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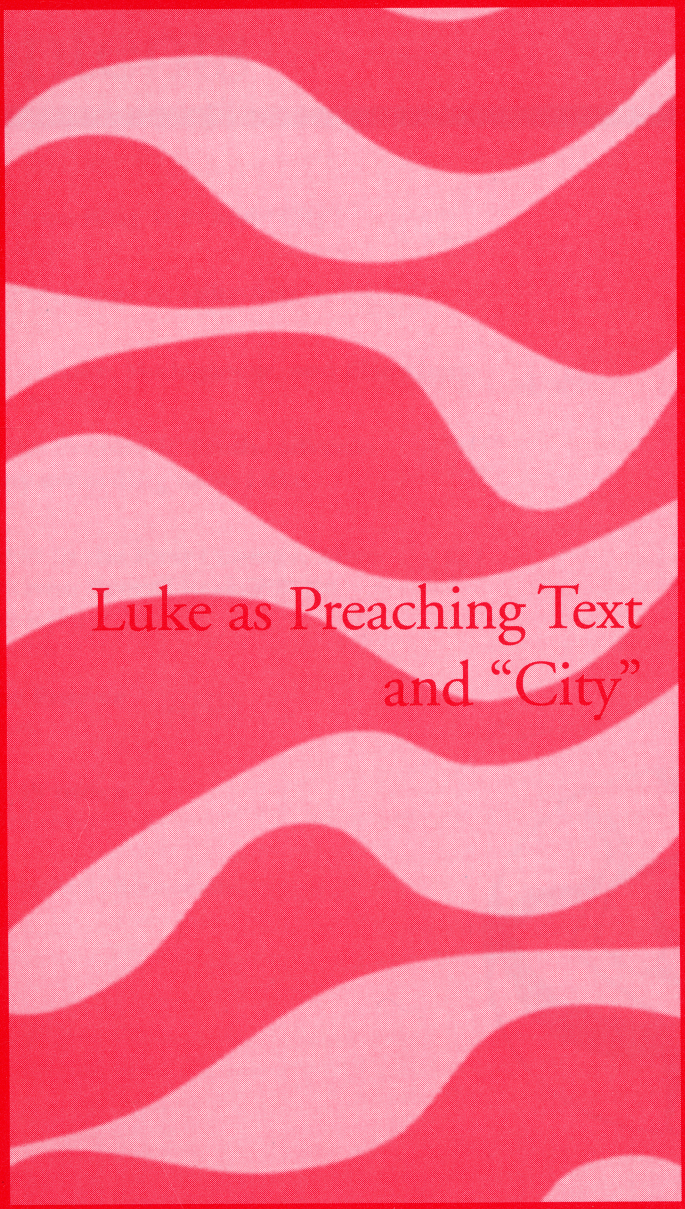

Luke as Preaching Text and "City"

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Drawings by Sara Olson-Smith

Luke as Preaching Text and "City"

From Advent 1 with its hopeful message "Your redemption is drawing near" to Christ the King with its fervent, forward-looking plea "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," we will all this year be preaching, reading, and being transformed by the Gospel of Luke. In this issue five leading ELCA scholars—two are parish pastors, two are seminary professors, and one is a former seminary president—provide retooling, midstream, on Luke's unique "take" on the Christian adventure.

Erik M. Heen observes that Luke-Acts' engagement with the severe disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in antiquity cannot be reduced to a simple dualism. It is not "the rich" *per se* that are critiqued in these volumes but rather the abuses inherent in the ancient patronal system as well as the values into which both patrons and clients are socialized. This article is an exercise in social-scientific criticism and therefore defines terms like patron, client, honor, shame, purity, impurity, holy, profane, righteous and sinner, and the inherent unequal relationships they presuppose. Patronage was a system of reciprocal relationships of mutual benefit between unequals. Many of the central Greek terms of the New Testament point to semantic domains that range over various aspects of patronage. Luke's Christian form of patronage supports the expressed values and mission of the church, including its unique focus in antiquity on the poor and the disadvantaged. Luke-Acts advocates a model of leadership lived out in voluntary abdication of privilege and in service of those who were destitute. God's grace has the power to redeem human relations just as sin has the power to corrupt them.

Ronald W. Roschke explores the focused interest on issues of health and healing in Luke. These reflections are informed by the healing ministry of the Malagasy Lutheran Church, which helps to reveal the cultural filters we employ when reading stories of healing in the Bible. Scholars today are exploring ancient medical texts in order to understand how older cultures thought about health and healing. The pregnancy of Elizabeth and the muteness of Zechariah in Luke 1, for example, would have been seen as parallel issues. Luke seems to share the medical presuppositions attested in the Talmud and the Corpus Hippocraticum. In the third gospel healings and exorcisms are also co-expressions of a divine-earthly showdown between God and Evil. In places such as Madagascar today, a scientific practice of medicine coexists with belief in demonic possession. Our Western individualistic approach to medicine closes the door to social realities that affect our

wellbeing. How might the church more powerfully support those who have committed themselves to say "No" to the powers of darkness which work against God and life because we have said "Yes" to grace? Do we want to observe Luke's worldview as an outsider, or are we willing to enter into this Word, allow it to claim us and to cast out from us that which is death-dealing?

David L. Tiede follows the readings from Luke from Advent through Transfiguration, underlining the evangelist's specific themes in these seasons. He notes that many of Luke's stories are embedded in Israel's social, political, and religious world and in the constant presence of the Roman order. Luke's advent lessons call the faithful to extricate themselves from the commercial enslavement of the "holiday season." Luke's Gospel disrupts the paganism of privilege and its hijacking of the Christmas story to legitimate the affluence of the powerful. Luke's narrative tells the prophetic truth, identifying where God was decisively at work in the events of human history, even events that seemed inconsequential to the ruling powers. The epiphany of Luke 4 is the public disclosure of Jesus as the Messiah and protagonist of God's mission. The Lord proclaimed by Luke knows that the poor, the hungry, and the sorrowful have an advantage because the Sermon on the Plain is pure balm for those who know their need for God. At the Transfiguration we learn that the fulfillment of the exodus of Jesus will be through his death and resurrection. God's reign of mercy and mission of love on earth will not be stopped.

Sarah Henrich reviews a number of recent approaches to the Gospel of Luke. The New Testament was written in a world with assumptions much different from our own and interpreters are faced with the daunting task of how to move from that era to our own day. Scholars have recently turned to ancient fiction for a renewed picture of the social world of the first century and the ways in which it was described for readers. These novels present plausible pictures of that world, its religious life, household and civic arrangements, and the kinds of speech conventions that were common. Attention to the ancient novels leads one to see that the Samaritan's behavior in the parable of the Good Samaritan is a conventional manifestation of *philanthropia,* whose value does not require the degree of enmity between Jews and Samaritans posited by some scholars. The parable of the prodigal son is about the joyful response of God, rather than about the character of God in comparison to the character of sinful humans. The article also touches on the similarity between the purposes of Luke and those of the Jewish philosopher Philo and on how ancient art can help us understand how ancient audiences would have understood the theological importance of Jesus.

S. John Roth discusses the prayer life of Jesus himself in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus prayed at unexceptional times and at pivotal moments of his

ministry. Jesus is someone for whom conversation with God is integral to who he is, but also as someone whose praying does not conform to any fixed pattern. Jesus is a pray-er from beginning to end, from his baptism to his death, and it is with a prayerful word that he ascends. Jesus's prayers are not confined to any one purpose and do not serve any one function. When it comes to prayer and character traits associated with prayer, Jesus is the believer's model. Was one of the motivations for Luke writing one more Gospel the need to convey the character of Jesus as a pray-er?

In the opening verses of the gospel, Luke acknowledged that he was not the first to write a gospel, but, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, he decided to write his own orderly account for Theophilus and all other God-lovers who want to know the truth. The last word of Jesus recorded in Luke is stirring: "Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Wherever your "city" is—I would imagine that the twenty-four chapters of the third gospel could be the city limits within which you will "stay" more or less every Sunday—I can only hope and pray that God's power dresses you up properly for the occasion of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins in the Messiah's name to all nations.

Stay in this city for good.

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Radical Patronage in Luke-Acts

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Luke-Acts is often characterized in terms of God's "preferential option for the poor" as epitomized in Jesus' inaugural sermon on Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18–19. A quick read-through of Luke-Acts confirms that the narrative is often critical of "the rich." This engagement with the theme of wealth and poverty begins with the Magnificat (1:51–52) and moves on to include such well-known texts as the woes against the rich in the beatitudes (6:24), the special Lukan parable of the Rich Fool (12:13–21), the first/last saying of 13:31,[1] the special Lukan parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (16:19–31), and the punishment of the cautious property owners Ananias and Sapphira in Acts (5:1–11).[2]

While the emergence of Liberation theology in the 1970s may have been the impetus for a re-examination of the economic import of Luke among biblical scholars, a recognition of the scathing critique of privilege in Luke-Acts has long since traveled beyond these circles.[3] The advancement of "the poor" at the expense of "the rich" by Luke has become an accepted reading of Luke-Acts.[4]

Such a response to Luke-Acts provides a challenge to those who seek guidance from the canon, particularly those communities of faith that are not socio-economically disadvantaged. How do you preach God's "preferential option for the poor" to those who, in global terms, are anything but lacking in material resources? Should Jesus' instructions to the young rich ruler in Luke 18:22 become *the* model of discipleship ("Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor!")? There are many possible responses to this query, including the frank acknowledgment of the well-established hermeneutic of suspicion directed toward those with wealth in the prophetic, apocalyptic, and even sapiential streams of ancient Judaism.[5] One must not

1. For a consistent reading of the apocalyptic reversals between rich and poor see John O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).

2. These texts represent but a sampling of this motif in Luke-Acts. For a more comprehensive listing see, for instance, the discussion of the theme by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke* (2 vols.; Anchor Bible 28–28A [Garden City: Doubleday, 1979]), 1:247–51; and John Gillman, *Possessions and the Life of Faith: A Reading of Luke-Acts* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991).

3. A consistent liberationist reading of Luke may be found in the ongoing, multi-volume work by Herman Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel for the Third World* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996–).

4. See, for example, the comment by Mary C. Orr, "Luke 12:13–23," *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 314: "The real issue posed by the story of the Rich Fool for Americans in the twenty-first century is whether or not it is a sin to be rich. The Gospel of Luke seems to indicate that it is."

5. See the evaluations of the influence of Jewish critiques of wealth on Luke-Acts in

domesticate the mandate for economic equity clearly revealed in biblical texts.[6]

Yet, as commentators have long noted, Luke-Acts' engagement with the severe disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in antiquity cannot be reduced to a simple dualism.[7] Christian patrons, as well as the poor, have positive roles in Luke's narrative.[8] The first are explicitly introduced in Luke 8:1–3 as people who directly support Jesus' itinerant ministry through financial gifts:

> Soon afterwards [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, *who provided for them out of their resources.* (NRSV; emphasis added)

From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the proclamation of the gospel was inseparable from expressions of favorable patronage. In Luke's acknowledgment of the presence of patrons in the Jesus movement there is, of course, the tacit recognition that a variety of models of discipleship are possible within Christian community. In Luke 8:1–3, one model is designated as "the twelve." It is marked by the divestment from all former attachments, allowing for radical itinerancy. Yet the text also

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the multi-article discussion in *George W. E. Nickelsburg in Perspective: An Ongoing Dialogue of Learning*, vol. 2, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Leiden: Brill, 2003). This extended dialogue includes a reprint of a 1979 *NTS* article, Nickelsburg's "Riches, the Rich, and God's Judgment in 1 Enoch 92–105 and the Gospel according to Luke," 521–46, as well as his more recent "Revisiting the Rich and the Poor in 1 Enoch 92–105 and the Gospel according to Luke," 547–71. John S. Kloppenborg responds to the two articles on pp. 572–88. For a reading of the "turn" of the wisdom tradition to the suspicion of wealth (from an understanding of it being a reward for covenantal faithfulness), see p. 575.

6. For an articulate representation of this reading see Craig L. Nessan, "The Gospel of Luke and Liberation Theology: On Not Domesticating the Dangerous Memory of Jesus," *Currents* 22 (1995): 130–38.

7. See, for example, Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (New York: MacMillan, 1927), 260–63. After a balanced discussion of Luke's "sympathy with the poor" and the narrative's examples of the "generosity of the rich," Cadbury concludes that "the rebuke of wealth, as of Pharisaic pride (Luke says 'the Pharisees were lovers of money') and of Jewish national conceit, betokens a concern for the oppressor rather than pity for the oppressed, and, as a technique for social betterment, the appeal to conscience and sense of duty in the privileged classes rather than the appeal to the discontent and to the rights (or wrongs!) of the unprivileged."

8. A partial listing includes, in the Gospel of Luke, the giving of alms, which is praised by Jesus in Luke 6:38, 11:41, 12:33. Acts 20:35 quotes Jesus in this regard. Also in Luke one has the positive model of Zacchaeus (19:8), the hospitality and/or support shown the disciples and Jesus by a variety of figures in 7:36; 8:1–3, 9:3–4; 10:4–5, 10:38. In Acts one has the tradition of house churches that assumes individuals of means (e.g., 12:12). Almsgiving is illustrated by Barnabas (4:37), Tabitha/Dorcas (9:36), Cornelius (10:2), the disciples who give famine relief according to their ability (11:29), Paul notes his bringing of alms (24:17). There are other persons of means who function as patrons, hosts, or positive examples including the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26), Judas (9:11), Simon (10:6), Proconsular governor Sergius Paulus (13:4–12), Lydia (16:15), influential Greek men and women from Beroea (17:12), Dionysius, a member of the court of the Areopagus (17:34), Aquila and Priscilla (18:1–4), Crispus, a synagogue leader (18:8), Philip (21:7–14), and Mnason (21:16).

implies that there are disciples who remain more grounded in the social locations in which they were called.[9] The two complementary models are further illustrated in the "sending of the twelve" in Luke 9:3–4: "He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.'" As the *HarperCollins Study Bible* aptly notes, "Taking *nothing* along requires reliance on local hospitality," a pattern that is repeated in the story of the sending of "The Seventy" in 10:4–5.[10]

Social-scientific criticism and patronage

How is one to evaluate the different messages concerning wealth and poverty that are mediated to us by Luke-Acts (e.g., Luke 6:24–25 and 6:38)? The gains social-scientific criticism has made in the last thirty years in understanding the patron-client relationship, as well as the honor-shame dynamic that accompanied it, provide the current reader with resources to puzzle out the tangle of messages concerning wealth in Luke-Acts.

A close literary reading of Luke-Acts, guided by social-scientific criticism, reveals that it is not "the rich" per se who are critiqued in these volumes but rather the abuses inherent in the ancient patronal system as well as the values into which both patrons and clients are socialized. The fact that each of the two volumes begins with a dedication to Luke's patron Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1)—someone of significant material resources—should prompt exegetes and preachers to probe beneath the surface criticism of wealth in Luke-Acts in order to appreciate the radical transformation (but not elimination) of patronage that Lukan rhetoric encourages in Christian community. While Luke-Acts does articulate a "preferential option for the poor," it also offers a model of patronage to those of means that was intended to liberate them from the zero-sum game of ancient patron-client cultural dynamics. That is, Luke-Acts holds out a vision of what might be called "radical patronage" where (a) the cultural worth of a patron does not necessitate the diminution of clients, (b) the gift itself (*charis*) is accepted for the theological mission of the church and the social values it advances, and, therefore, (c) a patron's wealth does not buy inappropriate influence in the affairs of the *ekklēsia* and/or the expectation of unconditional loyalty.

The vision of patronage that Luke-Acts lifts up, in short, has been transformed by the experience of the cross. It is one where the reality of great economic inequities is recognized but also one in which the dispensation of material resources is guided by the ideal of willing service for the benefit of those in true need. The model of patronage in Luke-Acts is "radical" in that it envisions a community in which the esteem of the patron comes at no one else's expense.

Ancient patronage: A description. The subject of the relationship between the rich and the poor in Luke has a long history of commentary, both ancient and modern.[11] A

9. An early analysis of the relationship between the "wandering charismatics" of the Jesus' movement and their patrons may be found in Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 8–23.

10. The reliance on local hospitality is also evident in Acts 9:43 (Peter) and Acts 16:15 (Paul).

11. For a bibliography of modern commentary, see Joel B. Green, "Good News to Whom? Jesus and the 'Poor' in the Gospel of Luke," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 60–61 n. 7.

new era was introduced with Frederick Danker's 1977 commentary on Luke that incorporated philologically based investigations into the patron-client dynamic in ancient culture.[12] This material, as well as other studies on ancient patronage by classical scholars,[13] was soon picked up by those interested in applying social-scientific methods to the New Testament, including insights from cultural anthropology.[14] In short order, a cottage industry of reflecting over how patronage in antiquity might best illuminate biblical texts was born. This wave of scholarship has recently made it into New Testament introductory textbooks and is a now a fundamental part of seminary biblical instruction.[15] The list of scholars working in the area of social-scientific criticism as well as individual works on patronage in antiquity is simply too great to list in depth.[16] What follows is a quick paraphrase of the basic lines of investigation that are germane to the subject of wealth and poverty in Luke.

In antiquity, there was nothing akin to the post-enlightenment notion of equality in human relations. The obverse of the Declaration of Independence's assumption, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," obtained in the ancient world. Relationships between equals were very rare; rights were anything but unalienable. More common were reciprocal relations of individuals of unequal rank (and of unequal status before the law) in which one individual was clearly perceived as dominant, the other subordinate. In New Testament social-scientific criticism, the former is termed a "patron," the latter a "client." The archetypal expression of this dynamic is found in the relationship between a master and a slave, but the basic structure extended throughout all society in a bewildering variety of expressions, including that between husband (patron) and wife (client) and even between the two unequal

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12. Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: According to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1977). A second edition was published in 1988. The epigraphical research was published in *Benefactor: Epigraphical Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982). The theme was also explored by Danker in the *Luke* volume of the Proclamation Commentaries published by Fortress in 1987. Critical engagement with Danker's work includes such articles as David J. Lull, "The Servant-Benefactor as a Model of Greatness (Luke 22:24–30)," *Novum Testamentum* 28 (1986): 289–305.

13. For example, Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadril (New York: Routledge, 1989).

14. The classic work is Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, rev. ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1993).

15. David deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), for example, is deeply indebted to this scholarship that deSilva himself has helped push forward in *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), and *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

16. Significant early works specifically addressed to Luke-Acts include Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), and Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 25–65. *In situ* analysis of Lukan texts may be found in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L.

classes (the elite and the non-elite) that made up the ancient world.[17]

An empire-wide hierarchy that stretched from Rome into the social system of the cities in the Greek East was structured on an intricate web of descending chains of patronage and power. The emperor in Rome, the overlord of the entire system, was enthroned at the apex of this social pyramid. The local high elite of the cities in the East (Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, etc.) were, for example, subordinate clients of the emperor while, at the same time, they were the dominant high patrons of other local clients. These latter clients (of the city's high elite) were, in turn, patrons of those of lesser rank and status in the city, and so on. At the bottom of the social pyramid were chattel slaves construed as a disposable source of hard labor. Though the public rhetoric that supported this system projected an ideology of patrons working benevolently on behalf of their clients, the ever-present threat of violent enforcement of the assumed dominance of the elite was never far from the surface. All were quite aware that the velvet glove of the patronal handshake contained an iron fist. A modern-day analogy of this system, as is often pointed out, is the Mafia, with its descending chains of command that ray out from the "Don" (short for the Latin *Dominus*, "Lord").

One difference between the modern versions of timocratic culture and the ancient varieties is that in antiquity there was no separation between "religion" and "state." Provincial and civic patrons were not only the ruling magistrates of the cities but were also religious functionaries. The high elite patrons of the Greek cities of the East were the high priests of the Imperial Cult. The cult of the emperor was popular in Asia Minor; its ritual clearly articulated the *princeps*' power while it positioned its

All were quite aware that the velvet glove of the patronal handshake contained an iron fist.

subjects for the emperor's continued good favor by awarding him divine honors as though he were a god.[18]

A common definition of patronage that circulates in the secondary literature is that it is a "system of reciprocal relationships of mutual benefit between unequals." As the definition indicates, the exchange across the relationship is theoretically of benefit to both sides of the dyad. For instance, a local patron might provide necessary funds for the continued functioning of an association (a collegium of dye-workers, or a syna-

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Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

17. The two classes (the "haves" and the "have-nots") in antiquity exhibited an inverse ratio of power to size. Although the high elite controlled most of the property (and hence the power), it has been estimated that they represent only .5 to 5 percent of the total population.

18. For an investigation of this aspect of patronage in antiquity, see S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); as applied to the world of the New Testament, see Erik M. Heen, "Phil 2:6–11 and Resistance to Local Timocratic Rule: *Isa theō* and the Cult of the Emperor in the East," in *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2004), 125–53.

gogue for Jewish residents of a city),[19] so that it might serve any number of purposes (as a resource for members' burials, education, celebration, worship, etc.). Clearly the clients in this exchange benefited from such largess. But what of significant worth did the patron receive in exchange? In the first place, the notable is awarded honor (*timē*)—public recognition of the patron's beneficence. Honor, explored in more depth below, odd as it might sound to us, was considered *the* desideratum of antiquity.

In addition to being praised for their material contributions, however, it is also clear that the patron, by means of the gift given, gained influence in the affairs of the association while claiming the undivided loyalty (*pistis*) of its individual members. The patron's wishes, expressed directly or indirectly, were to be respected in the association. Also, there were economic gains to be had. It was expected that members of the association would favor the patron's extended network of business interests over those of the patron's competitors. In short, the quip sometimes attributed to Will Rogers is a true descriptor of socioeconomic and religious life in the ancient city: "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch." The patron's gift (*charis*) came with a variety of strings attached. Again, the Mafia is a good modern-day example. The patronal favor of the "family" comes at the price of an unquestioned loyalty to the Don and his chain of command.

It also needs to be noted that the "gifts" of the elite were not generally philanthropic. Little of the munificence given by the elite actually trickled down to those of the lowest status who, from a modern perspective, needed it most in the city. Indeed, ancient patronage usually excluded the more destitute inhabitants of the city (its noncitizens, including immigrants and slaves).[20] Ancient patronage served to advance the interests of the elite, not the "welfare" of the city.

Honor/shame, purity/impurity, holy/profane, righteous/sinner. The patronage system of antiquity represented a zero-sum game. Material resources, especially land, as well as honor (*timē*), were rarefied commodities that were the possession of a very few. The two commodities combined to create a world of remarkable privilege for the elite patrons. As in any zero-sum game, the increase of prestige for "the few" (*hoi oglioi*) meant the decrease in prestige for "the many" (*hoi polloi*).[21] This system was structured by means of a variety of social values that cogged into one another. The complementary pair most often analyzed

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19. See the descriptions of the centurion in Luke 7:4 and Cornelius in Acts 10:2.

20. See Peter Brown, "Late Antiquity," in *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. Paul Veyne (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 261: "The civic notables 'nourished' their city; they were expected to spend large sums maintaining the sense of continued enjoyment and prestige of its regular citizens. If such nourishment happened to relieve some distress among the poor, this was considered an accidental byproduct of relief from which the civic body as a whole, the rich quite as much as the poor, benefited by virtue of being citizens. A large number of the city's inhabitants—most often the truly poor such as slaves and immigrants—were excluded from such nourishment. These large sums were given to the city and its citizens to enhance the status of the civic body as a whole, not to alleviate any particular state of human affliction among the poor. . . . The idea of a steady flow of giving, in the form of alms, to a permanent category of afflicted, the poor, was beyond the horizon of such persons."

21. See the discussion in James C. Scott, "Prestige as the Public Discourse of Domination," *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 146–66.

in social scientific descriptions of antiquity involves "honor" and its inverse, "shame."

Honor was given publicly in a variety of ways, from setting up appreciative inscriptions by clients to ritual acclamations of a patron's generosity by those who had benefited from them during festivals, games, or religious ceremonies (events that were also funded by patrons and for which they received honorific acknowledgment in turn). Epideictic rhetoric (the rhetoric of praise or blame) was formally subdivided into particular forms of praise depending on context (the *encomium*, *panegyrics*, funeral oratory). The modern "eulogy" (literally, "good word") is a descendent of this ancient rhetorical grouping. In short, the public and formal acknowledgment of the public's indebtedness to the generosity of the patron was ubiquitous. This public awarding of honors also followed a precise etiquette that made careful distinctions among the levels of gratitude particular benefactions demanded. In the rivalrous atmosphere of antiquity, patrons actively competed for these public honors. The higher civic offices (the magistracies) were open only to those elite who could successfully demonstrate their ability to attain the highest honors. With public recognition of honor, then, came incredible power won at no little cost to the elite.

It was not only in such formal settings that the honor of the patron was constructed. It was reinforced in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in the daily life of the city. The elite were distinctly marked by differences in dress, education, and speech, the means of their travel, and even their diet. The homes they built in the city and their villas in the countryside set them apart (literally). Their living quarters isolated them from the congested squalor of ancient urban life and buffered them from many of the diseases that came with it. Their aristocratic mores elevated them above others and were often accompanied by a display of contempt for cultural entities construed to be below one's own station, such as labor, social inferiors, "filth," and low culture.

