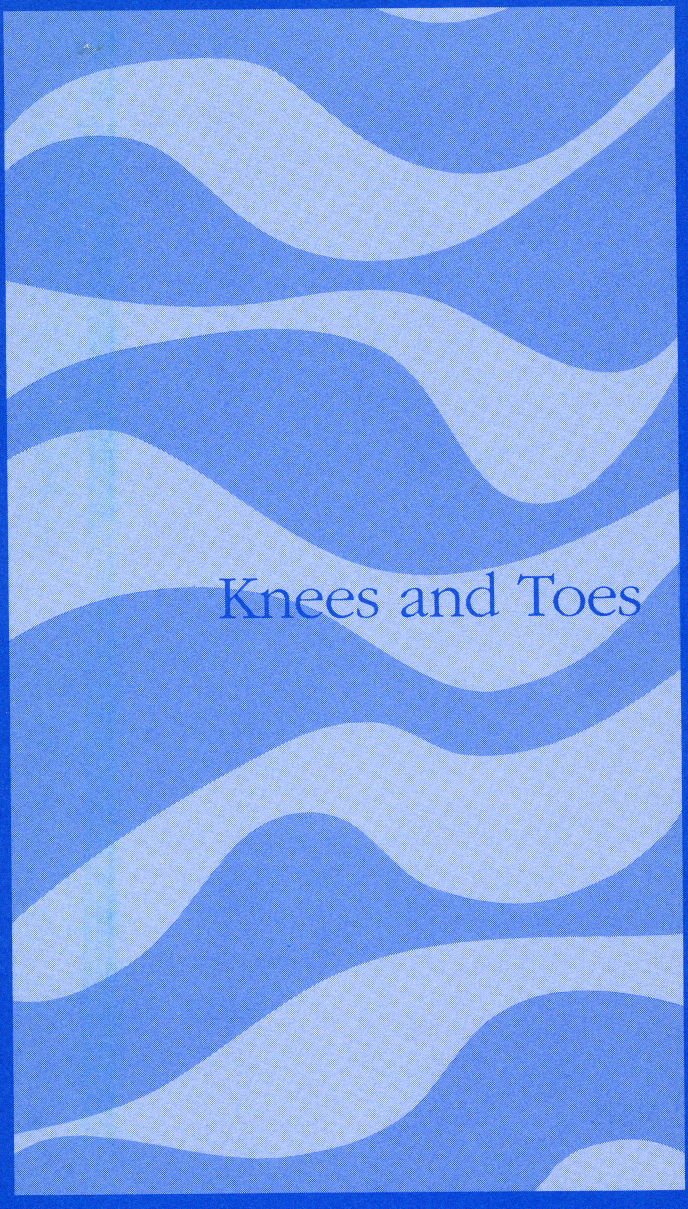
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Knees and Toes

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in Theology and Mission

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Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
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Editor: **Ralph W. Klein**
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
rklein@lstc.edu
Associate Editor: **Norma Cook Everist**
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Assistant Editor: **Peggy B. Eldredge**
currents@lstc.edu
Editor of Preaching Helps: **Robert H. Smith**
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
duensmith@aol.com
Editors of Book Reviews:
Edgar Krentz
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0752)
ekrentz@lstc.edu
Kathleen Billman
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0778)
kbillman@lstc.edu
Craig Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary (319/589-0212)

Editorial Board: **Mary R. Bischoff, Reinhard Hütter, Connie Kleingartner, Randall R. Lee, Richard L. Ramirez, Mary Vance-Welsh, Fritz Wehrenberg.**

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Knees and Toes

While these words are quite similar to a game we play with my six-week old first grandchild, they actually come from our lead article, which tells us how to get ready for the future: to keep on our toes we have to stay on our knees. By the time you get this I will be sitting in the library of the Albright Institute in Jerusalem, enjoying a (well-deserved) sabbatical and trying to catch up on archaeology and a twenty-year long project on the Books of Chronicles. The pains of Palestine/Israel are enough to keep anyone on their knees.

Mary Todd sketches the near-term sociocultural trends in the diverse United States, the context for most of our ministries. She puts in orderly form observations we all have made, but adds to that many new facts and fresh conclusions. Last year, for example, saw the largest number of immigrants ever to the United States, and from colonial days onward the nation's wealth has been in the hands of the few, and property ownership has been beyond the grasp of a significant portion of the population. Only three of 100 families have a working dad, a stay-at-home mom, and two children. Our gains in gender roles are too new and too fragile to be completely secure, and the national conversation about race is going very badly in this post-civil rights era. Uniformity prevails, as do violence and terrorism. For a century our politics have been marked by the growing influence of special interest groups and the diminished interest and involvement of the average citizen. We Americans pride ourselves on individualism and then worry about the loss of community. Jihad and McWorld make war on the sovereign nation-state *and* undermine its democratic institutions. The common good requires compromise and sacrifice, hard words in the current climate. How we meet the challenge of the future will depend to a significant degree on how we understand what has brought us to this point in time.

Hector Garfias-Toledo reports on the peasants' rebellion in Chiapas, the poorest state in Mexico. The revolutionaries (EZLN) are reacting to years of oppression, poverty, and exploitation. Illiteracy, poor education and medical care, and the negative effects of NAFTA are taking their toll. The majority Catholics are divided between those who opt for power and those, such as liberation theologians, who opt for the poor. While EZLN and the liberation theologians differ on the use of military force, they both have concern for the people's culture and traditions, their suffering, their needs, and their dignity. How does one minister in Chiapas, or in its northern neighbor which bears

significant responsibility for the troubles in Chiapas? True peace can only be attained through justice.

Eric T. Lange responds to an earlier article in *Currents* by James Hallerberg that called into question close(d) communion. He holds that pastors are held responsible for excluding manifest and impenitent sinners from the sacrament and argues that the Lutheran Confessions exclude those who reject or are ignorant of the Lord's teaching or who err ingenuously. Paul, of course, recognized the possibility that some would experience judgment for not discerning the Lord's body (1 Cor 11:29). In our American culture, the article contends, any form of exclusion is immediately considered an attack on inalienable rights. (Editor's note: This dispute in one segment of American Lutheranism is stated well, and with dignity, but there are several ironies. John Tietjen would surely answer the author's question in footnote 3 with an emphatic Yes! and the Galesburg Rule has come to mean that not all Lutheran altars are for all Lutherans! No one denies the need for the correct use of pastoral discipline, but where and how does one draw the line? Others might want to speculate with me on what Arthur Carl Piepkorn would say on this were he still alive.).

Dan Feaster believes that humor and clowning can prove a strong healing potential that can be useful in pastoral counseling settings. The medieval church had three festivals of humor, and Jesus invited people to a fools' paradise, where men and women dared to live out their dreams and pay whatever price was asked of them for the privilege. By making people laugh the clown enables people to sharpen their critical awareness. Humor must be used at the right time and in proper dosage.

Phil Ruge-Jones considers three recent books on faith by Douglas John Hall in light of Christian ministry. The combination of cross and contextual theology seems natural enough from the perspective of the Christian narrative, yet rarely is the relation between the two so eloquently articulated as it is in Hall's writing.

Someone once said that praying the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer originally had an eschatological overtone—one was praying for tomorrow's bread today. Luther taught us that "daily bread" includes everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body—food, drink, clothing shoes, house, home, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like. So, as we pray for this daily and coming bread, let's include also knees and toes.

Ralph W. Klein, *Editor*

Planning Ahead: Considering the Global/ Cultural Context of the Near Future

Mary Todd
Concordia University
River Forest, Illinois

Remarks to the LSTC Board of Directors
May 3, 1998

I've always wanted to be a prophet, to have a keen enough sense of observation and discernment as to offer fairly informed hunches about the direction a group or an institution was headed. I used to do quite a lot of teaching about spiritual gifts to various adult education audiences, and each time I taught, I took another gifts inventory, always secretly hoping that I would discover I had the gift of prophecy. But I was consistently disappointed—each inventory reaffirmed that my gifts were in teaching and leadership, so, although I may have *wanted* to be a prophet, I never scored high enough in that category to claim it as a spiritual gift. And as I lamented this one day with a friend who serves as something of a spiritual director, she rather bluntly said, "Get over it. You're not a prophet." Perhaps you can then imagine my delight when sometime after that I ran across this phrase: "Historians are prophets looking backwards." At last!

Still, my first reaction upon receiving President Echols' invitation was that I was being asked to read a crystal ball I didn't have. The best I could offer would be the perspective of my discipline. As a historian, my approach to the formidable task your president has given me will be to set my observations about current and near future sociocultural trends and issues in historical context. Let me suggest the metaphor of a sampler quilt to introduce what I call my "big picture" approach to history. While I am fascinated by the detail of the different designs in individual quilt blocks (the micro-), I prefer to step back and look at the quilt as a whole (the macro-) and the threads that hold it together.

I often begin preparation for an assignment such as this by asking my students' help. The students whose assistance I asked this time were juniors and seniors taking my course on twentieth-century America. I

told them I was working on a presentation in which I needed to look to the future, so I asked them what they expected their world would look like after they had left Concordia. Here's some of what they offered in response:

- the retirement of baby boomers and the end of Social Security
- "computerized everything"
- no more cash, but plastic money cards instead
- more single-parent households
- the disappearance of childhood
- the disappearance of authority and respect
- increased litigation over increasingly disputed rights
- "global everything"
- a surging stock market
- a loss of religion
- a growing sense of "anything goes" regarding values and morals

My young friends did not seem encouraged about the world they would find on the other side of their college degree. In fact, I had to remind them that trends need not be all negative, that they could suggest positive trends as well. Sadly, endemic among young people today is a cynical spirit that made that reminder necessary. And I wonder, what is the source of their cynicism?

The past as map

It seems to me only obvious that history should serve as a guide to the future, but that is not always so obvious to non-historians, especially students who understand their reason for being in my classroom as fulfillment of a graduation requirement and nothing more. Granted, history has long suffered from a bad reputation for being dry, dusty, and tediously boring. I consider myself already two strikes down when entering a classroom thanks to the bad rap history has taken. But I would argue that is because history has not been taught well—most history teachers have so much information to get through that they rarely take time to ask the really important historical question of relevance: *So what?*

We have much to learn from history if we understand it as an essential resource for dealing with our present and future. None of us would expect a physician to treat us without first taking a medical history, nor a banker to give us a loan without first taking a credit history, or even a mechanic to diagnose an engine noise without asking when and under what conditions the noise became noticeable. G. K. Chesterton once said that "we can be almost certain of being wrong about the future if we are wrong about the past." Yet we Americans are a notoriously ahistorical people, which has caused us on occasion to repeat mistakes of the past, some would say unnecessarily. My own attempt at a remedy is never to finish a history course without spending some time looking ahead, at least to the present, to see what difference the particular past we have been studying has made to the people we are today.

Because I am an American historian, it seems natural that I should begin with some observations about the current state of American society. But I also team-teach world history, and my particular interest there is in the state of the post-Cold War world. Perhaps no word is more overused these days than *global*. Despite regular attempts over the course of this century to remain removed from the rest of the world, America has found it impossible to do so. In these last days of the twentieth century, observers are noting that the United States had better recognize its place as a partner in a global economy or risk losing its role as world leader. More on that later; first to what's going on here at home.

America's near future

In 1995 the population of the United States reached 263 million, projected to be 275 million by the year 2000. More and more demographers declare the single best descriptor for this society to be the word "diverse." If you learned that the average American is a 32.7 year-old white woman, a married mother living in a mortgaged three-bedroom gas-heated suburban home, and that she is a high school graduate with a clerical job and some German ancestry, what would you know?[1] Very little, really. It has become increasingly difficult to profile the average American as a result of statistical information. Perhaps the best we can do is note some significant demographic trends.

America's *population* has shifted, new regions dominate, the south and the west now rather than the midwest and northeast. A quarter of Americans live in cities, many of which are blending together to become known as "spread cities." But the focus of the future will be growth in the suburbs, we are told, as suburbs begin to have suburbs of their own.

Immigration continues to bring nearly 900,000 people a year to America. Last year, in fact, the Immigration and Naturalization Service recorded the largest number of immigrants in American history. This long and consistent aspect of our history will significantly shape the America of the future. As a consequence, America will look different than it has before—it won't be as white, it will be more Hispanic.

Economic trends will likely continue to widen the wealth gap between rich and poor. Scholars whose work emphasizes social class are warning of the potential discontent that lies just under the surface of class differences. For too long, they suggest, Americans have thought of themselves as a classless society; acknowledging that there are of course the very wealthy and the persistently poor at the extremes, for the most part we have lumped everyone else into a huge conglomerate called the middle class.[2] That simply is not an accurate depiction of American society today or anytime, for that matter. From colonial days, the nation's wealth has been in the hands of the few, and the essence of the American dream—property ownership—has remained beyond the grasp of a significant portion of the population.

The twentieth-century arrangement between management and salaried employees known as job security has been broken in the 1990s by the phenomenon of *downsizing*. Wholesale layoffs have generated significant anger among middle class Americans who thought that loyalty to a corporation would be rewarded by their long-term employment. And while the media has noted the extensive layoffs (for example, 58,000 Americans received pink slips in December 1997 alone),[3] it has more regularly noted the health and well-being of American business and industry in this booming, low unemployment economy. Yet newly unemployed workers are finding it necessary to rethink the employment options available to them in a very differently-configured marketplace.

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[1] Sam Roberts, *Who We Are: A Portrait of America Based on the Latest U.S. Census* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 4. Roberts' study is invaluable in providing statistical background for several of the key demographic trends impacting the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

[2] See, e.g., Benjamin DeMotte, *The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

[3] Clark Davis, "Downsizing Becomes Normal," History News Service, April 15, 1998.

The *nature of work* itself has changed, with computer skills and basic levels of competence expected for even entry level positions. New technologies and new patterns of using time will contribute to very different options regarding work, leisure, and mobility. No area of work will be in greater demand than health care,[4] especially as America ages, which it will continue to do dramatically. The median age in America today is 34 and may reach 40 by the year 2020. By 2040 nearly one in four Americans may be over 65, far outnumbering the cohort of young people. And as America ages, more and more people are wondering just who will care for them if and when they reach an age where they require dependency on a caregiver. Eventually demographers predict there will be more deaths recorded than births per year, leading to a population decrease. In such a case, immigration becomes significant as the only means by which a population continues to grow.

Brave new families, as sociologist Judith Stacey has called them,[5] make up a large part of the American profile. Since the 1950s, married women with children have entered the workforce, first as part-timers and then full-time workers, as a rising cost of living has virtually mandated the two-income family. Family demographic trends are marked today by three Ds: delayed marriage, deferred childbirth, and divorced couples.[6] The number of childless couples, working women, and single parent households continues to change the definition of family from the classic model of a working dad, stay-at-home mom, and two children, a model which only three out of a hundred American families fit today.

Children seem to be growing up faster than ever. And while we may consider ours a child-centered culture, in reality we often act as if children were little adults to be targeted as miniature consumers who, although they may not have disposable income of their own, certainly have influence over that of their parents. Our national argument over public education reflects the ambivalence we feel about children; those caregivers in whose hands we place the future of America, whether teachers, day care workers, nurses or others, are often neither valued nor adequately compensated. They are, however, held accountable when children's success is not what we expect.

Housing in America is a perpetual problem, though home sales are currently booming as interest rates make for a buyers' market. Yet fewer and fewer twenty-somethings are able to even think about saving enough for a down payment, and indeed, a growing trend is the boomerang kid who goes off to college only to return to his or her parents' home after graduation because rents are too steep and college loan payments are also. The number of singles living at home today is the highest ever despite two million marriages a year.[7] Changes in the welfare laws are adding to the number of homeless in shelters and on American streets. Public Action to Deliver Shelter (PADS), an essentially volunteer-based coalition that exists through the commitment of individual churches to provide emergency shelter where no government assistance is available, last season serviced thirty percent more homeless than in the previous year in the northwest suburbs of Chicago alone. PADS itself is a phenomenon of the very recent past, initially resisted by some suburban

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[4] Roberts, 264.

[5] Judith Stacey, *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

[6] Roberts, 33.

[7] Roberts, 47.



residents who felt that homelessness was an urban problem only.

Political trends suggest the continuing seesaw between the post-1960s conservative dominance and a growing impatience on the part of many Americans with partisan politics. Consider just the elections of this decade: Bill Clinton's 1992 defeat of incumbent George Bush thanks in whatever measure to the third party candidacy of Ross Perot, followed by the so-called Republican Revolution of the midterm 1994 elections, followed by the rejection of that same group with Clinton's 1996 re-election. We Americans may not have the long memory of history, but we clearly do have acute short-term memory when it comes to casting blame politically, whether that be about taxes or government shutdown. For a century, our politics have been marked by the growing influence of special interest groups and the diminished interest and involvement of the average citizen. The cynicism I noted in my students seems almost genetic since Watergate. Recent polls reflect an attitude that almost expects political misbehavior in public figures. Just get the job done, we say. We don't want to know how you're doing it because we suspect some of it will be under the table.

And since the late 1970s we have also the curious admixture in our society of religion and politics, those two things your mother always told you polite people never talk about at the dinner table. The phenomenon of fundamentalism, which I understand and often define for students as the political use of religion, needs to be studied and understood in its various manifestations globally. In this country, one cannot do justice to the history of the late twentieth century without referencing the influence of the Christian right on politics at all levels. And while I do not mean to equate evangelicalism and fundamentalism, many people—in particular the media—do. What concerns me rather is the insistence of the fundamentalist mindset that there is only one way to do something, one answer for every question, one solution for every problem. In this way of thinking options are limited at best. Return with me for a moment to that one word that best describes our nation at this critical point in history—diverse. Haven't we come too far as a people and a nation for us all to think in a unitary way? History reminds us that political parties were the inevitable result of differing opinions on the proposed national constitution two hundred years ago. Yet there are today some in power and some seeking power who would impose on us all the standard of their minority viewpoint, through election or appointment to office, through legislation, and occasionally through various means of terrorism.

Late twentieth century *cultural trends* certainly must include the communication revolution, beginning with the remarkable growth of computer-based means of communicating by e-mail and the Internet. Suddenly we have almost instant access to more information than we know what to do with. A friend who is a master teacher in an

eastern state speaks of her role these days as teaching children not information, but how to manage information.

And while we have more information than ever before, we also have less understanding. How often is our memory of an event connected only to a news photo or sound bite that we have seen over and over (and over) again? We hear news no longer "every hour on the hour" but every ten minutes. It doesn't even seem to matter to what network we're tuned.

In terms of our interpersonal relationships, one cannot help but observe the increasing litigiousness of our society and the attendant rights claims, usually between individuals but often between or on behalf of groups. The first question anyone anywhere asks is usually about insurance, and only then, where does it hurt?

Long-held moral codes are difficult to apply to situations we never envisioned—particularly questions around the quality of life and individual self-interest. *Whose life is it, anyway?* was a Broadway play some years back. Now we ask, Whose baby is it, anyway—birth parent or adoptive parent, sperm donor or surrogate? And whose baby is it when it's a crack baby or an AIDS baby or born to a teenager who doesn't want anyone to know she's been pregnant for nine months? The technological advances of the late twentieth century have confronted us with scenarios beyond those imagined earlier only by science fiction writers, and we don't know how to respond, because the old guidelines, like LPs and eight-track tapes, no longer work in the new framework.

There are few threads in the American quilt more prominent than that aspect of the American character known as *individualism.* Thanks largely to Emerson and other nineteenth-century writers, including the insightful French observer de Tocqueville, we have come to embrace individualism as the essence of being American. Yet what does that mean when we also wish to speak of community? What holds us together as a people anymore if everyone is out for himself or herself? And it seems when we do embrace a community identity, we do so only to challenge the existence or the rights of others. One of the darker threads woven into the American quilt is something historians call *nativism,* defined as the reaction to immigrants expressed by those who have been here longer. It is a permanent and persistent piece of the American narrative. Today it is being expressed in calls for limitation of immigration, English only, cutbacks in social services available to aliens, and on and on. But we've forgotten our history again. Who or what are we if not, as John Kennedy once wrote, a nation of immigrants?

Another sociocultural issue, and one of the most contested aspects of the public discourse in this decade, has been the notion of *family values.* Contingent to this debate is dispute over a supposed golden age of the American family, to which many wish we could return. Scholars Stephanie Coontz, a historian, and Judith Stacey, a sociologist, have argued that "the way we were" is a myth that might better read "the way we wish we were."[8] Despite compelling evidence to the contrary, cultural conservatives tend to dismiss the Coontz/Stacey thesis of evolving family models in favor of an ideal they claim is rooted in the Ameri-

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[8] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) and *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

can past. And so the use of history to inform debate seems here essential.

Gender and race

At the center of this family values debate is the woman question, for more than anything else, it has been the remarkable changes in women's lives that have brought us to this point. We are torn between wanting equality for women and wanting women where they "always" had been, at home with the children.[9]

Some scholars have played at being prophets of gender. In *The Futures of Women: Scenarios for the 21st Century*, Pamela McCorduck and Nancy Ramsey offer four different possibilities for women.[10] Some of their depictions are nothing but frightening, especially to anyone familiar with Margaret Atwood's chilling novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

None of us can accurately predict the course of history. But one thing history itself teaches is that we would be wise to disabuse ourselves of the notion of perpetual progress. If anything, American history in particular reflects cycles of continuity and change interspersed by reaction to change. Periods of conservative backlash predictably follow periods of social upheaval—in recent memory consider the 1980s over against the decade of the 1960s. One of the most dramatic influences in American society since the 60s has been the second wave of feminism and its attendant gains as enacted into legislation in the 1970s, despite the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment. The 70s also saw the entry of significant numbers of women into the professional and graduate programs (including seminaries), and the accompanying opportunity for admission to professions previously closed to women or in which they were seriously underrepresented. (Until the 70s, for example, there was a riddle in which a child was rushed into a hospital emergency room, only to have the doctor on duty announce, "I cannot treat that child. He is my son." And the riddle went on to puzzle that the doctor was not the child's father, so who could it be? Now I have clergywomen tell me stories of their children who, having grown up knowing only mom in the chancel, think that men can't be pastors!)

The changes of the last generation with regard to gender roles in American society are unlikely to be reversed, but those gains are also too new and too fragile to be completely secure. Something we often observe in the university is the casualness with which young women born under these changes take for granted the possibilities available to them that were not open to their mothers. So middle-aged feminists worry that our daughters and granddaughters might not continue to demand gender justice from society. This worry is no different from the fears often expressed in the national conversation on race. A significant number of Americans believe that African-Americans achieved everything they needed to during the civil rights era, therefore attention to inequality in issues of access and opportunity is no longer necessary. Current arguments about affirmative action are set against this context. Does this say anything about us as a people, that we grant only so much time and attention to the claims of any group for justice and then grow impatient with repeated rights-talk from that group?

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[9] On this ambivalence and others, see Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All: What Middle Class Americans Really Think About: God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998).

[10] Reading, MA: Addison–Wesley, 1996.

That national conversation, by the way, is going very badly, a symptom of the unhealthy state of race relations in this post-civil rights era. It should serve as a red flag, but I'm not sure anybody's listening when everybody's talking at once.

Finally, we should all be troubled by the pervasiveness of violence both in this nation and the world, particularly that directed against women and children. Stories of the sexual abuse of children by adults are far too familiar. More troubling still are the recent examples of children using violence to resolve personal issues—boys with guns taking aim at girls in schoolyards should send shivers down all our spines. This culture of violence respects neither boundaries nor borders—where *are* our children safe if not at home or school?

Culture wars

A considerable amount of ink has been spilled lately over whether the so-called *culture wars* of this decade have been anything more than academic exercise. Is the average American at all interested, let alone invested, in what has been portrayed by sociologists as an ever-widening and deepening polarization of American society? The skirmishes of this supposed war have been fought by the talking heads on television and in the chambers of Congress in debates over the national endowments in arts and humanities, multiculturalism in the schools, and the most overworked phrase, family values.

At the center of all this discourse is the notion of authority, and a debate between fundamentally opposed worldviews. On the one side are absolutists who argue that there is a baseline moral code that is universally binding; on the other are those known as pluralists, who argue that ideals are contingent and that a spectrum of viewpoints exists on any issue. This dispute between worldviews replicates the basic premise of Cold War thinking—that all questions are framed in either/or terms. But life is rarely so simple.

