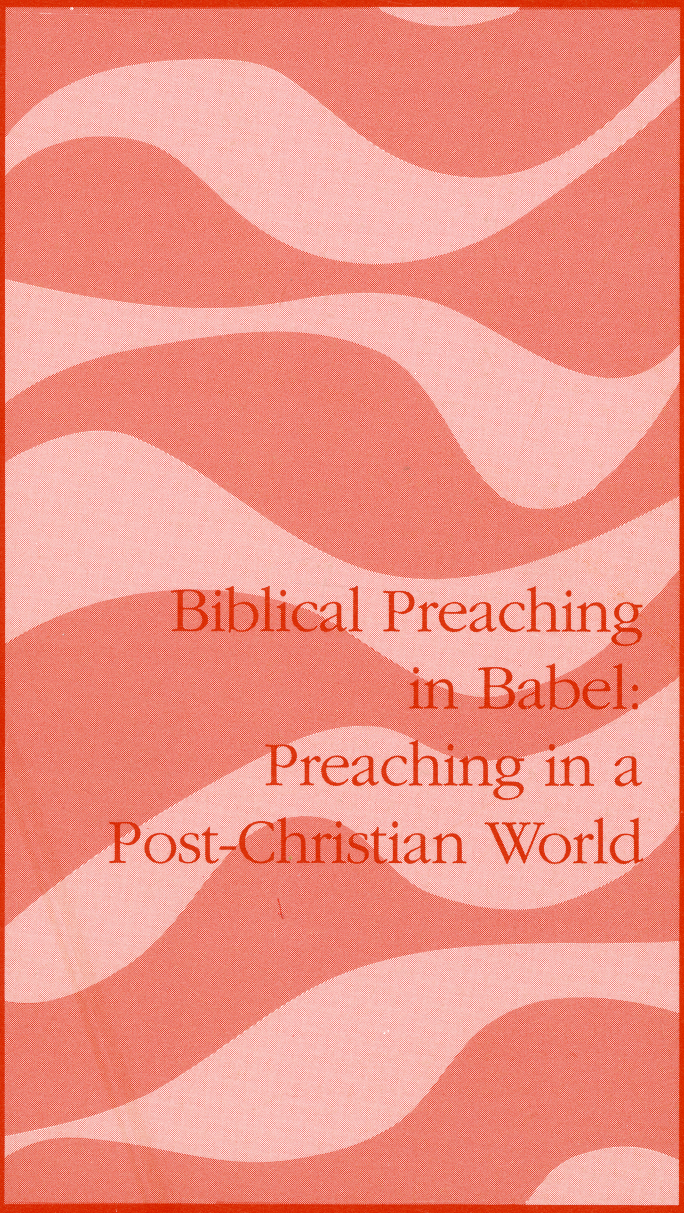
August 2003 Volume 30 Number 4



Biblical Preaching in Babel: Preaching in a Post-Christian World

CURRENTS in Theology and Mission

Currents

in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

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CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: $15.00 in the U.S.A., $20.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: $29.00 in the U.S.A., $39.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: $42.00 in the U.S.A., $57.00 elsewhere. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

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

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

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Biblical Preaching in Babel: Preaching in a Post-Christian World

The Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad and the Rev. Peter J. Gomes were the Hein Fry lecturers at the eight ELCA seminaries in 2002. Well-known preachers, they were asked to address the future of their craft in a culture that is post-Christian or at least post-Christendom. This they did with energy and enthusiasm, and with a good deal of hope, all of which makes us happy to share their efforts in this issue. All who trudge up the steps of the pulpit on Sunday mornings or drink in what is there being served will be heartened by this report on the state of the art—its challenges, opportunities, and mission.

In her first lecture, **Barbara K. Lundblad** observes that the theme for these lectures was chosen in part because people don't know the Bible, even inside the church. The words of the Bible linger on the page until they are spoken and heard and received in faith. The Bible is often messy, confusing, confounding, and contradictory. There is always a danger that we will insist on shaping the Bible in our own image. Even our confessions may tame the life out of the Bible. The movement is not always from the biblical text to the present situation; we bring our present situation to the biblical text as part of the interpretive process. Reading texts through the prism of justification, we Lutherans have often failed to hear the strong biblical call for justice. God is not only mercy for sinners and outcasts but manna for everyone. Is Babel only a place from which to flee, or is it also a place from which to listen? God is calling us to hear those gathered inside the sanctuary and those scattered outside the church doors. This isn't only a matter of evangelism but of rightly understanding the biblical texts themselves. The culture could teach us how to be more visual in our preaching. Isaiah 2 speaks about a word the prophet *saw*. Biblical preaching in Babel is difficult not only because of the secularization of America but because of the Americanization of Christianity. Biblical preaching calls us to pay attention to the portents of death masquerading as success and the tokens of resurrection hope in the midst of despair.

In her second lecture, **Barbara K. Lundblad** discusses "full-gospel" preaching. We can hear both old and new if we listen to the ongoing conversation between First and Second Testaments as well as what is new in our own time of history. The words written down invite us to see more than the words written down. In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip preached the good

news of Jesus beginning with Isaiah—though Jesus' name was not in the text. The Reformation Gospel—you will know the truth and the truth will make you free (John 8:31–32)—looks different when we hear it in the context of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11). Full-gospel preaching could not happen without paying close attention to both the Scripture text and the community text. In the story of Pentecost Luke gives us that glorious list of hard-to-pronounce places reshaped into a community of understanding, and what comes next? Biblical preaching. Full-gospel preaching must speak of both manna and mercy, pointing to God's provocative alternatives rather than the priorities of the world. Preaching that shapes and reshapes individuals and congregations doesn't remain inside the church walls. Can we translate full-gospel preaching into the language of the Web? Teenagers may be our best translation partners if we dare to ask them for help. Full-gospel preaching is for all the gathered and scattered children of God.

In his first lecture, **Peter J. Gomes** suggests that the paradigm that is dead is the paradigm of modernity and its absolute sense of self-confidence and self-assurance. That makes today the most exciting, demanding, and thrilling time for preachers. This may well be the first time the world is ready and even willing to hear the good news, because it has lived so long with bad news. If you have a congregation of very intelligent people who know nothing about the Bible, you have arrived in homiletical heaven. This is a teaching moment; it is even a listening moment. We have custody of the Bible because the culture by and large is not all that interested in it. It is ours—ours to open, to proclaim, to teach from, as it were, for the first time. The Bible comes to life where people are in a position to appreciate both the reality of tribulation and the reality of a hope that transcends that tribulation. We live in that difficult valley between history and hope. Our journey is not to go back to some previous moment; it is to take the momentum of those previous moments and be pushed forward to that great and perfect day which is yet to come. The sermons that will last are those that suggest how to learn to live in the middle of adversity, not prosperity. Hope is what you have left when everything else, including optimism, has been taken away from you. God doesn't love us because we are valuable, but we are valuable because God loves us. Our vocation as preachers is that place where our great joy meets the world's great need.

In his second lecture, **Peter J. Gomes** challenges the idea that the sermon itself is no longer a suitable or appropriate device with which to communicate in this age of communication. Short sermons are sermonettes for Christianettes. Such a thin diet creates people who are anemic, both scripturally and doctrinally. A long sermon is not necessarily a good sermon, but neither is a short sermon necessarily a good sermon. Is it better to have a long bad sermon

or a short bad sermon? One of the reasons Bill Clinton so charmed his friends and bedeviled his enemies was that, as a Southern Baptist, he understood the power of words and language and was far more exciting and interesting and compelling than—to take a name out of the air—Bob Dole. Your people will listen for 50 minutes if you have something to say for 50 minutes and say it well for 50 minutes. We are saved by our metaphors and not by our metaphysics. That means that we offer salvation not through our explanations but through the invitation to an experience. It is the irrationality, the unacceptability, the incredibility of our faith that is its chief attraction and our chief asset. If you are going to have a sermon at all, it must be a sermon that invites people into an experience, a relationship, and not simply into an exposition or an explanation. Emmaus is the perfect paradigm of the triumph of experience over explanation, but too often it is the road to Emmaus rather than the dinner in the upper room that consumes us. The hardest element of trust is to trust yourself—that you have been called, invited, or provoked into this great calling, that God, for reasons that you cannot explain, has seen in you something of value in this process.

We also include a sermon by **Peter J. Gomes** entitled "Good Shepherd, Good Sheep."

My triplet grandsons are now two and a half and have mastered the skill of climbing out of their cribs in the middle of the night and bugging their parents with their nascent insomnia. In desperation, their parents had them memorize "rules for bedtime" which they are happy to recite upon request: (1) stay in bed; (2) close your eyes; (3) go to sleep. These rules don't work, of course, just as there are no rules that make for good preaching. But I am heartened by the encouragement of our essayists, who tell us that our best preaching is still ahead of us and that our present context is a kind of homiletical heaven. When our message is that God is mercy for outcasts and sinners and manna for everyone, how can we not preach? And how can we not preach well and effectively? Memorize this rule: Just do it!

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Biblical Preaching in Babel

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After the terrible attacks of September 11, 2001, someone said, "Our response to these events will be determined by the simile we choose. Is it like Pearl Harbor, or is it like the Tower of Babel?" But no simile or metaphor could frame that day. Though many said, "We haven't seen such an outpouring of patriotism since Pearl Harbor," it was not like Pearl Harbor. No nation sent those planes, no government could be held accountable, and those who died were not in anyone's army. We've responded with the anthems of our nation and have bought flags faster than they could be sewn. We've called upon other nations to stand with us or be branded as our enemies. "God, bless America."

But there is too much pain and heartache to speak of the day as Babel's judgment. A few tried to bring God in to explain the tragedy, but not by comparing it to Babel. The problem, they said, was not tower-building, but that some were ungodly—libertarians, homosexuals, and pro-choice feminists were to blame. It didn't take long for such voices to be soundly chastised across the political spectrum, though the words couldn't be completely erased. Nothing could explain this tragedy except the very real presence of evil. It was not Babel, for that tower was not destroyed. Emotions were too raw to chastise the dead or the living for trying to make a name for themselves. It was not the time for critique, only unfathomable sadness. For many, it was also a time for revenge and a deep longing to know that the United States was still the greatest nation on earth. By Christmas time a billboard on the Westside Highway was pushing designer clothes, white letters on black: "God, dress America."

What is the Bible?

Babel and Bible. They sound so alike, Bs at the beginning and in the middle, Ls shaping the final sound. Only one vowel difference between them! Bible and Babel. Is Babel wholly profane and the Bible wholly holy? Did the fires of Pentecost reverse the confusing diffusion of Babel or call the diffusion good? Has this postmodern age taken Pentecost to the extreme: each one now hears in her or his own language so that no one can possibly preach a sermon that another could understand? (I hear what I hear and you hear what you hear, but we don't hear the same thing and there's no way we can authentically hear each other.)

The Bible is, of course, different things to different people:

- Stu Weber, writer and speaker for The Promise Keepers movement, says, "Think of the Bible as the owner's manual for your masculinity."[1]

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[1] Linda Kintz, "Tender Warriors," in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Castelli (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 500.

- An unnamed homeless woman interviewed by Jonathan Kozel in *Rachel and Her Children:* "The Bible is what taught me to read. When I read those 'thee's' and 'thou's' I have this dream. God comes to me. He calls me 'Thee.' I call Him 'Thou.'"[2]
- The parents in Stephen Dunn's poem "At the Smithville Methodist Church" wonder what to tell their daughter when she comes home singing songs about Jesus and the Bible. The father says, "Could we tell her the Bible is a great book some people use to make you feel bad?"[3]
- ELCA Constitution: "This Church accepts the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life."[4]

The theme for these lectures was chosen at least in part to address the present reality that people don't know the Bible, even inside the church. No longer can the preacher say, "Remember what happened to Jonah," because many people don't (or if they do, they remember something about a whale and nothing about Nineveh). No longer can we assume that the big words—*exodus, exile, justification, redemption*—ring any bells with people sitting in the sanctuary.

There is no common memory, so the preacher seems faced with a perplexing choice: every sermon must be a remedial course on Bible content *or* every sermon must leave the Bible behind in favor of contemporary human questions and longings. Thus, some "Seeker" preaching begins with dramas of real-life dilemmas rather than unfamiliar Bible passages. Even when a Bible passage is read, it is read primarily to distill a practical theme. Thus, Jesus' miraculous calming of the sea becomes "How To Deal with Life's Storms" or "Help Me Make It Through the Night."

Bible as sacrament of the "Word of God"

But we are Lutherans, and most of us are lectionary preachers. Every Sunday, week in and week out, we read three Scripture texts and sing a psalm. The texts are given to us in our red Minister's Desk Edition calendar and in the *Celebrate* folder inserted in the bulletin. Our seminary training takes us deep into Greek and sometimes Hebrew. Seminarians take courses such as "Preaching the Gospel of John" and "Preaching Paul's Letters Today." We preach *on* biblical texts or *from* biblical texts, but seldom *without* biblical texts.

Yet, we don't really begin with the Bible itself. We come to the Bible with our minds made up about certain things. We speak of "preaching the Gospel" or "preaching Christ," an understanding affirmed in the ELCA Constitution: "Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation." That definition precedes any reference to the "canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament."[5] This Word is a person, not reducible to print on the page.

"Scripture, like Eucharist," says Sandra Schneiders, "is best understood as sacrament. . . . Sacred scripture is the sacrament of the word of God."[6] Though we Luther-

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[2] Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Crown, 1988), 34–35.

[3] Stephen Dunn, *Local Time* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1986), 53.

[4] "Confession of Faith," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions, 1987, 19.

[5] ELCA Constitution, 19.

[6] Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred*

ans count only two sacraments, there is something helpful about Schneiders' use of the word *sacrament*. "The biblical text as physical object, that is, the book of the scriptures, is a religious art object. It is the stable physical entity that has continuous existence."[7] We've seen this religious art object on coffee tables, sometimes placed there when the minister comes to call. But the Bible is more than a stable art object. Schneiders continues:

> The scripture as meaningful, as sacrament of the word of God, is a work of art. . . . It must "come into being" as meaning by actualization that occurs through reading, that is, through interpretation. Between readings it "lapses" into non-being. The importance of the text as physical entity is precisely that it grounds the possibility of future actualizations of the word of God.[8]

Such an understanding echoes Walter Brueggemann's notion of the biblical text *lingering* over time, passed down from one generation to another, tended by scribes in order to be made available to the children's children. "Out of that lingering, however, from time to time, words of the text characteristically erupt into new usage. . . . What has been *tradition,* hovering in dormancy, becomes available *experience.*"[9] The bread lingers—flat circles in the waxed paper tubes (looking a bit like Necco wafers) or rounds of pita bread on the grocery store shelves. The water lingers—in a reservoir upstate, then through aqueducts into New York City, into the pipes in the church basement, then poured out into the baptismal font large or small. The lingering bread becomes available experience of the presence of Christ, and the water from the reservoir becomes a spring of Living Water bubbling up to eternal life.

So, too, the Bible as Word of God: the words linger on the page until they are spoken and heard and received in faith. Yet it is not the bread or the water we believe in; nor is it the words on the page. Again, Schneiders:

> The problem with sacramental objects is that they always tend to two forms of distortion: First, the temptation to make the sacramental object a magical object, to invest the object itself with power. . . . The second temptation is more serious: to make an idol of the sacramental object. . . . It has become opaque, an obstacle to encounter with the divine because it has replaced the sacred.[10]

What does this mean for those who preach and for those who listen? It means, as we have said many times, that we do not worship the Bible but God who is beyond the Bible. Though we have said it many times, it still doesn't seem to get through. Many inside the church are still captive to the temptation to worship the book itself. A literal, inerrant understanding of the Bible is still demanded in some parts of the Lutheran family. The book itself becomes an object of worship, replacing the worship of God. Such an understanding denies the human character of the Bible, turning it into something Docetic, without flesh and bones, like claiming that the bread of the Eucharist isn't really bread. Or that Jesus wasn't really human.

Bible as untamable text of the untamable God

As sacrament of the word of God, Scripture is more than the words on the page. Yet, like bread and wine and water, the words themselves have weight and texture. We would know nothing about Jesus Christ,

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Scripture (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 40, 41.

[7] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 42.

[8] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 42.

[9] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 1.

[10] Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text,* 43.



the Word made flesh, without the fleshly words on the page. We frame our doxologies of praise to God the Creator, borrowing words from the psalmists and the liturgists of Genesis 1. The gift of the Holy Spirit would be very elusive without the biblical stories and images that show us where the Spirit has been moving. Does our particular Lutheran lens allow us to hear and taste the words fully, or has the prism of justification by grace through faith become too narrow?

Just as there is a problem with worshipping the words themselves, so, too, there can be a problem with a controlling metaphor that frames the words with our own formulations. The Bible is often messy, confusing, confounding, and contradictory. There is always a danger that we will insist on shaping the Bible in our own image. Brueggemann warns us about this danger when he says, "Creedal reductionism does not want to acknowledge this God who leaks out beyond good doctrine. However, the maddening leakage is there in the text, waiting to be spoken of in faith and in dismay."[11]

Echoing similar concerns, Old Testament scholar David Carr urges us to see the Bible as "the untamable text of an untamable God."

> . . . this untamability is present in the text itself. It is even one element that enables the Bible to speak to communities separated from the original contexts of the texts by thousands of years. . . . If scripture is to survive as a life-giving resource . . . it will be because our reading is flexible enough to address creatively circumstances that the Bible's original authors never could have imagined. It may be the very "untamability" of tensive texts . . . that will enable them to be conduits of God's revelation for the future.[12]

People have sought to tame the biblical text in many ways over the centuries. Church authorities—whether pope or councils or independent nondenominational ministers—have claimed that there is only *one* valid interpretation of a text (usually their own). Rather, Carr urges us to honor the untamability of the text: "If we recognize that both the Bible as a whole and parts like Genesis will not submit to any one reading, then use of a confessional statement as a filter effectively means substituting the confession for scripture."[13]

We may want to argue with Carr and point out the danger of giving all texts equal weight, fearful that texts on the margins might become the center. Yet he alerts us to the possibility that our confessions may tame the life out of the Bible. Rigid formulations can make us protective of the text, unwilling to use texts that don't fit or to consider interpretations that differ from our definitions of what is central. It is the multi-voiced character of the texts that has

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[11] Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 76.

[12] David Carr, "Untamable Text of an Untamable God: Genesis and Rethinking the Character of Scripture," *Interpretation* (October 2000), 355.

[13] Carr, "Untamable Text," 356.

served many different faith communities through the ages, partly because the texts could not be reduced to any one of their traditions nor to that of any final redactor.[14]

Bible as living Word

This sense of the text's untamability fits well with our understanding of the Bible as God's "living word," not a past-tense text. New Testament professor Vincent Wimbush often startles students on the first day of class telling them the Bible is a modern book. While students protest that the Bible was written long before they stepped into class, Wimbush nudges them to see that every reader enters the text from her or his own particular time. In the moment of reading or listening, the words in the book are already being interpreted. But the movement isn't only away from the biblical text toward our present situation. It is also a movement in the other direction: we bring our present situation to the biblical text as part of the interpretive process.

In his book *The Exegetical Imagination* Michael Fishbane invites us into lively conversation with biblical texts:

> The rhetorical question, "To what does this matter compare?" opens up a hermeneutical space in which similarity is imagined. . . . The significance of a similitude is thus that life serves to explain the text, and it gives a concreteness or directness to the text which it might otherwise not have. . . . [Meaning is] also shaped by the conceptions and concerns of one's own time and place."[15]

Fishbane isn't talking about finding a few timely illustrations to make texts relevant; rather, he proposes that our life converses with the text and brings meaning to the text. "To what does this matter compare?" is a question that hears the text in this time, which is the only time in which we *can* hear it.

The significance of life interpreting texts is evident in the rereading of the Bible by African American people in this country and increasingly by people of color around the world. Wimbush sketches the development of such rereading within African-American communities in the United States:

> What did not go unnoticed among the Africans was the fact that the white world they experienced tended to explain its power and authority by appeal to the Bible. So they embraced the Bible, transforming it from the book of the religions of the whites . . . into a language world of strong hopes and veiled but stinging critique of slave-holding Christian culture.[16]

Wimbush then poses this perplexing question: "How does a people enslaved by a people of a Book come to accept that Book as authoritative and legitimate?" He finds the answer in a meeting of "worlds"—the world of African-American slaves meeting the world of the Bible:

> With its arresting stories of underdogs surviving and conquering and of a Savior figure who is mistreated but who ultimately triumphs, it is little wonder that the Bible came to be embraced by African Americans. . . . Again and again, the real situations of the heroes and heroines of the Bible appeared to be similar to those of the historical experiences of most African Americans.[17]

The reading of texts by European Americans may have seen the "Savior figure" in a very different light, as a sacrifice for personal sins who offers grace primarily as an individual gift. Reading texts through the prism of justification, we Lutherans

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[14] Carr, "Untamable Text," 353.

[15] Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

[16] Vincent Wimbush, "Reading Texts through Worlds, Worlds through Texts," *Semeia* 62 (1993): 131–32.

[17] Wimbush, "Reading Texts," 138.

have often failed to hear the strong biblical call for justice. People of Latin America, Africa, and Asia have heard biblical texts in ways far different from Eurocentric readers. Latin American theologian Juan Luis Segundo has reread the biblical texts, bringing to the text the questions and heartache of his community. There in the New Testament "he finds a radically theocentric and socially radical Jesus with a decidedly human face."[18] His picture of Jesus arises from his work with the poorest of the poor where Jesus invites everyone to eat at the table. The word "gospel" is understood as far more than forgiveness of "my sins" and has implications not only for one individual believer but for life in community.

Bible as manna and mercy

This understanding of gospel embracing both justification and justice permeates every page of Dan Erlander's book *Manna and Mercy.* The book's subtitle far surpasses Erlander's customary humility: "A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe." (Of course, he's speaking of God, not himself!) This book is a wonderful model for what I will call "full-gospel preaching." (I realize we Lutherans usually don't refer to ourselves as a Full-Gospel Church, but it may help us expand our vision.)

Not content to speak only of individual salvation, Erlander begins with the whole universe. Gospel is not only mercy for sinners and outcasts but manna for everyone. The meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is framed within the whole, untamable text of creation and covenant. This book is an ongoing conversation between the two testaments rather than a supercessionary line where the new overcomes the old. His attentiveness to the day of Pentecost includes all of Acts 2—from the gift of the Spirit to the sharing of property—manna and mercy for all.

This full-gospel promise is not past tense but is present now and leads us toward the future:

> Refusing to give up, the Creator continues to call individuals, families, nations and cultures to pass through the watery depths, through death to resurrection. Yahweh calls them to leave the old order of death and enter the new order of life and salvation.[19]

Bible and Babel: listening to the scattered people

This Creator who continues to call us from death to life is a present-tense God. If we are to bring our present situation into conversation with the biblical texts, we need to ask, Is Babel only a place from which to flee, or is it also a place from which to listen? It's a strange story, that account in Genesis 11. God did not destroy the tower they were building; rather, God confused their language, and they were scattered. But this scattering seemed necessary to fulfill God's word earlier in Genesis, a word not only to Adam and Eve but also to Noah: multiply, increase, swarm throughout the land and fill it. The problem wasn't only building the tower to heaven but their insistence in staying all together in one place! Is there a need now to listen to the scattered voices in order to understand the text more fully?

Consider what two professors at Columbia Theological Seminary have done. Stanley Saunders and Charles Campbell

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[18] Segundo, as cited by Larry Rasmussen, "New Dynamics in Theology: Politically Active and Culturally Significant," *Christianity and Crisis* (May 1988), 182.