It was, however, not simply that the elite of antiquity exhibited markers of a high status and were confident of their own superiority. Their dominance also required the ritualized performance of others' submission on a day-to-day basis. The manner in which the elite moved daily through "their" cities—with entourages of lictors and bodyguards—assumed their own right-of-way and others' "natural" deference. When the cities gathered in the theater or arenas, the high elite were given preeminent seats of honor. In religious processions they led the way. As adjudicating magistrates they presided over the disputations of citizens seated upon what amounted to thrones. They had an elevated status before the law that made it difficult for those of lower status to challenge them in court, and so on. While they were in public, in whatever context, the elite expected ritualized deference to be given to them. This script was basic to the public discourse of antiquity, and it did not have much room

for critical revision. As Wayne Meeks notes, "Submission and dignity were, at every stage, the most important lessons to be learned."[22] Real or imagined public slights to the dignity of a notable, where a subordinate was perceived to be not sufficiently submissive, could bring violent retaliations. For the non-elite, it was wiser and safer to defer to the elite rather than to risk the consequences of insubordination. Often such submission masked the true feelings of the subordinate. In the Latin context the word that best captures this kind of deference is *dissimulatio*—"the concealment of one's true feelings by a display of feigned sentiments."[23]

The inculcation of negative shame, the social inverse of honor, was one result of the repeated experience of social inferiority among the large underclass of antiquity. This form of shame represents the internalization of being "less than" that which enjoys society's public and positive evaluation.[24] Yet expressions of honor and shame were not the only complementary social values that structured ancient culture. The elite, because of their material resources, access to leisure time, and religious duties were able to attend to purity issues in ways the non-elite could not. The elite, therefore, were often designated by participation in cultic rituals as "righteous" and "holy" to the exclusion of the non-elite.

The patron-client relationship, therefore, provided the foundation that allowed antiquity to construct an elite who enjoyed a life of separation and distinction supported by their remarkable wealth and control of material resources. They enjoyed elevated status and rank, prestige, honor, purity, holiness, and righteousness before both human society and God (or the gods).

This social elevation of the elite came at the expense of the non-elite, who were socialized into roles that took on the zero-sum burden of various grades of poverty, shame, impurity, and an embeddedness in the common and the profane. Because of material deprivation, poor diet, dangerous occupations, and the crowded conditions in which many urban poor lived, they were susceptible to sickness and disfigurement in ways the elite were not. The resultant physical "weakness" of the poor was often read as evidence of their "sinfulness" before God and human patrons alike. As one looks out over the city life of antiquity, one can only conclude that the honor, power, and prestige of the few came at the expense of the many.

Patronage and biblical interpretation

Understanding the phenomenon of ancient patronage from a social-scientific perspective has proven to be helpful in biblical interpretation. Insights into the world that lies behind biblical texts have been achieved and the biblical texts themselves have come alive in a new way. For example, it is helpful to recognize that many of the central Greek terms of the New Testament point to semantic domains that range over various aspects of patronage. Often, given the reciprocity of the dyad, technical terms can describe *both* sides of the relationship.

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22. Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 39.

23. Vasily Rudich, *Political Dissidence under Nero: The Price of Dissimulation* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xii.

24. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World*, 31, defines honor as "the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) *plus* that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group." In Malina's understanding, "shame" has both positive and negative aspects. "Positive shame," he notes on p. 50, "means sensitivity about one's own reputation, sensitivity to the opinion of others."

For instance, "grace" (*charis*) can mean three different things depending on what aspect it describes within the dynamics of the patron-client relationship:

> The first meaning of *charis* . . . is the benefactor's favorable disposition toward the petitioner. In its second sense the term can be used to refer to the actual gift of benefit conferred, as in 2 Corinthians 8:19 where Paul speaks of the "generous gift" he is administering (i.e., the collection for the church in Jerusalem). The third meaning is the reciprocal of the first, namely, the response of the client, the necessary and appropriate return for favor shown. In this sense the term is best translated as "gratitude."[25]

So, *charis* can mean "graciousness," "benefaction," or "gratitude," depending on what aspect of the giving/receiving dynamic is in sight.

Similarly, "faith/faithfulness" (*pistis*) has its home in the patron-client dynamic. The appropriate meaning of *pistis* is also dependent on whether it refers to the attitude of the patron or the client or denotes that which is believed ("the faith"). The reason for the flexibility of this term lies in the cultural assumption that if the patron-client relationship (of mutual benefit) is to work (as ideally constructed), it demands the good will and fidelity of both parties. The patron must be reliable, that is, exhibit a *faithfulness* in providing what has been promised. The client, in turn, must exhibit a *trust* in the patron's intentions that, when lived out, also involves the client's *loyalty* to the patron.[26] Thus *pistis* can mean "faithfulness," "trust and/or loyalty," or "that which is entrusted" depending on the aspect of the reciprocal dynamic that is under review.

Although in this article I have focused on the manner in which the patron-client relationship functioned to order ancient society, it is evident that New Testament authors use the same terminology (*charis, pistis*) to describe aspects of humanity's relationship to God, whom the ancients construed as the ultimate patron(s). It is also clear that the New Testament understands that the God of Israel, as revealed in the death of God's son Jesus, does not act in a manner similar to that of other patrons of ancient experience. David deSilva points to the difference inherent in the New Testament's understanding of God as opposed to normal patrons encountered on a day-to-day basis:

> As one looks out over the city life of antiquity, one can only conclude that the honor, power, and prestige of the few came at the expense of the many.

25. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 132.

26. In BDAG, the three semantic domains identified for *pistis* mirror the above threefold definitions of *charis*: "(1) that which evokes trust and faith . . . the state of being someone in whom confidence can be placed, *faithfulness, reliability, fidelity, commitment* . . . (2) state of believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted, *trust, confidence, faith in the active sense* = 'believing' . . . (3) that which is believed, *body of faith/belief/teaching*." *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 819–21.

God's favor is surprising not in that God gives freely or uncoerced. Every benefactor, in theory at least, gave freely. Rather, God astonishes humanity in God's determination to benefit those who have insulted and alienated God in the extreme. The high-water mark for generous giving in the ancient world was to consider giving to the ungrateful—if a patron had enough to spare after giving to the worthy beneficiaries. Providing some modest assistance to someone who had failed to be grateful in the past would be counted a proof of a noble spirit. God, however, exceeds all expectation when God gives the most costly gift, the life of God's own Son, to benefit those who have not merely been ungrateful but have been openly hostile to God and God's law.[27]

The revelation of the radical love of God for humanity, understood in terms of the crucifixion of God's son through the agency of unworthy clients (humanity), provided the early Christians with a totally different understanding of *charis* ("graciousness/grace") than that normally experienced in the cities of the East.

Luke appropriates this theological understanding of patronage from the Christian tradition he inherits. Yet he takes it a step further by suggesting that such patronage might provide the basis upon which one might imagine a different kind of Christian stewardship. In 6:35, for example, in the context of Q material on "The Love of One's Enemies," we find the special Lukan saying that makes God's unusual expression of patronage a model for Christian emulation. Luke does so in a remarkable conceit by means of a critique of usury: "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." This is a radical revisioning of the very terms of ancient patronage by Luke-Acts, modeled on the odd favoritism God displays on those whom "the righteous" of a culture traditionally deem unworthy clients.

In the Greco-Roman world, the rhetoric of benevolence continually made the claim that the system was "a relationship of mutual benefit between unequals" and that patrons had the best interests of their clients at heart. However, given the inequality of power in the relationship, abuses were endemic to the system. There are examples of true benevolence in antiquity, both within Judaism and in the wider Greco-Roman world, but they are rare. Israel's prophets as well as Greco-Roman rhetoricians, philosophers, and historians often reminded the elite how far they had strayed from the ideals of benevolent patronage, yet with little effect.[28] It is precisely into this world of systemically corrupt patronage that Jesus enters, as well as the church that follows him. Luke-Acts' narrative revision of the Greco-Roman patronal template is, in particular, a remarkable achievement worthy of further investigation.

Patronage in Luke-Acts

Luke-Acts proclaims good news to the poor. It also contains a steely criticism of wealth and privilege as it was experienced in everyday life in Palestine during Jesus' ministry and in the cities of the Greek East in the following generation, the time of Luke-Acts' composition. In addition, as already

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27. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 135.

28. David L. Balch, "Rich and Poor, Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 214–33, analyzes Greco-Roman treatments of the social-political theme of rich and poor in a variety of genres and concludes that Luke is actually reinforcing pre-Christian attitudes toward patronage that argue for benevolence by the rich on behalf of the poor. The rhetoric, it seems, though persistent, was largely unpersuasive.

noted, Luke's narrative holds out the possibility of a peculiarly *Christian* form of patronage, a form that supports the expressed values and mission of the church, including its unique (for antiquity) focus on the poor and disadvantaged. But there is more. Luke's narrative also describes a patron-client relationship that is marked by the cross. Concretely, this meant that a Christian patron was to exemplify a kind of *charis* (graciousness) that did not anticipate a reception of public honor and the other socially ascribed attributes of patronage that would be a patron's due in the outside world (e.g., loyalty). In short, the zero-sum game that was part and parcel of Greco-Roman experience of patronage is both critiqued and replaced in Luke-Acts by the model of leadership lived out in voluntary abdication of privilege and in service of those who were destitute. In doing so Luke recognizes the true worth of clients as fellow children of God. The poor are lifted up; the mighty are brought down "from their thrones" (Luke 1:52).

This revisionist model of patronage is constructed throughout the narrative of Luke-Acts. It is perhaps best epitomized in the synoptic tradition of Luke 22:24–26, interestingly translated in the NIV as follows:

> Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."

In the NIV translation, the hubris of the elite is subtly brought to the surface ("they *call themselves* Benefactors").[29] In this text we find both criticism of the patronal systemics of antiquity and instruction in another model.

The radical revision of patronage, lest one miss it, is illustrated concretely in the special Lukan material that follows in verse 27: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." Here is clear acknowledgment of the values into which all had been socialized ("of course the patron who is waited upon is greater!") as well as a model of a different way to construe "service" (*diakonos*) in the church. At one stroke, the low have been lifted up (the importance of ministering to the other is recognized) and the world's notion of greatness as experienced by the large underclass, in real terms on a day-to-day basis, is exposed for what it is: an abuse of authority. God has intervened, in Jesus, to reveal to the world another way, another model of stewardship of the earth's resources.

Once one's eyes have been opened to the radical transformation of patronage that is affected in the narrative of Luke-Acts, one can discern it everywhere. It begins, I believe intentionally, by the dedication, in elevated Greek style, to Theophilus (literally, "the lover of God"), Luke's own patron. The narrative that follows the praise of "most excellent Theophilus," however, does not eulogize this patron's elitism. Rather, in many different ways Luke boldly portrays the extent to which the wealthy have abused the privilege they enjoy. Luke does not shrink from criticizing the elite class that funded the expensive research project that resulted in Luke's two-volume historical narrative (Luke 1:2). Theophilus gave the money. Luke received it with no strings attached.

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29. The Greek term translated "Benefactor" is *euergetēs*, a common designation for "patron."

From Luke's perspective, the cross of Christ had put an *X* through the zero-sum terms of the normally experienced patron-client dynamic.

In this brief essay I do not attempt a thorough, close reading of Luke-Acts' reconstruction of patronage by means of the exegesis of specific texts. However, some further observations can be made working sequentially through the text of the Gospel.

Luke's revision of the basic structure of patronage receives an important impetus with the appearance of the ministry of John the Baptist. In response to John's warning of imminent apocalyptic judgment (Luke 3:7–9, Q material, largely shared with Matthew), we encounter the special Lukan material that records the following exchange between the crowds and Jesus (3:10–14):

> And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

This direct instruction from John at the beginning of his ministry sets the tone for the entire Gospel with respect to those with material resources or positions of power. John's objective is the elimination of the suffering of the poor; his instructions are directed to those who have the resources to make a difference among people they encounter in their present vocations, in the course of their daily lives.

New insight, perhaps, can also be gained from the enigmatic Luke 9:23–25 if the text's primary implied reader is construed as a patron rather than the poor who had no chance to "gain the whole world":

> Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

This text suggests that those of means, in particular, will (daily) experience not "honor" from the outside world for their continued support of Christian mission but the social inverse: ascribed shame.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37, special Lukan material) illustrates the ability of a patron to extend help in a manner that transgresses cultural boundaries (by not respecting that which is construed as "righteous" activity for a patron) and subsequently redefines who is one's "neighbor." It is a form of patronage, one might also note, that does not come naturally to those socialized by strict sectarian social ethics (priest, Levite, Samaritan) that drew clear, cultural boundaries to what constitutes "honorable" activity.

In Luke 11:42–46, while dining as the recipient of a Pharisee's hospitality, Jesus calls the question of the relationship between the ritual displays of honor and the neglect of "justice and the love of God" and manages to offend not only his host's circle (a breach of etiquette for a client) but the legal profession as well.

In the parable of the Rich Fool (12:13–21, special Lukan material) Jesus concludes with the pithy "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." The assumption is that the rich man *could* have been wise in his use of his wealth if guided by a recognition of God's concern for the poor.

Clearly, the "Teaching on Humility" (Luke 14:7–14, special Lukan material) moves Luke's project of the revision of patronage forward. Beginning with the transitional verse 11 the pericope reads:

> "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Such texts represent a selection from the first half of the Gospel of Luke that addresses the theme of wealth and poverty, lightly gone over. The exercise is enough, perhaps, to indicate the extent to which Luke–Acts addresses itself to those of some means with the expectation that their patronage will be redirected to benefit those "who cannot repay." In addition, the patronage that Luke is advocating will clearly gain his contemporary Christian patrons no "honor" within the competitive public discourse of the cities of the East (Luke 9:25). If one were a patron of a cult that worshipped one crucified *by Rome* as a subversive criminal, one had placed oneself far outside the boundaries of a system whose highest honors were awarded to the *Roman* emperor as though *he* were a god. Also, within wider Judaism, the indiscriminate patronage by Christians was found by some Jewish sectarian formations as highly problematic. In the narrative of Luke-Acts this is represented most particularly by the "character" of Pharisaic Judaism.

The Christian patronage of the earliest church was *radical* patronage. It was countercultural in that it proposed a value system that was a clear alternative to that which structured the public discourse of city and empire. From Luke's perspective, the cross of Christ had put an *X* through the zero-sum terms of the normally experienced patron-client dynamic.

Contemporary application

More work needs to be done to tease out the profoundly radical notion inherent in the early Christian appropriation and transformation of ancient patronal ideology as it is mediated to us in New Testament texts. It is clear, however, from later church history that Luke's rhetoric did not fall on deaf ears. The model of patronage presented to the church by Luke-Acts did come to influence the church's understanding of its obligation to the disadvantaged in late antiquity. Peter Brown, for instance, notes that the Christian bishop's rise to prominence in the fourth-century city was specifically linked to the bishop's ability to provide for its poor:

> [The bishop] publicly associated himself with precisely those categories of persons whose existence had been ignored by the ancient, "civic" model of the urban notables. In the words of the *Canons of Saint Athanasius*: "A bishop that loveth the poor, the same is rich, and the city, with its district, shall honor him." One could not have asked for a more pointed contrast to the civic self-image of the notables of two centuries earlier.[30]

In time, Christian patrons would come to compete with one another in their ability

30. Peter Brown, "Late Antiquity," 280.

to alleviate the suffering of the poor. The amazing shift in public values affected in late antiquity by the fourth-century institutional church witnesses to the power of Luke-Acts' rhetoric to persuade people of means to acknowledge and enact God's "preferential option for the poor."

A cutting criticism of self-indulgent wealth is clearly present in Luke-Acts. It is, as commentators have long noticed, a theme that is emphasized in Luke as it is not in the other gospels. But there is also a clear appreciation in Luke-Acts of those who support the mission of the gospel "out of their own resources" (Luke 8:3). There is an awareness in Luke-Acts that there are different kinds of discipleship, each worthy in its own way. These range from giving up everything in order to be free to follow the call of Christ wherever it might lead, to the equally respected model of the Christian patron ("O Most Excellent Theophilus!"). The latter is a model of a discipleship that is embedded in the complexities of real life but still gives freely to those who cannot repay. The patron also gives without expecting that the gift, the *charis*, will buy influence in the community, a community made holy not by costly repeated ritual cleansings but by a single baptism in Christ. In such an understanding of patronage, clients are not construed as instrumental means to "honor." Rather, they are held to be of value in their own right.

The present world is experiencing a polarization between the poor and the wealthy that rivals that of antiquity. North Americans, it should be noted, have been leading the way in this socioeconomic trend. It is also clear that our late-capitalist consumerism is creating a culture of self-indulgence in which the elite of the world, while leading lives of separation and distinction, are increasingly isolated from the effects of their hubris. In this cultural environment, as in Luke's, the clear articulation of God's "preferential option for the poor" must be heard, as well as the *curvatus in se* that often comes with wealth in any culture.

The contemporary church, among other things, should preach the full range of options that are available to Christian patrons that a close reading of Luke-Acts, guided by social-scientific criticism, can recover – from voluntary poverty and "itinerancy" on behalf of the gospel, to a form of embedded patronage enlightened by the cross of Christ.

There is a public dimension to this project as well. The wider world also needs to be reminded, by the body of Christ, of God's true love of justice—whether it is found in a renewed engagement on behalf of the poor or in witnessing to the world how the cross of Christ reveals what is prestigious in *God's* eyes. Given the culture of denial that surrounds our common life these days, such public theology will constitute hard work. It will be hard, in part, because it is not granted much honor by the contemporary timocratic society the gospel seeks to serve. Given the "dishonorable" work that lies in store for a church that takes the radical patronage of Luke-Acts seriously, the *ekklēsia* needs *daily* to be reminded of the power of God's grace (*charis*) to redeem human relations as well as the power of sin to corrupt them. It is the task of the priesthood of all believers to do so.

Healing in Luke, Madagascar, and Elsewhere

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Already in the second century the author of the Third Gospel was identified as "Luke, the beloved physician" mentioned by Paul in Colossians 4:14.[1] For centuries afterward readers of the Bible saw abundant proof of the medical expertise that informed the gospel that bears Luke's name. When historical criticism tested long-held assumptions about biblical authorship, one of the notions to fall by the wayside was the conviction that the Third Gospel is a text written by a physician. However, beginning in the late twentieth century, scholarship has again begun to see in the Gospel according to Luke a text that exhibits a focused interest on issues of health and healing.

By my count there are more than sixty episodic references to healing and health in Luke; twenty of the Gospel selections in the Cycle C Revised Common Lectionary incorporate this healing material. In this article I review some of the current research being advanced to challenge us to think about biblical healing in new ways. Although I reference and analyze some of the healing stories we will hear in Cycle C, this analysis is by no means exhaustive of Lukan healing references in the lectionary. Rather, I raise broader questions and issues that preachers and worshipers might keep in mind as we make our way through the Year of Luke.

Of *toby* and evil spirits

My interest in New Testament healing came about in a rather circuitous way—actually, in Madagascar, on the other side of the planet from where I live. In the summer of 2005, I spent three weeks of my sabbatical visiting two synods in the northern regions of this island nation off the southeast coast of Africa.[2] I went to Madagascar to see firsthand an amazing ministry of the Malagasy Lutheran Church; it is called *Fifohazana*, the Awakening Movement. The movement traces its beginnings to the 1940s and 50s and a visionary prophetess by the name of Volahavana Germaine, more often referred to as Nenilava, Tall-Mother.[3] When she was a child, Nenilava began to receive

1. For a discussion see Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 35ff.

2. Thank you to Grace Lutheran Church, Boulder, Colorado, and Lilly Endowment, who supported this sabbatical. I also want to recognize the visionary Companion Synod Program of the Rocky Mountain Synod–ELCA for its groundbreaking work in building cultural and theological bridges with Madagascar.

3. For a description of the movement see Laurent W. Ramambason, *Missiology: Its Subject Matter and Method. A Study of* Mission-Doers *in Madagascar* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 60–79. Additional

visions from Jesus instructing her how to develop a healing ministry. This ministry was to be an expression of pastoral care within the church that would also reinstate a New Testament model of healing, including exorcisms. When Nenilava became a young adult she shared her story with her pastor, who saw in her story a genuine revelation for Christian mission in Madagascar. Over the decades the church has continued to implement Nenilava's visions. Today the Malagasy Lutheran Church has a specific department for coordination and oversight of this visionary healing movement.

At the heart of Nenilava's revelation was the creation of *toby*. *Toby* (pronounced "*too*-bee") is the Malagasy word for a "compound" or "settlement." Throughout Madagascar the church has founded dozens of *toby*. Each *toby* is a community of healing to which anywhere from a dozen to several hundred people might come. Some live in the compound a few weeks; some spend most of their lives there. A *toby* is staffed by a team of *mpiandry*, or shepherds—lay men and women trained for two years in the scriptural bases for healing. The shepherds work with the pastor to offer services of healing in the *toby* as often as three times a day. A healing service begins with hymn singing, Scripture reading, and preaching. Always the four biblical texts that formed the core of Nenilava's vision are read—John 14:12–17; Matthew 18:18–20; Mark 16:15–20; John 20:21–23. During prayer, the shepherds put on their white robes and then begin a general exorcism of the congregation. With commanding voices and waving arms the shepherds announce in the name of Jesus that all evil spirits must leave. Persons who are ill and possessed come forward and the shepherds deal with them individually, casting out demons with convulsive force. After the expulsion, prayer with laying on of hands invites the Holy Spirit to take possession of the petitioner.

Such a practice with its accompanying liturgies is a challenge to the sensibilities of many twenty-first–century Westerners steeped in a postmodern scientific worldview. But, as any careful reader of Luke's Gospel will note, its worldview is probably much closer to the experience of Malagasy exorcisms than it is to the laboratories, hospitals, and doctors' offices of contemporary North America.

Thinking about health: An introduction to medical anthropology

In recent decades, biblical scholars have teamed up with social scientists to help us think more critically about the cultural filters we use, often unconsciously, when we read healing stories in the Bible. It is very easy to assume that "health," "healing," and "disease" are universal concepts that have fixed referents in human experience. But all three terms are deeply embedded in cultural understandings of reality, and different cultures have radically divergent concepts of what these words mean and what realities they identify.[4]

Contemporary Western cultures approach these matters with a series of assumptions:

- The *individual* is more primary than the group.
- *Disease* can be understood, explained, and often influenced by identifying and

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information is from an unpublished paper by James W. Gonia, "The Healing Ministry of the Renewal Movement of Madagascar."

4. An especially helpful introduction to this area of study is John Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). Much of my analysis in this section is based on his research.

managing the physical causes of disequilibrium in the structures and functions of organs and organ systems; these causes include such entities as "bacteria" and "viruses."

- *Curing* means "to take control of disordered biological and/or psychological processes."[5]

It is easy to imagine that all of these presuppositions apply to other cultures as well as to our own, but medical anthropology reminds us that ancient cultures and some contemporary non-Western cultures approach healing with radically different assumptions:

- *Groups* are more primary than individuals; individuals receive their identities from being part of a group.
- *Illness* is more important than disease. Illness has to do with the "human perception, experience, and interpretation of certain socially disvalued states" and "is both a personal and social reality and therefore in large part a cultural construct."
- *Healing* is not necessarily the same as curing. It is, rather, an "attempt to provide personal and social meaning for the life problems created by sickness."

Thus, a contemporary Westerner would be more concerned about how a pathogenic organism may have created symptoms that ought to be eliminated by taking a certain drug. However, a woman from a biblical culture may have been primarily concerned with how an illness had affected her network of social relationships, her social status within the community, and the meaning of the illness for her life and the life of her family and community. Lola Ramanucci-Ross gives an excellent insight into this difference between the how and why of healing when she quotes a Melanesian woman who asked her, "What good is your medicine if you can't tell me why I got sick?"[6] This profound question deserves reflection, if not an answer.

There is a second source of insight into the cultural contexts for healing in the ancient world. Some biblical scholars are exploring ancient medical texts in order to better understand how older cultures thought about health, the human body, and healing. A major reference source for these studies is the Corpus Hippocraticum, a compendium of medical knowledge from the Mediterranean region. Some of the material in this massive work dates back to the fifth century B.C.E.; the work probably reached its final form during the first or second century C.E. By reading the New Testament through the lens of this ancient medical text we can sometimes achieve clearer understanding of the biblical text. Annette Weissenrieder has shown that this is particularly true for the Third Gospel.[7]

These differences in cultural orientation deeply influence how twenty-first–century Christians in North America read, hear, and understand the stories of healing from Luke. If we are to incorporate this gospel's stories of healings into the church's life we need to do more than translate these stories from Greek into English. We must also place the stories into their cultural context and consider what Luke's constellation of meaning implies for life in our culture. Perhaps all that we can hope to do

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5. Quotes in this section, unless otherwise noted, are from Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 25.

6. Lola Ramanucci-Ross, "The Hierarchy of Resort in Curative Practices: The Admiralty Islands, Melanesia," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 10 (1969): 119; quoted by Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament*, 75.

7. In this article I rely particularly upon Annette Weissenrieder's insights in *Images of Illness in the Gospel of Luke* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

is correct our own cultural nearsightedness so that we are less likely to read invalid presuppositions into the Lukan texts. However, my experience in Madagascar convinces me that ancient texts such as Luke's Gospel can help contemporary Westerners better assess critically our own cultural assumptions; they can even open the door to a deeper form of health and wholeness than that which is available through contemporary medical knowledge and practice. Looking at some specific passages may provide an entrée to that more challenging task.

An overlooked story of healing in Luke 1

It is easy to assume that the first serious reference to healing in Luke occurs in chapter 4, when Jesus quotes Isaiah and points to the "giving of sight to the blind" as a sign of "the year of the Lord's favor"; Jesus then goes on to perform exorcisms and healings.

However, the initial set of stories in chapter 1 almost acts as healing stories in disguise and creates a paradigm for reading the complete Lukan narrative. This chapter contains the cycle of episodes concerning the birth of John the Baptist. Elizabeth and Zechariah are childless. When the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will conceive, Zechariah asks how he will know this, for "I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Gabriel tells Zechariah, "because you did not believe my words . . . you will become mute" (1:20). Two verses later Zechariah's condition is described as κωφός, a Greek term that can mean either "mute" or "deaf" depending on context. It is likely that Zechariah's condition embraces both disabilities, for in 1:62 Zechariah's friends must "motion to him" in order to ask him a question—an unnecessary action if he suffered only muteness but necessary if he was also deaf. Thus, by the midpoint of this story Elizabeth's barrenness is paralleled by Zechariah's loss of speech and hearing.

