern that faces many communities that I observe.

The reading from Hebrews raises the question of what type of leadership or vision will it take to awaken lethargic attitudes. *Christian Century* had an article on Lay Pastors (L. Gregory Jones, “Pastors by Degree” www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=8054). Maybe, those who complain should be in the pulpit for a Sunday or two?

The Holy Innocents text is close to my heart, as my wife and I do not have children. What happens in a society when there are more retired baby boomers and fewer people to support them? How does one argue for a loving God when a child dies? I tend to fall back on Douglas John Hall’s *God and Human Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). However, I was told in seminary that this might not be good enough for many in American society today. DC

Second Sunday after Christmas January 2, 2011

Jeremiah 31:7–14
Psalm 147:12–20
Ephesians 1:3–14
John 1:(1–9), 10–18

Jeremiah 31:7–14 elaborates on a great homecoming of the people from exile. The reasons for worship and praise include thanking a God who gathers the anxious and vulnerable people who are marginalized. The people will rejoice and dance (vv. 12–13). Satisfaction, plentiful food and the fellowship of being part of a community again provide other reasons for praising God.

One interpretative lens through which to read the entire book of Jeremiah is 1:10: “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” This text can be used as a means to read and make sense of the whole book.

Many exegetical issues make Jeremiah difficult to read (Louis Stulman, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Jeremiah*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005). There are at least three voices within the book; some may even seem to contradict one another. Authorship has been contested. Jeremiah, Baruch, other scribes, and a Deuteronomic source are among the proposed writers. The bottom

line is that the book tries to deal with both God's sovereignty and the reliability of God's word (promise) amidst a crisis of the fall of the nation post 587 BCE (Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Verse 11 suggests another direction, in that God *ransoms* and *redeems* the people.

Psalm 147:12–20 seeks to affirm the transcendent nature of God (cf. John 1:1–18). It is a community song of praise. God is the provider of security and food. The lectionary text is the second of two parts within the hymn (vv. 1–11, 12–20). Generally, the text is dated as postexilic, from the reconstruction period of Nehemiah. The people are praising God after a period of waiting, possibly a winter month when the crops were scarce. In the world of the psalmist, God's power and care are measured by agricultural production, similar to how a person might use a paycheck or successful business today. The psalmist wants the people of God to worship God rather than the means of security and provision themselves. (Do not make the walls and prosperous crops as a false god!)

Ephesians 1:3–14—Authorship is contested for this book. Whether stylistic and theological differences, as compared to the undisputed letters of Paul, indicate a deuteropauline author has been an issue for many years. The content of the epistle stands on its own integrity regardless of authorship. A three-layered universe is assumed, where Christ sits enthroned above all creation.

Election is one direction to examine. To view election in a corporate sense (God elects the church) leads to a single predestination view of the entire body of Christ being God's elect. To take an individualist position (God elects me, and other individuals) could point to the Calvinist Double-Predestination view of the text.

Through baptism and grace (2:8), believers already share in the redemption of Christ's blood (1:7). Hearing the word, believing in it, and being marked by it are a deposit made on future redemption. The future is revealed in the present. Ethical response to grace affects the future. Apocalyptic fervor in other Pauline epistles is collapsed into the present in Ephesians. That is, the tension between the past and present is less important (Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of New Testament Writings*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998).

The text's purpose is to bring assurance to people of faith that God's promises through the redemptive work of Christ are reliable, so we may live in hope and experience glory. This text relates to the Christmas season in that Christ is the one who is glorified for his blood (v. 7). In this sense, both Christmas and Easter point to a crucified and risen Lord. Christ breaks down all barriers between all people. God's plans for the world are pre-existent (before the foundation of the world, v. 4).

John 1:(1–9), 10–18 can be viewed as another Christmas story (1:14): "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." This reading could be related to the reading from Ephesians in that God's transcendence is affirmed. Both readings point to a high Christology. Yet, God is incarnated in flesh.

Unique to John's gospel, God or the *logos* (principle of knowledge for the universe) is the Lord of life that has existed for all of eternity. Other themes include darkness and light, a John the Baptist theme, grace and grace upon grace, a law given by Moses fulfilled, and

power to become the children of God. John 1:1, "In the beginning," and Jesus' final words on the cross in John 19:30, "It is finished," provide bookends to this gospel to integrate any themes that might occur within a congregation. For instance, Jesus is the beginning of life, light, and faithful shepherding, but his time on earth is finished. However, the call to "feed the sheep" continues even today (John 21:1–19).