[19] Daniel Erlander, *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe* (Mercer Island, WA: The Order of Saints Martin and Teresa, 1992), 75.

were challenged by the director of The Open Door shelter for homeless people in Atlanta:

> Take your body out of the air-conditioned calm and comfort of Columbia Seminary. Put your body instead in a couple of Atlanta's public housing projects. . . . Go sit in the apartment of a teenage mother at Perry Homes. . . . Put your body in the waiting room at the Grady Infectious Disease Clinic. Sit with people who have AIDS as they wait to have their bodies pricked and poked and prodded. . . . Take your body into the Fulton County Jail. Visit with inmates through a pane of glass, unable even to shake hands. Notice the lipstick marks on the glass, the residue of kisses which fell short of human lips—each one a cry for physical contact. . . .[20]

So the two professors and their students took up the challenge. They read New Testament texts with people at the shelter, and students preached on the streets of downtown Atlanta. The biblical texts began to sound different, and neither biblical studies nor homiletics has been quite the same since.

What do the scattered people tell us about the texts? How do we read the Bible outside the sanctuary, the seminary, the study?

In the Pentecost story—often paired with the story of Babel—it seems that the terrible chaos and confusion of language is reversed. The crowd was bewildered: "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" This was not only a miracle of speaking but a miracle of *hearing*. God is calling us to hear those gathered inside the sanctuary and those scattered outside the church doors. This isn't only a matter of evangelism but of rightly understanding the biblical texts themselves.

Babel is a place from which we listen. The culture is not wholly profane, but it has gifts to offer and wounds to heal. The language of the culture isn't only evil; it provides images, metaphors, and sounds that can connect the texts with people's daily lives. This was true when Jesus spoke in parables and when Paul quoted popular poets to the people gathered on the Areopagus. Ours is a highly visual age with electronic images flashing at us at an alarming rate. We may rightly be concerned about such omnipresent images coercing us to become consumers. We might also imagine that electronic images could be like moving stained glass windows. Before people could read, they learned the biblical stories in the pictures surrounding them in the sanctuary. Perhaps we need such pictures now when people can read but no longer know the stories. The culture could teach us how to be more visual in our preaching.

Do you remember back to the First Sunday in Advent, the reading from Isaiah 2? "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. . . ." We expect to *hear* a word or *read* a word, but this is a word that the prophet *saw*. Can electronic images help us find new ways of getting the word across even as the printing press helped the reformers get the word across? We may be so suspicious of electronic communication that we cede its potential to the most conservative religious voices in this country.

Imagine what might happen if we asked our confirmation students to prepare the sermon for Pentecost using their computer expertise to help us *see* the word—the crowds gathered, the fiery tongues, the mighty wind, the communal sharing. What would happen on Sunday morning in the sanctuary? No doubt, some would be startled, even shocked. It might seem like

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[20] Stanley Saunders and Charles Campbell, *The Word on the Street: Reading Texts in Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 153–54.

capitulation to the culture. But it just might happen that some will say, "I *saw* the story in my own language!"

Bible and Babel: listening, but not seduced

But Bible and Babel are not the same. If we listen closely within the public square, we'll discover that God and the Bible aren't totally absent.

Since September 11, God seems to be everywhere in this country—in almost every political speech and on the bumpers of many cars. Explicitly Christian speech in the public square is usually pro-American, sometimes anti-women, predominantly anti-gay, affirming of capitalism, and often demeaning of other religions. Martin Luther King, Jr., was perhaps the last justice-seeking, full-gospel preacher to speak in God's name on the streets and the television sets of this country. (Some will count the Berrigan brothers, William Stringfellow, and Bill Coffin, but many don't even know those names.) Some 80 percent of religious sites on the Internet are fundamentalist Christian sites. Most religious radio and television programs preach biblical literalism and inerrancy. The best-seller lists include such books as the *Left Behind* series, and truck stops on the interstate have racks of Christian paperbacks. *The Prayer of Jabez* has sold six million copies and has made its way onto office plaques and coffee mugs. While some recent letters to *The Lutheran* insisted that the prayer's plea for "enlarging my territory" means new opportunities for evangelism, it seems likely that many were praying for increased sales and better jobs. In spite of the subtitle for these lectures, is it even accurate to call this a "post-Christian age"? It is hard to imagine a prior generation that offered more Christian music, Christian videos, Christian political movements, Christian television shows, Christian bookstores, Christian radio, and Christian tee shirts—at least in the United States.

Biblical preaching in Babel is difficult not only because of the secularization of America but because of the Americanization of Christianity. "In God we trust" marks our money, and the Ten Commandments mark some of our courthouse walls. Though the Promise Keepers movement now seems to be in decline, it is instructive to note how much that movement merges America and the Bible. Stu Weber, a key speaker and writer for Promise Keepers, takes us to the American West in his book *Tender Warriors.* He brings together "the frontier iconography of Manifest Destiny and biblical iconography" by using the television series *Wagon Train* as the centerpiece of his book.[21] He focuses on the heroic scout sent out to search for dangers threatening the community. His message seems to be summed up in the words "Be a Christian. Be an American. Be a man." Bill McCartney, founder of the Promise Keepers, is a member of a Colorado congregation whose pastor describes his purpose as "power evangelism" in which "self-conscious members of God's army are sent to do battle against the forces of the kingdom of darkness. . . . One is either in God's Kingdom or Satan's."[22] This sounds ominously similar to language that now shapes United States foreign policy.

The danger remains that we will try to reshape the Bible in our own image, that we will try to make a name for ourselves rather than trust God to give us a name. Strange, isn't it? This story of Babel comes between two long lists of names—Noah's descendants and the descendants of Shem. As one of my students from Jewish Theological

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[21] Kintz, "Tender Warriors," 497.

[22] Kintz, "Tender Warriors," 501.

Seminary said in a recent sermon, "They built the whole city to make for themselves a name, and there is not one name mentioned in the story."[23]

Babel/Babylon remains as tempting as it was in the book of Genesis, as seductive as the wealthy Roman empire in the book of Revelation. This seduction is not only far off in an evil country we may name "The Beast," it is also near at hand. "Come out of her, my people," cried John, "so that you do not take part in her sins." Just what were her sins? Many have a memory of "Babylon the whore" and "kings committing fornication," but we have neglected the heart of danger. As New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing reminds us, "[Revelation's] . . . primary critique is directed not toward individual sins but toward an entire political economy."[24]

Revelation builds and circles 'round through seventeen chapters until the fall of Babylon is announced in chapter 18:

Alas, alas, the great city,
Babylon, the mighty city!
For in one hour your judgment has come.
(Rev 18:10b).

Then, listen to the detailed list of the material goods the city had to offer—it's almost like walking through the mall, peering longingly in the windows—

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly word, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives. (Rev 18:11–13)

Alas, alas, the great city,
Where all who had ships at sea
grew rich by her wealth.
For in one hour she has been laid waste.
(Rev 18:19b)

Babel/Babylon remains as tempting as it was in the book of Genesis, as seductive as the wealthy Roman empire in the book of Revelation.

To what does this matter compare in our own time and place?

Alas, alas! They traded and speculated,
they established companies that were not,
they laid up for themselves treasures
of silver and gold
in bank accounts far beyond this land;
They built homes,
one more extravagant than the next,
the wealthy sold their stocks for millions
while those who had little ended up with nothing.
Their greed knows no end
and the heaping up of wealth no bounds.
See how they parade in the marketplace,
putting their name on stadium and tower!
And on Sunday morning
they enter the sanctuary,
praising God
and giving alms that cannot be missed.

"Come out of her," John cried. (But they knew John was speaking about the Evil Axis—Iran, Iraq, and North Korea—for they had attended the Men's Bible Study Class on Wednesday morning in downtown Houston.)

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[23] Ayelet Cohen, unpublished sermon.

[24] Barbara Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 164.

Full-Gospel preachers are called to be seers—not fortune tellers, but those who *see* what is happening around them in the marketplace. Stringfellow called us to this perceptive, prophetic seeing in *An Ethic for Christians:*

> Discerning signs . . . has to do with the ability to interpret ordinary events in both apocalyptic and eschatological connotations, to see portents of death where others find progress or success, but simultaneously, to behold tokens of the reality of the Resurrection or hope where others are consigned to confusion or despair.[25]

Biblical preaching as full-gospel preaching calls us to pay attention, to see clearly and speak of what we see—both the "portents of death" masquerading as success *and* the tokens of resurrection hope in the midst of despair. "God, dress America" is appropriate only if it means clothing the naked. "God, bless America" is appropriate only if the song doesn't end there.

But how do we engage in such full-gospel preaching? How do we listen attentively to the wild, untamable words in light of the Jesus, the Word? How does the Bible as sacrament of the "Word of God" take on flesh among us? How do we listen to the scattered voices with the counterspeech of God in our ears? How can such preaching be as tangible as the taste of bread in our mouths, as life-giving as water on our foreheads? We turn to such questions in the second lecture. For now, I leave you with what Mary Oliver says about poems: "For poems are not words after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry."[26]

So may our sermons be—fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, bread in the pockets of the hungry . . . manna and mercy for the scattered children of Babel.

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[25] William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), 138–39.

[26] Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 122.

The Shape of Full-Gospel Preaching

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Several questions lingered at the end of the first lecture. How do we listen attentively to the wild, untamable text in light of Jesus, the Word? How does the Bible as sacrament of the "Word of God" take on flesh among us? How do we hear the scattered voices with the counterspeech of God in our ears? How can full-gospel preaching be as tangible as the taste of bread in our mouths, as life-giving as water?

Full-gospel preaching shapes a peculiar community

Biblical preaching is, in many ways, a word for insiders. It is a word passed down over centuries of time within communities of faith, as St. Paul wrote: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you. . . ." This particular word is not written on the mountains and the hills or upon the collective subconscious. Indeed, we often divide the first eleven chapters of Genesis from all that follows: Babel ends the "primitive history" of creation and flood shared by people of many religious traditions. The story of a particular revelation begins after the people have been scattered, when God calls Abraham and Sarah. Babel ends in confusion and scattering because no one can understand the other. Pentecost gathers the scattered people from many nations and reshapes them into a new community where each one hears and understands, even though their language is not the same. From beginning to end, the biblical story is a community-forming story.

Full-gospel preaching as shared story

When the people crossed over into the promised land, Joshua commanded people to carry stones from the river to set up at Gilgal. So when their children asked in days to come, "What do these stones mean?" they could tell their children about the day the people of Israel crossed over the Jordan on dry ground, about the time God delivered their ancestors who were slaves in Egypt, about Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and all their kin. These stories not only made for good listening around the fire, they also shaped a peculiar people. The telling of stories is no small thing, especially in a time such as ours when generations no longer live in the same place and shared stories have become rare.

Stephen Dunn speaks of this longing for stories in his poem "At the Smithville Methodist Church." The parents in the poem have sent their little daughter off to Vacation Bible School. "It was supposed to be Arts & Crafts for a week," the father says, "but when she came home with the 'Jesus saves' button, we knew what art was

up, what ancient craft."[1] This father seems to be a good person. He and his wife want good things for their daughter. I know these people, even though I don't know their names. They teach their children to be fair; they sing songs like "You can get good milk from a brown-skinned cow, The color of your skin doesn't matter anyhow. Ho, ho, ho! Can't you see? The color of your skin doesn't matter to me." But they had long ago ceased to believe in anything or anyone as specific as God or Jesus. They are modern people, holding out for "random acts of kindness." After a few days of hearing his daughter sing and tell stories, the father admits, "Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes. You can't say to your child: 'Evolution loves you.' The story stinks of extinction and nothing exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have a wonderful story for my child. And she was beaming."[2]

He didn't have a story for himself either.

It may be that people in our congregations don't know the biblical stories because we haven't told the stories often enough. If we don't know where else to start, we might start with the human drama of Old Testament stories, gathering people in the sanctuary around the fire. Even those who aren't familiar with the Bible can see their own lives reflected in these very human stories . . .

- the pain of Abraham and Sarah, fearing that God's promise to them was null and void: Where have we given up on the promises of God?
- the pathos of Hagar and Ishmael sent out into the wilderness by Abraham and Sarah: How is the racism of this story played out in our own country?
- the anguish of Esau standing beside his dying father: "Is there no blessing left for me? Has God only one blessing?" Have you felt that way within your own family?
- the power of jealousy among siblings so tangible in the stories of Joseph and his brothers—the audacity of his self-centered dreams, the deception of his brothers, the unfathomable forgiveness when they are all reunited: What has jealousy provoked within our families or our congregation? Have we ever experienced such unearned forgiveness?
- the boundary crossing of the three women at the river: the Egyptian princess, the Hebrew mother and her daughter, and the baby in the basket: What would it mean for women to conspire across the lines of race and class?
- the strong pull of sexual desire as David looks out from his balcony at Bathsheba: Do we ever speak about the power of such strong sexual feelings?
- the poignant and passionate love between David and Jonathan, perhaps the most beautiful story of love and commitment in the Bible: Have we revisited that story since second grade?

There are many, many more. Perhaps preachers can reserve a block of Sundays during Ordinary Time to tell these moving human stories. Perhaps the month of September could be a storytelling time for all ages to listen together in the sanctuary. Perhaps the Sundays of autumn could tell the great stories of the faith as a way of leading up to Jesus' birth so that people understand more deeply the stories that shaped Jesus. The untamable texts are crammed with stories for people who don't have any—and for those who haven't heard them in a long time.

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[1] Stephen Dunn, *Local Time* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1986), 53.

[2] Dunn, *Local Time*, 54.

Full-gospel preaching as a conversational circle

But the Bible is more than a book of human stories. It's also a book of poems and liturgies, letters and theologies. It is a collection that often portrays a world very different from the one in which we live. Many things in the Bible are difficult to understand. What does the Bible say? Listen: It doesn't *say* anything. The Bible doesn't talk. As Krister Stendahl reminds us, "The Church and the Scriptures live by interpretation, not repristination. Faithful interpretation is faith-filled creativity."[3]



The Bible itself has given us clues for interpretation. Because the various books are all bound together in one tidy volume with chapters and verses, it's easy to forget that these books were written over many centuries. Over time, texts responded to other texts. Favorite texts especially were expanded. Sometimes, different versions of the same story were left standing side by side. We are given many glimpses of how biblical writers interpreted and reinterpreted the texts, including how New Testament writers related to Pentateuch and prophets.

Mary Boys encourages Christian interpreters to find an alternative to the supercessionary patterns that have lead people to believe that the "New" Testament has replaced the "Old." Rather than a straight line leading from Old to New, Boys invites us into a "conversational circle" between the testaments: "At times this may mean using the Old (First) Testament for clarification; on other occasions, it may mean drawing upon its images or using it to bring out a particularly important dimension of God's self-revelation."[4]

Such a conversational circle offers clues for interpreting biblical texts in our own time. Here, it's helpful to remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 13. After telling several parables, he turns to his disciples and asks them, "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." Then Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:51–52). We can hear both old and new if we listen to the ongoing conversation between First and Second Testaments, as well as what is new in our own time of history. These conversations may help us learn what it means to be faithful scribes.

One example of this interpretive model is the conversation between Acts chapter 8 and Isaiah 56. Both of these chapters appear in the lectionary, but we never hear the full text from Isaiah. (You can tell by the commas: Isaiah 56:1 [comma] 6–8. It

[3] Krister Stendahl, "Memorandum on Our Bible and Our Sexuality" (Letter to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, February 28, 1994), 3.

[4] Mary Boys, "How Might We Interpret Our Scriptures for Preaching?" Unpublished resource paper. For fuller treatment see Boys's helpful book, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist, 2000).

might be fun sometime to preach a sermon series on the verses in the commas!) In the lectionary, Isaiah 56 is paired with Matthew's story about the feisty Canaanite woman who insists that Jesus heal her daughter—"even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Because she is a foreigner, the portion of Isaiah 56 about foreigners is read. This is what's left out, the verses in the comma:

. . . and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."
For thus says the Lord:
To eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons or daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off. (Isa 56:3–5)

How could Isaiah say such a thing to eunuchs? Surely he knew the holiness code as written in Deuteronomy: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord" (Deut 23:1). Why would Isaiah say this after the exile, when the survival of the remnant people was at stake? when begetting children would have been a priority? when purity and boundaries seemed critically important? In just such a time, the prophet wrote these words—foreigners and eunuchs would be welcome in the household of the Lord. Could it be that the Spirit of God didn't wait until Jesus picked up the scroll of Isaiah in the temple? The Spirit hovered over the text and over the writer, bringing forth a different word, a word that overturned the exclusionary word.

Would such a thing ever be true? Would there be a time when foreigners and eunuchs would be not only welcome but given a name "better than sons or daughters"? Luke believed that time had come when he wrote the book of Acts. Surely it cannot be happenstance that Acts 8 tells the story of an Ethiopian eunuch, bringing the two categories of Isaiah 56 together in this one person. Luke is steeped in the writings of Isaiah from that day in Nazareth when Jesus read from Isaiah's scroll to this day on the desert road when an Ethiopian eunuch is reading from Isaiah 53: "About whom does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?" It was a good question, a question Isaiah never answered. But Philip answers anyway: "starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." But Jesus wasn't in the text! We believe Philip was continuing the work Jesus began on the Emmaus road, opening and interpreting the scriptures.

Yet, the church has had problems with this story—primarily because there seemed a need to affirm Cornelius as the first Gentile convert, and that story doesn't come until chapter 10. Was it because the Ethiopian was an African man, a dark-skinned man, and Cornelius was an Italian cohort? More than one of the early fathers claimed that at his baptism, the Ethiopian was made white![5] Some protested because the Ethiopian made no profession of faith before baptism (though such a profession was part of some of the ancient manuscripts).

Or was the problem that this Ethiopian was also a eunuch—a sexual misfit, a high official in the court of the queen, but clearly prohibited from entering the assembly of

[5] One example of the Ethiopian's change of color comes from Ephraem Syrus, *Hymns*, trans. J. T. Sarsfield et al., in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, 2nd ser., 13, pt. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 295. "The Lamb of Light met the dark man from out of the water. While he was reading, the Ethiopian was baptized and shone with joy, and journeyed on! He made disciples and taught, and out of black men he made men white."

the Lord? As they traveled along, suddenly they came to some water. "What is to keep me from being baptized?" the eunuch asked. "Everything!" we might shout. The words written down, the fear in our bones, the need to limit God's household to "our own kind." Yet here was water—water on a desert road. Both of them went down into the water, splashing in the scroll of Isaiah.

What are the implications of such a model for us as preachers? for us as teachers as we embark on the current study on homosexuality within the ELCA? Can we open up a hermeneutical space where similitude is imagined and concrete experience helps us interpret biblical texts?[6] The conversation between Isaiah 56 and Acts 8 provides a model for working with Scripture that can be more beneficial to us than current debates over verses in Leviticus, Romans, and Corinthians. We have reached an exegetical impasse. How many times can we exegete *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai?* Isaiah and Acts point our way to seeing that the words written down invite us to see more than the words written down! It happened when Second Isaiah heard a word of newness out of exile. It happened when Philip preached the good news of Jesus beginning with Isaiah—though Jesus' name was not in the text. The Spirit keeps hovering over the lingering text, calling us to roads we'd never imagined!

Full-gospel preaching looks for clues in the shape of the canon

Preachers in our time have been invited to see the whole canon as it stands. The early days of historical-critical biblical studies moved away from seeing the canon as a whole and began to dismantle it. Many of us spent time in seminary isolating the strands of J, E, P, and D in the Pentateuch and identifying the Q source in the Synoptic Gospels. We traced redactors' work with different colored highlighters through the book of Genesis, though we weren't quite sure what to do with this knowledge in our first parish! Much of this historical-critical work has been lifegiving to biblical texts and to listeners. But we know there were also times when preachers took the biblical text away from people in the name of higher criticism. In recent years such dismantling of the text has been called into question even as we acknowledge that there is no way to read the texts as our ancestors did.

Isaiah and Acts point our way to seeing that the words written down invite us to see more than the words written down!

It's a wonderful time to be a preacher, for in many ways the texts have been returned to us. The wild, untamable canon and the intricate textures of texts have been given back to us after years of being dissected. Biblical scholars have taken us deep into the texture of the texts using rhetorical criticism. Voices of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians have heard things in the texts that we had missed. Feminists and womanists have unearthed stories that had

[6] Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

been completely disregarded. We now ask not only, What is the history of this text? or How did redactors reshape this text? but also, What does it mean that this text is *here* at this place in the canon?

Two texts, one from 2 Kings and another from John 8, give examples of such canonical clues.

• *2 Kings 4: War interrupted by shalom.* This chapter is part of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. Two of the stories in 2 Kings 4 clearly parallel earlier tales told about the prophet Elijah: the never-ending supply of oil and a dead boy brought to life by what appears to be artificial respiration. No doubt many redactors took a hand in shaping this chapter from stories in the oral tradition. But we miss a great deal if we don't pay attention to where this chapter now stands within the canon. Chapter 3 ends with the king of Moab sacrificing his firstborn son, desperate, as the battle turned against him. Chapter 5 tells the story of Naaman the Syrian warrior. Chapter 4 interrupts the cycle of never-ending war with stories of wholeness and shalom: (1) a never-ending supply of oil for the repayment of debts; (2) a mother who insists on life for her child (and gets Elisha, the holy man, to come down from his mountain); (3) poisoned stew made good; (4) barley loaves to feed a hundred with some left over (echoed later in the Gospel of John).

The longest and most detailed story in this chapter is the story of the Shunammite woman persisting to save the life of her son. In Jewish congregations this story is the *haf-tarah* reading alongside the sacrifice of Isaac.[7] Could this story be a midrash on that story? A mother's insistence on God's prophet saving her son from death filling Sarah's absence in the earlier story on Mt. Moriah? How might this canonical interruption speak to the unending cycle of holy war in our world today?

• *John 8: A tensive conversation between the center and the margins.* Every year we Lutherans hear a portion of John 8 as the Gospel text for Reformation Sunday: "If you continue in my word," says Jesus, "you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. . . . If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:31–32). What sort of truth is this truth that sets us free? For a long time the first verses of John 8 weren't even there! They were in the footnotes, sometimes in brackets or italics. Yet the story remained and now stands within the canon in the same chapter as the Reformation Gospel. What might a conversation between these two texts tell us about the truth that sets us free?

The religious leaders bring to Jesus a woman caught in the very act of adultery. (Evidently, the man—who must also have been caught in the very act—got away!) The law of Moses is on the accusers' side: it was written down. She should be stoned to death.

Jesus is silent. He bends down within the vicious circle and writes on the ground. Did he write the truth? Did he name the sins of those in the circle? "Whoever is without sin throw a stone at her," he said. Then he bent down again.

You will know the truth and the truth will bend low, entering the world of those accused. You will know the truth and the truth may contradict what is written down. You will know the truth and the truth does not condemn but transforms women and men for life abundant. Truth looks different when we hear the Reformation Gospel in conversation with this story from the

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[7] I am indebted to Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig for our conversations about 2 Kings 4, including the reading of this text in the Reform Jewish worship.

margins. Thankfully, the canon has placed both stories within the same chapter of John's Gospel, begging us to pay attention.

Full-gospel preaching is present tense

Interpretation isn't only a past-tense enterprise, seeking to know what the text meant long ago. We recall the question Michael Fishbane brings to the text: "To what does this matter compare?" Answering that question "opens a hermeneutical space in which similitude can be imagined."[8] Our own experiences and the situation of our time give concreteness to the text as living word.

One of the most compelling examples of this kind of present-tense preaching was heard in Chicago in November, 2002, at the installation of Bishop Mark Hanson. Pastor Heidi Neumark looked at the city of Jerusalem laid waste, its temple in ruins, most of its citizens taken into exile. "To what does this compare?" she asked.