We are caught in the crossfire between sameness and difference. The homogeneity of the American marketplace finds in every reasonably-sized town a Gap, a Home Depot, Office Max and Toys R Us. Everybody's got a home page, and if you don't do e-mail or at the very least have voicemail or a fax number, what's your problem? Uniformity prevails.

Violence and terrorism do as well. Too often in the last half of this century have we had visionary leaders cut down by assassins: Gandhi, the Kennedys, King, Rabin, Sadat. Dreams abruptly ended, and we are left wondering...will our children have heroes? and who will they be?

The United States in larger context: the global situation

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has pointedly declared America at the brink of the twenty-first century to be "the indispensable nation," because, she said, "We stand tall. We see further into the future."[11] I need to borrow a question from Luther: What does this mean?

According to Albright and those who agree with her, America in a post–Cold War world stands alone as a hegemon, defined as the undisputed leader or dominant power politically, economically, institutionally, militarily and culturally. "Never before in modern history has a country dominated the Earth so totally as the United States does today," claimed the German magazine *Der*

[11] R. C. Longworth, "Like It or Not, U.S. in Charge," *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 1998, section 1, 11.

The thing I love most about being Lutheran (aside from the music) is that we are a people of paradox.

Spiegel.[12] But what responsibility does this role of hegemon carry? Certainly the United States has thrown its considerable weight against aggressor nation-states like Iraq and has influenced traditional enemies in the Middle East, Bosnia, and Northern Ireland to negotiate at least truces if not peace.

Yet how is the leadership of the United States to be understood by the rest of the world when its government refuses to be a signatory on international human rights treaties such as those banning land mines or decrying all forms of discrimination against women? Like any power, that of the hegemon can be both positive and negative. What is most evident is the influence the United States exerts through television and film, consumerism and the market, and universities. (There are, by the way, far more international students in America than American students who take advantage of study abroad programs, something only two per cent of American undergraduates do.) Americans represent a style to the rest of the world, one that often gets imprinted on other cultures. So now you can go to Moscow or London or Rio or wherever and find the same comforts of home and familiar franchises you do in every part of the United States.

What is less clear is what is a priority in the post-Cold War world, especially when every development is labeled important. We have no definitive foreign policy in the absence of a visible enemy. For forty-five years the American mindset was framed in an either/or construct—free world versus communist. The enemy was clearly defined and every situation that developed anywhere in the world could be seen through the Cold War lens. But now what? President Bush, in gathering the grand alliance to fight the aggression of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, called for a new world order, and that call energized fifteen nations to join the United States in standing down Iraq's arrogance in the Middle East. But this past winter, when we again called for allies to resist Iraqi noncompliance of United Nations weapons inspection, we were virtually on our own.

The globalization so evident in the example of the European Union and its progress toward economic interdependence is also underscored by the difficulty in giving up national self-interest. Whose currency standard, for example, will the Euro be based on? Compromise is difficult, and so we are not surprised by the reaction to globalization we see in political tribalization and renewed claims of ethnic heritage.

And at the end of the twentieth century there are those who need to draw the wagons closer largely out of fear, yet their very actions cause others to be fearful in turn. The political use of religion earlier defined as fundamentalism is perhaps one of the gravest threats in the post-Cold War world. Not limited to any one of the great religious traditions in the world, but most often associated with Islam (at least by the media, the primary agent of influence in our society),

[12] Longworth, 11.

fundamentalism seeks to reclaim secular governments for the faith. It has to date been successful in Iran and most recently in Afghanistan, where the Taliban are currently holding hostage an entire society. A primary focus of my work has been the use of gender by fundamentalists, who see their world as under siege by the enemy forces of modernism, feminism, and secular humanism. To fundamentalists, these enemies are very real. And we are reminded of what Eric Hoffer once said, that a movement doesn't need a god but it surely does need a devil.

Benjamin Barber uses the telling reduction of a contest between *jihad* and McWorld to describe the late twentieth century global condition. *Jihad* is that which he calls the pessimistic, bleak rigidity of conformity required by an absolutist mentality. McWorld, by contrast, is the happy face of global theme parks and fast food outlets on an international scale. Barber's words are profound:

> Jihad and McWorld operate with equal strength in opposite directions, the one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets, the one recreating ancient subnational and ethnic borders from within, the other making national borders porous from without. Yet Jihad and McWorld have this in common: they both make war on the sovereign nation-state and this undermines the nation-state's democratic institutions.... Their common thread is indifference to civil liberty. Jihad forges communities of blood rooted in exclusion and hatred, ... McWorld forges global markets rooted in consumption and profit.[13]

Barber goes on to say that what is lost in all this is any concern about that old notion of public interest or the common good, which I would argue is an increasingly difficult idea for us to wrap our minds around. Believe me, I've tried. For each of ten semesters, I taught a course on the tension between individualism and community in which we did a unit on defining and identifying the common good. Gaining consensus on its meaning was an enormously challenging task. Two words continue to get in the way of Americans embracing that ideal, because it requires at best, compromise, and at worst, sacrifice.

Conclusion: The prophetic value of history

One day in the ELCA archives I was reading the transcripts of the Oral History Collection, and I found a wonderful story that I have never forgotten. It was tucked inside the recollections of an old family friend, the sainted first bishop of the English Synod of the AELC, Harold Hecht. Harold recalled how he had been long haunted by a dream in which he died and went to heaven, and at the check-in desk was first asked his name, and then the question, "What are you, Harold?" "I am a Lutheran," Harold stated proudly. At which St. Peter looked up and with a puzzled expression said, "What's a Lutheran?"[14]

We are rightly brought up short by Harold's dream if we become convinced of our own importance, or secure in our own sense of rightness. I suppose that is why the thing I love most about being Lutheran (aside from the music) is that we are a people of paradox. That word carries in, with, and under it all the tension it's meant to. We are caught between law and gospel, between being in and of this world, between

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[13] Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995, 1996), 6–7.

[14] Harold L. Hecht, interview transcript (1984), Archives of Cooperative Lutheranism ALC-AELC-LCA Oral History Collection, ELCA Archives, Chicago, Illinois, 64.

How we meet the challenge of the future will depend on how we understand what has brought us to this point in time.

bread and body, wine and blood, between a priesthood of all and a priesthood of some. But being people of paradox hardly means we're fence-sitters. Living in tension means instead that we have to be constantly on our toes, and, as my own pastor once noted in a sermon, to keep on our toes we have to stay on our knees. I think the greatest challenge we face as Lutherans in the world of today and tomorrow that I have visioned here is to live in the tension. Oh, it's certainly easier to embrace one side or the other, to choose between the either and the or; it's frankly just hard to live the both/and of paradox. Yet we can neither escape the context of our daily reality nor dare we ignore it.

The end of this Christian century and millennium invariably finds an assortment of religionists who claim that these are indeed the end times, and that the world as we know it will surely not survive into yet another century. But those folk no more have the mind of God than we do, and the best we can do is expect that we will continue to be called to serve in an ever changing world. Yet we need not be surprised by change. How we meet the challenge of the future will depend on how we understand what has brought us to this point in time, what forces have worked to shape our past and our present, and which are likely to exert the most influence on the near future.

Chiapas: A Testimony of Resistance

Hector Garfias-Toledo
Celaya, Mexico

The first day of 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, Mexico, according to its government, was walking toward *modernidad.*[1] Moreover, it was entering the "First World." The government implemented a new economic and political system that made other countries and even many Mexicans believe that poverty, injustice, and other problems had been overcome.

To the disappointment of the government, another image of Mexico also greeted the New Year: images of masked "rebels." By midnight on January 1, the people of the jungle, the ill-named "Indian peasants,"[2] made the world hear the cry of their voices. As members of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN),[3] hundreds of peasants marched the streets of the political, economic and religious center of the largely indigenous highlands of the state of Chiapas, San Cristobal de las Casas. The EZLN also occupied the municipal seats in Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, and Altamirano.

Battles took place over the next two weeks. The EZLN and the Federal Army fought intensely. The army ultimately recovered the towns that were taken by the EZLN which fled into the jungle. Casualty estimates vary. The dead are numbered between 150 and 500.[4] Whether the dead were 150 or 500, the truth is that the fights were bloody and many innocents were victims of this conflict.[5]

The peasant uprising does not represent a bunch of ignorant "Indians" who in

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[1] *Modernidad* (modernity) is the word used by the government to refer to the new phase or stage of Mexico's development. Modernidad means to leave the old state of underdevelopment to get into the "First World." Eduardo Luis Duhalde y Enrique Dratman, *Chiapas, la Nueva Insurgencia* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones del Pensamiento Nacional, 1994), 91-95.

[2] The word *Indios* (Indians) is misused giving a negative and demeaning connotation. It is used to differentiate the indigenous people of the region from the *mestizos, criollos, and ladinos* who consider themselves whites. The word is used to offend and insult. In Mexico the word implies being dirty, stupid, and ignorant. For that reason I refer to the people of Chiapas as indigenous people or natives of this land.

[3] Zapatista Army of National Liberation is the main post-revolutionary organized army opposing the government which is supposed to be formed by peasants.

[4] Philip L. Russell, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (Austin: Mexico Resource Center, 1995), 23.

[5] For a short chronology of the events, see Cayetano De Lella y Ana María Ezcurra, *Chiapas: Entre la Tormenta y la Profecía* (Argentina: Lugar Editorial, 1994), 201-39.

a matter of days decided to rebel against the government. The conflict resulted from many years of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, racism, lack of interest from government and society, and particular economic and political interests of those in power, both politicians and landholders, both Mexicans and foreigners.

We can find many theories, hypotheses, and explanations about the conflict. Each one emphasizes different aspects, but one factor is common: injustice and oppression. The *gente de la selva* (people of the jungle) demand dignity, justice, respect, and democracy.

The "new order," the political and economic system, and the desire to belong to the "First World" make Mexicans and their government forget the people who have occupied the land for more than 3,000 years. This selective amnesia has not always prevailed. *Fray* Bartolomé de Las Casas and Tata Vasco defended the human dignity of the indigenous people. In the second decade of this century, General Emiliano Zapata fought for peasants with the rallying cry, *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Freedom). In our time, a bishop of the Catholic Church, Samuel Ruíz, has committed himself to fight for the poor and oppressed. Bishop Ruíz, a liberation theologian, has been accused of being Marxist (he is called the "red bishop" by his opponents) and of misinterpreting Scripture. He has even been accused of being the chief commander of the EZLN.

The historical roots of the conflict are deep and complex. It is difficult to understand the movement if we do not have a vision of the context.

This essay will review *some* of the main issues related to the conflict. I will look at social, political, and economic conditions in the region and their influence on the uprising. Also, I will examine the role of religious institutions and especially liberation theology in the conflict. Finally I will consider how one ministers in this context.

Chiapas

The State of Chiapas is located in the extreme southeast end of Mexico. It is the eighth largest state. Its population is approximately 3,210,500. About 60% of the total population lives in rural areas.[6] Chiapas is rich in wild flora and fauna. A large segment of the state is covered by a rain forest. This state produces corn, coffee, cacao, and bananas. The area is rich in oil and natural gas.

The uprising took place in the Chiapas Highlands. This region is located in the central part of the state and is formed by a mountain chain where 27 municipalities with 40 towns are located. Each town has its own traditions, customs, and social organizations.

Los Altos de Chiapas is one of the areas with the lowest economic investment and also the lowest level of development. Agriculture is the main activity in this state among those who have not lost their land.[7] In spite of great cultural and natural resources, the state of Chiapas is the poorest state in Mexico. For tourists it is an ideal place to picture the indigenous people as "curiosities" ("indians" and dancers). We forget that these people are the original inhabitants of this land, the heirs of the Mayan culture. We also forget that indigenous people and many *meztizos* share the same terrible nightmare. Their options after 500 years of subordination are either to

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[6] *Proceso* No. 897 (10 Enero 1994): 46.

[7] They work together and keep close family ties. Others work for the big landholders and receive a wage.

die of extreme poverty or as a result of repression. Conditions of life in the region supply the basic reason for the rebellion. Looking at the living conditions for indigenous people and peasants, we could say that the Mexican Revolution never reached them. The lack of interest on the government's part allows rich and powerful people to take advantage of the poor. The landholders control affairs at the municipal level and are maintained in power by the state political apparatus as long as they deliver votes and keep the peace.[8]

A notable example of injustice is coffee production, of which 53% is exported. The peasants receive only a fourth of the final sale price. There is the same situation for cattle, honey, corn, and even electricity, gas, and oil. Chiapas is the main supplier to the big cities but does not receive just remuneration.[9] The government has implemented some programs, but the damage cannot be fixed due to political interests.[10]

Statistical data gives a good idea of the situation. More than one million people have no access to health care services. There is one medical doctor for every 1,500 people.[11] Approximately 54% of the population suffers malnutrition; in some areas the percentage goes up to 80%. The average meal of a peasant consists of coffee, *pozol* (corn), *tortillas*, and *frijoles* (beans). Regarding education, Chiapas has the poorest system in Mexico, although Chiapas is the state with the most youth between 1 and 15 years of age. Lamentably, illiteracy is common—approximately 30%—among people 15 or more years old. Children have to give up school in order to work; it "is common to see children, at school hours, on the streets bearing wood, corn or doing laundry."[12] Illiteracy and low education contribute to the rapid population growth, 4.1% per year—more than double the national rate.

Another significant issue involves the passage of NAFTA. Peasants and farmers fear that they will be overwhelmed by the food imports from the U.S. depriving them of their source of living. The combination of skewed land ownership, unfavorable market ties and government policies have led Chiapas to have some of the worst social indices in Mexico.

In addition to the political and economic elements in this conflict, social factors play a very significant role. Indigenous people are victims of racism, repression, and human rights violations. "Civilization" looks at the indigenous cultures as representatives of a glorious past of something now dead. The *mestizos*, *criollos*, and *ladinos* consider themselves to be *the* Mexicans, while the indigenous have become "the other, the inferior ones." Such a situation has made natives subject to exploitation. Gerónimo Hernández stated in 1992 that in Chiapas, animals have more rights than the indigenous people.[13] Violations of

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[8] Russell, 9.

[9] Chiapas is the state with the largest hydroelectric plants, but most of the communities have no electricity. There are not roads and other means to commercialize their agricultural products. Railroads were built during the revolution. The wealthy cut down trees without punishment, but the peasants are put in jail if they do so. This is a summary from the sources cited so far.

[10] The official party, PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) gives stoves and gas tanks, enhanced seeds, and a large amount of money to people. This is a political strategy rather than a real effort to eradicate poverty and injustice in the area. Municipal Presidents and landholders cooperate as a way to win political positions. See Carlos Bravo, *Chiapas: El Evangelio de los Pobres. Iglesia, Justicia y Libertad* (México: Espasa Calpe Mexicana, 1994), 34.

[11] *Proceso* No. 897:45.

[12] De Lella, 35.

[13] Duhalde, 111.

human rights have been reported for several decades. Most of the time, the origin of these conflicts has to do with the possession and ownership of land.

No people can live through 500 years of marginalization without getting tired. Conditions were ripe for a rebellion. The EZLN prepared itself for the moment when the indigenous people of the region, the impoverished peasants of the jungle, and the highlanders of Chiapas decided the time had come to say, *"No más!"* (No more!)[14]

It is interesting, the way the Mexican government, privileged people, and even the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church have accused international groups and even the progressive church of being responsible for the uprising. However, they do not take a moment to look at what is obvious. The indigenous people and peasants have been crying out for 500 years, but there has been no answer. Therefore, why should anyone be surprised? People are committed to look for solutions to their problems; it is easy to understand why the poor decide to support the EZLN and the church that listens to them.

The religious situation

We need to look first at the religious backgrounds of the indigenous peoples. The Mayans are a very religious society. Their cosmic view of the world is based on the wholeness of the universe. Human beings were created with earthly elements, so there is a strong sense of belonging to the earth. This view met the Christian "religion" during the conquest. The Christianity that arrived with the conquerors sank deep roots into the native peoples. Once Christianity and the Mayan faith fused, the result was a complex Mayan-Catholic religion.[15]

In spite of the great influence of the Catholic Church in Chiapas for 500 years, today the number of Catholics in the state is the lowest in Mexico. According to the census of 1990, 67.6% of the population say they are Catholic, 16.3% Protestant (the highest in Mexico), and 12.3% identify with no religion.[16] Within that context, Christianity has been presented to the indigenous people of the region by first, the hierarchical Catholic Church, and then by the Protestants, and most recently, by the Liberation Theology movement, primarily within the Catholic Church. The three groups have worked independently.

There is enmity because of doctrinal differences. Protestants are segregated and considered enemies of the Catholic Church for the simple fact of being Protestants. Therefore, they have concentrated their work on the ethical and moral aspects of Christianity, especially in connection with family responsibilities which includes control of alcoholism. They stress the idea of a personal spiritual relationship with God (a pietistic approach), conversion (accepting Christ as Savior), and they distinguish church and government tasks. Although this view is highly spiritual and unconnected with the Mayan faith, Protestantism grows fast.[17] Through its president, Alberto

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[14] Camú Urzúa, Guido y Dauno Tótoro Taulis, *EZLN: El Ejercito que Salió de la Selva*, 2nd ed. (México: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1994), 15.

[15] Gary Gossen calls it a synthesis where Mayan Catholicism emerged. For more information about Mayan spirituality, see *South and Meso-American Native Spirituality*, ed. Gary H. Gossen (New York: Crossroad, 1993), chaps. 2, 8, 16.

[16] Duhalde, 135; and Pedro Reygadas y otros, coordinadores, *La Guerra de Año Nuevo* (México: Editorial Praxis, 1994), 142.

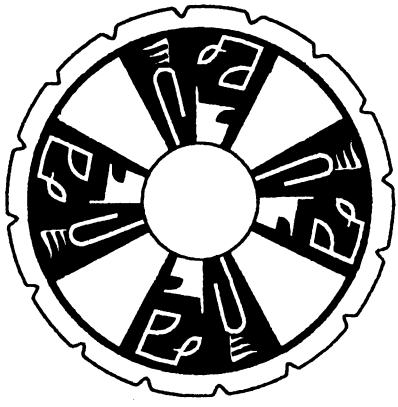
[17] It is hard to give an accurate picture of the Protestant work in Chiapas because there is not enough information. They have remained on the margin.

Montalvo, the *Foro Nacional de Iglesias Cristianas Evangelicas* (National Forum of Evangelical Christian Churches) declared that the conflict in Chiapas is a claim for social justice and also that the Catholic hierarchy is involved with the landholders. Montalvo has also criticized the participation of Bishop Ruíz as mediator. He has also accused liberation theology of being wrong because it teaches about justice achieved through an armed movement.

In Chiapas, the Catholics are divided into two groups, those who opt for the power and those who opt for the poor. The hierarchy of the church is led by the Apostolic Nuncio Giralano Prigione, who is considered to be on the government's side. He has tried to remove Bishop Ruíz from the San Cristobal de las Casas diocese. On January 1, 1994, he said: "The Mexican government makes an effort to help families in order that they can have the capacity to live with a family's salary." Elena Poniatowka, a Mexican writer, attributes such attitudes to the fact that the Vatican is so far from Latin America.

The distance between Rome and Latin America was partially shortened through the work of the progressive Catholic Church. In Chiapas the *iglesia luchona* ("wrestling church") is led by Bishop Samuel Ruíz[18] who has been labeled a Marxist, the red bishop, and chief commander of the EZLN and the guerrilla movement in Chiapas. He has defended himself in Rome against accusations made by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and against attempts to remove him from the diocese. Don Samuel has won the title *tatik* (it means "father" among the indigenous people) as a result of his intense fight on behalf of justice for the indigenous people of Chiapas.

Bishop Ruíz's and the liberation theologians' approach to the situation in Chiapas has sparked much opposition. The



Centro de Reflexion Teológica (Center of Theological Reflection) in Mexico addressed a response to accusations against liberation theology in connection with its participation with the EZLN and as a promoter of violence.[19] The theologians assert that to accuse liberation theology of promoting violence is to defend the illegitimate status quo. The church must respond to the economic and social violence already crushing the poor. Those who accuse liberation theology are capitalists and business people who are not concerned for justice toward workers and peasants.

Don Samuel says that theology is the seeking of liberation in a world full of suffering which is the product of injustice and misery: "No Christian can find the way of faith if such a Christian does not recognize Christ among the poorest."[20] The op-

[18] Bishop Samuel Ruíz García was born in 1924. He obtain a doctoral degree in Sacred Scripture and Theology in Rome. He was ordained in 1949 and was named Bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas in 1960. For more details see De Lella, 145.

[19] De Lella, 241-7.

[20] Camú, 48.

tion for the poor becomes an extremely controversial issue. Yet, to support the poor is the only potential for change, because they are the ones who will transform the church, the state, and the whole society.

Within such a framework, liberation theologians explain that liberation theology is:

—*a reflection about God.* Liberation theology pronounces a Christian word in connection with reality. It is not a recipe or ideological compendium that shows ways for insurrection, but a *religious analysis of concrete realities* derived from the unbalanced condition of human, social, cultural, and economic relationships in an uneven world.

—*a theology attached to the gospel.* It takes seriously Jesus of Nazareth, the anointed, who preached the good news to the poor, gave sight to the blind, and freed the captives. It actualizes the saving will of God. Salvation is related to our history and is collective. It includes not only the soul but the whole person, and it has connection with all of everyday life.

—*a prophetic and committed theology.* It extends Jesus' invitation to conversion and to believe the news of the kingdom of God. It is a theology that denounces situations of marginalization, dispossession, and inhumanity as opposite to God's will. The closeness of God's kingdom is the transforming force of history.

—*a theology on the side of the poor.* Liberation theology emphasizes the evangelical privilege of the poor. They are the recipients of the good news. Moreover, Jesus can be found among them, as Jesus said, "whatever you do to them you do to me." Liberation theology is on behalf of the poor and against poverty caused by injustice. It produces conscience, and it takes into account the *political dimension of the Christian faith.*[21]

In this theological framework the commitment of liberation theologians is to make sure that the poor have voice within the church and society, and to remember the great commandment, to love one another.

Such an aim is in part achieved through the work of the catechists. As a result of their work, indigenous people have lost their fear of repression and are no longer scared of the landholders; they learned not to keep silence and not to stare at their naked feet. Some of the catechists have left the church and joined the EZLN. Ernesto Aguilar Mancera, a missionary and priest in Tuxtla Gutierrez, says that it is not proper to condemn the catechists who opted for violence because only God can judge.

Bishop Ruíz makes clear that he supports nonviolence. He does not approve the violence of the movement, but he respects the ethical justification for armed resistance by some Christians and non-Christians.[22] Liberation theology holds that true peace can be achieved only if there is justice. Justice is the preliminary step toward social peace. The task of the Christian is to seek peace through justice. The call is to follow Jesus who preferred to die rather than to kill. However, this ought not be reduced to a simplistic interpretation. To opt for nonviolence does not mean that under all circumstances violence is always unacceptable.[23]

We can see that the position of liberation theology is revolutionary and it favors change. This situation gives reason to con-

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[21] This is a summary of the information in De Lella, 241-7.

[22] For more details about the position of Bishop Ruíz regarding peace and nonviolence, see Bravo, 134; Reyes; and the other sources which cover the topic from different perspectives.

[23] Camú, 49.



sider the connection between the EZLN and liberation theology. Both parties have been clear. They agree that there are many areas where the ideologies overlap and share the same ideas. However, they remain completely independent. Their demands are in common. Both demand an end to injustice, exploitation, racism, and abuses, and they both condemn NAFTA. Both fight for the indigenous people of Chiapas.

They are different, however, in the way they would achieve their goals. The EZLN chooses armed uprising. Don Samuel prefers teaching and *concientización*. Liberation theology does not legitimate the uprising, but it can give a Christian explanation for the movement's motives. The fact that the indigenous people of Chiapas decided to support and join either the EZLN or the liberation theology movement is not surprising. Both movements offer what the indigenous people are looking for, liberation. Certainly, such a liberation has different connotations. The EZLN is a purely political movement, while liberation theology combines a spiritual dimension with political liberation. Common to both is concern for people and for the people's culture, traditions, suffering, needs, and dignity, and the recognition of their capability to make their own decisions.

There are many open questions. How valid is the use of violence to achieve liberation? How far can the church's teachings and actions go? Liberation theologians awake consciences and teach people to think. The EZLN sends them to fight. It is hard to decide who is right or wrong. The circumstances in Chiapas—the government's negligence, the injustice and lack of concern of the elites, and the insensitivity of the rest of Mexican society—are perhaps the factors that pushed the people of Chiapas to use violence as a last resort.