Preaching Directions

In the world of Facebook, how many people reconnect with their high school class if they are less than successful? Here is an instant homecoming event.

In both the readings from Ephesians and John, suppose being "elect" meant to suffer, live in poverty, and be told, "Your reward will be in heaven"? What CEO job do few people want? DC

Baptism of Our Lord
January 9, 2011

Isaiah 42:1–9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34–43
Matthew 3:13–17

Isaiah 42:1–9 has been a contested text because the identity of the "servant" is uncertain. Did Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah) refer to the nation of Israel or a future Davidic leader? The servant is to restore creation through reconciliation with its God (or ground of "Being" as Tillich might say, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*). The nation is in exile while experiencing spiritual alienation. Isaiah is assuring the people that world occurrences are not arbitrary, but that divine providence is behind all economic, legal, and international relations that affect people. Fear of assimilation is present. Bringing new life to religious symbols is one strategy of the author. The God of Israel is still the center of the universe, despite immediate evidence that the Babylonian god Marduk has won the day.

Does the Jesus who is baptized on this day fit the description or criterion for this servant? N.T. Wright suggests that the Christ event is the fourth action to complete a four-act play (*The New Testament and the People of God,* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

Verse 5 suggests a creation theme. Verse 7 suggests the new role of the "servant" who brings the people hope, "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Psalm 29 ascribes praise to God for victory over the forces of chaos. The psalm runs parallel to Isaiah 42 in its affirmation that God is the Lord of history. God is enthroned over the flood (symbol of chaos) and is enthroned forever (v. 10). The psalmist hopes people will transfer the direction of their lives from the false gods to the Lord God of Israel. Which god/God gives us stability today? Psalm 29 is an invitation to move any lingering confidence in the gods of this world toward the Creator God of Israel. Baptism is one traditional means of grace that the church has practiced throughout the centuries.

Acts 10:34–43 points toward other areas of lordship for Jesus. Many within the Jewish Christian community did indeed believe God showed partiality toward them. This text does not argue for a "supercessionist" position of God replacing the old covenant with a newer one. Rather, it is about Peter receiving new information based on experience. This text presses the question of experi-

ence becoming the frame for shaping community policy and norms, rather than the traditional interpretation of the sacred Scriptures of the times.

Baptism now has the added dimension of receiving the Holy Spirit (v. 38), rather than mere proselytite baptism. The tricky part of this text is to consider what new experiences will be embraced by the community of faith, which could be viewed as contradicting previous frames of interpretations of the texts. In the case of this text, it is a matter of re-telling the community story within the framework of God showing no partiality (v. 34), yet attempting to use the traditional prophets to make the point (v. 43).

Matthew 3:13–17—Is the narrative of Jesus' baptism in both water and the Holy Spirit? John's baptism was only for the purpose of repentance and/or to proselytize people into the community of faith. Once baptized the person grows in the Holy Spirit. It is the first step toward righteousness in Matthew. In the Matt 28:19–20 "Great Commission," the church is called to make disciples by means of baptizing and teaching. This is one area we could find support for baptism/confirmation ministry practices. Matthew's main point is that Jesus' journey is in harmony with God's will.

This is one place where "God talks" (Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998). This will occur again on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:5). Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42 are on a collision course with regard to God's plan for royalty and a servant. Like other New Testament authors, Matthew's tendency is to seek strands of tradition that would make sense of the experience of the early church (Wesleyans might suggest this to be part of their "Quadrilateral" of Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. John Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995*)*. This is not necessarily "proof texting." Rather, it is a way of doing theology to address new pieces of information. In this sense, the text would run parallel to the reading from Acts 10.

Preaching Directions

Today, does "baptism" hold the significance of providing identity in a shifting culture of change? Is a baptized file clerk as important as a baptized CEO in any organization?

Like those in exile in Isaiah 42, mainline Christians are often marginalized in American society. Does the message of our creeds, confessions, and sacraments still have integrity when it is now the minority view? This could apply to any family who relocates due to job or education opportunities.

If people seek some stability in the community of faith (Psalm 29), will they take on the gods of the world whom many family members might favor?