> The world-renowned city that seemed invincible—attacked and capsized by terror. Towers collapsed in rubble, bronze temple pillars broken into pieces—the glorious architectural feat and economic seat in the great city, crashed and burning.
> Jerusalem 587—New York 9/11

> Survivors in exile from all that was expected and secure . . . displaced people without foothold or language, wondering where is the Word that failed to stay this chaos—as tons of paper and all the words scatter and dissolve in ash.
> We don't even have the alphabet.
> Jerusalem 587—New York 9/11[9]

Neumark opened up a hermeneutical space in which similarity could be imagined. The text is no longer "back there" or "out there," but here and now. So, too, she brought our present situation to the ravaged city of Jerusalem and to those who were left behind in the city:

> *The captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.* . . . So there, in what was considered the waste places of Jerusalem, you had a blend of North Dakota and the South Bronx all in one. A first-call delight![10]

Neumark was doing something far deeper than making Isaiah's text "relevant" to the congregation. She helped the congregation see Jerusalem by bringing to the text our present situation. The struggling farmers of North Dakota and people from the poorest neighborhoods of the South Bronx are brought into the text. We hear the text itself in fuller and more concrete ways.

Full-gospel preaching as counterspeech

Such preaching could not happen without paying close attention to both the Scripture text and the community text. As we listen carefully to both texts, we will often hear the dissonance between the text's "provocative alternatives"[11] and the texts of this world. Walter Brueggemann calls such preaching "counterspeech."[12] It is like the preaching of Jeremiah and Isaiah who see the inequities of the marketplace and dare to name them aloud. It is like the anointed

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[8] Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 5.

[9] Heidi Neumark, "Words for a Bishop-Elect: Follow Those Feet!" sermon preached at the installation of Bishop Mark Hanson (November, 2001), published in *Currents* 29:1 (February 2002), 5.

[10] Neumark, "Words for a Bishop-Elect," 9.

[11] Larry Rasmussen, unpublished lecture on "Jesus and Power." Rasmussen lifts up three aspects of Jesus' power, including "The power to forge provocative alteratives."

[12] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 3.

preaching of Jesus in Nazareth bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives, never afraid to call attention to where this vision falls short.

Such preaching shapes a community that practices a different way of life, people shaped by Pentecost. What sort of faith community comes into being at Pentecost? Acts 2 begins in fear: the doors were locked —for fear of the authorities, both religious and Roman. A locksmith cannot change things; a rush of wind is needed to break through the door and bring these dry bones to life. The Spirit descends like tongues of fire upon all people: women and men, old and young, even upon those at the very bottom, maidservants and menservants. The confusion of Babel is transformed:

> How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites and the residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power. (Acts 2:8–11)

That glorious list of hard-to-pronounce places is Luke's attempt to gather up all the nations, not scattered in confusion but reshaped into a community of understanding. Then, what comes next? Biblical preaching! In the power of the Spirit, Peter stands up to preach in the public square. His results are the hope of every preacher: three thousand people were baptized that very day! But that's not the end of the story. To know what kind of community is shaped on Pentecost we have to read all the way to the end of the chapter:

> All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44–47)

Mercy and manna! Manna and mercy! Wind and fire and bread on the table. Full-gospel preaching must speak of both manna and mercy, pointing to God's provocative alternatives rather than the priorities of the world.

But how do we preach these provocative alternatives? Imagine 116 people gathered on Sunday morning in First Lutheran Church. What sort of counterspeech does the preacher bring? The preacher looks out at the 116 faces. Grounded in the prophetic tradition and attuned to socioeconomic analysis taught in seminary, she preaches about the systemic evils of racism, sexism, and classism. He names the hegemonic oppression of white, male, patriarchal domination. She points out our captivity to global consumer capitalism. What he says may be true. What she says is backed up by the data. *But it's too overwhelming!* People jot down notes on their bulletins . . . then find them folded up in pocket or purse two months later and feel guilty that they haven't done a thing.

Sometimes, we preach on a stage far bigger than the sanctuary. The people sitting there don't know what to do about these huge systems. The answer is not to be silent or to be complacent about evil but to find words fitting for the stage on which people live their lives.

- Connect back to memories of September 11—the commitment people expressed for setting different priorities: more time with family, more time for prayer, attentiveness to religious questions, no more business as usual. What has happened to that resolve to live in a different way? Why is it so hard?

- Help people practice provocative alternatives. Learn to talk about checkbooks and credit card bills, about luxuries and necessities. The book *Practicing Our Faith* can be a helpful resource.[13] As the title suggests, we need to *practice* our faith, because God's provocative alternatives don't come naturally.
- Shape congregational life in ways that take economics seriously. Do we spend money only on ourselves? Do we remember the whole Pentecost story, including how the chapter ends?

Preaching God's provocative alternatives has the power to shape and reshape our lives as individuals and our corporate life as Christian congregations. But such preaching needs to be down to earth, where people live their daily lives.

Full-gospel preaching in the public square

Preaching that shapes and reshapes individuals and congregations does not remain inside the church walls. This was surely true of most preaching in the Bible—it took place outside the sanctuary: Isaiah in the courts of the king, Jonah on the streets of Nineveh, Jesus on the hillside or by the sea, Paul on the areopagus in Athens.

As noted earlier, biblical preaching in the Babel of this country presents unique challenges. It's difficult not only because of the secularization of America but also because of the Americanization of Christianity. God is not completely absent from the public square, but the God who lives there seems peculiarly American. It's hard to get a full-gospel word in edgewise.

But we must try. We are called to speak not only as open-minded people, as liberal or progressive people, as justice-seeking people, but as people of God. As Christian people: "Dear Senator, As a Christian I'm deeply concerned about the detention of children who entered this country as undocumented people. They remain in prison, often without legal counsel, even though they have done nothing wrong."

> Imagine 116 people gathered on Sunday morning in First Lutheran Church. What sort of counterspeech does the preacher bring?

We need to be concerned with both manna and mercy, asking the kind of theological questions the biblical prophets often asked in the public square—questions such as:

- Why is this child starving?
- Why do we spend more to imprison youth than to educate them?
- Why is that man sleeping in a cardboard box on the street?
- Why are wealthy corporate farms being subsidized while family farmers are forced to go under?

Preaching in the public square can take many forms. We might risk preaching on the streets like seminary students in downtown Atlanta. We might follow the

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[13] *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). See especially Chapter 1: "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith" by Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, and Chapter 4, "Household Economics" by Sharon Daloz Parks.

Biblical preaching is not only for the sake of the church. It is a word spoken for the sake of the world.

Stations of the Cross in public as Pax Christi does every Good Friday, walking across busy 42nd Street in Manhattan, from the Hudson River through Times Square to the United Nations. We might write letters to the editor or to Congress. Perhaps we could encourage people by printing up postcards for them to use:

NO ONE IS ILLEGAL WITH GOD
(Isaiah 56:3)

WHEN WILL YOU VISIT ME
IN PRISON?
Signed, Jesus (Matthew 25)

GOD SO LOVED:
(a) AMERICA or
(b) THE WORLD
(see John 3:16)

Preaching in our time happens on the computer screen as well as in the pulpit. What is the word on the Internet? Luther was not reluctant to use the new technology of his time. Can we translate full-gospel preaching, both manna and mercy, into the language of the Web? Teenagers in our congregations may be our best translation partners if we dare to ask them for help.

The odd testimony of Scripture draws us beyond the sanctuary, even as it continues to shape those on the inside. Biblical preaching cannot be limited to forging communal identity within the Christian church; it draws full-gospel preachers and lay people into the marketplace, where people are scrambling to make a name for themselves. Biblical preaching is not only for the sake of the church. It is a word spoken for the sake of the world. The water of Baptism cannot be bottled up or it will become stagnant. The manna cannot be hoarded or it will go bad.

The prophet Ezekiel gives us a wondrous image for the mission of the church. Ezekiel's guide brings him to the front of the temple, where he sees water flowing out under the doors. He wades in the water. It's up to his ankles, then to his knees, then his waist and up to his neck, and finally he has to swim, for the water has become a great river. The river flows toward the east, and wherever it enters stagnant waters, they are made fresh. Fish are teeming, and trees on the banks of the river are lush and green. "And everything will live where the river goes" (Ezek 47:9b).

Can you see this word? The water spills out over the baptismal font, drenching the minister and the acolyte holding the green book. The pages of the book will never quite close again, forever crinkled as they are with holy water! The water runs down the center aisle, soaking the new carpet, then out under the church doors and into the streets: "And everything will live where the river goes."

I saw that river not long ago when I took my preaching class to Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the South Bronx. There, on the front doors of the church, the water was flowing. Young people of the parish had painted the doors to replace the graffiti that had long been scrawled there. On the

left-hand door, a boy had opened a fire hydrant and the water was flowing in a wide arc into the baptismal font on the right. Beneath the flowing water, a table was set: a cup, a loaf of bread—a roast chicken and a quart of milk. Sacraments of life on 156th & Prospect Avenue. Manna and mercy in the South Bronx. The water was not only on the doors but flowed out under the doors into the streets: eight hundred units of Nehemiah housing, a new high school going strong and five more planned, children learning to read in the after-school program, and African American young men being mentored into adulthood. "And everything will live where the river goes."

That's where the biblical canon ends—at that lifegiving river. Babylon with its seductive materialism and oppressive politics does not have the final word. John borrows Ezekiel's vision for the last chapter of the last book of the Bible:

> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:1–2)

Even more expansive than Ezekiel's vision, the leaves along Revelation's river are for the healing of *the nations*. Shaped by God's global vision, full-gospel preachers are called to lead the people in singing a new song:

God bless the world we love,
Stranger and friend,
Go before us, restore us
With a hope that despair cannot end.
Ev'ry people, ev'ry nation,
Mighty oceans, heaven's dome!
God bless the world we love,
Our only home.
God bless the world You love,
Our only home.

"And everything will live where the river goes." Manna and mercy for everyone. Full-gospel preaching for all the gathered and scattered children of God.

The Death of a Paradigm

Peter J. Gomes
Plummer Professor of Christian Morals
and Pusey Minister in The Memorial Church
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

I have never spent much time among the Lutherans in the limitations of my career, for New England was very stony soil for Lutheranism and your ancestors, and there are very few seeds that survived even to sprout, let alone to become trees. Clearly I was deprived. So, when the Lutheran chaplain at Harvard—who is really a missionary who brings the Lutheran gospel to a place which hasn't heard it before—persuaded me that it would be good for me to do this Hein Fry thing, I accepted. I like new opportunities, challenging contexts, and venturing to foreign lands, and I said I'd do it.

Only then did I ask what it was that I was to do, and I discovered that I was to visit four of the eight Lutheran seminaries and to hold forth under the auspices of this foundation on the subject "Biblical Preaching in Babel." Also I discovered that Barbara Lundblad, whom I do not know well but happened to have had preach for me last year, was also going to do this.

At first I imagined all sorts of scenarios, none of which turned out to be the case. I thought that maybe she and I were coming together, and that she'd do one and I'd do the other; maybe she was Hein and I was Fry, and we would do a little hand-off. Then I discovered that that was not to be the case, and I said, "Well, maybe she goes first and I come to correct her after that," and I discovered that that was not to be the case either. She has gone to your other four seminaries. In some sense it is the proper Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, plus Johann Sebastian Bach; and I think if I were you I would be very grateful to be Bach in that quartet.

I am delighted to be a part of this, and I understand the task that is before me, which is to try to make sense both of the title and of the lecture description which others have written for me. We all know the curse of the title. We Baptists are keen on sermon titles—I don't know whether or not you Lutherans use them, but we are keen—because only if we can give it a title do we know what it is we are talking about.

The title that has been given to this series is "Biblical Preaching in Babel: Preaching in a Post-Christian World," and there is a set of questions that this brochure poses, which I trust you have seen, which Professor Lundblad and I are to deal with in one way or another. I actually am going to try to do that. Here are your questions. I didn't formulate them, but I shall certainly try to answer them.

1. What does genuinely Christian preaching look like in this extraordinary, complex cultural and linguistic situation?

2. What challenges must be addressed? (This is the subject of the present lecture.)

3. What dangers threaten in this context and what new resources and opportunities does this situation present? (That is the subject for the next lecture.)

Now, you may wonder, to what situation do these formulations refer? They refer to the first paragraph of your brochure:

> One feature of contemporary life that indicates that we live in post-Christendom is the fact that a preacher cannot suppose that her hearers generally share a broad familiarity with the Bible. Few of its stories are common currency, much of its vocabulary rings strange in many ears, and a great number of persons never or only rarely employ its declarations, themes, and images in interpreting their lives and the world. The preacher today cannot presume that they all speak any common language, large migrations have mixed formerly isolated groups, and rapid change has so differentiated generations that even many small-town communities are now astonishingly diverse. The supplanting of mass media by niche media, such as 200-channel cable television and the Internet, makes it less likely that people share common experiences and stories. The great question is, in that context, in that setting, how does one preach, and how does one preach biblically, if in fact we are speaking different languages and often languages in conflict with one another?

So, it is to the dilemmas, the challenges, the opportunities of biblical preaching in what this paradigm describes as a "post-Christian world," that the formulations refer.

Well, I want to challenge the paradigm, which is why I have called this first lecture "The Death of a Paradigm," and I hope to exhume the paradigm, examine it, perform a proper autopsy on it, and then give the paradigm a decent burial so that we might get on to other matters.

I have to address, however, the question straight on, and the assumption behind it is that "post-Christian" means that nobody speaks our language; that is, nobody has the shared experiences or expectations or vocabulary which our ancestors, our predecessors, could have presupposed. The second assumption of that paradigm is that nobody is interested in our language, that what we say and what we write is of no particular consequence to anybody in general or in particular. We preachers are, in effect, literally speaking in someone else's sleep, and as a result of that we are continuing to use the same images, languages, and theorems that we have always used, but it is as if people are overhearing what we are saying in a badly-remembered foreign language.

I used this instance in a part of *The Good Book*,[1] when I said that it was very much like people having been educated in high school French. We all know how terrible high school French can be: three years, and we can't even read the menu in a third-rate restaurant. Then we go on a school trip abroad to Paris, and in the most humiliating of all experiences we listen to people who actually do know French and are speaking in French, and we overhear and understand maybe one out of fifteen words and no syntax. It is frustrating, and eventually we give up.

In some sense that is the theory behind our dilemma of preaching in this post-Christian age. The consequence of accepting that paradigm is that we have grown comfortable with it, and we actually don't expect anybody to understand what we say, but rather we expect to go through the pantomime, go through the motions, and as long as nobody calls the other on the motions we maintain for this enterprise, this sort of rhetorical shadowboxing, we accept this paradigm and we go with the assumption, joined by the general dumbing-down

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[1] Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (William Morrow, 1996; reprint, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002).



of everything. We reduce it all to the shortest possible level of complexity, and in a way find ourselves living not a mural nor a painting, not even a drawing nor an etching, but a cartoon; and not altogether a favorable cartoon but a small representation of what once was.

Now, there are a couple of ways of responding to the paradigm without disputing its truth. One is a certain kind of cultural nostalgia, and lots of my friends in religion love this kind of cultural nostalgia. "In the old days, you know," they say, "this church used to be filled on Sunday morning. We had an evening service, too, we used to present sixty or seventy people for confirmation, and Pastor So-and-So was a very learned man and was listened to by the School Committee, and people tipped their hats to him as he walked down the street; in the old days we used to have that sort of thing." You can fill in the blanks; every one of you has someone in your church who is an expert on the way things used to be. Most of them run your churches, and at the drop of a hat there is a cultural nostalgia about the fact that the culture has run away from us, yet we're still doing the same faithful and good things; the culture has just gone on to other things.

This is not just a lay phenomenon; it is also a clerical phenomenon. You get the clergy together in continuing education or on retreats or on governing bodies' activities, and sooner rather than later a nostalgia for an imagined golden age will come, and the golden age is always five years after you have left wherever you last were. That is how the golden age is defined. Something is missing, we have lost something, we have been deprived of something, and hence our response to this lost golden age is either to try to recover it in some way, figuring out what worked then and trying to bring it back, which usually doesn't work, or simply to concede the whole thing as a lost cause and try to figure out how we can turn what we do into the closest semblance of the David Letterman show or the Jay Leno show or any other of the cultural artifacts that seem actually to work in our time.

I suggest that this is not the only way to respond, and in our effort to answer the questions about biblical preaching in Babel we have to ask some basic questions about the nature of Babel, in the first place, and the nature of preaching, in the second, and where we stand. That is what I would like to do now.

I begin with three pieces of writing, with which at least two will be relatively familiar to those of us who are seminary types. In my sophomore year in college, in the fall term of 1963, we were given a book that we had to read in Religion 101. Now, if you want to know one of the lost paradigms, it is Religion 101. In the olden days, everybody who went to any decent liberal arts college in North America took Religion 101, and when you didn't "take" it, it was forced upon you as a required course. It was assumed that every 17- to 18-year-old student going to private liberal arts colleges, most of which had some Chris-

tian origins, would be provided a kind of thoughtful introduction that would undo everything they had been taught in Sunday School and give them something a lot more demanding and better. Religion 101 was one of the basics of our education into a larger culture, now largely vanished in most schools.

It was in Religion 101 at Bates College in 1963 that we were given by our rigorous young instructor a thin little book to read, called *Honest to God*,[2] by an obscure—at least to us—English bishop, John A. T. Robinson. I read *Honest to God* in a single sitting, which was easy to do with that thin book, and it was surprisingly easy to read, and I was suspicious of the book because I seemingly understood it; and my basic theory about theology was that if I understood it it wasn't very good, and that the more obscure it was, the better it was for me—sort of a Lutheran principle there, don't you think? The harder it is, the better is for you! So when I started to read *Honest to God* and discovered that I understood it and, surprisingly, that I agreed with it, and, third, that I found that it was reassuring to discover that this 18-year-old kid from the country and a country school had ideas that were affirmed and developed and carried forward by one of the great theologians of the church, it was an exciting moment for me. I didn't have to put up with the scissors-and-paste attempts of my pious but terribly uninformed Sunday School teachers to try to make sense of the questions that any intelligent Christian would propose to ask.

So, here was something that actually addressed my condition; and I would say, contrary to the controversy that *Honest to God* provoked in its own time and a little bit afterward, that instead of challenging my faith in the wrong way and tossing me off my theological hobby-horse, it actually preserved the Christian faith for me. It made me, I hope, a thinking and thoughtful believer. Up to that time, I thought that these two elements were in opposition: that you either believed something and weren't very bright, or you were very bright and didn't believe anything. I wanted to be very bright, that's why I went off to college and why my parents were paying the exorbitant fees of $2,500 per year to send me: I jolly well wanted to be bright; but how was I to do that and retain the second-grade theological education that I had got in Sunday School? How could I live off the rather anemic diet of my well-beloved pastor, who really hadn't moved very far down the road? *Honest to God* helped me to do it, and *Honest to God* put these two things together; but *Honest to God* also introduced a paradigm that suggests, even today, that if you're going to be honest to God you're going to have to leave the church and the Bible behind. That is not what Bishop Robinson said, but that is the easy construction that many people have put upon it.

Two years later I was in my first year at Harvard Divinity School. You see, *Honest to God* took, and I decided that Harvard Divinity School was where I wanted to go. My church prayed for me because I was going to Harvard Divinity School, and although I had thought they were praying God's blessing upon me, they were praying that God would move me toward a Christian school and not to Harvard Divinity School. God sent me there, however, and in the fall of that year another book was given to me to read, *The Secular City*, and this was by my present colleague Harvey Cox, and if there were doubts announced by *Honest to God* in 1963, by the time *The*

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[2] John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Westminster John Knox, 1963; reprint 2003).

Secular City came out, most pious Christians felt that the world was pretty rapidly moving farther away from us than we were willing to go, and the paradigm of the post-Christian age was very much set into place.

I think this is the most exciting, demanding, thrilling time to be around. It is the most exciting moment for preaching that I can imagine. . . .

In 1977, a good deal later, a third piece of writing came out, not anywhere nearly as ballyhooed as the first two, but to my mind perhaps the most accurate marker of the second half of the twentieth century. It wasn't by a theologian or even by a Christian. It was an article by the Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell, and it was called *The Return of the Sacred*, and its thesis, in the middle of assumptions about the secularization process and the modern religious world, was the theory of the exhaustion of modernity. In other words, it took a sociologist to recognize that while there may be problems with the church and problems with the Bible and with individual communities of faith surrounded by an emergent and self-confident and arrogant secular world, there was nothing that really could be done with the fundamental questions that continue to be asked by people: Who am I? Where do I come from? What am I meant to do? What is the meaning of life? What is my origin and destiny? Those are questions that cannot be suppressed, nor can they be satisfied, and ultimately modernity's attempt to do so—to say we have the answers or the questions aren't worth answering—were not satisfactory. What Bell says is that when modernity itself is exhausted as an unsatisfying solace and even bankrupt concept, what remains when unbelief has gone?

All of this is to suggest, at least as far as I'm concerned, that the paradigm that is dead is the paradigm of modernity and its absolute sense of self-confidence and self-assurance. It is dead, and what remains when unbelief has gone presents a tremendous opportunity to the communities of faith, and to the Christian faith in particular, and to preachers of the Christian faith and the Bible. It presents an opportunity the likes of which we have never experienced. This is why I wish to declare to you that I think this is the most exciting, demanding, thrilling time to be around. It is the most exciting moment for preaching that I can imagine, and I would not exchange twenty-four hours with John Wesley, or Dwight L. Moody, or John Bunyan, or any of those great preachers of the past. I wouldn't give five minutes, with all due respect, for a conference with Dr. Luther, fine as he was, and fine as he is, because that's not where it's at, so to speak. Those fellows had their moments and their day, and they lived in a world remarkably different from ours. I am thrilled to be here now, for this may well be the first time the world is ready, and perhaps even willing, to hear the good news, because it has lived so long with bad news. That means that it is a great moment for preachers and for preaching.

Let me illustrate. When I went to The Memorial Church as an assistant in 1970, and succeeded my senior in 1974, people laughed at me and said, "Poor you! You are

going to go to a place filled with people who are smarter than you are" (which is definitely the case) "and who really don't care or know anything about the one thing you care about and know something about."

I thought about that, and the analysis was that these people had moved well beyond the Bible, and that most of these people had never moved *into* the Bible; it is a foreign book, it is a phenomenon very much like the paradigm described in the opening paragraph of your brochure. No one speaks the language, nobody has the vocabulary, nobody has the words, they think the epistles are the wives of the apostles; they don't know the difference, and does it matter to them? So, pity me, standing up there armed with only these sixty-six canonical books, trying to speak about the Bible to people who are well on the other side of that language.

I thought about that for a while, and then I realized what a golden opportunity I had, what a first-rate chance this was for a preacher!

Now, if I went to my little First Baptist Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts, with seventy elderly souls there on a Sunday morning, and proceeded to preach on the Prodigal Son, how many times do you think those seventy people in their eighty years have heard about the Prodigal Son? Been there, done that, and there is not a thing you can tell them that they don't already know. They think, "Oh, he's going with the father; oh, he's going with the elder brother; no, he's going with the swine. . . ." They've heard it all. If you have a congregation of very intelligent people who know nothing, however, you have arrived in homiletical heaven!

So, for thirty-two years I have preached to the most intelligent, biblically ignorant people I know, and as our introducer has said, it has made my reputation. I don't know whether you would have invited me were I the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Plymouth, but I doubt it very much; you might not even have invited me had I been at Yale. You're all snobs, and you invited me because I'm at Harvard, and you assume that if I've survived there I must have something to say.

Well, I have a lot to say, and the thrilling part is that I have a lot to say to people who are prepared to listen, because this is the one thing they don't know very much about; and no one compels them to come, there is no social reward or academic credit for doing so. They come because they're interested. Most of them come not out of habit, because most of them are not from church families or brought up in a house of faith, and this is new to them, *terra incognita*. So, I pass this along as a paradigm for the much larger situation: Most of us are now preaching to people who know less about the Bible than their parents and their grandparents and their great-grandparents. Rather than seeing this as a moment for despair and tossing in the towel, though, and saying, "Well, we must find a new book to preach from," maybe it is just this moment, just this opportunity, that we can take to make the old book new, and perhaps find that people are amazed to discover what's in it.

