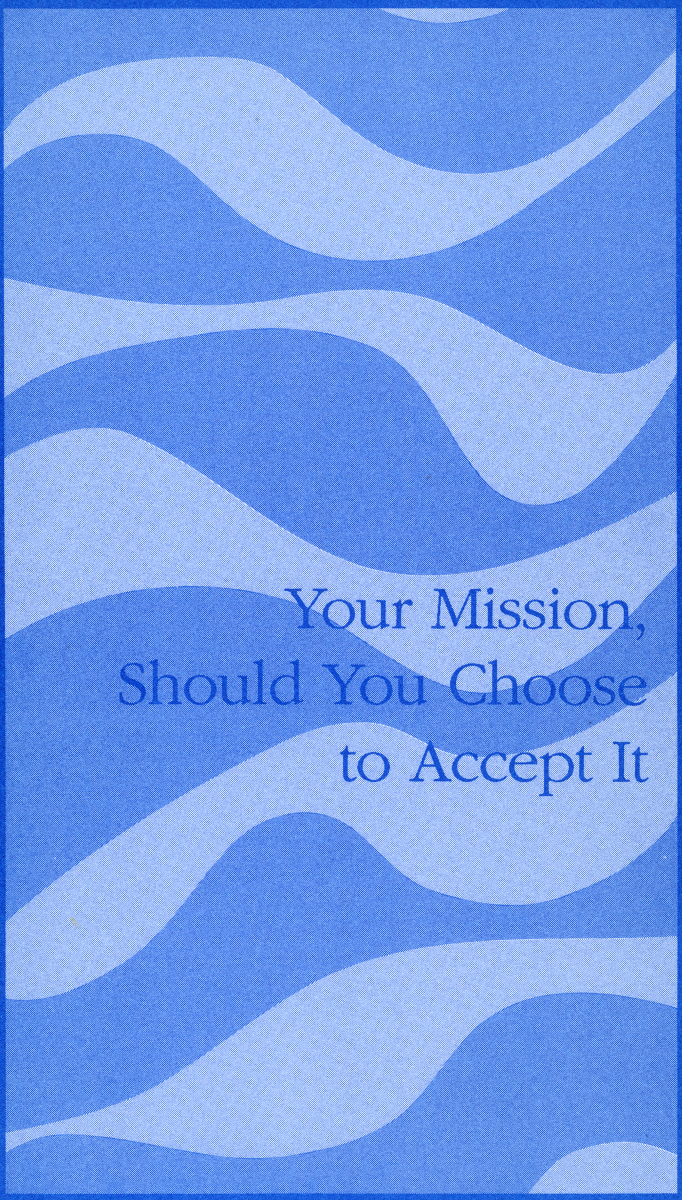
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Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It

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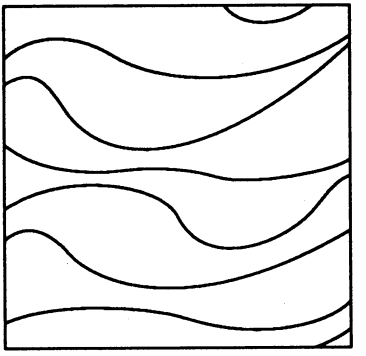
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Series A
First Sunday in Advent—The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Contributors: Richard Simon Hanson, Fred Strickert, Jean Lebbert, Lucy Kolin

Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It

I don't watch much TV, but 25 years or so ago, when "Mission Impossible" was on the tube, I was a regular. Each episode, as you recall, gave the special agent a truly challenging assignment against crime-lords or spies, it also gave him or her a way out: "Your mission, should you choose to accept it...." Then the tape recorder on which the instructions had come would self-destruct with a puff of smoke. And so the spine-tingling adventure would proceed. Somehow those brave agents always accepted their mission.

Almost everyone's for mission in the church, but we are really quite divided on what mission means. Some methods of mission strike critics as imperialistic; other methods of mission are blasted as a sellout to dialogue. A third type of mission is criticized as social engineering, mixed with a little prayer. When the mission is God's mission, it almost always forces would-be missionaries to rethink all inherited values, to count others better than themselves, or to experience mission in reverse. Those who are sent on God's mission better count the cost and check their motivations... before gladly accepting their mission.

Paul G. Hiebert reviews how people have interpreted other people over the last 500 years. For some it has been a contest between Christians and idolatrous savages; for others it is civilized Europeans versus superstitious-ignorant-primitives. Some missionaries saw little good in other people's cultures. Today God calls us to a radical contextualization of the gospel in local cultural categories and practices.

At the deepest level of our identity as humans, there are no "others"—we are one humanity. In the church there are no "others"; the church's unity is an essential part of the good news. We come to "others" in humility, as one sinner inviting another to salvation offered through Christ.

Abraham Akrong responds to Hiebert's proposals by affirming that in the final analysis mission is about building relationships. A distortion of the humanity of the "other" can lead to the distortion of the relationship between missionaries and their audience. We must define the "other" as brother and sister, to whom we are bound together by the love of God in Christ.

David Rhoads describes Mark as a Gospel with a radical approach to mission and a boundary-crossing mentality. God in Mark is on the margins and the Jesus movement starts from the margins. The realm of God is a revitalization movement, and the itinerant followers of Jesus are change agents bringing the life of God's realm to the world. The goal is not a church, but the realm of God in a renewed world, preparing for the imminent establishment of the realm of God in power. Mission occurs anytime we act for the other rather than for ourselves. There are no structures, no rituals, no creeds, but an ethic of relinquishment in service to others. The death of Jesus empowers us to follow in Jesus' way.

Robert Smith asks about the point of Revelation. Does it offer comfort to those undergoing Roman persecution? Or does it blast the comfortable, who have too easily adjusted their lives to the everyday realities of the Roman Empire? In John's eyes Rome was seducing Christians into accommodation with Roman power and Roman ways. Revelation is an inner-church struggle about mission. Arrayed on the other side are the authors of 1 Peter and the Pastorals, who were far more sanguine about the possibilities of Christian life in the empire. Revelation forces us to ask anew: What does Christian faith require in a culture such as ours?

In his fourth installment on preaching, **Andrew M. Weyermann** demonstrates that the basic problem in gospel prognosis is the separation of the proclamation of God's deed in Christ from the new life of the

Christian. The preacher's goal is to create faith that surrenders unconditionally to the God who is unconditionally good. Such unconditional surrender happens only in response to the promise of God's unconditional grace. The cross and the empty tomb are the ground for declaring God's unconditional grace and for leading the hearer to live in unconditional surrender to God's goodness.

You are but one voice in the church, engaged in an endless discussion with your people about missionary methods and missionary goals. Your context may be urban or rural, in congregations that are booming or dying, in places where the "other" may be Norwegian, Swedish, African American, or Euro American. You are the official apostolic spokesperson for the faith, supported—and challenged—by others who love the Lord so dearly that they disagree with you about the church's mission. Your assignment, should you choose to accept it....

Ralph W. Klein
Missionary

Are We Our Others' Keepers?

Paul G. Hiebert
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, Illinois

Are we our others' keepers? This is the central question of anthropology, the science of the Other and Otherness, and of missions, the church's ministry to the Other. Before we can answer this question, we must examine who are our Others and how we see them, for in defining these Others we define ourselves. I would like to examine the different ways in which the west has viewed Others, and how these views affected us in missions.

The Middle Ages

Two images of the Other dominated the Middle Ages. The first of these was that of 'monsters.' North Europeans had stories about monstrous humanoids who were embodiments of evil forces (Jeffrey 1980). There was considerable discussion regarding the reality and nature of *satyr* (half human-half goat), *pyrs* (hairy woodman living in marshes), water-sprites, woodwose (shaggy creature overgrown with moss), walt man (associated with wild women), the Old Norse *vir*, the Scandinavian *bergrisar* (giants) and *bergjarlar* (mountain rulers), and Grendel of *Beowulf*. As these myths were Christianized, the Germanic monsters became "descendants of Cain."

The church's response to this belief in monsters was given by Augustine in *The City of God*. He wrote,

> It is also asked whether we are to believe that certain monstrous races of men, spoken of in secular history, have sprung from Noah's sons.... For it is reported that some have one eye in the middle of the forehead; some, feet turned backwards from the heel; ...others are said to have no mouth, and they breathe only through their nostrils; others... are said to have no head, having their eyes in their shoulders.... But whoever is born anywhere a man, that is, a rational mortal animal, no matter the unusual appearance he presents..., no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast (Jeffrey 1980, 48).

Despite this affirmation of the unity of humankind, belief in monstrous races continued until the sixteenth century.

The second image of the Other during the Middle Ages was that of the Muslim armies invading Europe from the South and East, and threatening to wipe out Christianity. They were seen as Infidels—humans who had rejected God and therefore had to be killed.

The Age of Exploration

The picture changed radically at the end of the fifteenth century. European explorers, seeking new routes to the spices of India, discovered unknown lands and strange peoples not found on anyone's maps. The age was one of exploration, and of redrawing mental and physical maps to include the new, the bizarre, the hitherto unknown. Were the creatures of these new worlds humans? Did the Hottentot of Africa have souls that needed to be saved? Could the Aborigines of Australia be made slaves? These queries not only raised profound questions of geography but also of sociology, economics, politics and theology.

This was the Age of Geography. The newly discovered Others were defined in terms of their geographic locations. Maps were drawn and societies charted for much of the world. In 1555, in his preface to Antonio Pigafetta's account of Magellan's voyage around the world, Richard Eden wrote, "In fine, this may we boldly affirm, that the antiquity had never such knowledge of the world which the sun compasseth about in twenty-four hours as we have this present by the industry of the men of our age." (Arber 1885, 247)

The explosion of modern geography shattered the older geographies by Ptolemy, Strabo, and Pliny. Not only did the explorations show the empirical errors of the ancient authors but also the fundamental flaws in the ways they perceived the Others. For the ancients, others beyond the pale of the Mediterranean world were bizarre creatures. The explorers found that these Others around the world were indeed all humans. Maximelian Transilvane reported that the survivors of Magellan's heroic trip found that

> in our time of sailing by the ocean sea, having discovered all the coasts of the lands toward the west... nor the Portugals who compassing about Africa have passed by all the East... nor yet the Spainyards in their last navigation, in which they compassed about the whole earth, did never in any of their voyages write of such monsters (Arber 1885, 248).

In 1537 Pope Paul III proclaimed in the bull *Sublimis Deus* that "the Indians are true men."

The Christian response: Others as humans and pagans. The discovery of worldwide humanity raised difficult theological questions: if these indeed are humans, who are they, and how do we relate to them? Several answers were given. First, Christians saw them as *pagans* and *heathens*. These new people were not Christian heretics nor Muslim infidels who rejected Christian truth. They were people who had never had the opportunity to hear the gospel.