In Acts, has the Holy Spirit *de facto* created an "open canon" for God's work in the world? If so, what boundaries are we to use to avoid heresies or accommodation to cultural ideas for the sake of survival or relevance?

Finally, in Matthew, as Jesus identifies with sinners in being baptized, what is the proper grooming for leaders today? Does a simple baptism and confirmation ministry matter anymore? DC

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 16, 2011

Isaiah 49:1–7
Psalm 40:1–11
1 Corinthians 1:1–9
John 1:29–42

Isaiah 49:1–7 is about the servant. The servant's identity has been contested. The suffering servant in previous chapters is one possibility. In addition, Cyrus, who will allow the people to return to their land, is another candidate. Israel as a people of God has also been identified as the servant. "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them" (v. 9) is the desired outcome. So a messianic leader as well as a community of faith may both usher in a new era after much suffering. If one assumes Cyrus as leader is the servant, then the qualities of suffering in verses 2–3 would speak against this view.

The idea of "call" during the Epiphany season ties this text to the others for this Sunday.

Psalm 40:1–11 reminds readers that patient waiting has its rewards. This is an individual thanksgiving song. Not only has the psalmist's prayer been answered, thereby resulting in praise, but the victory celebration is observed at a distance by foreign nations. God is reliable in God's promises to deliver from the pit and mire, and provides a steady rock of security (v. 2). The pattern of deliverance has a history since the victory at the sea event (Exodus 15).

There is evidence that a king is praying this psalm. The writer of Hebrews 10 also appropriated this psalm. Christ's sacrifice is a final one, according to Hebrews. Psalm 40 indicates that delight in God's law is to be preferred to offerings. Christians within the Hebrew community might see Jesus as Christ being the final sacrifice and prototype of one who keeps the laws as God had intended. He is the deliverer that a Jewish reader might seek from God (Peter Craigie, *Word Bible Commentary: Psalms 1–50,* Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1983).

1 Corinthians 1:1–9 begins with a superscription of Paul the apostle (sent one) by the will of God. One issue of this text is that of "calling." Does God limit "call" to the accepted route such as being one of the original twelve disciples, or can God operate outside the box (Acts 9, Damascus Road experience)?

To be "in" Christ has raised some questions of meaning. The church in Corinth is identified as "sanctified" (v. 2). This is important to bear in mind, as the apostle will address issues within the church that suggest they are less than sanctified. The definition of "church" is raised in that there may be many places within the city that people worship, thus suggesting many house churches. Verses 5, 6, and 7 indicate themes that may be taken up in future passages. These include testimony of Christ, strength as a Christian, and use of spiritual gifts (Roy Harrisville, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1987).

Verse 9 suggests an interpretative lens for the whole text: "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." As one reads the rest of the epistle, the reminder that "God is faithful" can be a recurring theme in every sermon about the book.

John 1:29–42 begins with John the Baptist's witness of Jesus being the "Lamb of the world." This Johannine image has its ultimate climax in John 19, with the crucifixion of Jesus as the true Passover

lamb. Jesus is the pre-existent one as well as the Son of God. Exploration of these terms could prove to be fruitful during the Epiphany season, when people seek to experience God in unique ways.

This text also contains the calling of Andrew and Peter (Cephas). As in 1 Corinthians 1, how do people receive calls from God? Andrew indicates that Jesus is the Messiah. It seems that John is redefining this political figure to be the "anointed" one who will not lead Israel to a political victory over Rome, but rather a defeat of sin and death. John 3 will elaborate on this theme more as the gospel progresses. These biblical texts point to God's epiphany revelations or experiences outside the mainstream narratives one might find in the synoptic gospels (John Kysar, *Augsburg Commentary in the New Testament: John*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986).

Numerous works have been written to suggest that tensions existed between the followers of John the Baptist and those of Jesus. Texts such as this one seek to reconcile this conflict by having John identify Jesus as the "lamb."

Preaching Directions

It has become fashionable to use the term "Servant Leader" in many organizations. What is a true "Servant Leader"? Those gifted in vocations that do not pay much despite requirements of higher education are keenly aware of this reality. What does it mean to be "servant leaders" in education, human services, ministry, writing, performing, and fine arts in a time when sports and electronics professions often pay more?

Both Psalm 40 and 1 Corinthians raise the issue of how patient we are with God. In Epiphany, God might be in our midst and we do not realize it until later.