Yesterday I was preaching in The Memorial Church. After Easter I always try to manifest the fact that the gospel is alive and that Easter is not just the end of Lent but the beginning of a whole new dimension and dynamics, so yesterday I was talking about "Things Worth Fighting For," and it was a sermon based on Paul's advice to Timothy to fight the good fight of faith. In 1 Timothy 6 there is a list of things worth fighting for, which are listed in the confession of the faith, such as righteousness, kindness, gentleness—one of those lists of virtues. I

tried to suggest that the fight that Paul is inviting Timothy to proclaim and to engage in is not a kind of militant thing with our political or cultural foes, but in many ways a fight between the two levels of our consciousness—the easy wrong, the difficult right—those warring members of which St. Paul speaks. If that fight of faith is managed and maintained, then we are armed and empowered to fight the greater battles with which we must contend every day.

It is a small point, but a point worth making, and it was a new point to most of these people. I illustrated it with the very familiar story of David and Goliath, and I said to them at the beginning of the sermon that I was sure they were all relieved that in the first lesson of the morning was a story that they vaguely remembered. They remembered who won; David won over Goliath—David was the little one, Goliath was the big one. They got it. So far, so good! The point, of course, was that even in the text in 1 Samuel, the battle which David waged with Goliath was relatively easy compared with the ultimate battle that he had to wage with himself, which he lost. That battle between the good fella, who knew that it wasn't a nice thing to be spying on Mrs. Uriah the Hittite, and the bad thing, about which God always reminded him, which caused him to cause Uriah to be killed in battle so he might make off with his widow. It was easier to slay Goliath with a sword than to prevail in that internal trouble, and that was why he lost. Even though he remained the apple of God's eye, that was why he lost the battle for faith, of which Paul speaks in Timothy.

Now, I don't offer that as the last word or the most urbane or sophisticated reading of those texts, but I was able to say it because I knew these people would listen because they hadn't heard it before, that they were not so overly familiar with it that they would just ho-hum and fast-forward to the end and wait for the last hymn; and that there was some possibility for newness in there that could actually be applied to their own circumstances, to their own existential being. This is why I say it is exciting to be alive and around for preaching at "such a time as this," as we remember from the book of Esther, because this is not only a "teachable moment," as the pope is fond of saying, but it is also a listening moment.

If you have noticed in your congregations, since September 11 of 2001, people are prepared to listen a little more closely than they might have before. We can't build our whole edifice, our whole household of faith, upon the embers of that tragedy, but it is noteworthy that a woman of my congregation said to me, oh, in about the middle of November, "Are we using a different translation of the psalms?" I said, "No, it's the same old one. Why do you ask?" She said, "They certainly sound different to me now." I will say that September 11 didn't bring this all on; September 11 is just one more piece of where we are now, which means, in my opinion, that we have never had a more propitious moment for a favorable work.

Let me illustrate this again, in another way. Last Commencement day at Harvard [2001] we had the usual three student speeches. We are blessed at Harvard in not having some imported windbag sound off to us in the Commencement exercises in the morning. They do it in the afternoon, but in the morning, where the students are, and their parents and friends, and thirty-two thousand other people in the College Yard, we do what we have done since 1642: we have student speakers, now only three. One speech is given in Latin by a College senior—so, effectively, there are only two speeches that you have to listen to—one in English by a College senior, and the third,

also in English, by a professional degree candidate.

The undergraduate English oration was given by a student whom I have come to know very well and for whom I have enormous regard. Now, if you have sat on the Commencement platform for thirty-two years, you feel that you have heard it all and that there is very little new that can be said and few clichés that have not been run around the track. So, you sit back and wait for lunch. This boy, however, stood up and gave the usual recital of the Harvard greats: John Adams and John Quincy Adams, Harvard graduates; Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt, Harvard graduates; John F. Kennedy, Harvard graduate; Helen Keller, Radcliffe graduate; and he went down the list of all those great and heroic names because of whom we pay thirty-five thousand dollars a year to go to Harvard. At the end he said, "What have they all in common?" There was a collective breath taken in by the audience, and he answered his own question: "They're all dead! That's what they have in common: they are all dead! That was then, this is now, and this is our moment." Knowing that he had his audience, he continued, "What will be our invitation, our summons, to noble purpose?" He said, "I am 22 years old, and when my father was 22 years old he was dealing with the war in Vietnam; when my grandfather was 22 years old he was dealing with World War II," and he went back and forth. Then he asked, "What will be our moment? What will summon greatness to us? What will we hear for the first time in our time that will make a difference?"

That was on the eighth of June. On September 11, this boy heard the siren call and enlisted where he now is, in the Officer Candidate School of the United States Marine Corps, to the horror of his parents and consternation of his friends. His astonishing sense now, which he communicated to me on Easter Sunday when he came back, having just been commissioned, is that he doesn't have all the answers—he isn't one of those smarty-pants who has all the answers—but he felt for the first time in his life that here was an opportunity to serve a moment of noble purpose, and he was hungry for such an opportunity.

The blush has gone off the rose of modernity. We are not such self-confident, self-assertive people as we once thought we were.

I think people across our culture are hungry for such an opportunity. The blush has gone off the rose of modernity. We are not such self-confident, self-assertive people as we once thought we were; we don't know all that we thought that we once knew. We wander in confusion. We look and wonder, "Has anybody else ever been in this situation? Are we the first people to encounter turbulence, tribulation in the world? Are we the first people to ask about the mysteries of birth, the compounding realities of life, the ultimate mystery of death? Are we the first people to be able to ask these existential questions about meaning, and are we satisfied with the answers that are offered to us twenty-four hours a day on three hundred cable channel television stations, talk radio, and in *USA Today*? Is that meeting our fundamental needs?

You know that the answer to that is No! People are starving. There is a spiritual anemia which is manifesting itself in strange and bizarre ways. You go into the book stores, any of the big chains, and once upon a time there was a section called "Religion." You'd go there and you'd find

> The Bible has to be seen as a book about the future and not about the past.

The Interpreter's Bible, which you were all brought up on, you'd find a lot of stuff from Billy Graham, there would be Catherine Marshall—a book a day by Catherine Marshall—a lot of religious education stuff, and so forth. Well, go to a book store today, and the Religion section has become very small, if you've noticed, with really hard-core Bible stuff, and the "Spirituality" section has got bigger and bigger and bigger. You can find the Spirituality section in any bookstore because that is where the incense is burning; you just follow your nose, and there will be some beanbag chairs and some very strange people, and that is the Spirituality section.

Now, I don't knock spirituality. I think it is one of these vague buzz words, but I know what it means. It means that people have not yet found satisfactory answers to their questions and have not even yet found a satisfactory way to ask the questions, which leads me to think that we have been here before.

There is a whole book about all of this, this human dilemma, this connection between the spiritual and the divine, this great wandering after false gods and then this claiming and being called "home"; this sense of giving priority and purpose, that takes difficulties and dangers seriously and offers no quick, no cheap, no easy answers but only the ultimate direction in which to look for them. That book is our book, the Bible. We, strangely enough, have custody of it, because the culture by and large is not all that interested in it. It is ours—ours to open, to proclaim, to teach from, as it were, for the first time.

Let me ask you: Where in the world is it—in your experience, either firsthand or anecdotal—that the Christian faith is flourishing? This will be a very hard question for you Lutherans to address, for it is not flourishing in the land of Luther, it is not flourishing in western Europe. Do you know that less than one half of one percent of the British population attends a Christian church once a year?—and that is in a culture which has been so nourishing of the western Christian tradition. Go to France: even less. Go to Germany: I'm not altogether sure, but you know that there are no bonfires of faith burning on the continent of Europe.

So where is it flourishing? It is in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and it is in the burned-out regions of urban North America and in strange suburban places in North America. The Bible comes to life where people are in a position to appreciate both the reality of tribulation, of trouble in the world, and the reality of a hope that transcends that tribulation and flourishes where people can be assured that they will hear from it, and that in hearing from it there will be a word that they can take seriously and be compelled by.

We live in what I call that difficult valley between history and hope. We have the glorious history of the past, which is

fascinating and interesting and a noble and glorious inheritance, and yet we have this hope that is before us, which none of us has yet achieved, and we are in a valley between history and hope. As the hymn puts it, "Standing in the living present/Memory and hope between. . . ."

What does that mean? First, it means that the Bible has to be seen as a book about the future and not about the past, and that is very counterintuitive to your church and to mine. We think we have this treasure that we must hold onto, which was once appreciated and understood and is now in danger of being lost; and the only way we can hold onto our time and our people and our book is to let nothing happen to it that didn't happen to it in the past. This is called orthodoxy, and sometimes it can be very destructive. The thing that one must remember about the Bible, both in its construction and its content, is that it is a book that has always by definition looked forward and not backward. It is only the people who look backward. The book looks forward.

So, if you ask, "When was the golden age of preaching?" I would answer that there never was a golden age of preaching, there never was a golden age of the faith, there never was a golden age of spiritual attainment. We have not yet got there. Our journey is not to go back to some previous moment; it is to take the momentum of those previous moments and be pushed forward to that great and perfect day which is yet to come. This means that preaching's task is always constructive and not simply reconstructive. It is always moving forward, it is always realizing that God is always out there ahead of his people, his people are always trying to catch up; and our task as preachers and as friends of preachers is to facilitate that forward motion and direction.

At Easter we all say the same thing. When I was a very young man about to enter the ministry, I was terrified by the fact that after I preached my first Easter sermon there would be nothing else to say. What do you say? "He was dead. He was in the tomb. He rose. He lives." What other variations can you make on that? It's pretty difficult. Well, I've somehow managed to find something to say each Easter for these many years, and it usually is not quite the same thing, but there are three fundamental elements that are always there, and sometimes they provoke, but I hope in most cases they persuade people to do what I think was done on Easter morning.

1. I tell them that Easter is not just about Jesus, but about us. It is not just Jesus who is dead and raised, but we who are dead are to be raised, so don't just leave it all on Jesus.

2. It's not just about death being vanquished; it's about life being renewed and affirmed in the power of the Spirit.

3. It's not just about the past, and trying to prove the circumstances of Easter morning according to whichever synoptic you want to use. It's about the future, where the operative words that Jesus says to the women and to the apostles is, "It is as I said it would be," and the angel said it just right: "He goes before you, even as he said." He's always ahead of us, and we have to catch up.

It seems to me that that is the power that a world that is literally stuck in its tracks needs to hear. The things that the Christian church can proclaim through the witness of the Bible are the very things that this world does not know how to take very seriously.

Let me illustrate. I'm sure we can all remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, and more than that, we can remember the Sunday

Hope is what you have left when everything else, including optimism, has been taken away from you.

following September 11. My ushers were overwhelmed. My church begins at 11:00, and at 10:30 every seat in an eight-hundred-seat church was taken, and people were standing—and not like they do on Easter, though it was an Easter-sized crowd. Easter crowds are filled with very un-Christian people: "I want that seat! I have that seat; that seat was saved for somebody else; get outta there!" There are really bad scenes on Easter morning in most of our churches, but this wasn't like that at all, though it was the same kind of crowd. There was a very different demeanor, with a kind of listening moment that was extraordinary; and it seems to me that the sermons that will last from those days will not be the sermons of cheap and easy comfort, the sermons of a tinny patriotism. Those sermons will go to that great black hole where all bad sermons go.

The sermons that will last are those that suggest how to learn to live in the middle of adversity, not prosperity. Where did our faith begin? In adversity, not in prosperity. What was the fire that tempered the seal of our faith? It was not security, but suffering. What is the danger of which any faithful people have to be aware? That they are too good for bad things to happen to them. You will not hear that in *The New York Times*, you will not hear George Bush tell you that, you will not hear 90 percent of television and radio preachers and evangelists tell you that, because that is too hard to take except for those of us who have been nurtured in the gospel of Jesus Christ and who take tribulation seriously because we know "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Remember, "In this world ye shall have tribulation. So be of good cheer," says Jesus; "I have overcome the world."

It is only by the taking of tribulation seriously that we can take hope seriously, and hope is not mere optimism. Hope is what you have left when everything else, including optimism, has been taken away from you. You don't learn that in philosophy courses, and you ought to learn it in history but most people don't, but it is the meat, the marrow, and the morsel of the Bible. That is why that book is so precious to us, and it is why I am convinced that if it is rightly, wisely, and imaginatively opened, it will receive a new hearing among people hungry and thirsty for it.

How do we bring this to a useful conclusion, about this post-Christian age? Let me make it as clear as possible. I do not believe, my dear friends, that there ever has been a Christian age, so how can there be a post-Christian age? What age will you offer to me as an example of how the Christian life was properly led, from which we have departed? I defy anybody in this room to give me even a Christian decade, let alone a Christian age, in which this has all been done. You can't, and the reason you can't is that we're not there yet; we are still a work in progress. We are still trying to build the kingdom, we're not trying to reconstruct it—it's never been constructed. What is that great line? "Christianity is not a faith that has been tried and found want-

ing; it's a faith that's been wanted and never tried."

Here is a moment, a wake-up call, an opportunity; and so we're not living in a post-Christian age. Maybe the way to get people's attention is to say that we are living in a very sophisticated pre-Christian age, an age very much as the apostle Paul would recognize, with sophisticated pagan ideologies, temptations and seductions all around, dangers on every hand, and a huddled, shattered, faithful few hoping for the coming of the kingdom. We are much closer to the first half of first-century Christendom in the life of the apostle Paul than we have been at any point, it seems to me, in the last two thousand years.

Now, you just take that from one ordinary preacher, one ordinary church historian; you can chew it up and spit it out if you want, but you can't say you didn't hear it, and if you do say you heard it, please say you heard it from me.

This means, I think, that we have to—and this is where Jim Forbes likes to say that I stop preaching and commence to meddling—this is where I think we have to bring an end to what might be called—dare I say it?—conceits of the Reformation.

Now what might those conceits of the Reformation be? I'll give you three:

1. We can understand and explain everything. That is a conceit of the Reformation. The medieval Roman Catholic Church didn't try to explain very much, and it certainly didn't expect you or me to understand anything: great mystery, great confusion, great problems too, and I can understand that, but not this notion that somehow we can boil it all down and make sense of it. I go into the libraries of these four seminaries—I hope to go into yours tomorrow—and if I go into the right section I will see a shelf the length of that wall filled with red and blue bound volumes of the complete works of Dr. Luther. There was not a thought he had that he didn't commit to paper, and there was invariably somebody to translate it from German into English two and three times, so you have a whole wall full of all there is to know. Well, that is all very well and good, but that is not all there is to know, and this notion that we somehow, as Protestants, can understand and explain everything—not just as Protestants but as western Protestants, and not just as western Protestants but as American western Protestants, and not just as American western Protestants but as American western modern Protestants—that we have it all down; and that's why there's no more fun in it. It's all there, there is nothing left to break forth from out of God's marvelous word, and so we go on to other more interesting things. That is one conceit we should do away with. We can understand and explain everything? No. We can't.

2. Another Reformation conceit we may want to put away is that things are getting better. Well, all you have to do is reach the age of consent, or even the age of puberty, and you know things are not getting better and better and better; they're getting complicated, they're getting demanding, they're getting ambiguous, and in certain cases they're getting worse. That's an invitation to a certain kind of cultural modesty on our part, which is not one of those high virtues of Protestants, as we are not a modest people; we won, we say. Somebody has said, "One of the things the pope is going to ask the cardinals tomorrow, when he gets them all in front of him, is, 'How is it that the Roman Catholic church in America is the largest Protestant church in America?'" He's going to be very interested in the answer to that question. Some of us do say, "Yeah, right, if you only become like us you'll be all right, it'll

all go away." Things are not getting better; that's an invitation to modesty.

3. The third conceit is that *we* are getting better. Some of you are old enough —I can tell by looking around, so don't pretend you're not—to remember M. Coué's idea, in the twenties and thirties, "Every day in every way I'm getting better and better and better." *Things* may not be getting better, but *we* are, we think, and we know that that's not true. We are in that position that T. S. Eliot wrote about nearly sixty-five years ago, in one of the Four Quartets, when he said that we spend all our energy "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one need ever be good."

Well, what's the bottom line? As my old predecessor and great teacher of preaching George Arthur Buttrick used to say, "What's the good news? Where's the good news in all of this for the culture, for the Bible, and for preachers?"

There is one thing that people need to hear, and that we need to say, and that is this, in the words of Bishop Fulton Sheen: "God does not love us because we are valuable. We are valuable because God loves us."

Remember Bishop Sheen, the Loretta Young who used to sweep in in his swirling robes, and do his thing? That was Bishop Sheen's line that has made its way into the anthologies, and it is a great word for a troubled and ignorant time; and that's where we are, in a troubled, ignorant, and fearful time. God doesn't love us because we are valuable, but we are valuable because God loves us; and who in the world will be able to proclaim that God loves us, but us? Where do we get proof of that but in this book, which is uniquely ours to share? Fred Buechner has a line addressed to those of us who are in this business, talking about our calling, our vocation—for nobody would do this who has any other option! I tell my students in the Divinity School, "If you have any other option, take it; don't do this, there are easier ways to make a living, and you'll make a much better living than you will if you go out as a preacher or a teacher. You will have to put up with the most difficult of people, live in drafty rectories, deal with ignorant superiors, and be scoffed at by your spiritual and intellectual inferiors. There are other ways, but if you can't avoid it, then you are truly called, this is your vocation;" and Buechner defines vocation as "That place where your great joy meets the world's great need." That's a wonderful line.

I have to confess, though, that *joy* is not the first word that leaps to my mind when I think of Luther. I know you're earnest, I know you're well informed, I know you're serious, and I know you're sincere; but joyful? I don't know about that. Maybe I've been listening too much to your great evangelist Garrison Keillor, and maybe he should change his lines; but how about a little joy? It is almost as if you might think that it may be true, and what a terrible thought, if it's all true, my God! Well, it *is* all true, and Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Your grimness will get you nothing, and nowhere, but your joy is contagious, and I suspect that there's a great deal more joy than earnestness in heaven. You don't have to be earnest in heaven, because you're there, it's done, it's achieved —"achieved is the glorious work"—and you're not earning up credits anywhere.

Here on earth, I know, we have to do a little work: how about a little anticipatory joy?

A Matter of Trust and Imagination

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In the first lecture I endeavored, with as much candor and imagination as I could, to respond to the challenge set forth by the trustees, whoever they may be, of the Hein Fry Lectures for this year under their somewhat paranoid topic, "Biblical Preaching in Babel." I think my job was to try to say to them then, as I say to you this morning, that just because they're out to get you is no reason not to be paranoid; but paranoia is a very minor virtue, and what I'm trying to suggest to you is that we ought to get out from underneath the cloud of paranoia which we tend to find comforting and reassuring—for, because we've been under it for so long, we recognize the familiar as the good. I'm suggesting that we get out from underneath that and actually claim the opportunity that our Babel presents to us at this point.

I do that by suggesting that we remember the problem of Babel. The problem, which has been rehearsed over and over and over again for us, was the misdirected ambition, pride, and arrogance of people who understood one another. Think about that. The problem wasn't that they didn't know what to do, or know one another, or understand one another; it was their universal understanding of one another that enabled them to translate that capacity for understanding into an act that actually rather annoyed God. So, the parable of Babel is taking power and resources, which we take for granted, and using them for an ill purpose: "We shall build a proud tower even unto heaven"—an exercise in understanding, in cooperation, and in all of the urban values that most of us appreciate, which is why the story of Babel is so disconcerting to most of us, because the very qualities that annoyed God in Babel are the qualities to which most of us have aspired in our lives: understanding, cooperation, a common task, getting as near to heaven as possible, and building proud towers. It is God who rains—literally—on that parade, and interrupts this cooperative venture, and one might even say interrupts this ecumenical venture. You Lutherans might want to think carefully about the paths you have begun, at long last, to tread, and the confusions amongst them.

The story of the tower of Babel is not my text, but I ask us to think about inverted values as I try to undermine the paradigm that has suggested Babel as something to deal with. Of course your trustees took Babel to be now—the confusion of tongues, and the fact that some of us speak in language that others do not understand, and the resulting chaos and confusion. These lectures occur in Eastertide, looking forward to the clarification of tongues that occurs at Pentecost, when confusion is meant to be dispersed by the power of the

Holy Spirit, and so it suggests that Babel is a good place to be because we have something to look forward to that is clearer: deeper understanding, and a subversion of our desires and fears, and a confirmation of our understanding of God's purposes and movement among us. If you are groping for what you might say in your Pentecost sermon, maybe this is one of those freebies for which you come to lectures such as these, groping for yet one more unused illustration from a foreigner; and I give you permission to do with it whatever you wish. Remember, in this age of anxious attribution of sources, all work and no plagiarism makes Jack or Jane a dull preacher. I give it to you for all that it's worth.

In the first lecture I talked about the new paradigm in which we find ourselves, which is turning a dilemma into an opportunity—that is, dealing with people who don't speak our language and who are interested in what we might have to say, which therefore presents a new opportunity for preaching, in my opinion—a golden opportunity for the rehabilitation of the sermon. Marcus Borg has a wonderful set of constructs, which he uses in the titles of his books on rediscovering Jesus for the first time and rereading the Bible for the first time,[1] and the thing that makes the titles interesting is the notion that we are recovering something with which we were once familiar but which we now hear differently and in a different voice. I suggest to preachers (among the most paranoid people I know) that this is our moment, our time. To those of you who are beginning this exercise, to those few seminarians who have managed to stagger up at this early hour of the day and find yourselves in these strange circumstances known as the Seminary Chapel, I would say to you scattered few that your best years are ahead of you and that the sermons that you dread are filled with "blessings round your head," to paraphrase one of the old psalm paraphrases. To the rest of us, who are long in the tooth, I want to say that our best years, and the best years of what we do, are also ahead of us. No matter how distinguished our careers might have been up to this point, or how bad, or how mediocre, better days are in store for us. That is the eschatological hope, and it's not just a hope; I think it is a fact for what it is that we do.

There are certain requirements, however, that will make it so, certain expectations that will bring it to pass, a certain sense of confidence without which it will be impossible for us to proceed outside this dangerous paradigm and outside of this cloud of paranoia, and it is my task today to try to suggest to you how that may be done. Thus, my topic this morning is "A Matter of Trust and Imagination." I am suggesting that the two elements essential to the performance of our task—and I use that word *performance* quite seriously—are trust and imagination, and that both in equal measure are essential to the worthwhile task of preaching. I will illustrate as we move along.

The setting of this is another piece of conventional wisdom. Last night the conventional wisdom—the paradigm of which I spoke—was that we speak in an obscure tongue, that nobody is particularly interested in it, and that the world is moving far beyond the religious dimension with which most of us are familiar. This morning the conventional wisdom against which I wish to speak is that the sermon itself is no

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[1] Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (HarperCollins, 1994), and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (HarperSanFrancisco 2001).

longer a suitable or appropriate device with which to communicate in this age of communication. No less an authority than *The New York Times*, early in this spring term, actually on March 30, 2002, ran an article with the headline, "An Era When the Art of the Sermon has Declined." That's the usual piece of tripe from *The New York Times*, the notion that nobody has the attention span to listen to one person talking to them for more than three or four minutes, that the literary quality of the sermon as an art form has long ceased to be recognized as such, that both preachers and listeners have lost confidence in this particular way of communication, and that it ever persists in its downward spiral.

What motivated this piece of analysis was a lawsuit in the ecclesiastical courts of the Episcopal church, I believe in the diocese of Michigan, where a rector was brought up on charges of plagiarism by people in his parish who couldn't get him on anything else. It had to be true, because if the Episcopalians are worried about sermons, there is something very very awry in the state of Denmark! The charge was that their rector had taken his sermons from the Internet and was using them without attribution, claiming them as his own. This thing went through the ecclesiastical courts, and I was actually asked if I would be an expert witness both for the prosecution and for the defense, and one of the wisest things I ever did was to decline to serve in either capacity. When the defense lawyer called me—these are ecclesiastical lawyers, a very special breed—I cited the little line that I gave you at the beginning: "All work and no plagiarism makes Jack or Jane a dull preacher;" and he said he was afraid that would not be altogether helpful to the cause. So, I withdrew before I was asked to withdraw.