Responding to the cry of the poor

The conflict tells us that something is wrong in Mexican society and that we have not seen or do not want to see it. The conflict reveals that most of us have been only spectators, like Romans in the coliseum watching the beasts devour Christians. The liberation movement shows us that there are people working to stop the injustice that seems to be normal in our society. Moreover, the uprising calls Christians to take a stand and review our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters in Chiapas. The problem is not only for the people of Chiapas but for all people in Mexico and for all Christians.

Whether we take a position or not, we still find ourselves among either the oppressors or the oppressed. Luther had to deal with this issue during the peasant uprising in Swabia. Although the circumstances were different from Chiapas, he struggled trying to define his position.[24] He wrote

[24] See Walter Altman, *Luther and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 85-131.

The people of Chiapas are considered by many to be less than human, but God did not create half-human beings.

these words in connection with the peasant rebellion that can be applied to Chiapas: "We have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords, and especially you blind bishops and mad priests and monks... as temporal rulers you do nothing but cheat and rob the people so that you may lead a life of luxury...."[25]

In Chiapas, the princes and bishops are the government and the exploiters. As Mexicans and as Christians we cannot stay indifferent. Luther differentiated between aggressive and defensive wars. The people of Chiapas did not opt for an aggressive war; they are attempting to stop the aggression from the government and the powerful.

Violence is not the best way to accomplish justice. As a matter of fact violence conflicts with Jesus' teaching. Should we Christians condemn the uprising? Before condemning we should thank God that we are not suffering as do the people in Chiapas. Also, we should ask for forgiveness for feeling so little solidarity with them. As Christians we cannot stay away from social, political, and economic affairs. We all are part of them and we are affected by them. Christians have a political responsibility and a commitment. Even Luther rose against the oppressors of his day. Our fight should always be in a frame of justice. We need to look for the common good, keeping in mind our faith and Jesus' commands.

The people of Chiapas are considered by many to be less than human, but God did not create half-human beings. People created them that way. Before God all people are equal. We can question the means to achieve justice; however, we ought not judge people for seeking dignity and justice. God will judge us all in due time. Meanwhile we can question and denounce the inhuman actions of many who say they are Christians and yet commit crimes against their own brothers and sisters.

Liberation theologians provide a good example of how the church can work among and with the people of Chiapas. Base communities are an important element in the church's mission. They consist of the people themselves, and therefore they take account of the people's needs. According to them, the church must opt for the poor.

My question is: Who are the poor? The indigenous people are poor for obvious reasons. I believe that not only the indigenous, but also the rich and powerful are poor. They are poor because they are not free from their gods—money, power, political positions, etc. They are poor because they do not sense how they oppress their brothers and sisters. In short, we are all poor. The church's work cannot be limited. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not minister only to the poor but he also ate with Pharisees and tax collectors. The gospel is both a message of hope and call to repentance that needs to be proclaimed in different ways.

We cannot remain indifferent to the recent events in Chiapas. The situation has become increasingly complex since 1994. Last December 22, forty-five indigenous

[25] Altman, 120.

men, women, and children were massacred by a group of people who have not been identified. That group is supposed to be related to paramilitary forces. In addition to this shameful event, the government in Chiapas is very unstable. Signs of instability include the replacement of the governor, the restructuring of the police, and the appointment of a new secretary of state to deal with the issue.

Many international observers are working in the region. Several have been accused of illegal involvement in national issues. The church has also been accused of receiving financial resources from international organizations (mostly European), and of supporting the EZLN. The negotiations between government and the EZLN have ceased, with each side blaming the other.

This series of developments tells us about the complexity of the issues. In spite of the many attempts that have been made through meetings and agreements between government and the EZLN, one reality remains: the indigenous people of Chiapas are still victims of manipulation and violence created by the many competing interests which today seem to be very different from the original concern for their justice and dignity. We still see the indigenous people humiliated, hungry, and unable to be whole human beings. It is sad and frustrating to see such images of poverty, manipulation, and death among those who are as human as we are.

How many more years? What are we supposed to do? What is the church supposed to do? How can we respond to this issue? Human efforts are not enough. The situation has become a game where the only winners are the politicians and the people in power. Those who once opted for the poor have abandoned their sense of humility and service to satisfy their own interests. If the church does not surrender its real mission and submit all its gifts to Christ to minister among the poor (all the people involved, not only the indigenous), any effort will be in vain.

The church in Chiapas needs to be prophetic and faithful to its foundation, Jesus Christ. Any transformation or change needs to take place within the gospel framework. The church is not by itself the instrument of change but the agent for God's kingdom. The church is *el hogar de los pecadores y la escuela de los santos* (home for sinners and school for the holy ones).[26] A change of social structures, the liberation of our lives from suffering and selfishness, cannot take place without God's action through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. The presence of God is necessary in our hearts. May God helps us to be instruments in God's hands to serve and love all people!

Note: I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Rob Cogswell and Dr. Craig Nessan in my English usage.

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[26] M. Philip Moila, "El Señorío de Dios y el Compromiso Político," en *Relectura de la Teología de Lutero desde del Contexto del Tercer Mundo* (México: El Faro, 1995), 131.

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A Response to James Hallerberg's Communion Theses

Eric T. Lange
Redeemer Lutheran Church
Gresham, Oregon

In a recent article in *Currents*,[1] James Hallerberg, an LCMS colleague, calls into question the practice of "close(d) communion." Hallerberg's article is timely and it is very refreshing to see someone actually arguing for a truly *Lutheran* communion practice on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions. Furthermore, it is to Hallerberg's credit that he avoids the all-too-common stereotype that anyone who practices a closed communion policy does so merely out of "mean-spiritedness." However, I would suggest that neither his statement that "legalism likes things more closed than open" nor his characterization of LCMS practice as "the sinful pride of... legalism" (288) promote understanding. Since Hallerberg rightly acknowledges that the Confessions' authority come from the fact that those who subscribe to them believe that the Confessions are a faithful exposition of God's Word, I would like to suggest the possibility that at least some of us who maintain a closed communion practice do so not on the basis of a character flaw or a personality quirk, but in fact *because* we desire to remain *faithful* to the practice of the Confessions.

With Hallerberg I firmly believe that the Lutheran Confessions are a faithful *exposition* of God's Word. Yet, in light of this shared perspective, I found Hallerberg's opening theses somewhat perplexing since he creates the impression that a good Lutheran cannot accept any statement beyond that which is found in the Book of Concord. Yet, if the Confessions themselves are an *exposition* of the Scriptures and if it is true that the Formula of Concord gives an *exposition* of the Augsburg Confession—an *exposition*, it should be noted, that was not held by every proponent of the Augsburg Confession[2]—then, the mere fact that the LCMS has made statements (i.e. *expositions*) declaring its understanding of

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[1] "Seventeen Theses Opposing 'Close(d) Communion,'" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 23:4 (August 1996), 287-90.

[2] Thus, not Melanchthon, but "Luther understood the true intention of the Augsburg Confession better than any one else ..." (Formula of Concord, SD, VII, 33). The Formula makes this point also at paragraph 34. The Formula then interprets the Augsburg Confession on the basis of Luther's writings.

the Confessions cannot be viewed as something improper. The issue is not whether such statements concerning "closed communion" should be made, but rather whether such statements faithfully capture the intent of the Confessions. Of course, this is why it is important to argue on the basis of the Confessions (i.e. the Lutheran Symbols) themselves.

Hallerberg argues that "neither Holy Scripture nor the Lutheran Symbols teach 'close(d) communion'" (287-88). However, his article fails to prove this bold assertion. It should be noted that the Confessions' omission of a specific section entitled "Closed Communion" does not in itself deny the practice. A similar situation exists with respect to the doctrine of Holy Scripture. There is no article on the nature of Holy Scripture in the Confessions, precisely because the nature of Holy Scripture was not in dispute at that time. Closed communion may have simply been assumed by all sides. Nor does the lack of the term "closed communion" prove that such a practice was not normative (compare our use of the non-biblical terms "Trinity" and "sacrament"). Hallerberg rightly reminds us that Scripture is "misused whenever one part... is selectively quoted and another... portion is omitted" (288). But the same truth applies to our use of the Lutheran Confessions. In reality there are many passages in the Confessions that seem to promote a closed communion practice. Unfortunately, Hallerberg does not address these passages.

For instance, Hallerberg suggests that a truly Lutheran communion practice should "help individuals to make decisions rather than presuming to make decisions for individuals" (289-90). Yet, the Augsburg Confession seems to note approvingly Chrysostom's report "how the priest stood every day, inviting some and *forbidding others* to approach" (AC, XXIV, 35; emphasis mine). This same confession states that "the power of bishops is a power... to *administer* and distribute (*zu reichen und handeln/ administrandi*) the sacraments..." (AC, XXVIII, 5; emphasis mine). Furthermore, it describes how such administration takes place when it states that "people are accustomed to receive the sacrament together, *in so far as they are fit* to do so... for none are admitted unless they are first *heard and examined*" (AC, XXIV, 5-6; emphasis mine). In the Large Catechism, Luther says, "*We must... make a distinction...* among men. For those who are wanton and dissolute *must be told to stay away*" (LC, V, 58; emphasis mine), and denies the Sacrament to anyone "who *desires no grace and absolution nor intends to reform*" (LC, V, 58, 61; emphasis mine). All of these passages contradict the notion that pastors fulfill their office by merely dispensing the Sacrament without any regard for the fitness of the individuals approaching the Lord's Table. In fact, these passages indicate that pastors must make decisions both *for* and also *regarding* the fitness of individuals.

Hallerberg is properly concerned that all those who are fit to receive the Sacrament should be encouraged to do so, and he rightly notes Luther's stress on such encouragement in the Large Catechism. However, when he suggests that one should abandon the practice of closed communion because it may *dissuade* worthy communicants from the Sacrament, he fails to note that the Large Catechism evidently does not share his perspective. Thus, the Large Catechism begins this very section by stating, "we do not intend to *admit* to the sacrament and *administer* it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come" (LC, V, 2; emphasis mine). In fact, the argument for *encouragement* is in itself an admission that individual believers may not make the appropriate decision regarding whether to

commune or not *on their own.* Thus, the Large Catechism can have the pastor deny the Sacrament to some by stating that some "must be told to stay away" and in the very next breath say, "others...must not absent themselves" (LC, V, 58). Just as pastors must encourage, so also they must forbid. At the time of the Reformation there were those who argued that the doctrine of justification by grace alone would dissuade individuals from doing good works. The Confessions, however, consistently recognize that

> one must not by-pass or reject a teaching of the divine Word because some people misuse and misunderstand it; on the contrary, precisely in order to avert such misuse and misunderstanding, we must set forth the correct meaning on the basis of Scripture. (FC, SD, XI, 3)

Undoubtedly, the practice of closed communion will be misunderstood by some people. It may create fears of clerical domination, of intolerance, of lovelessness, and a whole host of other real and imagined dangers. Many of these fears are not new. What is needed is not the abandonment of the practice, but rather even greater efforts at explaining and implementing a proper practice.

Although Hallerberg suggests that the individual communicant is able to determine whether or not to commune merely on the basis of the "liturgy and... *verba*" (289), i.e., on the basis of the liturgy and the words of institution, such a notion is clearly not supported by the Confessions. The Confessions argue that Christians coming to the Sacrament ought to be trained first in the catechism and that this training represents "the minimum of knowledge required," and that whoever "does not possess it should not be... admitted to a sacrament" because those who "come to the Sacrament ought to know more and have a fuller understanding of all



Christian doctrine than children and beginners at school" (LC, Shorter Preface, 2 and 5). The Confessions recognize that our Lord's mandate to baptize includes the command of teaching people to cherish all things whatsoever our Lord has given us to believe (Mt 28:19-20). Baptism and teaching are here joined together. Teaching implies the knowledge of certain truths, and baptism implies a life willing to receive instruction from the Lord. In this light, the Confessions can warn that "if any refuse your instructions, tell them that they deny Christ and are no Christians. They should not be admitted to the Sacrament..." (SC, Preface, 3 and 11). Clearly, the Confessions do not believe that the liturgy and *verba* alone supply sufficient instruction.

It should be noted that the Confessions assume that exclusion from the Lord's Supper need not imply a verdict of unbelief against the excluded. The Confessions not only exclude those who through obstinacy reject any of the Lord's teachings, but also those who are ignorant of the Lord's teachings or who "err ingenuously." The Confessions maintain divisions at the altar on the basis of doctrinal disagreement because they wholeheartedly desire that "no other

The practice of closed communion and exclusion from the Sacrament need not be evidence of lovelessness nor legalism.

doctrine be treated and taught in our lands, territories, schools, and churches" (Preface to the Book of Concord, compare Formula of Concord, SD, VII, 33; XII, 6). Some hold to false views and practices due to impenitence, others hold to such views due to a lack of information, still others hold both informed and sincere, yet incorrect, views. The Confessions recognize the difficulties these various situations create for those who desire to defend pure teaching and to distinguish it from false teaching, and they seem to hope that their excluding actions will be judged charitably. The Confessions have no desire to condemn those who err ingenuously. However, the Confessions maintain these divisions because they recognize that the "responsibility devolves upon the theologians and ministers duly to remind even those who err ingenuously and ignorantly of the danger to their souls and to warn them against it" (Preface to Book of Concord). Admittedly, it is especially tragic when doctrinal divisions occur among fellow Lutherans.[3] However, it would seem that even here charity would allow that the practice of closed communion and exclusion from the Sacrament need not be evidence of lovelessness nor legalism.

Is there any biblical warrant for questioning the Confessions' practice? Although Hallerberg rightfully suggests that in our deliberations we should consider the first Lord's Supper and our Lord's own words, the conclusions that he draws are questionable. He notes that when the Lord originally commanded that his body and his blood be received, he did so in connection with the phrase "all of you." He argues that "'all of you' here means *all Christians* (the phrase 'all of you' in this context clearly means those gathered with Jesus in the Upper Room: the disciples—i.e. those who follow Jesus)." (288) However, the Twelve were not the only Christians at that time. Therefore, "all of *you*" cannot refer to "all Christians."[4] In fact, Hallerberg himself does not seem to understand the *you* to refer to all who call themselves Christians, since he properly adds the limitation "who can hear, understand, and respond in faithful obedi-

[3] The situation has become even more complicated since the ELCA's recent approval of "full communion" with several reformed denominations. One wonders whether or not the possibility still exists for Lutherans in America to unite, as John Tietjen once promoted, by "regarding the Lutheran Confessions as the correct exposition of the Scriptures—that much and no more" (*Which Way to Lutheran Unity?* 151) or even under the old Galesburg Rule (1875) which held that "Lutheran pulpits are for Lutheran ministers only. Lutheran altars are for Lutheran communicants only."

[4] At issue is not the meaning of the word *all*, but of the referent of the word *you*. Although the word *all* is cited in AC, XXII, 1-2 to show that the cup should be given to the laity, there the point is that the *all* includes the same people that received the bread. To the objection that the *all* may have reference only to the priests, the Confessions' argument is not finally based upon the word *all*, but upon the fact that the congregation at Corinth received both kinds. Thus, the referent of *you* must include more than just the priests.

ence..." (288). The practice of closed communion need not be viewed as a "counter-command" to our Lord's own command (his thesis seven), any more than Hallerberg's own qualifications regarding worthy recipients at the Supper need be seen as contrary to the Lord's command.

On the basis of 1 Corinthians 11, Hallerberg hints that the "validity of the celebration of the Eucharist is in question" if we exclude anyone (289). The question of validity may be prompted by the NIV mistranslation of 11:20, "when you come together, it is *not* the Lord's Supper you eat." The verb *phagein* is an infinitive and conveys purpose and, thus, should be translated, "when you come together it is not *(in order) to eat* the Lord's Supper." Although they were actually receiving the Lord's Supper, they were not intending it to be the *Lord's* Supper; they treated it as *their* supper. The Corinthians were reprimanded not because every form of exclusion involves a lack of discernment of the *body*, but because their particular form of exclusion lacked such discernment since it was not based upon proper theological considerations (God's agenda), but upon mere social considerations (human agenda). Yet, it was *because* they were eating the Lord's body and blood, that they were being chastised by the Lord.

According to Paul, chastisement occurred in connection with the Sacrament because some were not discerning the Lord's *body* (1 Cor 11:29). Although Lutherans have traditionally viewed the reference to the *body* as a reference to the sacramental presence,[5] in recent years many NT scholars understand the *body* as a reference to the church, Christ's mystical body, or even as a *double entendre*, referring to both the church and to the sacramental presence. Yet, no matter what position one takes, it is clear that there is an eating and drinking which brings judgment. In 1 Cor 11:30, Paul explains that this is why "many among you are sick, weak, and a number are asleep." Although Paul himself cites the *verba*, he also has to unpack the full significance of these words, especially the possibility of a *judgment* connected with reception of the Sacrament. This detail alone shows that some people were not properly determining whether or not they should be communing merely on the basis of the liturgy and *verba*. If they had, they would not have come into judgment.

Whatever the historical situation at Corinth,[6] self-examination does not preclude pastoral responsibility. Indeed, both are of the utmost concern where one truly believes that Christ "is just as much present to exercise and manifest His judgment on unrepentant guests as He is to work life and consolation in the hearts of believing and worthy guests" (FC, Epitome, VII, 17). This is why pastors are held responsible for excluding "manifest and impenitent sinners" from the

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[5] For the traditional arguments, see for instance Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 130. See also Heinrich Schmid's *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Charles A. Hays and Henry E. Jacobs, 3rd edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 577.

[6] Could 1 Corinthians, as an early letter of Paul, represent a time when the ministry in Corinth was not fully established? This might explain the references to the divisions that occurred because some were following Apollos, others Paul, and still others, Cephas (1 Cor 1:12). Probably none of these men were at Corinth on a full-time basis. Later, in Philippians, Paul specifically greets the "overseers and deacons" (Phil 1:1). Should one take into account the possibility that 1 Corinthians is an early "missionary" situation, when one notes the strong stress upon self-examination?

Sacrament (Smalcald Articles, IX, 1; see also SA, III, 44). The term "manifest" testifies to the existence of hypocrites, that is, unbelievers who outwardly appear to be believers. Because pastors cannot recognize hypocrites, there will always be the need for *self*-examination.

Hallerberg's conclusions seem to be based not on clear statements from the Confessions, but on certain "principles" that he feels require us to act in a certain way. Yet, if clear statements from the Confessions are in contradiction to our principles and our definitions, perhaps our principles and definitions are not those of the Confessions. Such is the case, when Hallerberg is willing to grant altar fellowship to anyone who believes in some undefined "Real Presence" (see his two sample communion statements, 290), contrary to the Lutheran Confessions.[7] Likewise, although Hallerberg, as a good Lutheran, laudably wants us to avoid "legalism," he gives his own definition of legalism when he writes, "legalism tends to complicate." Is "simplicity" really a mark of the gospel? Is it not the law that seems very simple and the gospel which is foolishness to our human way of thinking? And how does the principle that "legalism tends to narrow definitions rather than broaden perspective" square with our Lord's definition of the gospel as the "*narrow* way"? (Mt 7:14)

One wonders how much of the modern rebellion against closed communion is driven by our own egalitarian and Jeffersonian notions and our pluralistic society's stress upon tolerance rather than by biblical evidence or ancient catholic practice. Perhaps the greatest difficulty facing a truly Lutheran communion practice is that in our American culture, any form of "exclusion" is immediately considered an attack on our "inalienable rights." This is further complicated by a very common one-sided reading of the biblical evidence. Many people know "judge not lest ye be judged," but they often do not realize that our Lord in the very next breath states, "do not give what is holy to the dogs."[8] Hallerberg himself gives the impression that any act of exclusion is improper and unloving. Another difficulty is that deeply embedded cultural beliefs are completely inimical to granting any sort of distinctions of authority among men and women. The church, however, must recognize that our Lord himself "gave *some* to be pastors," and that those in the office of the holy ministry are "*stewards* of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1), and therefore commanded to judge and thereby to exclude. Our Lord's own words, which have been

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[7] Arthur Carl Piepkorn notes: "The basic insight upon which the Lutheran church rightly insists is that what Christ has promised to give to the communicants in the sacrament of the altar is his body and his blood. This is not to be sacrificed in favor of a vague 'real presence' of Christ either in the eucharist or in the celebrating congregation. Such a concession, it is rightly felt, would reopen the door to the Sacramentarian distortion which was quite willing to concede the presence of Christ to faith while it intransigently and sometimes obscenely rejected the objective presence of his body and blood under the earthly forms of the consecrated bread and wine (see for example, FC SD VII 67). In the final analysis this is all that the *manducatio oralis*, the *manducatio indignorum*, and the *unio sacramentalis* were intended to secure." "Christ Today: His Presence in the Sacraments," *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, ed. Michael P. Plekon and William S. Wiecher (Delhi, New York: ALPB Books, 1993), 152. See especially FC, SD, VII, 33.

[8] Compare our Lord's cleansing of the Temple or our Lord's words to the Pharisees in Mt 23:13 ff. or the parable of the marriage of the king's son in Mt 22:1 ff., especially verse 11 and following where the man without wedding clothes is thrown out.

taken into the Catechism, read, "if *you* forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if *you* do not forgive them, they are not forgiven,"[9] not "let individuals forgive themselves on the basis of their own judgment concerning themselves." Such tremendous authority need not imply tyranny, for pastors are commanded to fulfill their office not on the basis of whim[10] but on the basis of God's Word.

Hallerberg begrudgingly permits the use of "positive, inviting, and welcoming" bulletin or communion card statements in "the pursuit of responsible pastoral care." However, is this practice truly "*responsible* pastoral care"? In a day of no-fault divorce and no-fault auto insurance, when few want to be held accountable for themselves, let alone for anyone else, one can see how our flesh might be tempted to practice "no-fault shepherding." But if we are truly concerned about our neighbor, and take the shepherding metaphor seriously, perhaps we will heed Arthur Carl Piepkorn, father to many both in the ELCA and the LCMS, who wrote:

> ...it is wrong to admit individuals to the Holy Eucharist indiscriminately merely because they are physically present, with no effort to determine if they have been baptized, with no effort to determine their continuing status as members of the church, and with no assurance that they have the requisite dispositions of sorrow for their wrong-doing and faith in the atoning work of our Lord that is made present again in this mystery.[11]

The *effort* and *assurance* Piepkorn speaks about is surely not satisfied by self-examination nor by vague bulletin announcements. Indeed, even the common practice of giving the Sacrament to visiting members of our own denomination without knowledge of their spiritual health and some sort of announcement to the pastor is not the practice envisioned by the Confessions. Of course, responsible pastoral practice is never easy. Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh stand in our way. Against such foes what is needed most is mutual encouragement to do what is right and that with Luther we once again believe and pray:

> Our office... now involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trials, and, in addition thereto, little reward and gratitude in the world. But Christ Himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully. To this end may the Father of all grace help us, to whom be praise and thanks forever through Christ, our Lord! Amen. (SC, Preface, 26-27)

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[9] John 20:21-23, also cited at AC XXVIII, paragraphs 5-7.

[10] "Therefore a bishop has the power of the order, namely, the ministry of Word and sacraments. He also has the power of jurisdiction, namely, the authority to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses or to absolve them if they are converted and ask for absolution. A bishop does not have the power of a tyrant to act without a definite law, nor that of a king to act above the law. But *he has a definite Word of God*, which he ought to teach and *according to which he ought to exercise his jurisdiction*.... They have the Word, they have the command about when they should exercise their jurisdiction, namely, when anyone does something contrary to that Word which they have received from Christ" (Apology, XXVIII, 13-14; emphasis mine). "It is clear that the common jurisdiction of excommunicating those who are guilty of manifest crimes belongs to *all* pastors" (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 74; emphasis mine).

[11] Piepkorn, "The One Eucharist for the One World," *The Church*, 164.

The Importance of Humor and Clowning in Spirituality and Pastoral Counseling

Dan Feaster
Madison, Wisconsin

Throughout history humor has provided valuable resources to all of humanity. Humor and clowning motifs can provide rich metaphors and an understanding of Christ that can foster our spiritual growth and development. Humor and clowning can also provide a strong healing potential that can be useful in pastoral counseling settings.

Humor festivals

During medieval times there were three festivals which celebrated humor. The seriousness of religion was balanced by these three festivals. The Feast of Fools (*festum stultorum*), Holy Innocent's Day (*festum puerorum*), and The Feast of Asses (*festum asinorum*), were the three festivals that occurred following Christmas.