Modern readers may not recognize the conditions of barrenness and muteness as health issues, since they do not seem to have pathological origins in the story. We think of loss of fertility as the natural result of aging, while Zechariah's condition seems to be an unnatural result of direct divine intervention. However, at 11:14, Jesus casts out of a man a demon who is κωφός, and when the demon is cast out, the man who was κωφός can speak. Here κωφός looks like an illness that is healed.

Furthermore, in 7:22 Jesus sends messengers to John the Baptist to remind him of signs that point to Jesus as "the one who is to come": "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf (κωφός) hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them."[8] The condition of κωφός here is identified as illness, along with blindness, lameness, and leprosy. Because the episode about casting out the κωφός spirit has not yet occurred in the narrative, the clear referent to Jesus' statement at 7:22 is to John's own father!

While there is no readily apparent act of healing in chapter 1, Zechariah's "illness" is resolved when Elizabeth gives birth. The relationship of Elizabeth's and Zechariah's conditions becomes more sig-

8. NRSV translates the last phrase "good news *brought* to them." This is a legitimate translation of the Greek πτωχοὶ εὐαγγελίζονται, playing on the concept that the εὐαγγελιστής is a "bringer of good news." However, the connection between the deaf hearing good news *proclaimed* could be weakened by the NRSV translation; I have reverted to the RSV's rendering of εὐαγγελίζονται as "preached." I believe we need to focus more on ears than on feet in this verse.

nificant when we begin to look at their circumstances in light of ancient medical texts.[9] The Corpus Hippocraticum (CH) has several references to barrenness. In the CH, as in contemporary Western culture, a lack of fertility is associated with the aging process. However, there is another very interesting medical correlation between the CH and Luke 1. Ancient physicians thought that organs within the body were capable of migrating. If the womb were to travel upward in the body cavity and stay there too long, the patient could become mute. Another set of references from rabbis, quoted by Weissenrieder, creates an interesting correlation between Elizabeth's and Zechariah's conditions: "R. Hisda and R. Jichaq b. Evdami (explain it); for loosening the upper mouth, another explained it for loosening the mouth of the mute; Bar-Qappara explained it for loosening the mouth of the sterile."[10] Here the birth canal and the oral cavity are linked together by the word "mouth." In Luke 1, Elizabeth's "mouth" had been "closed" (she could not conceive) but then is "opened" (she becomes pregnant); Zechariah's mouth had been "open" (he could speak) but then is "closed" (he becomes mute). What may appear to us as two conditions with no "medical" correlation may have been seen as being medically related by some persons in ancient culture.

From this perspective, Zechariah enters his own nine-month "pregnancy of silence" parallel to Elizabeth's gestation. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah are taken up into an alternate reality where they are set apart, "consecrated" and "cleansed." The effects of old age and incredulity are undone. The radical character of this holy time is emphasized even more dramatically in the center of chapter 1 when Mary's "magnificent" poem ties the wonders of these pregnancies to God's plans for the world: "He has shown strength with his arm . . . lifted up the lowly . . . filled the hungry with good things" (1:47–55). These thoughts are further amplified by Zechariah, who speaks prophetically (ἐπροφήτευσεν λέγων, 1:67) at the occasion of John's circumcision. Like Mary, Zechariah interprets these events against God's plan for the world, "as [God] spoke through the mouth [!] of his holy prophets (προφητων) from of old" (1:70). Thus Mary and Zechariah claim that the events of Luke 1 have meaning for the health of the entire world. As Mary's son would remind Elizabeth's son in chapter 7, "the deaf hear . . . and the poor have good news preached to them." So from the very beginning of Luke's Gospel it does appear that "the year of the Lord's favor" is indeed coming—health for those who are ill and for the entire planet!

Medical knowledge in Luke

Is such a reading of Luke 1 legitimate, or are we making spurious connections between elements of the Lukan text and entries in the CH and elsewhere? We would be more confident of the connections if we could sense that the author of the Third Gospel was familiar with the concepts discussed in ancient medical texts. We do not have to prove that "Luke" was a physician who used CH as a desk reference. It would be sufficient to show that the medical ideas contained in the CH, Talmud, and elsewhere are part of a cultural world shared by "Luke" and perhaps also by his readers. Weissenrieder's work attempts to demonstrate this very connection. Two examples will help illustrate her argument.

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9. See Weissenrieder, *Images of Healing*, 81ff., for an extensive analysis of Elizabeth's barrenness as a medical condition.

10. Weissenrieder, *Images*, 123.

Weissenrieder shows how the episodes of Luke 1 are organized around Elizabeth's pregnancy. The opening scenes (1:5–23) occur close to the time when she conceives. At 1:24, we are told that Elizabeth remained *hidden* (περιέκρυβεν; NRSV "in seclusion") for five months. In Elizabeth's sixth month, her kinswoman Mary is visited by Gabriel and conceives, and "in those days" (1:39) visits Elizabeth, staying with her "about three months" (1:56). The final episode in this chapter (1:57–79) occurs in the last month of her pregnancy, when Elizabeth gives birth to John. The chapter is thus divided into three episodes that correspond with three phases of Elizabeth's pregnancy: months one through five, six through eight, and nine. The Greek physician Soranus analyzed pregnancy in trimesters, the first of which should be spent "in seclusion" to avoid shocks that could disturb the pregnancy, and the second during which the movement of the fetus becomes pronounced (see Luke 1:44).[11] The Talmud defines pregnancy in three trimesters in which the uterus ascends in the body cavity and then descends to prepare for giving birth.[12] The CH's correlation of "high uterus" with muteness seems again to be on the horizon of this text.

Another example of Luke's familiarity with medical knowledge can be seen in the way this gospel modifies the Markan text at Luke 9:37–43. In this story Jesus casts out an unclean spirit from a boy. Luke describes the symptoms as seizure. In the parallel passage in Matthew, the boy is described as epileptic (σεληνιάζεται, 17:15), a "diagnosis" Luke does not mention. Mark's original differs from Luke, however. Mark says the evil spirit that plagues the boy not only convulses him but also makes him rigid. Is there a reason why Luke might drop Mark's reference to paralysis? Weissenrieder notes that in the CH, epilepsy can develop from either of two distinct causes. A disproportionate amount of phlegm will lead to a variety of epilepsy in which seizures occur in the daytime. On the other hand, too much bile in the brain leads to epilepsy marked by nocturnal paralysis. These are two separate diseases, but Mark seems to join them together. Weissenrieder suggests that Luke "cleans up" Mark's misdiagnosis to give a more accurate portrayal of a daytime epilepsy that presents with seizure. Thus Luke seems conversant with the medical literature of his day. Together with the greater number of references to healing when Luke is compared to the other gospels, these insights create a portrait of "Luke" as someone conversant with the medical knowledge of his day.

Healing and exorcism

Although there may be evidence that the author of the Third Gospel is conversant with medical knowledge contained in the CH and elsewhere, there is a way in which Luke differs significantly from the medical perspectives of the CH. Very often the illnesses Luke describes are related to demon possession. This is a perspective that Luke receives from Mark; Luke makes no attempt to expunge possession or exorcism from his text. Unlike the New Testament exorcism texts, the CH does not identify evil spirits as a factor in illness. The CH understands the causes of illness to be discernible by observation together with an understanding of the physical reality of our bodies. Many illnesses are identified in the CH as the result of a disruption in the equilibrium of the four primary bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Some conditions that could be de-

11. Weissenrieder, *Images*, 92.
12. Weissenrieder, *Images*, 91.

scribed by Western medicine as disease may be seen by the CH as the body's attempt to therapeutically readjust its equilibrium (see discussion of leprosy below). Many of the CH's models seem bizarre and thoroughly "unscientific" to twenty-first–century Westerners—traveling uteruses and the like! But throughout, the CH shares a modern conviction that issues of illness and health can be understood and modified through observation and treatment; the approach is empirical, not supernatural.

Demon possession and exorcism add a complicating layer to this model of health. They inject a spiritual and otherworldly dimension to the understanding of health issues. It is easy to explain this as an expression of a more ancient worldview (and often possession/exorcism is explained by modern scholars just this way), but the CH demonstrates that ancient peoples could also analyze health issues without reference to demonic possession.

Demonic possession is a significant feature in all three Synoptic Gospels but plays no significant role in John. Thus, it would be fair to assume that demonic possession may have entered the canonical Gospel materials through Mark; from Mark it made its way into Matthew and Luke. The importance of demonic possession for Mark is signaled in Mark's first exorcism story, at 1:21–28. In this episode the unclean spirit is able to identify Jesus not only as "Jesus of Nazareth" but as "the Holy One of God." The discovery of Jesus' identity is a major theme in Mark, an insight that has guided biblical studies for more than a century now with exploration of "the messianic secret." Mark reveals Jesus' identity to his readers in the very first verse, but, as has so often been noted in the literature, it is only at the confession of the centurion who oversees Jesus' crucifixion (15:39) that characters in the story

catch up with what the reader already knows. How curious, then, that already in the opening scenes of Mark's narrative demonic powers are also able to correctly identify Jesus! Mark creates the impression that the forces of an immense cosmic struggle between ultimate good and ultimate evil are aligning themselves over the character of Jesus of Nazareth. The demonic powers know and appreciate the threat Jesus poses to their hegemony. The cosmic showdown finally takes place at the cross, as the sun's light is extinguished and the temple curtain is ripped (ἐσχίσθη, 15:38). However, this ripping has been prefigured in the tearing of the sky at Jesus' baptism (σχιζομένους, 1:10).

In other words, in Mark's Gospel from beginning to end cosmic powers of good and evil are aligning themselves in an opposition in which both heaven and earth are theaters of the conflict. Mark's story is not an apocalypse, but it has many points in common with the apocalyptic landscape. Exorcism episodes portray this conflict and locate it within the lives of characters who interact with Jesus. Throughout Mark's Gospel Jesus is shown to have power over unclean spirits; he is able to cast them out

and conquer evil in all its variegated manifestations. This is expressed also through the stories of healing, where the "powers" of blindness, deafness, and paralysis are overcome. In other words, in Mark's narrative world exorcisms and healings are equally powerful examples of a great showdown between bigger-than-life constellations of reality: Good and Evil, Life and Death. What is ultimately definitive for the Jesus story that Mark tells is that in the end his central protagonist allows this battle to enter his own body. He dies, evidently powerless, on a cross. "He saved (ἔσωσεν) others," the scoffers jeer; "he cannot save himself" (15:31). The Greek verb σῴζω is rich and multivalent; it means "save," "rescue," and "heal." In the end, Mark's powerful healer allows himself to be conquered by Death. He cannot heal himself. God must raise him from the dead. And God does.

These are all features of the way in which Mark shapes the story of Jesus and shares it with his readers. In this way of telling God's good news both healings and exorcisms become powerful demonstrations of the primary conflict that serves as the dynamo for Mark's story. This concern for exorcism is not an invention of Luke; Luke receives it from Mark. What is important for reading and understanding Luke, however, is to note that Luke embodies this basic understanding of Jesus and carries this motif into his own "orderly account" of the story of Jesus. For example, Luke amplifies the irony at the heart of Mark's Gospel by having Jesus quote a proverb in his inaugural sermon: "Doctor, cure yourself" (4:23)—the very thing Jesus will be unable to do (23:37; par. Mk 15:31). In Luke, healings and exorcisms continue to be coexpressions of a divine-earthly showdown between God and Evil, Life and Death. If the author of the Third Gospel is, indeed, conversant in the "scientific" knowledge about medicine in his day, he evidently sees no contradiction between that knowledge and the story of the cosmic battle which he has inherited from Mark. Healing and exorcism are twin realities; one can be an expression of the other. It is curious and important to note that when Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law (4:39), Jesus "rebukes" (ἐπετίμησεν) the fever, the very same action by which Jesus deals with evil spirits, gaining control over them and sending them away.

A deeper healing: Part 1

Twenty-first–century readers of Luke need to reflect upon how we interpret and apply Luke's understanding of illness and its relation to demonic possession and exorcism. One option, which has been adopted by a majority of exegetes in the modern and postmodern era, is to demythologize Luke's first-century worldview. In this approach demonic possession and exorcism are dismissed as artifacts of a worldview that can no longer be supported by scientifically minded Westerners. Demonic possession is "translated" into categories more acceptable to the paradigms by which we understand health. Possession is understood as a prescientific way of describing conditions such as epilepsy or mental illness.

However, insights from medical anthropology and a greater familiarity with the medical knowledge of the first century suggest to us that there is another way in which we can understand demonic possession. Perhaps we are too myopic when we claim that our disconnect with possession is a uniquely modern hermeneutical problem. If the author of Luke has fused the positivist categories of medical knowledge of his day with Mark's story of a cosmic battle between Good and Evil, it teases us to consider whether such a fusion might be possible—and desirable!—in our own era.

Scientific Westerners will need some help to make this leap. We can find assistance from contemporary cultures in which a scientific practice of medicine coexists with belief in demonic possession and the practice of exorcism—in places such as Madagascar.

During my visit to Madagascar in the summer of 2005, I had a wonderful conversation with Pastor Andrianjafiherilala Ramarokoto of the *toby* at Betéla and seminary professor Flavien Volatombo, who served as translator. I asked Pastor Andrian, "Are you able, with prayer and exorcism, to cure serious illnesses here at the *toby*—illnesses such as tuberculosis?"

"No!" the pastor exclaimed. "We cannot heal anyone; only God can heal."

I thanked him for that distinction, based upon more sophisticated theological language than I was using. I should have known better, as well: I had already seen the greeting painted on the wall above the reception desk at the Lutheran hospital at Antanamilandy. In Malagasy it proclaimed "We treat; God heals."

I rephrased my question: "Does *God* heal diseases such as TB here at the toby?"

"Oh, yes," Andrian replied.

I asked, "How does this happen? What if someone arrives at the *toby* and you suspect he may have TB? What do you do?"

The pastor outlined the process: Contact is made with the local hospital. The doctor sees the patient and confirms that he has tuberculosis. Then the patient is admitted and undergoes the first stage of treatment using intravenous drugs. After this the patient is discharged from the hospital and begins the second, more difficult, stage of treatment, which lasts for several months. Medication is taken orally, but the side effects are pernicious; patients often discontinue treatment in this phase, increasing the likelihood that their TB will become drug-resistant and untreatable. However, our patient leaves the hospital and goes to live at the *toby*, where he is surrounded by a supportive and encouraging community, takes part in the services of healing and exorcism, and, as Pastor Andrian said, "God heals him."

Our modernist bifurcation of physical and spiritual reality has diminished our ability to deal holistically with issues of disease and health.

Noteworthy in this conversation is the Malagasy refusal to create an opposition between scientific and spiritual healing. Our modernist bifurcation of physical and spiritual reality has diminished our ability to deal holistically with issues of disease and health. Our individualistic approach to medicine closes the door to social realities that affect our well-being. In our culture, when a person enters treatment for cancer or struggles to recover from a serious heart attack or stroke, or when an HIV-infected patient must confront her own mortality, it becomes clear that we are involved in struggles of life and death. A battle is being joined within and around us, yet we may not have adequate language or ritual to comprehend or describe what is happening to us or tools to seek the full healing God can give. The network of relationships that support this person are not understood to be part of the disease or its resolution.

A radical encounter with the fusion of science and spirit in the Third Gospel could encourage us to think again about our definitions of health and illness. Third-world sisters and brothers in Christ might teach us about disciplines and tools we have forgotten or neglected as we seek the fullness of life God offers through Jesus. Exorcism is one of these; it is not an alien action that needs to be introduced into Christian reality from the outside. It is an integral part of the Christian's baptismal birthright—a feature of the ancient practice of baptism that disappeared for a while during the "dark ages" of our positivist modernism but that now is happily being anticipated, if not reinstated, in newer liturgical expressions of the baptismal rite.[13]

How might the church more powerfully support those who have committed themselves to say "No" to the powers of darkness that work against God and life because we have said "Yes" to grace? Much work needs to be done to reinstate a Christian rite of exorcism in our communities of faith. It will be more difficult for us in North America than it is in Madagascar, where indigenous understandings of possession provide a cultural reference and starting point. We need to do the difficult work of learning how to speak about evil and its power among us. M. Scott Peck's challenging work in this area, now more than twenty years old, is still an invitation that we have yet to enter and explore fully.[14] Perhaps a fresh reading of Luke's Gospel will encourage us to take up this difficult but important task.

A look at leprosy

Another feature of healing in Luke that is profitable for us to consider is leprosy. There are two stories in Luke about lepers who are healed by Jesus: a leprous individual at 5:12–16 and the ten lepers at 17:11–19. Jesus also refers to the healing of the leper Naaman at 4:27 and includes cleansing of lepers as a sign of "the one who is to come" at 7:22.

In modern medical science "leprosy" is a shorthand term for Hansen's disease, a bacterial infection that affects skin and nerves. Leprosy is encountered most often in tropical climates. It is a slowly progressing disease that creates numbness as well as eye problems. Loss of sensitivity in extremities can lead to serious injury, which, in combination with other opportunistic infections, can cause radical disfigurement. The English word *leprosy* is derived from the Greek noun λέπρα, which is the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew noun צרעת. The most extensive description of צרעת is in Leviticus 13–14. What makes these two chapters interesting is that the disease described there is not Hansen's disease. In the Bible, צרעת/λέπρα seems to designate a variety of skin diseases, including psoriasis and perhaps ringworm. John Pilch suggests that a key to understanding leprosy is to note that in Leviticus 13–14 the term צרעת applies not only to diseases of the skin but also to cloth (13:47ff.) and to the walls of buildings (14:34ff.). Leprosy, suggests Pilch, is a disease of

13. In my own liturgical tradition it is helpful to compare the baptism rite in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* with the newer rite in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006). The church is inching its way toward a more complete exorcism rite but still has a way to go. See, for example, *ELW*, p. 229. The renunciation of evil has been strengthened here; however, the rite still lacks an actual expulsion of evil spirits and, thus, still adopts a rather naive view that we are able to renounce evil without having it actually cast out of us.

14. See M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1983).

boundaries.[15] He quotes Mary Douglas, who urges us "to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structures reproduced in small on the human body."[16]

If leprosy is a disease of boundaries, it would help to explain Luke 17:11–19, where concern over the medical condition is paralleled by the "boundary conditions" of Jewish and Samaritan territories. Jesus is in "the region between Samaria and Galilee." Luke's story contrasts two kinds of healing: the cure of a disease and the deeper healing of faith shown by the Samaritan—"The Other," a "foreigner" (ἀλλογενὴς)—who returns to thank Jesus. Pilch uses a typology from medical anthropology to suggest that Jesus' willingness to touch lepers and embrace them is the heart of healing stories concerning leprosy. The health issue for people of Jesus' day had less to do with the eradication of symptoms and nothing to do with the destruction of bacteria; it had more to do with the social estrangement lepers experienced when their boundary disease, seen as a social threat, excluded them from social interaction. The embrace of Jesus undid this diseased boundary condition and made them whole.

Weissenrieder is critical of Pilch's analysis on the basis of her reading of the CH.[17] She notes that although the CH at times identified skin diseases as independent illnesses, it also describes them as the body's own therapeutic attempts to rid itself of imbalanced fluids. Weissenrieder challenges Pilch's analysis of skin-as-boundary as an anachronistic misunderstanding of ancient ideas about skin and the human body. On the basis of CH, we can see that ancients saw skin as a semipermeable membrane. Pilch's analysis is further weakened, says Weissenrieder, by noting that in Luke 17:11–19 Jesus does not heal lepers by touching or embracing them; this is a feature of the healing story at 5:13. In the Ten Lepers episode it is *sight* that becomes the tool of healing.

Although Weissenrieder is correct in her analysis of Pilch on the basis of the CH, she may overstate her case by assuming that the author of Luke follows the CH unquestioningly. The strength of Pilch's analysis of the Ten Lepers story is seen in his sensitivity to the dynamics of Leviticus 13–14 and what seems to us to be the inexplicable juxtaposition of skin diseases, mildew in cloth, and dry rot in walls. Pilch's reading of the biblical material takes account of this fusion as examples of "leprosy"; this suggests that biblical culture may have operated with assumptions and insights about this condition that differed from those in the CH. Luke seems to embrace both sets of understandings. The CH may not see leprosy as a boundary disease, but Leviticus does; biblical culture may not have understood skin in a way identical with the CH. Finally, Weissenrieder's observation that healing in Luke 17 involves sight and not touch is well taken. However, Pilch's reading of Luke 17 works just as well if we employ the metaphor of sight instead of touch: how we *look* at The Other (ἀλλογενὴς—whether leper or Samaritan) is simply another way of speaking about the boundaries that influence the way people *touch* each other. In later work on the Lukan material in Acts, Pilch explores the importance of sight as an instrument of healing for Luke.[18] Weissenrieder's insights

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15. Pilch, *Healing*, 39–54.

16. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1996), 115; quoted by Pilch, *Healing*, 50.

17. Weissenrieder, *Images of Healing*, 136ff.

18. Pilch, *Visions and Healing in the Acts of the Apostles: How Early Believers Experienced God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical

on this matter would be supported by Pilch's subsequent research.

A deeper healing: Part 2

In my visit to Madagascar in the summer of 2005, I attended a service of healing and exorcism at the *Toby Mahatsinjo* just outside Antsiranana. The general exorcism of the congregation had given way to individual exorcisms and healings. I was participating as best I could by joining the congregation in singing Malagasy hymns. However, all of this radically changed when my translator, the sixteen-year-old daughter of my host, asked me, "Do you want to go forward?"

"For healing? For casting out demons?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

The question was a crisis for me. I had come to Madagascar to personally observe these liturgies. I was cautiously willing to consider them in their own cultural context and to suspend my Western scientific skepticism so that I might not be blinded by my own presuppositions. But now I was being invited to actually experience the reality from the inside. I asked, "Can I do that? I am *vazaha*." *Vazaha* is the Malagasy term for a white foreigner. I am "Other."

"Yes, you can go," my guide replied. "Do you want to?" she asked again.

I did, but there was also a deep dis-ease within me. Not being a part of this cultural reality I might not know how to respond. Could I appear unyielding to the power to cast out demons? Could I unwittingly side with the powers of darkness simply because I was not an insider to Malagasy cultural codes? I had no desire to pretend, and I did not want to give or cause offense. I struggled for a way to bring my fear to expression.

"What if I do *fady*?" I asked. "What if I don't act the way I am supposed to act?"

Fady (pronounced FAH-dee) is a powerful concept in Malagasy language and culture. It can be translated as "taboo" or "offense." In Malagasy you say "*aza fady*" for "excuse me."

My guide answered my question with an extremely simple response: "You can't do *fady* here."

I had come to the place were *fady* is cast out. I was standing on holy ground. How could I hold back?

I went forward and knelt on the grass mat, as others were doing. The shepherd laid hands on my head and prayed for me in Malagasy phrases I could not understand. But the meaning of the event transcended what words could convey. I was touched, no longer *vazaha*, no longer Other. And *fady* was cast out.

That day when I phrased my concern to my translator in terms of *fady* I did not know how near I had come to the heart of the matter—I had been in Madagascar a very short time. What I would discover, however, is that *fady* is close to the very center of exorcism in indigenous Malagasy culture.[19] *Fady* comprises a complex system of things to be avoided or shunned. Both space and time in Malagasy culture are shaped by *fady*. There are *fady* days, *fady* places and directions, *fady* behaviors. If a person encounters *fady* it must be ritually neutralized; failure to do so can have deadly results. Indigenous Malagasy exorcism seeks to cure the effects of *fady*.

Press, 2004). Sight, staring and "looking intensely," Pilch argues, are indicators of altered states of consciousness that were critically important to the healing arts of ancient cultures.

19. For an excellent discussion see Jørgen Ruud, *Taboo: A Study of Malagasy Customs and Beliefs* (Oslo and London: Oslo University Press and George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1960).

Christian exorcism is understood to be an antidote both to *fady* and to the system of non-Christian belief and practice that maintains and attempts to deal with *fady* apart from the name of Jesus.

Perhaps from this brief overview of *fady* the reader can sense that this Malagasy concept has points of contact with both leprosy and exorcism in the Gospel of Luke. Like demon possession, *fady* needs to be cast out; it represents a malevolent power to be avoided and, if necessary, exorcised. *Fady* is also an issue of boundaries and uncleanness; it is an expression of the threat which The Other can impose upon us. If we can experience and grasp the concept of *fady* we may be in a much better position to resonate with the unified worldview of Luke, where illness is more than a morally neutral and dispassionately analyzed consideration of microbes and chemicals and their interactions. In Luke's world, matters of health and illness are part of the cosmic interplay of the elemental powers of Life and Death, Good and Evil.

As readers of Luke, we are faced with the same choice that faced me at *Toby Mahatsinjo*: Do we want to observe Luke's worldview as an outsider—as The Other—or are we willing to enter into this Word, allow it to claim us, to cast out from us that which is death-dealing and raise us to new insights and the possibility of a deeper life in tune with Life itself? What does it mean to read this Gospel as the baptized who have entered and been committed to the struggle between Good and Evil?

As scientifically oriented twenty-first–century Westerners, we may find our own cultural presuppositions about the meaning of health and illness and the practice of healing challenged.[20] But as servants of the Word we owe it to ourselves and those we serve to imagine what a recovery of New Testament healing might mean for the church. What would a North American *toby* look like? How could we better support each other if we created places where chemotherapy or difficult surgery could be supported by liturgical rites that cast out what is death-dealing to make way for God's renewal? What would happen if we reflected more deeply upon the implications of baptism and its accompanying exorcism for the practice of medicine and the quest for wholeness?