It's not the subject of that trial that intrigues me so much as *The New York Times* account of it, that preachers and preaching are in such a desperate situation that they have to resort to canned ideas, canned sermons, predigested thoughts in little gobbets, simply to fill in the time between the Gospel and the 'comfortable word,' or prayer of consecration.

For a Baptist, as I am, that is a strange observation; and as I have enjoyed my experience among the Lutherans during these now four Hein Fry Lectures, one of the things I have asked of my host, or the person who has ferried me around in each place where I have been, is, How much time do I have in the liturgy, for the sermon? I know I have 55 minutes plus for the lectures, but I ask where the sermon works into the liturgy. As a rule I have been told that I have somewhere between "six, max," or maybe eight, or maybe twelve, or (grudgingly) maybe fifteen minutes, but that would be really taking up a great deal of time of the occasion. I have been told that here—without violating any confidences—it is the custom to speak for about seven minutes, and if you exceed that you get a letter from the dean or the president. So, Mr. President, wherever you are, I look forward to several letters from you today, and I will keep them where I keep letters of that sort.

This is in part the issue, however, and it raises a paradox. Bill Coffin, in his heyday at Yale, used to describe the little sermon as "sermonettes for Christianettes," and his view was—and Bill was not a long-winded Baptist preacher, he was a Presbyterian by ordination—that you needed a rather stiff diet with which to cope in a tradition that in a sense had invented the sermon as the eighth sacrament. I take that rather seriously, as an opportunity; and the paradox that faces us, it seems to me, as people of the Word, is that one of the great Lutheran inheritances that we have all

> We have this thing called the talk show in an age when we seemingly have less and less to say to one another.

received and cherished is not a Lutheran or a Reformation conceit but a Lutheran and Reformation gift to the whole church. Think about this: We probably have more reading of Scripture now in our services than at any point in the history of our church: an Old Testament lesson, a psalm, an epistle, and a gospel: four hunks of Scripture. We live in an age in which people know less and less and less about any of that Scripture, which is helpful, liturgically, in the face of this preponderance of Scripture and the abysmal illiteracy on the part of our people, because the sermon has become shorter and shorter and shorter. It strikes me that something is wrong in that syllabus, and one must begin to ask what it is.

I hear your answers before you're prepared to give them, and I know exactly what you're thinking right now: "Now look, we are a eucharistically-centered body, we have recovered the ancient liturgical rites of the church, and how are we to preach these long-winded, long-stemmed sermonic commentaries on these four pieces of Scripture, communicate with our people, celebrate the holy mysteries, and get it all done in 55 minutes?" Well, that's your problem. There is an obvious answer to it, which you do not hear; but you will hear it today, at least from me.

The obvious answer is that you cannot sustain the people of God on such a thin diet of exposition and proclamation. You simply cannot do it. That is why our people, by and large, are anemic both scripturally and doctrinally. They are well fed in the body and blood of Christ, but that is not the only diet to which the faithful have been summoned, and therefore the responsibility for not feeding them adequately on the Word of God is not their fault, although they will make it difficult to feed them otherwise. We somehow have introduced into the ecclesiastical culture the secular cultural values of the limited time span, the notion of constant entertainment, the fast movement that is characteristic of the talk show. Think about the talk show. Here we have invented this format for entertainment called the talk show, everything from Oprah to Jay Leno, in an age when we seemingly have less and less to say to one another. That is a paradox, and the church's job, in my opinion, is to transcend conventional paradoxes.

This is not just an argument for longer sermons. A long sermon is not necessarily a good sermon, but neither is a short sermon necessarily a good sermon, and one might pose the question: Is it better to have a long bad sermon or a short bad sermon? That you might think about as you compose, and if you want to say that all sermons are bad by definition, then what chance does one have to improve upon that situation? Most of us are of the view, alas, that we should quit while we're ahead; and we're ahead usually about six or seven minutes into it, and after that it is usually groping or repetition, and therefore we should bring it to a merciful close on behalf of everybody.

It must be clear to you that I am not particularly in favor of, and do not wish to encourage, what I call these "warm mur-

murings" over the gospel. Warm murmurings over the gospel feed very few people, and if I can do anything in this process, I want to encourage you to do more than massage the text. My predecessor in The Memorial Church, Dean Sperry, was famous fifty years ago for taking a mildly cynical view of what Americans like to call their "textual preaching," and he coined this aphorism which I have used in many ways differently from what he intended. It does, however, describe something of the kinds of preaching of which I'm speaking. His formula went like this: "Take your text; depart from your text; never return to your text." You may not do this, but doubtless you are sitting next to somebody who does. Therefore, this is a kind of veiled warning against that particular way of doing things.

This is all in the context of our continued affirmation of the power of the word, and of the value of words to deal with the power of the word. The notion that words move people and make a difference is often denigrated in our image-minded culture. We have been told that action and image is the way of communication, and that words are sort of artifacts on their way out. I ask you if that is really true. Ronald Reagan was called the "great communicator." This is not because he was a great actor, for he was a terrible actor, a mediocre actor, a B-level actor, as were all of his films: not one good film did Ronald Reagan appear in. What made Reagan work, whether or not you liked him, was the illusion of his capacity to use words to move people, and that was what communication was seen to be in political life. It is the reason, one of many, that Michael Dukakis, who ran against Reagan, was not president of the United States—not because he looked silly riding around in a tank with Mickey Mouse ears but because his words were not effective in persuading people. One of the reasons that Bill Clinton, wherever you stand in the syllabus of Clinton virtue or Clinton vice, so charmed his friends and bedeviled his enemies was that, as a southern Baptist, he understood the power of words and language and was far more exciting and interesting and compelling with his words than, shall we say, to take a name out of the air, Bob Dole. If you had to be locked in a room to listen endlessly to one or other of those two, which room would you go to? Of course you would go to the place where the words, the language—and it didn't matter if you believed them or not, that is something else entirely—affected you; and that describes our present dilemma in the last election.

Neither of the most recent candidates was compelling because of his words—neither Al Gore, a good Harvard man with great ideas but not the most persuasive of communicators, nor our present president. There are two things wrong, I think, that most of us think of this president, that have nothing to do with his policies (about which another lecture could be given without drawing breath). One is that poor George's eyes are too close together; they are not trustworthy eyes. George is always blinking, have you noticed that? There is always something very squinty about President Bush, unlike his father, which is disconcerting to some. Second, no matter how well or badly articulated his polities might be, his syntax is downright annoying. He cannot construct a simple English sentence, and either it is an artful dumbing-down in order to undermine his elite eastern credentials and make him sound like an inarticulate Texan, or he really is that way, which is even worse from the point of view of the rest of us. Now, I say this as he too is a Harvard graduate, although of the Business School, where articulation in speech is not necessarily the highest virtue celebrated,

but even by that rather low standard he does not cut much of a figure.

Language is a powerful thing, and we admire it in others even though with that language they may do bad things, and we deplore it in those who, even though they do good things, are not able to communicate them. In World War II we had before us three people who were masters of language who turned the world upside down, for better or worse.

There was Adolf Hitler, admittedly one of the most powerful rhetoricians the world has ever seen, so powerful that his words alone ignited a terrible fire which nearly consumed the world. It was his words articulating his ideas that did that. If you watch his speeches, even though you don't understand a word of German—of course I'm in the wrong place for not being able to understand a word of German, because you all dream in German here, I'm sure, and therefore can understand every syllable that Hitler uttered—you are nevertheless terrified by what you hear, because you sort of understand it even though it's in a foreign language, because he was a great communicator.

Thank God he wasn't the only communicator to illustrate the power of words, because we had two others. We had Mr. Roosevelt, who was blessed not with a great intelligence but with a powerful arsenal of language which moved our country into the right position; and we had the greatest communicator of the twentieth century, I want to argue, and that is Sir Winston Churchill. All three of them had words as their nuclear weapons, so don't buy into the notion that words no longer work, that people are incapable of understanding words strung together in sentences, that they are content to have as the archetypes of communication and languages the talk-show hosts and television mimics, and that we all now have been reduced to the third-grade level of two-minute attention spans. That is a conceit that has been sold to us as a bill of goods, and we should not buy it; and the last people who should buy into that are the ministers of Word and Sacrament.

You have sold out if you have bought the notion that this is the wave of the future, that this is the way of discourse; and when your people sit in your pews, no matter what they say or what you think they say, they will hear anything that you are capable of communicating. If they cannot hear the sermon it's not their fault, it's your fault. They will listen for 50 minutes if you have something to say for 50 minutes and say it well for 50 minutes. You have to reclaim the initiative of the word and take some responsibility for shaping the context in which the word is heard. If you do not, you have nobody to blame but yourselves. You can't blame TV, you can't blame radio, you can't blame the secular culture, you can't blame politics; you have to blame—if blame is the word at all—yourselves. My contention is that people will hear anything that we are capable of communicating—anything.

Now, if we have in our care and custody the Word of Life, of course people are going to want to hear it, and it is our responsibility to figure out the most effective way for us to communicate that Word of Life. Instead of thinking of the sermon as a problem that has to be solved every Sunday, you must think of it as an opportunity that has to be grasped every Sunday. Instead of thinking of the sermon as an unfortunate interlude in the face of a seamless liturgy, you must understand that the sermon is the essential ingredient of the liturgy. It cannot be an add-on or a drop-off; it has to be essentially a sacramental ingredient, the outward and visible sign of

an inward and spiritual grace. That is what the Prayer Book defines as a sacrament, and the sermon is no less a sacrament than that.

For those of you who have been brought up in what we might call the diminished climate of expectations of the sermon, you have a responsibility to overcome that climate and turn it around. It is never too late. Your best years are ahead of you; and is it not reassuring for you, as it ought to be for your people, that your best sermons are ahead of you? Is not that good news, that every week you have a chance to experience that, to witness to that, to celebrate that? I am hoping that you will claim that opportunity as your own.

How does one do it? That is my point this morning. There are two elements that must be engaged in order to achieve this great promise of the sermon as a new and enlivening form of discourse, and these two qualities I fear are in short supply among us these days. The first is a matter of trust, and the second is a matter of imagination. Within that framework of trust and imagination, I assume you have all done what you have to do with the ancient languages. Now, whether or not the ancient languages are good, I really don't know; there is a certain number of hurdles through which our seminaries put our people, but at a simple level, asking the indulgence of the professors of Old Testament and Hebrew Bible and of New Testament and Greek, I ask, in a sort of cynical observation, whether this is like three years of high school French. I say, "Thank God people smarter than I am have already translated this, because if it depended upon my seminary Greek or my seminary Hebrew, I suspect that few would be saved and many more, including myself, would be lost." I know that it gives employment to very smart people to teach these languages,

People will hear anything that you are capable of communicating. If they cannot hear the sermon it's not their fault, it's your fault.

and I'm not going to diss them, because you will ask me questions later on and expose my ignorance. It may be very good for a lot of people, but I really do wonder if it does any good other than, I hope, to give the facility to use a good concordance, a good lexicon, and some fundamentally useful word studies.

Kittel is a lot smarter than you are, however, and if you know where you can put your hand on Kittel and the whole host of Germans who indulge themselves in linguistic studies—you do not have to be a fireman to smash the glass and pull the alarm—that may very well be a useful device to you. I don't want to knock that, but I do want you to think about where the priorities are placed. Many a good preacher has been ruined from trying to be a good linguist, and unless we start where your ancestors started, early enough that these languages become a part of us, and I mean in the first grade, then I wonder what use they are. I am in favor of introducing classics and foreign languages when we introduce English to students, in the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades, so that by the time they reach high school they can *think* in those languages. By the time

you are 21, and you are taking up the classical languages for the first time, by and large, unless you are a hidden genius, it is too late to be of any use. Those of you who are in second and third careers and are coming from the fruit of one labor and trying to start another—I don't want to say it's a waste of time, but I do think that, given the short time the Lord has given you in the second career, you might put your time to somewhat better use. I don't want to get into that, however, as that is curricular reform, and we all know that that is a bog into which one shouldn't step.

Having said that, the issue, it seems to me, is a matter of trust and imagination. How do we get into that? In the matter of imagination, at least initially, I will refer to a secular colleague of mine, Samuel Beer, who has just turned 90 this fall and is well retired from his eminence as Eaton Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard, a professorship that he honored for something like 45 years. He was one of the great giants at Harvard and in the intellectual world. He was honored at a gathering of his colleagues in Cambridge on his 90th birthday in November, and he gave a wonderfully rambling disposition on his intellectual pilgrimage and how he got from where he was to where he is. As a sort of summary of it all, and having lived in the golden age and dealt with some of the high points of twentieth-century political science, he said, essentially, "Ultimately I think that I have learned more from metaphor than I have from analysis." Now, this is a master in the field of analysis, and in a sense he was offering a secular social scientist's affirmation.

The point I've tried to make in other settings is that for clergy and for the people of God, we are saved by our metaphors and not by our metaphysics. We are saved by the pictures we draw, the images we create, the symbols that have been offered to us and that we offer to others. We are saved by our metaphors and not by our metaphysics, which means that we offer salvation not through our explanations but through the invitation to an experience. How many of you have sat through sermons that try to explain something? Christmas Eve? Oh, what painful years I have spent listening to others preach, explaining the great mystery of the Incarnation: "This is the way it works, this happens, that happens . . ." and nobody is fed at the manger on that stuff. If Christmas Eve is bad, Easter is even worse. Every sophomoric argument in which we have ever been engaged comes out to try us on Easter morning. How did the tomb get empty? Who rolled the stone away? What did the women see or not see? What did they say or not say? Was it a real angel, or were they just hallucinating because they hadn't had any breakfast and had been up all night?

Over and over and over again we trot out these tawdry little explanations and think that that is the good news, until quickly we say, "Let us pray," when in fact people hunger and thirst for an experience. "Listen, brother; listen, sister, is there something that has saved you that might save me? Is there something you have that you can give to me? Is there something I need that you have?" Those are the kinds of questions that can be answered only by the imagination, in a sort of license to think and respond freely rather than simply in the land of pseudoscientific fact. You and I have been brought up in such a culture, where we have had to defend the Christian faith against the host of rational opposition, and we're defeated before we start because we have accepted its terms for the debate. We have accepted the notion that we must make our faith credible, reasonable, acceptable, and understandable, so that the

grossest heathen might make sense of it and then reject it. That is not a level playing field, and it is certainly not a field on which we can play with any degree of confidence. It is the irrationality, the unacceptability, the incredibility of our faith that is its chief attraction and our chief asset, and to embrace that is to turn our critics on their heads, because they cannot accept those terms. That is why they are on the outside and we are on the inside, and we should accept that.

Have you ever tried to have an argument with a Buddhist? Have you ever tried to have a debate with a Hindu? It doesn't work, because in their sweet inscrutability they simply do not admit to the terms in which we seemingly are obliged to debate. We want explanations, they offer sweet experience, and we will always lose that debate. The liberating notion, however, is that it was never our debate in the first place. You think of the Bible, and those teaching moments of Jesus, the great teacher —Jesus is the master of using words with which to teach—and when Jesus teaches miracles, those miracles are framed in language, in words; and is it not generally the case that we find most of Jesus' explanations of his miracles and healing works unacceptable? They really don't make much sense at all, and they didn't make any sense to the apostles, who were there on site and had some knowledge! Why then should they make any more sense to us? We are not any smarter than the apostles and we're further removed from the moment of encounter, so why should we understand more than they the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, for instance? What makes us think that we have finally understood what those poor bewildered companions of Jesus did not understand?

Here is a perfect illustration of this. How many of you have scratched your head into baldness trying to come up with something new and interesting to say on the Feast of the Transfiguration? I just ask you about that, and we have two Sundays now on which to do it: the Sunday before Lent begins—a mistake, I will add, of our liturgical Mafia, which runs how we are to read Scripture, and this is a big mistake to do that on the Sunday before Lent—and then we have it where it used to fall, on the calendar in the middle of the summer. I have never heard, nor have I ever given, a convincing sermon on the Feast of the Transfiguration. "It is good, Lord, for us to be here," is about as close as we can get, but what about these booths, and where does Elijah fit into all of this, and how is it that even Jesus himself did not give a satisfactory explanation to those who were there? That's just a small illustration, and I have consulted the commentaries hither and yon, and even the commentaries of Dr. Luther himself, and am persuaded that we will all have to wait until we get to heaven to find out—where no explanation, of course, is necessary, because we will have had the experience.

So, my suggestion is that the ticket into the imagination, which frees us from bondage to the tyranny of explanation, is the notion of experience, which we try to communicate, to celebrate, and to share, and words are the means to that end. If you lack experience, and if you lack the ability to communicate with imagination, everything else you do, in my view, is vain and foolish. If you're going to have a sermon at all, it must be a sermon that invites people into an experience, a relationship, and not simply into an exposition or an explanation. I sometimes feel that my colleagues in New Testament have done more harm than good, because in their heroic and altogether sincere efforts to teach us how to treat the texts through our exegesis, the dangers of

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eisegesis, our reading of the texts, our cultivation of languages, and our sense of a historical use of the texts, we have persuaded them that having done that, they have done all they need to do in order to teach someone to preach; and to those of us who teach preaching, oh, how we have suffered through people reading their exegesis, thinking they are preaching the Word of God. Oh, what a crime! Oh, what a sin! Hell will be listening to exegeses read aloud by bad exegetes, and at least a quarter of Hell will be filled with professors of New Testament.

Why is this a problem? I'm sure this is not true in Lutheran seminaries, but it is true for most seminaries that professors of New Testament have drawn the line, and say that their job is simply to explicate the text and not to invite anybody into the experience toward which the text points. This is not to say that they are not devout and faithful believers, but it is to say that they have a very narrow view of their function, and that that view is contagious, alas, and part of it has to do with what I think is the rather shortsighted vision of many people who are devoted to the explication of the text but not to the experience of the text. The way to grasp that experience of the text is through the imagination, of seeing things that aren't there. In a sense, I take Dean Sperry's aphorism that I gave you at the beginning of this talk as very wise, for truly we are meant to depart from our text—it is a launching pad—and at some risk I will say that it is also our ultimate purpose to never return to our text. That is to say, the text is meant to send us somewhere else and not back to itself.

My next piece of work, the next book in which I hope to invest my life's blood, is a book whose title I hope will illustrate what I've just said. Its title is *The Good News: From Scripture to Gospel.* How do we get from the text, which is a mere artifact, to the good news to which the text invariably points and from which the text has come? There is this thing called "gospel" out there which gets manifested in this thing called "text" right here, and reading that text properly and with imagination takes us away from it and to gospel, good news. How does that work?

One of the problems has been that those of us who are people of The Book are stuck in these 66 books, and we think that's it; we don't spend a great deal of time wondering where it comes from out there, and even less time on where it goes. My ambition is to try to suggest how one does that for preachers, because it will not be seminary professors who will accomplish that task; it is up to us as preachers to make that transaction. The seminary professors give us the tools to work with what we have, what's here, and the more inspired of them have some relationship to where it comes from, and the most inspired of them tell us where to go, but most of them give us simply the tools with which to deal with what's here. It's up to us preachers, ministers, stewards of the mysteries of Christ, to make that transaction. So, that's another

way of taking that aphorism and using our imagination to lead us into the realm of experience.

The imagination is both the means and the destination, but that is not the chief problem that affects us in this activity of ours. It is true that imagination is in short supply among preachers; our language and diction are impoverished by our lack of imagination. My solution to the imagination of the preacher is reading—and not reading just theology, because those who write theology also seemingly lack imagination, at least in their diction and language. Most books of serious theology that we are obliged to write and read, alas, do not have wings. They don't float, they trudge along. I think most theologians—and I've said this to my own faculty, so I don't mind saying it to you—can be represented by the walk to Emmaus. Here they are, licking yesterday's wounds; a stranger comes among them, and they say, "Don't you know what happened?" and they try to explain from their point of view. It's an interesting discourse, but they certainly don't persuade the stranger, try as they may as they fiercely walk toward Emmaus, on their way to tenure. Only when the stranger begins to talk to them do their hearts burn within them as he opens the Scripture to them along the way and ultimately manifests himself in the breaking of the bread, in an act of imagination. Emmaus is the perfect paradigm of the triumph of experience over explanation, but too often it is the road to Emmaus rather than the dinner in the upper room that consumes us. I want to suggest that imagination is the way that liberates us from the tyranny of that journey, which is essentially a retrospective: looking at what happened, how sad it is, and how woebegone we are. It is the meal that breaks the power of that paradigm.

That is not the chief problem, however, of preaching as we face it today. I think the chief problem is also not a matter of authority, though I often hear that as an explanation. The so-called problem of authority was introduced into our seminaries and our preaching more explicitly, over the last quarter of a century, with the rise of the enrollment of women in the seminaries. I say this quite candidly out of my own experience, because one of the problems I can remember when women started appearing in our preaching classes was the problem of authority. Women in some sense ceded early on the notion that authority belonged to the men, whom they had heard all of their lives, whether legitimately or not, and they were determined not to sound like men and therefore were determined not to assume the kind of cultural authority that they associated with men; and so the issue of authority became increasingly an issue with which we had to deal in preaching. It wasn't so much the authority of the word, which we by and large accepted; it was the authority of the proclaimer of the word.

So, a number of problems were introduced, and I was a slow learner; it took me a long time to grasp this issue of authority. I remember I used to say to my women students, "You must speak up! We're not going to have this whispering, this subtle posing. I will not have Barbara Brown Taylor in my class: you will *speak up*!" There was a great deal of controversy about that, I must say, but I've lived to tell the tale. Whispering is not the most advantageous way of communication; you think you're seducing people to listen, but they're going to go to sleep because they can't hear you, so *speak up*!

Needless to say, the word got out, and many fewer women enrolled in my classes, and I had to think of another way of doing it. It was a question, however, of how

authority is communicated, how authority is claimed, how authority is expressed, and there is no one way, I have learned, to do that.

Authority, however, is not the real issue. The real issue is trust. Have we anything to say that is trustworthy, and is there any reason that people should trust us to say it? That is the problem, and it is not just a female problem but a problem of men and women trained to be preachers in an age where not only the form of discourse, the word, is under suspicion, but the content. This question of trust was dealt with in a variety of ways, and there was a time when the preacher said, "Look, I want to be treated as an equal; I don't want to stand up there and wear funny clothes, I just want to be down here with my people on the same level; and why do we have to wear these vestments?" and so on. "I just want to struggle with this thing along with everybody else, I do not want to stand ten feet above contradiction, I don't want to do that anymore." This was challenging old Pastor Lundquist, with his collar and his bands and his black robes, and his thundering "Thus saith the Lord."

The other side of that is, "Well, if you're just like me, and we're standing in the same place and you're just stumbling through this along with me, why should I bother to listen to you do the same thing? Maybe the thing isn't worth doing at all. Just let's sit around as we do, in what is called—in a misnomer, I think—'Bible study' in most of our churches, and say, 'What do you think about this?'" Someone will say, "Well, I like this text, it reminds me of my mother, when she was sick, she . . ." and off we go into tangent land, from which we never return. You give your deeply moving response to that, then we go on to somebody else, who says, "Yes, I like this text, it reminds me of when I was in college . . ." and then there's another one, and we do this for forty minutes. It's called the "African Bible Study method," and I think that's a calumny against both Africans and the Bible; I think much of it's a lot of hooey and nonsense. There is something in the texts, we have to find out what it is, and in some places we have to go beyond it; it's not just a Rorschach test about the text, which is why so much of what passes for Bible study these days is a waste of time. It's therapy, but it's not study, and it therefore doesn't go anywhere. We just heap this stuff up in the middle of the room and leave it there, and we come back and add another heap the next week and another the next week, until you have fifty-two heaps of stuff and still you've gone nowhere. You have to rethink what you're going to do with this thing called Bible study. It is a question of authority, and so it also leads to the question of trust.