The Feast of Fools was a time of reveling following Christmas, usually celebrated on the first of January. During this festival, inferior clergy would burlesque or poke fun at the offices of their superiors. A Lord of Misrule was elected to rule. His installation occurred at a Vespers service during the portion of the Magnificat beginning with the words, "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree." At times a Fool's Pope was elected.

The festival of Holy Innocent's Day was a time when the gravity and grandeur of the office of bishop was suspended in the appointment of a boy bishop. For a day, the church returned to a time of playful innocence of childhood. The boy bishop would officiate at a service in which the ecclesiastical positions and functions were assumed by children. The day concluded with the boy bishop providing the episcopal blessing from the residence of the archbishop.

The Feast of Asses was a festival that commemorated Mary's flight into Egypt. An ass was ridden into the sanctuary by a young girl carrying an infant boy. While the ass and its riders were standing beside the altar, a mass was sung in dog-Latin rhyme.

The priest and congregation would bray the refrains: "Haw, Sir Ass, he-haw." The ass has often served as the mascot for the fool.[1]

The Feast of Fools was never popular with the leadership in the church. It was always being condemned and criticized. At the Council of Basel in 1431, the Feast of Fools was condemned, but it still managed to survive until the sixteenth century. During the age of Reformation it gradually died out. Harvey Cox points out, "The divine right of kings, papal infallibility, and the modern totalitarian state all flowered after the Feast of Fools disappeared."[2] Elements of this festival continue with the pranks and revelry of Halloween, New Year's Eve, and at Mardi Gras. These festivals were important as a way of challenging some of the abuse and absurd behavior that occurred within the church.

According to Floyd Shaffer, during the time of the Feast of Fools, the clown symbol was used by the church both in worship services and in educational classes. The emphasis in the worship service was on the clown as interrupter. The interrupter would help raise the awareness of the people through the use of humor and exaggeration. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, the fool is regarded as a sacred vocation within the church. The fool is regarded as one called by God to obey the words of the apostle: "if any among you thinks that they are wise in this age, let them become a fool that they may become wise" (1 Cor 3:18).[3]

Christ as clown

We will now focus on the greatest fool of all, Christ as clown. Many comparisons of Christ as a clown have been used throughout the 20th century. In 1927, the play *Him* spoke of the clown as the Christ figure. George Rouault, a French expressionist painter, painted Christ as a clown. In 1966, the movie *The Parable*, shown at the New York World's Fair, presented Jesus as a clown sacrificing himself for others. Harvey Cox and Elton Trublood write about Christ the clown. Floyd Shaffer produced a movie showing the Christ clown motif. Tim Kehl describes Jesus the clown:

> Jesus refused to be shackled by the traditions and conventions of his day. In an age of military might he counseled turning the other cheek. In an age of materialism, he urged his followers not to be anxious about possessions. In an age which exhibited women, he treated women as equals. In an age which looked down upon the poor and the outcast, Jesus cast his lot among them and dared to claim that they would be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Like clowns before and after him, he was banished from his hometown and crucified.[4]

Colin Morris believes that Christians should explore this image of Jesus as clown, that portrays a lifestyle bursting with hope. Morris writes:

> This clown, Jesus, set up his kingdom in a tiny backwater of a great empire and declared a handful of peasants to be pathfinders of a new humanity. He talked and practiced absurdities about loving one's enemies, cherishing the unlovable and unlovely, and claimed

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[1] Conrad Hyers, ed., *Holy Laughter—Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 19; Conrad Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith—A Celebration of Life and Laughter* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981), 47.

[2] Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3-5.

[3] Mark Liebenow, *Is There Fun after Paul?—A Theology of Clowning* (San Jose: Resource Publications Inc., 1987), 40-43.

[4] Liebenow, 36.

> that forgiving and being forgiven are the most sublime human achievements. He established a fools' paradise, a colony of clowns-men and -women who dared to live out their dreams, and pay what ever price was asked of them for the privilege. There are two kinds of people who refuse to conform to the limits of the possible—madmen and clowns. Both may end up behind prison bars, in straitjackets, or on crosses. But sometimes they display such inspired foolishness that they change the world by the sheer power of hope, transforming today's impossible ideals into tomorrow's practical realities. [5]

Morris points out that Jesus' wit was not to humiliate but to redeem. The clown can use the weapons of humor and laughter to disarm enemies, and laughter provides a key ingredient in any strategy of hope. Morris continues by writing:

> Jesus the clown had this ability to celebrate life. Like a jester he defied custom and scorned authority. Like a wandering troubadour, he had no place to lay his head, and like a minstrel he frequented parties and dinners, upsetting the guest list and bringing with him his disreputable companions to outrage the social conformist. He gathered together a motley army of outcasts, peasants, and rogues, and marched at their head to take a great city in a parody of martial conquest. [6]

Jesus and the clown have much in common in the way they relate to the world around them.

Harvey Cox portrays Christ as the harlequin. Christ is the personification of festivity and fantasy in an age that has almost lost both. The image of Christ with greasepaint and a halo is able to touch our modern consciousness while other images of Christ are not as effective.[7]

The image of Christ the clown, while troubling to the serious, provides a saving grace to many others who can relate to this image. For Christian clowns, who model their clown after Christ the clown, the colors of the greasepaint are significant. The white on the face symbolizes death, and the colors symbolize the new life that we receive through Christ.[8]

Clown

The term "clown" is from an English word which originated during the time of Elizabethan England. Clown meant "clod," "clumsy," "country bumpkin," and had a very earthy quality to it. The name also implied a kind of childlike innocence and simplicity.[9] Joseph McLelland writes:

> The clown is the symbol of the human comedy. He offers up mankind as a fit oblation to God: good for nothing, simply enjoyable. He is the high priest of pity and of laughter beyond tears. Sometimes he is the comic hero, unmasking the pretensions of the pompous and the rich and the square. Sometimes he is tragicomic, so proud that you know he's heading for a fall, so matter-of-fact that you know he'll get up again. He is vulnerable and indestructible. In the circus he appears with grotesque makeup and outlandish costume, an exaggeration of ourselves. On him the trappings of social status and one-upmanship (top hat or bowler, vest and spats, perhaps cane or monocle or walking stick) look merely ridiculous. He shows us that the things we put on to cover our funny nakedness are themselves funny. We

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[5] Colin Morris, *The Hammer of the Lord* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 94.

[6] Morris, 99-100.

[7] Cox, *Feast Of Fools*, 139-42.

[8] Floyd Shaffer, *If I Were a Clown* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 42.

[9] Hyers, *The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith*, 81.

> know he is asking for trouble, because to wear garments of respectability you have to take yourself seriously, or else the game is up. Therefore when he trips or is pushed, when he is insulted, splattered, soaked with water or doused with paint, covered with confetti or feathers, we laugh because he was surely asking for it, and when he shakes himself and straightens up, resets the cock of his hat and steps out again with jaunty air, we still laugh because he deserves this too, and because he has drawn us through the experience of laughing at his, and our, pretension, of rejoicing in his, and our, recovery, therefore he has renewed our humanity and moved us with hope.[10]

Most people can relate to a clown while it may be difficult to relate to other actors or circus stars. People can identify with the mistakes and embarrassment that the clown experiences. Samuel Miller writes:

> The clown recovers for us the nature of our humanity. In him, in his ludicrous contradictions of dignity and embarrassment, of pomp and rage, of assurance and collapse, of sentiment and sadness, of innocence and guile, we learn to see ourselves. We follow in his bold bluff, and crumple in his public disasters. We are, in short, restored to our humanity.[11]

Miller believes the reason we often are not tolerant of clowns is the same reason that many people are not tolerant of Christ.

Harvey Cox points out that a key skill and ability of the clown or jester is through the process of making people laugh, they are able to sharpen their critical awareness. The jester mocks and ridicules the very things that we often don't want to examine.[12] Mark Liebnow believes that the clowns, fools, and tricksters of all societies attempt to restore the balance of work and play, along with reverence and irreverence. Clowns attempt to point out that no matter how bad life is, there is always a reason to hope for something in the future. Liebnow also writes, "The spirituality of the clown is rooted in being an improvisational artist. Make no mistake, clowns are artists; and the arts are one of the greatest channels of authentic prayer."[13]

Healing power of clowning

In my experience as a clown minister, I have discovered that the clown motif is able to touch many individuals at a powerful emotional level. Many people express how the clowning touched them in a special way and they felt the presence of God, or they understood and enjoyed or appreciated the worship service more. Over the years I have talked to several individuals who claim to have experienced a conversion response to the clown service, and planned on getting more involved with their faith.

Similar experiences have occurred when clowns visit nursing homes. Clowns can provide a powerful way of making someone laugh or of touching them emotionally in a special way. Once when I was visiting an elderly woman in her room in a nursing home in my clown costume, she walked out of the room after me and asked for a balloon. Suddenly two nurses came running over, looking very startled. I was told that this woman had not spoken to anyone or left her room in over six months.

Over the years I have taught clown classes and trained many youth and adults in the art of clowning. My first clown ministry workshop occurred at Christ Seminary-Seminex where I trained several

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[10] Joseph C. McLelland, *The Clown and the Crocodile* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1970), 114-15.

[11] Hyers, *Holy Laughter*, 100.

[12] Cox, *Feast of Fools*, 136.

[13] Liebenow, *Is There Fun after Paul?* 7, 50.



students and faculty to be clowns. I have often said that it was my clowning and humor that kept me in seminary and graduate school. When things became too serious I went clowning. The clowning provided me with a balance to my often all too serious and busy life. Changes were also beginning to occur within many of the new clowns.

Several years later, I started conducting clown therapy groups. I worked with groups of severely emotionally disturbed adolescents and trained them to be clowns. The adolescents, who lived in residential treatment centers, were taught basics of clowning, make-up, magic, juggling, balloon sculpting, and clowning around. The adolescents were then taken into the community—to day care centers, schools, and shopping centers. I later met one of the girls I had trained in a clown group. This 15 year-old girl told me that she used to sell herself as a prostitute in Chicago, and now she is selling herself as a clown at a grocery store.

I once had a client I was counseling, but we didn't seem to be getting anywhere. At the end of a session I told her that the following week I had to do some clowning prior to meeting with her and I wasn't sure I would have time to take off my clown make-up. I asked her if she minded meeting with a clown for a counselor. She laughed and said she didn't mind. The following week I came to the counseling session as a clown. After her initial laughter, she opened up and told me about her past experience of being sexually abused. She later explained that it was much easier talking to a clown then it was talking to a man. From that point on we made progress in counseling.

Another client, noticing a picture of a clown on my wall, told me her own clown story. She explained that she had been raped and had been very traumatized by this experience. She was also involved in coordinating a costume party at a restaurant. This woman had been a clown for some years so she attended the costume party as a clown. The man who had raped her happened to be present at this party. She explained how she as a clown had the power to walk up and tell this man to leave, and he did.

On another occasion, I had been counseling with a deaf girl with the assistance of an interpreter, but the interpreter was unable to keep the appointment. I knew that this girl had been part of a clown/mime troupe at her school. We used clowning and mime skills to communicate with each other. This girl who had been abused by her father wanted to be a male so she could be powerful. I helped her select a masculine clown, a keystone cop. She took on this masculine clown role and eventually integrated this into part of her personality. The girl was able to accept the fact that she could be a girl and still be powerful like a male figure.

During an adult clown therapy group, I had a young male who suffered from an eating disorder—he was both obese and bulimic. He told how throughout his life when he became uncomfortable, he would make fun of his weight to relieve the tension. As a result of this he had very low self-

esteem and his eating disorder was out of control. He became a tramp or hobo clown and would go out on the street and entertain people with his clown skills. He reported that people laughed at his clown and not at him. He began to like himself, and his self-esteem grew as his obesity and eating disorder got under control.

I once was brought to an Army base to do some clowning and lead a workshop on humor and on clowning. The clown class visited the local Army hospital. I noticed a room of about twelve male soldiers looking very afraid and sad. As a clown I walked in and introduced myself as their doctor. I proceeded to give them an imaginary examination with my balloon stethoscope. Soon all the soldiers were laughing and were much more relaxed. As I left their room, I overheard one of the soldiers saying that he wished I really was his doctor.

There are many healing stories that occur through the use of clowning and humor. Hospitals all over the country are developing humor rooms and learning about the importance of laughter as being necessary in the healing process. Therapeutic clowning involves a combination of gestalt, psychodrama, systems theory, and group dynamics. The focus is on using the clown in therapeutic ways for self and for others. Individuals can use clowning to work on their own personality development. The clown mask initially can provide a freeing up experience for individuals. Quiet individuals as clowns may become very outgoing. Outgoing or talkative individuals may become mime or silent. Individuals also experience an increase in self-esteem, learn positive stress management skills, and learn to play and have fun in healthy ways. Clowns are androgynous and contain elements of both masculine and feminine qualities. Males can become gentle feminine clowns, and females can become aggressive masculine clowns. The clown motif can assist individuals in getting in touch with both masculine and feminine sides of their personality. When someone has mastered some of the clowning skills, they can feel good about what they have accomplished. At the same time, clowns can be klutzes that make lots of mistakes. If a clown is juggling and drops a ball, this can become part of the act. Many people can relate to the clown's mistakes, mishaps, and silliness. Clowns will usually experience immediate reinforcement for their behavior through the smile of a child or adult they are clowning for.

I believe there is a clown that can be found within each person. This clown may at times become stuck or trapped. Through the process of therapeutic clowning or learning to play, the clown can be released.

In many cultures, the clown is a symbol of hope, trust, creativity, and playfulness. The clown can stand as an image for the whole person. The image of the clown can at times play a prophetic role and challenge some of the abuses of society. The clown, like the ancient king's jester or fool, provides a social outlet for expressing the truth that may need to be told. Once, in a clinical pastoral educational setting, there was much tension between the students and the supervisor. One day while the group was meeting inside a juvenile detention center, I excused myself and later returned as a clown. In this context I was a mime clown and didn't speak. After the initial round of laughter, the supervisor became very upset, although I had obtained permission from the assistant supervisor to do the clowning. I blew up a balloon that was imprinted with the word "love" and handed it to the supervisor. The supervisor became very angry and refused to take the balloon, got up and left the room. The group temporarily become overwhelmed and immobilized. I left and took off the clown make-up and rejoined the

The image of Christ as clown can challenge us and provide new insights into Christ, his ministry, and our ministry.

group to process the events that occurred. I then went and found the supervisor and processed the events with him as well. It had not been my intention to challenge or upset the supervisor, but the clown scene picked up on the tension that was already existing within the group. This became a turning point for the group which then bonded together with one another and with the supervisor.

Humor and therapy

Humor can be very useful in the pastoral counseling and psychotherapy process. Humor in therapy can take on many forms including the use of playfulness, exaggeration, paradoxes, anecdotes, parables, jokes, clowning, or pointing out incongruities. Humor can be spontaneous, responding to what is occurring in the moment, or it can be a form of stock or standard humor that applies in various situations. Through humor, clients are invited to see their concerns as both serious and non-serious at the same time. They can also become amused by the serious/non-serious configuration. The effect is to liberate clients from their over-involvement with seriousness without losing the sense that their concerns are serious.[14]

There are many benefits to the use of humor in counseling. Humor can help clients learn to laugh at their failings, and to not take themselves too seriously. It can relieve the monotony and overseriousness of some of the heavy aspects of therapy. It can aid clients in obtaining some objective distance regarding self-defeating behaviors and to acknowledge how they may sabotage themselves. It can provide a distraction from their intensely anxious and depressed thoughts and feelings. Humor can draw attention to human idiosyncrasies and show how fallible the person really is. Humor can provide alternative ideas and plans and can interrupt old, stuck thinking patterns. Humor can provide a sense of joy and happiness and teach clients that they can control and change their disruptive feelings and behaviors. Through the use of humor, the paradox can be shown that at times good things can come out of bad events. If clients learn to take a humorous attitude, they can learn to reframe their situation, and positive changes can occur.[15]

Humor can be used in a desensitization approach. It can provide comic relief and help individuals learn to relax. If clients can learn to laugh at what they are afraid of, the fear may be physiologically relieved through the use of laughter. Through the use of laughter and exaggeration, a client can push negative beliefs and behaviors to their extreme and then reject these beliefs and behaviors as being preposterous. Humor can also provide a different interpretation that the person may otherwise have rejected. In humor, certain truths can be perceived that

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[14] *Handbook of Humor and Psychotherapy—Advances in the Clinical Use of Humor*, ed. William Fry, Jr. and Waleed A. Salameh (Sarasota: Professional Resource Exchange, Inc., 1987), 131.

[15] *Handbook of Humor*, 280-81.

ordinarily could not be. Often through the use of laughter, the therapeutic alliance can be strengthened. Humor can assist in building rapport and certainly make the counseling session more enjoyable for both client and therapist.[16]

Humor alone cannot be a counseling approach. It is simply one technique along with the basics of good communication, empathy, caring, and being grounded in a theoretical approach or model of counseling. Humor can be very powerful and effective when used in the right dose at the right time. Humor can also help prevent burnout for the counselor in the counseling process.

The following is a list of guidelines that I have found useful in my humor approach:

—Be receptive and open to humorous situations.

—Tailor the humor to the person or situation, using the right dose.

—When in doubt about the use of humor, be conservative.

—Allow the child/clown within to come out and be playful.

—Love yourself, and laugh at yourself.

—Laugh with and not at someone.

—If you offend someone, apologize.

—Don't be sarcastic or judge someone else's sense of humor.

In a holistic way, humor affects all aspects of our lives. Humor is one of the most important forms of stress management. I believe through the use of humor we can experience and become much closer to God. Through learning to appreciate humor, I have learned to appreciate God and God's creation. The clown motif can be beneficial to many as a form and expression of humor. The image of Christ as clown can challenge us and provide new insights into Christ, his ministry, and our ministry.

Finally, there are many therapeutic aspects of humor that can be useful in the pastoral counseling process. Bob Mitchell, a social worker and humorist, once told me of a study that he conducted. He asked new clients at their intake session how long it had been since they laughed. He found that clients who couldn't ever remember laughing were in counseling a long time with limited benefits. Those that used to laugh but hadn't for awhile, were in counseling a medium length of time, but made generally good progress in their counseling. Those clients that had recently laughed, were in counseling only a short period of time and tended to make excellent progress. Humor is important as a coping and survival skill.

We all need to learn to laugh and practice humor in an intentional way in our lives. Martin Luther was known to have said, If there is no laughter in heaven, then I don't want to go there. I believe there will be much laughter in heaven, but until then we need to practice and enjoy humor now and let the clown within each of us come out and play!

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[16] *Handbook of Humor*, 33, 47, 95, 157.

Additional resources

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Mission for the Long Hall

An Examination of Douglas John Hall's Comprehensive Trilogy in Light of Christian Ministry

Phil Ruge-Jones
Visiting instructor, Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest
Austin, Texas

Thinking the Faith. By Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. 456 pages. Paper. $22.00.
Professing the Faith. By Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. 566 pages. Paper. $28.00.
Confessing the Faith. By Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996. 534 pages. Cloth. $45.00.

In 1996, the third and final volume of Douglas John Hall's North American statement of faith was published, providing us with the opportunity to survey the whole of this magnificent project and to ask about its significance for the readers of *Currents* as they engage in Christian ministry. Hall has written an ambitious attempt to think through the faith within a North American context. He has grounded his contextuality in the theology of the cross. The combination of cross and contextual theology seems natural enough from the perspective of the Christian narrative, yet rarely is the relation between the two so eloquently articulated as it is in Hall's writing.

In the first volume of the set, *Thinking the Faith*, Hall lays the methodological and theological groundwork for the whole project. He expounds upon "the thin tradition" of the theology of the cross as the foundation for our thinking as the Christian community. Rooting this tradition in the Older Testament prophets he states, "the theology of the cross, at base, is about *God's abiding commitment to the world*" (p. 25). Within this definition, Jesus' cross is an intensification and concretization of the passion of God bent upon loving the world. With this framework, it is easy to see how Hall grounds theology in context:

> For it would be the height of contradiction to insist that what is revealed in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's abiding commitment to this world, and then to enucleate a theology which in effect ignored the specific realities of the here and now (p. 29).

Hall indicates three reasons why our theology must be contextual. First, as human beings our activities, including our theological activity, will necessarily be caught up in all of the contingencies of our existence. Second, since the subject of

theology is the God who chooses to engage the world vigorously, our method must reflect the living, passionate relation of God to our world. Thus, the first point is again embraced, but this time in an even deeper manner. Finally, the theologies we create ultimately must be *confessed*; that is, they must be embodied and announced for the sake of the world. Thus the world cannot be treated as irrelevant. These three grounds for contextuality correspond roughly to the three volumes. We need to engage in the human act of reflecting critically upon both faith and context (*Thinking the Faith*); we do so on the basis of the God whose presence we describe (*Professing the Faith*); and we give living testimony to that Presence for the sake of the world (*Confessing the Faith*).

For Christians in North America, thinking the faith is no easy task. More often than not, we have sought light and more light, and have refused to engage the darkness which threatens us. The theology of the cross promises to free us "prisoners of official optimism" (pp. 158f.) so that we can dwell with God in that night where a faithful hope might be born. As with the whole of Hall's literary corpus, this "official optimism" is declared one of the root causes of the multitude of other symptomatic problems in our context; he begs theologians to pay attention to this dominant crisis, rather than pursuing derivative crises such race hatred or gender oppression since these will not ultimately address the dominant contextual challenge.

The second volume, *Professing the Faith*, addresses and models faithful Christian knowing in light of the resources of received traditions. Hall calls for a threefold process to help us come to terms with this knowing for our present day. The first phase involves acquaintance with and acknowledgment of the original testimonies of the faith (Scriptures) together with the commentaries upon them throughout history. The church as a reflective community places itself in continuity with the past and explores the many facets of the communal memories that comprise our inherited traditions. Again, attention to context, both within the past formulations and within our own, will be indispensable. For example, how did Constantine's quest for one empire bleed into the church's understanding of oneness? Or, how does seeing the bankruptcy of North American optimism call us to examine somber elements of Christian traditions that we have neglected? The second phase is critical reflection upon what has been received from the past. This manifests itself in a radical question which again is contextual in that the focus of the questioning is our actual reception of the traditions. Finally, in light of the first two phases, what are the constructive directions we can take to speak of the faith in a way which is appreciative of historic contributions, yet which looks critically at their appropriateness for the present situation? The goal in professing the faith is summarized by these questions:

> How shall we articulate the rudiments of our belief in such a way that the world within us and around us will be existentially grasped by this account of reality? What do we ourselves believe? How may we formulate here and now this "meditative core" of faith that is and must become the basis and presupposition of our confession of Jesus as the Christ? (p. 37)

Throughout this volume, one benefits not only from the methodology that Hall proposes, but also from his own careful modeling of this process. He does this with three specific foci of theological reflection: God, humanity, and Christ.

We will look at his work in Christology

Christians enter profoundly into the struggles of their world in order that they might pray authentically the world's lament before God.

as a concrete example of the flow of thought he suggests. Beginning with the scriptural writings about Jesus, Hall observes that the fundamental affirmation of early Christian theology was that every subject must be viewed from the meditative core of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Within the Newer Testament, the person and work of Jesus are understood as a unified whole and are understood most clearly in terms of his relationship with the God of Israel. As this "tradition of Jerusalem" merged with that of "Athens" (an often disastrous, though perhaps necessary, historical moment from Hall's perspective), the "relational ontology" gave way to a "substance ontology." Identity and work became divided, and the ontology of communion implicit in the Scriptures was banished from subsequent thought. Within our context, this has been further mutilated by a fixation upon professing Jesus' divinity in a way that swallows up his humanity. This plays out as a triumphalistic Christology in which a refashioned Jesus becomes the divine mascot of our officially optimistic society. To combat this tendency, Hall calls for a reclaiming of the biblical ontology in the form of a "Christology of representation." Jesus stands among us as the representative of the God who is both with us and for us; he is Emmanuel, revealing the saving God who saves us precisely for life. On the other hand, Jesus represents us to God. Having entered fully into the estrangement, the disorientation of relationship, the grief and struggles of human existence, Jesus appears before God on our behalf as our representative. And he does so not meekly and mildly but "after Auschwitz" and its many cousins, "with a great deal to quarrel about" (p. 545). Thus, as Hall summarizes his second volume work in the last one,

> that which the tradition calls "divine" (*vere Deus*) in the Christ impels him toward the human, and that which is "human" (*vere homo*) in him impels him toward God. In moving toward the creation, in solidarity with all creatures, Jesus represents the Creator who continually yearns for full communion with the creation; and in moving toward the Creator... he represents the creature, which even in its separation from God yearns for reconciliation and communion with God (Vol. 3, p. 186).