In Luke's world, matters of health and illness are part of the cosmic interplay of the elemental powers of Life and Death, Good and Evil.

In the year of Luke, there will be ample opportunity to focus on such concerns. If we give ourselves more deeply to Luke's vision and let it claim us, we may discover that this is, indeed, a year of the Lord's favor.

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20. Stanley Hauerwas's excellent volume *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame and London: Notre Dame Press, 1977), is still a wonderful entry point to this discussion. Another worthwhile volume for reflection is Joel James Shuman and Keith G. Meador, *Heal Thyself: Spirituality, Medicine, and the Distortion of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Telling the Prophetic Truth: Advent–Epiphany according to St. Luke

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A narrative of the things that have been fulfilled among us

Beginning in the first Sunday of Advent of Year C, Christian communities and their preachers will dwell deeply in their weekly worship within the Third Gospel through the months of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, until the Transfiguration of our Lord. The Gospel readings are all from Luke, except on the Second Sunday after Christmas and Epiphany, and the Second Sunday after the Epiphany. What authorization does Christian preaching receive from this immersion in Luke's narrative?

In an era when various Gnosticizing "gospels" are eagerly marketed, it is important to note the profound coherence of the four canonical gospels from the first century in comparison with the pieties, spiritualities, and politics of second- and third-century "gospels." Yes, those later accounts reflect diverse traditions that are partially disclosed in the canonical gospels. And yes, the canonical gospels themselves display a remarkable range of stories, oral and literary styles, and convictions. But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all bring their readers into Israel's story of God's engagement with the world in Jesus, and they all conclude with the Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection. Luke's stories of Jesus' birth, epiphany, and transfiguration are carried in the deep stream of faith that flows from Israel into the Roman world of many cultures and religions.

In a technical sense, only Mark identifies itself as a "gospel" (Greek *euaggelion:* Mk 1:1). Its clipped episodes announce secret news of Jesus in sharp contrast to the Caesar's imperial gospel. Matthew's first word mentions a "book" (*biblios*) or "account of the genealogy of the Messiah" (Matt 1:1 NRSV). Luke's formal introduction (Lk 1:1–4; see also Acts 1:1–2) invites close reading of the whole "narrative" (*diegesis*) or "orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (NRSV) in order that the reader might "know the truth" (*asphaleia*).

What is the character of this "truth?" Taken together, the narrative of Luke-Acts comprises about 30 percent of the New Testament. What is the bold testimony to the "truth" that preachers and communities are invited to declare in Advent–Epiphany? How can Luke's distinctive literary project authorize and inform Christian interpretation, proclamation, and life?

Telling the truth of history

To begin with, Luke-Acts is an historical narrative. Luke's preface (1:1–4) emulates the formal claims of the Greek and Roman historians to the reliability that derives from "eyewitnesses" and reputable sources ("ser-

vants of the word"). The texts for the first three Sundays in Advent include links to such events of public consequence as the Roman destruction of the temple (**Advent 1**: Lk 19:28–40, 21:21–25), and the beginning of John's preaching is synchronized with the reigns of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, the Herods, and the High Priest Caiaphas (**Advent 2**: Lk 3:1–6), stopping just short of Luke's account of the palace intrigue that caused John's imprisonment (**Advent 3**: Lk 3:7–18, 19–20). Jesus' birth is also coordinated with the registration of the empire by Caesar Augustus (**Christmas**: Luke 2:1–20), and events in Acts are linked with the reign of the Emperor Claudius (11:28; 18:02).

Scholars delight in exploring comparisons with the historical writings of Luke's age, discovering rich formal similarities but little shared content with Josephus or the Roman historians. Debates continue, for example, about the accuracy or verifiability of Luke's report of Augustus' census. But the theological and prophetic integrity of Luke's "historical narrative" is about more than corroborating facts with Roman annals. Nor is this simply a mythic story in support of a sectarian cultus. The third evangelist is testifying to the engagement of Israel's God in the events of the Messiah's reign. Luke's Advent, Epiphany, and Transfiguration stories are embedded in Israel's social, political, and religious world in the constant presence of the Roman order. As the Apostle Paul on trial before the Jewish King Agrippa II and the Roman procurator Festus declared, "this was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

Telling the truth of Jesus' Advent, Birth, Epiphany, and Transfiguration reaches beyond the sacred canopy of worship into the world. Advent cannot be limited to ritual penance and private preparation. "Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk 3:3; **Advent 2**) is a public event as much as it was in the days of John the Baptist or Luke the evangelist. Repentance (*metanoia*) is the "change of mind" or "turning" toward God that disrupts schemes of self-interest.

No one changes unless they must, and who is the preacher to call the community into a profound return to God when things are officially jolly in the midst of the pre-Christmas bustle? And what is the content of repentance? What "turning" is required now to "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"? For whom is this call to "turn" the gift of a new future? And who will reject the kingdom Jesus brings?

Addressing the congregation as a "brood of vipers" wasn't an obvious church-growth strategy in John's day, either, but John's prescriptions in Lk 3:10–14 (**Advent 3**) are eminently practical, laying bare the people's participation in the crooked ways of a corrupt system: to the crowds: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do the same"; to the tax collectors: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you"; to the soldiers: "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

The Advent lessons call for particular, gritty truth telling. What concrete steps are the faithful now called to take to extricate themselves from the commercial enslavement of "the holiday season" to welcome the Messiah, the Savior of the world? (Luke 2:1–20: **Christmas**) Luke's story is not a scolding from a social critic but the revelation of hope in the God who is gathering strength. It's time to get with the program, God's reign.

The truth of history that Luke is telling is about the living God. Israel's God is engaged, but not for a nationalistic triumph.

Compared to the official histories of the empire, Luke's narrative is an alternative version of world history, resisting cooption by political myths of the "divine right" or "manifest destiny" of empires, ancient and modern. Luke's confidence in the reign and power of the God of the Jews would have seemed odd to the Romans, or even dangerous in the era following the conquest of Jerusalem. The formal similarities with the Greek and Roman historians are important to the civil order within which Luke is writing (e.g., 1:1–4). But if the Roman world is the foreground of the story, the background, indeed the plot, is Jewish and scriptural.

In order to tell God's truth of history, Luke adopts the mode of the scriptural narrator. Beginning in 1:5, Luke writes in an antiquated style reminiscent of Israel's scriptural histories. The archaic King James Version captures this "biblish" tone well in the familiar first words of the Christmas story, "And it came to pass in those days . . ." (Lk 2:1). Luke 1–2 is particularly full of this linguistic affect, woven deeply into parallels with John and Jesus in the stories of the births and childhoods of Samuel and David, the king and the one God sent to anoint him (see 1 Samuel 1–2 and Acts 10:37).

In the alternative readings for **Advent 1** (Lk 21:21–25 and 19:28–40) God's truth of history stands in sharp, even fearful, focus. Which is more difficult? —for Jesus to get Jerusalem's attention on his arrival? or for the preacher to break into the last days before Christmas with Jesus' ominous oracles? The passages from both Luke 19 and 21 are filled with prophetic speech, echoing Jeremiah's lament for Jerusalem's dire fate in the hands of the neo-Babylonian empire. In 19:41–44, just beyond the assigned reading, Jesus indicates that the testimony of the stones will be the crushing collapse of the city, "because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God" (19:44). All of this is profoundly relevant for Advent. Jesus, whom the angel announces on Christmas as "a Savior who is the Messiah" (2:11), brings God's reign with him. Jesus' advent is a visitation from God. As Simeon declares in his prescient oracles, this child is God's salvation, "a light for revelation to the nations and for the glory to your people Israel." He is also "destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed" (2:28–35).

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann describes "the Alternative Community of Moses" in terms of a vision of God's salvation from the tyranny of the Egyptians and their gods. Brueggemann describes those gods as "creatures of the imperial consciousness," justifying the "eternal" rights of the mighty Pharaoh.[1]

Luke's Gospel also disrupts the paganism of privilege and its hijacking of the Christmas story to legitimate the affluence of the powerful. According to prophetic truth, history is the arena where God's reign is enacted, even as God's will is defied.[2] The truth of history is the narrative of God's entering into the suffering of the world, bringing healing and forgiveness, even to the unworthy. This is the script for the visitors coming from prison fellowship on Christmas Day to impoverished children of felons. In dingy hallways, they say, "We have a gift from your father!" Along with a present bearing the imprisoned father's name, they read the story of the child born in a stable. "Know what?" one small

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 6.

2. See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 190–91.

boy announced. "God came to our house today!" This Gospel brings light and hope to those who live in the deep darkness beyond the garish glare of the secular season.

Telling the prophetic truth

Every year the season of Epiphany begins with Matthew's account of the Magi. When it is Matthew's year, the First Gospel's rich stories of scriptural fulfillment follow. Mark is called the "Book of the Secret Epiphanies," because Jesus is revealed as Messiah and Son of God at the same time his identity is hidden. All of the gospels are broadly "prophetic" in this season because Jesus is enacting the promises God made through Israel's long history of the law and the prophets.

Luke draws the preacher into the prophetic mode in at least three specific dimensions in the Epiphany readings:

1. Jesus surpasses John as the Spirit-empowered prophet of the new age.

2. Jesus' interpretation of the promises to Israel is prophetic.

3. Jesus' mission reveals that God is gathering strength for a promising future.

Luke consistently schematizes the succession between John and Jesus. The parallels between their conceptions, births, and childhoods not only reflect the scriptural prototypes of Samuel who anointed David, but Jesus surpasses John within each phase. The Gospel lesson for the first Sunday after the Epiphany (**The Baptism of Jesus**: Lk 3:15–17, 21–22) is full of John's disclaimers that he is not the Messiah. His baptism by water anticipates Jesus' baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire," which is explicitly fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4).

In Lk 16:16, the theme of succession is sounded in sweeping historical terms: "The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed." The schema is extended to the point that neither Luke nor Acts directly credits John with Jesus' baptism. The observation is easily missed because all the rest of the canonical tradition testifies that John baptized Jesus, and Luke does not deny it. The preacher may notice, however, that the verses that are omitted from the reading (3:18–20) report John's imprisonment before Jesus' baptism. Luke's emphasis is articulated in Peter's speech in Acts 10:37–38: "That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power."[3]

Luke does not relegate "the law and the prophets" to a dead past, but they are now marshaled as witnesses to what God has done in Jesus. As the risen Messiah declares: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all of the scriptures" (Lk 24:27; see also v. 44). So also, Jesus identifies John as "a prophet . . . and more than a prophet" (Lk 7:26–27) because John fulfills the role from Malachi (3:1) of God's messenger preparing the Messiah's way. Jesus' next words frame John's role in God's drama: "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Lk 7:28).

Luke knows well that Jesus himself was born of a woman, but his inauguration as Messiah, therefore, is the story of "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38; Lk 3:21–23)—that is, he was authorized

3. This was a key insight in the previously influential analysis of Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

with the Holy Spirit's presence, power, and royal agency as God's Beloved Son. The voice from heaven echoes the royal acclamations of the enthronement of David, even in the direct address "You are my Son" (Ps 2:7; see also Isaiah 42).

The Gospel text for the **First Sunday after the Epiphany** reveals how, in the midst of the political intrigues of Rome, the High Priests, and the Herods, God was empowering an alternative king through a strange prophet in the wilderness around the Jordan. Luke's narrative tells the prophetic truth, identifying where God was decisively at work in the events of human history, even events that seemed inconsequential to the ruling powers. Although Luke's account of his birth and childhood provided glimpses of what was to come, Jesus' public obscurity was still intact in the story. Then, "anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power," Jesus "began his work" (3:23).

Jesus' public inaugural as Messiah in Lk 4:14–32 (**Third and Fourth Sundays after the Epiphany**) manifests the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee" (v. 14). "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me" (v. 18; see Isa 61:1 and also Lk 4:1). This story is historical in the simple sense of being one of the most complete surviving depictions of first-century synagogue practice. It also is theologically historic in Israel's prophetic understandings of God at work in human affairs. This is an epiphany of God's Messiah (anointed one), and the apparent rejection of his rule receives a traditional diagnosis from the Prophet-Messiah: "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (4:24).

The story is carefully crafted, to the fascination of commentators throughout the ages.[4] What is most interesting to this exploration of Luke's telling of the prophetic truth is that (1) Jesus is depicted as identifying himself as a prophet (4:24); (2) the body of his message is almost completely a citation from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, with links to chapter 58; and (3) Jesus' interpretation of the passage he read is prophetic.

Luke, who recounts Jesus' lengthy Sermon on the Plain (see below) and several extended speeches in Acts, reports Jesus' inaugural address as a one-sentence interpretation of Isaiah: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That speech would be brief for Calvin Coolidge! But every word is weighted.

"Today" is prophetic, not in the sense of prediction or even future promise, but in declaration. The reader has been alerted that Jesus has returned to Galilee "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit" (4:14). "Today" means authority, as when a Prime Minister or a President takes executive action in a state of emergency. "Today, I am giving an order."

"This scripture has been fulfilled" is about the content of the passage, its claim, its promise or threat. In Handel's *Messiah,* the grand refrains from Isaiah continue to wash over generations of church and public communities. Does anyone listen to the content and claims of these scriptures? Or what do they mean theologically if God enacts them?

"In your hearing" may be translated more directly as "in your ears." This is all

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4. Without rehearsing the details, some readers may be interested in the challenge and delight this passage has brought to me in other contexts. See David L. Tiede, "No Prophet Is Acceptable in His Own Country," *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 19–63, and *Luke*: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 101–11.

the more stunning because the hearer can't stop what has already been said. Whether or not the hearer wants to listen, the ears already got it, like it or not, without being warned. This is the prophetic conviction that God's word may be received either in faith or in hardness of heart. Again quoting Isaiah in another context, Luke's Jesus announces that he teaches in parables "so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand'" (Lk 8: 10; Isa 6:10). These verses from Isaiah are also cited in Acts as the Holy Spirit's reproof of unbelief. God's promises disclose hardened hearts in a call to repentance (see Acts 28:25; Acts 13:40–41; Rom 11:8).

The ending of the reading for the **Third Sunday after the Epiphany** with Jesus' declaration in verse 21 is thus loaded with significance. If the preacher has not helped the people measure the gravity of Jesus' very brief words, no one will be prepared for his near assassination on the **Fourth Sunday**. Jesus presents the Isaiah passage as a word of address. His program is authorized by God. He has been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord (1) "to bring good news to the poor," (2) "to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free," and (3) "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." None of this was original with the prophet Isaiah, either. The prophet brought forward a recitation of Israel's historic hopes for restoration by God.[5]

For the Messiah Jesus, however, this is his platform, the program of his mission. When John's disciples later ask "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Luke's Jesus responds by echoing the program from Isaiah: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them." Then, almost as a lament for what went wrong in Nazareth, Jesus adds, "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (Lk 7:18–23).

It starts going wrong quickly in verse 22. All the speaking well of him and wonder at "the gracious words" which came from Isaiah can not disguise the edge in the question: "Is not this Joseph's son?"

That identification is not humanly wrong, but it is inadequate and rejecting. Luke has brought the reader inside the story that is theological at the same time it is ordinary. The annunciation of Jesus' virginal conception is given privately to Mary (1:26–38). Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem for the census because Joseph came from David's house (2:4). The angels spill the news at Jesus' birth, but apparently only to the shepherds, Mary, and Joseph. And when they bring Jesus to the temple for his

5. Two descriptions of the historical cauldron in which Israel's hopes were shaped deserve commendation: Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); and Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1986).

God's intent is not to annihilate mere mortals with holiness but to make them into prophets and apostles.

circumcision, Mary and Joseph are simply named Jesus' "parents" (2:27, 48) and even his "father and mother" (2:33). In the temple, the child Jesus knew he needed to "be in my Father's house," but apparently with a public disclosure of his true identity. When Jesus' genealogy is traced through David to Adam, "son of God," he is identified humanly (then indirectly theologically) as "the son (as was thought) of Joseph" (3:23). In Luke's telling, the voice from heaven appears to have spoken directly to Jesus (3:22), and his testing by the devil as God's Son (4:3, 9) is evidently not public.

But now, in Nazareth, Jesus' divine identity becomes public. Thus in the context of the Messiah's inaugural, the question about "Joseph's son" is hostile and theologically defiant, rejecting the revelations that readers have been given of Jesus' divine agency. Jesus' declaration "today this scripture is fulfilled" is prophetic and messianic. Soon even the unclean spirits will blurt the truth in another synagogue. "Jesus of Nazareth" is "the Holy One of God" (4:34–35).

Jesus' response in Nazareth to the apparently benign question of Joseph's parentage is fierce, followed by a prophetic diagnosis of what they will say next. At first he seems to be putting words in their mouths, but Jesus is fulfilling Simeon's oracle that "the inner thoughts of many will be revealed" (2:35). Then he comes after them with prophetic truth: "Truly I tell you. . . . The truth is." His precedents from Elijah and Elisha pull the promises to which Israel felt entitled away from them to the benefit of others.

In a landmark essay, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," James A. Sanders contrasts what he calls a "constitutive hermeneutic," in which the faithful count on God's promises being for them, with a "prophetic hermeneutic," in which those who presume they are the elect are brought to repentance by God's going outside first.[6] In Acts, the Apostle Paul also calls upon this tradition of prophetic reproof so that the growing Gentile mission, which is actually Israel's vocation (Isa 49:6; see Acts 1:6–8), becomes a warning sign (Acts 13:46–47; 18:6; 28:28; see also Romans 9–11).

The "epiphany" of Luke 4, therefore, is the public disclosure of Jesus as the Messiah and protagonist of God's mission. Beginning in his hometown of Nazareth, Israel is being called to her vocation. God is moving beyond the entitlement or pastoral assurance of the elect. Those who do not take offense at the Messiah are truly "blessed" (7:23) because they understand that the inclusion of the outsiders means the fulfillment of their vocation, not their exclusion. But those who have claimed God's promises as their possession are offended, at the point of seeking to stone Jesus as a false prophet. "They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for

6. James A. Sanders, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*. Part One: New Testament, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 75–106.

you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep'" (7:32).

The epiphany/call story of Peter (5:1–11: **Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**) is minimally about the catch of fish. The deeper miracle is that, up to his armpits in fish, Peter sees the reign of God breaking in. Like Isaiah in the temple surrounded by smoke and visions (Isa 6:1–13), Peter is immediately aware of his mortal danger in the presence of God. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" But the Lord does not go away. As with Isaiah, God's intent is not to annihilate mere mortals with holiness but to make them into prophets and apostles for the reign of God and the Messiah Jesus. It is Isaiah and Peter who will "go" as agents of God's mission. Whatever else may be said about the apostolic office, at its root it is a prophetic calling, more a missionary and itinerant vocation for the blessing of the world than a position of privileged power. As Brueggemann puts it, "Prophetic consciousness thereby is put on notice against every historical agent that assigns to itself enduring, even ontological, significance."[7]

Luke's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain is entirely included in the readings for **the Sixth** (6:17–26), **the Seventh** (6:27–38), and **the Eighth** (6:39–49) **Sundays after the Epiphany**. Along with Matthew's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, this material has inspired great Christian interpreters from Tolstoy to Martin Luther King and was used by Gandhi to develop his nonviolent strategy for change. Apart from Christian mystics, social revolutionaries, and sectarians, however, it has often caused anxiety in much of the Western church. Perhaps its deeply prophetic character has offended the consciousness of Christendom that is so focused on eternal assurance of salvation.

But instead of trying to explain why Jesus didn't really mean to say "Blessed are you who are poor," let us continue to explore how Luke's distinctive literary project of prophetic truth telling authorizes and informs Christian interpretation, proclamation, and life. Verses 17–19 identify the public setting and the audience who "had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases." "Power came out from him and healed them all." The power to heal is a sign of God's Spirit in the receptivity of faith (4:27; 5:12–16, 17), and, while his brief sermon in Nazareth met opposition, this multitude from everywhere and a "great crowd of his disciples" had come to hear him. The presence of persons afflicted with diseases and troubled with unclean spirits is also a sign that these were not the ones whose status or resources could be tallied as signs of their righteousness. It makes a difference to the impact of Jesus' words if his hearers are actually poor, hungry, grieving, excluded, or reviled. Jesus is not giving a lecture on the nobility of poverty. He is addressing people with the promise that God's love and favor will come to them on an entirely different basis than the privileges of the prosperous.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, the problem affluent, well-fed, officially optimistic Christians of high standing have with Jesus may be not that we don't understand but that we do. Instead of getting in on God's dramatic action for the outsiders, we are like the Israelites confronted by Elijah and Elisha or the people in Nazareth challenged by Jesus. How is this prophetic priority for outsiders good news for us? The predicament of the prosperous may be less our theological objection that Jesus is teaching the law in his sermon than that the good news of the kingdom he announces is not

7. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 34.

sufficiently respectful of what we have achieved. What can we make of such extravagance of God's mercy for the "undeserving?"

As the Apostle Paul said to the Christians in Corinth, "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:26–27). Consider the high probability that Luke-Acts was written in the last third of the first century when Judea had been decimated by Rome and Jerusalem burned. As the early Christian movement was swept by the Holy Spirit in irrepressible hope into the Greco-Roman world of many cultures, religions, languages, and peoples, Jesus' Sermon on the Plain was an alternative vision to the official respectability of the empire.

Within the past century the majority of Christians on the earth has shifted from Europe and North America to the two-thirds world. North American congregations with members from those churches or with sister church relationships will do well to listen or at least imagine how eagerly their brothers and sisters from those communities gather at the feet of Jesus to hear the Sermon on the Plain. They also have an abundance of sinners, which is how any of us qualifies to listen, because Jesus "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (5:32). Our Lord knows that the poor, the hungry, and the sorrowful have an advantage, because this sermon is pure balm for those who know their need of God. As an African pastor described the deaths in his church from AIDS, he said, "We have God. We have hope." The repentance (*metanoia*) to which Jesus calls the prosperous is a "change of mind" or conversion from trusting our gods of mammon to becoming disciples and apostles of Jesus' reign of mercy.

The prophetic truth of Epiphany is that Jesus' mission reveals that God is gathering strength for a promising future. It is not a straight line from one imperial triumph to another. Jesus and the Christian evangelists and prophets with him are caught up in God's love, passion, and compassion for a wayward world. **Transfiguration Sunday** (9:28–36) thus offers another glimpse of God's future breaking into ordinary time.

Moses and Elijah appear in the sleepy and awake vision of the disciples who also behold the Messiah's transcendent splendor. Jesus' "departure" which they are discussing with him is more than his leaving the earth. The Greek word is *exodon*. The "departure" of Israel from Egypt was not merely a leaving, either. It was a divine deliverance, an "exodus." And Jesus is "about to fulfill his exodus in Jerusalem." The word can also mean his "death," as when someone is said to be departed.

In the prophetic narrative of history, these heavenly figures, who also had remarkable deaths or translations, appear to be briefing the Messiah on what is to come in Jerusalem. There is no hint of spiritual escape from the gruesome passion ahead. Heaven and earth are preparing to witness how the human systems and powers that are set against the Lord and his anointed will connive to bring him down. Then what will happen to the prophetic vision, the light of Epiphany shining in the darkness?

In Luke 9:51–61, following the Transfiguration, Jesus makes it clear that, like the prophets of old (Isa 50:7; Ezek 21:1–2), the Messiah-Prophet-Son of God will set his face to go to Jerusalem. The "fulfillment" of his "exodus" will be through his death and resurrection. God's reign of mercy and mission of love on earth will not be stopped.

Embedded in the First Century, Alive for Our Own: Recent Research on Luke's Gospel

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It is stimulating and provocative to have vast amounts of information readily at hand about every sort of topic. Yet, this information age in which we live can become downright daunting. How do we sort through that information to find its significance for the calling of preaching, teaching, and imagining God's dynamic presence among us?

Even when we narrow our focus to preaching and teaching based on Luke's Gospel, we are confronted with an enormous amount of detailed analysis of everything from carob pods to the standard vocabulary of friendship in the ancient world. Japanese New Testament scholar Hisako Kinukawa has identified part of our task very well: "The social, cultural, political, economic, and religious reconstruction of the times when the texts were edited, when the stories were told, and when the incidents took place must be done carefully and continuously."[1] Given the massive size of this agenda and the equally massive information to be uncovered and analyzed in regard to each part of it, Kinukawa's next statement is painfully true: "It seems, however, that it is far beyond my capacity to do all the research on my own."

Indeed, it is beyond any single person's capacity to keep up even with the research done by others! Learning comes from the efforts of an ever-larger team of players.

Two kinds of interpretive questions

Looking over the landscape of Lucan studies from the past five to ten years suggests that scholars have been pursuing two basic sets of questions. One set deals with the words, images, and rhetoric of an ancient Greek text written in a world with assumptions and knowledge vastly different from our own. How was the story of Jesus perceived as good news in that world? How was this good news described? A second set of questions is about connecting the world of the earliest Christians and our own. How does a better understanding of the ancient text sharpen implications for our own interpretation? Susan Garrett points out the "social and cultural chasm that separates us from the authors and first readers of ancient texts. The remarks about ancient medical and philosophical assumptions about femininity and sexual abstinence draw attention to this stunning gap."[2] The more one learns about those early texts, the more challenging it is to understand their authority in our own time.

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1. Hisako Kinukawa, "Response," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20.1 (Spring 2004): 117.