It is the question of trust that I have taken up more consistently than anything else in my teaching, and I try to address how we proceed. People ask me, "Can you make a great preacher?" As Professor Harms will doubtless say, and others have said, "No, nobody can make a great preacher; I can make a bad preacher a better preacher, that's all I can do. If you do as I say, and maybe even as I do, I can take you from point A maybe to point B . . ." and that's not a bad thing to do.

Your congregation on Sunday in some sense deserves a medal—not for simply having to listen to you, but for the fact that they come out for no particular social reward. Not everybody does it any more; many watch the Sunday morning talk shows, tend their gardens, maintain their families, sleep in, or engage in any other set of attractive alternatives, so those who bother to come to church week after week deserve something. The reason they're there is not

necessarily because of your preaching; they are there and they endure your preaching, they even come to expect something of your preaching, and they come to wish you well. They come to wish you well! In the Black church we know this, because they come and they say, right out loud, during the sermon, "Preach it, brother!" "Go!" "Amen!" "Hallelujah!" "Yes, you're right!" "Be careful . . . don't go there!" "Yes, good!" You get a lot of encouragement as you make your way in the Black church, but Lord help you Lutherans, because your people sit on their hands. They see you coming to this terrible homiletical cliff off of which you are about to drop, and they sit there and watch you go over, and that's the end of that. Nobody warns you, "Danger ahead!" "Be careful!" Then they come back to see if you'll jump off that cliff again.

This is a bit like the Flying Wallendas. Remember the Flying Wallendas, that famous European family of acrobats who flew through the air with the greatest of ease, without a net? That's why we went to see the Flying Wallendas. Nobody who went to see the Flying Wallendas ever wished them ill, no one wanted to see anything awful happen, but had you the opportunity to be there when one of them missed the connection and crashed and burned, while you wouldn't rejoice, it would be an experience that you would remember and perhaps tell other people about.

Let me say that your people do not come to watch you crash and burn; they come in the hope that even in hope triumphing over experience, something good might happen here, and they want to be a part of it. You should trust them, because, strangely enough, they trust you. So, not only trust the text, but trust the people; they are built to receive what you have to offer, and they can receive anything you are capable of offering.

The third thing is to trust the Spirit. We actually do believe that the Spirit inhabits the text and the word, and that the Spirit is what gives us utterance: we believe that, yet we really are not altogether sure we believe that. I, however, have the



experience of it and I know all of you have, too. All of you preachers know that when you are preaching there is a strange creature, I call it the Jiminy Cricket of homiletics, who sits on your right shoulder—you all know this—and this creature utters a running commentary as you're preaching. It'll say, "That's pretty good, bet you didn't know where that came from . . . uh-oh, watch out for this one, it's not going to go where you think it'll go, do that; or it will say, "Time's running out;" or "Skip to the third verse;" or "This is pretty good, you're much better than you think you are." You hear all of this, and at the end you say to yourself, "You can still fool some of the people some of the time."

That Spirit, no matter how annoying, is there, and our job is to listen to it with one ear as with the other ear we listen to the people. I say "listen to the people" through

the Spirit, because I have a theory of how listening works—and I'll be interested if the professors of homiletics here agree with me. I argue that you never have your congregation with you all the time, in fact I argue that inevitably every congregation is divided up into three sections. There is the group that is with you at the very moment that you're speaking, there's the group that has just left you, they've gone off to wool-gather, to think about it, to prepare themselves for the next moment when they're with you, and then there's the group just ready to come in. You're the conductor of an orchestra, with these various groups. They are not all with you at the same time, you bid farewell to this one, you embrace this one, you beckon this one to come in. Haven't you ever realized that that's why we have three-point sermons? There are never three points, it's one point expressed in three different ways, because we have three different congregations all at the same time, as I have right now. There's a group of you with me right at this moment, hanging on my every word, while another group of you is thinking, "This is interesting, I wonder how it works in my life," and another group of you is just ready to come in. What are they listening to? An effective preacher recognizes that he has these three groups all sitting in the same place at the same time but not doing the same thing. Therefore you have three different sets of illustrations, you have three different jokes, you have three different stories, three different expositional lines; and your hope is that somewhere along the way each of your three listening congregations has heard what it is you have to say, and that they're with you as you begin: "I take as my text . . ." and when you end: "Let us pray. . . ." Between "I take as my text" and "Let us pray" there is a symphony going on; and if you're a bad conductor you're in deep trouble. Trust the Spirit, for the Spirit will enable you to do this.

Finally, the hardest element of trust, I think, is to trust yourself. Trust the fact that you have been called, summoned, invited, provoked into this great calling where words, language, Spirit, and imagination take their part; that God, for reasons that you cannot explain, has seen in you something of value in this process. Therefore, ultimately, trust God, who has trusted you. It is that element of trust that most concerns me, because so many ministers of Word and Sacrament don't trust themselves. They feel, "Woe is me, I am inadequate, I am a man or woman of unclean lips"—quoting from Isaiah 6—"How can I manage among so great a people?" The power of Isaiah, after the sixth chapter, is that inadequate as poor old Isaiah is, God somehow has some use for him and puts that use to good and visible purpose. God has such a use for us. He has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light, and if God can trust us, then it's not simply a matter of our trusting God but of our trusting ourselves, whom God has entrusted with the ministry of Word and Sacrament, the mysteries of Christ, and the ministry of reconciliation. So, if God can trust us, we must trust ourselves.

That is not a matter of arrogance, or of self-aggrandizement, but of affirmation and appropriate confidence, and it allows us to take as our own those words of the apostle who says, "Greater works shall ye do. To whom will be shown a more excellent way. To whom has been given the custody of the true and lively word." To nobody else is this given: not to lawyers, not to doctors, not to pundits, politicians, or pollsters, but to us. The most unworthy, we have been given the greatest thing possible and the only thing that will save our people. If we are aware that that is what we have—

"power unto salvation"—it will open the door by our imagination through to the experience of the living God; and that is what our people still instinctively believe they have a right to expect from us. It is a sin of the first order to disappoint that expectation.

My old friend and colleague, Gardner Taylor, the great dean of Black preachers —the great dean of preachers, I will argue—in Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York, once was asked in a homiletics course, "Dr. Taylor, how many points should a good sermon have?" He replied, "At least one."

So, my one point today is that we should have the confidence and boldness of Christ in our unique proclamation. We should let our imaginations loose, which will open up both ourselves and our people to the experience of the living Word and the living Christ. We should open not only our minds but our hearts to this process, and we can do so by the wonderful grace that God gives us. You Lutherans now share in the rich Anglican tradition, and they share in the rich Lutheran tradition, although it is not altogether clear to me how you cohabit; but you have a lifetime to sort that out, and the rest of us can watch and wish you well. You now share in the great inheritance of the Book of Common Prayer; and my favorite collect, which occurs on one of the many Sundays after Trinity and which you have incorporated into your own book of worship, is a collect that somehow sums up my one point in these two talks. It may be familiar to you, and it goes like this: "O God, who has prepared for them that love Thee such good things as pass our understanding: pour into our hearts such love for Thee that we, loving Thee, may obtain Thy promises, which exceed all that we can imagine or desire."

It's an incredibly comprehensive text that we owe to Archbishop Cranmer. There are many things that Archbishop Cranmer didn't do or get quite right, but the writing of collects was one of the ways the Spirit worked through him, and that one, which says that God has given us through our understanding and our reception of his word more things that we can imagine or desire, opens up the whole panoply of expectation through our faithful attention to the word that God has given us to say.

My hope is that in that one point all of these points are summarized and brought together, and that taken as a whole they may do something that may enable you to be better preachers of the Bible in Babel. If I have contributed in any way to that, I feel I will have justified, at least from my point of view, the four experiences in these Lutheran seminaries under the auspices of the Hein Fry Lectures.

I was told yesterday that one of your Lutheran Web sites, in commenting upon the appointment of Professor Lundblad and me to this lectureship, said that Drs. Hein and Fry would be turning in their graves that we would bear their names. I don't know why they would be annoyed with Barbara Lundblad, she's one of you, yet I can probably expect that they would be concerned that an open, practicing, and affirming Baptist, as I am, might give them a little pause; but I hope that when we all meet—and I hope that we all meet in the same place—they will have heard these lectures, and in the midst of their churning and their turning, might find something of the word of God that has crept into these words of mine. So may it be.

Good Shepherd, Good Sheep

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I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold; I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.

—John 10:16–16

The gospel of the Lord.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be found acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Yesterday I spoke of the burden of the familiar, and I know that this text has a burdensome familiarity to all of you, because on Sunday most of you had to labor through it, it being Good Shepherd Sunday. I appreciate the fact that you hope that I will do at least as well as you did, and that you may hope to grab at least a morsel of some novelty from me, or from whoever else could be standing up here today, for next Good Shepherd Sunday. So, I'll do my best on the principle of Hansel and Gretel; I will try to drop a few bread crumbs along the way in the hope that we will not be eaten by the big bad wolf of the text but may find something here that will be helpful to us all.

I've spent my life dealing with this wonderful text about the Good Shepherd and, by implication, with comparison with a bad shepherd; and I once had a wonderful experience that lends itself to an attempt to provide both an exposition and an experience of it.

Many years ago I was invited by a great friend, Richard Holloway, whose name may be familiar to some of you Episcopalians at least, to preach on the occasion of his consecration as bishop of Edinburgh and the Episcopal Church in Scotland. The position of Episcopalians in Scotland has always been slightly ambiguous; Episcopalians are used to being the established church wherever they are, but in Scotland they are merely ordinary dissenters, the established church being the Church of Scotland, which is Presbyterian. So, the Episcopalians in Scotland are mildly defensive, and when people are defensive they become terribly aggressive.

Richard was, and remains, my friend, and in extending this extraordinary gesture he broke with all convention in inviting me, a Baptist, to preach at his consecration in St. Mary's Cathedral; and later he was placed in the embarrassing position of having his invitation rejected by his fellow Presbyters—fellow bishops in the Scottish church—because I, as a mere Baptist, did not stand in apostolic succession. Poor

Richard had to do the embarrassing thing of withdrawing the invitation he had extended to me and inviting me instead to preach at his enthronement in the evening rather than at his consecration in the morning. He was embarrassed by this, and I was mildly perplexed and even a little bit annoyed, but not altogether surprised.

The text that was assigned to me at the enthronement in the evening was this very text about the Good Shepherd, and it was wonderful. The bishop was enthroned, he stood at the door of his cathedral on the outside and banged on it with his crozier demanding admission, and this was great ceremony and all of that; and there was I, this Baptist, surrounded by all these ancient bishops of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, and still smarting, I must confess, from my exclusion in the morning. Not the Spirit of God, but a spirit got into me, and I proceeded to give out the text which you have just heard, and I announced to all assembled the fact that really this pericope ended somewhat prematurely, because the faithful will know that this goes on to describe in more detail, after the eighteenth verse, some interesting things about the shepherd and the sheep, and that one of the most telling verses, which was omitted from this reading, was the fact that the verse goes on to say of the Good Shepherd, "All who came before me were thieves and robbers." I said, "So much for the doctrine of apostolic succession."

This point would not be lost on you Lutherans, I knew, in the matter of your new relationship with the episcopate in your sister church; and it reminded me then, as it reminds me now, when we hear the lesson of the Good Shepherd, that it is a grave and perhaps even diverting temptation to routinely associate ourselves with the shepherd and not with the sheep. What an interesting ego trip it is to say, as we read this, "Yes, this is talking about us, we are the shepherds, and those poor wandering bewildered people in our congregations, who are either there or not there, are the sheep." So we try to figure out where we fit in. Do we know our people by name? Are we better than hirelings? How do we carry ourselves like the Good Shepherd as opposed to the Bad Shepherd?

I want to suggest that the connection in this text on Good Shepherd Sunday, particularly for the clergy, is not that we are the shepherds, good, bad, or indifferent, but that we are among the sheep. That puts a slightly different perspective on this text for us, because when we preach to our people as fellow sheep instead of as shepherd and sheep, they may actually be inclined to hear the text somewhat differently than we are accustomed to giving it to them and they are accustomed to receiving it. If we think of ourselves as among the sheep, as opposed to belonging to the Shepherds' Union, we may actually gain a new insight into the relationship that we have with one another. It is not the only one, but it may be a useful and a mildly novel one.

In New England, the ancient parishes of the seventeenth century in the Congregational order are not described as "founded"—if you ever look at an old seventeenth-century New England church, the sign will not say, "Founded in 1620," "Founded in 1636," "Founded in 1690"—but use a very strange nomenclature used nowhere else in the church, either in Europe or in this country: it says "Gathered in 1620," "Gathered in 1640," "Gathered in 1690," and there is something very different between being founded and being gathered. The notion is that of sheep being gathered into the sheepfold.

St. Augustine, in using this paradigm, describes the function of the shepherd as that being who puts his body in the narrow

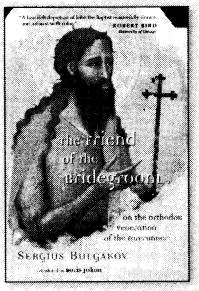
opening of the sheepfold, the opening designed to protect the sheep gathered within and to prevent the wolves on the outside from leaping in. There is something to be said for being gathered rather than founded; and to be gathered together by the Good Shepherd, who knows us by name, and who protects us as the shepherd and guardian of our souls, is a cause for thanksgiving. It connects and unites us with the people of God, it doesn't separate us from them; and, when they are used to hearing about good shepherds (us) and dumb sheep (them) it removes some of those textual barriers and makes the image one of being gathered in together.

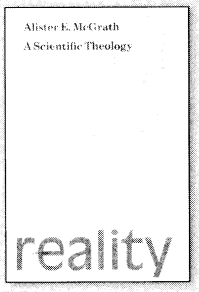
Remember, though, that in the notion of a metaphor, sometimes the metaphor has limits and you can't go much beyond it. We have to remember that the purpose of gathering sheep together was to protect them for a purpose, and that that purpose was to fatten them up for the slaughter. Those sheep were gathered together because their purpose was to be sold and eaten, and that's it; it's not much fun being a sheep. That's where the limits of this metaphor take us.

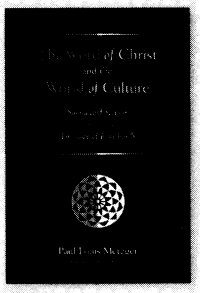
For us, where the metaphor ends and the good news begins is that we are gathered and guarded not for the slaughter, and not to be eaten, but for love and redemption. That is where we take leave of the metaphor and embrace reality. What do we do in response to this truth and this reality? As usual, it is the epistle that instructs and amplifies the gospel. The epistle says, in answer to what we do, "We believe in Jesus"—the Good Shepherd—"and we love one another." The two are connected. We love one another because we believe in Jesus, and we believe in Jesus because he is the shepherd and guardian of our souls.

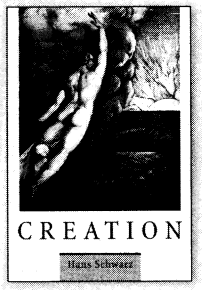
To be gathered in in such a name, to be known by our own name, by the name that is above every name, is cause for thanksgiving and may redeem the familiarity of Good Shepherd Sunday. It may be the means of our own redemption; and for that we give thanks and praise to God. Amen.

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Book Reviews

The Soaring Crane: Stories of Asian Lutherans in North America. By Edmond Yee. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. xviii and 258 pages. Paper. $15.99.

Edmond Yee is professor of Asian studies at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) in Berkeley. Urged by his Asian Lutheran colleagues, he finally consented to write a history of Asian Lutherans in North America before the collective memory of those who lived through this formative period disappears.

After a general survey of countries in Asia and an account of the people from different Asian countries who crossed the Pacific Ocean to the U.S.A. and Canada, Yee reconstructs the stories of various Asian Lutheran churches, their pastors, and lay leaders in America. The stories were mostly about their struggles to organize ethnic and/or language-specific congregations, the pain in dealing with the "racist" ecclesiastical structure and administration on the district/synod and national level, the joy of growing the local congregations, and the challenges of serving in the national headquarters.

Comparatively speaking, the Lutheran churches recognized the need of Asian ministries in America relatively late. The first Asian Lutheran church in America is True Light Lutheran Church, a congregation of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), which was started in the Chinatown of New York in 1935.

This book informs readers about the home mission of the Lutheran churches among the Asians. It explains how the Asian Lutheran congregations in cities across the land (such as the ones in New York, Vancouver, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco) were organized and grew. Yee not only attempts to retell the stories of the Asian Lutheran churches but also traces the delicate webs of relationship among the Asian pastors (who were almost all from Asia), church administrators, and coordinators.

Today Asian Lutheran ministries in the ELCA include not only Chinese but also Korean, Asian Indian, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Filipino, Hmong, Thai, and Laotian ministries. Asian Lutheranism in America has blossomed in spite of huge obstacles from the hierarchical church and tremendous challenges from without in the postmodern, post-Christian society.

The "soaring crane" symbolizes an optimistic view of the unprecedented opportunities for the American Asian Lutherans ascending to the mountaintop to view a new horizon (p. 206). The book is carefully researched, systemically organized, and chronologically presented. The human stories, rich experiences, and precious historical moments are well documented by thorough footnotes and an extensive bibliography. This book is written for those who are interested in learning about the historical background, contemporary issues, and future prospects of Asian Lutheran ministries in America and should prove especially helpful to Asian Lutheran clergy, seminarians, and lay leaders. By reading *The Soaring Crane*, one gains valuable insight into the Asian Lutheran mission and ministries within the ELCA and LCMS. The book is a great reference and resource book, especially for the Asian Lutheran communities in America.

The book intends to be historical in nature, not theological (as Yee states, p. xvi). As the narrative reveals, Yee was involved as a liaison between the Chinese clergy from Asia and the church administrators in the early development of the Asian Lutheran mission and ministries in the ELCA as well as one of its predecessors, the Lutheran Church in America. Furthermore, he continues to shape and form American Lutheranism as a professor at PLTS. As with any author who is an actor in the events described, there arises the issue of objectivity in the interpretation of all the data. In any case, we can be grateful for the story/history that is preserved in this book.

Alan L Chan
Chinese Lutheran Church
San Francisco, California

Preaching John. By Robert Kysar. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. xii and 252 pages. Paper. $18.00.

The God of the Gospel of John. By Marianne Meye Thompson. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001. x and 269 pages. Paper. $22.00.

Robert Kysar is a distinguished pastor, teacher and author, most recently at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta. This book is the culmination of his career and brings together the two of his major interests—the Gospel of John and preaching. Kysar states that "the Gospel of John is filled with both promises and problems for preaching." From this simple assertion Kysar proceeds to share insights into the often problematic language and imagery of this fourth Gospel. He seeks to enable preachers to better understand John in order that they might tap its resources for preaching. Proclamation is his goal throughout the book.

He begins by addressing some of the scholarly proposals for this Gospel as background. He looks at the Gospel's theology, language, and relationship of narratives to Jesus' discourses and explores the unique Johannine Passion story. He concludes with a look at the passages from John present in the Revised Common Lectionary and comments on some that are missing. Each section includes "Homiletical Implications" in which he considers what the discussion means for preaching. He illustrates his comments with brief sermonic examples. This book is part of the Fortress Resources for Preaching and a welcome addition to the preacher's library. Keep it handy as you come upon the readings from John in each of the lectionary cycles.

Back in 1975, Nils Dahl, a professor at Yale Divinity School, published an essay suggesting that scholars writing about New Testament theology had neglected to say much about God in their rush to talk about Christ. Dahl called this the "neglected factor in New Testament theology." Marianne Thompson, New Testament professor at Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, California, responds boldly to Dahl. She asserts that the New Testament is a book about God and argues that it is in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, that we see the fullness of God's mercy and righteousness.

In chapter 2 she points out that the most common designation of God in John is "Father," a word used about 120 times. This is more than the occurrences in the synoptics combined. This is an important chapter in view of the attempts today to make language about God more gender-acceptable. She looks further at issues around the knowledge, the spirit, and the worship of God as found in the Gospel of John. She supports her proposal that John is "theocentric" in that it directs our attention to God. She leads the reader carefully through the themes of John in response to the assertion by Dahl.

Thompson has given us another volume to place alongside that of Kysar as we look at this important Gospel in our weekly if not daily ministry of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Kenneth M. Ruppar
Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
Richmond, Virginia

Moving Beyond Church Growth: An Alternative Vision for Congregations. By Mark A. Olson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002. 156 pages. Paper. $15.00.

I thank God for the life of Pastor Mark A. Olson and the bold testimony he provided to God's mission in the world through congregations! Consistently in his writing and speaking, Olson witnessed to the centrality of three themes that characterize the life of Christian community: praise, righteousness, and compassion. Olson's theological commitments were deeply grounded in biblical tradition. He advocated that congregational ministry and mission should be patterned after what God has revealed to be the essentials of faithful community. Employing these theological criteria, in this book Olson both criticizes the logic of "church growth" and proposes an alternative model for congregational mission.

In the first chapters of this book, Olson provides a trenchant analysis of church-growth principles, unmasking them as thoroughly grounded in modernity rather than biblical faith.

Church growth portrays itself as a science that operates by certain universal rules and is grounded in objective knowledge about what is effective. It promotes specialization and individual freedom as key elements in successful churches. In chapter 3 Olson evaluates the principles of church growth according to the biblical criteria of praise, righteousness, and compassion, and deems them seriously lacking in theological substance.

Olson proposes an alternative agenda for leading faithful congregations. I will make reference to only two of his provocative proposals. First, Olson advocates that the lectionary texts for a given week become the focus of attention for the entire life of the congregation. Not only at worship but in meetings, in prayers, as well as in explicitly educational programs, congregations would be transformed by orienting their common life entirely by what God is speaking to them through the particular texts assigned for a given week. Olson imaginatively offers the reader a glimpse of what this might look like in the life of the congregation.

Second, Olson argues that congregations would be served best if each congregation only had a single pastor. "For congregational witness to be boldly evangelical . . . congregations must have a strong, compassionate, courageous, and clearly identified leader. When this essential leadership role is divided and shared, the evangelical mission of the church suffers greatly" (pp. 86–87). Where congregations require multiple staff for effective ministry, Olson contends that these should be lay staff, employing the gifts of the universal priesthood of all believers. What might be the implications of this proposal for addressing the current shortage of ordained pastors?

Creative theologian and faithful pastor, Mark A. Olson died on November 7, 2002. To those who knew him, his life was a personal gift. Through his writings, including this book, many others can continue to benefit from his wisdom. *Requiem aeternum dona Mark Domine!* It is a great encouragement to know that he, amid the company of all the saints, now is cheering us on to faithfulness in the race that is set before us.

Craig L. Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Christian Faith: The Basics. By Walt Kallested. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999. 96 pages. Paper. $6.99.

Walt Kallested, Senior Pastor of Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona, consolidates the main tenets of the Christian faith into one small, easy-to-read book oriented toward Christians and those who might be interested in exploring Christianity.

The thesis of *Christian Faith: The Basics* is that God exists, is knowable, and wants to be known by us. Kallested briefly states some general arguments for the existence of God and a description of God's character as posited by the Bible as viewed through a relatively flexible evangelical frame of reference. He centers his argument around the understanding that a relationship with Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the way to know God.

The book is written in a self-help-manual style and offers information about the Christian worldview as well as directions the reader can use to move into the Christian faith. It has clarity of structure, well-chosen subtopics, and specific guidance for growth as well as sets of questions with accompanying answers. These questions are followed by open-ended discussion questions that would facilitate use of the book in small groups, a bibliography, and suggested Bible readings at the end of each chapter.

This book would be a good library addition or education material for persons new to the faith.