This Christology/soteriology sets the stage for volume three, *Confessing the Faith.* In fact, for this reader, volume *two* kept getting better the more I read volume *three!* The confession of the faith occurs when what the disciple community professes is given public testimony through words and deeds, actions and attitudes. Because God is committed to creation, the people of God commit themselves to the same. Ecclesiology studies at the school of Christology. The disciple community participates in the representational life and ministry of Jesus Christ. This entails an act of both listening and participation in two directions simultaneously. On the one hand, the traditions which have borne witness to God from the Scriptures until our present day are studied in order to obtain a clear and distinctively

Christian foundation for worldly engagement. On the other hand, the Christian community enters deeply into the travail of its human contemporaries. Christians enter profoundly into the struggles of their world in order that they might pray authentically the world's lament before God. Yet they also enter with equal profundity into the testimony to God so that the basis for the hope in Emmanuel might be made present for the world. Dis-engagement from the world occurs in order to see the godly vision; but this dis-engagement ultimately must serve re-engagement with the same world. The community withdraws so that when they return to the world, they might have a new word, yet a new word that drives graciously toward the world. The possibility for disengagement is offered Christians at the dusk of Christendom; yet to enter fully into this new possibility, the community must recognize and embrace this disenfranchisement as the gift of God.

Hall's theology is written in the midst of great tensions which he identifies, but refrains from taming. For example, true understanding of God is always gift, but it also comes as challenge; contextual theology refuses to live in isolation from the world, but also rejects absorption; Christian communities are to respect authorities, but must also identify with the victims of the same; the disciple community is called to prophetic resistance, but must not lose sight of God's gracious, suffering love for all. The constant presence of these tensions in the reflections of Hall faithfully reflect the tensions of the Christian life as he sees it. Method, form, content and commitment all coalesce to form a coherent, if open-ended, whole.

Some criticism of this work is in order; the author himself invites it. Personally, I am surprised that he does not enter into more intense engagement with other theologies and communities in this context which might have made strong contributions to the project he proposes. While I applaud his commitment to enter into the crises of his own people—white middle class North Americans need to do our own theological work, too—it remains questionable to me how well we can do this without listening to the perspective of those who have had to live in the margins of our privileged world. His minimal amount of intellectual engagement with the reflections of North Americans of different races or even of North American feminists is puzzling to me. Hall's highly relational proposal would seem to demand this dialogue; his attempt to follow God's stance toward the marginalized would seem to require listening to the same in a sustained way. What I am calling for is not mimicry of what these communities have said about his (my) community, but rather engagement, critical yet attentive engagement, as Hall has consistently defined it. From these sources, Hall could have received a broader understanding of his own particular location and crises. He also could have received resources for faithfulness from communities who share our geographic location without succumbing to the official optimism of the rest of us. Even as a white male, though younger than Hall, I felt that my own generation's cultural particularities (two examples being the intense concern with communication and the search for meaningful spirituality) were not engaged, but rather trivialized and dismissed without serious reflection. This is not to deny the value of Hall's contribution to the whole contextual conversation. It is, however, to insist that Hall's careful debunking of pretensions to universality, especially among his own people, not be negated *in practice* by a subsequent insistence on centering the conversation on the crises of those who

once could feign universality.

As I have insisted throughout, this series of books calls for our attention in a dramatic way. Its weaknesses do not overshadow its greatness. I would, therefore, like to end by allowing myself to become captive to his theology and ask what it might look like if a people were to take his thinking, professing, and confessing to heart. What would ministry and mission look like in the long haul? We would see a small community of believers driven to confess their faith to the world in a distinctively Christian manner. They would have no pretensions to become a mega-church, but would be content with the smallness indicated by Jesus' images of salt or yeast. They would have leaders, possibly pastors, capable of drawing them into the rich traditions of the church in order to reflect together upon those resources. Their regular gatherings would allow for several hours of reflection so that those sources could be engaged critically, appreciatively, and responsibly. Through the Scriptures and the traditions of the church, an understanding of the world, humanity, and God would be recovered as an alternative to the theologies of glory, both secular or religious, that reside in this context. In fact, one of the chief roles of the disciple community would be to foil all attempts at reasserting such theologies. The community's members would also think deeply about the world around them and within them.

Such a community would not be afraid of penetrating into the night of existence, but rather, driven by a courage born of faith, would face it confident that surely God was in that place and would sustain them there. Above all, they would be centered on the God revealed in Jesus Christ: they would be always conscious of the fact that they are saved by God's grace. Their minority status would not be cause for arrogance, for they would know that the night is also within them, and that if they have received another vision to live by, it has come as a God-given gift which they are to share with the world. They would join with non-Christian movements when they were able to work with them for the mending of God's good creation, yet they would do so bringing their own kind of thoughtfulness as a particular faith community. Though these foundations would not always be shared verbally, the community would be ready to render an account of their faith when called upon to do so by the world. The dual sensitivity of the community both to God and to the world would not issue in sporadic attempts to fight the legion of demons that might present themselves; rather, the community's reflection would allow it to define "the *little point* which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking," as Hall is fond of quoting Luther.

Where might one see such a community taking shape in this context? Hall saw it most clearly in another time and context where the Barmen Declaration confessed the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But at times, Hall also directs our gaze to a faith community in our own context: the Sojourners community, in Washington, D.C. It is my contention that if Hall had sustained reflection on the Sojourners community as often as he returned to Barmen, the contextual implications of this trilogy might have been even more clear, and the objections raised above would have been addressed. With Hall's books as resources, let *us* then continue in faithfulness; let us be vigilant so that the thinking, professing, and confessing not end.

Book Reviews

One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, but Many: the Truth about Christian Origins. By Gregory J. Riley. San Francisco: Harper, 1997. 228 pages. Cloth. $22.00.

Riley addresses the question: Why was Christianity able to succeed in the Greco-Roman world? His answer is that the remarkable story of Jesus—who was born of a virgin, performed remarkable works of power, courageously faced an unjust death, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and offered eternal life to those who followed him—fed into the many diverse stories about greater-than-life figures already in circulation at the time of the early Christian movement.

Riley spends much of the book unpacking the context in which the Jesus movement was born. He explains the virtues and traits of the various gods, daemons, angels, heroes, and humans that were popular in the Greco-Roman world, as well as the variety of Jewish expectations regarding the messiah, holy men, prophets, kings, sages, and apocalyptic figures.

When early Christians explained Jesus in such a Hellenistic world, they drew upon all these disparate images—resulting in the preaching of many different christs! And the diverse images of Jesus up and down the ancient concept of the "Great Chain of Being"—from a remarkable human to a gnostic spirit—explain why there was so much controversy among early Christians themselves.

It was precisely the fluid capacity of the elements in the Jesus story that enabled Jesus to be embraced so quickly across the ancient Mediterranean world. But also, it was the promise that anyone who was "converted" and followed Jesus—regardless of their status in life—could be empowered to be the same kind of hero and, in so doing, could also gain eternal life as Jesus had done. And the capacity for heroism in the face of persecution by the Romans only gave more opportunities for followers to die heroic deaths and thereby gain more adherents.

Riley's book does not give a comprehensive explanation for the success of the Jesus movement in the Roman world, but it surely offers a hypothesis that offers wonderful insights into Jesus and the early Christian movement.

David Rhoads
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Images of the Church in Mission. By John Driver. Scottdale, PA: Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1997. 240 Pages. Paper. $19.99.

Building on the tradition of Paul Minear, in his well-known book *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (1960), John Driver studies twelve biblical images to drive home one fundamental theme: the church is God's mission in the world. Unfortunately, for Driver, the church too often understands its identity and role through images drawn from the surrounding society rather than from the church's rootage in the "true biblical tradition." Not surprisingly, this isn't a new problem. Driver goes to great lengths to explain that the divorce between mission and church came primarily with the advent of Constantinianism. With the coming of the Constantinian shift, mission was no longer perceived as the essential role of the church as a "charismatic contrast society." Although Driver recognizes the formal demise of Constantinianism, the ecclesiological and missiological aspects of its heritage have not disappeared.

What can be done? If the church is to recover the integrity of its life and mission, it must have adequate images to capture and inspire its imagination. Driver highlights twelve images of the church to this end: The Way, Sojourners, The Poor, The Kingdom of God, New Creation, New Humanity, The People of God, The Family of God, the Shepherd and the

Flock, Salt Light and a City, A Spiritual House and a Witnessing Community.

Driver's choice of images is imaginative and sometimes surprising (e.g. "Body of Christ" is missing). The list emerges from Driver's longtime teaching in Latin America and his Mennonite tradition. Whereas Driver's approach makes wonderful reading and is a valuable addition to the present literature on church and mission, his notion of a "charismatic contrast society," although compelling and challenging, may leave some readers uneasy. Missiological literature today might suggest that avoiding the trap of Constantinianism doesn't always lead to creating such a large gap between church and society.

Richard Bliese
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Who Do You Say That I Am? Christians Encounter Other Religions. By Calvin E. Shenk. Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1997. 294 pages. Paper. $19.99.

Let's face it! We are increasingly encountering other religions. What used to be chance encounters in larger urban centers is now the norm even in rural communities of the United States. When a Muslim grandmother dies and her grandson attending your Sunday School asks, "Will I see grandma in heaven?" how will you respond? If you have been looking for a reference book to give you background into the vast array of literature on religious pluralism, as well as provide you with tools for relating to individuals of other religions, this is the book for you.

Calvin Shenk's style of writing is helpful and includes a well-documented body of literature presented by other scholars. The book is complete with endnotes, bibliography, and index. Also helpful is his presentation of new (or new usage of) terms. These terms are placed in italics in the text, with the author's definitions placed within parentheses. Concepts discussed earlier in the book resurface from time to time, reinforcing the reader's retention of the subject matter. The writer also intersperses brief 'real life' examples from his vast experiences, to drive points home. Shenk's style presents an issue by providing a definition, description, response, and evaluation.

This book could be divided into four major areas: (1) detailed discussion on religious pluralism, (2) biblical perspectives on religions, (3) the uniqueness of Christ, and (4) forms and styles of witness.

In the early chapters Shenk openly and fairly presents the views of current writers on the issues of religious pluralism. Then, without tearing apart the writer, Shenk offers his critique of the position. This one volume can inform the reader of a host of various positions taken regarding religious pluralism. In the chapter on "Assessment of the Religions," Shenk tries to be fair in his treatment of other religions, yet comes from his position of placing emphasis on Christ, rather than on Christianity as a religion.

The author contends that Christ is unique, but is self-critical in admitting that the Christian church has often misrepresented Christ. He quotes Carl Braaten, who noted that "Christology becomes so much clay that we model to make Jesus look like ourselves."

The five concluding chapters are given to an in-depth discussion on witness. Shenk notes that evangelism is only one of five forms of witness, the other four being church, presence, service, and dialogue. Shenk suggests that "theology must be translated into relationships" and encourages the reader to practice "invitational theology rather than an answer theology." The concluding chapters read like a manual, perhaps more on what *not* to do rather than on what to do in witnessing to someone of another faith.

Shenk, it seems, raises more questions than answers. He discusses the issues fairly, but at the same time he comes with a strong Christian viewpoint. The questions raised are very provocative and require serious reflection. Personally, reading this book has caused me to reevaluate my position as a follower of Christ and how I witness. The book is broad yet focused and appropriately related to the question, "Who do you say that I am?"

David Ramse
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Judah & Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis. Studies in Literary Form & Hermeneutics. By Esther Marie Menn. Leiden: Brill, 1997. xvi and 412 pages. Cloth. $143.75.

In this revision of a dissertation at the University of Chicago, directed by Michael Fishbane, Menn provides an extensive exegesis of Genesis 38 in its canonical context and then studies its appropriation in three later Jewish works: The Testament of Judah, Targum Neofiti, and Genesis Rabba. Each of the three post-biblical interpretations comes from a community that regards Genesis 38 as part of a set of authoritative and revelatory written texts and that uses the biblical text to help interpret the circumstances facing each writer. Prominent among the methods used in this book are reader response criticism and comparative midrash.

Within the Bible itself, the sexual liaison between Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar in Genesis 38 points to the morally ambiguous origins of David's lineage (note the connections to David in genealogies in Ruth and 1 Chronicles). David and Absalom both name their daughters Tamar. The cautionary words about kingship are, of course, echoed elsewhere in the Bible. The Tamar story also has interesting links to the stories of barren wives in Genesis though there is no birth narrative for David in the Bible.

The Testament of Judah, recontextualized as autobiography, interprets the incident as the story of a warrior king's tragic downfall and his weakness for women. Judah is involved in immoral behavior, but he also is a model of contrition and repentance. His defeat comes because of his overconfidence in his own strength. His failings will be repeated in history by Israel's kings until the coming of the sinless royal descendant. Judah appeals for sympathy for himself and portrays the women in the story with extremely unflattering detail.

The Aramaic Targum Neofiti employs narrative expansion to illustrate the concept of sanctification of the divine name, that is, both Judah and Tamar show a willingness to die for their beliefs though ultimately they get a divine reprieve. Tamar becomes a pious and prayerful woman, and Judah becomes a teacher of ethics as well as an exemplar of willing confession of sin.

Genesis Rabba adds a number of providential events that issue in a royal and messianic lineage. The idealized recollection of strong and just kingship from the biblical past and the expectation of its restoration in the future define the author's contemporary period of oppression under foreign government as a temporary aberration in Israel's history. This document arose in the 4th or 5th century C.E.

Menn points out that each interpretation illustrates the role of historically situated readers for determining the religious meanings of a biblical narrative. Each interpretation of Genesis 38 reveals at least as much about the community that produced it as it does about the biblical text itself.

Menn is a Lutheran who teaches at the University of Virginia. Her thorough and well-argued work is also beautifully printed. Of course, at its price it should be.

Ralph W. Klein

Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans. By Charles H. Cosgrove. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997. xiii and 146 pages. Paper. $16.00.

Charles Cosgrove sets out to scale the Mt. Everest of Romans: what does Paul mean by the term "Israel"? Even if Cosgrove has not reached the peak of this steep interpretive mountain, he has taught us much during the climb.

A strength of Cosgrove's work is his refusal to state a dogmatic position and argue unrelentingly for it. Instead, he explores what he considers to be a range of plausible readings. He suggests that Paul's ambiguity is by design and that Paul wants his listeners to work with him in determining the meaning of the text ("co-deliberation"). Cosgrove's own conclusion is that "all Israel" in 11:26 is the Jewish people, they are irrevocably elect, and the hardening of Israel means only that Israel has a limited blind spot toward Christ, not that Israel is entirely blind. What is troubling is how he reaches his conclusions.

(a) For the purpose of Scripture he turns not to Romans nor to Paul at all, but to Matthew

22:37-40 (the two greatest commandments). The result provides an enlightened, humane filter for deciding among different readings. But why take Matthew as the basis? He doesn't say. Why not John 20:30-31 or Romans 1:2-3 or 3:21-22? He does eventually admit that his reading of Romans is "informed by moral judgments lying largely outside the conceptual frameworks of Paul" (p. 79). That is quite an admission.

(b) Cosgrove's argument that the placement of the apocalyptic Paul into the canon converts him into a prophetic Paul is intriguing. But why should we read Paul in that direction? Why not read other portions of the canon in light of Paul's thoroughgoing apocalyptic?

Many of Cosgrove's conclusions make sense. But he has not constructed a pathway up the Pauline mountain that I, at least, can follow.

Walter F. Taylor, Jr.
Trinity Lutheran Seminary
Columbus, Ohio

Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity. By Luke Timothy Johnson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. viii and 199 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Johnson has written a compelling study of early Christianity guided by the conviction that the language of the New Testament is religious in nature and that this religious language is expressive of real experiences. While this may appear to be stating the obvious, he rightly observes that these texts have more often been interpreted either as a compilation of theological propositions or as ideological constructs. In contrast to what he terms a "reduction of religion to a cognitive mapping of reality," Johnson aims to discern the experiential dimensions of these religious texts.

In the second chapter, "Getting at Christian Experience," Johnson develops a phenomenological approach to religious experience that is particularly attentive to the element of power. Religious experience, according to his working definition, is a response to what is perceived as ultimate. More than that, it issues in the organization of life around a perception of power regarded as transcendent. In one sense, this book is a sustained argument for the authenticity of the experiences of transcendence that these New Testament texts presuppose, and an argument against attempts to reduce the language of power to politics and ideology.

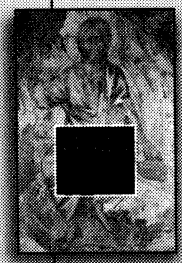
But for Johnson this is a power that finds expression primarily in the context of community. By using cross-cultural models of religion together with a thorough going historical approach he is able to avert a collapse into subjectivity and illuminate early Christian experience within the larger religious context of the Greco-Roman world. Chapter 3, "Ritual Imprinting and the Politics of Perfection," demonstrates how baptism and other ritual patterns of communal behavior provide access to the religious experience of the earliest Christians. Chapter 4 deals with glossolalia, and in chapter 5 Johnson interprets the importance of Christian meals in terms of a phenomenology of meals in the ancient world.

This important book features a neglected aspect of early Christianity. In part it is a response to those who posit various strands of early Christianity with no shared point of origin. Johnson concedes some diversity but emphasizes the shared range of symbols that point toward some significant degree of common experience and conviction. Perhaps he needs to overstate his case to make his point, but I suspect early Christian experience was more varied than he suggests. Also, at times the tone is polemical. Nonetheless, Johnson makes a compelling case for the need to take the experiential aspects of these texts seriously.

This book could provide pastors with another set of lenses to read the New Testament in a new light. Especially for Lutherans and other cerebral types who mine these texts for theological propositions with a view to providing a cognitive map of reality, here is an approach which might yield more visceral and communitarian readings of the New Testament that may even serve to mediate the transcendent power to which they bear witness.

Ray Pickett
Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest
Austin, Texas

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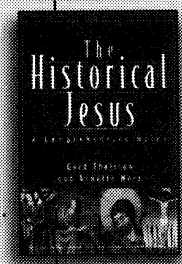
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FORTRESS PRESS
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers

Jesus at Thirty: A Psychological and Historical Portrait. By John W. Miller. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997. ix and 177 pages. Cloth. $18.00.

Psychological portraits of Jesus have always been an embarrassment to serious historical Jesus research, offering highly speculative conclusions based on scant evidence and dubious methodology. The ideological motivations behind studies that diagnose Jesus as a paranoid schizophrenic, a neurotic egomaniac, or a homosexual (he must have been! he had male companions and he wasn't married!) are only too transparent.

John Miller may bring respect to a field of study that until now has neither received nor deserved it. This slender volume offers in brief compass reasonable theses based on applying the most widely accepted concepts of developmental psychology to those portions of the Jesus tradition that are most commonly deemed historically authentic.

Miller suggests that, as the eldest son of a Palestinian family, Jesus may have been forced to assume the position of surrogate husband and surrogate father when Joseph died during his adolescence. He demonstrates how many aspects of the adult Jesus' personality and teaching match what developmental psychology would anticipate for a thirty year-old who had been confronted with such crisis. For instance, Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist and to God (his Abba) can be traced to his own need to replace the lost father figure in his life. Tensions with his mother and siblings reflect the consequences of his inevitable break with the role that had been thrust upon him and can be understood as the outworking of oedipal crises. Most enlightening, for me, are Miller's discussions of Jesus' parables and aphorisms, sayings in which particular images of fathers are noticeably present and images of mothers correspondingly absent.

Some parts of the book are less insightful. Miller interprets the temptation story from Q as indicating that Jesus struggled with but ultimately rejected thoughts of messianic grandeur. This is a tired old interpretation (fed by Wrede's misunderstanding of the messianic secret motif) that just doesn't work. Many recent historical Jesus scholars have concluded that Jesus probably did think of himself as the Messiah.

Still, if only half of what Miller claims is right (and more than that is convincing), he has done theology a service. Antidocetists will applaud this presentation of Jesus as one who has been tested as we are, that is, as one who knows the internal crises of growth and development that come with being human.

Mark Allan Powell
Trinity Lutheran Seminary
Columbus, Ohio

The Theology of Paul the Apostle. By James D. G. Dunn. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988. xxxvi and 808 pages. Cloth. $45.00.

What a marvelous book this is! James G. D. Dunn, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, has drawn upon decades of research and previously published commentaries and theological studies to produce a *magnum opus* on the theology of the apostle Paul. Choosing a dialogical rather than a descriptive method, Dunn enters into conversation with Paul and seeks the development of his thought through three stages: Pharisee, converted Christian, Apostle. He uses Paul's Epistle to the Romans as a template for understanding theological views presented in all his letters, especially the Corinthian correspondence, Galatians, and Colossians.

Dunn organizes Paul's theology under these major headings: God and Humankind; Humankind under Indictment; The Gospel of Jesus Christ; The Beginning of Salvation; The Process of Salvation; The Church; and How Should Believers Live. Separate chapters under each heading usually end with a concluding section that summarizes the material and offers challenging insights. For example, the chapter on Christ Crucified describes the variety of metaphors the Apostle uses to explain the meaning of Christ's death and to make the case for its necessity. Among other major insights, the concluding section affirms:

At the end of all discussion, Paul's message as God's ambassador on Christ's behalf is stark. Christ's death offers an effective response to the power of death and its sting (sin). That response is itself death. Those who ignore that response will find that their death is their own, as they choose, and that's that—*finis*. But for those who find in Christ's death the answer to sin and death, who identify with him in his death, there is the prospect of sharing with him also in his resurrection beyond death.

Dunn offers new insights into Paul's theology. In an illuminating chapter on Paul's teaching of justification by faith Dunn argues that the phrase "works of the law," which Paul warns against, has a restricted meaning. Those works refer to Jewish attempts to maintain their covenant distinctiveness from Gentiles and Christian Jews' attempts to require Christian Gentiles to adopt such covenant distinctives. Dunn argues that justification by faith is only one of three metaphors of salvation in the apostle's theology. The two others, which describe the same salvation reality, are "participation in Christ" and "the gift of the Spirit." Dunn is eloquent in contrasting the "beginning of salvation" with the "process of salvation" in Paul's theology, so describing the "eschatological tension" between the "already" and the "not yet."

Dunn maintains that in Romans 9-11 Paul shifted the discussion from a "Jew-Gentile" confrontation to "Israel," thus opening up the possibility of seeing Jew and Christian as Israel and giving fresh impetus to Jewish-Christian dialog.

For the scholar there are innumerable bibliographical references. For the pastor the volume is a rich resource for teaching and preaching based on the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul's writings have been systematized into a theology, but always and only on the basis of exegesis of specific texts. The "Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Writings" will take you to the texts so that you can check out for yourself the relation of those texts to Paul's theology as a whole.