The question then arose, were these Others sinners in need of salvation? Europeans needed redemption because they were descendants of Adam. Were these Others pre-Adamic, and therefore pre-sin? Or did they, like the Europeans, commit primal sins of their own? Oviedo in his *Natural History of the West Indies* (1526) goes to great lengths to describe the diabolical practices of the natives to show that they do, indeed, need salvation. D. Duran wrote,

> [O]ne *can* say that the devil had persuaded and instructed them, stealing from and imitating the Divine Cult so that *he* be honored as a god; for everything was a mixture of a thousand heathen beliefs, deceits, and imperfections. (quoted in Todorov 1984, 210)

In the end, Sahagun concluded, "What is certain is that all these people are our brothers, proceeding from Adam's stock even as we ourselves." It follows they are sinners

like us, and so intelligible within the Christian cosmos.

If they are sinners, then they are also potential Christians. Bartolome de Las Casas wrote that Columbus was "the first who opened the doors of this Ocean Sea, through which he entered and introduced to these so remote lands and realms, until then so unknown, our Savior Jesus Christ" (1971, 37). The Catholic mission movement was born out of this belief that the Others are humans and sinners, and that they can be converted to the Christian faith. Missionaries spread throughout the New World along with the explorers and rulers, preaching, baptizing converts, and organizing congregations in the church of Jesus Christ.

The question then arose, what should be done with the "horrifying customs" of these pagans, which were seen as evidence of their natural degeneracy? Most believed that these had to be eradicated and replaced by Christian ways, by law and force if need be. Some argued that missionaries needed precise information on pagan superstitions if they were to eradicate idolatry. Sahagun noted, "To preach against those things, and even to know if they exist, it is necessary to know how they used them in the time of their idolatry." (Elliott 1972, 6)

The commercial response: Other as gold and slave. For the western commercial world, the newly discovered Others were seen from a commercial perspective. The age of discovery was not a random exploration of the world motivated by a desire for knowledge. The explorers were looking *for* something: namely gold. On the day after his discovery of the New World, Columbus wrote in his diary, "I was attentive and worked hard to know if there was any gold." His prayer was, "Our Lord in his goodness guide me that I may find this gold" (Todorov 1984, 8). Las Casas wrote, "I do not say that they [the explorers] want to kill them [the Indians] directly, from the hate they bear them; they kill them because they want to be rich and have much gold, which is their whole aim...." (Todorov 1984, 142)

The discovery of world-wide humanity raised difficult theological questions...

This search for gold raised three important questions. Why do the natives have so much of it, why do the Europeans desire it, and what right do the Europeans have to take it? Two answers were given to these questions. In both of them, the Other is seen as a *child*. Some Europeans argued that the Other, as a child, is inferior to the European who is an adult. Frey Pedro de Feria, Bishop of Chiapa, wrote in 1585, "We must love and help the Indians as much as we can. But their base and imperfect character requires that they should be ruled, governed and guided to their appointed end by fear more than love." J. H. Elliott notes, "In the bishop's words we hear the echoes of the sixteenth century schoolroom" (1972, 13). If, indeed, the Indians are children, then Europeans are justified in their colonial expansion, in which they act as parents, educating and managing the natives' wealth for their own good. Other scholars argued that these Others, like innocent children, are superior to the Europeans, who are en-

slaved by their own greed and lust for gold. But then the Others, because of their higher morality, have no desire to keep their gold, and the Europeans, therefore, are free to take it.

The Other became not only a source of gold, but also of work. The people on the newly discovered lands were forced into indentured labor and into slavery. This was possible because they were not seen as fully adult humans like people in the West.

The scientific response: Other as savage. The most profound impact of the age of exploration was the secularization of space, and of the Other. The earth in the fifteenth century was seen as an island (*Orbis Terrarum*), made up of Europe, Asia, and Africa, with the Holy City of Jerusalem in the center and God in control. This sacred space was surrounded by the dark, inhuman, evil void of the deep waters. There were no "continents," no "oceans" (Cassidy 1968). Moreover, the deep waters were not so much empirically unknown, but were in principle unknowable.

The crossing of the seas and the discovery of new lands radically changed how Europeans viewed the earth, a change equivalent in its depth and scope to the Copernican revolution that moved the earth from the center of the universe to being a minor planet circling a minor star in one of the myriad of galaxies in space. Now, for the first time, the world was seen as a uniform, continuous, secular space covered by continents and oceans. Exploration was no longer medieval travelers such as Marco Polo reporting on the strange places and incredulous customs of Others. It was explorers deliberately extending their knowledge of a uniform world. The wedding of the new geography with Copernican astronomy led to a unified universe. Bernard McGrane notes,

> The road traveled was that of a geocentric to a heliocentric to an anticentric—a centerless, pointless—view of both the universe about the earth and the lands and peoples dispersed over the surface of the earth.... [T]he theologians' heavens are transformed into an astronomical space. (1989, 37)

This unification of the universe by means of homogeneous secular space had a profound impact on the way scientists looked at the Other. The Others were now secular humans, and could be compared with other humans. What, then, accounts for the difference between peoples? They are not 'fallen' and therefore redeemable. They are humans, like us, but they are also Other and different from us. But what is this difference? First, they are objects which we can study. It is we who define the questions and categories of analysis. It is we who explore the world and give names to their continents and peoples.

Second, their Otherness has no validity in its own right. It is defined only in contrast to us. We are educated and scientific. They are "ignorant" and "less scientific." Above all they are *savages.* In other words, they are Other because they are not like us. There is no value or validity in their Otherness. As McGrane points out,

> [The 15th century's] account of difference does not *preserve* the difference it accounts for but rather destroys that difference. It accounts for difference by transforming difference into ignorance and that destroys its original character as difference (1989, 39).

Third, they are Other because they are immature children. By this analogy, the alienness of these Others becomes familiarized and comprehensible.

This homogenization of space and secularization of humans laid a foundation for the view of the Other in the Enlightenment.

The Age of Enlightenment

The definition of the Other changed with the coming of the Enlightenment. The shift is epitomized in the experiences of Robinson Crusoe, the quintessential Enlightenment man—solitary individual, Cartesian rationalist, and technological inventor. After almost eighteen years alone on the island Crusoe suddenly comes across charred human bones on the beach. Cannibals! From the depth of his European body and soul he vomits. He wrote,

> I turned away my face from the horrid spectacle... for the aversion which nature gave me to these hellish wretches was such that I was as fearful of seeing them as of seeing the Devil himself. (Defoe 1961, 163)

His initial reaction was that these Others were "savages," "beasts," "evil,"—a response that fit the Age of Exploration. By contrast, Europeans were "civilized," "refined," and "good." He decides to slaughter all the savages he can.

But, on further reflection, Crusoe undergoes a paradigm shift. He says,

> What authority or call had I to pretend to be judge and executioner upon these men as criminals, whom Heaven had thought fit for so many ages to suffer unpunished to go on.... How far these people were offenders against me, and what right I had to engage in the quarrel of that blood, which they promiscuously shed on upon another.... How do I know what God Himself judges in this particular case? It is certain these people do not commit this as a crime; it is not against their own consciences' reproving or their light reproaching them. (Defoe 1961, 168)

He decides that it is wrong for him to judge other people by *his* standards. They must be judged in the light of *their own* morality and culture. This sets the trajectory of Enlightenment view of the Other.

The next transformation takes place when Crusoe rescues one of the cannibals, who is himself a cannibal. Crusoe then exercises the sovereign right of the Explorer to name him. Crusoe proclaims the savage's name will be "Friday," and that he will address Crusoe as "master." Thereby Crusoe transforms the stranger from a nameless *savage* who exists beyond the boundaries of humanity and civilization, into Friday, a *primitive human being* who is a member *in* Crusoe's world. Crusoe teaches Friday English and gives him a place to live half way between Crusoe's house and the forest inhabited by beasts and cannibals. Friday is awestruck by Crusoe's gun and wants to worship it. Crusoe has to teach him that it is not miraculous but can be explained in natural terms. Crusoe is religious, but his religion is divorced from a secular explanation of the natural world.

> The most profound impact of the age of exploration was the secularization of space, and of the Other.

In his daily encounter with Friday, Crusoe is increasingly forced to recognize Friday's full humanity. Friday no longer exists outside the pale of humans as a beast. How, then, can Crusoe account for the differences between them? His answer is that

Enlightenment historians sought to create a unified "world history" explained in purely natural terms.

Friday is unEnlightened, therefore naked, primitive, and nonChristian, while he is Enlightened, clothed, and Christian. But Friday can be taught, and he can be saved through Crusoe's efforts.

Crusoe marks the transition into the world of the Enlightenment. In the Enlightenment "Christianity" had been reduced to being a "religion" alongside other religions. Now science, not Christian faith, defines human differences. The central question is no longer are the Others "Christian," but are they "Enlightened." Evil is no longer sin, it is ignorance (unenlightenment). The earlier distinction between refined Christian vs. idolatrous savage was replaced by the civilized-European vs. the superstitious-ignorant-primitive.

The evolutionary response: Other as primitive. Three fundamental shifts underlie the early Enlightenment worldview. First, there was a shift in the west's understanding of history. In the Middle Ages and the Age of Exploration, biblical history was the encompassing frame within which human history was understood. The major Christian chronologists of the 16th and 17th centuries focused their attention on the biblical record and sought to account for the newly discovered Others in that frame (Manuel 1963, 38). This was not always easy. For example, if all people are descendants of Adam, how did some get to these distant lands in six thousand years after creation and the flood?

The Enlightenment historians sought to create a unified "world history" explained in purely natural terms. This included bringing all people into one grand narrative of progress. Regarding the emergence of modern anthropology, one of the offspring of the Enlightenment, Johannes Fabian writes,

> The rise of modern anthropology is inseparable from the emergence of new conceptions of Time in the wake of a thorough secularization of the Judeo-Christian idea of history. The transformation that occurred involved, first, a generalization of historical Time, its extension, as it were, from the circum-Mediterranean stage of events to the whole world. (1983, 146)

This shift brought all humankind into one common story. Others are now part of world history. The Bible no longer set the frame for the western understanding of history. People were no longer sinners, but primitives.

From common humanity to hierarchy. A second transformation in the Enlightenment view of the Other was the introduction of the Greek concept of the Great Chain of Being (cf. Lovejoy 1936). The cosmic order is likened to a great chain stretching from heaven to earth, teeming with every possible type of created being—from orders of angels down to the most minute particles of matter. "According to this conception...," writes C. S. Lewis in *Preface to Paradise Lost*, "[e]verything except God has some natural superior; everything except unformed matter has some natural inferior" (1960, 73). This hierarchical no-

tion is not taken from the Bible, but rather owes its roots to Plato and Aristotle.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, William Petty sought to arrange in order all animate beings in what he called the "scale of creatures." One of the main problems he encountered was to determine what comes next after man. He wrote,

> Man being the first or top of this Scale, the question is what animal shall be next! ...I therefore propound an elephant for the next creature in dignity to man, not because of his great strength (which is equal to the strength of man assisted by levers and wheels) but rather because of his wonderful dexterity arising from the various and multiform use and application of his proboscis, which in many cases equals, and in some exceeds those of a man's hand. I give him the second place for his memory and understanding, which I have heard extend to the greatest use of the language of those men with whom he converses (Petty 1927, 26-27).