John 1 points to being called outside the mainstream. In the movie *Independence Day,* Capt. Steven Hiller, played by Will Smith, was rejected by NASA, but still flew an alien spacecraft to save the world from hostile aliens. DC

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2011

Isaiah 9:1–4
Psalm 27:1, 4–9
1 Corinthians 1:10–18
Matthew 4:12–23

Isaiah 9:1–4 "But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish" (v. 1), is the good news of this text within the Epiphany season. Regardless of whether the Christmas season was a positive or negative experience, those who live in gloom continue to have a reason to hope in this season of Epiphany. God can meet believers in unexpected and mysterious ways. Whatever bars are on people's shoulders can be broken.

This text has been contested in terms of being from the era of Deutero-Isaiah. Canon scholars such as I. Howard Marshall would argue that the community of Isaiah still found it necessary to include such texts even before the time of calamity of the fall of Jerusalem (*New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004*)*.That God's promises are reliable is an ongoing theme. It is realistic to look toward a time of rejoicing despite the most dismal circumstances in which we find ourselves during the wintry weeks of the Epiphany season (Christopher, Seitz, *Interpretation, A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Isaiah 1—39.* Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993).

Psalm 27: 1, 4–9 can be seen as herbal tea for the soul in this time. God is the light, a stronghold, and reason not to fear amid any changing times or chaotic challenges that seek to disrupt the journey of the believer. Such times are par for the course of life as a believer. There is comfort and sanctuary while in the presence of the Lord. One might pursue whether this is a "refuge" or "stronghold."

Crying out and seeking God during times of despair is actually a normal part of the journey of faith. This psalm could be prayed by anyone who is in a similar situation to that of Isaiah 9. It assumes that God hears the prayer, God cares about God's people, and God is capable of deliverance in God's time. Like herbal tea, it takes time for God's word and response to prayers to seep into one's soul. This contrasts with the market-driven culture, which advertises instant relief.

1 Corinthians 1:10–18 provides insights into divisions related to followings of various charismatic leaders, which are already occurring within the Christian church. Paul does not want to be numbered as another strong leader with groupies who think his spin on the gospel is to be preferred to other church leaders. Baptism and living under the cross of Christ are inseparable for Paul. This text is another challenge for people to find their identity in their baptism rather than a particular cultural or even church hero.

"Chloe's people" are mentioned as a source of division. Who they are remains unknown, though some have speculated they were early gnostics. No one leader died for the people on the cross. For Paul, this atonement view is what qualifies Christ as the one whose life Christians are to imitate and base their meaning of life upon. Sports heroes, legends of the faith, and national leaders will disappoint us before the grave or at the grave.

Matthew 4:12–23 suggests that Jesus is a fulfillment of the hopes of the Isaiah 9 text. If one believes that God continues to reveal God's self in all ages, then those who lived in the period of Isaiah 9 experienced God's presence and good news in mysterious ways. The New Testament community of Matthew believed that Jesus was the ultimate revelation of hope from God. This does not preclude any future blessings from God that any community of faith may experience. A Trinitarian theology might suggest that God's Spirit and God the Creator act in all ages. But both complement the words and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. This is one approach to diminishing a supercessionist approach to such texts. God's covenant has been intact and continues to be intact, though in differing ways.

That those who suffer will receive good news continues to be a theme of this series of texts. John the Baptist's death prompts Jesus to withdraw from the heavy trade areas into the land. Then there is the call of the disciples within this text. The use of the call to make fishers of people is well-known from basic Sunday school and Bible school stories and songs. In this season of Epiphany, the question of following one's calling in life is a fruitful avenue for preaching.

Preaching Directions

Isaiah 9 invites us to consider that it is easier to be a cynic or prophet of gloom (e.g., based on early congregational financial reports)rather than to see where God is at work in spiritual growth and in congregations reassessing their mission.

Psalm 27 invites us to discover where the darkest areas of our lives are and still affirm God's light. It could be a health, financial, economic, or family situation.

Epiphany realizations can occur as people learn to handle conflict in a helpful, constructive manner. Also, a good test for any organization is whether it can outlast the life of its founder or charismatic leader. What if a leader is not an extrovert, but is still loving and faithful?