2. Susan R. Garrett, *The Christian Century* 115 (December 16, 1998): 1225.

Joel Green and Luke Timothy Johnson, for instance, have written excellent commentaries on Luke's Gospel (Green in 1997 and Johnson in 1991), and both have more recently written about the interpretive process.[3] Green and Johnson insist that the meaning of a text does not and cannot abide only in the time of a text's origin. We all trust that Scripture texts continue to speak among us. Many scholars write of being drawn into the world of the text, where we are re-formed by the powerful envisioning of God's realm. To the extent that we are drawn into the "world of the text," historical study (including literary and rhetorical analysis) must be done. Green points out that a "critically engaged reading of the text would account for . . . the cultural embeddedness of all language (rather than assuming that all people everywhere and at all times construed their cultural life-worlds as we do). . . ."[4]

Embedded in the first century

Luke's Gospel generally is read with The Acts of the Apostles in view. Although there is disagreement about the genre of both Luke and Acts, it usually is accepted that both were written by the same person. If Luke is the "interpreter of Israel,"[5] Jesus' engagement with Israel in Luke is likely to be coherent with the story of Israel as it moves on in Acts. How might the complex portrayal of "Israel" and the Jews in Acts lead us to nuance our portrayals of Pharisees and Sadducees in the Gospel?

A second area much examined is the study of how Luke's Gospel is embedded in the Greco-Roman world—its traditions, social arrangements, politics, and the like. Such names as Loveday Alexander, Marianne Bonz, David Balch, Richard Pervo, Vernon Robbins, and Ronald Hock come to mind.[6] A third area of study has to do with the connections between Luke and other "interpreters of Israel" such as Philo and Josephus. Gregory Sterling has been eager to read Luke as deeply embedded in the world(s) of Hellenistic Judaism, as portrayed by Philo and others. Green, David Moessner, and many others pursue Luke's embeddedness in the Hellenistic Judaism of the Septuagint.

Ancient fiction/romance novels

Scholars recently have turned to ancient fiction for a renewed picture of the social world of the first century and the ways in which it was described for readers. Hock has been working with ancient Greek nov-

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3. Joel Green, "Scripture and Theology, Failed Experiments, Fresh Perspectives" *Interpretation* 56:1 (January 2002), 5–20; Joel Green, *What About the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002). Johnson has gone on to work on Acts and the letter of James but has also written a strong response to historical Jesus research, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999). He also has written on the work of biblical scholars, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002) and the creed as a hermeneutical rubric for Christians: *The Creed, What Christians Believe and How It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

4. Green, "Scripture and Theology," 19.

5. A rubric to describe the project in which the first volume is *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim on Israel's Legacy*, ed. David Moessner and David Tiede (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), to cover the work of the Society of Biblical Literature Luke-Acts Seminar).

6. For a variety of essays by these authors and others see *Ancient Rhetoric and Early Christian Narrative*, ed. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998).

els since the early 1990s. In a 1998 essay Hock argues that ancient novels, usually referred to as romances because of plots that revolve around the difficulties of love, "provide the reader with a remarkably detailed, comprehensive, and coherent account of the social, economic, and religious institutions of the people and regions that witnessed the spread of Christianity into the Greek East of the Early Roman Empire."[7] These novels were read throughout the ancient world. In telling stories about men and women of their time and place, they present plausible and satisfying pictures of that world, including its religious life, household and civic arrangements, and the kinds of speech conventions that took place at all sorts of events.

Such pieces offer many clues about the New Testament world, including the Gospel of Luke, which also makes assumptions about "everyday" behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and practices. The parables show that Jesus also used everyday circumstances to tell a story about God. Where and how what we read is everyday life becomes critical in knowing how Luke wants us to see God's activity as similar to or an extension of the everyday or utterly different from it. In Luke Jesus interacts with all kinds of people who are involved in their everyday activities. Jesus' speech or action surprises folks, causes them to wonder who he is, and leads to a reconsideration of what is really going on in the world. The ancient novels help us to understand what exactly was surprising about Jesus' speech or action.

Hock asks how reading ancient romances might help in understanding Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30–37). This parable, unique to Luke, has been interpreted with great care and attention to detail over the millennia of its existence. Much loved and familiar even in the world outside the church as a description of selfless assistance to one's neighbor in need, the story has been approached from literary, historical, and doctrinal perspectives, some of which demand allegory to make sense. Hock asks how this story might be understood if it comes from the same world that read, heard, preserved, and handed on the romances. He notes that the time and space spent on the Samaritan is much more than is spent on anyone else in the story. When he reads it with the plots and vocabulary of those romances in mind, he finds many fresh and new connections. Let me outline a few of his key insights.

Rereading Lucan parables alongside ancient novels

This parable is about the highly valued ancient quality of *philanthropia*, love of humankind. *Philanthropia*, for which another word was mercy (*eleeos* and cognate forms), was much thought about in the ancient world, not simply in regard to giving great sums of money. Careful attention to the ancient novels leads one to see that the Samaritan's behavior is a conventional manifestation of *philanthropia* whose value does not require the degree of enmity between Jews and Samaritans posited by some scholars. Do countless generations of sermons about Jews and Samaritans as hostile entities shape contemporary Christians who hear in this parable adumbrations of tensions between Jews and Palestinians?

Equally interesting is the way that piety toward God and toward the neighbor is the standard ancient way of "describing a good person."[8] Luke's Gospel moves in a broad Mediterranean context and shows us

7. Ronald F. Hock, "Why New Testament Scholars Should Read Ancient Novels," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 123.

8. Hock, "Ancient Novels, 137.

Jesus emphasizing concrete ways of being "good." To be philanthropic in the first century would be to "accept a limited number of responsibilities toward an unlimited number of people."[9] As Hock points out, *philanthropia* in the ancient world would have been a kind of mirror image to friendship, or *philia,* in which one owes unlimited responsibility to a very limited number of people. Luke and the other New Testament writers make use of both concepts to talk about the kinds of relationships that exist among people and between humankind and God.

We are back at that point made by Kinukawa: No one alone can make a definitive interpretation. The work of translating, editing, and publishing the ancient novels has been of relatively recent vintage. Some of it was accomplished by the work of literary and historical scholars of the classics, who are not theologians at all. Yet these resources let us come fresh to our New Testament texts. Again, I find encouragement when there is overlap between stories of Jesus and the worldview of his near contemporaries. There is a ring of authenticity about the Gospels and this preacher/teacher/prophet/Son who emerges from them. There is also the freedom from having to make a case for Jesus as absolutely unique. Instead we are invited to see how Jesus, embedded in the language, the concepts, the systems of his time, evokes the work and ways of God in terms that people can grasp.

Hock also treats Luke's parable of the father with two sons (Luke 15:11–32) in light of the features of ancient novels.[10] As in the example of the Good Samaritan, Hock reviews the difficulties of interpreting this parable over the last two thousand years. In our time parables generally are imagined to use the everyday world and its situations to make some point about the life of discipleship or the activity of God.

Hock identifies the way in which parables were deemed to function in their own time, using "familiar events in some area of everyday life . . . to clarify and confirm claims being made about another area of life."[11] He discovers that the events in the parable of the prodigal son are really much more conventional than many had believed. He finds that the behavior of the father in hastening to welcome home one believed lost or dead is not surprising, unheard of, or undignified. Many interpreters of Luke's parable have found its center in the eager reception of the son by the father. They have seen that as so highly unlikely and unacceptable among humans that it must be identified with the reception of sinners by God, whose love undoes human convention. While this is a good thing to say about God, it is not an accurate thing to say about human fathers in the first century.[12]

Hock sees this parable as turning on the "social event of 'getting back.'" The parable then is not about crisis in the family, broken relationships, or a terrible loss of honor for the father, all interpretations that many thoughtful New Testament schol-

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9. Hock points out the areas of responsibility as (1) greeting everyone, (2) aiding anyone who is unfortunate, and (3) being gregarious. "Ancient Novels," 132–33, 137.

10. Hock, "Romancing the Parables of Jesus," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.1 (Spring 2002): 11–37.

11. Hock, "Romancing the Parables," 37.

12. Carole LaHurd, in "Recovering the Lost Women in Luke 15," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24.2 (1994): 66–76, also argues that portraying the father as radically unconventional in the interpretation of this parable is not consistent with information she gleaned from women in the contemporary Middle East. This counters the self-descrip-tion given by males whom Kenneth Bailey interviewed and is supported by Hock's analysis of the ancient romance novels.

ars have suggested. Instead, the parable is about the joyful response of God rather than about the character of God versus the character of sinful humans. Because the response of joy at "getting back" what had been deemed lost is the thrust of the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep, the joy of God at "getting back" one deemed lost is the central point of this parable. In such an interpretation, one is not constrained by reference to customs no longer in sway, to ideas of Jewish sources, or tenuous literary allusions to other scriptural stories of two brothers. The parable becomes more straightforward. It also raises the interesting point that we may, indeed must, imagine some things about God on the basis of our human experiences.

What other "team" members bring to interpretation

Interpretations that use ancient fiction to make the world of Luke's text more familiar to us work well when someone else on our "team" of interpreters does the research. For those of us whose calling is to lead others into the Scriptures that shape our faith and back out again into our everyday, the real challenges are to know whom to trust, to bring our own best critical thinking to the methodologies used, and to be honest about the gap between Luke's world and our own.

When it comes to work on Luke, there are important modes of interpretation in addition to the use of ancient fiction, all of which highlight interesting facets of the Gospel's embeddedness in its context. Most ancient novels, for example, do not deal with Jewish characters and Jewish life. Were Jews socially invisible, not important enough to be included in novels that have survived for us? Visibility in the written descriptions of the sociopolitical world tell us much more about the writers, readers, and preservers in the ancient world than they do about the groups' lives. While it is true that Jews would have held many conventions and assumptions with non-Jews in the centuries after Alexander, and while we know about some obvious differences between Jews and non-Jews, are there things we miss because of a dearth of "everyday" information about Jewish life?

Some scholars have turned to Jewish "novels" such as *Tobit*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 1–4 *Maccabees*, *Susanna*, or even *Judith* to see how Jews told their own stories of the ways of God and the demands of discipleship. Such stories may be especially useful in helping us understand two aspects of Luke's Gospel: the demands and rewards of discipleship or service of God and the hopes characteristic of Jewish life. It is highly salutary to read friendly witnesses to Jewish life and theology, as opposed to some of the polemical positions within the Gospel, positions often taken as historical "truth" by some contemporary hearers.

A second area, not different but certainly distinct from working with ancient novels, is that of attending to the genre of Luke's Gospel as a form of ancient history writing. History is variably defined by such writers as Gregory Sterling and Marianne Palmer Bonz, who typify the broad range of possibilities that might fall under the rubric "history." Bonz is interested in Luke-Acts as a "foundational epic" similar in desired effect if not in exact form to the *Aeneid*, the foundational epic of Rome, written by Virgil to connect the Augustan dynasty to divine intervention during the Trojan War.[13] Her thesis is suggestive of how Luke and Acts as a two-volume work (the *Aeneid* is also divided into two parts) might be imagined to function in a Greco-

13. Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

Roman world. Sterling, on the other hand, turns our attention to Philo: "I think that the Philonic corpus is the single most important body of material from Second Temple Judaism for our understanding of the development of Christianity in the first and second centuries."[14] It is not that any of the Gospel writers or Paul know or consciously imitate Philo but rather that Philo's project of making sense of Jewish Scripture for Jews (and perhaps others) who lived in a predominantly non-Jewish world is like the project of the early believers in Jesus.

David Balch has begun to probe the ways in which Luke's (hi)story of Jesus was embedded in the visual culture of the time.[15] Balch's work reminds us that literacy in the first century was very low; artistic depictions of myths and stories were prevalent throughout the Mediterranean world. How might one who knew and saw the story of Isis and Osiris, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, or the death of Hector on a wall, a vase, a drinking cup, or a piece of armor come to appreciate the story of the death of Jesus? Balch seeks to identify some of the concepts within which a first-century audience would have imagined the theological importance of Jesus. This is precisely the work carried out by contemporary preachers and teachers, who also face a visual culture whose symbols are powerful and difficult to keep up with. Artistic renderings of themes found in Luke's Gospel (and throughout the New Testament), particularly in regard to Jesus' death and resurrection, is a relatively new approach for the time period of the New Testament.

This has been a brief look at some of the particulars of recent research into the Gospel of Luke. There has been a turn toward a humble reimagining of the culture in which this Gospel was embedded, with a hope of discerning how and why Luke's story was good news, a cause for joy, hope, and transformation of people's lives. Such approaches are humble because the focus of each particular work must be somewhat narrow. As these approaches overlap one another, some of the richness of the conceptual life of Luke's Gospel and its audience is revealed. Likewise, some of the great differences between Luke's day and ours become clear.

Scholars argue about the relative importance of the world "behind the text"—Luke's world, the world(s) of Luke's audience(s), the world of Jesus, the world of the early church—and the world "in front of the text"—that created by the text and the contemporary reader/hearer.[16] The world created by the text must resemble the world behind the text, or it would have been unintelligible to its reader. In order for us to be caught up in this world in such a way that it can reshape our own, we must work harder than our ancient forebears to discern its assumptions. Otherwise, we will substitute our own assumptions, based on millennia of having been taught "right" answers about God's activity in Jesus. Such seeing requires many voices who will consider each other's questions and answers, methods and sources, as ways to know the God of our forebears more fully in our own time.

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14. Gregory Sterling, "The Significance of Philo of Alexandria for New Testament Study," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30:3 (Fall, 2003), 252.

15. David Balch, "The Suffering of Isis/Io and Paul's Portrait of Christ Crucified (Gal 3:1): Frescoes in Pompeian and Roman houses and the temple of Isis in Pompei," *Journal of Religion* 83:1 (January 2003), 24–35.

16. A recent example is J. Severino Croatto, "Jesus, prophet like Elijah, and prophet-teacher like Moses in Luke–Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124:3 (Fall 2005), 451–65.

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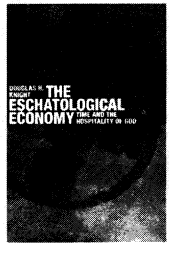

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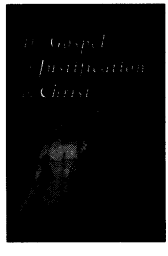

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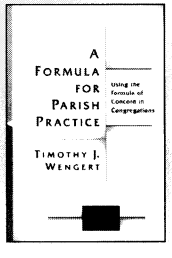

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Jesus the Pray-er

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The ideal reader of narratives—ancient and modern—must be prepared to respond to the emphasis of the narrative with respect to character, placing individuality or "typical" connection foremost to the extent which the narrative itself calls for such priority; but above all he must bring to his consideration of character a versatility of response commensurate with the infinite variety of narrative characterization.[1]

The Lucan Jesus is a pray-er. To be sure, all four biblical Gospels record Jesus in prayer, and in expansive prayer in John's Gospel.[2] Yet Luke is singularly interested in Jesus' prayer life as an integral aspect of his life and ministry.[3]

My contribution to this set of articles on the Gospel of Luke is to reflect on Jesus' practice of prayer in this Gospel. Please recognize that my topic is not Jesus' teaching about prayer, nor is it prayer as a theme in the Third Gospel.[4] I am intentionally limiting myself to observations on Jesus' own praying. I would suggest that there is, at least initially, a heuristic advantage to this approach, i.e., to looking at Jesus' own praying apart from his teaching about prayer. Such an approach fits the narrative progression of the Gospel itself. Jesus practices prayer beginning in chapter 3; yet Jesus does not begin to teach his disciples about prayer until they ask him, and they do not ask him until chapter 11. Perhaps Luke's own teaching method was to introduce his readers to the Pray-er before instructing them on praying.[5]

By my count, the Lucan Jesus is in prayer fourteen times, and another passage refers to him having prayed.[6] Luke shares some references to Jesus at prayer with Matthew and Mark.[7] Additionally, Luke

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1. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 206.

2. The words "pray" and "prayer" (forms of προσεύχομαι) do not appear in John's Gospel. Nevertheless, "to lift up his eyes to heaven" and address "the Father" (John 17:1), for example, fits any conventional definition of prayer.

3. Fred Craddock's commentary *Luke* (Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox, 1990]) is particularly adept at drawing out this observation; see esp. p. 84. (Incidentally, taking nothing away from the power of prayer, is "might of prayer" supposed to read "night of prayer" on that page?) My interest in this topic was heightened by Craddock's delightful series of audio lectures produced under the title "The Prayer Life of Jesus."

4. For general treatments of prayer in Luke-Acts, see A. Trites, "The Prayer Motif in Luke-Acts," in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Perspectives in Religious Studies 5 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978]), 168–86; Craig G. Bartholomew and Robby Holt, "Prayer in/and the Drama of Redemption in Luke," in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, and Anthony C. Thiselton (Scripture and Hermeneutics 6 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005]), 350–75; John Navone, *Themes of St. Luke* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970); P. T. O'Brien, "Prayer in Luke-Acts," *Tyndale Bulletin* 24 (1973): 111–27.

alone reports that five of the events in Jesus' life recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels were accompanied by prayer: Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21; parallels Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11),[8] when he withdrew for prayer after healing a leper (Luke 5:12–16; parallels Matt 8:2–4; Mark 1:40–15), prior to his selection of the twelve (Luke 6:12–16; parallels Matt 10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19), the occasion of Jesus' question "Who do the crowds say that I am?" (Luke 9:18; parallels Matt 16:13; Mark 8:27), and his transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36; parallels Matt 17:1–13; Mark 9:2–13). Luke tells us that Jesus taught his disciples to pray after having been in prayer himself (Luke 11:1–13; parallel Matt 6:9–13).[9] We see Jesus at prayer as well in an episode unique to the Third Gospel: when the seventy return with joy (Luke 10:21). Plus the Lucan Jesus tells us that he has been praying for Peter (Luke 22:32).

I comment on features of each of these references to Jesus at prayer that appear to me to contribute to our understanding of Luke's characterization of Jesus. My interest is in how Luke shapes our image of Jesus as we, as interested readers, journey through the Gospel.[10] What stands out to me is the absence of any one overarching or unifying theme that ties together all of Jesus' praying. Though some prayers and praying situations display common features, we can look carefully and find more variety than sameness. At the end I suggest answers to the question, What does this variety in Jesus' praying tell us?

"Oh, by the way . . . Jesus was praying"

When did Jesus pray? How did Jesus pray? What did Jesus pray about? Frequently, Luke answers only the first of these questions, and says nothing about the second and third. In fact, six of the eight references to Jesus' praying in chapters 3–11 are only general, summary statements, such as "when Jesus was praying," and "he withdrew . . . and prayed." We get no information on the manner in which Jesus prayed, nor do we learn the content of his prayer. The remark that Jesus was praying is made almost in passing.

Nevertheless, the act of praying is itself meaningful. "Every aspect of charac-

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5. It may be worth further study to ask what literary/rhetorical significance there may be to the prayer-related transitions in the narrative. Luke suspends reports of Jesus at prayer from the time Jesus teaches his disciples to pray (chap. 11) until he is in the upper room (chap. 22). Within that span, Jesus tells the prayer-related parables of the friend at midnight (11:5), the widow's judge (18:1–8), and the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple (18:9–14).

6. Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:16, 18, 28–29; 10:21; 11:11; 22:17, 19, 32, 39–46; 23:34, 46; 24:30, 50–51. In this list, the two references to Jesus giving thanks to God at table in the upper room (22:17, 19) are counted as one prayer episode. Conventional lists are shorter, omitting for example the meal scenes in chaps. 9, 22, and 24; see, e.g., Navone, *Themes of St. Luke*, 118.

7. At the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:16; parallels Matt 14:19; Mark 6:41) and at the meal in the upper room (Luke 22:17, 19; parallels Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22).

8. John's Gospel alludes to Jesus' baptism, without any mention of prayer by Jesus (John 1:32–34).

9. The contexts in which Jesus gives his model prayer are obviously quite different in Matthew and Luke.

10. If you are familiar with the language of "ideal reader," "implied reader," "authorial audience," and the like, you will recognize that my article exhibits some imprecision in distinguishing between hypothetical ancient readers and the "real reader" (me). I try to be clear about such a distinction where this distinction appears to me to be pertinent. But I envision this article more as a conversation with you than as a technical treatise before a session of the Society of Biblical Literature.

ter is given expression in action," say Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg of ancient sagas in their classic analysis of narrative.[11] This observation offers insight into our Gospels as well and is particularly appropriate to Jesus the pray-er. We learn of Jesus in Luke's Gospel not only from what Jesus says and from what others say of him but also through what Jesus does. Whatever he does is in some way an expression of his character.

Because action is always contextual, context contributes to characterization. So, in instances where we have no more than a summary statement that Jesus was praying, we develop an image of the pray-er from the circumstances surrounding the prayer. Characterization is also cumulative. This means that each of Luke's references to Jesus praying, however cursory, introduces some additional feature, quality, or nuance to our impression of Jesus the pray-er. It appears to me that as the narrative progresses Luke creates a multifaceted impression of Jesus the pray-er by accumulating these "oh, by the way" references to Jesus at prayer.

Jesus' baptism (**3:21–22**)[12] is an extraordinary event: heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form; the heavenly voice addressed Jesus to express the Father's pleasure and to affirm him as the beloved Son. All of this takes place, Luke says, "while Jesus is praying" (a present participle). Moreover, it is striking that the event is at the same time both public and private. "All the people" baptized appear to be present when the Spirit descends on Jesus, and yet the heavenly voice speaks to Jesus alone.[13]

What might Jesus have been praying about at his baptism? Is there a connection between the prayer and the descent of the Spirit? Was it a prayer of thanks for the calling that led to being baptized? Was it an intercession for future strength and/or guidance? Was it simply an act of adoration to the Father? We can only speculate. The narrative is suggestive enough to lead us to such questions and to provoke us to formulate answers, and it is sufficiently silent about Jesus' prayer so as to require us to construct our own conclusions.[14]

As public as Jesus' praying at his baptism was, his time of prayer following his healing of the leper was decidedly private and low key. The account is brief: "He was withdrawing to the wilderness places and praying" (**5:16**).[15] Beyond the observation

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11. Scholes and Kellogg, *Nature of Narrative*, 173.

12. To help the reader review particular comments quickly, I have put a passage reference in boldface type to indicate the first discussion of this reference.

13. With Mark 1:11 and in contrast to Matt 3:17, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

14. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. 18, 35, on textual indeterminacies and "gaps."

15. Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series 6 [London: SCM Press, 1967]), 69–75, argues that Jesus would have prayed at three appointed times during the day according to Jewish custom: sunrise, 3:00 p.m., and sunset. According to Jeremias, Jesus' prayers at those appointed times would have begun with formal, liturgical prayers (principally the "Eighteen Benedictions"). However, again according to Jeremias, it is not these liturgical prayers that account for Luke adding the motif of the praying Lord at 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 21. Rather, "the most likely answer is the existence of a firmly established tradition about Jesus' prayer in solitude by night" (p. 76). In fact, Jeremias wants to cite these references as evidence that Jesus "was not content with the pious practice of liturgical prayer three times a day" (p. 75), and Jesus' prayers when he withdraws represent a new

that Jesus prays here in private, two other features are worth noting. The mention of prayer gives the scene a proactive dimension. There is a reason for Jesus' withdrawal beyond simply a desire to escape the crowds: he gets away in order to pray. Moreover, the parallel participial constructions ὑποχωρῶν and προσευχόμενος with the imperfect ἦν impress upon Luke's reader that this is a repeated pattern, perhaps even a habit.

Whether it was a routine retreat for prayer and Jesus got carried away, or a deliberately extended prayer session commensurate with the weight of his deliberation, we do not know. But prior to choosing twelve apostles from among his disciples, Jesus prayed through the night (**6:12**). Separating out twelve of the disciples looks forward to the development of the church. Luke will see to it that this original number, twelve, is reestablished after the loss of Judas (Acts 1:15–26). Though "the Twelve" as a group will have no distinguishing duties or privileges during Jesus' earthly ministry,[16] they will embody the church's continuity with Israel's past (the twelve tribes). With tongue only partly in cheek, Fred Craddock wonders whether it might be more fitting to say that the church was launched not with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, as traditionally thought, but in an all-night prayer vigil by Jesus.[17]

David Crump argues that Luke intended for his readers to conclude that Jesus prayed for guidance as he was making his selections of those to be included in the Twelve.[18] Joseph Fitzmyer proposes that Jesus was praying not so much for God to grant him discernment but for God's blessing upon those who would be selected as the Twelve.[19] Both emphases are plausible, and neither is demanded by the narrative.

Bringing us from Jesus' overwhelmingly populous and public engagement with

Whatever Jesus does is in some way an expression of his character.

a crowd of five thousand, Luke takes us again to Jesus in seclusion and in prayer (as in 5:16). This time Jesus himself interrupts his praying (**9:18**) to ask his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" This is a poignant moment in the Gospel. It is

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initiative by Jesus of prayer in the idiom of everyday life. The only specific suggestion that Jeremias makes as to the substance of Jesus' innovative prayers is that they would have addressed God as "Abba." Because we know explicitly from prayers by the Lucan Jesus elsewhere that Jesus addressed prayers to his Father (10:21; 22:42; 23:34, 46), the strength or weakness of Jeremias's proposal does not impact our discussion. One may rightly object that Jeremias's appeal to the Eighteen Benedictions to illustrate his point is anachronistic. He does, however, convincingly argue against the "oh, by the way" prayers of Jesus being simply the customary formal prayers of Jews of Jesus' day.

16. Jesus does, however, declare that they will one day sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30).

17. Craddock, "The Prayer Life of Jesus" (audio).

18. David Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor: Prayer and Christology in Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1992] 1999, 144–46.

19. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 28 [Garden City: Doubleday, 1979]), 616. Fitzmyer cites John 17:6 in support of his read of Luke 6:12.

the occasion of Peter's assertion "[You are] the Messiah of God"[20] as well as of Jesus' first prediction of his passion/resurrection.