Petty does admit that gorillas look more like humans, but rejects them because of their inability to understand and communicate with humans.

It was this search for the classification and ranking of all forms of life that led to the study of human races (Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid, Australoid, Vedoid, etc), and efforts to rank them in terms of their physical features—a search that continued well into the nineteenth century.

Other as ancestor. The intersection of these two ideas—secular history and hierarchy—gave birth to the theories of biological and cultural evolution. It is a short step to move from seeing hierarchy as a description of creaturely differences to seeing it as a historical progression—from simple to complex, from ignorance to intelligence, from innocence to sophistication.

This theory provided the intellectual framework for the Enlightenment's view of the Other. Now the people discovered by explorations are no longer potential Christians, nor are they savages. They are primitives, but primitives of a special kind—they are human fossils. They resemble our ancient ancestors. The spirit of this evolutionary age is captured by Joseph Conrad in his description of his trip into Africa:

> We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness.... But suddenly as we struggled around a bend, there would be a glimpse of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands, clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying.... It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman.... They howled and leaped... but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship. (1950, 105)

In the mid 19th century anthropology emerged as the science of the Other and Otherness. It formalized this view in scientific thought. Regarding E. V. Tylor, one of the founders of anthropology, McGrane writes,

> It's as though Tylor saw the whole world as a museum-drama: on stage one, in the Amazon, for instance, we can see act one. Simultaneously, on stage two, in New Guinea, we can see act two, etc. The people of the world act out the story of *our* history, and the only audience who can understand the play is, of course, "us." We have the benefit of hindsight: we know how the story ends, we *are* how the story ends. In this sense Tylor assumes there is purpose in the world and that purpose is "us." (1989, 95)

The living Others represent petrified peoples in a kind of global congress whose purpose is to reveal to us our origins.

The goal of evolutionary anthropology

was ultimately not to explain them, but to explain *us*. In this stage, the 'we' of anthropology was an exclusive 'we.' Anthropologists speak *about* the Other, but never *to* the Other. It is assumed that the Other is not a part of their audience because the Other cannot read and is outside the discourse. McGrane notes,

> Tylor uses the terms "us" and "them" and then equates "them" with the "savages and barbarians." To do this he must assume and *thereby help produce and establish the situation* that members of his audience will be able to identify themselves as part of the collectivity labelled "us." This particular concept of "us" also includes Tylor himself within this collectivity. Supposedly the reader-collaborator will know automatically that he is one of the "us" rather than one of "them." (1989, 96; italics in the original)

Evolutionary theory sought to explain differences between humans in biological terms. For much of the 19th century, physical anthropologists sought to demonstrate the biological superiority of western whites. But when detailed study showed that Caucasians share more features with apes than do the other races, they abandoned the theory of racial superiority and began to study other questions.

When biological differences failed to explain human differences, evolutionists turned to mental development to explain human differences. Others are "pre-logical," therefore they are primitives (Levy-Bruhl 1966). We are "rational," therefore we are scientific. Science marks the end of the evolutionary process from the magic and myths of the pre-logical mind, to the religions of the proto-logical mind, to the science of the logical mind. Science is a new form of positive knowledge not found in earlier human history. The Other now becomes the object of study. We who are Enlightened must study them, and help them understand their place in evolutionary history, and to progress.

Finally, the evolutionary theory held that western civilization was most evolved of all cultures and therefore was the goal towards which the rest would move. Others are *primitives* in the process of becoming like Us through enlightenment. We, for our part, are responsible for educating them. In this light, the colonial venture is not evil or oppressive, it is our benevolent endeavor to help the Other join us in our full humanity.

On the surface, the superior nature of modern civilization was self-evident. But there remained in the minds of many a gnawing doubt—is it possible that savages are Noble Savages who are happier than we? Herman Melville captures this in his description of the encounter of a French admiral and a native king.

> The admiral came forward with uncovered head and extended one hand, while the old king saluted him by a stately flourish of his weapon. The next moment they stood side by side, these two extremes of the social scale—the polished splendid Frenchman, and the poor tattooed savage. They were both tall and noble looking men; but in other respects how strikingly contrasted! At what an immeasurable distance, thought I, are these two beings removed from each other! In the one is shown the result of long centuries of progressive refinement, which have gradually converted the mere creature into the semblance of all that is elevated and grand; while the Other, after the lapse of the same period, has not advanced one step in the career of improvement. "Yet after all," quoth I to myself, "insensible as he is to a thousand wants, and removed from harassing cares, may not the savage be the happier man of the two?" (1974, 33)

The Enlightenment and missions. The effect of the Enlightenment and the theory of

evolution had a profound effect on Christian missions. On the surface, many missionaries rejected the theory of evolution. But they bought deeply into the Enlightenment agenda of the west to educate and civilize the 'natives.' Wilbert Shenk writes,

> The seventeenth-century New England Puritan missionaries largely set the course for modern missions. They defined their task as preaching the gospel so that Native Americans would be converted and receive personal salvation. But early in their missionary experience these New Englanders concluded that Indian converts could only be Christians if they were "civilized." The model by which they measured their converts was English Puritan civilization.... They gathered these new Christians into churches for nurture and discipline and set up programs to transform Christian Indians into English Puritans. (1980, 35)

Stephen Neill notes,

> Missionaries in the nineteenth century had to some extent yielded to the colonial complex. Only western man was man in the full sense of the word; he was wise and good, and members of other races, in so far as they became westernized, might share in this wisdom and goodness. But western man was the leader, and would remain so for a very long time, perhaps for ever. (1982, 259)

Most missionaries built schools and hospitals alongside churches, and science was as essential a part of the curriculum as the gospel.

One consequence of this equation of the gospel with western civilization was that it made the gospel unnecessarily foreign in other cultures. There is an offense in the gospel itself, but the modern mission movement required converts to become western in their customs. Consequently, Christians were seen as foreigners in their own cultures.

A second consequence was that missionaries saw little good in the people's cultures. John Pobee writes,

> ...the historical churches by and large implemented the doctrine of *tabula rasa*, i.e. the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up. (1982, 169)

It was a time of the radical displacement of other religions—of noncontextualization.

A third consequence was that missionaries increasingly saw Christianity as the fulfillment of other religions (cf. Dennis 1897, 1899, 1906). David Bosch notes,

> It was, however, not until the arrival on the scene of the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, the rise of liberal theology, and the birth of the new discipline of comparative religion, that the stage was set for an approach according to which religions could be compared and graded in an ascending scale. In the Western world there was no doubt, however, about which religion stood at the pinnacle. In almost every respect every other religion—even if it might be termed a *praeparatio evangelica*—was deficient when compared with Christianity.... (1991, 479)

The Christian response

What answer should we as Christians give today to the question of who is our Other? We must reject the arrogance and power-up position of Enlightenment colonialism. In the past we in missions have been too often shaped by the spirit of our time rather than by the gospel. But we can no longer view the Other as the Age of Exploration did, as

Savage and Child. Nor can we embrace the Enlightenment views of the Other as Pagan, Primitive or Totally Other. As Anthony Gittins pointed out so well in last year's Eleanor and Arnold Scherer Memorial Lecture, Christ rejects all earthly hierarchies by which we make ourselves superior to the Other. He calls us to be servants, not masters; servers, not served.

One humanity. What, then, must we affirm? The Scriptures lead us to a startling conclusion. *At the deepest level of our identity as humans, there are no others. There are only us.* We are males and females, blacks and whites, rich and poor, but we are one humanity.

Our oneness of humanity is declared in the creation account (Gen 1:26) and is affirmed by the universalism implicit in the Old Testament (Ps 148:11-13, Isa 45:22, Micah 4:1-2).

> The entire history of Israel unveils the continuation of God's involvement with the nations. The God of Israel is the Creator and Lord of the whole world. For this reason Israel can comprehend its own history only in continuity with the history of the nations, not as a separate history. (Bosch 1991, 18)

The nations are waiting for Yahweh (Isa 51:5). His glory will be revealed to them all (Isa 40:5). His servant is a light to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6), and they will worship in God's temple in Jerusalem (Ps 96:9).

It is in Christ and the New Testament that the implications of our common humanity are fully worked out. We see this first in Christ's teachings about the Other. An example of this is the parable of the Good Samaritan. When the Pharisee asks, "Who is my neighbor?"—in other words, who is one of us?—Jesus turns the question on its head and asks, "If your enemy, the Samaritan, is a neighbor to a suffering Jew, who are you?" The Pharisee was forced to admit either that he was indeed a neighbor to the Samaritan, or that he had cut himself off from his fellow Jew.

On another occasion Jesus says, "You have heard that is was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:43-44). War demands that we hate our enemies and brand them as Other. Jesus says, our enemies are Us, not They. Therefore we must love, not oppress and kill these our human brothers and sisters.

It is sin that divides and alienates us from one another. In the fall, humans were alienated from God (Gen 3:8-10), men from women (Gen 3:12,16), brother from brother (Gen 4:8,23), and race from race (Gen 11:9). Moreover, our common humanity extends beyond the fall. We are all sinners in need of redemption. Commenting on Luke's theology of mission, Bosch notes,

> Both the poor and the rich need salvation. At the same time, each person has his or her specific sinfulness and enslavement. The patterns of enslavement differ, which means that the specific sinfulness of the rich is different from that of the poor.... This means that the poor are sinners like everyone else, because ultimately sinfulness is rooted in the human heart. (1991, 104)

This commonness extends to God's invitation to salvation and to the fact that we are all potentially new creations in Christ.

If we start with the view that some people are Other, then all our attempts to build bridges of reconciliation between "us" and "them" will ultimately fail. Beneath all the bridges we build, we know that there is still the chasm of Otherness which will divide us when things go bad. If we begin by realizing that the Other is not Other but Us, we start from biblical reality—from the

If we start with the view that some people are Other, then all our attempts to build bridges of reconciliation between "us" and "them" will fail.

fact that we *are one* humanity, no matter how we feel about one another. We can then celebrate our differences because they are secondary—because we know that no matter the misunderstandings and tensions that may arise, underneath we *are* still one. We can then begin the difficult task of bringing our mental images and social structures into line with that reality.

One church. The Scriptures lead us to a second startling conclusion: *in the church there are no others—there are only us.* Peter's amazement at what was taking place can be detected in his words in the house of Cornelius, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality!" (Acts 10:34) The unity of the church is not a product of the Good News, it is an essential part of that Good News.

For Paul, the gospel meant announcing Christ's lordship over all reality and inviting all to submit to him. His theme is "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9, 1 Cor 12:3, Phil 2:11). The good news is that the reign of God, present in Jesus Christ, has brought us all together under judgment and has in the same act brought us all together under grace. It should not surprise us that in Paul's churches Jews, Greeks, barbarians, Thracians, Egyptians, and Romans were able to feel at home. This mutual acceptance of Jews and Gentiles was itself a testimony to the world of the transforming power of the gospel.