Karen Yakimow
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

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A Tribute to Robert H. Smith

Ralph W. Klein

Bob Smith began his ministry of editing Preaching Helps in the October, 1987, issue. That makes for sixteen times through the liturgical year and more than five times through the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. During this time he identified and invited pastors and other colleagues to offer exegetical insights and pastoral reflections so that the gospel might be proclaimed—freshly, creatively, and for the church and the world.

Bob was and is a self-starter, who worked closely with Peggy Eldredge, who gets copy ready for printing and distribution in her own inimitable, gracious, and self-starting way.

To read these sermon starters was always refreshing, but nothing was ever more refreshing and stimulating than those poignant, splendidly crafted pastoral essays that Bob drafted as an introduction for each issue. One learned with excitement what Bob was thinking and reading and saw first-hand his mastery of the beauties of the English language.

We never had a staff meeting, and our only direct contact was a dinner we shared at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. In addition to sharing memories of times past and the excitement of current family news and scholarly projects, we would end by assuring one another that we would go on together until. . . .

Well, "until" finally has come, and I have accepted his decision to end this part of his ministry with profound gratitude for his service and with undiminished admiration for what he has done for us all for sixteen years. These words are only a poor down payment on what he is owed.

And so the torch will be passed, beginning with the next issue, to Craig A. Satterlee, my young colleague in homiletics here at LSTC, who for the next X years will do with and for us what Bob Smith and, before him, George W. Hoyer have done over the last thirty years.

Preaching Helps

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost—Day of Thanksgiving, Series B

At Last

This is the last issue of *Preaching Helps* that I will be editing. Sixteen years ago George Hoyer cast his mantle on me, and it has been (mostly) a pleasure to edit 96 issues over the course of these past years. Always being on the lookout for writers has been good for me. It has put me in touch with many teachers and preachers whom I would otherwise not have known. It has also taught me more than a few things about the homiletical task.

For example, *Currents/Preaching Helps* works with a rather long lead time. I have ordinarily issued invitations six months or even a year in advance of the deadline. And then I have sent edited copy to Chicago for the printer two months before the issue will be mailed out. This kind of schedule has one very important consequence, one that weighs more heavily on me now than it used to. It has meant that the studies appearing here, even in the section that I have called "Pastoral Reflections," fail to reflect pastorally and homiletically on the news of the day.

Many of you know Andy Weyermann or at least know of him. In more than one conversation this last year he has said that he regrets having neglected to preach and to teach others how to preach on the pressing social and political and cultural issues of the day. We have been neglectful, he thinks, in part because the issues are sensitive, and we fear that dealing with them will offend important elements in the congregation. But he says we are called to "fear and love God" above all things. We fail the test of the first commandment if we stick to safe topics out of fear of the congregation.

Some may breathe a sigh of relief that the pulpit does not "get political." It is true that the effort easily goes awry, but how can we press beyond the issues of individual piety and address wider issues of community and public life?

I haven't been able to manage it. Let me confess another shortcoming. Maybe this one is an indication that I have held on to the job of editor too long. In our June issue we unwittingly published studies and reflections on the texts

that are assigned by the *LBW* instead of following our usual practice of commenting on the texts appointed by the *Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).* It is my error for not communicating clearly with the author of the materials.

That error had two results: (1) Texts appointed by the *RCL* for the sixth through eighth Sundays after Pentecost (June 22–July 6) were actually treated in our June issue, but they appeared under the *LBW* dates: July 20–August 3. Aargh! (2) In the second place, the following *RCL* texts were not dealt with at all: Mark 6:14–29 (July 13), Mark 6:30–34,55–56 (July 20), John 6:1–21 (July 27), John 6:24–35 (August 3). I am going to comment briefly on these texts right here. Once we caught our error, we sped up the production process in hopes that you might receive this August issue in time for some of this to feed into your preparation process, assuming, as we have been, that you are using *RCL.*

Mark 6:1–56 is a long and coherent set of narratives. Preachers usually complain that the lectionary gives them fits in the summer of Year B, since the lectionary has substituted John's version of the feeding of the 5,000 for Mark's version. The lectionary grabs hold of John 6 and breaks it up into five fragments. Then it directs preachers to distribute these very similar tasting fragments to their congregations Sunday after Sunday, until preacher and congregation are all fed up.

I love John 6, but it is a shame that the lectionary has inserted it where it has in the sequence of readings. It has done violence to Mark's story. Mark 6 begins with Jesus' visit to his hometown of Nazareth (6:1–6a). Jesus offers wisdom in the synagogue and lays healing hands on a few sick people. But he is all too familiar to his old neighbors. They recognize him only as "the carpenter" or "craftsman," and they seem to know his whole family and imply that "we knew him when." Mark says, "They took offense at him." Jesus sums up the situation this way: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown. . . ." And he is amazed at their lack of faith.

Having coined (or repeated) the proverb about lack of respect for prophets, Jesus goes right on (6:6b–13) to appoint "the twelve" to go out as prophets! He certainly gives them a prophetic mission: Go out, two by two, taking only a staff; no bread, no bag, no money tucked into your waistbands; travel light and depend totally on freely offered but sometimes fickle hospitality. So off they go, these newly minted prophets, casting out demons and anointing the sick.

These two stories together (Mark 6:1–13 = Pentecost 4, July 6) speak to us of the ultimate rejection of Jesus and of his call to us to fear not but to take up the prophetic task of speaking truth and dispensing cures, no matter what the cost.

The plot thickens as Mark continues (Mark 6:14–29 = Pentecost 5, June 13). We might ask, "How hard can it get for prophets?" Some will say, "Can't you handle a little rejection?" Mark will answer those questions. As the twelve go off on their mission, Mark interrupts their story and turns to King Herod. Mark's segue is the remark that the missionary journeying of the twelve came to King Herod's attention. Herod begins to speak all in one breath of Jesus, John the Baptist, Elijah, the prophets of old. God's Spirit, Herod fears, is once again stirring up trouble for us politicians!

In part, Mark is interested in telling us what Herod thought about Jesus, because he wants to tell us how bad it can get for prophets. It can't get much worse than it did for John the Baptist, who in his gruesome death foreshadows the coming execution of Jesus. John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus as he meets his end at the hand of powerful social and political forces.

Mark sandwiches the story of John's execution between the commissioning of the twelve (6:6b–13) and their return and report to Jesus (6:30). Being prophetic, speaking the truth to power, can be dangerous to your health!

Mark has meditated on John's execution in ways that the other evangelists do not. The Fourth Gospel has no story of the Baptist's death, and from Luke's words (3:18–20 and 9:7–9) we would not necessarily deduce that the Baptist was executed on Herod's order. Matthew shares much of Mark's account, but Mark is the evangelist who offers the richest and most colorful narrative of Herod's fateful birthday party (6:14–29).

I do not think it is an accident that Mark first reports Herod's birthday banquet and then immediately narrates Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness (6:30–44; cf. John 6:1–21 = Pentecost 7, July 27). Mark wants readers to contemplate these two kings, King Herod and King Jesus. Think, says Mark, about the huge difference between the kingdom of Herod (he promised up to half of it to his dancing daughter, 6:23) and the kingdom of God/kingship of Jesus.

Of course, this Herod is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. He was actually "tetrarch" of Galilee and not a king. But Mark deliberately calls him "king" (6:14, 22, 25, 26, 27) and speaks of his "kingdom" (6:23). He does that not because he flunked history. He wants us readers to think about the awesome wonder of the "kingdom" that Jesus announced already in the first words he ever uttered in this Gospel (1:14–15), and he wants us to ponder the strange truth of the placard over the cross, the "king of the Jews" (15:26).

"King" Herod is portrayed as serving up the head of John the Baptist like a bizarre offering of meat on a silver platter (Mark 6:8). Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 6 and John 6) and at table in Jerusalem (Mark 14:22–25) acts in a manner

diametrically opposed to the custom of worldly powers. He looks with compassion on the crowds that pursue him into the wilderness and sees that they are "like sheep without a shepherd," subjects and citizens suffering under the callous indifference of their political leaders (Mark 6:30–34,53–56 = Pentecost 6, July 20). Unlike Herod, Jesus welcomes the nameless and the powerless and gives them an honored place at his table. He cures their ills (Mark 6:56) and finally offers himself as truly nourishing food and drink (John 6:51–58 = Pentecost 10, August 17).

In his account of the feeding of the 5,000 (Pentecost 7, July 27), John features the command of Jesus, "Gather the fragments that nothing may be lost" (John 6:12). John sees the whole mission of Jesus as one of "gathering" people into the life of God so that they may no longer be "lost," wandering aimlessly in the dark, subject to the lie (John 3:16; 11:51–52; chapter 17). "As the grains of wheat, once scattered on the hill were gathered into one to become our bread, so may all your people from all the ends of earth be gathered into one in you" (*With One Voice* 705; *Didache* 9:4).

"Seeking" is another persistent Johannine theme, and it emerges in John 6:24–35 (Pentecost 8, August 3). The first word out of the mouth of Jesus himself in the Fourth Gospel is the question, "What are you seeking?" (1:38) I believe that Jesus is addressing that word to every reader of John's Gospel. What are we seeking in this book? What are we seeking as we read this narrative of Jesus? What are we seeking with all our energy and all our time? What are we looking for as we move through life? What is our aim, our goal? The Jesus portrayed in John's Gospel has been called "elusive." God, even though ever-present, is elusive, not merely obvious to all. So in the synoptic Gospels Jesus calls out, "Seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:31; Psalm 27:8, "Come," my heart says, "seek God's face!"). In the Fourth Gospel, people seek Jesus in two different ways. They seek him in order that they might abide with him and enjoy the life he bestows, or they seek him in order to kill him. What are we seeking?

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle of Jesus narrated in all four Gospels. Mark and John (and the others) have meditated long and deeply on this marvelous feeding. Mark 6 and John 6 deserve all the attention we are capable of mustering.

"Preaching the law" might be described as weaning people off their bad diets, hazardous to their health. And "preaching the gospel" means filling listeners with the One who is true food and true drink, who feeds us with genuine life.

So this is issue number 96 for me. I suppose I could have stuck around for four more and made it an even hundred. But enough! This end for me is a fresh beginning for *Preaching Helps* and its new editor.

In April of 2002—more than a year ago!—I invited **Craig Satterlee**, Professor of Homiletics at LSTC, to write for this issue of *Preaching Helps*, and I was delighted when he accepted that invitation. About that same time I announced to Ralph Klein my intention of giving up the editorship of these pages. In September of 2002 I learned that Craig had agreed to assume the task of editing these materials. So Craig is the author in this issue, and he will be the editor in issues to come. My delight has been doubled.

Ordained in 1987, Craig served congregations in upstate New York and in Michigan before taking up his duties at LSTC in 2000. He received his M.Div. and S.T.M. at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, and he earned the M.A. and Ph.D. in homiletics and liturgical studies from the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching* and coauthor of *Creative Preaching on the Sacraments.* And he has other books in the works. Craig describes his ministry as one of "preparing and renewing women and men to be proclaimers of Jesus Christ."

As a person who is legally blind, Craig has a passion for ministry with persons with disabilities, and he has a unique perspective on the faith and on church and world. He makes his home with his wife Cathy and daughter Chelsey in Chicago's Hyde Park.

What a pleasure for me to introduce Craig Satterlee to our readers and to commend you and him to one another as you continue good preaching, good feeding, good proclaiming.

Yours,

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Note: for treatment of texts for July 13, July 20, July 27, and August 3, please see pp. 303–305 in this issue.

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost October 5, 2003

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

First Reading

Genesis 2:18–24 is part of the Yahwist creation story, in which woman is created subsequent to man. Rather than teaching the subordination of woman to man, it depicts woman not as helper but as equal, sharing the same dignity. The passage declares that the bond of marriage is stronger than that of lineal descent, that the couple form a single entity ("one flesh"), and that marriage is part of God's created order.

Selections from the Epistle to the Hebrews provide the second lesson for the remaining Sundays after Pentecost, until Christ the King. The elegant Greek of this epistle leads literary critics to conclude that it was not written by Paul. The letter seems to be addressed to the second generation after Christ, who know persecution and distress and need encouragement to continue in faith. Hebrews, which is more sermon than letter, undertakes this task by comparing the person and work of Jesus to the worship of the Jerusalem cult.

1:1–4 provides an introduction to Hebrews. By comparing the various ways God spoke to our ancestors to God's final redemptive word in Christ, the writer of Hebrews shows that God is one and that God's unified work is fulfilled in Christ. The following verses affirm that Christ is both the one through whom all things were made and the priest who has made purification for sins.

Jesus' teaching on divorce and Jesus' subsequent blessing of children are combined in the Gospel reading. While the Pharisees want to know how much is permissible and still within the law, Jesus insists on the absolute standards that God envisioned in creation, leaving no room for the trials and difficulties of life in this world. It is interesting that Jesus uses Genesis to respond to Deuteronomy. Jesus makes God's actions and intent the ideal for human behavior; the "one flesh" is two human persons equally bound to one another.

Pastoral Reflection

What do we say about divorce? If we are kinder and more understanding than Jesus, many will praise our compassion. If we say what Jesus says, as he says it, we will be criticized. How much easier and more comforting it would be to concentrate on the last verse: "And [Jesus] took [the little children] up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:16). But would we be true to what the assembly has heard?

Perhaps we should allow the facts to speak for themselves. One out of two marriages ends in divorce. That's why everyone who hears Jesus' words at least knows and probably loves someone who is divorced. It's not only young people and the unchurched who can't make marriage work. Sometimes pastors and church pillars find, after more than thirty years of marriage, that they must go their separate ways. Perhaps the first thing we say is that divorce should shock and sadden us and send us into prayer. The second thing we might say is that there are situations and circumstances when divorce is the necessary and perhaps the best alternative.

Rather than divorce, maybe we could preach about marriage. Perhaps we need to begin at the beginning, as Jesus did. Marriage, both the institution and one's own spouse, is a blessing given by our generous Creator. Although the emphasis in our wedding liturgy is on the couple's vows making them married and not on anything the church does, this in no way minimizes Jesus' statement that God marries people through the "one flesh" unification.

The sexual union of man and woman supersedes even the biological connection of parents to child. Genesis declares, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (2:24). The two are one not only during the act of love, intermittently; the bond is forged by God so permanently that even subsequent to a legal divorce the bond persists so intact that it can be adulterated. The most obvious evidence of the permanence of this bond is, of course, children. But in a very real sense, once we have been known by a person as the result of becoming one flesh with them, there is no way we can become "unknown" to that person again. The bond persists.

The wonder of the closeness and intimacy that God intends to be the basis of marriage is frightening for a world that spends its life either building up or tearing down walls of fear and defensiveness. The pure comfort and fearlessness that Adam and Eve felt in God and one another's sight is long gone. We nurse our fears and brokenness these days. We break God's intent for wholeness into tiny pieces of pain that fragment and separate us. The Genesis image of God's design judges many of our relationships in an age when we no longer seem to have a sense of humor or regret about our failings. Rather than admit that we're wrong, we simply give up and move on. Divorce has many forms beyond the end of a marriage.

It is in this greater context of throwaway relationships that we might proclaim that Jesus flatly forbids divorce. Jesus says, "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:9). Jesus prohibits divorce in order to protect us. More than being contrary to God's will, divorce is awful in and of itself, particularly in its effects on children. So let's not avoid warning against future divorces because we are afraid of offending participants of past ones.

Jesus identifies the cause of divorce as "hardness of heart" (v. 5). This hardness may not necessarily be in the hearts of both spouses. Abuse of any sort—including adultery—is a pathology. And, when abuse is involved, divorce is sometimes the best path to pursue. But while we need to say this, we also need to say that today it seems that such divorces are the exception, not the rule.

We know what needs to be said about divorce: God intends marriage in particular but relationships in general to be much more than just another aspect of our throwaway society. Jesus calls us to thank God continuously for the relationships that are the fabric of our lives. Jesus calls us to give before receiving and to be grateful for what our partners do for us, even when they do it out of a sense of obligation. At the same time, Jesus calls us to fulfill our obligations to our partners without expecting thanks. Jesus calls us to love and not just to negotiate. Jesus reminds us that, when outside pressures increase, it is easy to stop making this effort in order to concentrate on other matters. Then the partner complains, hardness of heart sets in, and we become unwilling to repent and repair. We become unable to return human relationships generally and marriage in particular to the high priority God gives them.

If we say that divorce is not an option, then many of us married people may be a bit

more careful how we treat our lifelong partner. Of course, fearing there's no escape, we could become totally hardhearted and grow to abuse our partner. But not if we take seriously that, before we were married, we were baptized. In baptism we find the strength to make human relationships work in Jesus Christ. Hebrews pictures Christ as our sibling, as the One who shares the same family and parent (2:11). Jesus is like us, female and male, in every respect. Christ's life, death, and resurrection are therefore packed with promise as we undergo pain. Christ's sufferings tie him to us. Jesus lives our suffering with us so that God's Word might have power as it comes to us in our testing, suffering, and struggling. In good times as well as in times that are marred by pain and brokenness, we are sister and brother with One whom we can trust because he knows us and our need.

Hebrews, then, tells us that Jesus does not help us to feel okay about giving up and being defeated by temptation. Rather, Jesus helps us to beat temptation. Our basic temptation is to distrust God. Instead of God we trust ourselves, our needs, our feelings, our desires. But because of Christ, we can trust God to preserve us and give us life. This trust humbles us into softheartedness. With our hearts open to God, God gives us life—so much life that we can afford to spend life on our spouses and marriages, our significant others and significant relationships. What do we say about divorce? We say, God help us! And we mean it!

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 12, 2003

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

First Reading

Amos came from southern Judah to prophesy in northern Israel in the eighth century B.C. He addressed Israel as God's people and expected them to respond. His overriding message concerned the polarization between the powerful few, who sought personal advantage without regard for the common good and the social consequences of their actions, and the rest of the population. Amos's accusations are pointed and specific. He scores oppression, financial pressure, and bribery. His verbs are most vivid and striking: cast down, hate, abhor, trample, afflict. They make clear what we in our global economy are discovering: no one gains without someone else's losing.

Hebrews 4:12–16 deals with the revealing capacity of God's Word. The "Word of God" is not the Bible but God's disclosing and judging activity. Nothing is immune to being exposed to God's Word. Thus, God's Word does not guarantee the church security, but insecurity. The church is therefore careful about when and how it appeals to God's Word, lest it fall into self-justification.

Though paralleled in Matthew and Luke, Mark's version of the man with many possessions is the strongest and most drastic. The man's posture and greeting are excessive; his question focuses on himself. Jesus changes the focus to God and all humanity. Jesus offers the practical and hard path of the commandments; the man replies that he

has done these things since his youth. Accepting the Jewish notions that it is possible to keep the commandments, Jesus warns the man of the dangers of wealth. The man's accolades are replaced by shock, and he walks away. Jesus makes clear that human love of acquisitions excludes us from God's realm but that grace can change even the hearts of the rich.

Pastoral Reflection

In our best theological moments, we know that we are creatures. The God who made us, redeemed us, and continues to give us life is the One to whom we belong and the One to whom all creation belongs. God gave us Jesus who paid the ultimate price for us. God joined us to Jesus' death and resurrection and claimed us as God's own in baptism. God receives us and sustains us as God's own, even when we reject God. God owns us. But most days we live as though no one owns us. As Americans, we are free; we own what we own because we earn it. In reality, we are all owned by something—family, job, health, obligations, reputation. The question is whether we will be owned by God or by something else.

The man who wants to know the way to eternal life is not some malicious, greedy soul. He is simply struggling with possession—not demon possession, but the reality of the things he possesses and what it means to be possessed by God. In the final analysis, the things this man possesses own him; he is not owned by God.

Mark tells us, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (10:21–22).

We can try to kid ourselves into believing that following Jesus isn't such a difficult thing. Yet, if there is one thing that stands in our way of truly living as full members of the reign of God, it is our money and our possessions. Jesus is right. It is "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the reign of God" (v. 25). For we treasure our riches above all else, including God. Our possessions own us; our possessions make us defensive before God and the world. "I deserve what I have," we say, "I've worked for everything I've got. I give what I can."

Instead of looking to God as the One who owns us and all that we own, we ask, "How much should we share? How much should we give back to God? What is enough?" We look for rules. "How much is everybody else giving? What's my fair share?" But when we live by rules, what we're really trying to do is to remake God's reign to fit our needs and desires. Instead of giving everything to the God to whom everything rightly belongs, we come up with formulas to calculate God's share. When our rules take over, our purposes and not God's are served. "I have kept all these since my youth," the man answers Jesus (v. 20). What he has not done is put God before the rules, and in so doing he becomes deaf to God's call.

And God is calling us to justice and mercy. Amos reminds us of the poor and the needy. Who owns them? Who do they belong to? They are God's own, just as we are. Therefore God's people have no excuse to "trample the poor" either by our own hoarding and greed or by allowing individuals or institutions to do the same. We cannot "push aside the needy at the gate" and feel justified because we have responsibilities of our own. God's priorities of justice and mercy are not changed or redefined by our economics, politics, or personal circumstances.

Knowing who owns us and all that we

own makes a difference in how we treat both our possessions and those around us. If everything belongs to God, there will be plenty for all; not only in grace and forgiveness but when it comes to the basic necessities of life. What belongs to God will not be hoarded or bought and sold at the expense of peoples' lives. When we understand this, our entire orientation changes. We see the world and ourselves through the eyes of the God who owns us and not simply through the lens of desires that threaten to possess us.

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 19, 2003

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

First Reading

The reading from Isaiah is taken from the fourth and final Servant Song (52:13–53:12). While common in Christian parlance, the title "Suffering Servant" does not appear in any of the four Servant Songs. The servant might be Israel, a historical figure such as Moses or Jeremiah, or Christ and the Christian community. These multiple uses speak of the text's richness and vitality. Regardless of the servant's identity, this text names painful issues and announces the good news that God through the Servant is with us in the midst of our pain, brokenness, and alienation.

Hebrews 5:1–10 is the conclusion of a larger passage (3:1–5:10) that develops the theme of Christ as faithful and merciful. The appointed text describes high priests in general (vv. 1–4) and Christ as a priest of Melchizedek's order (vv. 5–10). While other priests are described in terms of their weakness, Christ is devout, obedient and perfect. Verse 8 is better translated, "Since he was a Son. . . ." Christ's obedience came through harsh discipline.

Following Jesus' teaching about enduring suffering, James and John request places of honor next to Jesus. This request is in keeping with Mark's perspective that no one fully understands Jesus until after his suffering and death. The passage consists of the conversation between the Zebedee brothers and Jesus (vv. 35–40), and Jesus' teaching on servanthood to the disciples (vv. 42–45). James and John are interested in their own places of honor rather than in solidarity with the community. Jesus challenges James, John, and all disciples to compare themselves not with each other but with Jesus. Are we able to drink Jesus' cup and share Jesus' baptism of suffering and death?

Pastoral Reflection

"Grant us to sit," James and John ask Jesus, "one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." When the other disciples find out that James and John are trying to secure the top slots for themselves, they become indignant—angry, incensed, irate, offended. And the disciples' complaint is not "Knowing Jesus, how dare they ask such a thing?" but "What about us?"

Like everyone else in their world, the Zebedee brothers measured their worth according to where they stood in relation to others. Like everyone else in our world, so do we. We spend our lives in an ongoing effort to achieve first place. How often life resembles a playground filled with school kids' squabbles or a group of adults vying to be first in the checkout line at a sale! Whether it's doing the work of three jobs in order to hold on to one, or programming our children from little on up in order to secure their future, or cramming our golden years with

activity in order to avoid boredom, we strive to be first. And we're left feeling on-guard, watchful, paranoid; for the competition can come from anywhere—work, friends, even family. Or else we decide that it's hopeless to try to be first, and we give up. And we're left filled with apathy and distrust. "Why bother?" we ask. "Who cares?" Commitment is replaced by convenience, and we become afraid of excellence because it might make someone look bad. In either instance stress abounds. If we cannot see this game of "compare and contrast" in our own lives, we can surely see it in the lives of many congregations.