Is it possible in this instance to surmise what Jesus was praying about? Charles Talbert proposes that "implicit within 9:18–22 is that Jesus, while at prayer, came to the realization that he must suffer, die, and rise."[21] This is not an unreasonable inference. However, it appears to me that in light of the verbal resonance connecting "the crowds" in Jesus' initial question with "the crowds" in the immediately preceding story of the feeding of the five thousand (9:11, 12, 16), it is at least as likely that while in prayer Jesus was weighing his relationship with the throngs that came to him for healing.

To suggest what Jesus may have been praying about when he was transfigured (**9:28–29**) would be pure speculation. But what about the content of his praying before one of his disciples asks him to teach them to pray (**11:1**)? Might the "Our Father" mirror Jesus' own praying in structure and substance?

Several components of the Our Father appear in or resonate with prayers of Jesus. He addresses God as "Father" (10:21; 22:42; 23:34, 46). He gives glory to God (10:21; cf. "hallowed be your name"). His blessings over food acknowledge God's gift of "daily bread." He seeks to avoid unnecessary trials (22:42; cf. "do not lead us into temptation"). But Jesus never prays to be forgiven. And, although the kingdom is a regular feature of Jesus' teaching, we do hear him praying for its arrival. Therefore, the Our Father is not necessarily a clue to the content of Jesus' prayer in 11:1.

To summarize what we have seen so far: In none of these "oh, by the way" mentions are we privy to the substance of Jesus' prayer. It is beyond the available evidence to suggest that there is a thematic pattern to his praying in these six passages. When Jesus takes the initiative in the action subsequent to his prayer, we may perhaps try to infer that his prayer was somehow related to that action, as in 6:12 and 9:18. Still, inferences about themes in his prayers in these cases remain speculative.

There is no pattern of narrative correspondence between Jesus being in prayer and his taking the initiative in the subsequent event. Nor is it necessarily so that the praying Jesus anticipates the next move in the story; it would be especially difficult to assert on the basis of the narrative itself, for example, that Jesus expected to be led by the Spirit into the wilderness following his baptism (4:1).[22]

These prayer episodes are more notable for their variety than for their sameness. Jesus prayed at what we might call unexceptional times (5:16; 11:11) and at pivotal moments in his ministry (9:18, 28–29). He prays with all of his disciples nearby (9:18; 11:1), with some of his disciples nearby (9:28–29), and when perhaps no disciples are present (5:16; 6:12). He prays in the presence of the general public (3:21–22).[23] He engages in extended prayer

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20. After Peter's declaration, the title "Messiah" is used only as a polemic or in deriding Jesus (Luke 20:41; 22:67; 23:2, 35, 39) until Jesus applies it to himself after his resurrection (24:26, 46), when he teaches his disciples with echoes of his passion/resurrection prediction. Then, the title is used extensively in Acts (twenty-four times) to identify and to affirm Jesus.

21. Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 103.

22. There is a distinct tone of compulsion in Luke's use of ἄγω in this episode and the one that follows (see Luke 4:9, 29).

23. While five of these six "oh, by the way" reports of Jesus praying say that he did so in relatively private venues, it would be

(6:12) and in briefer prayer (9:18). He may pursue prayer in wildernesses (5:16) or on mountains (9:28–29).

This variety produces a rhetorical effect. The cumulative force of these "in passing" references to Jesus praying characterizes Jesus as a pray-er—as someone for whom conversation with God is integral to who he is—but also a pray-er whose praying does not conform to any fixed pattern. His prayer life varies according to particular needs or circumstances.

We turn now to prayers of Jesus that Luke invites us to overhear.

In adoration and gratitude

In the first opportunity Luke gives us to hear words Jesus spoke in prayer (**10:21**) we hear Jesus address God as "Father." He repeats this manner of address later, on the Mount of Olives and on the cross (22:42; 23:34, 46). Addressing his prayers to his "Father" is the singularly consistent feature of Jesus' prayers and stands out because of the contrasting moods of the prayers: joy (10:21), anguish (22:42), beneficence (23:34), and trusting acquiescence (23:46).

The mood of this prayer is, indeed, joy. The popular translation "I thank you, Father" is not an incorrect translation of the verb ἐξομολογοῦμαί. However, "I thank you" does not capture the sense of affirmation and adoration that also adheres to the Greek word.

The meal prayers

The words "pray" or "prayer" do not occur in **9:16**, **22:19**, and **24:30**. Nevertheless, Jesus prays on these occasions. And we may infer from the meal context what the content of Jesus' prayer is in each case. Surrounded by the crowd at the end of the day, Jesus determines to feed them (9:14). "In accord with Jewish meal practice, Jesus blessed the loaves and fish before he broke them into pieces for distribution,"[24] as the head of a Jewish household typically would. In essence, Jesus offers a table grace, which would be a Godward expression of thanks for the food.

There are two Greek words that are translated "blessed" in the New Testament. One is μακάριος, most familiar to us in Jesus' beatitudes, as in "blessed are the poor," "blessed are those who are hungry now," and "blessed are those who weep now" (Luke 6:20–21).[25] The other one, the word behind "blessed" in 9:16, is (to use the verb form) εὐλογέω; our English word "eulogize" comes from it. Does Jesus eulogize the bread and fish before feeding the five thousand? Hardly. Let us take a closer look at what is happening.

To εὐλογέω is to thank God for God's beneficence or to appeal to God for God's beneficence.[26] Three times in Luke's Gospel, God is the object of εὐλογέω. Zechariah bursts out with praise when his ability to speak is restored (1:64). Simeon cannot contain himself at the appearance of the Lord's salvation in the infant Jesus (2:28). Jesus' disciples give voice to their joy over

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inaccurate to characterize the Lucan Jesus as one who eschewed corporate prayer. Luke notes that it was Jesus' custom to participate in synagogue worship (Luke 4:14).

24. John Paul Heil, *The Meal Scenes in Luke-Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach* (SBL Monograph Series 52 [Atlanta: SBL, 1999]), 61. So also *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), s.v. εὐλογέω.

25. Noun forms of μακάριος are common; a verb form occurs in Luke 1:48.

26. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. εὐλογέω.

Jesus' resurrection (24:53).[27] Clearly, we have here expressions of gratitude to God for remarkable demonstrations of God's beneficent goodness.[28]

Five times in Luke's Gospel, εὐλογέω takes an object other than God: Jesus' father and mother (2:34), those who curse you (6:28), Jesus' disciples (24:50, 51), and, in the passage under discussion, the bread and fish (9:16).[29] From a strictly etymological standpoint, it would be possible to read 2:34 as Simeon's praise of Mary and Joseph, that is, to read the passage as Simeon eulogizing the parents. But that reading hardly fits the character of Simeon's song and prophecy. Rather, in view of the salvation drama to unfold, Simeon commends Jesus' parents to God's favor and acknowledges that the glory of God will be shown through them.

There is a thematic consistency in the way εὐλογέω functions in 2:34 and in 6:28. Simeon appeals to God for God's beneficence toward the parents. Jesus' hard instruction "Bless those who curse you" is his command that his followers appeal to God to act beneficently toward their condemners. "Bless those who curse you" is, therefore, essentially equivalent to "Pray for those who abuse you."[30] This thematic consistency continues into 24:50–51, where the risen Jesus entrusts his disciples to God's beneficent goodwill.

Does this same thematic consistency extend to the bread and fish in 9:16? Yes, to the extent that there is a Godward direction to the action expressed.[31] Jesus is hosting a meal. He will, therefore, praise God for the nourishment God has provided in the food to be eaten; and, like Simeon's blessing over Mary and Joseph in the temple and Jesus' blessing over his disciples at his ascension, his blessing over the bread and fish anticipates that the glory of God will be revealed through the bread and fish.

Jesus' meal prayer with the five thousand foreshadows his meal prayer with the Twelve the night he is betrayed and his meal prayer with the two disciples he accompanies on the road to Emmaus. Luke rhetorically links 9:16 with 22:19 and 24:19 by the repeated sequence of actions: "took," "blessed/gave thanks," "broke," and "gave." To be sure, the second term in the pattern varies; in the Upper Room, Jesus "gave thanks" (εὐχαριστέω in 22:19, compared with εὐλογέω in 9:19 and 24:19). Because the variation in 22:19 occurs within the fixed pattern ("took," "blessed/gave thanks," "broke," and "gave") common to all three episodes, it is reasonable to conclude that in these contexts εὐλογέω and εὐχαριστέω are synonymous.[32] It is not

27. It might be intriguing to explore the possible significance that the three instances in Luke's Gospel of persons "blessing God" are all connected with the Jerusalem temple (the "house of prayer" [Luke 19:46]): a temple-serving priest and two temple scenes.

28. See F. W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel*, revised and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 64.

29. We could consider Acts 3:25–26 as well.

30. An echo of poetic Hebrew parallelism.

31. In both 9:16 and 24:50–51, Jesus is acting as a pray-er.

32. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV*, 1398, 1399, locates the kinship of εὐλογέω and εὐχαριστέω in a common Hebrew antecedent. C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (TPI New Testament Commentaries [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990]), 785: "The two words are virtually synonymous, as in Jewish thought blessing was accomplished by giving thanks to God." I would caution that the two words are not quite synonymous in every context, since it would be a stretch to say that "blessing those who curse you" amounts to thanking God for them.

unusual for Luke to vary his vocabulary. Moreover, in addition to linking Jesus' action at the meal in the Upper Room to the feeding of the five thousand and the meal in Emmaus, Luke is presenting, as parallel actions, thanking God for the bread (22:19) and thanking God for the wine (22:17).

Pleading for Peter

We do not actually see or hear Jesus praying for Peter in the Gospel. Jesus tells us he has done so. "I have prayed for you," Jesus says to Peter (**22:32**). The verb typically translated "have prayed" in this sentence (δέομαι) expresses a highly emotive "ask," "plead," or "beg."[33] It is what the leper does when he falls on his face before Jesus (5:12). It is the cry of the demoniac when he is still tormented (8:28) and his plea to Jesus when he is in his right mind (8:38). It is the distraught father begging on behalf of his son (8:40).

Jesus' prayer for Peter is verbally and thematically parallel to the praying that Jesus admonishes his followers to do in his earlier discourse on the cosmic upheaval at the appearance of the Son of Man: "Be alert and pray (δέομαι) at all times for the strength to come safely through all that is going to happen and to stand before the Son of Man" (21:36).

Jesus lets Peter know that he has pleadingly prayed for spiritual strength for him during the dangerous days ahead. Both the vocabulary and the context of Jesus' reference to his intercession on behalf of Peter convey intensity.

Yes, "Jesus implicitly predicts Peter's rehabilitation after his moral collapse."[34] But Jesus is not simply announcing future events; he speaks of praying on Peter's behalf. Within the narrative itself, telling Peter that he is praying for him heightens the tension in the scene. To say "I have been praying for you" has a bonding effect on the pray-er and the one prayed for. At the same time, this episode is about Jesus knowing that Peter will distance himself from Jesus.

On the Mount of Olives

Luke identifies the location of Jesus' arrest as the Mount of Olives (**22:39**). Though Luke has mentioned this Mount several times as the place where Jesus spent the nights during his final week (19:29, 37; 21:37), identifying it as the location for prayer after the Passover meal may prompt the reader to make comparisons with the two other mounts to which Jesus went to pray: the mount of all-night prayer (6:12) and the mount of transfiguration (9:28, 37).

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." Prior to this, we have not heard Jesus pray a prayer of supplication for himself. Is this Luke's way of communicating to readers a condition under which supplication for oneself is acceptable to God? If so, the message is mixed.

Because others had taken in hand to write narratives of events related to Jesus (1:1), Luke does not assume that readers will be learning of Jesus' crucifixion for the first time when they reach his account of it. Therefore, the reader's prior knowledge creates dramatic irony as Jesus asks that this cup pass from him, for the reader knows that the Father's answer will be "No." As it turns out, the only time Jesus prays an intercession for himself, the requested outcome is not granted.

Is Jesus praying in order to discern the will of the Father for him, or is his prayer an expression of his anxiety over what he already knows is the will of the Father? It

33. See BDAG, s.v. δέομαι.

34. L. Johnson, *Luke*, 346. Johnson's observation is representative of those of commentators in general.

is one kind of struggle to discern God's will; it is another kind of struggle to accept God's will when you discern it. Perhaps Jesus' struggle here is the latter; the Lucan Jesus has insisted that the Son of Man must (δεῖ) suffer greatly and be killed (9:22).

On the cross

The first prayer. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" **(23:34)**.[35] This prayer is intriguing in a couple of ways, beginning with the implication drawn from "they do not know what they are doing." The implication is that ignorance is no excuse. Someone who commits injustice without knowing he or she is doing so still needs to be forgiven.[36]

The idea that those who act out of ignorance are still held accountable is expressed in Luke 19:42–44. Approaching Jerusalem, Jesus weeps over the city:

> If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.

Jerusalem's destruction, then, is the consequence of being unaware of what is really going on.

Peter's message in his speech in Solomon's Portico is even more directly parallel to the implication in Jesus' prayer. After summarizing the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, Peter concludes,

> I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. (Acts 3:17–19)[37]

Note that in Peter's speech here forgiveness is available, and contingent upon repentance.

Returning to Luke's crucifixion scene, Jesus' prayer implies culpability. Those who contributed to the crucifixion of Jesus need forgiveness, regardless of their acting in ignorance.[38]

This leads to the second intriguing feature of the prayer: they need forgiveness, but Jesus does not forgive them. Jesus does not tell his executioners, "I forgive you," or even the less personal "Your sins are forgiven." He has the authority to do so. He forgave the paralytic in order to assert that "the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Luke 5:24). He reinforced this authority by forgiving the sinful woman in Simon the Pharisee's house (7:37–50).

Nevertheless, Jesus on the cross does not exercise his authority to forgive. Instead, he hands the case over to the Father. "Father, forgive them," he prays. Why doesn't Jesus simply forgive the offenders himself?

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35. It is necessary to acknowledge that there is a serious text-critical issue with this verse. I do not rehearse here the arguments for or against the verse's authenticity. My view is that the verse is authentically Lucan, and my discussion treats it as such. For an extensive overview of the textual issue, see Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor*, 79–85.

36. And crucifying the innocent Jesus is an injustice; cf. the centurion's declaration in 23:47.

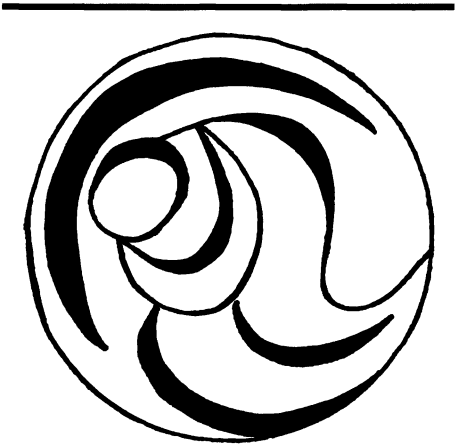
37. See also Acts 13:27: "Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him."

38. Crump, *Jesus the Intercessor*, 85–86, has a helpful discussion of "Forgive Whom?" in which he points out that there is no need to choose between Roman authorities/soldiers and Jewish collaborators as the subjects of Jesus' prayer.

Let me suggest that Jesus does not confer forgiveness because there has been no repentance. From the announcement that John the son of Zechariah went "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3), through the risen Jesus' declaration that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in (the Messiah's) name to all nations" (24:47), and into Acts and Peter's directive "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38), Luke casts the Lord's salvation in terms of release from sins via repentance.[39] Jesus' ministry was to "call sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). There is joy in heaven over sinners who repent (Luke 15). The one who says "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" is the one who goes home justified (18:13, 14). Repentance elicits forgiveness (17:3–4). Where there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness. Indeed, "unless you repent, you will all perish" (13:5).

One might object that neither the paralytic in chapter 5 nor the sinful woman in chapter 7 explicitly repents before Jesus extends forgiveness to them. But this objection is overcome by attention to Jesus' focus on their faith. A connection between faith and repentance is not as obvious with the paralytic as it is with the sinful woman, but the rhetorical effect of telling the story of the sinful woman subsequent to telling the story of the paralytic is to expand the reader's understanding of faith to include acts that convey a turn away from sin and to Jesus. The faith of the paralytic and the sinful woman stands in contrast to the rejection of Jesus by those party to his crucifixion.

The nature of Jesus' prayer on behalf of his executioners may be illustrated in this way. In my pastoral practice, I distinguish between forgiving someone and "giving up the grudge." When a troubled parishioner, recalling Jesus' commands to forgive (Luke 6:37; 17:3–4), laments to me that he or she feels unable to forgive an unrepentant offender, this distinction clarifies the parishioner's situation and offers resolution. Forgiveness is a transaction that requires the involvement of both the offender and the offended. "Giving up the grudge" is a unilateral action on the part of the offended, not dependent upon the behavior of the offender: one commends the offender to God's judgment and mercy and does not allow one's own attitudes, thoughts, or actions to be bound to the offense or to the offender. The analogy is not perfect. Nevertheless, when he prays "Father, forgive them," Jesus is giving up the grudge.



This prayer functions paradigmatically. On the cross, Jesus himself does what he commands his hearers to do in 6:28. The prayer "Father, forgive them" is an appeal to God for God's beneficence toward those

39. See Guy D. Nave Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts* (Academia Biblica 4 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002]), esp. 189.

who are condemning him. It is a prayer of blessing (as in εὐλογέω). Jesus is blessing those cursing him, praying for those abusing him.

As is universally recognized, the dying Stephen's prayer for his murderers echoes the dying Jesus' prayer for his: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Stephen would have been obligated to forgive those who killed him had they asked for forgiveness (Luke 6:37; 17:3–4). But they do not ask. Therefore, Stephen does as Jesus did: he commends them to God. He prays for those abusing him.[40]

The second prayer. Jesus' final prayer before his resurrection (23:46), the one he utters at the point of his death, is prayed in words that are not his own. He prays Psalm 31:5 (LXX Psalm 30:6), after first identifying the Father as the addressee of his utterance: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." At this climactic moment, the reader learns of another dimension to Jesus' prayer life—namely, that it can reach into the liturgy and sacred songs of his people to borrow just the right words.

This prayer is hardly private; Jesus shouts it with "a loud voice" (23:46). The prayer is apparently overheard by the centurion and is at least part of the reason for the centurion's praise to God and assertion of Jesus' innocence (23:47).

At Jesus' departure

Jesus leaves his followers with a blessing reminiscent of the blessing Simeon gave Mary and Joseph in the temple.[41] Jesus blesses (εὐλογέω) them, and as he is blessing them he ascends away (24:50–51). Based on the rhetoric of εὐλογέω that we have seen previously in Luke's Gospel, we can describe this blessing as a prayer to the Father, praising God for God's beneficence shown to these followers and anticipating the beneficence of God that will be shown through them in the future. Even before the Holy Spirit descends upon them (Acts 2), the disciples enjoy the favor of God.

Concluding comments

Luke's characterization of Jesus reflects Aristotle's and Horace's ideal of consistency.[42] Jesus is a pray-er from beginning to end. Prayer is a constant in Jesus' ministry, from his baptism to his death, and it is with a prayerful word that he ascends.

Lucan commentators frequently observe that Jesus prayed before pivotal events in his life. They note that he prayed before selecting the Twelve, before his transfigu-

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40. It is worth noting that in both cases, Jesus' prayer for his executioners and Stephen's prayer for his, the prayers remain unfulfilled within the narrative itself. By contrast, Luke chronicles the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer for Peter (22:32). Is Jesus' prayer for his executioners predictive of their future reception of forgiveness? Does this prayer come to fruition like his prayers for Peter did? Or is Luke's silence about the prayer's fulfillment ominous?

41. Mikeal C. Parson, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts: The Ascension Narratives in Context* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 21 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987]), 74–75, proposes that Jesus' blessing brings to mind Zechariah's failure to bless the people (Luke 1:23). "In effect, Jesus completes what Zechariah could not do: he blesses the people of God" (p. 74). The interpreter must decide whether Jesus is adopting a more priestly bearing, that is, speaking for the Father to the disciples, as Parsons suggests, or whether he is more at this point expressing thanks and praise to the Father for the sake of the disciples, as I suggest, drawing on the parallel with Simeon. The two interpretations may not be mutually exclusive, but they do cast the scene in differing lights.

42. Aristotle, *Poetics*, XV.4; Horace, *Art of Poetry*, 119–27.

ration, and before his arrest. A survey of the Gospel confirms that this observation is true. But by itself the observation can be misleading. It would be a mistake to imply that the presence of prayer makes the event exceptional. Luke's mention of Jesus in prayer is not necessarily a narrative marker that a climactic moment is at hand. References to Jesus praying are scattered through exceptional and less exceptional narrative moments. They form the backdrop for mundane days as well as for pivotal events.

In addition, Jesus' prayer life in the Gospel of Luke is too varied to be captured by a single summary statement—and maybe that is an aspect of Luke's message. Jesus' prayers are not confined to any one purpose and do not serve any one function. Prayer may be traditional (a table blessing) or decidedly nontraditional ("Father, forgive them"). Jesus may pray in his own words and with words borrowed from his Scriptures. He prays at revelatory times and at introspective times.

Where we know the content of Jesus' prayers, these prayers model or mirror the prayers and piety of other faithful persons elsewhere in Luke-Acts. Believers are not expected to imitate all of Jesus' characteristics. Some characteristics of Jesus set him apart from his followers and from the rest of humanity. Jesus' transfiguration is an obvious testimony to Jesus' uniqueness; less obvious is the beneficence Jesus shows toward the blind, the lame, and the poor, beneficence that sets him apart as God's unique eschatological agent of salvation.[43] But when it comes to prayer and character traits associated with prayer, Jesus is the believer's model.[44] Thus the narrative urges believers to as full and wide-ranging a prayer life as Jesus' was.

I quoted Scholes and Kellogg above to suggest that in Luke's Gospel "every aspect of character is given expression in action." Let me draw this to a close by asking, What aspect or aspects of Jesus' character are brought to expression through prayer?

Prayer is a constant in Jesus' ministry, from his baptism to his death, and it is with a prayerful word that he ascends.

Several character traits come to my mind: ritually pious, deferential to the Father, unhurried, unselfish, and independent. Given the "gaps" in Luke's sketches of Jesus at prayer, any interpreter's summary of Luke's characterization of Jesus through prayer runs the risk of being a reflection of the interpreter's personally held view of ideal character traits. Letting our impression be shaped by the full sweep of references to Jesus at prayer serves as a corrective to idiosyncratic characterization.

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43. If the church is to imitate Jesus' beneficence to the blind, the lame, and the poor, why are there so few examples in Acts of Christians healing the blind and the lame, and no references at all to the poor?

44. See, e.g., Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:31; 7:59–60; 10:9; 16:13. It is striking, however, that Luke does not record in Acts any Christian addressing God as "Father." Peter refers to "the Father" in 2:33, but this is in a speech, not a prayer.

Luke opens his Gospel with a nod to similar works by his predecessors: "many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us" (1:1). So why one more? That it "would seem good" to Luke to add to the number of narratives about Jesus already available implies that Luke believes there is more to the story than others have already recorded.[45] But Luke does not tell us directly what this "more" is. To find it, we look for what we can infer from the Gospel itself, for what we can infer from distinguishing characteristics of his narrative.

Is it too far-fetched to suppose that Luke determined that another orderly account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was needed, in part, in order to convey the character of Jesus as pray-er?

Sitting on a shelf behind me as I conclude this article is a four-and-a-half-foot long row of books on the person of Jesus. Among the thousands of pages describing the person and work of Jesus, my quick review netted only about two dozen pages that make anything more than a passing reference to Jesus as a person who prayed, and most of these are devoted to scholarly ruminations related to the Lord's Prayer. Yes, I am aware of the methodological hurdles the criteria of dissimilarity and multiple attestation place in front of passages that refer to Jesus' prayer life.[46] Nevertheless, as I enjoy speculating that one of Luke's motivations for writing his narrative was to reassert to his audiences[47] the significance of Jesus as one who prayed, I would add that it delights me to turn to his narrative to do likewise—that is, lift up Jesus the Pray-er for my audiences as well.

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45. Alternatively, Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3 [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991]), 4, suggests that Luke may have seen his unique contribution to be presenting the narrative "in order"—that is, providing persuasiveness through his sequencing of events. So also, in part, Robin Griffith-Jones, *The Four Witnesses: The Rebel, the Rabbi, the Chronicler, and the Mystic—Why the Gospels Present Strikingly Different Visions of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), 194–95.

46. Hal Taussig, *Jesus before God: The Prayer Life of the Historical Jesus* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1999), attempts to overcome these hurdles.

47. I use the plural "audiences" deliberately. See Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, 3, 20–21.

Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany—Fifth Sunday in Lent, Series C

The Purposes of Preaching

How would you define the purpose of preaching? I am spending my sabbatical writing a book that I hope will help preachers and parishioners talk together about their understandings of the sermon's purpose, in order to identify the faith convictions that provide the basis of their various understandings and explore the implications of those convictions for congregational life and mission. In formulating my own understanding of the purposes of preaching, I've discovered that the list seems to be ever-expanding. Preaching brings unbelievers to Christ or the unchurched into the congregation. Preaching might be a doctrinal lesson for the faithful, a witness to the Good News of Christ, an exposition of Scripture, a pronouncement of divine judgment, or an assurance of God's love.

As I write these words, I have just completed a three-month preaching assignment in the same congregation, a real treat for a seminary preaching professor. Personally, preaching in the same congregation on a weekly basis keeps me open to, connected with, and dependent on God. For me, a purpose of preaching is to keep me spiritually disciplined.