We in Christ *are* one body (Eph 4:4), one family. We do not need to build the unity of the church. God has already done that. What we need to do is to express that unity in our lives and in our churches. This unity underlies the human distinctions of ethnicity (Gal 2:11-21), class (1 Cor 10:1-11) and gender (Gal 3:28, Acts 2:44f., 4:32). It is not simply an abstract, spiritual principle. It must be lived in real human communities in which reconciliation between ethnic groups, classes and genders is manifest. Bosch notes,

> Conversion does not pertain merely to an individual's act of conviction and commitment; it moves the believer into the community of believers and involves a real—even radical—change in the life of the believer, which carries with it moral responsibilities that distinguish Christians from "outsiders" while at the same time stressing their obligation to those "outsiders." (1991, 117)

But this is no ordinary family, no human community. In world religions, the gods demand the service of their worshippers, who must feed and clothe them, take them on processions, and offer sacrifices to them. In the church it is God who descends to identify himself with his creation, washes the feet of his disciples, offers himself as their sacrifice, and invites them to a banquet in which he himself is the meal! From a human point of view this is incomprehensible.

In the world, we form clubs and corporations, but these are not true communities. It is the true nature of the church to manifest *koinonia*. In it the leaders are to be servants,

the rich to give their wealth to the poor, and the powerful to empower the weak and oppressed. In short, its social order is an inverted hierarchy (Mk 10:35-37) in which serving ranks higher than being served (John 13:14-15), and ministering to others higher than being ministered to. In such a community, we have true oneness and fellowship.

One mission. Finally, let me venture that the Scripture leads us to a third startling conclusion: *we are our Others' keepers because they are not 'others' but 'us.'* In Christ we are called to love and serve our fellow humans in need. This lies at the heart of Christian mission. We are not ministering to 'monsters,' 'infidels,' 'primitives,' 'pagans' or 'natives,' we are serving those created in God's image, and called to be saints. It changes our attitudes in ministry when we see broken humans not simply as sinners like ourselves, but also as potential saints in the kingdom of God, perfect and free.

This raises a difficult question. Which is deeper, our identity as humans or our identity as Christians? If we see our deepest identity as 'Christians' over against 'Non-Christians,' in missions we will always see ourselves and we will be outsiders. We will see the expansion of Christianity in triumphalist terms, as a conquest of the enemy.

I believe that in missions we must identify with people in our common humanity. We are all humans, created in the image of God, fallen, and redeemable. Just as Christ identified with us in our sinful state, so we are called to be one with those who need salvation. Only then will we model an incarnational mission in our identification with the poor, oppressed, and lost. Only then will we avoid the arrogance and colonialism that too often has characterized missions. Bosch notes,

> We are not the 'haves,' the *beati possidentes*, standing over against spiritual 'have nots,' the *massa damnata*. We are all recipients of the same mercy, sharing in the same mystery. (Bosch 1991, 484)

We must go in an attitude of humility because Christian faith is a religion of grace which is freely received, and it finds its center in the cross which judges us also.

The church must refuse to understand itself as a sectarian group. It is actively engaged in a mission to those still outside the pale of the gospel. To become a disciple means a decisive and irrevocable turning to both God and neighbor. Mission is to us as well as to our neighbor.

But the church is not only called to identify with the world, it is also called to be a prophetic community calling people into the kingdom of God. Berkhof notes, "[T]he church can be missionary only if its being-in-the-world is, at the same time, a being-different-from-the-world" (Berkhof 1979: 415, translated by Bosch, p. 386). This lies at the heart of mission. We cannot ignore the plight of our fellow humans, nor are we content to simply sit and commiserate with them about our common condition. We want to share the good news of hope and salvation that was given to us, with a world lost in evil and despair.

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Response to Hiebert, "Are We Our Others' Keepers?"

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This paper shows in a very creative way the use of theoretical anthropology at the service of both historical analysis and constructive theology. The provocative analysis of the "other" in the Western theological tradition invites theologians to evaluate the relational implications of their anthropological assumptions in the light of biblical models of relationships. This is against the backdrop of the enslavement of theology, especially theology of missions, to the Western cultural view of the "other," which is tainted by what Johannes Fabian calls the "us and them" distancing, which negates mutual relationships. Professor Hiebert is reminding theologians that whatever else we might conceive theology to be, it is in the final analysis about transforming relationships.

To the question therefore, Are we our "others'" keepers? The answer is: we are if we view them as we view ourselves, and we are not if we view them as less than ourselves. This is the answer which Professor Hiebert arrived at after his analysis of the "other" as the root paradigm of the theory of mission in the Western theological tradition.

The value of the methodological approach of Professor Hiebert is that by defining mission in terms of human relationships he lifts up a fundamental biblical view of mission which has been lost in the praxis of mission—the idea that in the final analysis mission is about building relationships.

The category of the "other" in existentialist philosophy from Heidegger to Albert Camus represents the significant "other" through whom we affirm and define our existence. And in Camus' *L'Etrange* the tragic hero was a stranger both to himself and his family because he could not see or recognize himself in and through the family from which he receives his identity. As a result he lost himself by losing his family. He became an object to himself and to them because there was a denial of the most basic reciprocity that define us as human beings.

The analysis of the "other" in the theology of mission of the Western tradition shows how a distortion of the humanity of the "other" can lead to the distortion of the

relationship between missionaries and their audience. Such questionable relationships have always raised questions about the integrity of the Christian faith in the eyes of outsiders. These false relationships sometimes negate the most basic human reciprocity which defines our humanity and therefore the primary level of human interaction on which the biblical vision of mission is premised. This distortive relationship makes an authentic Christian fellowship a burden because oftentimes the relationship between the missionary and the converts is based on a false sense of superiority/perfection and inferiority/imperfection, which creates a caste hierarchy of social interaction. This kind of social interaction creates mistrust and false connectedness or psychological and spiritual distancing, that make both the missionary and his message strange to the converts and vice versa. The loss of genuine human reciprocity denies both missionary and converts the opportunity of celebrating together the joy of the transforming power of the gospel that recreates us anew as brothers and sisters in the household of God.

The view of the "other" which destroys genuine Christian fellowship also creates the impression that Christianity is a "white man's religion," or that one must be Western in cultural orientation in order to be Christian. Unfortunately, this view of the relationship to the "other" destroys genuine Christian fellowship and still persists in some missionary circles today. For this reason the challenge of Professor Hiebert's paper is an invitation for all of us to reexamine the paradigms of the "other" which undergird the anthropological presuppositions of our theologies.

The challenge of this paper should not lead us blindly into the luring hands of what Professor Hiebert describes as the "unfathomable anthropology" of post modernism,

Whatever else we might conceive theology to be, it is in the final analysis about transforming relationships.

which leads to an anthropological "solipsism," the kind of nihilism that destroys human connectedness and community. Instead Prof. Hiebert directs our attention to the rich concepts and categories of biblical faith which can help us to define the "other" as brother or sister, relative and kinsman or kinswoman, to whom we are bound together by the love of God in Christ, a neighbor we are called to serve and love as Christ loved us. This kind of definition of the "other" will make it possible for us to receive God's gift of transformation from those we serve, who, though they may be strangers, have become our relatives, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Mission in the Gospel of Mark

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This article was first presented as a lecture to the United States Catholic Mission Association in St. Louis in October, 1994.

The Gospel of Mark has a radical approach to mission—a sort of stripped down version of Christianity for ready movement, lean and hungry for mission. No other New Testament document is so thoroughly oriented to mission. Some New Testament documents show how to secure a movement through expansion (Acts). Others show how to consolidate a mission into stationary communities (most of Paul's letters). Still others show how to maintain and guard already-established communities (Matthew, 1 Peter, the Pastoral Epistles). By contrast, Mark is bent toward mission in a radical way—not only in terms of what Mark does include about mission, but also, as we shall see, in terms of what he does not include about communal formation. Mark believed that the followers of Jesus had to reach the ends of the earth with the message of the kingdom before Jesus' very imminent return. Therefore, Mark discourages the movement from settling in. All aspects of Mark's narrative world were put in the service of his approach to mission—the view of God, the experience of time and space, the vision of the kingdom, the understanding of the work of Jesus, ethics, organization, ritual, and practice. Mark depicts a Jesus movement oriented to mission, and Mark fosters in readers an orientation to mission.

Radical movements are seldom practical in the usual sense of the word. Because of Mark's apocalyptic expectation of the end of the world, we may find that much of Mark's view of mission will not apply to our time. On the other hand, it may be very appropriate to some mission contexts. In any case, an unblinking look at such a radical view of mission in the Gospel of Mark can be both sobering and salutary for all of us.

The realm of God as transformation for mission

From Mark's perspective, a fundamental transformation is necessary in order for people to be oriented toward mission.

Anthropologist Jonathan Smith tells us that there are two fundamental orientations to life—finding power from affirming one's place or finding power from crossing boundaries (Smith, 1970, 1972).[1] On the one hand, we may get our power from the expe-

rience of having a place for everything and having everything in its place. This is a stance concerned with keeping people in place and with guarding boundaries to preserve order. Such order can be a source of grace and power, but it can also be oppressive, confining, and excluding of certain people. On the other hand, Smith argues, we may get and express our power by crossing boundaries in order to break out of the confines, to gain freedom. This is a stance concerned with resisting oppression and with relating to people who have been considered out of bounds. Such boundary-crossing can be a source of grace and power, but it can also lead to chaos. The shift from being a person who stays in place to becoming a person who crosses boundaries is a conversion at the most fundamental human level. To make such a change, Smith argues, "is to totally change one's symbols and to inhabit a different world."

Such a reorientation is exactly what happens in Mark's story with the arrival of the realm of God. The realm of God breaks in. Many people resist—the scribes, the Pharisees, the elders and the high priests. These are place-oriented people. To them the Jesus movement seems to be all out of place, and so they seek to suppress the new elements that are out of bounds. But for others, the realm of God breaks in with such power and magnificence that it ruptures their whole way of thinking about the world (Berger). For those who embrace the realm of God, there is an end of this world and the embrace of a new world, a new view of God, a fresh grasp of the human condition, a new realization of human possibilities, and a changed set of values (Berger and Luckman).[2] Those who follow Jesus leave family and societal constraints, and they engage in mission.

In ancient society, the creation of a people in mission involved a fundamental reorientation to life. Ancient society, in particular the agricultural society of Palestine, was basically a stable society made up of in-groups existing side by side. Families lived on the same land, in the same village, and in the same abode over many generations. People were inculturated into their in-group and were seldom exposed to other cultures. People got their identity from their group and were deeply embedded in the community to which they belonged—their family, their village, their religious and cultural life together (Malina, 1993). The survival of the group depended on everyone knowing their place and staying in it. Even if a person wanted to break out, there was nowhere to go, since another in-group would not trust or accept outsiders. There was little mobility in ancient Palestine. Because travel was threatening, villagers would travel together as groups to the markets of cities. As villages, they would pilgrimage in caravans to the feasts in Jerusalem. There was simply no security outside the in-group. It was best for people to stay in place where they belonged. Therefore, the problem Jesus had was how to move people from being radically oriented to staying in place to being radically oriented to mission (Malina, 1994). To understand this problem, imagine, for example, trying to convince some Amish people to completely uproot from their community and their land in order to become seasonal workers or itinerant missionaries.