John H. Tietjen
Trinity Lutheran Church
Fort Worth, Texas

Briefly Noted

Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel. By Phyllis A. Bird (Fortress, $19). The twelve articles republished in this volume were written over a twenty-year period and are divided into five categories: women in ancient Israel, women in Israelite religion, Genesis 1-3, harlot and hierodule, and hermeneutics and the authority of the Bible. B. admits her own growth over the period in understanding the impact of the Bible's patriarchy (she was still using generic male language herself in the earlier essays), and she has constantly paid attention to the use of the Bible for contemporary roles and relationships and to the nature of biblical authority (only as it directs our attention away from itself to the Living God may we proclaim it as the "word of God"). Hosea appealed to the common stereotypes and interests of a primarily male audience when he used the metaphor of prostitution as a rhetorical device to expose men's sins. It is easy for a patriarchal society to see the guilt of a "fallen woman." Hosea says, "You, male Israel, are that woman!" B.'s contributions are among the finest in feminist scholarship today. *RWK*

Obadiah. The Anchor Bible 24D. By Paul R. Raabe (Doubleday, $34.95). Obadiah contains 21 verses, the shortest book in the Old Testament, but it takes R. 273 pages to comment on the book. Small wonder, since the book is a vitriolic diatribe against Edom that needs to be "explained." Despite the diverse viewpoints expressed in the book, R. holds to unitary authorship in which the prophet set forth at one time different perspectives, emphases, and styles. R., who teaches at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, brings a great deal of learning and insight to individual verses, but adopts an aloof hermeneutical position: "Some readers might be inclined

to criticize Obadiah for his harsh language and his pro-Israelite zeal or to dismiss his theological perspective as simply political propaganda. Nevertheless, in this commentary I strive to avoid an anachronistic reading of an ancient book in light of contemporary western views and sentiments. My goal, rather, is to read the text sympathetically...." *RWK*

A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming. By Walter Brueggemann (Eerdmans, $32). This is a reprint in one volume of a two-volume work originally published as part of the International Theological Commentary. B. wrote a new introduction that surveys the current state of Jeremiah studies. Otherwise it is vintage B.: a plurality of methodological approaches and scintillating connections of the biblical and modern worlds. *RWK*

Handbook of Biblical Chronology. Revised Edition. By Jack Finegan (Hendrickson, $34.95). Finegan provides an introduction to how the ancients construed time and the calendar and then leads the reader through the chronological problems of both the Old and New Testaments, beginning with Abraham and giving specific attention to the life of Jesus. First published in 1964 (F. is now 90 years old!), this handbook provides 196 tables and detailed introductions to such early chronographers as Josephus and Eusebius. Along the way one learns about the Egyptian and Babylonian calendars, the calendar at Qumran, and the Roman calendar. *RWK*

The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah. By Gershon Galil (Brill, $65.50). This is a masterful study of the chronology of ancient Israel in the monarchical period that takes full account of the 115 chronological references in the Book of Kings *and* the twenty inconsistencies in this chronology (e.g. did Hezekiah become king in 726 (1 Kgs 18:1) or in 715 (1 Kgs 18:13?). G. reviews and criticizes in detail all of his predecessors (including Thiele's and Albright's widely used chronologies) and reconstructs a convincing new chronology. He reconciles 90% of the biblical and extrabiblical data on the basis of six clear and simple principles, including some coregencies not explicitly documented in the Bible. Especially useful are his tables which correlate year by year what is going on in Judah, Israel, and the Ancient Near East, and Appendix B, which lists all 166 chronological items in the Bible and from ancient inscriptions that must be considered by the modern historian. The research here is in a much narrower field than the Handbook by Finegan above and the approach more innovative and up to date. If you do not understand terms like antedating and postdating, however, Finegan is a helpful place to start. *RWK*

The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 5: Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach. Edited by Leander E. Keck et al. (Abingdon, $60). This is the fourth of seven volumes planned for the Old Testament and the apocrypha in the NIB. As is true with the other volumes, the exegete assigned to each book is also responsible for the homiletical and theological reflections at the end of each major pericope. The cast of commentators is again stellar, beginning with Professor Richard J. Clifford, S. J., who wrote the introduction to wisdom literature and who is preparing a commentary on Proverbs in another series. The other commentators in order are: Raymond C. Van Leeuwen (Christian Reformed Church in North America), W. Sibley Towner (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], Renita J. Weems (African Methodist Episcopal Church), Michael Kolarcik, S.J., and James L. Crenshaw (Baptist). The absence of Lutherans in this volume is a reminder that Lutheran theology has historically paid insufficient attention to wisdom literature and has much to learn from it. It's hard for me to imagine why a pastor or a church library would pass up this wonderful series. *RWK*

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Preaching Helps

First Sunday in Advent—The Transfiguration of Our Lord, Series A



Flesh? The Word Became Flesh?

Yes, that's what John says, and that's what "incarnation" means. So C. S. Lewis, someplace or other years ago, could say, "God likes matter, since God after all invented it." We could say that God likes bodies, since God of course invented them. "I believe," Luther wrote, "that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses...." Our contributors this Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season could not agree more, and they do so without benefit of prior mutual consultation.

Both sets of materials (one of our authors wrote up Advent-Christmas, the other reflects on Epiphany) seem to emphasize the body, the body Jesus received or became in Mary's womb and the many bodies of our own existence: my personal body (and yours) and then the varied bodies of which we are "members": bodies like our church body, a student body, or the body politic. God's coming in the flesh impacts them all.

In the preface to his book, *Embodiment* (Augsburg, 1978), James B. Nelson quotes John 1:14 and comments that "the embodiment of God in Jesus Christ is, in faith's perception, God's decisive and crucial self-disclosure." And a few pages later he cites the oft-quoted observation of anthropologist Mary Douglas that "Just as it is true that everything symbolizes the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolizes everything else." That means that our attitudes towards our own physical body are a reliable indicator of our attitudes towards society as a "body" of people. Nelson was concerned to write a fresh Christian word about sexuality in a time of increasing sexual freedom and sexual confusion. His agenda was to produce what he called

a "sexual theology" to parallel feminist theology or liberation theology or black theology. His program is not narrowly focused on the right or wrong of various kinds of genital sexual activity but on larger questions of what it means that God has made us male and female, embodied persons redeemed by an embodied Logos.

Martin Luther, C. S. Lewis, James Nelson, and others think of creation and salvation not only individualistically or spiritualistically but corporately. And of course "corporate" comes from the Latin *corpus* which means "body." It is hard to forget in this context that the words of institution in Latin are *Hoc est corpus meum.* So the Logos was embodied and the embodied Logos all through his embodied pilgrimage connected with other bodies, and every-body who met him was touched by healing and saving power. And at the end he summed up the whole journey and the climax of the journey with his word connected to plain brown bread, "This is my body—for you."

Other voices have said that forgetfulness of the body is a kind of dis-memberment, and that is an ugly word, a shocking and pain-filled word. And re-membering, as in doing things "in remembrance of me," is healing and joyous.

From the beginning in many and various ways the body of Christian people has repeatedly rejected the idea that matter is evil and bodies are bad while the soul or the spirit is good. Of course, the reason for the repeated rejection is the continuous flirtation with a view called variously docetic or gnostic or spiritualizing.

Our writers in this issue offer healthy reflections on the full-bodied texts of the season. **Barbara Finley-Shea** is a Luther Seminary grad who for eight years served a two-point parish, with one point in Minnesota and the other in Iowa. She is now pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran in Lyle, Minnesota. She and husband Keith have two children. She writes of her children that their "questions, quarrels and quirks keep my body and brain looking at the domestic side of theology," making her feel like a kind of clerical Erma Bombeck. She says she has developed a kind of "housewife model of ministry. That is, if I don't do it, it doesn't get done."

She certainly got the job done for us. She has taken "pilgrimage," that wonderful metaphor for the lifelong movement of our bodies, as her theme. Along the way, in the midst of many other strong phrases, she evokes the image of birth in a barn with all the odors of the stable and muses about manure on the bottom of one's sandals and how all of us find ourselves walking in that stuff from time to time, as we glide along or trudge along on our journeys.

And our second writer is **Peter Rehwaldt**, who told me how he was struck by the sensuality of the readings. They are filled with smells and textures, with weights and heft and sights and sounds. He says, "I have tried to follow this incarnational exegetical path, letting the senses of the biblical writers and my own senses blend together."

After graduating from LSTC in 1989, Peter served as assistant pastor in Ferguson, Missouri (with Sam Roth), as interim pastor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, Kansas, and as pastor of Ruskin Heights Lutheran in Kansas City, Missouri. At the present time Peter is in a doctoral program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California ("my fair city"). The focus of his research is how the presence of children in worship can or should affect the way preachers preach.

Both Barbara and Peter have their feet firmly on God's good earth, and they both seem to me to be people who take the time to smell the roses and the manure. And they hear both birdsong and cries of anguish. They sense all that in scripture and in their own human environments, and they know how to connect the stories of people today with the big story that God has been writing over the centuries. I thank them for their work with the texts and textures and with all the stories of our many-storeyed universe.

Back in seminary days (I graduated long before Barbara and Peter) I read a book called *Our Common Life in the Body of Christ*, by an English theologian named Lionel Thornton. He is the first one who drew my attention to the wonderful line of St. Paul in 1 Cor 6:13, "the body is for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body." Thornton wrote of the way theologians and preachers easily emphasize the first half of that saying, and how easily we neglect the good news in that second half. "The Lord is for the body." For my body and for yours. And for our "corporate" lives, in school and town and city and church. God gave the Son and the Son still gives his body for our bodies.

Thanks to Barbara and Peter, and best wishes to all you who have the privilege of publicly embodying the Logos afresh in your words in the great season of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany.

Yours,

Robert H. Smith, *Editor of Preaching Helps*
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
2770 Marin Avenue
Berkeley, California 94708

Itinerary for Advent/ Christmas

As Christians the pilgrimage of Pentecost is our life-long journey, but during this season of Advent/Christmas, we are especially aware of being on the road, on the move, and on the receiving end of things. Our travels this season begin with Psalm 122 as our feet join those of the Jewish pilgrims standing on the steps of the Jerusalem temple, chanting joyous prayers of thanksgiving and peace. In our six weeks together we will share the types of adventures that all long-term travel companions come to know, love, hate, fear, expect, and be surprised by.

A word to the savvy traveler:
Do not fasten your seat belt!
Do not remain seated!
Please refrain from panic! If the lights go out, if you lose sight of your guide, your companions, or if you think you are lost or alone, *wait patiently and call for help. You will be rescued. Guaranteed.*

Here is your road map for stops along the way.

First Sunday of Advent: *People of pilgrimage—On our feet and on our knees*
Second Sunday of Advent: *People of pilgrimage—Unique and united*
Third Sunday of Advent: *People of pilgrimage—Redemption by reversal*
Fourth Sunday of Advent: *People of pilgrimage—Expect the unexpected*
Christmas Eve: *People of pilgrimage—Witness of the witless*
Christmas Day: *People of pilgrimage—Sing of Our Savior (or S.O.S.)*
First Sunday after Christmas: *People of pilgrimage—Rescue and redemption*
Second Sunday after Christmas: *People of pilgrimage—Hope in our hearts*

First Sunday in Advent November 29, 1998

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

Pilgrim people on our feet and on our knees

First Reading
Psalm 122 was sung on the steps of the Jerusalem temple by Jews on pilgrimage. This is the joyful song of arrival, "Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem" (v. 2). In other words, We are here at last! in the place we have longed to be.

In the Isaiah reading, the people are on their feet, walking "in the light of the Lord!" (v. 5). This arrival day is both destination and process. While chapter 1 lays out the depravity of the people of Judah and Jerusalem, so that the insincerity of their worship wearies God, chapter 2 is a vision of hopefulness of how life will be "in the days to come" (v. 2). With the city's restoration will come cosmic changes as well.

The two main themes of Isaiah, judgment and hope, come out in these first two chapters. The prosperity that Judah had come to trust must be stripped away for the people to trust in God alone.

In Romans Paul rouses the dozing pilgrims from their sleeping bags with the sound of his bugle; "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep... the night is far gone, the day is near" (vv. 11, 12). In other words, Let's get to our feet and be the people we are called to be in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Watch the skies for signs of flash floods (Mt 24:38, 39). In fact, while on your journey be alert for signs of any kind of danger. You are always in unknown territory, so keep your wits about you; be ever watchful

(v. 42). Keep your cell phone handy and stay in constant contact with the Father, so that you will "be ready for the Son of Man, coming at an unexpected hour" (v. 44).

Pastoral Reflections

My first faith pilgrimage was attending the National Lutheran Youth Gathering in 1973 at Houston, Texas. While I would not have called it a pilgrimage at the time, looking back at the experience now I see that it was. I had to leave my home and had to come together with other pilgrims in order to learn something new about God, to grow in my faith and to see with new eyes, to feel with a new heart what it means to be the church, to be connected to other pilgrims of faith.

The theme that year fits well with the theme of today's readings; it was "With Eyes Wide Open." My eyes, as well as my heart, were opened to a fresh awareness of God's presence with us, with us as individuals, but also and especially with us as a body, the Body of Christ. While I no longer remember the workshops I attended, the sermons of our worship services, or the name of the cute boy in the room next to ours, what remains as fresh a quarter of a century later as it did at that moment was the experience of praying the Lord's Prayer together in the Astrodome at the end of our evening worship.

My pilgrimage of 1,000 miles brought me to one "ah-ha" moment that remains still a pivotal memory. This pilgrimage led me, and tens of thousands like me, not to the temple steps of Jerusalem but to the nose-bleed section of the Astrodome, where our chant was not Psalm 122 but the Lord's Prayer. Hearing our voices blend, asking in unison for God's care and deliverance, submitting together our wills to God's will, I heard that night in our prayer overtones, as when a choir sings in perfect harmony. And in that moment, for all my youthful immaturity, I sensed that we were more when we were together than we could ever be when we were apart. I sensed God's presence with us as we prayed, holding us, binding us together. I felt connected to something, Someone larger than myself, felt awe and wonder and knew in that moment that together in Christ Jesus we could, as a body, do anything the Lord called us to do.

So keep alert, pilgrims! Stay connected to our Guide, so that when we're called to move out or move on, you'll be ready!
BF-S

Second Sunday in Advent
December 6, 1998

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

Pilgrim people unique and united

First Reading

Psalm 72 speaks of the works that our king will do though the gift of justice that God will give him (v. 1). In that justice the king will serve all, without special consideration to those of power. There will be a global blessing uniting all nations and people by this king who will be guided by the Lord (v. 17).

Isaiah 11 looks to the future for hope that one day the hunter and the hunted will not merely co-exist, but will seek out each other's presence and dwell together in genuine, not negotiated, peace (vv. 6-8). The unity of people will be permanent, not only until the next dispute, for disputes and wrangling will be no more, made possible by this righteous one who will come from the stump of Jesse.

In Romans we hear of a genuine diver-

sity of voices: weak and strong, Gentile and Jewish. The goal is for "you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus," "so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (vv. 5, 13).

There is great sense of immediacy in John's preaching that "the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 3:2). His words were both warning and welcome and discourage us from merely being bench warmers, but draw us into the game! There are no special considerations for the outwardly pious. There is one measuring standard for all: repentance and the fruit it bears (v. 8).

Pastoral Reflections

Multicultural issues and concerns are at last reaching the region of the Midwest where I live. People who once worked here seasonally as migrant farm laborers are now settling here, buying homes and becoming permanent members of the communities. With good economic prospects available for jobs, many people are coming in hopes of creating a better life for themselves and their children. Some of these people speak in the tongues of Africa; some speak in the tongues of Asia; some speak in the tongues of Central or South America. All speak the language of hope.

More and more we discover the uniqueness of our neighbors as we meet them on the streets, in our schools and hopefully in our churches. And through our faith we also discover the common and shared unity that we have in Jesus Christ, whose life was given for all.

While the diversity that Paul was addressing in Romans 15 was diversity between those who followed strict dietary restrictions and those who followed the Jewish observance of certain days and those who did not, yet the import of his message speaks equally to us in this culture, who are embroiled in the battle over bilingual education and community life.

Paul admonishes, "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 2, 5).

Some in our society would artificially make one voice, while true unity is by Jesus Christ, not by the tongue in which we speak. On our own we can not create unity. We need only to live the oneness created by Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. To deny this reality is to make a god of our pet peeves!

As pilgrims of faith God leads us to people, places, and positions we could not envision, not even in our wildest dreams! BF-S

Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 1998

Luke 1:47-55
Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-10
Luke 3:7-18

Pilgrim people redemption by reversal

First Reading

Some scholars say Luke 1:47-55 is actually Elizabeth's song, and like Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1-10) is more rightly the song of an older woman who has seen more and experienced more of what the song is about. It is a song about reversals, the downfall of the arrogant and the elevation of the down-and-out. Justice is finally coming home to roost upon the unjust.

The Isaiah text envisions restoration of Judah and Zion through divine blessing upon the land and the people. There will be reversals that can only happen by God's doing; the weak hands, the feeble knees, and the fearful hearts will be strengthened. The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall hear. People and all of nature will be changed in wonderful and life-giving ways!

There are five imperative verbs in the James reading, giving it a sense of urgency and importance as advice to the early church. The writer wants the people to be patient and he wants it right now!

John the Baptist speaks in Luke 3 of the redemption by reversal that is coming soon. Using Isaiah he quoted, "Every valley shall be filled, every mountain made low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (vv. 5, 6).

Preparation for the reversal involves rectifying the injustices of our lives, in a word, repentance. Thus John proclaimed the "good news to the people."

Pastoral Reflections

Humor is all about reversal, the upset of the upstart, the overthrow of the arrogant, the lifting up of the lowly, the triumph of the underdog. Humor sings today through the song of the Magnificat with its many reversals, accomplished only by the grace of God! Whether sung by Mary or Elizabeth, the singer is probably laughing the laughter of Sarah by the end of her song, remembering the "promise God made to our ancestors," Abraham and Sarah.

Reversals are joyous good news to those who will be receiving but are painful good news to those who will be losing. We never consider losing to be good news, and yet how else can God reach us sometimes? Preparing our Christmas gift of a Savior, come to deliver us from ourselves, God seeks to draw our attention to the greatness of the gift. But how do you get the attention of a people who have everything?

You take it all away that they may see God. And to the people who have nothing, you give them everything that they may see God.

Reversals on the losing end are not a pretty sight, and yet there, too, is grace, joy, and yes, folks, even new life! Jesus told us that God makes the "sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45) (I think that includes tornadoes), so when a tragedy happens, it isn't necessarily a sign of God's judgment, but rather God's message of good news can speak to us, even when we're on the losing end of reversals.

At the end of March this year several of the most powerful tornadoes ever remembered for this area hit the communities of Comfrey and St. Peter, Minnesota. Sixty-two miles of farmland and towns were devastated as swirling winds left a trail of splintered homes, twisted trees, and land littered with leftovers of earthly goods.

A group of us from the Lutheran churches in our community went to St. Peter to assist with the town's clean-up, along with thousands of other volunteers from many other communities. What we saw when we arrived literally left our mouths agape. Homes looked as though someone had taken a saw and cut them in half, leaving them as huge doll houses, open, exposed, and completely ruined. Farm fields were strewn with cars, chunks of broken lumber, papers, and any number of broken household items.

Having lost everything of earthly value, save their lives, how did this devastated community respond? As we drove along the streets, we read the signs that the town's people had painted on the remaining standing walls of their homes, "Thank you for

helping!" "God bless You!" "For Rent: Nice Apt.—A Little Breezy!"

The good news, as it approaches, may not always look like a welcomed guest. But God's redemption always has at its heart the giving of new life! Sometimes our lives must be stripped of their clutter, so that we can see not only what we really need, but also what we already possess, the holy presence of God with us, Immanuel!

Pack your sack, pilgrim. It's time to move out. We've got more territory to cover. BF-S

Fourth Sunday in Advent December 20, 1998

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Pilgrim people expect the unexpected

First Reading

Psalm 80 is a plea, an appeal to God to be the protective, guiding Shepherd that Israel needs in order to be restored, not only into God's good grace, but rebuilt. It ties in to the first lesson in which God is trying to shepherd King Ahaz, but Ahaz won't listen.

Isaiah 7. There is a political/military threat brewing against Judah, and the Lord invites King Ahaz to seek a sign from God, but Ahaz will not ask for God's help. Isaiah is angered at Ahaz's indifference to God, but still offers to give Ahaz the sign from God that the danger will pass. The sign is that a child will be born, by "the young woman," possibly a member of Ahaz's own household, and his name will be the sign of God's presence, Immanuel, "God is with us."

In Romans Paul reminds the reader that Jesus, as a descendent of David, was of royal blood lines, but the irony is that he came humbly and to be a servant.

Matthew 1:18-25 is a birth narrative in which the mother is referred to but never makes an appearance. It's all from Joseph's point of view and what God is doing in and through Joseph to bring about the safe birth of Jesus.

Joseph's plans are changed twice in this short story, first when he learns that Mary is carrying a child that is not his, then again when he has the dream in which the angel of the Lord instructs him to "take Mary as your wife" (v. 20).

Pastoral Reflections

Many of the best known comedians of this century have been people of Jewish ancestry. What is it that makes for their comedy? Could it be their ethnic history? Could it be... scripture? Much of scripture is narrative, stories about life, and stories about life are stories about the human condition, and the human condition can be simultaneously horrific and hilarious.

Ever since God tried to make a spouse for Adam and kept coming up with animals (see Gen 2:18-20), God has had fun with the business of matchmaking, the original yenta. God's playfulness shows up in this match-made-in-heaven for Joseph and Mary, too.

One of the lessons of humor is that things are often not as they appear to be and humor lies in our trying to square the "what is" with "what we expect." And so we do a double-take, just as Joseph did. God's sense of humor calls Joseph to do something that went against his original sense of propriety.

We hear the echo of God's laughter ringing out through the ages in the humor of this marriage story, as we heard it in the many other biblical marriage stories, with the odd pairings of couples, the surprises and the funny and tender courtships.

At Mary's telling Joseph about her visitation by the angel and resulting pregnancy, Joseph was thinking, "You think you have a woman figured out and then she surprises you with something like this!" Joseph thought he knew what had happened. No one had to draw him a picture! And yet that's exactly what God had to do.

God drew Joseph a picture to show him that reality as he envisioned it was not the only way God could work. And after God drew Joseph the big picture, he drew Joseph, himself, into it.

The incarnation is a bigger picture than we can imagine or than we even dare hope for. We are blessed that it's also a picture God draws for us over and over and it's also a picture God invites us to enter.

Surprise! BF-S

Christmas Eve
December 24, 1998

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

Pilgrim people witness of the witless

First Reading

Psalm 96 invites us to sing to the Lord a new song! We praise and worship God, for the Lord will come to judge and bring justice.

The image in Isaiah 9 is a scene after a bloody war when the oppressor is defeated and the clothing of those who died can be burned. In this child born to us God has broken the yoke of the people's burden, the bar across their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressors.

The decree in Luke 2 to go for the census seemed like bad timing, but in the midst of a forced migration comes the good news, "I am bringing you good news of great joy!"

Pastoral Reflections

God sent the beautiful, singing angels, bearing the news of Mary's bearing Jesus, to shepherds, who bore the stigma of low social status and the burden of low economic status and who perhaps bore personal struggles that kept them in an occupation designated for low-lifes.

We ask at such a conundrum, "What does this mean?"

It was to show us that God in Jesus identifies with all of us, particularly at those times when we bear the weight of our own sins, and the burdens of life. Perhaps the good news came to and through the lowly shepherds, so that we can freely bare ourselves before God, trusting that in our nakedness and vulnerability we will be neither rejected nor ridiculed, for Jesus himself will bear with us, bear our sins and deliver us to new life.

How could this good news message be conveyed any other way, save coming from the down-and-out shepherds? God's Word of grace and truth could not have been spoken any more eloquently by a well-dressed prince or priest than it was by the excited shepherds, scared witless, but still witnessing to what they had seen and heard.

In Mary's unadorned delivery room, in the lowly shepherds' adoration, God wrapped the world's Christmas present in packaging that befit the nature of the gift, love on our level. The sports and entertainment idols of today may have fans who admire them for their larger-than-life lives, but the incarnation reaches us in ways that our idols never can, precisely because the baby Jesus came smaller-than-life and meets us where we live.

A congregation member told me that while she usually doesn't remember ser-

mons much after church is over, one of my Christmas Eve sermons several years ago touched her where she lived. In that sermon I spoke about the smells of the stable that would have filled Jesus' nostrils. A stable of animals will naturally have a warm, earthly smell of manure. Sometimes manure in barns can get deep, and sometimes it gets deep in our lives, too. We may find ourselves stepping in it and suffocating in the stink.

But Jesus knows that smell; he was born into it. It doesn't drive him away from us, nor keep him from helping us shovel it out.

And so our expectations of God are fulfilled in unexpected ways, including a young woman unexpectedly expecting the greatest expectation, Jesus, whose nativity was witnessed by witless shepherds, and whose witness comes still to us, who in our own life pilgrimages are sometimes frightened out of our own wits, but who are nonethe-less called to be witnesses of God's great redemption reversal, witnesses of what God has done, is doing, and will do for us all! Amen! BF-S

Christmas Day
December 25, 1998

Psalm 98
Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-12
John 1:1-14, 16

Pilgrim people Sing of Our Savior (S.O.S.)

First Reading

"Wake up, wake up, you sleepy heads, get up, get up, get out of bed"—so the song "Red Red Robin" begins. And so our Isaiah reading begins, "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion!" (v. 1). "Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem" (v. 2). Get to your feet, pilgrims, and rejoice! The night of darkness is over; our messenger of good news is here! It is time to "break forth into singing!" (v. 9)

The good news calls forth a response from our hearts, our souls, our voices (Psalm 98). Even nature and the sea creatures, the world and all who live in it, the floods and hills clap their hands and sing together for joy! They sing for joy because of the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth with righteousness and equity.