In a collection of essays titled *Purposes of Preaching* (ed. Jana Childers [Chalice, 2004]), "leading scholars in the field of homiletics, all of them powerful preachers," describe the purposes of preaching in North America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Their list includes (1) theological interpretation of life through conversation; (2) exorcizing and building up the community of faith in practices of a discipleship; (3) opening people to God's ongoing and unfolding work in the world revealed in Jesus Christ; (4) presenting the acknowledged word of God in such a way that the listener or observer senses the impulse of change or conversion in his or her own life; (5) forming Christians for and calling Christians to mission; (6) speaking what cannot be spoken, empowering and being silenced by those who have little voice and even less power; (7) keeping in touch with God; (8) disrupting life to create a space in which the Holy Spirit can work, the community can rethink, revisit, and receive; and (9) communicating faith.

What would you and the people in your congregation say is the purpose of preaching? Reflecting on the "experts'" list of preaching's purposes, and adding my own ideas to it, reminds me that, however we name its purpose, preaching ought to do what God is doing–in the text and in the world, but mostly in the gospel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Pastor Timothy V. Olson, author of this set of Preaching Helps, reminds me of the old saying that the purpose of preaching is to "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." But Pastor Olson takes things a step farther, highlighting for us that, in the readings assigned for the final Sundays after Epiphany and Lent, God turns everything upside down. He reminds us that "the pervasive theme of reversal runs throughout Luke. From Mary's song to the resurrection itself, Luke proclaims that not only are changes on the horizon of history but that the coming day will turn the world upside down. The 'real' world is actually inverted and will be righted in the end, by God."

As Christians, God confronts us, undoes our pretensions, gives us divine work to do, and then accompanies us into a world with a message that may or may not be welcome but is nevertheless a means of announcing God's reign. We are undone by the presence of God. Without the cross, the brilliant light of God's presence causes us to fall on our faces. Because of the cross, as Paul says, that light comes so close it is reflected in us. We are somehow cleansed, somehow made worthy, somehow selected to be God's messengers. Epiphany happens when we find ourselves living prematurely upside down.

Pastor Olson also turns the Lenten theme of repentance upside down—or perhaps restores it to right side up. Repentance is less about giving up, making amends, doing right, and changing our ways. Repentance is about turning around from our own way of being and living to see the new thing God is doing, the change that God is making, the reversal that God is bringing. Pastor Olson reminds us that only the repentant will be able to see how God will turn the devastation to new life. The Lenten call to repentance, then, is "an opportunity for each and every one of the people to reflect, turn, stand before the Lord in humility, and see what God will do."

Of course, it is not enough for preaching to do what God is doing, in this case turning everything upside down. Preaching ought to do what God is doing in the way that God does it. The invitation of these seasons is to preach in ways that help our people to look for God's epiphanies in themselves rather than on remote mountaintops and to repent in ways that lead them to look to God rather than concentrate on themselves.

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I pray that preaching Epiphany and Lent finds you turning to see what God is doing as you lean into God's inverted reign!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor of Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 4, 2007

Isaiah 6:1–8 (9–13)
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Luke 5:1–11

First Reading

The second half of the eighth century B.C.E was a time of grave uncertainty, terror, and fear for the people of Judah. The conquering power of the Assyrians was on the march. Their neighbors, Syria, and their kin, Israel, were conspiring to get Judah involved in an effort to stop Assyrian hegemony, even if it meant installing a new king. Into these events the Word of God enters through the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah's commission to speak to these events comes to us in familiar form. Like the burning bush of Moses and the angel of Gideon, Isaiah is confronted by God through an epiphany of wondrous dimension. As a priest, the place of Isaiah's vision is expected—the immense, awe-inspiring, mighty temple of Solomon. The hem of God's robe fills the huge temple; the voice of God shakes the unshakable hinges of the mighty doors. While Isaiah may have felt fairly secure and even righteous in the temple, this vision undoes all pretenses, and the ceremonially clean priest confesses his true status as "unclean." Through both a word pronounced and action taken (v. 7) Isaiah is made clean. His response is to offer himself as the one who will speak for the heavenly court, even though Isaiah does not know what he will say. The word he is to speak is one of judgment. The Assyrians will not be the only means of God's wrath. When they are done, another wave of judgment will fall. In the end, hope rests in a stump, a small remnant. The content of this message is played out in the chapters to come as Isaiah pronounces God's cleansing judgment upon Judah and the whole world.

The characteristics of Isaiah's epiphany are also present in the other two readings appointed for this day. In 1 Cor 15:1–11, Paul looks back upon his own commissioning as an apostle. The events of the encounter on the Damascus road are accessed in verse 9. That story contains the dazzling encounter and divine speech of Isaiah's experience. Like Isaiah, Paul confesses his status as "unfit" or unworthy (οὐκ εἰμὶ ἱκανὸς) because of his persecution of the church. While this is different than Isaiah's language of being unclean (ἀκάθαρτα from LXX) and Peter's declaration of his sin in the gospel reading (ἁμαρτωλός), the meaning in all three phrases engenders the same experience. Each of the three called is undone in the presence of the Lord. Additionally, Paul's message is not of his own imagination; it is "handed on" (v. 3). Here the tradition of the apostles supplies the message.

The reading from Luke centers on Simon as the object of the epiphanic commissioning. Unlike the previous experiences of Isaiah and Paul, this epiphany has no bright lights or earth-shattering, heavenly voices. It has fish—lots of fish. After a long night of catching nothing, the professional fisherman is instructed by a carpenter to let down nets in the heat of the day. Simon explains the seeming futility but then obeys. Simon is undone by the presence of so many fish that the boats are swamped. While the scene is much more this-worldly, much more incarnational, the impact is the same. Peter's pretensions are stripped away, and he ends up leaving everything—including a huge pile of fish—to do as Jesus commands.

In the end, while these three readings are about Isaiah, Paul, and Simon Peter, the

main character is God, a God who confronts us, undoes our pretensions, gives us divine work to do, and then accompanies us into a world with a message that may or may not be welcome but is nevertheless a means of announcing God's reign.

Pastoral Reflection

The stories of Isaiah, Paul, and Simon Peter as they are encountered by God may provide some of the best material for preaching this week. In each case we see people undone by the presence of God. In each case we see people somehow cleansed, somehow made worthy, somehow selected to be God's messengers. The disparity in the stories provides a means of speaking this word to a variety of people.

Isaiah is a priest, a cleric, a man comfortable and at ease in the presence of holy things. Isaiah is a character that we preachers may be able to understand just a little. Even if Isaiah is the most reverent, pious priest who ever lived, we know the struggles of the office. There are days we can be "holier than thou." There is a sense in which we get so used to texts, stories, sacraments, and the like that they sometimes seem ordinary. Let's be honest: while we may always be sure that we live among people of unclean lips, we at least sometimes feel ours are a bit more germ-free. Isaiah's vision undoes all that kind of pretense and reduces the priest to lying on the floor in the fetal position. He speaks the truth of himself, and God's angels cleanse him, making Isaiah now worthy for the work he may have thought he was doing before.

Saul/Paul's story is well documented. Like all the zealous persecutors of the world (we perhaps know more about this than even Paul), Saul is bent on being right, being righteous. Saul is sure of his claim on truth as he proceeds up the road to Damascus. Like Isaiah, Saul finds himself on the ground, faced with his newly revealed falsehoods and the real truth found in Christ. Like Isaiah, he now is sent to proclaim a word that not everyone welcomes but that gives life.

Simon Peter's story is more subtle. The only possible pretense he brings to the story is as a fisherman good enough to own his own boat. Having labored all night, he knows that fish are not happening that day. Bad news at the dinner table, I suppose. When a carpenter commands him to try again, I imagine Simon rolling his eyes. Out of respect, social pressure, or faith, he obeys. The catch of fish leaves him on the ground, questioning everything he ever knew but sure of one thing: He has met the Messiah, and he is unworthy. The radical impact of the meeting makes a fisherman leave a pile of fish on the beach and change careers. Simon Peter, who tradition says will pass on what he has received until it gets him hung upside down on a cross, will bear God's Word to a world that needs it so badly.

There is something familiar about the plot line of these three stories. It happens every week. People full of pretense, full of themselves, gather together. In the hearing of the Word of God, if we dare to listen, we are undone, confronted by the Word and thrown to the ground. That Word then raises us up and tells us not to fear. As we open our hands, we receive the sacrament and, once again, are proclaimed worthy. Then, we too are sent to proclaim, in season and out. TVO

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany February 11, 2007

Jeremiah 17:5–10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12–20
Luke 6:17–26

First Reading

The passage from Jeremiah strikes a chord that resonates throughout the readings for the day. The first section (vv. 5–8) is reminiscent of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Wisdom and foolishness, curses and blessings are laid side by side that we might learn the difference, even if our "heart is devious" (v. 9) and we remain resistant to the teaching. The question at the root of such a presentation is "In what or whom will you trust?" בטח, which means to "trust" or "have confidence," appears in v. 5 in a condemnation of trust in human strength. It appears again in v. 7 lifting up trust in the Lord. The wise choice is clear. Even though the choice laid before the student of wisdom is said to take place in the *heart* (vv. 5, 9), the Hebrew sense of this word, לב, alludes to the thinking, inner workings of a person, not the seat of emotions, as we so often think.

The curse that results from turning from the Lord and relying on human strength is borne by images of being dry, barren, and unnourished. A shrub in the desert, parched wilderness, and salt lands evoke a sense of futility. While a sense of punishment cannot be excluded, it seems that the curse is self-inflicted. Planting a shrub in the desert does not lead to lush vegetation. Verse 10 asserts that the Lord "give[s] to all according to their ways." The blessings, in contrast, offer not only images of water, nourishment, and life but the added dimension of resistance and strength in the face of the adversity of drought and heat.

It might be said that Paul is also addressing the polarity of wisdom and foolishness among the Christians at Corinth. Concerns about the disposition of the dead have arisen that have led to doubts about the resurrection. Perhaps it was the prominent Greco-Roman notion of the immortality of the soul. Perhaps it was simply an inability to accept resurrection at all, as in the case of the Sadducees. Whatever the case, Paul presents the wisdom of the resurrection by first positing that it is untrue. If that is the case, the Corinthians and Paul and every other Christian should call it quits. The resurrected Jesus is the cornerstone on which faith stands. The Corinthians want to fit the resurrection into an existing "wisdom" construct, to plant a shrub in the desert. Paul insists that all wisdom flows from this event of new life in Christ. This wisdom provides a real means of addressing their anxieties about the death of those they love.

Luke's abbreviated Beatitudes (compared to Matthew) evoke the pattern of the reading from Jeremiah. Luke also brings some new things to the table. In Luke, Jesus' blessings and curses have an obvious eschatological bent to them. The hungry *will* be filled, those who weep *will* laugh. Likewise, the rich *will* be hungry. These proclamations point to a day to come, a Jubilee. That coming day presents the blessings and curses in a way that advances the pervasive theme of reversal that runs throughout Luke. From Mary's song to the resurrection itself, Luke proclaims that not only are changes on the horizon of history, but the coming day will turn the world upside down. The "real" world is actually inverted and will be righted in the end, by God. Left in the sermonic context of this passage, it is possible to write off this vision as naive or idealistic. Luke however, sets this sermon in the broader context of a whole narrative where eschatology leads to

ethics. Mary sings of the day the rich and powerful will fall and the poor be lifted up. Zacchaeus (chapter 19) enacts that vision in anticipation of what is to come.

Pastoral Reflection

The texts from last week were ready-made for the season of Epiphany. Isaiah's grand vision full of light, fire, angels, and the booming voice of God, paired with the miraculous catch of fish in Luke, seem to shout "God is here!" Coming off those powerful images, this week's texts may seem pale, rather unepiphanic. However, just because these texts do not have lots of bells and whistles does not mean God is not revealed. In fact, the more mundane and routine shape of these texts may mean that they have a better chance at connecting with us. After all, how many of us have had an experience like Isaiah's?

God is found in wisdom in all of these texts. God is revealed in the way that leads to life, to blessing, to resurrection. That is fairly obvious. The difference between foolishness and wisdom is presented in rather clear terms—no riddles to figure out, no parables to unravel. Yet, precisely because the way of wisdom is so obvious, and because the language so familiar, we can miss the epiphany because we miss the stumbling block that is at the heart of biblical wisdom.

Jeremiah tells us that foolishness is found in self-reliance. Moving fast, we say, "Check. No self-reliance." But, look at our lives, our culture, our hopes and dreams. Jeremiah, in one verse, condemns most of our lives to wilderness and ash, drought and death. The terrifying prospect of rejecting "conventional wisdom" is the path to life, to encountering and being encountered by God.

The blessings and curses of Jesus are beloved, partly because we don't try to live them. Perhaps Luke's eschatological use of the future tense lets us procrastinate. If we read closely, we are likely, at least in our culture, to have more in common with those who are cursed than blessed. The reversal of the kingdom is coming. The epiphany for today happens when we find ourselves living prematurely upside-down.

The "law" in a sermon on wisdom is not so much about condemning what is obviously foolish. Instead, it is about lifting up how scandalous and "unrealistic" God's wisdom is. It is about showing how we are indeed not the green trees, well watered, but the shrubs, dying in the wilderness.

Hollywood and other cultural arts are wonderful allies in our proclamation of the law. Countless movies offer plots that uncover our bourgeois sensibilities with plots that end up exposing the foolishness of the ways of the world. *Wall Street* (20th Century Fox, 1987) presents the story of a wealthy financier who takes on a "student" to learn the wisdom of the world. In the end, both end up consumed by the house of cards they have built, on their way to jail. "Woe to you who are rich." Dozens of other examples help us lift up the "law" found in these texts.

Preaching however, cannot simply moralize. Law must be followed by gospel, death by resurrection. In the movie, the student turns state's evidence on his boss because he finally figures out that the foolishness of his blue-collar father and life in humble New Jersey aren't foolish at all. He has an epiphany, if you will, and finds wisdom where he never looked. He might be able to even say "Blessed are the poor."

As we think of the images of those who marched in the face of the wisdom of apartheid and died, can we say "Blessed are those who suffer"? As we stand at the bedside of a saint slipping into death, knowing how dearly she held to the promise of the resurrection, can we say "Blessed are those who mourn"? If we can, the gospel comes alive today, and epiphany happens. TVO

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 18, 2007

Exodus 34:29–35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2
Luke 9:28–36 (37–43)

First Reading

The heights of Sinai, belching smoke, mist, and fire, present a quintessential example of what one might identify as the "Old Testament" God: wholly other, supremely transcendent. The image of Jesus, teaching, talking, and showing a flash of very human anger, presents the counterpoint: the incarnational, very human "New Testament" God. The trouble with generalizations, of course, is that they do not present the complexities of the scriptural witness. The texts for today defy such generalizations and demonstrate a long tradition of blurring the categories of the transcendent and immanent God.

While the heights of Sinai, the untouchable mountain, provide the backdrop of the text from Exodus, and while the sin of the people has heightened their sense of God's otherness, it is precisely here that God comes all too close in the light reflected in Moses, who is unaware of the effect of God's presence on his appearance. God's presence is as plain as Moses' face, and that makes the people, still stinging over the events of the golden calf (Exodus 32), afraid to come close. Moses has spent time with the Lord and has been transformed. The people have spent time with an idol and are filled with fear.

For Paul, the divine light reflected through Moses on Sinai is a fading light. The Greek in v. 13 speaks of a glory that is at its end (τέλος) and being nullified (καταργουμένου). While Paul's argument is at times forced, it offers a pivot that moves us from Moses on Sinai to Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration. The light of Moses, Paul says, is a mediated light that is not only veiled but still as distant as Moses' face. The light, or glory, which Paul says is dawning, emanates from Christ and erases the final distance. This light is unveiled and, through Christ, shines in all who call on his name.

Luke's story of the Transfiguration is laden with meaning and mystery in its own right. It also is woven into the larger narrative in a way that gives us even more to chew on. The question uttered by Herod—"Who is this about whom I hear such things?" (9:9)—lies at the heart of this passage and of all of chap. 9.

Immediately before Jesus goes up the mountain with the chosen few, Peter declares that Jesus is the "Messiah of God" (9:20). Jesus then instructs the disciples as to what this means by pointing to the cross that awaits him in Jerusalem. In this context, the Transfiguration is a foretaste of both his coming glory and his "departure, which he was about to complete at Jerusalem" (v. 31)—the cross. Peter's confession led to a misunderstood word from Jesus. The glory of Jesus with Moses and Elijah confirms the messianic identity but is also followed by the misunderstanding of Peter. Amidst the myriad messianic expectations swirling around Palestine at this time, Jesus is defining what "messiah" really means, and it is mysterious, even mindbending.

The Word that rumbles from the cloud is both a parallel and contrast to Moses' descent with the tablets. Moses bears God's Word to the people with the command "Listen to these." Here God commands "Listen to him" (v. 35). If we may borrow from John, Word has become flesh. Moses and the prophets are summed up in the one who is left alone, standing before his disciples.

The episode of the next day is a manifestation of God's power as Jesus does what his disciples could not: cast out a demon. The curious turn here is that these same disciples seemed to have no trouble with this kind of task at the beginning of the chapter (9:1–6). The only thing that has changed for all of them is the growing misunderstanding about Jesus' messiahship, rooted in suffering and service.

Pastoral Reflection

There seems to be a rash of new television shows that are about kidnapping. Shows like *Without a Trace* perhaps speak to a society that feels lost. Many of the episodes follow a plot where a child has been abducted. By the end of the show, the intrepid FBI agents have tracked down the child and the kidnapper. The kidnapper is somehow removed from the plot, and then the agents find the child, cowering in a corner. Conditioned by the length of time in captivity to fear strangers, the initial reaction to the agent who has come to the rescue is to recoil. A chasm opens up between the one who is lost and the one who has come to save. Because all television shows like this end on a high note, somehow the child opens up to the agent and the chasm closes, the distance is overcome. Agent and child go off to safety hand in hand.

There is a sense in which the texts for the Transfiguration of Our Lord are about a similar chasm that exists between God and God's people. On the one hand, like moths to flame, the glorious, gleaming figures of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus attract us. On the other hand, we approach with fear and trembling because we have built the golden calf; we shine so little. We cower in the corner when the glory descends. Yet, in the midst of the terrifying light, a face, a hand, a voice reaches across the divide, and God is with us. What must God do to stop our fear? What do we do when God draws near?

In the movie *End of the Spear* (Every Tribe Entertainment, 2006), the Waodani people of South America are encountered by missionaries who arrive by air. The Waodani live a life untouched by modernity, and so the arrival of an airplane lowering gifts from the sky and bringing people who look so different is an encounter with The Other, in a sense. Mincayani is leader of this band of people. He is wary, afraid, and anxious about this encounter. The missionaries, led by the pilot (named Saint) want to bridge the gap, while Mincayani wants it preserved. The missionaries are speared to death, and that becomes the thing that allows the chasm to be closed in the end.

That the revelation of God's glory in Jesus through the Transfiguration is surrounded by Jesus' persistent announcement of his journey to the cross tells us what it will take for the chasm between God and God's people to be bridged. Before the cross, the brilliant light causes us to fall on our faces. After the cross, as Paul says, that light comes so close it is reflected in us.

Perhaps the most difficult element of these texts is the notion not only that the transcendent wishes to move to the immanent but that the glory, which is so wholly foreign to us, is somehow intended to be shared with us as well. Jesus does not simply want the disciples to bring all the demon-possessed and sick to him; he wants them to do the healing and exorcising. God allows the divine light to transfer in part to Moses. Paul boldly proclaims that the distance is traversed; the light is to shine in us. The glory of God, before the atoning death of Christ, is a revelation of what we are not. After the cross, it is a sign of what we shall be. TVO

Ash Wednesday
February 21, 2007

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

First Reading

Both Jesus, in the reading from Matthew, and the prophet Joel are calling for people's hearts to be turned toward God. The context of Joel's message is a locust infestation that, like other natural crises in the Old Testament, has brought at least the prophet, if not the people, to the realization that they have strayed from God. "Hearts turned to God" is a call for repentance. In Matthew, Jesus is teaching the crowd about the motivations and manifestations of faith. Practices like prayer, giving, and fasting arise from "hearts turned to God," not people concerned about themselves and their standing in the world.

The text from Joel begins with a prophetic announcement. The trumpet blast, the alarm, is a call to all the people. The prophet declares that the "day of the Lord is coming near" (v. 2). Joel follows the lead of Amos (5:18) and other prophets in portraying this day as something to dread rather than embrace. The prophetic word continues through the verses skipped by the lectionary, reiterating the prophetic declaration. This prophetic word turns to a priestly invitation in v. 12. Cultic acts and the proclamation of God's grace open the possibility of redemption. In v. 15, the prophetic announcement is renewed regarding the coming day of the Lord. However, note the change in tone. Where destruction was the key of the trumpet sound before the priestly verses, now a note of hope is sounded. This is not a transactional movement where the repentance of the people causes God to relent. However, without hearts turned to God, how will the people see the redemption if and when it comes?

Jesus' instructions offer a way to avoid the meaningless ritual Joel warns about in v. 13, "rend your hearts and not your clothing." Public displays of piety, in Jesus' day and ours, are often a means of public attention and heightened status. The end result is rewards that are both superficial and penultimate. This is what Jesus means by saying "they have received their reward" in v. 2. The end pursued by means of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving is to be eternal, aimed at the eschatological vision of the kingdom that pervades Jesus' preaching. When we aim toward the wrong goal, we miss the mark.

"Piety," as the Greek is translated in v. 1, refers to a healthy manifestation of righteousness, or God's justice. It is not filled with the negative connotations the word can bear for us today. This kind of righteousness is a common theme in Matthew. We can recall that Joseph, way back at the beginning of Matthew's story, was a "righteous" man—a pious man, in the best sense of the word.

Matthew's construction of the message of Jesus has a dual focus. Certainly, the strained relations with the synagogue in Matthew's world make this a bit of a polemic against conventional Jewish piety as practiced in a Roman culture. However, Matthew also aims the polemic at the constant temptation to this kind of heartless piety in his congregation (and ours).

The reading from 2 Corinthians connects with the other readings in its call to act as "ambassadors of Christ" (5:20) and its call to authenticity of action beginning in 6:4. Here, the character of piety is outlined. It produces hardship (vv. 4–5) and participates in God's character (vv. 6–7).

Joel calls for hearts turned to God through repentance and openness to God's ways. Matthew calls for our piety to flow

from hearts turned to God and God's future. Paul knows that hearts turned to God will manifest God to the world.

Pastoral Reflection

Preaching from these texts on Ash Wednesday always seems strange. Talking about faith practices in a world that sees faith as a possession perhaps provides material for a book on preaching that could be titled *People Are from Mars, Preachers Are from Venus.* The obvious homiletical approach is to reintroduce, again, the rather foreign concept that faith is practiced. Growing data point to faith practices as means and marks of congregational vitality.

The practice Joel lifts up is repentance. It is brought about by a stiff dose of reality: locusts cover the land. As we look around the world today, signs of plague and destruction are all around. High doses of reality are available to us if we will but look. To speak of repentance meaningfully, we need to wrestle with the complexities and realities of the judgment that comes in the shape of locusts, or perhaps terror attacks, or, on this night, the ashes that speak of the certainty of death.

Joel sees the locusts as a reminder that destruction is real, that the world is beyond the control of mere mortals. Are the locusts punishment? Joel seems to think that they are—in the first part of the announcement. But he also sees them as an opportunity to turn to God, to repent, to set aside all hubris and pride and allow God to bring redemption through the locusts. Locusts can befall the faithful as well as the sinful. Only the repentant will be able to see how God will turn the devastation to new life.

Ash Wednesday, with its proclamation "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return," brings us face to face with reality. It is a judgment. Repentance, as a practice, turns us over and over to the One who can make life from the dust and ashes. Perhaps this is a way of talking meaningfully about how hurricanes and the towering emptiness in the New York skyline after 9/11 are acts of judgment. They force us to admit we are not God, that destruction is what we humans are best at. They force us to turn hearts to God and repent that we might see what God will do. Note that Joel does not call only people he thinks are "evil" to repent, blaming them for the pests. It is an opportunity for each and every one of the people to reflect, turn, stand before the Lord in humility, and see what God will do.

What God will do is at the heart of what Jesus teaches us about prayer, fasting, and giving. These are not acts done to promote ourselves. We don't give away money at a press conference or while looking for a plaque to be raised in our honor. Instead, we practice now what is to come. In anticipation of the end of hunger through God's righteous hand, we experience the hunger that will be overcome. We pray "Your kingdom come" to remind ourselves that this is our goal and hope. We give to the poor because God's reign will bring an end to the unjust distribution of all that has been given to us.

Paul too sees the practice of faith as something that participates in the character of God. He also testifies to the reality that really practicing what we preach leads not to acclamation in the public square but to hardship and affliction, to a cross-shaped existence that is a paradox. We give away money in a world dedicated to accumulation. We pray in the face of hardship, relying on a faith that cannot be proved. We fast, denying ourselves the pleasures the world seeks. TVO

First Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2007

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

First Reading

The temptation of Jesus, beautifully narrated by Luke's Gospel, sets before us two major themes that deftly set a trajectory for the season of Lent. First, in the appearance of Satan, the conflict that will pervade the narrative and lead ultimately to the cross is laid before us. The figure of Satan is the personification of the powers and principalities that will be confronted ultimately on the cross. Second, we are introduced to the means by which this battle will be waged—the Word of God. Beyond any sense of mere incantations, the Word of God is the very presence of God in the conflict. These two themes find expression in all of the readings for this day.

Certainly, as Luke sets the scene of Jesus' temptation, we are intended to recall the events of Moses on Sinai, Elijah on Horeb, and the people in the wilderness. To connect Jesus' forty days to just one of these (or other) times of trial diminishes the archetypal treatment of such a journey in scripture.

The trouble with an ancient text's use of Satan to embody the temptations is that, for us who consider ourselves beyond such "mythology," the "guy in the red suit" distances us from the reality of these temptations in our own world and lives. Literalism and a sense of modern superiority rob the image of its power. Ancients (and folks like Martin Luther) were not so afflicted and could recognize how "Satan" attacked us all. At work here are "the powers" that try to contravene the Word of Life with a sentence of death—and do so with such subtlety that we fall unaware.