Thus, Jesus' invitation to the disciples to enter mission entailed a radical reorienta-

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[1] Smith calls the stay-in-place approach to boundaries a "locative stance" and the boundary-crossing approach the "utopian stance."

[2] Berger and Luckman refer to such a conversion as "resocialization at the primary level."

In Mark, the vision of God's realm is concerned with the restoration of human beings to their proper place in creation.

tion at a fundamental level. At the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus announces: "The time has been fulfilled, and the realm of God has arrived. Repent [change the mind], and trust the good news" (1:15). This statement represents an apocalyptic declaration announcing the end of one world and the beginning of another. "Repent," turn from the former way of being in the world, and "Trust the good news," enter a whole new way of being in the world. Jesus' subsequent words to the fishermen make clear the missionary impetus of this new world: "Follow me and I will make you become fishers for people" (1:17).

The realm of God had to be mission, because God was doing something new in the world and because God was doing it for everyone. For Mark, God was acting in a way God had not acted before. Power was available in a way power had not been available before. The arrival of God's realm meant that God was taking active rulership over the world, over creation. In Mark, the vision of God's realm is concerned with nothing less than the restoration of human beings to their proper place in creation. The mission for Mark is the restoration of creation. In creation, God set humans under God and over the rest of the created order. But now the creation is all awry—demons dominate and possess, illness renders people unclean, maladies diminish human capacity, nature threatens human life with storms on the sea and a lack of food in the desert, the leaders of the nation oppress people, and the Roman empire oppresses Israel. People ought to be under God and over the rest of the created order; instead, people are oppressed at every turn. However, the arrival of God's realm rectifies this. The realm of God restores people to their proper place by making available the power of God over all non-human forces that oppress people.

So, when Jesus enters Capernaum and encounters a demoniac, the unclean spirit asks him, "Did you come to destroy us?" Jesus answers by telling the demon to "Be quiet and come out of him" (1:21-28). This is a concrete instance, the first in Mark, of God taking rulership over creation. And the whole story of Mark which follows this event is a display of God's growing and spreading rulership over creation. God's agent Jesus assumes authority over every non-human form of oppression; he binds Satan, drives out demons, heals the sick, pardons sins, cleanses lepers, restores the incapacitated, calms storms, and raises the dead. Jesus does not just oppose a particular form of oppression; he opposes oppression as such. God's realm was a new order of wholeness and freedom from oppression first in Israel and then among the nations (7:27; 13:10). Of course it had to be mission. Hence, when Peter wants to linger and enjoy the honor Jesus is getting from being a healer in Capernaum, Jesus says, "Let's go on to the next towns so I might proclaim there too, for that is why I came out" (1:38). The inauguration of the realm of God calls for a people in motion.

Such movement required a transformation. In Mark, the portrayal of reluctant and resisting disciples shows the difficulty

of making such a transformation. In his book, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*, novelist Reynolds Price writes about his own life, how a catastrophic long term illness shattered his former life. His advice to others is that when such an illness strikes, you can never go back to being the same person that you were before. So the sooner you are able to give up trying to recover the old self, the sooner you will be able to put your energies to creating a new self that will emerge in coping with the illness. In a sense, the arrival of God's realm is like such a catastrophic illness, but the opposite of a "catastrophic illness." It is "catastrophic healing." The realm of God has the effect of shattering the old self and creating a new self. The sooner we die to the old self, the sooner God can get on with the apocalyptic reconstruction of ourselves and our world.

We now turn to look at four aspects of mission in Mark which relate to this fundamental reorientation from an in-place mentality to a boundary-crossing mentality: Mark's view of God, the nature of the Jesus movement, the structure of the Jesus movement, and the ethics of mission.

Mark's view of God

God is the most significant force in Mark's narrative. Although the figures of Jesus and the disciples take immediate center stage in the drama, Mark's God lurks everywhere in the background and in the foreground. God is the force which drives the whole plot. God prophesied the powerful words through Isaiah (1:2-3). God sent John (1:2-4). God ripped apart the heavens (1:10). God sent the Holy Spirit upon Jesus (1:10). God anointed Jesus to usher in the realm of God. Jesus proclaims the good news about God (1:11, 15). It is God who empowers Jesus and the disciples to heal, drive out demons, control nature, pardon sins, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers. God has initiated God's realm, and God brings the increase of that realm. And it is God who will establish the realm in power when Jesus returns on God's right hand within a generation. To be in mission is to be God-centered.

The key is not just that God is significant but that God is acting in a new way. The dramatic arrival of God's realm in Mark ruptures the conventional conception of God and creates a new understanding of God. For Mark, God shifts from being a God who stays in place to being a God who crosses boundaries. In Mark's story, the leaders of Israel hold a view of God as a God in place. For them, God is defined in terms of "holiness by separation," a God who is holy by virtue of separating from all that is unclean, a God who will withdraw in the presence of the pernicious threat of impurity.[3] It is the role of the leaders to guard this holiness of God from defilement. Therefore, the temple is to be kept pure or God will withdraw. The land is not to be polluted or God will withdraw. The people are not to be defiled or God will withdraw. God is a being in place, and God's people are to guard God's place. (Neyrey, 1986; Malina; Malina and Rohrbaugh)

The arrival of the realm of God shatters this orientation and brings a new understanding of God, a view of God as one who crosses boundaries (Rhoads, 1992). God is not limited to a particular place where God's presence needs to be protected. God is not in retreat. Instead of withdrawing from defilement, now God is actively spreading holiness. The announcement of God's realm portrays God as a boundary-crossing real-

[3]This is especially true in the condemnation of Jesus' blasphemous statements (2:7; 14:63).

ity: God rips open the heavens, crosses the boundary to earth, and sends the Spirit upon Jesus (1:9-11). Later, God rips open the curtain of the temple and leaves the confines of the temple to be available for forgiveness and blessing anywhere people have faith (15:38; 11:22-24). Instead of God withdrawing from defilement, God spreads holiness and wholeness. God is in mission.

For Mark, God shifts from being a God who stays in place to being a God who crosses boundaries.

Our experience of God makes a difference in our behavior. Consider the difference in the God of dogmatic theologians and the God of liberation theologians. The God of the dogmaticians is often a God of being, and their theology of God gives an ordered and systematic description of God's being and God's relation to the world. On the other hand, the liberation theologian develops a constructive theology in a process of action and reflection about a God who is in action and in process. This theology is dependent upon praxis. Or consider the shift that Saul made in his view of God when he became Paul. He changed from being a zealot who guarded God's holiness by getting Christians back in bounds to becoming an itinerant apostle commissioned by God to spread salvation to every part of the world. Similarly, the arrival of the realm of God in Mark brings a shift from a God in place to a God in mission. For us, too, there is a connection between our view of God and the way we live our lives. The bottom line is this: If we are not in mission, it may be because our God is not in mission.

The manifestation of God's realm involved another shift. God can work anywhere. For the leaders in Mark, God works from the established center of power, in Jerusalem where God is in place. From there people are sent out and brought in. But for the Jesus movement in Mark, God is a God of the margins who can work not only from the center of power and wealth but from the periphery, from the edges (Elizondo). The pardon of sins which was centered in the Temple now pops up in Galilee, of all places. The interpretation of the Law which emanated from Jerusalem now appears in the village of Capernaum. The authority in Israel is now granted to a woodworker from Nazareth. This is a God of the margins who acts among people of no social consequence—not among the elites but among the peasants, not with the righteous but with the sinners. This is a God of the margins who appears in the geographical areas of no political consequence—not in Rome but in Israel, not in the city but in the countryside, not in the Temple but in the fields, not in the synagogue but in a house, not in inhabited areas but in the wilderness.

Thus, for Mark, God appears in unexpected places—in the cracks in the system, in the places where the system has broken down, among the people who are out of bounds and out of sorts, among those whom society shuns. It is not at the centers of power or wealth that the realm of God first appears. Just the reverse. The realm of God works from the margins with a challenge to the center. And this again is the bottom line: if we do not expect our God to appear in unexpected places, we will probably not be

in mission. If we are not in mission, it may be because we do not expect God to work in unexpected places.

Furthermore, this sea-change in the view of God radically alters the experience of time and space. Now time is foreshortened; therefore, the mission is urgent. The time for people to see God's realm and respond is limited, for the end of history is coming soon. The disciples are to proclaim the good news to all the Gentile nations before the end comes. The impending future events of promise or threat thus drive the present time forward. This vision of an imminent realm of God in power drives the characters in Mark story. Consider this analogy: if you learned that you were to die in six months, everything would change—priorities, focus, intensity, urgency, and so on. Or imagine you became convinced that ecologically we were facing the end of the world unless the world repented and changed behavior now. You would have to convince people to give up greed and rapacity and to learn cooperative self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good—to change before it was too late. Similarly, for Mark, it is not now the past which determines the present. Rather, it is the future—the promise or threat of the new age—which lures, drags, and pulls the present forward. For Mark, to be in mission is to have a vision of the final coming realm of God, already begun now, and to live for it—indeed, to live the future vision as if it were now.

The experience of space also changes. In Mark's thoroughgoing mission mentality, there are no longer boundaries to be guarded. In Mark's depiction of Israel, Jesus eliminates the internal boundaries of the nation that separated and protected those who were pure from those who were impure. And Jesus eliminates the external boundary that separated Israel from the Gentiles. These boundaries were no longer to be treated as boundaries to be guarded but as lines to be crossed. Mission is a matter of thinking without boundaries—without the kind of boundaries that people make in order to keep some people in and others out, the kind that people draw in legal or de facto ways around neighborhoods, institutions, social groups, national identities, and so on. To be in mission is to cross these boundaries with a vision that transcends them, a vision meant to bring life to those in death, liberation to those in oppression. For Mark, the only boundary left is the extremity of the earth, which the disciples are to reach before the end comes.

So, what drives Jesus and the disciples is that they are agents of God commissioned to enact God's realm everywhere and to invite people to repent and enter the realm of God before the generation is over.

The nature of the Jesus movement in Mark

Just as God is a God of the margins, so the movement is a movement from the margins. Mark may be the only writing in the New Testament written out of a genuinely peasant perspective. Mark depicts the Jesus movement as a peasant movement. This is not a middle class movement seeking to help peasants. There is no middle class in Mark's social world. And no one comes from outside. In Mark, even Jesus does not come from beyond in a visitation from heaven. Rather, he comes from Nazareth of Galilee. He and the disciples are peasants meeting the needs of other peasants for whom the bottom has dropped out. They are peasants challenging the establishment to repent of oppression. They are Galileans, with a vision to transform the whole, calling the Judeans and Jerusalemites to repent. Even when the Jewish followers of Jesus go

to Gentiles, they are obviously not proclaiming from a position of dominance or superiority. In Mark, people do not act as agents of the kingdom from a position of dominance. When Jesus called a rich man to follow him, he first told him to sell everything he had and give the proceeds to the poor. Joseph from Arimathea was a respected member of the council who was seeking the kingdom, and he risked his whole reputation by taking courage and going to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus. If people were not marginalized before they associated with Jesus, they soon became that way.