He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being... (Hebrews 1). You are the image of your father. We will wear out like clothing, and like clothing we will "change," like the faded glory of out-of-date styles. We don't last forever, but God is the same, whose years will never end.

John's prologue is some of the most beautiful poetry in scripture. John speaks to our hearts. Who among us has not received "grace upon grace"? (v. 16). The pericope lesson stops at v. 14, so as not to include v. 15, but the reading doesn't feel complete unless we include v. 16.

Pastoral Reflections
A few years ago the movie "She's Having a Baby" came out as a light-hearted look at the life of a young man moving through his college years, entering the work force, marrying and journeying through his wife's first pregnancy. Many of the scenes of his discovery of what pregnancy means were humorous, but by the end of the film the young man's youthful self-centeredness has "worn out," "perished," "changed," and in its place is a new awareness of the meaning of life and his purpose for being.

One line in the film reveals the young man's transformation from being the center of his own universe to focusing instead upon the new life about to arrive. Reflecting on the event about to happen that will change his life forever, he says, "I realize now that I have received far more than I have ever given."

Isn't that what John's Gospel tells us? The coming of the Word into our universe, into our lives, the breaking in of the infant, incarnate Word opens our drowsy eyes and rouses our lethargic hearts to an awareness that "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (v. 16). We have all received far more than we have ever given. When we tally up our scores, when we count the presents under the tree with our name on them, there will always be more that we have received than given.

We can not outlast, outlive, or outgive our God, whose mercy and love, whose creativity in finding ways to reach us never ends.

It is from the great storehouse of God's gracious giving that we ourselves draw what we need, so that we may share the fullness of God's grace with the world. BF-S

First Sunday after Christmas
December 27, 1998

Psalm 148
Isaiah 63:7-9
Hebrews 2:10-18
Matthew 2:12-23

Pilgrim people—rescue and redemption

First Reading
Matthew's narrative of Jesus' birth and early life, including chapter one and today's reading, contain references to five dreams through which God spoke to Joseph and the magi: (1) Joseph is told in a dream to marry Mary; (2) the magi are told to take an alternate route home, avoiding King Herod; (3) Joseph is told to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for safety when Herod plans to kill all the baby boys; (4) Joseph is told to return from Egypt; (5) Joseph is warned in a dream not to return to his home area in Judea, and settled then in Nazareth.

The dreams function both as means to show one of the ways God speaks to us and also to remind us that however clever we think we are, we can not stop God's plan to rescue and redeem.

Hebrews 2: "...should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings." Jesus shares our flesh and blood and in the absurdly unjust accusations and crucifixion that Jesus endured, he joins us in the horrible sufferings we find no words to explain or fathom.

Pastoral Reflections
Jesus was hunted from the time of his birth until his death, sought both by those who wished to adore him and by those who wished to annihilate him. Hearing of Jesus' natal star, King Herod knew that this child was not

just another ordinary king, and he inquired of the Jewish religious leaders as to where the Messiah was to be born. Rather than rejoicing, Herod and oddly "all Jerusalem with him were frightened." Evidently the people felt as threatened at the Messiah's birth as Herod, who knew it was God that he was trying to thwart.

For a comparable story, look at Esther 4. In this story of an earlier planned genocide, the king was duped into ordering the deaths of all the Jews, while King Herod deliberately ordered the deaths of all the infant Jewish boys. In both stories God works deliverance through God's timing and the careful listening and obedience of God's faithful servants.

We all have our own faith stories of God sending deliverance to us in time of need, whether as a rescue on the road, help in a medical emergency, or someone coming to visit at just the right moment in our despair.

In the horrible deaths of the infants, a death Jesus escapes for the time being, their mothers are left wailing inconsolably. Their cries will become the echoes of the wailing of the women at Jesus' crucifixion and tomb. While Jesus' birth was sung by the angels, his birth also stung the proud Herod, caught up in the imagination of his own heart. The response of the lowly to his birth was joy, while the response of the proud was envy and fear.

As human as ourselves, Jesus faced not only being victimized, but as he grew in stature with God and with humanity, as he realized his identity and came to terms with his power, Jesus himself faced the temptation to turn the tables to his own advantage (see Mt 4:1-11). Jesus could have returned the favor upon those who injured or insulted him. He could have used his power to victimize those who sought his life. But having become like us in every respect, Jesus became a merciful and faithful high priest.

The proud, legends in their own minds, and the lowly, too humbled in their own minds to even think of themselves as created in God's image, are both ransomed by Jesus' sacrifice; "because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (Heb 2:18).

The growing violence in our society and the larger world gives us the imperative to share our faith with those to whom Jesus is a stranger, to "recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us... according to the abundance of his steadfast love" (Isa 63:7).

The world needs us to show them Jesus because it is Jesus who meets us when we are tempted to do away with others, to do away with ourselves, and to do away with God's claim upon our lives. He meets us in our struggles because he's already been there. "It was no messenger or angel, but his presence that saved them, in his love and pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Isa 63:7).
BF-S

Second Sunday after Christmas January 3, 1999

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

Pilgrim people—Hope in our hearts

First Reading

The psalm writer praises God for God's work, things that only God can do, works of nature, creative and beautiful, awesome and powerful. The imagery is poetic and dramatic. God hurling down hail like crumbs, God making it so cold that no one can bear it, God alone having the power to melt that cold by God's word, God healing the brokenhearted, and binding the inner wounds of life (v. 3). Verse 10 tells us that God's delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor in the speed of a runner, but rather God's pleasure comes in the people's recognition of who is behind the beauty and majesty of it all, in the people's trust in God.

Verses 19 and 20 tell us that it's the people of Israel who recognize that it is God who does all these things and it's the people of Israel who know God by God's ordinances and statutes. In other words, to know God is both recognizing the divine presence at work in life and recognizing God at work in our lives through the word, the word that God has given Israel.

For an exiled people Jeremiah 31 is more than good news. It is great news! This is a message of hope!—hope in which the people can trust, for it is not a mere politician making promises, but it is God who promises to bring back together the people, the blind, the lame, those with child, the remnant, a "great company."

And when that time comes their sorrow will be exchanged for gladness, mourning exchanged for joy. Great joy and exaltation at the redemption by our God, our shepherd (v. 10).

The Ephesians passage, too, is good news for those who struggle, reminding us that redemption is ours now in the forgiveness of our sins, but that there is another redemption coming, too. In that redemption, coming like the birth of Jesus "in the fullness of time" (v. 10), God will again gather, but this time not only the remnant of Israel, but "all things" (v. 10) on earth and in heaven. And the pledge, the seal, the insurance that this is true and will come to pass is the baptismal "seal of the promised Holy Spirit" (v. 13).

Pastoral Reflections

Donna, our church secretary at Our Savior's, is a little older than myself and a lot wiser. Before starting the task of writing these reflections on the Advent and Christmas texts, I asked her what she listens for when she's hearing the season's texts read and what she listens for in the sermons. "I listen for hope because there's *so much hope* in the scriptures at Christmas!" she told me. *So much hope.* (The emphasis was in her voice as she said it.)

Our scriptures today are not only about hope, they *are* hope; they deliver hope. Hearing them, our mourning is turned into joy!

Our world searches for signs to hope in. We channel-surf life, searching, searching for something, someone in whom to anchor our hopes. Cynicism, the form despair often takes in our world today, has no hope, and a cynical people are people with no hope.

Observing Princess Diana's funeral service on television in September of 1997, I listened for hope, listened for God's Word of grace to be spoken into the tragedy. But

aside from the scriptures and the closing prayer, there was no Word spoken to counterbalance the many words of anger and grief, spoken eloquently and passionately by Diana's brother. Would that the priests officiating had had the courage to proclaim with eloquence and passion God's good news, "set forth in Christ, as [God's] plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him..." and that God's stamp upon us, the sign of God's pledge, more trustworthy than any waxed seal of human nobility, is that believing in him, we "were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph 1:10, 13).

One of the television commentators at the funeral dismissed the need for a funeral sermon, saying that "Funeral sermons are mostly just a series of platitudes." The dictionary defines platitudes as "dull," "banal," "trite," "insipid remarks." Hardly the words a funeral sermon calls for, hardly the words of scripture, hardly the word called for by life's pain and challenges.

Scripture speaks more boldly than in platitudes. Scripture and the witness of those who have lived a lifetime trusting in God and wrestling with God both testify to what God can do. Jeremiah knew what God can do. Jeremiah experienced God's rescue of him from death and from adventures that rival any of the "Indiana Jones" movies!

We go through life listening for hope. We listen to hear what God has done. We listen to hear what God is doing. We listen to hear what God will do. We listen for hope and we look for signs. We are always on the lookout for signs of God's presence along the way on our pilgrimage of faith.

Thanks for being my travel companion! Adios, fellow pilgrims! I hope our paths cross again soon! BF-S

The Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 1999

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Isaiah 60:1-6
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

First Reading

There is pain between the lines of these readings, pain that fills the community with a sense of brokenness, of fear, of questioning, of doubt. The prophet sees the darkness over the land and the people, notices the absence of sons and daughters, and hears the other nations mocking the children of Sarah and Abraham. The psalmist hears the cries of the weak, knows the hunger of the needy, and sees the poverty of the poor. In Ephesians the writer knows the confusion and lack of understanding of those to whom this letter will come. Finally, Matthew tells of Herod's fright (and the fright of all Jerusalem!), recounts Herod's conniving and deceit, and repeats to the hearers the warning of danger given to the wise men. There is pain here, just under the surface.

But there is something else here... something so precious it belongs under royal lock and key, something so potent and so powerful that you can smell it even through the darkness: frankincense. According to Pliny, the owners of the ancient perfume workshops in Alexandria demanded that their workers do their labor dressed in special aprons, masks, and hair nets, then strip down completely before leaving the premises. Frankincense, used to mix certain sacred ointments, was so precious that it was kept locked in the Temple treasury.

The aroma of frankincense heralds a powerful royal announcement. Matthew

crafts the announcement as a question, put in the mouths of the wise men: "Where is the child... king of the Jews?" Where is the new king who drew the wise men away from their own lands to pay homage? Herod, a tyrant who will let no one—not even his own family—get in the way of his power, is clearly no king worth honoring.

A light has come, says the prophet, to banish the darkness, to gather the nations, to guide home the exiles and the lost, and to help the Israelites to see once more, to be radiant once more, to rejoice once again. A king has come, says the psalmist, that we may have justice and righteousness and peace. Gospel—good news—has come, says the letter-writer, a revelation of grace given not just to one nation but to all.

In this world of pain, with this unexpectedly rich aroma of royalty and this startling announcement of grace, lives are abundantly changed. It's a family reunion in Israel; so joyous a party that all the neighbors are coming, too, with gifts and songs to join in the celebration. "Arise, shine," says the prophet. "Don't just sit there. There's a celebration coming!" There is a sense of energy, of bursting forth, of newness and life. God's boundless riches, says the letter to the Ephesians, are being poured out for you in a revelation that gives boldness and confidence, that gives new sight and understanding. Joy overwhelms the wise men, and gifts are poured out on a stable floor.

A celebration is coming, indeed. Can't you smell it?

Pastoral Reflections

What does your parish, your ministry *smell* like? Seminary did not teach me to think about the aromas of ministry—but I have come to treasure them.

You know what I'm talking about, if you pause for a moment to think about it: the aroma of pine at Christmas that welcomes guests as they enter the narthex, even before they have entered the sanctuary... the mix of colognes and perfumes that linger in a meeting room for hours after the meeting has ended... the antiseptic smell of a hospital waiting room, mingled with fear and doubt... the aroma of honest sweat on a parish workday, as workers of all shapes and sizes paint, clean, mow, rake, wash, wipe, and generally make things new once more... the smell of pork steaks, bratwurst, and brisket at the church BBQ.... Do you know the scents of your parish?

Neighborhoods have their smells, too—as individual as colognes and perfumes. In the last three years, I have gone from the aroma of freshly mown lawns in Kansas City to diesel buses and trucks in inner city Oakland to the salty aroma of the San Francisco Bay, just fifty yards from my front door in Alameda. The markets of Chinatown in Oakland have a different scent from Kansas City's endless array of barbecue joints. Walking down a nearby busy street in Alameda, I am greeted by a dizzying panoply of aromas, each with its own promise calling out to me: pizza from a corner pub... hot fresh bagels... someone's new permanent in the hair salon... oil from a mechanic's garage.... And *your* neighborhood—what does it smell like?

Smells carry with them a promise—a hint of something larger, grander, more impressive yet to come. They draw us closer, inviting us to absorb them into our very selves. The smell of fresh paint announces a new beginning, and fresh pastries almost will themselves off the shelf into waiting mouths by their scent.

And frankincense and myrrh? So familiar in the royal courts, and so seemingly out of place in a humble backwater like Bethlehem. The smell of sheep—now that fits—but the smell of riches, of wealth, of royalty? Not in Bethlehem, surely? But yes, it is

precisely in Bethlehem that we smell the royal fragrance. And this surprising scent announces that this child—Jesus—is the messiah.

A pastor I know in the Midwest makes home visits during the week to those who visit her small parish on Sunday morning. Lots of pastors make visits like this, but not many bring a loaf of fresh bread with them. "There's something about the aroma of fresh bread," she said, "that just makes folks smile, no matter how their day, their week, or their life is going at that moment." It's an unexpected scent, a precious gift, and a most powerful ministry.

Another pastor, newly called to his parish, was making his first call on one of his shut-in parishioners, and he was afraid. It began with an unspoken but very real fear for his car ("Can I park it in *that* neighborhood?") and became a fear for his wallet as he neared his destination. He got out of the car, and began to fear for his very person. ("I saw them dealing drugs! Right here in the open! Did they see that I saw? Will they come after me?..."). On top of that, though, was the smell of the place. Outside, sidewalks and alleys that smelled of garbage and urine; inside, no doubt, would be a stuffy apartment, filled with knic-knacks and photos, that reeked of medicinal cleaners or dirty laundry or some other strange and threatening smell. ("How short can I reasonably keep this visit?") As he reached his parishioner's door, however, he hesitated. He sniffed. He sniffed again. "It can't be," he thought. "It must be my imagination." He knocked, and when the door opened, he almost fell over. He no longer dreaded the visit, and his fear ceased to rule him. It was the smell of chocolate chip cookies, fresh from the oven. An unexpected scent, a precious gift, and a most powerful ministry.

The smell of pine boughs in the narthex, bread brought by a visitor, or cookies baked by a host compete with the more painful aromas in our lives. Unlike the pain, though, these scents carry with them the promise of a welcome. "You are valued, esteemed, honored—even before we have come face to face."

That's the promise found at the Eucharist. After the prayers, where the community's pains are poured out for healing, the community shares the peace. Then, from the back, there comes the aroma of freshly baked bread. Forward come the ushers, and the incense of the loaf fills the sanctuary. "This is the body of Christ, broken for you," and one by one, the aroma of promise comes to each. "The blood of Christ, shed for you," and one by one, we partake first of the scent, then of the wine itself.

The prayer of the day puts it well: "Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives...." Lead us in our pain by faith in this surprising announcement made to us, to know the presence that radically changes lives. God is at work here, and a person is changed, a community is changed, a world is changed. There's change in the air—can't you smell it? PR

The Baptism of Our Lord
First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 10, 1999

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

First Reading

These are noisy readings. Everywhere you turn, there are voices. Loud voices, soft voices, confident voices, questioning voices, voices of all kinds.

Matthew gives us John's protestations ("Isn't this backwards?"), Jesus' assurances ("Just go with it"), and that voice from heaven, arriving with the dove ("My son, the beloved"). He didn't have to do that, you know. In Mark and Luke, we hear only the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism. In John's Gospel, we hear John the Baptist recounting the story after the fact, sharing again only the words of the voice from heaven. To Matthew, though, the exchange between John and Jesus is important. The voices matter.

Peter's voice fills the story from Acts—at least the portion of the story given in the lectionary. (Left out of the pericope is God's voice, telling Peter repeatedly to eat what is set before him.) Peter's is the voice of confession: "Now I get it. I've lived according to the law of Moses my whole life, I listened to Jesus day in and day out for years, but it's only now—in the house of this Gentile, this centurion, this devout and God-fearing man named Cornelius—only now that I understand that God shows no partiality...." Here is Peter, who now perceives the world differently after hearing the voice of God. God's love is bigger and the community of God's people is wider than he ever... dreamed?

God's voice fills the reading from Isaiah, trading off with the voice of the prophet. To a people lost in exile comes a familiar voice of old, recounting former deeds and promising new ones. Twice God announces, "I am the LORD," as if to say, "Don't you remember me?" "Thus says the LORD," says Isaiah, and we hear that divine voice echo through our heads. Creator of the heavens? Provider of the earth? Giver of life? We remember that voice. "My glory I give to no other." It sounds like the same voice Moses heard at Mt. Sinai. "New things are about to happen," says the LORD, but "before they spring forth, I tell you of them." The one who turned the tables on Joseph's brothers, the one who surprised the Pharaoh with frogs and boils, the one who brought down Jericho and raised up Esther is at it again: "My chosen servant is here, bringing peace and freedom and life—not by shouting and raising his voice, but with faithfulness and an unstoppable hunger for justice."

My, what a voice. The psalmist can't stop going on about that voice—the *kol YHWH*, the voice of the LORD. Seven times in six verses the psalmist uses that phrase. The voice of the LORD is in the waters and in the trees, in the mountains and in the forests, in the wilderness and in the throne-room. It's a thundering voice, a powerful voice, a voice of splendor, a voice that changes the world. It's a voice that emboldens the psalmist to demand that others raise their voices in tribute. "Ascribe to the LORD. . ." says the poet, for that is what the LORD is due. And in the temple, God's people know it.

God's voice calls forth other voices: the psalmist and the worshippers in the temple, Peter and Cornelius, John and Jesus. God's people are promised strength, promised justice, promised forgiveness, promised peace. My, what a voice!

Pastoral Reflections

And what are the voices that surround you, that fill the ears of your parishioners, that clamor for your attention?

I remember quite vividly the first day of one of my first classes in seminary thirteen years ago. It was New Testament Interpretation with Fred Danker. After calling the roll, he asked his first question: "Who here watches soap operas?" We looked at him, dumbfounded. This is the Danker of Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker fame? He repeated his question again: "Who here watches soap operas? Raise your hands." Hands began to rise, just a sprinkling at first, but then more. "Your parishioners watch them, you know, and if you want to connect with them, you need to watch too."

So, like Fred, I'll repeat my question: What are the voices that surround you?

Try the radio: Garrison Keillor, Bob Costas, Ray Suarez, Jack Buck, Dr. Ruth, Dr. Laura, Dr. Love, Dr. Dean, Dr. Demento, Rush Limbaugh, James Dobson, Click and Clack, Howard Stern, Charles Osgood... and the list goes on. They talk about sports, news, and political commentary, ranging from local to national, in more languages than most of us can identify, let alone speak. What about the proverbial chorus of musical voices: classical, rap, reggae, ska, R & B, techno, rock (in all its flavors, from lite to classic to today's), blues, jazz, country (both classic and young), etc., etc., etc.!

Then, of course, there's TV. Sunday morning pundits of all kinds, game shows, talk shows, morning shows, late night shows, Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers, Power Rangers, all of Fred Danker's soap operas, plus CNN, ESPN, and the rest of what's on cable, pay-per-view, and the satellite dishes. Newspapers raise their voices with headlines (the print version of sound bytes), urging us to read on. We're taken inside Hollywood and inside politics, up close and personal.

Even our cars talk, and I'm not referring to "Your door is open" prerecorded messages. I mean bumper stickers, window stickers, license plates, and all kinds of things hanging from rearview mirrors. Try arranging for a few of the high school youth to slip out of church during the distribution, and have them go through the parking lot recording all the stickers and messages we place on our vehicles for you to read. (One of my favorites: "Bookburners got the library in Alexandria, but they'll never get mine.") Spend the next day walking through the streets of your parish, and do the same thing yourself.

So many voices, and so many of them are aimed at dividing: us from them, the good guys from the bad, the friends from the enemies. Ultimately, these are voices that bring death. You've got to be right, you've got to be on our side, or you'll die. We've got to win, or we'll die. "They" are out to get us, rob us, beat us, kill us.

As I write this in California in June, we just finished an amazing primary election season, with distortions, deceptions, and demonizations galore. When you get this issue in October, we'll be in the midst of the fall campaign season, and I doubt things will be different then. By January, when you are up to your ears in your sermon preparation, the pundits will be hard at work analyzing the "new" Congress which has just begun its session, and probably getting into speculation about the presidential election in 2000 as well. So many voices, so little life, so little love, and so much death.

In the midst of this chorus of death, people are listening for and longing for a new and different voice. It's a voice that makes these other voices seem weak and puny by comparison. It's the voice of one who knows the people who gather to hear it, who loves them, cares for them, and consoles them. It's a voice that calls them to get out of a warm

bed on a cold January Sunday morning and sit on a less than comfortable wooden bench. And it's so compelling a voice, that they come. It's a voice that strengthens them to shake off their confusion and say, "Now I get it." It's the *kol YHWH*.

In his book *Preaching*, Fred Craddock recounts a televised exchange between the poet Carl Sandburg and a reporter. "What, in your opinion, is the ugliest word in the English language?" asks the reporter. Sandburg's answer, as related by Craddock, is a masterpiece of poetic timing, magnified for Craddock's readers by his own observations:

> Mr. Sandburg drew his brow thoughtfully over his face and repeated the phrase, "The ugliest word in the English language." The reporter and television audience waited. Mr. Sandburg gathered his face into a circle of concentration and said slowly, "The ugliest word?" Everyone waited. Mr. Sandburg looked away as if searching the room for a word written somewhere on a wall, pursed his lips and almost mumbled, "Ugliest? The ugliest word?" The reporter and millions continued to lean forward. The pause seemed long, but alive and promising. Mr. Sandburg turned back to the reporter. "The ugliest word," he said, "the ugliest word is [pause] 'exclusive.'" Into a nest of anticipation, built entirely of restraint, he dropped the word, and years later, in the memory of many, it lies there yet, still vivid, fresh, and strong.—Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 167-68.

"I truly understand," says Peter, that God's voice calls for removing barriers, not shoring them up. God calls for reaching out, not pushing away. God calls for life, not death. And God's voice is a compelling, powerful thing.

Right now in the ELCA, we continue to struggle with the issue of homosexuality. On the one hand, we have a churchwide assembly resolution that proclaims that gay men and lesbian women are welcome to participate fully in the lives of our congregations. On the other hand, we have gay and lesbian pastors—some of them quite fine pastors—being removed from their congregations under a separate churchwide policy that demands celibacy from them. Caught between these two conflicting voices, we struggle to hear something new, something that gives life and not death.

More than struggling with an abstract issue, though, we struggle with one another, whatever our sexual orientation and whatever our views on sexuality. Deep down, we Lutherans really believe that God's welcome is what Peter says it is: without partiality. But we get skittish when we are faced with the reality of it. Are gay men welcome to sing hymns during worship in our congregation? Can a lesbian couple have one set of offering envelopes and a picture together in the church directory? Can a gay couple place flowers on the altar and have a prayer of thanksgiving for their wedding anniversary? Can a lesbian woman preach the gospel?

Real flesh and blood bodies (in contrast to abstract issues) make people nervous, even when we know better. All are welcome, we proclaim, but how do we react when something or someone different comes along? What do the ushers do when a street person comes in during the reading of the gospel, dragging his trash bag full of aluminum cans into the pew? What do parents do when their small children noisily ask, "What's that?" in the middle of a quiet prayer? What do pastors do when the acolyte is late in arriving in the sacristy before worship?

Martin Luther, in the preface to the Large Catechism, took pastors and teachers to task for their arrogance: "Most marvelous fellows, to think we can finish learning in one hour what God cannot finish teaching!" In the midst of all the changes in our world

and all the exclusions we practice, God's voice still calls for welcome. "You, my broken and exiled people, you are mine. I have called you, loved you, and sent you to spread this word of life." God spoke through the prophets, God spoke through the real flesh and blood body on the cross, and in our preaching, God speaks through us. My, what a voice.

But just listen to the warfare. How should gays and lesbians be treated? Should there be flags in the chancel? Which hymnal should be used? For whom should we vote? What should be taught in public schools? We have so many ways to divide ourselves from one another, but only one that will succeed in uniting us despite our differences: Easter. Pastor Jane Ralph, a lesbian who was recently removed from the ELCA clergy roster, once described the great banquet feast of Easter as the place where one could see the most unlikely people dancing together. Imagine: Rush Limbaugh dancing with Hillary Clinton.