Charles Campbell offers an excellent insight into the reality of the powers in Luke's presentation.[1] The first temptation is to use one's own power for self-preservation or survival. The second is to use that power for political gain or social power. The third is to claim God's favor for one's own purpose. We need only look around the world to see these struggles constantly raging around us. In that light, the triumph of Jesus is cause for true celebration. He does do what we so often, if ever, cannot.

Paul's opening quote from Deuteronomy (30:11–14) brings God's Word close in the confrontation with the powers. The powers in question are implicit to some extent. The clue is in v. 11, where Paul announces "No one will be put to shame." Roman culture is a culture of honor and shame. Most of Paul's hearers probably either lived in shame or spent their time trying to shame others to receive honor. The confession of faith in Jesus Christ—one who is most shamed—frees us from that power. Verses 9–10 seem to imply an "if, then" structure that some might see as an opportunity to call for everything to be up to us. Just confess and believe rightly and you'll be saved. We know that Paul would choke on that thinking. The ability to confess and believe in Christ is a gift. To act in faith is to embrace his power over the powers that be.

The powers are also implied in the passage from Deuteronomy. False idols and rejection of God lurk throughout the whole of this book. The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are here in Israel, too. This cultic

1. Charles Campbell, "First Sunday in Lent, Year C," in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 320.

act of remembrance and response is a means of enacting the nearness of God's Word. Faced with prosperity they could claim as their own, the people are to remember the story. Then they are to act, grafting the act of gratitude onto the whole story of their ancestors. Their offering and life are now part of the great promise.

Pastoral Reflection

Perhaps the biggest temptation for preachers this Sunday is to deal with temptation too lightly. It is all too easy to make the theme of temptation a self-help presentation. It is also easy to lift up Jesus' victory over temptation so high it becomes inaccessible to our lives and struggles. The temptations that are dealt with in these texts are serious and universal.

We live in a culture of affluence, a land of plenty. The opening verses of the text from Deuteronomy, describing what the people will find in the Promised Land, mirror the prosperity of our own culture. The temptation for the people as they go from the scarcity and dependence of the wilderness to the abundance and seeming self-sufficiency of the Promised Land is simply to believe that it all has come by the sweat of their own brow, not God's gracious hand. The instructions for offering that follow aim the Word of God, in the form of the remembrance of the Exodus, at the heart of the temptation, that it might be exposed and defeated. The temptation to claim for ourselves all within our grasp sets us on a course that destroys neighbor and planet. It ultimately leads to self-destruction.

In the 1998 movie *A Simple Plan*, two brothers find a downed plane in the woods. The pilot is dead, and a bag with $4 million is inside. Their "simple plan" is to claim the money for themselves. The trouble is that the plan leads to ever more complex problems and ever more villainous outcomes: marital strife, alienation, and several murders. Loving people are destroyed by the "simple plan" to claim what does not belong to them.

Jesus' confrontation with Satan is a confrontation with powers that prowl around us every day. Prodded by the powers of Madison Avenue and the media, we are encouraged at every turn to a life of self-preservation. We are tempted to believe that the definition of daily bread, or the essentials of life, grows all the time. Once we "turn stones to bread" and abandon the relationship to the one whom we ask for such provision, we become slaves to the bread. Our appetite for things grows beyond bread, and we begin to see ourselves as "like God," supplying our own needs at the expense of everything.

It is not just politicians and corporate bosses who are tempted to take power over others. Every relationship in life creates an opportunity for us to try to lord it over the other. A coworker is making a costly mistake. Do you tell her so that she can avoid a career-ending blunder? or keep quiet and ensure one less competitor for the next step on the ladder? We act "like God" as we pretend to control our own fate and the fate of others.

The temptation to use God for our own purposes is also pervasive. Politicians claim moral authority by calling on the name of the Lord. White supremacists and fanatical terrorists inflict death and hate in God's name. One Christian calls another "unfaithful." We argue as if God is really on our side. All along God weeps.

To combat these temptations we need more than piety and personal strength. We need God to fight our battles. God is manifest in this battle through the Word of God and is then as close to us as our lips. Speaking of the powers as personified in Satan, Luther says, in his classic hymn, "One little

word subdues him." The good news is that one who can stand against the powers is with us and for us and has already triumphed. TVO

Second Sunday in Lent March 4, 2007

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17–4:1
Luke 13:31–35 or Luke 9:28–36

First Reading

The Lenten image of a journey rises to the surface throughout this week's readings. Abram's nomadic existence once again intersects with God's promises, leaving a sense that God is always on the journey with Sarai and Abram. Paul's invitation to "imitate" him, given to the church at Philippi, bears the qualities of a journey as he beckons the people not to follow the lead of those who are "enemies of the cross" (v. 18). The passage from Luke is set within the story of Jesus "setting his face to Jerusalem" that began in 9:51. This text attests to Jesus' determination to be on that path.

Three times God announces the covenant to Abram. This text in chapter 15 is the first after Abram's call in chapter 12. While the faith of Abraham is generally portrayed as the paradigm of righteousness, we can see here that it is a developing thing. Abram's terse and challenging response to God's approach and announcement in v. 1 should not be ameliorated or overlooked. God has chosen Abram, for better or for worse. Grace abounds in the relationship. God's patient proclamation as Abram's eyes are lifted to the heavens is the source of Abram's response—"he believed in the Lord" (v. 6).

Abram's obedient offering becomes yet another chance for God's presence to pour out grace. The animals are prepared according to custom and laid out in a way that invites the participants in the covenant to be bound. Abram navigates the gauntlet of flesh on his own. How will God do the same? In the fire that passes between. The journey of faith continues to chapters 17 and 18, where the covenant between God and Abram will further flesh out the faith of Abram and show the faithfulness of God.

The challenge to the journey of faith in Philippi is rooted in the "alternative" teachings that have cropped up. On the one hand there are the "Judaizers" who want to lead the Philippians down a road of legalism. Paul has addressed this matter in previous verses (3:2 ff.). On the other hand, Gnostic elements are pulling them in the direction of a disembodied antinomianism. That seems to be the ill-advised option in this passage. Paul's invitation to "imitate" him is not a bid to gain favor or prove himself right. It is more akin to the plea of a rescue worker telling people to "stick close" as he leads them from a burning building.

The warning of the Pharisees is certainly a plea for Jesus to alter his course. That occurs in many forms and comes from many voices, including the disciples. Leading Jesus astray is probably not the agenda of these Pharisees. Luke paints this category of character in his story with an ambivalent brush. There is no reason to assume they are being disingenuous. Nor is it unlikely they prefer Jesus over Herod.

Jesus' response drives toward the end of v. 32, where the word τελειοῦμαι points to a task completed, a thing run its course. Verse 34 begins a lament over the city that is his goal, Jerusalem. The tender, feminine image of the hen and chicks is powerful and a stark contrast to the fox of v. 32, who waits with others in the hen house. That "house" (v. 35) echoes prophetic treatments of the

fall of the palace, temple, and ruling powers found in Jeremiah 22 and Ezekiel 8–11. They will indeed see him in that city before it all falls on the day the crowd sings "Blessed . . ." (v. 35). They will neither recognize him nor listen. His journey, however, will be at its destination.

Pastoral Reflection

In the movie *16 Blocks* (Warner Bros., 2006), we are introduced to a broken-down, drunk cop (played by Bruce Willis) and a petty crook (played by Mos Def). The cop's task is simply to get the crook to the courthouse that stands sixteen blocks away to testify. Because the crook's testimony will reveal police corruption, the simple trip turns into a race for survival. The remarkable thing about the plot is that these two unlikely pilgrims are forged by the journey into friends. With each hurdle overcome, they become faithful to one another in ways that surprise them and change them into better people than they were. In self-sacrificing acts that neither expects of the other or of themselves, their journey confronts the powers that rob them of life and the powers out to destroy them. It is precisely when one manages to show faithfulness to the other that the other is further transformed.

This is the kind of journey in which we find Abram and Sarai engaged in the text from Genesis. So often, we can blithely portray Abram as a paragon of faith in a way that makes it sound easy for him. He was *always* Abram. Yet, as his name change signals, Abram is shaped by every step, every encounter with his traveling companion, the God who called him from Ur. We see here his very real frustration at the lack of offspring. We see how God meets him in that despair and offers hope through a promise. We see faith kindled to yet another level. If we read on to the second and third accounts of covenant renewal, we find more evidence of a transformative journey with God.

The Gospel pulls us along with Jesus who has "set his face toward Jerusalem." It might be hard to speak of any real transformative aspect of the trip to the cross on Jesus. He is the faithful companion, determined, ever moving. However, we can note the impact this journey has on those who are swept along the way with him. Today, Jesus explains a bit more what it means to be on the way, what the end point of the journey will be. The words are hard for all around him to understand. Fortunately, it is not by words that Jesus will save the world, but by his actions. Even as his opponents walk along to the cross, they will be transformed—perhaps not willingly—as the structures of power begin to crumble through the events of cross and resurrection.

The passage from Philippians offers up another image related to our journey of faith: intersections or forks in the road. The competing voices in the community offer paths that lead down the wrong road. Like the German soldiers who moved road signs to point the wrong way as they retreated in the face of the D-Day invasion, the "Judaizers" and "Gnostics" are, for Paul, playing a game of misdirection. The faithful need to stick together on the journey and cling to the teaching of the apostles.

The challenge for this day is to be on the road. The good news is that God in Christ is the constant, faithful companion who not only leads us and finds us when we are lost but will sacrifice himself for our sake. In the process, we will be changed—which can be either a challenge or good news, depending on how honest we can be with ourselves. Whether it is sixteen blocks or a lifetime, we must be on the way. TVO

Third Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2007

Isaiah 55:1–9
Psalm 126
2 Corinthians 10:1–13
Luke 13:1–9

First Reading

The inescapable Lenten theme of repentance is woven through the fabric of all the passages appointed for this week. The pervasiveness of this single theme, however, does not mean that the tapestry is monochromatic. There is a rich, complex interweaving of the many ways that repentance is an essential element of our journey with God.

The text from Isaiah comes to us from the time when exile is drawing to a close. Yet, while God knows and the prophet trusts this to be true, the people are unsure. Some are learning how to be Babylonians, and stay that way. Some just live in fear and despair. The opening verse uses the image of a marketplace where everything is free. The imperative voice of the grammar does not necessitate a harsh tone. This is more like the voice of a street vendor persistently urging people to partake of the bounty. For a people who question each day how God could still be at work when everything seems to be gone, the attention of the prophet to the covenant of David (vv. 3–5) provides a strand of unbreakable cord that connects them with their roots and the ongoing story of God's love.

The call to repentance in this passage is not about stopping nasty personal habits or losing weight. Instead, it is a call to hope in the face of despair. Despair has driven the people to other marketplaces (v. 2) where the food does not do anything but deepen the despair. The call in the opening verses, and again in verses 6–7, begs the people to turn to a way of life, a way of being, that is awash in hope. When desperate people hear an offer of such grand possibility, they normally say "It is just too good to be true." The prophet responds by reminding them that God's ways are inscrutable (v. 9).

Sometimes repentance can happen when we reconnect our lives to the never-ending story of God's love for God's people. The Corinthians have developed a particularly nasty strain of libertarianism in response to the gospel's gift of freedom. Paul is trying to reframe their notions about everything and anything being acceptable. Paul parallels baptism and the Lord's Supper with the experience of Exodus and then lifts up the stiff-necked ways that Israel responded in a way that allows the story to refute their behavior.

Jesus' call for repentance in the reading from Luke has the impact of a slap in the face if we read it closely. Two examples of suffering and violence are lifted up as means of addressing the relationship between sin and suffering. One incident involves violence perpetrated in Galilee; the other, natural disaster in Jerusalem. The effect is to address the universality of the matter. The answer to the link between sin and suffering that we actually hope for is that suffering is the result of sin. That means that I am in control of whether suffering happens or not. Jesus refutes such nonsense in a way that prefigures his innocent death on the cross.

In one sense, Jesus seems to be saying "Stuff happens." However, his rather direct call to repent, or perish in the same way, does not allow a fatalistic shrug. What Jesus really refutes in this passage is the notion that if you are alive and happy, you deserve it; you are not sinful. No: death comes to all. Judgment comes to all. The call to repent is the call to live a life filled with gratitude for each breath and live toward the things that transcend happiness defined as simply ex-

isting without suffering.

The parable of the fig tree points to the radical grace of God brought in Jesus Christ, who forestalls the judgment of all at his own expense. Yet, the final moment will come, and the tree is indeed expected to bear fruit. This kind of serious attention may be uncomfortable for both people and preacher, but there it is.

Pastoral Reflection

Perhaps the question "Why?" is part of what makes us human. We learn to ask it when we are young. We learn to ask it often. We especially ask it when bad things happen. As medical science continues to advance, we are becoming ever more aware that our personal choices often bring horrific consequences to our bodies. "Did you hear that Harry has cancer?" one friend asks. The other says, "Yeah, bad break. You know he smoked for years." Though it may sound cynical, I can't help but wonder whether pointing to Harry's bad habit is a way to make us feel safe. As long as we don't smoke, smoked less, or stopped sooner, we can think we will not die of cancer.

In what may be some of the most relevant sections of the gospel for today's Christian, Jesus takes up the question of the relationship between sin and suffering in the passage from Luke. His response to questions about an incident at Galilee, instead of producing the assuring tones of pastoral presence we might expect from Jesus and offer ourselves, brings a call to repent, lest you "perish just as they did" (vv. 3, 5). His seeming harsh words unmask this human propensity to deny death and escape judgment. The Galileans who perished, those in Jerusalem who suffered, and even ol' Harry are no different from any of us.

Jesus does lift up an alternative, however. Through repentance we can somehow face the suffering, the inevitable death, in a way that is different. Through repentance, Jesus implies, our end may somehow not result in perishing "just as they did." What does this mean? Perhaps, as many commentators suggest, the death of the Galileans was a result of their pursuit of a revolution against Rome, and Jesus is calling for his own vision of messiah that precluded this and pursued peace. The parallel about buildings in Jerusalem falling down, commentators often suggest, is a prophecy about the destruction of the temple and the futility in trying to keep it standing. Repentance is a call to a new way of being with God.

Aside from these possibilities, we are offered the path to death that Jesus takes himself. Jesus links his suffering not with sin but with fidelity to God's will. Jesus does not give in to a despair that is concerned only with his own ending but goes to the cross forgiving all. Perhaps to "perish as they did" is to perish in the fear, anxiety, and despair evidenced by the human need to avoid death and judgment at all cost.

The Parable of the Fig Tree offers a word of grace: Through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the destruction has been put off. There is time. The parable also holds out a word of judgment: The time on the clock is still winding down. Whatever the preacher's solution to this paradox, this text offers up a way of preaching that lays out the complexity and paradox of the good news rather than holding to simplistic notions that fill the bumper stickers of the land.

The desperate images of exile also connect with today's landscape of fear, violence, and uncertainty. Drawing on what causes us to live in despair, the preacher has an opportunity to truly enact the gracious call to hope in Isaiah 55. The people live in exile, but release is on the way. We indeed live in Lent, but Easter is coming. We live in the shadow of terrorism and war, with no end in sight, but God is at work. We face

death and destruction personally and communally, but new life is promised. TVO

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2007

Joshua 5:9–12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16–21
Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

First Reading

There is movement in the texts for today. Joshua testifies to the movement of the people of Israel from wilderness to Promised Land, from wandering to possession, and from manna to milk and honey. Paul calls on the Corinthian congregation to move into a new life characterized by reconciliation with God, and so a life as "ambassadors of Christ" (v. 20). Jesus tells a parable that portrays the movement from lost to found, from outcast to son.

The reading from Joshua is preceded by one of those texts that make modern folk squeamish. Just after the waters of the Jordan have yielded their course to allow the Israelites to pass over, the command comes to recircumcise all the males. Scholars debate whether this is a second enactment of circumcision or the inclusion of uncircumcised relatives gathered along the way. In any case, this rite of initiation into the community of God's people is undertaken as a preparation for both the celebration of Passover and the taking of the Promised Land. The text does not explain whether God's "rolling away" of the shame of Egypt (Gilgal is from the Hebrew word that means "to roll") comes as a result of the group circumcision or as a precursor to what follows, or both. This Passover features a home-grown menu, not the manna that has come each day for a generation. This is a turning point. They now move from promise to fulfillment.

"From now on . . ." (v. 16), Paul says as this section of the letter opens. Immediately preceding this verse, Paul has lifted up the death and resurrection of Jesus as a constitutive event. Cross and resurrection have brought about a fulfillment, an end to the old ways. "From now on" things are different because we are reconciled to God in Christ. But this new status is not a personal possession, something we hold on to for ourselves. Instead, it makes us purveyors of the new way. Before, we were ambassadors of death and sin. Now, we have a new diplomatic mission to all the cosmos: to bring peace between God and everything through our lives lived under the rule of reconciliation.

The parable presented in Luke is perhaps so well known that the interpretive danger is in overlooking the richness of the parable as the obvious overwhelms us. First, the fundamental problem is in losing sight of the subject of the plot: the father. The parable is about "a man who had two sons" (v. 11). The two sons do not play the lead in this show. They portray a kind of movement from one life to another in the form of negative movements.

The younger son chooses to move away from status as a son by asking for the inheritance, which means he wishes the father dead. He moves, in progressive fashion, to life as a complete nobody, living with pigs. The older son too moves away from his status as son when he declares himself more like a hired hand (v. 29). The Gentiles and the Pharisees have moved from life to death.

The father has a way of moving all back to new life. As the younger son formulates a plan to simply move up a notch from nobody to slave, the father welcomes him as a son. The older son, who wishes to wallow in his self-loathing rather than eat with a sinner, is assured of his place with the father

as his child. In the end, it is the party the father throws that offends everyone. From the occasion that prompts the feast to the seating arrangements at the table, the father's graciousness and desire to bring new life is just—well, wrong. Isn't it?

Pastoral Reflection

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1). Whether we are honest about it our not, this is still one of our beefs with Jesus. The church today, whether through big social concerns or more local animosities, still has a hard time believing that the gospel Jesus brings is for everybody. The Corinthians have been busy building up exclusions to the guest list just a couple of decades after Jesus. Certainly Luke's intended audience felt the sting of the older son's gentle rebuke as well as the acceptance of the younger son. Perhaps one place to start for the preacher is by bringing out the Pharisee in all of us. The parable, read closely, is like a movie with an ending that leaves us hanging. Does the older brother go in? Can he reconcile with his father, let alone his brother? This unwritten ending suggests that this is the character Luke is aiming at us. It would be fine if the younger brother returned as a slave, perhaps to bread and water. The scandal is in the feast. If we can lift up these elements in our telling, it will make it tough to avoid the parable's meaning and make it hard to write the Pharisees off as simply religious cranks.

Fred Craddock points out that a great deal of preaching on the parable from Luke focuses on the son instead of the main character, the father. He says we do this with the parables that precede it as well. We focus on the *lost* coin and sheep instead of the *finding* and the *one who finds*.[2] It is the finding and the celebration that drives home the parable and makes it transformative. If Holy Communion is part of the worship when this parable is preached, one approach may be to unlock the joy and scandal that are present at the table each time we celebrate.

Another pitfall for preaching the parables in general and this one in particular is the temptation to explain. Parables, like strong narratives, may need a little set-up to bridge the contextual gap, but they are intended to invite the listener into the parable's landscape to get caught up in the story. Some hearers will resonate with the lostness of the younger son. Some will burn with the anger of the older one. Some may even see in the father a call to become more like the one who welcomes the sinner. To see the latter, we will need to lift up the costliness of this whole turn of events for the father. Both sons treat him as dead—one by asking for the inheritance early, the other by seeing himself as a slave. In order to welcome home the lost son, the father humiliates himself by running to meet him and incurring the wrath of both neighbor and older son when he throws a feast. This is all in character for a God who will go to a cross in order to communicate to you and me that we are welcome, we are loved, we are redeemed.

This parable is also an enactment of the biblical story of God and God's people. The people of Israel are always, it seems, returning home. Today's reading from Joshua can be seen as the embrace of the father as their wandering comes to an end and new life in the Promised Land begins. That it occurs around the Passover meal makes another connection between the two texts. God has welcomed home the lost without ever neglecting the faithful from the beginning of time. Will God do so with us? With some annoyance, we know the answer. TVO

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2. Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 186.

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 25, 2007

Isaiah 43:16–21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b–13
John 12:1–8

First Reading

There are signs in today's texts that "something is up." There is a sense of the future tumbling in upon us as we hear Isaiah pointing hopefully across the desert; as we hear Paul waving the church at Philippi forward, leaving behind all their extra baggage; and as we see Mary anointing Jesus for events that will change the world.

For the people of Israel, living in exile in Babylon, the events of the Exodus are an old story of bygone days. Perhaps the young roll their eyes as the elders recount the tales, wondering what all of this has to do with them. The reading from Isaiah is set in this context. The prophet, using images of the Exodus, reminds the people of the "good ol' days." Then, in a move that must have seemed like heresy to some and delusion to others, the prophet announces: "You ain't seen nothing yet." God is going to do a whole new thing—something that is reminiscent of the great deeds of Exodus but more than can be imagined. The desert that stands between home and the cursed place of exile will be opened up for passage and tamed by the divine hand. Isaiah's words create a space in the midst of despair for hope. They turn the terror of the trek home into a means of showing God's power (vv. 19–20). All of this is to come not because they are deserving but because God has called them to a vocation of praise before the nations (v. 21).

Paul's words issue a strong condemnation of clinging to the present way of looking at things. Paul describes his own credentials (vv. 4–6) as things that matter only in the old age (vv. 7–8). In fact, our credentials and deeds have been rendered "filth" (σκύβαλα, dung or garbage) in comparison to life in Christ. Paul expresses a yearning to embrace all that the new life in Christ offers (v. 10). Instead of seeing faith in Christ as a possession, an unchanging thing, Paul sees faith as something that drives us ahead into the future Christ has revealed. The image of running a race for all we're worth may not be a familiar way of looking at things for those who are more passive in spiritual matters.

John's Gospel presents the most in-depth look at the anointing of Jesus. It is connected to the raising of Lazarus, who is now seated at the table with Jesus. Jesus is among friends, those who love him (except for Judas, John reminds us). Anointing marks a change in direction in scripture. David is anointed king long before he takes the throne, but from that day forward his path, his life, and the life of Israel are altered.

The Passover is a recurring event in John. Each Passover points to Jesus' death and resurrection. The cleansing of the temple (John 2:13 ff.) and the feeding of the five thousand (John 6) show brewing conflict and advance Jesus' messianic mission and claims. The anointing acts as a marker that tells us that this next Passover will reach the zenith of Jesus' work.

Judas and Mary are contrasting characters. Mary can sense what is coming. She leans into the future, even if she does not yet fully see. She is the disciple straining for the light and life. Because she "gets it," her actions seem shameful (taking down her hair) and foolish (spending all that money). Judas is still in the dark and unable to see. His own greed (as John explains in v. 6) and his inability to trust Jesus' way keep Judas bound to the task he will undertake.

Pastoral Reflection

One of the artistic nuances that musicians deal with at the end of a piece of music is how long to hold the unresolved penultimate chord before resolving into the final note. The "Ah" must be just the right length before we reach "men." Too long is too much. Too short misses the tension and robs the resolution of its power. This final week of Lent is the "Ah" before the "men" of Holy Week and Easter. The preacher is called to lean toward where we are headed without rushing to the final cadence.

Living a life of anticipation is part and parcel of the Christian life as we live this side of the resurrection of all things. We see this anticipatory living played out in different ways in the readings for today. Isaiah deftly draws upon old refrains of Exodus in order to cast a vision of a trip home. Certainly there are parallels between living in Babylon, longing for release, and our lives today. In the face of terrorism, we can despair. In the face of financial pressures, we can dread the future. We too are capable of thinking that the "old, old, story" is just that: a story with no bearing on us. The preacher can borrow the message and technique of Isaiah to sound a hopeful cry that God is indeed always up to something new.

Paul's words to the Philippians bring to mind the image of taking teenagers camping for the first time. They show up with too much baggage to carry, sometimes even with curling irons and creature comforts that need to be plugged in. None of it will help, and all of it will hinder their travel. Paul sets aside what is worthless—his credentials and self-image—because he does not need them anymore. In Christ, he has been given all, and he will strain to embrace all that this means.

As pastors, we often get to walk with people through their final days. It is an honor beyond words. One thing we often observe is how the person facing death leaves behind more and more so that life is as full as possible. The dying don't have time to hold grudges or nurse old wounds. The dying don't have time to put up with pretense from others and see the folly of it in themselves. Paul urges us to live this kind of life, rooted in and yearning for Christ alone, as we live, not just as we face death.

In spite of the fact that Jesus rebukes those who rebuke Mary, some of us still think that Mary was wasteful, just too extravagant. We will apply this scene to our belief that stained-glass windows and expensive vestments and vessels are a waste. That John aligns those of us who feel this way with Judas is sobering. The difference between Judas's pragmatism (or deceit) and Mary's lavishness is rooted in anticipation. What makes Mary's gift perfectly acceptable is the gift that is coming through Jesus himself. She has some sense of what is ahead. Certainly the cross and resurrection of Jesus will pale the extravagance of her gift. In the shadow of the tomb and light of the empty tomb, what is expensive oil? Judas can't see this. He is an Israelite who can't imagine going home and a Philippian who clings to his titles. Perhaps if we could grasp, in a fleeting moment, the vision of Isaiah and the yearning of Paul, the extravagance of Mary would come as naturally as breath itself. TVO

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Responses
are welcome!

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