Just as God was a boundary-crossing figure, so the mission movement is a boundary-crossing movement (Rhoads, 1992). In Mark, the leaders not only had a stay-in-place view of God, they also had a stay-in-place view of people and places. Just as the leaders guarded God's holiness, they also guarded holy places and holy times and the holiness of God's people. So, in Mark, for example, the Pharisees refused to eat with unclean tax collectors and sinners (2:15-17), they guarded the holiness of the Sabbath (3:1-6), and they prohibited eating food which was unclean (7:1-13). The core value behind their commitments was the sentence from the Law, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Such a posture enabled Israel in a very positive way to guard the nation and the religion against erosion from the colonial influence of the Greco-Roman world.

By contrast, the Jesus movement was a boundary-crossing movement of risk. The Jesus movement in Mark rejected the view of holiness by separation and embraced holiness by contagion. Instead of withdrawing from impurity, Jesus crossed boundaries to spread holiness, wholeness, and healing. As God's agent for the realm of God, Jesus makes an onslaught upon defilement with the power of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning of the story, he drives out "unclean spirits" (1:21-28), heals a leper (1:40-45), eats with sinners (2:15-17), heals a man with a withered hand (3:1-6), is touched by a woman with a flow of blood (5:25-34), touches the corpse of a little girl (5:35-43). The culmination occurs when he goes into Gentile territory, encounters a demoniac who lives in the graves, and he drives out a legion of unclean spirits into a herd of pigs! (5:1-20)

But Jesus is not defiled by these contacts. The rule of God reverses the whole process. Jesus touches the leper, but instead of Jesus being rendered unclean by the leper, he cleanses the leper. He touches the woman with the flow of blood, but instead of being defiled by the woman with the flow of blood, he heals her. He touches the dead child, but instead of being polluted by touching a corpse, he raises her to life. Here is a movement invading the territory of impurity and spreading holiness.

This marginalized and boundary-crossing movement depicted in Mark was a wide-open movement that cut across existing boundaries of the society, boundaries which had excluded the sinners, tax collectors, lepers, unclean women, people with unclean spirits, and Gentiles. In Mark, the itinerants who proclaim sow the seeds of the word everywhere (4:1-20), and they let those who hear determine the response to the realm of God.[4] The proclaimers in the

[4]The secrecy motif in Mark may seem contradictory to this theme of sowing the seeds everywhere. The riddles/ parables of Jesus function as boundary mechanisms which draw those who sympathize and thwart those who already oppose the realm of God. Yet Jesus sows these riddles everywhere in the hope that people will hear and look and understand (4:1-33).

The Jesus movement in Mark rejected the view of holiness by separation and embraced holiness by contagion.

movement never limit or determine who is in and who is out. Only the people outside the movement determine the limits by means of their rejection of the movement. What a radical view of boundaries! Jesus says, "Those who are not against us are for us" (9:40)—whether they are part of the Jesus group or not. He adds, "Everyone who gives you a cup of water because you bear the name of the Christ will definitely not lose their reward" (9:41)—not because *they* bear the name of Christ but because *the missioners* whom they receive bear the name of Christ! Thus, Mark does not think in terms of membership of a church, but of participation in the relationships of God's realm.

Some people who are not even part of the movement nevertheless share the values of the realm of God. These are people who are outside the Jesus movement but who are not outside God's realm. For example, the disciples try to stop an exorcist who was exorcising in Jesus' name, "because he was not following us" (9:38). Jesus tells them not to stop him, for "those who are not against us are for us." Then there is the example of the poor widow. Jesus notices the poor widow put two little lepta into the temple treasury. Here is someone who has absolutely no connection with Jesus and does not even know Jesus is watching her. Yet Jesus calls his disciples over and says, "You see this poor widow. I swear to you that she put in more than everyone else, for they gave out of their surplus but she out of her need put in everything she had, her whole living"—her whole life! (12:41-44). That makes her a model figure in the realm of God. Someone unconnected to Jesus is virtually a Christ figure—giving away her life! Jesus is not possessive of his movement, seeks no personal glory from it, has no need to control, and therefore celebrates the realm of God wherever he sees it happening.

This movement is pure mission. The movement does not exist for itself, so there is no consolidating. The movement exists for the world, and anything that inhibits or retards that mission is removed. It is like the "energizer" battery. It just keeps going and going and going. To be sure, Jesus retreats to the privacy of a house or to deserted places for rest, but then he moves on. The idea of mission in Mark is not to bring people in, but rather for the agents of the realm of God to keep on spreading out and to be agents of God's realm wherever people are. There is nothing to bring people into except the relationships of this realm, into the orbit of God's new power—the power for human renewal through exorcism, healing, cleansing, forgiveness, the call to renounce oppression, and the invitation to serve others. The realm of God is a revitalization movement, and the itinerant followers are change agents bringing the life of God's realm to the world.

The structure of the Jesus movement in Mark

I have described the followers of Jesus in Mark as a movement. It would be mislead-

ing to call the followers a community or a group if such depictions implied something stationary. Rather, the followers of Jesus in Mark comprise a "movement," because they are in motion.

What kind of structures will bear the mission of such a movement? Here we get to the heart of Mark's conception of mission. The radical nature of the Jesus movement in Mark may be compared to the movement of St. Francis of Assisi. He enjoined people to own no property (even in common), carry no possessions or money, hold no office, have no status. It was an entirely mobile movement in which members depended on others for their well-being. It was not meant to start a new organization but to renew society. It is amazing that an order ever grew out of it, because, in his rule, St. Francis prohibited everything and anything necessary to establishing an order—property, office, money, rituals, rules of communal order.

Likewise, in Mark's portrayal, Jesus establishes what might best be called a network-community. It has to be community, because in the first century there was no identity apart from community (Malina, 1994). However, this is not a stationary community. In Mark, Jesus does not create organized, stationary communal groups. He does not provide for the twelve to be in a stationary communal situation. Nor do the twelve disciples create separate communal groups in the villages where they proclaim and heal. Mark nowhere depicts communities of Jesus' followers gathering in the villages, except when the traveling missionaries return. There is no formation of stationary communities. Rather, much like St. Francis, Jesus forms a network going out like branches and twigs on a tree—first Jesus at the center, then the disciples whom he sends out by twos to heal and proclaim, and finally those who receive the disciples in their houses. Sometimes those who are healed go around and proclaim on their own, despite Jesus' command for them to be quiet or to go home. Jesus is on the move. The disciples whom he sends out are on the move. As the disciples go from place to place, people receive them in the villages, sympathizers who give them hospitality in their homes. (Theissen, 1978)

Thus, the basic relationships of the movement are relationships of mobility, that is, relationships of hospitality. Jesus says, "There is no one who has left house or sisters or brothers or mother or father or children or fields for me and the good news who will not receive a hundred times as many, now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and fields and persecutions" (10:29-30). The disciples do not leave small children or spouses, nor are they to abandon their responsibilities to parents (7:9-13; 10:19). Yet the new familial acquisitions are not the sharing of possessions among people in a stationary community (as in Acts 2:44-45). Rather, these are the familial relationships that the disciples receive as they go from village to village in the solidarity of hospitality. The disciples experience a reciprocity in hospitality. On the one side, the disciples proclaim and heal; on the other side the recipients offer hospitality—their houses, their families, their fields. For Mark, whoever participates in these relationships is doing the will of God. As Jesus says, "Whoever does the will of God, that is my mother and sister and brother." (3:33-35)

Jesus sends the disciples out so that they have to depend upon these relationships. When Jesus sends the disciples out, he tells them to take nothing on the way except a staff to assist walking—"no bread, no beggar's bag, no coins in the belt, but to strap on sandals and not wear two tunics"

(6:8-9). The disciples have to proclaim and heal; otherwise they will have no way to survive. Without bread or beggar's bag or money, they have to depend on hospitality for food. Without an extra tunic for sleeping out in the cold nights, they have to get hospitality for shelter. With no means to be independent, they have to keep going. They have to proclaim and heal in order to get hospitality!

Not everyone in the network is an itinerant missionary, but everyone is necessary to mission. The story makes a distinction between those who follow Jesus as itinerant missionaries and the suppliants who receive healing or respond positively to the proclamation. Jesus never calls those he heals to leave families and to follow him. There are no strings attached to the healings. Jesus tells people to be quiet and to go home. They may go off and proclaim, but they do so on their own. Or like Simon the leper in Bethany, they may go home and later give hospitality to those followers who are itinerant. It is these people who redefine a sense of "place" for the realm of God, for they do not exclude in any way but rather offer hospitality for Jesus and those who come in his name to their houses.[5]

Thus, in Mark, the relationships of hospitality are relationships of mutual dependence in mission. The healer *and* the person being healed both had to have faith in order for healing to take place. To those who were healed, Jesus said, "Your faith has restored you." Jesus was unable to heal in his home town because people there did not have faith. He could not heal unilaterally. It had to be mutual. The proclaimer had to proclaim for the movement to continue, and the recipient had to give hospitality for the movement to continue. The style of the movement was mutual serving. There was no privilege to the itinerants (the disciples) in comparison to those who received them.

The idea of mission in Mark is not to bring people in, but rather for the agents of the realm of God to keep on spreading out...

Mark often subverts any sense of prerogative on the part of the disciples (Rhoads, 1994) by showing other people carrying out the roles of the disciples better than the disciples do! Besides, both give and both receive. Just as people come to ask for healing, so the disciples go out to ask for lodging.

This is the model Jesus provides in his own relationships with others. He teaches the disciples, and they in turn procure a boat for him, get a donkey for the entrance to Jerusalem, and prepare the Passover meal. Also, just as Jesus served throughout his ministry, so in his time of need others serve Jesus—a woman anoints him, Simon carries his cross, Joseph buries him, and women come to anoint his body. Jesus came to serve, not to be served; however, for those who give it freely in return, Jesus allows himself to be served. In the same way, the disciples give and receive in the places they go.

Thus, itinerant followers make themselves vulnerable to those who receive their

[5] I owe this insight to Margaret Guider.

healing. The disciples who go out to proclaim and heal stay in the houses of the villagers, thereby making themselves vulnerable to those to whom they preach (6:7-12). The proclaimers could even learn and change from those who came for healing. The most striking example of this is the story of the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30). Here is a Gentile woman who wants

> Jesus is not to be worshipped; he is to be followed. People are to have faith in God as Jesus had faith in God.

Jesus to heal her daughter. At first Jesus rejects her request, arguing that the children, the Judeans, should be fed before the benefits of the realm of God should be tossed to the dogs, the Gentiles. But she turns out to be a paragon of God's realm: she wants her daughter healed, she is willing to be least for her daughter, and she argues that even now the puppies under the table should be able to eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table. And she convinces Jesus. Jesus not only sees her as a model, as he does the poor widow, he also learns from the Syrophoenician woman. Indeed, he changes his mind—not only about healing her but about his whole strategy in mission, for after he leaves her he goes back to other Gentile territory, to the Decapolis cf. 5:1-20), and gives bread to 4,000 Gentiles in the desert. What a surprising model for mutual mission: Jesus himself is open to hear the "word" of God from the very person with whom he found himself in mission!