Thanks, Carl and Jane... and Peter and Fred. Now I get it. PR

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 17, 1999

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

First Reading

Do you see what God is up to here? Do you see, with your eyes and your mind and your heart?

Isaiah could see, and he shared his vision with the exilic community. Here he sits off in Babylon, preaching day in and day out, and what happens? Nothing. He tells God this, and God says, "OK, Isaiah, let's change things a bit. Your task is too small. I want you to be a light not just to Israel, but to the world." God shows Isaiah a vision of what shall come to pass. Kings shall see what God is up to and stand up, honoring these despised, abhorred slaves. Princes shall see, and bow down. Now there's a picture I'd like to see.

Paul could see pretty well also—certainly better than the folks in Corinth. The opening nine verses of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth preface an appeal for unity in that divided congregation. His opening is a subtle plea for the Corinthians to open their eyes. Paul points out God at work in their midst, past, present, and future. Don't you see it? Past tense: You have been called to be saints, and you have been enriched with every spiritual gift. Present tense: You are the church of God, and you are sanctified. I give thanks for you, writes Paul, because you have all you need. There's nothing missing, nothing left out, nothing left to be added. Future tense: God will strengthen you and you will be blameless, because God is faithful.

John's sight wasn't too bad, either. The Gospel records John the Baptist describing what he saw at Jesus' baptism—the Spirit, descending like a dove. "Look" says John to his disciples, pointing out Jesus, "here is the Lamb of God." "Come and see," said Jesus to John, Andrew, and another of the disciples. Seeing matters. It mattered to John the Baptist and his disciples, who saw the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus, the Lamb of God. It mattered to John, Andrew, and another of the disciples, to whom Jesus said "Come and see." They came, they saw, and Andrew brought his brother Peter to have a look as well. Jesus looked him over, and gave him a new name: Rock.

Seeing matters to the psalmist, too. God put a new song in my mouth, and "many shall see, and stand in awe, and put their trust in God." The psalmist almost despairs at trying to share such a grand vision with the community. "Oh that I could make them known and tell them!"

Paul, John, Andrew, the psalmist—all of them saw something of what God was doing, something that no one else noticed. God is at work here, just as God promised.

Pastoral Reflections

Let me say this right up front. When most of us look at ourselves, we are pretty blind. We easily sell ourselves short, and miss the gifts that God has given to us. Just look at the Martin Luther King holiday.

It's sad that I should have to say this, but I'll do it anyway: You don't have to be African-American to celebrate Martin Luther King Day. If Harold Washington (the late African-American mayor of Chicago) could lead the St. Patrick's Day parade in Chicago to celebrate his Irish heritage, those of us who are much more pale in skin color can celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday. You just have to be able to see.

King had vision like Paul's. He could see the mountaintop when most could only see the foothills. He could see a chorus of children singing, when most could only see divisions and dissension. At a time when many could only see "those" people moving in and moving out, King could see people of every color of the rainbow sitting down to eat together, pray together, sing together, and live together.

The communities that sang the spirituals had vision like Paul's. They knew that despite their circumstances, God had bestowed on them strength, and given them every spiritual gift. Their owners and their society might treat them as second class or less than human, but they could see the truth. Knowing the truth, they just had to sing.

I collect hymnals, and it's amazing to see the changes from one to the next. Each one is broader and more wide ranging than the last. Lutherans today would be missing many of their favorite hymns if all they had to chose from were German chorales. Think of it: no spirituals, of course, but also no Wesley, no Watts, no Gruntvig, no Taize, no Haugen, no Huber... and no James Weldon Johnson.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" is an amazing hymn, and not just for African-Americans. You don't have to be African-American to know about stony roads—look at farmers whose fields are rock hard in the hot summer sun. Flood victims know about paths watered with tears. Anyone released from prison knows about gloomy pasts, and many of our elderly are well acquainted with weary years. And yet, for all these hearts burdened with pain and brokenness, there is hope. There is light. There is life.

Do you see the vision that Isaiah saw: the powerful giving honor and respect to those they formerly despised and abhorred? Look around your community, and see what this looks like. Put flesh and blood to these abstract words. In San Francisco, years ago, a young black lawyer named Willie Brown and his wife suffered at the hands of exclusionary racist housing policies. Today, "His Williness" (as he is known in one of the local papers) is the mayor of San Francisco. Nelson Mandela went from prisoner to president and peace prize winner. What does this vision look like in your community, of the oppressed given respect?

Poet Audre Lorde addressed the 1977 meeting of the Modern Language Association, and challenged the teachers in the audience to "not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, 'I can't possibly teach Black

women's writing—their experience is so different from mine.' Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust?" (*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches of Audre Lorde* [Freedom, CA: The Crossings Press, 1984], 43-44).

I hear her challenge, and think about my preaching and that of my colleagues. How often, I wonder, are we in the pulpit guilty of hanging onto the same mockeries? "I can't talk about King—I'm not African-American," or "There are no African-Americans in my congregation, so why bother?" Yet for how many years have we talked about 16th century Europeans like Luther and fourth century Africans like Augustine? We are surrounded by gifts of all shapes, sizes, ages, and colors, if we only will open our eyes and look.

Can I get a witness? PR

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 24, 1999

Psalm 27:1, 4-9
Isaiah 9:1-4
1 Corinthians 1:10-16
Matthew 4:12-23

First Reading

The strong physicality of these Epiphany lessons keeps on going, and today's readings seem very body-centered. Weights and burdens, yokes and crosses, walking and fishing. Bodies being worn down, and bodies being healed.

Bodies being worn down. In the first chapter of Isaiah, the prophet surveys the scene around him, and announces God's displeasure. Israel is a beaten, broken, bloody body, covered with bruises from its rebellion against God. "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah." Keep your burnt offerings and never mind your sabbath assemblies, but instead "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean... cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." A new day is coming, says the prophet in today's reading, with a new ruler, whose light will banish the gloom of those who are in anguish and lift the burdens from those who are oppressed.

Bodies being broken. Paul laments the broken body of the church in Corinth: factions and divisions, quarrels and disagreements. (Is this the baptismal equivalent to arguing about ordinations in apostolic succession?) Subtly, he reminds them that they are brothers and sisters, one family—not separate groups at all. Not so subtly, he reminds them of the good news of the gospel. It's foolish to think that out of a broken body on the cross can come healing and life, but that's just what God has done for us in our brokenness. This cross—this yoke that sucks the life out of condemned bodies—has become for us the very source of life that gives us the power of God.

Bodies laboring, heavily. Peter and Andrew, James and John, laboring with their nets and their boats. "Come," says Jesus, "and labor with me." Off they went, preaching and teaching to every body throughout Galilee, healing and curing every body of every illness and disease. Laboring bodies, to be sure, but a labor that gives life.

The body of the psalmist is surrounded by evildoers ready to "eat up my flesh," yet she sings with great delight and strength. "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?" Even in the midst of a siege, the psalmist can't help but sing! "God shall set me high on a rock, keeping me safe."

Oppressed people long to have burdens lifted. Enslaved people yearn to have their yokes removed. People engaged in a civil war cry desperately for an end to divisions. Burdens, yokes, and divisions are heavy stuff. Pun intended. But the cross is stronger than all of it.

Pastoral Reflections

If ever there was a Sunday for dealing with physical bodies in a sermon—beaten, bruised, and broken bodies—this is it. In addition to the lessons appointed for today, with all of their very tangible physical bodies, this Sunday is also Super Bowl Sunday. It is the triumph of one football team over all the rest, in one of the most physical sports in our society. Watch the game, and you will see bodies beaten, bodies broken, bodies exhausted. Read the papers and listen to the sports reporters, and the language of the conversation is the same: losing teams are trampled, beaten, blown away, murdered, exterminated, ripped apart, and destroyed. That's the point, after all: for *us* to hit *them* harder, faster, and more powerfully, so that we can triumph, so that we live.

But what kind of life is this? Win at all costs. You lose, you die. Life like this is not only destructive of others, but ultimately self destructive as well. It becomes life in fear of the next match, the next fight, the next struggle. In the end, it becomes no life at all. Do you know this life? Do you see these bodies in your community? Your parish? Your home?

Commuters wrung out by traffic... parents and children heading in different directions every minute of the day... waitresses and busboys at the end of a long shift... corporate managers exhausted by long hours of trying to stay ahead of the competition... pastors who go to every meeting and every event, first to arrive and last to leave....

Exhaustion. Then these tired bodies succumb to illness—as mild as a cough or as serious as a stroke. Perhaps these fearful, beaten bodies lash out, and the result is more pain, more brokenness, more death. A frustrated worker arrives home to find that the kids have left their toys lying around the house again, despite repeated requests to put them away. "I may have to sit on my anger at my boss, but BY GOD at home I am in charge!" thinks the parent, and all that anger comes flooding out, aimed at the least powerful targets. Spouses and children are yelled at, pushed around, beaten, and abused. Such is the "life" that the win-at-all-costs mentality creates.

But there is another way. Just ask Isaiah, or the psalmist, or Paul, or the disciples. It's the way of confession and repentance, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of justice and mercy, of healing and love. It's a way that gives up on the win/lose games. It's a way that sets aside division and hierarchy in favor of unity and mutuality. It's the way of God, and it's a way that brings peace.

And what about the "church body" or "body politic"? I am remembering events of one particular January, exactly 25 years ago (1974) at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. The student body, hurt and dismayed at the actions of a Board intent on dismembering the faculty, declared a moratorium on all classes. They protested the suspension of President John Tietjen and the accusations of heresy leveled against members of the faculty.

Out of the injuries of those hectic days a community called Seminex was born. That story may not be your story. We need to ask ourselves today where the body is hurting. Where is it that my congregation or the ELCA or the Christian Church generally is hurting or is being injured? Where is it wounded, or where is it inflicting wounds?

The cross, so weak and so foolish, is given for the healing of all our bodies. PR

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 31, 1999

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

First Reading

Whose speaking can be trusted? That's the question in every trial, which is the scene for every reading for this day.

In these days of Judge Judy, Ken Starr, and the semi-legendary O.J. trial, the reading from Micah should resonate with a wide number of people. It's a courtroom drama, with all the back and forth between the opposing sides. The Lord has issued a subpoena, demanding testimony, and the prophet has come to answer it. The mountains shall sit in judgment over this controversy between God and God's people.

"What have I done to you?" begs God. In your younger days, I got you out of jams with the neighbor kids in Egypt. I gave you guides to lead you—Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. I protected you when your enemies tried to do you in. And now this: you ignore me, and wander away. No thanks, and no recognition of all that I have done for you. What have you got to say for yourself?

What *could* one say to all that? I tithe? I worship every week? No! Protestations of innocence will be swept aside. What about plea bargaining: I'll give you anything—even my firstborn child? No, says the prophet: simply do what God requires—do justice, love kindness, and walk with God.

The psalmist also portrays a trial scene—it's a landlord/tenant debate. Who is entitled to live in God's house? Those who live as God does. (We don't want the tenants to give the landlord a bad name, after all.) Their word must be sure, and they must neither give nor accept bribes. No guile allowed, nor evil or slander against other tenants. God runs a nice place, you know.

Paul is like the courtroom reporter, commenting on the suits and counter suits flying around the community in Corinth. He does not decide them, like the judge, but instead offers a warning, borne of watching case after case after case come before this judge. Beware your own wisdom and eloquence, you lawyers and defendants and plaintiffs. God's foolishness is wiser than your finest wisdom, and God's weakness is more than your strength. God will not be fooled, and God will not be swayed. What's more, God is constantly lifting up the lowly (like you) to bring down the proud (again, like you), so beware.

After the verdict is decided, the sentence must be determined. In the reading from Matthew, with each "Blessed are" that comes from Jesus' lips, sentence is passed. The downtrodden of every shape are sentenced to reside in the kingdom of heaven. Those who work as God does are given a similar sentence. Mercy, peace, and righteousness—these are the signs of God's rule. The sentence is not to be delayed, but is carried out immediately: "theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven" right now, not down the road some time.

But then something strange happens. Jesus turns to the spectators, and passes sentence on them as well. "And blessed are you when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake...." Jesus announces the sentence before these new cases even come to the court, complete with a citation of precedents.

Whose voice can be trusted? In the end, say all the readings, it is God's voice that is trustworthy beyond a shadow of a doubt. And that's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Pastoral Reflections

And in your place of ministry, whose word is trusted there? Who are the powerful, who are the lowly, and who are the blessed?

It's congregational meeting time for many congregations. All kinds of things might be on the agenda, like the adoption of a new budget or the election of new officers and leaders. Reports are made by various committees, and decisions might be made with respect to the policies of the church.

Fights at congregational meetings are the stuff of legends. Perhaps it is a division among council members that becomes a division within the church. Maybe it is the council fighting with non-council members, or a dispute between the pastor and the council. Many pastors become rather nervous when the annual meeting comes around, because you never know who will say what. And it's not just what is said. Who the speaker is matters as well. If you've been in your parish any length of time, you know whose voices carry the most weight. In some congregations, it is the treasurer, because everyone is concerned about the finances. In other congregations, it might be the longtime leaders who founded the church whose voices carry enough power to sweep aside anyone else's opinion. In still others, it might be the young energetic members, whose enthusiasm overwhelms some of the older folks. In others, it might be the pastor's voice that is the biggest, because she speaks for God, after all.

But notice, too, whose voices are quiet, or silent. And take special notice of who is not even in the room. These are the lowly, the humble, and the meek. These, according to Paul, are the ones that bring down the mighty.

A small congregation was considering three candidates for pastor. Each one had come to visit, and everyone had had a chance to meet and speak with them. When folks began to discuss the merits of each one, the discussion was lively and without rancor. Each candidate had different gifts, and each one had supporters who pointed them out for the group. Evangelism was the key for some, while stewardship was critical to others. After a while, a little girl walked up to the congregation's president at the podium. "I want to say something," she said, "but you never call on me." "I didn't see you," said the president, "but you can go ahead and speak now." The girl—about five years old—turned to face everyone else. "I don't know all this stuff that some of you are talking about. But I like Pastor so-and-so, because he didn't just talk to my dad. He bent down and talked with me, too." That little girl was about as lowly as they come, but she spoke with wisdom beyond that of her elders as she gave witness to what she had experienced. The discussion turned from concepts to people, and the congregation called a pastor who was exactly right for them.

We place great value on longevity, experience, education, wealth, status, and dozens of other things in our society and in our churches. There is much there to be valued, to be sure. But I wonder what our congregational meetings would be like if only those who were *under* 16 could vote?

I know, I know—it sounds pretty foolish. PR

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 7, 1999

Psalm 112:1-9 [10]
Isaiah 58:1-9a [9b-12]
1 Corinthians 2:1-12 [13-16]
Matthew 5:13-20

First Reading

As this season of Epiphany draws to a close, we come to a Sunday where emotion is key. Seeing, smelling, and all the other senses still matter, but today the readings center on the energy and the motives that put the body into action.

The first reading begins with God's command to the prophet to be passionate. "Shout out, do not hold back!" says God, and Isaiah complies, challenging the community of God's people to examine their motives and their passions. All around he sees people passionate about oppression, passionate about fighting and quarrelling, and passionate about ritual. Compare this, says the prophet, with God's passion: loosing the bonds of injustice, freeing those who are oppressed and breaking the yokes that held them. Here is God's passion: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and repairing broken relationships in the family.

Why, wonders the prophet, would anyone choose these first passions when God's passions are so much more satisfying? Having returned from exile to a ruined city, why would you choose to fight with one another? Having been freed from the yoke of exile, why push new yokes on each other? Instead of that, rebuild! Rebuild the bodies of the hungry with food, rebuild the afflicted by satisfying their needs, and in so doing, God will be at work restoring this parched garden, and rebuilding these ruins.

The Gospel reading deals with passion as well. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees...." Here we have one of the few places where Jesus holds up the scribes and Pharisees as positive models. Unless your devotion to God's way is at least as strong as the devotion of the scribes and Pharisees, says Jesus, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Let your light shine brightly, for all to see, and share God's passion for people.

Living by the commandments is all about linking God's passion with our own. God is passionate for us and for our neighbor, and wants us all to share in that passion. God wants our relationships to be strong, and therefore does not want us to steal from one another, or bear false witness, or commit murder. Nothing Jesus says in his preaching goes against this; indeed, he keeps driving it home harder and harder.

And whence comes such passion, for God, for self, for neighbor, and for community? According to the second reading, it comes from the Spirit. Human wisdom gets caught up in human pride, says Paul, but "we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God." God's passionate love is poured out for the community on the cross, and God's plea is that we would share that passion with one another.

Pastoral Reflections

Passion is a tricky thing. For example, if you overheard two people in the fellowship hall refer to a third person as "passionate," would that be positive or negative? If someone told you that your sermon was passionate, would that be a compliment or an insult?

When I think about passion and the church, I think of children and young people. When children are excited by something, the whole world will know. The opposite is true as well—if they are bored, they'll let you know about that, too. At the congregation I served in Kansas City, the church gave a

personalized LBW to each child during Advent of their first grade year. By this gift, we tried to say that worship is not something for adults only, but is also for them. The reaction from the kids was, well, passionate. They brought their LBWs with them every Sunday, smiling so proudly. "I belong!" they seemed to say.

But it often works the other way as well. Youthful passion can be squashed and stifled with a curt "Shut up and keep still" from a parent, or a withering look from a pastor. Passion, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It means that something matters. It means that there is something worth getting excited about. What do people get passionate about in your setting?

Congregations and their pastors can get passionate about almost anything: the beauty of the Christmas decorations, the number of typos in the bulletin, or the hymns chosen for a particular service. We get passionate about our facilities: who has keys to the church office, or the color of the roof shingles that no one without a ladder or an airplane will ever see. These are not good or bad, though. The variety of responses to the question points to something deeper: what motivates our passion?

This is what Isaiah struggled with centuries ago, and what we struggle with today. Does our passion arise out of a desire to elevate ourselves at someone else's expense, or does it come from a desire to build up the community? Does our passion proclaim our own glory, or the glory of God?

I have no memory of this, but I have been told (repeatedly!) that when I was about three years old, I would sing with the choir at church. That is to say, I would sit either with the basses or the sopranos in the choir, depending on whether dad or mom was holding me at the time, and when everyone would stand to sing a hymn, I would join in as only a three year old can. As long as everyone else was singing, this was no problem. Unfortunately, I would keep singing after everyone else had stopped, until mom or dad put a hand over my mouth. That's passion. Since that time they have taught me to read music, so that my passion could be somewhat more of a gift to those around me than sheer exuberance. That's passion that has been nurtured and shaped, to give glory to God.

Passion is a gift of the Spirit to be embraced and enjoyed. Passion inspires us to make some kind of response to the good news we have received. Think about it: if someone said to you, "That was a moving sermon, Pastor," wouldn't you hope that they would indeed *move* as a result? PR

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 14, 1999

Psalm 2 or Psalm 99
Exodus 24:12-18
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

First Reading

Fear. Moses left the people of Israel below, and traveled up the mountain accompanied only by Joshua. For six days, the glory of the Lord covered the mountain, and all the people below could see was a devouring fire. For forty days there was no word from Moses, and the people below wondered and fretted. That first reading leaves us hanging, much the same way as Moses left the Israelites at the bottom of the mountain. Where is he? What is going on? Such fire—could he possibly still be alive? If we read on in Exodus, the ancient storyteller spends eight chapters on the giving of the law, and finally in chapter 32 we hear the people's voice once

more. Their leader was gone, and they were lost. They went to Aaron, and asked him to build the golden calf. "As for Moses, we do not know what has become of him."

Fear. The disciples had been following Jesus, this powerful healer and itinerant preacher, for quite some time now. Peter, just a few days earlier, made his confession of Jesus as the Messiah. Perhaps they thought that they had seen it all. Until now. Jesus' face shining like the sun, his dazzling white robes, Elijah and Moses? The stunning voice from heaven? It was too much, and they fell to the ground.

There is a numbness that accompanies fear like this, a paralyzing feeling that everything you knew and trusted and could count on has been taken away. Moses had led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and now he was... what? Jesus had led Peter and the others all over Galilee, and now he was... what?

An experience of the divine glory is not the easiest thing in the world to take in, and the voice only made matters worse. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Their world had been jerked out from under them, and they fell to the ground. But Jesus did not leave them cowering in fear: "Get up and do not be afraid."

Now *that* sounded familiar, like the Jesus they knew. In the boat, during the storm, he asked, "Why are you afraid?" To the paralytic he said, "Stand up," and the paralytic stood. At Jairus' house in Capernaum, he took Jairus' dead daughter by the hand, and she got up. Later, as he walked across the sea toward the disciples in their boat, he said, "Do not be afraid." Again on the mountain they heard that familiar voice, and they got up, and saw only Jesus.

It was familiar, but things were not the same. "Let it rest for now, and don't try to explain it to anyone," said Jesus. "It won't make sense until later—until after I have been raised from the dead."

And later, after Easter, it did make sense. "We have been eyewitnesses to Jesus' majesty," writes the author of 2 Peter. We saw the dazzling white clothes with our own eyes. We heard the voice: "This is my son, the Beloved." We saw, we heard, and we are not at all the same.

It took us all of the season of Epiphany to get to the mountaintop, and it will take all of the season of Lent for us to make sense of it. The transfiguration is not a display of divine fireworks, but a display both of God's overwhelming and transcendent power and of God's most intimate and down to earth love.

Pastoral Reflections

The liturgist in me says that this is the festival of the Transfiguration, or if you must observe a lesser commemoration, the day of Saints Cyril and Methodius; the pastor in me says that this is Valentine's Day, though it does not appear on the LBW's calendar of commemorations. So what do we celebrate this morning?

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, there are two different martyrs from the early days of the church who could be the St. Valentine whose day is remembered so fondly (though possibly they may be the same person). According to one legend, Valentine was a priest who performed marriages against the order of the Emperor Claudius, who was tired of his recruits trying to get out of military service through marriage. For this, Valentine was imprisoned and died. Another legend has it that Valentine was jailed for helping persecuted Christians, and performed various miracles while in prison, including healing his jailer's daughter of blindness, to whom he later seny tender letters, signed "From your Valentine."

Whatever the story of whatever ancient martyr, today's understanding of the day is decidedly separate from any religious connection, save perhaps the presence of Cupid and his arrows. Yet I sense that we preachers ignore the conjunction of these celebrations at our peril.

The word on everyone's lips that day is "love"—with all the shades of meaning that slippery word carries when used between two people. On Valentine's Day, love is a word that is used between partners who have been together for 50 years and between all the kids in Mrs. Grundy's third grade class. ("Bring one for everyone, and don't leave anyone out!") The newspaper comics and TV sitcoms will delight in the trauma faced by people who have just started dating as they try to gauge things, so that their cards and gifts match the progress of their relationship. ("Is it too much, too soon? Is it too little, too slowly?")

It can be a difficult day, though, for the widow grieving her loss, the parent who is newly divorced, the young single who is not only not married but not seeing anyone, or the child whose best friend just moved away. So much societal emphasis is placed on "couples in love," that anyone without a partner is somehow left out of Valentine's Day.

The love in the transfiguration story, though, leaves no one out. "Get up," says Jesus to all who cower in fear. To the grieving widow, whose life is torn apart by a spouse's death, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." To the newly divorced, whose life is turned completely upside down and inside out, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." To those who are lonely on this most "coupled" of days, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." To the young child who can't imagine getting through the rest of third grade without her best friend, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid."

Cyril and Methodius were 9th century missionaries to the Slavic people, and their ministry was one of inclusion. Preceding Luther by several centuries, they translated scripture into the Slavic vernacular—and they had to create an alphabet to do it. (We can thank them for the cyrillic Russian alphabet.) Bringing God's love to the Slavs did not mean that they had to first learn Latin or Greek. No, the missionaries learned their language, and brought God's love in a form they knew. Language is no reason to be left out.

No one is left out, and nothing can keep God from offering this comfort to all who are in distress of any kind. Jesus' words of love to his disciples won't have their full impact without the cross, so he tells them to keep things to themselves until after the resurrection. Lucky us, though, because we are post-resurrection people. "Do not be afraid," says Jesus, "because there is nothing that will separate God from God's people—not even death." Not death, not divorce, not loneliness, not anything.

There are no Transfiguration cards, from Hallmark or anyone else. There's just the familiar story, so get up and preach it. Don't be afraid. PR

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