Jesus instructs the disciples (and through them instructs us) that to become great is to become a servant. To become first is to be last. To sit with Jesus is not to be served but to serve, and to give one's life as a ransom for many. Mark is deliberately vague, probably in recognition that each disciple's life of faith and every congregation's life and mission will call them to different challenges. One of the preacher's tasks is to provide the details appropriate to their hearers. As Mark is vague, so is Isaiah. If the servant could be Israel, Moses, Jesus, and the Christian community, it certainly is us. To be great in God's reign is to bear others' infirmities and carry their afflictions, be wounded for their transgressions and crushed for their iniquities.

When we compare ourselves to Jesus and find ourselves wanting, Hebrews reminds us that Jesus did not set himself up as a measuring stick. Jesus merely clarified the task of those already about the business of comparing. For our sake Jesus reverently submitted—to us and to God. Jesus learned obedience through suffering. Rather than the yardstick that condemns us, Jesus became the source of salvation. We do not need to seek seats next to Jesus. Jesus has taken a place among us.

Reformation Sunday
October 26, 2003

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

More important than the historical contexts of the appointed texts, the preacher needs to recognize that Reformation Sunday shapes our interpretation of these pericopes. Reformation Sunday lifts these pericopes out of their original contexts and sets them into a sixteenth-century historical context.

Today we celebrate Martin Luther nailing 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg in 1517. In doing so he raised the question, "In what does the church place its trust?" Is it tradition—doing what we've always done? Is it convenience—doing what comes easiest? Is it democracy—majority rules? Is it avoiding controversy—don't ruffle any feathers? Is it the Bible—opening a heavenly answer book and always finding the solution? Or is it Jesus Christ, the living Word of God?

The church of Luther's day seemed to trust the selling of indulgences. The church taught that people could buy God's mercy by purchasing certificates guaranteeing the forgiveness of sins. As preachers prepare to preach, they might ponder what indulgences our church is indulging in.

So how do these texts preach? In the context of the sixteenth-century Reformation, Jeremiah's promise of the day when all will know the Lord, from the least of these to the greatest, speaks of restoring Word and Sacrament to the laity. Regardless of what Paul intended when he wrote Romans, on this day it is about holding that we are justified by grace through faith, apart from good works. When Jesus says, "If you con-

tinue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (8:31–32), we hear *sola scriptura*.

But what does a twenty-first–century celebration of Reformation look like? Before opening their Bibles, let preachers examine Reformation Day, the filter through which they will hear these texts. Is it Lutheran Heritage Sunday, or the occasion for a good game of Kick the Catholic, or our annual reminder that we are continually reforming because God is not done with us, whether church or world? While the first two understandings lead us to celebrate our selves, the latter calls us to trust God.

Paul's discussion in Romans about the righteousness of God directs us to the core of our Reformation celebration. We are called to remember first of all that in Christ God has made us right. All we need to do is trust God to save us, and God will save us and make us new. The basic good news is that we can trust in God and don't need to rely on ourselves.

Jeremiah promises that there is a day coming when God will make us new, sculpting new hearts and faithfulness among us. Preaching this is both anxiety-producing and full of hope. We believe that in Christ God's work of sculpting new hearts and faithfulness has already begun. We also live in hope that God's sculpting us in the shape of Christ's cross will one day give us the wholeness we long for so dearly. At the same time, being sculpted means that we will change. God, who in baptism claimed us as God's own, gives us unconditional love. But God's loving us as we are does not mean that God will leave us as we are. God's love will not allow us to rest easy when it comes to our hate. God's mercy will not let us accept injustice, at least not in the name of God. Trusting God brings reformation.

Psalm 46 is a moving witness to God's steadfastness in the midst of upheaval and change. The psalmist uses the imagery of nature and its powerful physical changes to address our fears. "Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult." What is true for mountains and the heart of the sea is also true for buildings and the institutions they house, even the institution of the church. Trusting God means trusting God even in the midst of the fear and upheaval that reformation brings. Perhaps on this Reformation Sunday preachers can dare to broach one of those subjects that people fear will shake our church to its foundations and ask how God might be reshaping our hearts.

The few short verses from John's Gospel remain central to our understanding of what it means to be free. It is only by trusting God that we find real freedom. Notice that Jesus is speaking to people who believed in him, not to unbelievers. Jesus is talking to us. Jesus reminds us that we are not free because of our association with our ancestors, physically or spiritually, but we are free because of residing and remaining in Jesus' word. While we cannot have a permanent place in God's house by virtue of our obedience (since we are slaves to something other than God) or by our connections ("My family's been a member of this church for three generations!"), we do have a permanent place in God's house by virtue of Jesus Christ. For Jesus is the heir, whose home is open to all who trust God's hospitality and welcome.

All Saints Sunday
November 2, 2003

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

Once again, the festival of All Saints rather than historical context provides the interpretive filter through which we hear these readings. A first reading suggests that these are funeral texts. This is very appropriate, inasmuch as All Saints is the day on which the church remembers its beloved dead. In a death-denying culture that races through the grieving process as fast as it can, All Saints is a profound day for many who will gather in church. In a very real sense the sanctuary is filled with the communion of saints as the assembly is mindful of those who once occupied the pews and are now at rest in God.

On this day the spoken Word can be powerfully complemented by an enacted Word: names read as candles are lighted, the placing of banners, baptismal remembrance, the Eucharist. In one congregation I know, as the names of those who died are prayed aloud, a loved one comes forward and lights a votive candle placed on the altar. By the time the names are finished, the altar is symbolically ablaze with the light of those saints who, although they have parted from us, continue to share Christ's table with us and whose lives brighten our path as we walk through this world by faith. The light of those candles reminds the assembly that Christ's table has one end here on earth and one end in heaven and, even though people move from one end to the other, they remain at table with us.

Perhaps the best preparation for preaching on this day is to allow the scriptural images and the enacted words of the occasion to dance in the preacher's imagination. Certainly the preacher will spend time prayerfully remembering the departed saints of the congregation, particularly those who died in the last year, and the saints that shaped the preacher's own faith and life. While the purpose is not to eulogize, such remembering will bring focus, richness, and depth to the proclamation of the gospel on this day.

All three of the readings speak of conquering death. Isaiah envisions the mountain of the Lord where the Lord makes a feast for all people, where death is swallowed up, tears are wiped away, and disgrace is removed forever. The mountain of the Lord is wherever the cross is planted. The feast of rich food and well-aged wine is the body and blood of Jesus. In Christ God brings Isaiah's promised future to us where we are. In Word and Sacrament Jesus brings the awaited day to us now. On this day we declare, "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in the salvation of the Lord." And we rejoice that new life is not only for us; the feast is extended to all people.

Revelation makes this clear. The images have nothing whatsoever to do with individuals. The vision is of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new holy city, adorned as a bride for her husband. God is at home among mortals, the very God is with us. And again we hear the promise: "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." God's feast on the mountain of the Lord extends to all people, to all creation.

But for me, the most compelling image of a saint comes from John's account of the raising of Lazarus. A saint is someone unbound from death and let go to live a new life. To be unbound from death and let go to live new life means continuously struggling

with the question of how to use life to bear witness to Christ and to proclaim Christ's reign. That's what Jesus is asking Mary and Martha to do. Jesus is standing with the grieving sisters at Lazarus' tomb and asking them to be unbound from death and open to new life. Jesus says, "Take away the stone." And Martha shows just how bound up in death they are. She warns of the stench. But Jesus calls the sisters to breathe in the stink of flesh that's been rotting for four days. Jesus challenges the sisters to stare death square in the face and to trust that they will see the glory of God revealed in new life.

Kicking away the stone, breathing in the stench of death, and trusting in new life are the struggles of saints. Mary and Martha did it. They took away the stone and breathed in their brother's death. Saints trust what Mary and Martha saw. "Lazarus, come out! . . . Unbind him, and let him go." Mary and Martha saw Jesus stand outside their brother's tomb and shout. But for all the saints, Jesus does one better. For all the saints, Jesus climbs into a tomb himself so that God can blow the stone away and defeat the power of death—from the inside. Jesus unbinds us from death and lets us go to live new life. As we wait for that day when the two ends of Christ's table are not separated by time and space, saints proclaim that the day is coming and bear witness to the One in whom that day comes. Unbound from death, saints are let go to live new life now, here, today.

On this All Saints' Sunday, being unbound and let go means continuing to commend both departed loved ones and ourselves to God's unfailing care. It means struggling seriously with the question of how to use our new life to bear witness to Christ and proclaim Christ's reign.

Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost November 9, 2003

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

First Reading

Our first reading is one of those wonderful Elijah stories. Elijah matches wits with Ahab and Jezebel, who ruled the northern kingdom in the ninth century B.C. Elijah curses the land in the name of God: no dew or rain until Elijah says so (18:1). Then Elijah hits the road out of fear for his life. Elijah hides out beside a brook. When the brook runs dry, God sends Elijah to Zarephath, to a down-on-her-luck widow who is down to her last meal. By miraculously providing for the prophet, the widow, and her son, God graciously guarantees that God's Word will not be silenced.

The second reading probes how Christ's sacrifice is superior to the priest's sacrifice in the temple. The writer of Hebrews assumes that everything earthly is a copy of the heavenly, and this age stands in contrast to the age to come. Thus the author of Hebrews understands the law of Moses as the shadow and foreshadowing of what is revealed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christ intercedes for us in the very presence of God. Christ offers himself once and for all; and Christ's sacrifice puts away sin forever.

In the Gospel, Jesus contrasts the self-serving demeanor of the scribes with the self-giving of the widow. Jesus accuses the scribes of manipulating situations in order to claim honor. The scribes devour the widow by interpreting Torah in ways that allow her to do something that is not God's intention for her. The widow, on the other

hand, gives all that she has to live on and is therefore honored by Jesus. The honor, Jesus teaches, does not come from the size of the gift. It comes from what the gift means to the giver. Is it a portion of abundance or one's whole life?

Pastoral Reflection

Perhaps it's because we are hearing these texts in November, but these readings speak to me of stewardship and giving. If anyone had a good excuse not to give, it was the widow of Zarephath. Elijah, on the run from Jezebel's wrath, comes begging for bread and water. Her response is to tell him that the cupboard is bare. After all, there is a famine going on. She fears to help him, because there simply is not enough. The wolf is at the door. Elijah implicitly understands her fear and promises that if she feeds him, God will provide. And she does. And God does. The power of God's Word stills fear and meets her needs. Another widow, symbol of both the fragility of life and real poverty, gives more sacrificially than those whose gifts are, in comparison, quantitatively astronomical. She casts fear aside and puts in her whole living.

The widows' giving seems extraordinary; in a sense it is. But in another sense, it is not. The family in Zarephath could have eaten their bread and starved to death a few days later. The widow at the temple might have hung on to her thin copper coins that day. But, sooner or later, they would be spent and she would be broke. If they relied upon themselves, both widows knew they would surely die. They also knew that their only chance was to rely on God's grace. They were totally dependent on God, and so they gave. These widows remind us that our giving is one of the ways we respond to God's grace in our lives with praise and thanksgiving. Rather than wrestling with how much to give, perhaps we should wrestle with how truly we know our need of God. Then, when we give, our giving praises God and shares the hope within us. Our giving proclaims that we know that God gives us everything we need to live.

Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost November 16, 2003

Daniel 12:1–3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11–14 [15–18] 19–25
Mark 13:1–8

First Reading

Our readings shift from life in God's reign to the coming of the reign of God. The reading from Daniel is the climax of the last vision of the book (11:2–12:13). It furnishes a portrait of the transition to the time of God's salvation. This transition will be traumatic. "There shall be a time of anguish, such as never occurred since nations came into existence" (12:1). Then Michael, Israel's angelic guardian, shall intervene, and those whose names are written in the book, known to God as faithful, shall be delivered. This is the earliest unambiguous declaration of resurrection.

Our reading from Hebrews contrasts the many, repeated sacrifices of the old priesthood with the single, eternally effective sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Following his sacrifice, Jesus is described as sitting at God's right hand until his enemies are defeated (cf. Psalm 110). An eschatological dimension is added using Jeremiah 31:33–34. Believers enter into a new, inward relationship with God through the intercession of Jesus Christ and his enthronement in the coming reign.

The Gospel reading is part of the last

extended teaching of Jesus in Mark's Gospel (13:1–32) and is addressed to Jesus' followers. Commonly known as the "little apocalypse," the chapter incorporates many OT passages, motifs common in Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic, and genuine sayings of Jesus. Verses 1–2 report the total destruction of the temple. Verse 4 might be two questions: the time of this destruction and the signs by which one might know the time. Verses 3–4 make clear that Mark understands the destruction of the temple as an eschatological event that is part of both God's judgment and the chaos of the end.

Pastoral Reflection

I remember with longing the last time I preached on these texts. Then the question that confounded me was how to make "all these things"—the great stones of buildings thrown down, wars and rumors of wars, nation rising against nation, earthquake and famine—relevant to people's lives. Today, the United States occupies Iraq. The news reports explosions in Saudi Arabia, the worst terrorist attack against Americans since 9/11. This time they went into people's homes. Are these "birth pangs," and of what? The *pax americana* or the reign of God or something else? And what do we preach to this new reality?

Recall what got Jesus started on all this talk of gloom and doom. As they were exiting the temple, one of the disciples pointed out the great stones and the great buildings. In Jesus' day the temple was surely the symbol of Jewish national and religious identity. Like the Trade Towers and the Pentagon, it stood for all that the nation stands for. With dazzling white stone walls and so much gold that the sun's reflection blinded onlookers, the temple stood for blessing, prosperity, accomplishment. The problem is that the completed temple only stood for seven short years before it was destroyed with all the rest of Jerusalem. "Not one stone will be left upon another," Jesus says, "all will be thrown down." Jesus looks to that day when the nation's edifice would be destroyed. And he promises that, rather than the end, they are the birth pangs of a new aeon, and new order, and a new reign.

How often we stand and admire our accomplishments—our towering cities, our military power, our technology, our democracy. And even when we're face to face with their destruction, we fail to fully grasp how fleeting these things really are. Almost as they are falling, our first instinct is to rebuild, to seek to get back to "normal," to somehow assure ourselves that we're in control, that we can, in fact, direct our destiny and save ourselves. It's too scary to acknowledge that, no matter how tight our airport security, how high our economic activity, how broad our celebration of democracy, how awesome our military might, in the end, death will have its way, not only with us but also with our institutions and our accomplishments. It's too scary to admit that, no matter how hard we try, we cannot save ourselves.

In these days when America is trying so hard to hold on to itself, to its power, to its institutions and its way of life, Jesus speaks the life-giving word that, when our airplanes crash and our skyscrapers crumble, when our economy shrinks and our military might leaves us powerless, God in Christ will save us. When not one stone is left upon another, Jesus, the stone that the builders rejected, stands firm. Jesus stands as the cornerstone of God's new order. For the God of Golgotha is the God of Auschwitz and Manhattan and Afghanistan and Iraq. And, more than being in the worst of it with us, Jesus brings us to new life. And so we pray "Thy kingdom come" expecting that it will. And when Christ comes, the imperfec-

tion of our systems, the injustice of our courts, the poor in our land, even the power of our hate will be no more.

"When?" the disciples want to know. And so do we. These days many are reading the supposed signs and predicting when Christ and Christ's reign will come. Jesus warns us, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am the one!'" These are the ones who claim to have all the answers about when and how, the ones who think they know exactly what God is doing and offer us a calendar of the final coming events.

Hebrews reminds us that we are saved by the single eternally effective sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not resort to power and might. Instead he made a home with those thrown down. The answer to the question of when is this: When Jesus died on the cross!

The Reign of Christ
November 23, 2003

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14
Psalm 93
Revelation1:4b–8
John 18:33–37

First Reading

Daniel envisions one like a human being coming in clouds, not to earth, but to the throne of God. Daniel speaks of this one being invested by God with worldwide authority. This one is permanent; this one represents the divinely ordained alternative to the judgment of the court, whose books are open.

I take comfort that, even in the early church, Revelation was regarded as difficult to interpret. "Grace and peace" is a Christian greeting heard also in the Pauline epistles. "From the one who was and is and is to come" expands on the name of God given to Moses. The "seven spirits" might be the seven archangels of Jewish angelology or else the sevenfold spirit of God. Jesus is also pictured before God's throne and introduced in ways that describe his relationship to persecuted Christians. Christ is prayerfully addressed in vv. 5–6. Christ's coming is described in vv. 7–8, using images from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10–13:1.

In the Praetorium, after Jesus has been arrested by the temple guard and handed over to Pilate for trial, Pilate, the representative of Roman authority, appears caught between the demand for Jesus' death and Roman justice, which would acquit him. In the questions that follow, Pilate seeks to discover whether Jesus is a threat or simply a religious leader he can safely release.

Pastoral Reflection

Remember when John's account of Jesus and Pilate staring each other down, of the kingdom of God going head to head with the kingdoms of the world, was something that happened long ago? Remember when Jesus and Pilate, or at least church and society, were buddies? The world was Christian. Families worshiped together. Churches were regarded as centers of the community. Schools respected an afternoon or an evening each week as time for religious instruction. In the neighborhood, some kids were Catholic and some were Protestant but everyone was something, and the big issue was whether Lutherans would really go to hell if they dared set foot in a Catholic church. Back then, society helped the church raise her kids. Everybody knew the story of Jesus. And so the church could expect that children presented at the baptismal font would show up for Sunday School and Confirmation class. And we could assume that, when Christ stood before Pilate and said, "My kingdom is not of this world," he was not so much concerned with this life but with the promise of heaven, with the promise of life to come.

Today it's a different story. In many of our homes and schools and neighborhoods, Christ is on trial. Jesus and Pilate are staring each other down as the kingdom of God goes head to head with the kingdoms of the world. Not only don't a lot of families worship together, a lot of families don't stay together. Churches have been pushed to the periphery as schools claim even Sunday mornings for soccer and band. For many people, belief in God has become such a personal matter that they wouldn't think of practicing their faith publicly because they're not sure it has anything to do with real life. And that just goes to show that people don't know the story of Jesus. Now, when children are presented at the font, I find myself hoping and praying that parents will take their promises to Christ seriously. If they do not, the children will not know about the love of God working actively in their lives, and that makes me fear for them.

Jesus stands before Pilate and says, "My kingdom is not of this world," and Jesus is right. For in Pilate we find a frightening representative of the world in which we live. Pilate's Roman Empire stood for greed, status, ruthlessness, rule by intimidation, power, and the willingness to use it. Sounds a bit like the United States in Iraq. The cross that loomed over the courtroom where Jesus stood before Pilate was just one of many. Thousands had died of crucifixion before Jesus was ever nailed to the tree. People knew what it was like to walk outside and see the form of a cross standing out against the sky. We can all list the terror, the threats, the evils that we see as we leave the house each morning.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus says. And he's not talking about heaven. He is saying that in the midst of the kingdoms of this world—the kingdoms of greed, status, ruthlessness, intimidation, and power—there stands a kingdom of justice, truth, goodness, and peace. To the rule of intimidation, to the street sense of dishonesty and deceit, to the pursuit of power and possessions, to the way of life that does what is desirable and expedient, there is an alternative—the rule of grace and truth. This kingdom is God's kingdom, revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the deepest sense this kingdom is not of this world. But this kingdom is here. This kingdom is definitely at work in this world and in our lives.

In Christ we learn that God is in control, but not as a ruthless tyrant ruling by force and intimidation. God loves us so much that God gave up all control and allowed us to nail Jesus to the cross. But God raised Jesus

from the dead. And we learned that, though God's kingdom is resistible, it is also invincible. God raised Jesus from the dead. And we learned that, though we can do things to diminish ourselves, we cannot dethrone God. God raised Jesus from the dead. And we learned that, though God lets us do it our way—with greed, status, ruthlessness, intimidation, and power—in the end it will be God's way. And God's way is to never give up on us, even when what we do breaks God's heart. God's way is to have a purpose for each and every one of us and for our life together. For the one thing God cannot bear is to give us up.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus says, "but it's here." God's kingdom is here, in word and sacrament. Here, things are different than they are out there in the world. Here we admit our faults and failings, and the response is forgiveness and acceptance rather than ridicule and revenge. Here we tell the stories of how God never gave up on Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary Magdalene and Peter, you and me. Here we pray for those whom the world would just as soon give up—the aged, the unemployed, the homeless, the physically and mentally ill, people with AIDS, the poor, the dying—and our prayer leads us not to give up on them. Here we offer ourselves, not in order to get something back, but in gratitude for all that we have. Here we come to a table where everyone is equal, where all have a place; a table where we take the King into ourselves and know that Jesus is ours and we are his.

Day of Thanksgiving
November 27, 2003

Joel 2:21–27
Psalm 126
1 Timothy 2:1–7
Matthew 6:25–33

As I was listening to myself preach my fifth Thanksgiving sermon, calling the congregation to be thankful, to adopt an "attitude of gratitude" (a theme I stole from a friend), it occurred to me that I was "preaching to the choir." I wasn't preaching to people who dedicated Thanksgiving Day to gorging on turkey and then crashing on the couch in front of a football game. My hearers were in church! People who come to worship as part of their Thanksgiving celebration know that they have plenty to be thankful for. They know to whom they should give thanks. They know, at least on some level, that they're not thankful enough. They know that we can never be thankful enough when it comes to the gifts and the blessings of God, who gives rain so that the threshing floors will be full of grain and the vats overflow with oil and wine (Joel 2:23–24). What amazes me most of all is that, though their lives be touched by tragedy, uncertainty, and fear, still they are in church, not to complain, but to give thanks.

Perhaps, rather than spending our time on a sermon, we should heed the words of 1 Timothy 2:1: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone." Carefully crafted prayers might be the order of the day. Rather than speaking for God to the people, speak to the people for God. Be their voice. Mouth their words. Give their thanks and praise. Perhaps the entire sermon could be this kind of extended prayer, speaking for as well as to the people. The

challenge in doing this is not sounding pie-in-the sky. So how would these readings preach if we interpreted them using a Thanksgiving prayer hermeneutic?

If your Thanksgiving table is full of food and the wine is overflowing, Joel's promise has come true. But if your experience of rain is either flood or drought, and Thanksgiving brings another day of hunger, for what do we give thanks? Can we thank God that shortage of food, destruction of crops, and our shame that we do not take care of one another are, according to God, temporary? Can we thank God that God is in our midst and does not leave us to our own devices? Can we give thanks that God cares for the soil and the animals of the field in the same way that God cares for us?

Turning to 1 Timothy, how do we offer thankful prayer for "rulers and all who are in high position"? Does it depend on poll, party, and public policy? How do we offer thankful prayers when our nation is not leading "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity"? Can we give thanks that God "desires everyone to be saved, to come to the knowledge of the truth"? Can we give thanks that, despite how we sometimes feel, we are not in charge of the world? I'd guess at times our leaders thank God for that! Surely we can thank God that Jesus Christ, himself human, gave himself as a ransom for all! We can thank God for "appointing heralds, and apostles, and teachers of faith and truth."

And we can listen to Matthew and thank God that we are not worried about our life, about what we will eat and drink and wear, unless we are worried about these things. Surely we can thank God that God intends life to consist of more than food and clothing. Surely we can thank God that we are worth more to God than birds and lilies, which, when we observe them, appear to be worth a lot to God.

I want to stop urging people to be thankful when by their presence in church on Thanksgiving Day they show that they *are* thankful and that they are striving first for the dominion and righteousness of God. Instead I want to give thanks with them that God knows our need and in Christ will bring a time when all needs are met.

Responses
are welcome!

Readers who would like to respond to any article published in *Currents* are invited to contact the editor by mail at the address below or by e-mail, rklein@lstc.edu.

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