Matthew 4 reminds us to ask ourselves what the "Kingdom of Heaven" is for various people. In the movie with the same name, Balian (Jeremy Irons) protects Jerusalem against invading forces, and concludes that the Kingdom of Heaven is within each person's heart. DC

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 30, 2011

Micah 6:1–8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18–31
Matthew 5:1–12

Micah 6:1–8 "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) This text could be seen as an interpretative lens for God's will for both the Southern and Northern Kingdoms, to whom the prophet preaches. For Hosea, sacrifices are no substitute for right behavior toward one's fellow community members (vv. 6–8).

The prophet Micah spoke against both Samaria (Northern Kingdom) and Jerusalem (Southern Kingdom of Judah). Scholars have had a difficult time reading the book, as it seems to lack a common "thread." So it is viewed as a "literary collage" of independent units, often juxtaposing previous messages and contexts. Throughout the book, there is the ongoing economic question between "guns or butter." Micah leans toward "butter." Warfare is learned. Micah believes that skills to build the world are to be preferred over destruction through violence. Doing justice entails not charging usury to fellow citizens, preserving the land by not overusing it for agricultural production, and following the laws of the book of Deuteronomy as a measuring rod for community ethics.

Psalm 15 might be viewed as a response to the Micah 6 text. The psalm is an entrance liturgy intended to respond to two errors in worship. On one hand, the holiness of God can be so highly stressed, that the ordinary person feels unworthy to worship God in the temple. The other extreme is that too much openness toward God results in a casual, thoughtless attitude toward worshiping God. Approaching worship with integrity, a need for forgiveness, and a time of deep introspection might be a median position toward worship. The prophets such as Micah would accuse the people of being too casual, possibly hypocritical in their worship. The epistle and gospel readings suggest that humility is the ongoing posture toward worship, but it should not impede the believer from sincere ministry and mission.

1 Corinthians 1:18–31 teaches what Paul views as foolish and wise. This uncontested epistle contains a major core value of a theology of the cross. God's wisdom is foolishness to the world. The world's wisdom is foolishness to God. The ongoing task is to present the counter-cultural message of this text to those who would want to accentuate only the resurrection or victory texts in the Bible (which are still in the Bible!).

This is a good text to challenge whatever false god of the national or local culture promises deliverance and new life. All such gods rely on some sort of

victory, whereas the cross will always be a scandal. God uses smaller towns (Micah) and humble people (Psalm 15) to do great things to usher in the kingdom.

A "theology of the cross" finds its bull's-eye in this text. Paul argues to a newly successful or economically secure people that God uses foolishness and not so famous people to accomplish God's kingdom. The Corinthians are part of this group of people. They were grafted into the covenant promises made to the Jewish people. The bottom line for Paul is for those who boast, to boast in the Lord, not anything we have accomplished (v. 31).

Matthew 5:1–12 contains the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. Are these present realities? Are they hoped-for visions? Do they reflect that Jesus envisions the Kingdom of Heaven to start taking shape during his ministry? Commentators seem to differ. The Sermon on the Mount establishes Jesus as the "second Moses." He is teaching them! This lesson is an extension of, rather than an abolition of, the laws of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Jesus reinterprets them to follow the spirit of the law, rather than legalistically attempting to find ways around the letter of the law (which Matthew accuses the Jewish or Judean leadership of the day of doing). For Matthew, being a good Christian is also being a good Jew or Judean.

In Matthew, Jesus says "blessed are the poor in spirit" rather than simply "the poor," as Luke writes on the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20). Persecution is inevitable as one follows these teachings (vv. 10–12). Any one of these beatitudes could be a sermon depending on the context of the preacher. A sermon on the entire passage might also remind people that this remains a counter-cultural teaching. All theology is a prescription for the church, not a description of it. Verse 9 suggests an interfaith approach in that anyone in any religion could potentially be called a "peacemaker" in the global conflict that occurs daily in this year.

Preaching Directions

A preaching direction from Micah and Psalm 15 asks the question, "Is small and humble always inferior?" This would include those with small projects in urban, rural, or other cultural settings.

For people or a community that is not "Number 1," 1 Corinthians reminds us that God is very active in our lives as God works through the foolish. This is the time to remind people that God is in solidarity with them and present with those who never even made it to the reality television shows.

Matthew 5 poses the question. "How high has the bar risen before a person feels blessed?" DC

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