In the realm of God, this network *is* the community for followers of Jesus—the relationships among people who serve each other by giving and receiving. There is no separate community for healers and proclaimers as distinct from recipients. Beyond the relationships of mutual sharing in mobility and hospitality, there are no provisions for the structures of stationary communities. For example, the Markan Jesus prohibits hierarchy. It is a central value of Mark's Jesus that no one is to lord over anyone else. Jesus designates no leaders with authorities over others. The familial relations in Mark are relations of solidarity, not of authority. Followers leave father and mother and sisters and brothers and children, and in the network, they receive mothers and sisters and brothers and children, but no fathers (10:29-30). There are no patriarchal figures in the movement; God is the only Father.[6] People have solidarity in relation to others in the network, but in terms of roles, no one is a father and everyone is a servant, because no one is to lord over another. As Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be most important is to be everyone's slave" (10:43). And there is no communal discipline. Whoever causes another to sin is to cut off their own hand or foot; no one else will exercise discipline over them (9:42-48).

There are also no other features of community. This really is a stripped-down movement. In Mark there are no provisions

[6]There is no mention in Mark of Jesus' father, only his mother and sisters and brothers. For Jesus, in Mark, God is the only Father.

for rituals, such as baptism or eucharist. In Mark, there is no command to repeat baptism. The baptism in Mark is the preparatory baptism of John (1:1-8; 10:35-40). Also, in Mark, there is no command to repeat a eucharist or communal meal. In Mark, the last supper of Jesus is just that, the last meal Jesus had with his disciples before his death (14:22-25). Furthermore, the beliefs are also stripped down. There are no creeds or confessions, except the recognition that Jesus is the anointed one. There is only a call to live for the good news of the realm of God. Jesus is not to be worshipped (10:17-18); he is to be followed. People are to have faith in God as Jesus had faith in God. The concern here is to elicit a committed response to the proclamation of the realm of God. The bottom line is an identification with Jesus and the commitment to act in his name.

To repeat, the Jesus movement depicted in Mark is not a mission to establish stationary communities. There is simply no basis for a stationary community to organize, discipline, exclude, or expel. With no organization, there are no members, no rituals of entrance, and no procedures to maintain the boundaries of the community. Such structures would only make people stationary and thereby retard mission. This is not a mission that exists to establish a church. The community is comprised of the followers and all who benefit from them. In Mark, the Jesus mission exists in a radical way for the world, a renewal movement designed for Israel and the nations with the power and morality of the realm of God. Those who experience God's realm and respond to it will return to their homes and villages and will relate to people in new ways. The goal is not a church but the realm of God in a renewed world in preparation for the imminent establishment of the realm of God in power.

The ethics of mission in Mark

We have indicated that Mark presents a stripped-down version of the Jesus movement—no structures, no rituals, no creeds. The same is true of ethics. There are few laws or rules or regulations. The main ethic is that humans are called to bring good to others and not harm (3:4), that is, to love the neighbor as oneself (12:13-17). Thus, Mark has not so much an ethic of laws and regulation, but a reorientation to serving the other.

However, this is no easy reorientation, because in Mark's view human beings are gripped by self-orientation, fed by the fearful need to secure ourselves. It takes an apocalyptic reorientation to love our neighbor as ourselves. At its deepest level, the reorientation to the realm of God is a Copernican revolution from thinking the things of humans to thinking the things of God (8:33). We are called to give up asking, "What do we want for ourselves? What will we get out of this? How can we secure our lives?" And we are invited to ask: "What does God want people to be? What is best for humans? What is God doing in the world? How can we cooperate with what God is doing?" For Mark, it is the arrival of the realm of God that empowers people to overcome the grip of fearful self-concern and grants people the courage to serve the good news of God's realm. For Mark, in a basic ethical sense, mission occurs anytime we act for the other rather than for ourselves.

For Mark, the fundamental problem of the human condition is anxious self-concern—the orientation to self, rooted in fear, which leads people to secure and protect their lives. In Mark, the authorities are afraid of Jesus, afraid of the crowd, afraid of losing their standing and security with the populace (11:18; 12:12; 14:1-2; 15:10). The

disciples too fear anything that brings threat to them (4:39-41; 9:6; 9:32; 14:50, 66-72). It is fear that drives us—fear of any harm that might come to us, fear of loss of status, fear of loss of control, fear of embarrassment or rejection, fear of financial insecurity. We deal with this anxiety about ourselves by seeking to secure ourselves, that is, by acquiring. We have an ethic of acquisition. We acquire possessions, seek status, try to gain power. If we already have wealth, power, and status, then we work to maintain these things at all costs.

For Mark, this quest to secure ourselves is always at the expense of others. Out of the effort to protect themselves, the political leaders in Mark's story do whatever they have to do to John the Baptist (6:14-29) and Jesus in order to preserve their wealth, their honor, and their positions of power. Out of the effort to secure themselves, the disciples argue with each other about who is greatest (9:34), push away the insignificant little children (10:13), and seek positions of power on Jesus' right and left (10:37). This is the mentality that characterizes the political life in Israel and the nations. Jesus says, "Those who rule the Gentile nations lord over them, and those regarded as great among them exert authority over them." Thus, a life lived in fear designed to secure and to maintain the power and position of the self is a destructive life.

By contrast, the realm of God stands in opposition to the kingdoms of the world. God calls people to an ethic of relinquishment for others. For Mark, having power does not give one either the right to use it or the right to abuse it. Nor is it right to acquire wealth just because one has access to it. The realm of God calls people to lose their lives for Jesus and the good news. As Jesus says to the rich man, "Sell all you have, give to the poor, and come follow me" (10:21). The disciples add, "Look, we have left everything and followed you" (10:28). This is the service for others that should characterize all human relationships and all political order. The followers of Jesus are called to exercise that service for others now in anticipation of the imminent establishment of God's political realm in power. The realm of God calls people to give our life away rather than to accumulate it, to lose my own life as the way to save our lives together. This is an ethic of relinquishment in service to others for God's realm.

But even more. It is not only the anxiety about relinquishing what one leaves behind, there is also fear of what lies ahead. People in mission not only relinquish security, they also face trouble. Jesus says that followers are not only to deny themselves, they are also to take up their cross (8:34). Following Jesus involves confrontation—by crossing boundaries that others are guarding and by confronting oppression wherever it exists. In Mark, what lies ahead is persecution (13:9-13)—being beaten in synagogues, standing before governors and kings, being handed over by family members, and, by implication, all the other things that happened to Jesus—loss, ridicule, rejection, misunderstanding, marginalization, pain, death. If we are to follow Jesus, we must deal with our fear.

These ethical principles cohere with a reorientation from being stationary to being in mission. The ethic of acquisition is a mentality of staying-in-place and accumulating things—money, status, power. By contrast, the ethic of relinquishment is a boundary-crossing mentality of mission, because, in order to go out in mission people leave family and possessions, relinquish their status in a community, and lose control of their lives by being in the territory of another. Jesus says people are to deny themselves—to lay aside all that brings identity in a stationary context and to go

where that identity is not secured. The ethic of relinquishment for the realm of God is an ethic for mission.

How are people empowered to make this reorientation from an ethic of acquisition to an ethic of relinquishment? Mark knows that we cannot embrace an ethic of relinquishment unless we deal with our insecurity. There will be no mission unless we deal with our tenacious fear. For Mark, the key to transformation is faith. In Mark, faith is the opposite of fear. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, only have faith" (5:36) and "Take courage, do not be afraid" (6:50). Faith grants courage. It is faith that enables the apocalyptic reorientation to take place. In Mark, faith is not belief about something. It is the entrusting of oneself to God. The whole first half of the story shows how God brings life. People are amazed at the power present in Jesus' ministry, and amazement at the realm of God is the first sign of transformation to faith.[7] Who could witness the healings, the exorcisms, the calming of storms, the raising of the dead and not recognize that all wholeness, life, and salvation comes from God? For Mark, everything is possible with God, and faith is access to God. Therefore, everything is possible for those who have faith. The activity of the realm of God awakens the courage to overcome fear. If God can do all these things, then we can have faith that God will raise us in the future. Because our future is in God's hands, there is courage to face death in the present. If life and salvation are secure with God, then we can expend our lives now for others. Such faith is the key to relinquishment, the capacity to live without human security, without wealth, status, or power, and with persecution.

And so the whole development of Mark's plot moves toward confrontation with death in Jerusalem. If followers can face death, they can also face all the other lesser deaths amidst life—loss of property, embarrassment, ridicule, rejection, misunderstanding, and persecution. Jesus seeks to prepare the disciples to face death. But Mark's story is ultimately directed to us hearers, to en-courage us to face the fear of death. As hearers, we are heartened by the astounding power of the realm of God to grant life. We see Jesus preparing his disciples for death. We see the death of Jesus, and that experience empowers us to follow in Jesus' way. We experience the greatness of Jesus, all the power he had from God, and the greatness of his faith, his willingness to give up his life for others in obedience to God. We see that he too does not want to die, but at the same time he chooses to do what God wants. We also see the disciples flee in shame and grief. We see the women at the end fleeing the grave in terror and saying nothing to anyone. And, at the end, when all others have failed, we hearers are the only ones left to tell this story. And we are left to ask, "Will we be like the disciples who flee and the women who are silent? Or can we not now be courageous like Jesus in the face of death and proclaim the realm of God despite all?"

In Mark, faith is not belief about something. It is the entrusting of oneself to God.

[7] I owe this insight to Margaret Guider.

Epilogue

We said at the outset that Mark offers a thoroughgoing depiction of mission in the face of the end of the world. Should we judge his view as a unique vision that was relevant only for his time? Or is not our world also in desperate need of such commitment to the kingdom? It is difficult to know how much Mark's own community replicated the network he depicts in the story. By means of his depiction of the Jesus network in mission, Mark could have been reinforcing the community network of his readers, or he could have been fostering a community he hoped his readers would become, or he could have been countering a tendency in his readers to abandon mission. Our only clues to their response is that Christianity did in fact survive and that the Gospel of Mark was preserved with it.

What of our response? Are we not invited in our day to embrace the radical vocation of mission that Mark offers? We are not called to adopt or replicate a biblical lifestyle in a literal way. Nor are we to feel guilty because somehow we have not done mission in the particular way Mark calls for it; his vision may inspire us, but it is not the only biblical view of mission. Nor is there reason to dismiss Mark because his program is somehow impractical for us. Rather, the Gospel of Mark is an invitation to see. We are called to see and to understand Mark, to enter his world and immerse ourselves in it, to see his vision of Jesus and to live with it, to be transformed by it, to be empowered by it, and to emerge from an encounter with Mark's world ready to ask what difference this experience of Jesus will make in the vocation of our lives and in the mission of our communities.

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Why John Wrote the Apocalypse (Rev 1:9)

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John on Patmos

Symeon is the youngest and perhaps the most mystical of the monks inhabiting the Monastery of St. John the theologian on the island of Patmos. For the past four summers he has graciously served as my link to the people, icons, manuscripts and liturgical celebrations of the monastery.

One day I asked for his opinion on a point recently debated in some Western circles. "What do you think, Symeon? Did John really come to Patmos as a prisoner of the Romans, or did he select Patmos as place of spiritual retreat and arrive here under his own steam?" Without hesitating Symeon answered, "We know he came as a prisoner." "Really?" I asked, "How can you be so sure?" His soft but firm reply: "We have his chains."

And so they do. Symeon took me to the chapel of Holy Christodoulos. Along one wall of the narrow chapel is the entire body of Christodoulos, who founded the monastery in 1088. On another wall is a glass-covered case displaying the skulls of Makarios, Philip the Deacon and (doubting) Thomas. In the same case with the skulls are a few feet of very ancient chain. For Symeon and his fellow monks, that settles the matter. As it does for many.

During the last week in September, 1995, hundreds of clerics, professors and laypeople will gather on Patmos at the invitation of the Monastery of St. John the Theologian to celebrate the 1900th anniversary of the Revelation of John. 1900th anniversary? Yes. Late in the 2nd century, Irenaeus gave it as his opinion that John was exiled to Patmos in a time of Roman persecution "near the end of the reign of Domitian" (Eusebius, *Eccl. History* 3.18.3). Domitian reigned A.D. 81-96, and so for centuries now, the year 95 has been the traditional date of John's visions. And Roman persecution under Domitian has enjoyed the status of unquestioned dogma in discussions of the situation in which the Apocalypse was born.

Traditional scenario: persecution

The Book of Revelation explicitly names the author and seems clear and straightforward about his circumstances and those of his readers: "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the persecution (Gk: θλιψις = distress or trouble of some sort) and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of

the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." (Rev 1:9 NRSV)

The "persecution" named in John's sentence has with few exceptions been understood as the result of the egomaniacal insistence on the part of Domitian that he be addressed as "Lord and God" and that he be worshiped as divine in a significantly expanded emperor cult. His fresh demands are supposed to have precipitated a crisis among Christians throughout the empire but especially in Asia Minor.

In the seven cities, according to this scenario, John led the Christian opposition. Because of his outspokenness, he fell victim to state-sponsored Roman persecution directed at all who refused to honor the emperor as he demanded. Antipas (Rev 2:13) and perhaps others also were martyred, while John (because of his social prominence or connections?) was merely exiled to Patmos. John wrote to his fellow Christians, urging them not to bend in their opposition to the emperor but to remain wholeheartedly devoted to God and to the Lamb. In his visions he foresaw the annihilation of the seemingly invincible Roman Empire together with all that this old world counts as firm and secure. The Lord is coming and will reward the saints and martyrs with life in the New Jerusalem.

This view has held sway for nearly two millennia. In spite of loud and often bitter argument on every other topic relating to Revelation, a near miraculous harmony has prevailed among interpreters from the beginning right up to the very recent past on this one point.

It is not only in Eastern Orthodoxy on Patmos that Revelation is thought to be a Christian response to Roman persecution. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1527) brilliantly represented the Western tradition of interpretation in 15 celebrated woodcuts illustrating the Book of Revelation. He produced his woodcuts almost exactly 500 years ago (1498) at Nuremberg in pre-Reformation Germany.

The first of the woodcuts, by no means as famous as his rendering of the Four Horsemen, is reproduced on these pages in reduced size. It shows John squatting in a cauldron of boiling oil in the presence of the Emperor Domitian at Rome. According to the apocryphal Acts of John, this effort to snuff out the Seer's life failed because of divine intervention, and so John was remanded to the island of Patmos.



Detail from Albrecht Dürer's woodcut depicting the attempt to boil John in oil (early apocryphal story).

Alternative scenario

An alternative view of Revelation has been circulating for a relatively short time. In this view, John's primary purpose in writing the Apocalypse was not to comfort the persecuted but to blast the comfortable. His prophetic eye saw the majority of Christians all too easily adjusting their lives to the everyday realities of the Roman Empire, skillfully finding ways to avoid irritating the powers that be, happily participating both in Christian community and in the social, economic and political life of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicia.

A tiny minority, like Antipas (2:13) and John himself, saw Rome as "Babylon" (Rev 17:5; 18:1-24), destroyer of Christian faith and Christian life. Rome was a beast, like one of Daniel's nightmare empires, the tool of the Dragon (Revelation 12-13), the ancient enemy of God and of the people of God.

John condemned Rome/Babylon, not because Rome was persecuting Christians but because Rome was seducing Christians, drawing Christians into the orbit of her life and values. So he pictured Rome as "the mother of whores" (Rev 17:5), the great seductress. Those who were at home in Roman society and Roman culture, John said, were "committing fornication" with her (18:3,8). They were "in bed" with Rome, accepting the favors of the Roman system and Roman civilization, and their payoff was prosperity (18:3, 7, 9, 13, 19).

What did the Seer see? The bright and potent allure of Roman culture and Roman customs and Roman civilization. He saw Christians adjusting and accommodating to Roman power and Roman ways. And most of all, he saw Christian leaders who disagreed with his perception. For them he reserved his harshest words, calling them "false prophets" and worse. More on that in a moment.

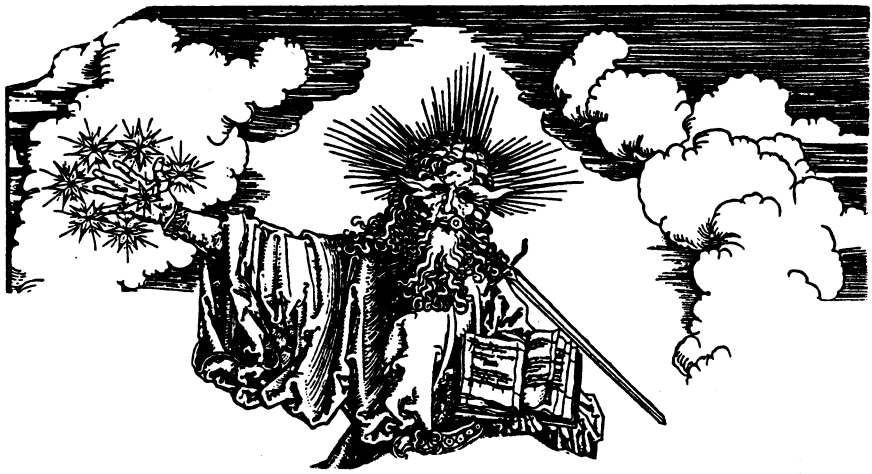
What's the evidence? John speaks in vague traditional terms about persecution, but he offers vivid details supporting the alternative scenario. The seven letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3) are an integral part of the inaugural vision of the Seer (Rev 1:10–3:22). The opening section of the vision communicates the Seer's fundamental conviction: the seven churches are in the hand of the crucified and risen Christ who far transcends any merely human authority. His face shines like the sun, he holds in his hand the keys of death and grave, and his tongue is like a sharp two-edged sword, so the churches had better listen!

The resurrected One commands the Seer: "Write!" And the Christ then dictates the seven letters, which sharply communicate the Seer's own fundamental convictions regarding the spiritual condition of the seven churches.

Placed prominently at the beginning of Revelation, the letters are a lens through which readers should approach everything that follows. Unfortunately the modern reading experience is directed less by the Seer's guiding hand than by the tradition that Revelation is all about an evil empire persecuting innocent Christian people.

What do the seven letters to the seven churches say? Hardly a peep about any struggle between Church and Empire, but revelation upon revelation about a battle inside the church between warring factions of Christians.

The letters blast Christians who have found comfortable niches for themselves in the dominant culture of Asia Minor. John condemns the posture of those Christians in acid terms. He stigmatizes their various accommodations by applying to them the most ferocious terms used by the prophets



John is certainly sharp-tongued, and it is no surprise that in his initial vision he pictures Christ with a two-edged sword proceeding from his mouth.

in the old biblical tradition. They are guilty, he says, of "eating food sacrificed to idols" and of "practicing fornication" (Rev 2:14, 20). People who do such things will never be numbered among the redeemed and will be barred from entering the new Jerusalem.

"Eating meat offered to idols" and "practicing fornication" were recognized code words for the kind of participation in pagan culture which blurred the distinction between God and idols, in effect betraying God and denying one's faith. In the eyes of John, the teaching or behavior of fellow Christian leaders who disagreed with him was not simply different; it was deviant. It transgressed the boundaries between good and evil, truth and the lie.

John and other Christian prophets

The "deviant" Christians had their leaders. John mentions some of them. At Ephesus some claim to be "apostles," but John says they are "false" (2:2). At Thyatira a woman calls herself a "prophet," but John calls her "Jezebel" (2:20). These leaders teach the accommodationist doctrine which the Seer labels "the teaching of Balaam" (2:14) which is also called "the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (2:6, 15).

John never calls these other Christian leaders by their real names, unless they called themselves Nicolaitans (followers or descendants of Nicolaus, Acts 6:5?). John indulges in ferocious name calling. As far as he was concerned, those other Christian leaders, whatever their real names, were all "Balaams" and "Jezebels."

Unfortunately we do not have access to the teaching of these Balaams and Jezebels in their own words. Or do we? We possess some remarkable testimonies from Christian contemporaries of John. It came to me with a jolt resembling a revelation when I first really noticed that John was not the only vocal Christian leader at work in Asia Minor in the second half of the first century. Other Christian writings besides Revelation were in circulation.

For example, the First Epistle of Peter is addressed to Christians living in "Pontus,

Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet 1:1). "Asia" includes all seven of the churches of Revelation, and the other provinces named are close by. It is no certainty, but it is widely believed today that "Peter" is a pseudonym for an unknown Christian living at the end of the first century. In other words this "Peter" was a contemporary of the author of Revelation, and he says in his conclusion that he is writing from "Babylon" or Rome (1 Pet 5:13; cf. Rev 17:5, 18; cf. 2 Tim 1:17).

Like 1 Peter, the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Timothy and Titus) are commonly thought to be pseudonymous works written around the end of the first century. Like Revelation and 1 Peter, these letters also have connections with the cities and provinces of Asia Minor (Ephesus in 1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 1:18; 4:12; Miletus in 2 Tim 4:20; Asia in 2 Tim 1:15 and Galatia in 2 Tim 4:10).

1 Peter and the Pastorals speak far more positively than Revelation on many facets of life in Asia Minor. While Revelation (14:1-5) praises "virginity" (literal? metaphorical?), they are highly critical of asceticism which "forbids marriage and commands abstinence from foods which God has created to be received thankfully" (1 Tim 4:3; 5:14; 1 Pet 3:1-7; Titus 1:15). They speak in detail, not of avoiding marriage but of the duties of spouses to one another and of the relations of parents and children. At a time when celibacy was being promoted in numerous Christian quarters, 1 Timothy advises younger widows to marry and bear children (1 Tim 5:14). Tweaking the noses of teetotalers, Timothy encourages taking a little wine for the stomach's sake (5:23; cf. Romans 14).

Most astonishing of all, 1 Peter and 1 Timothy speak of Roman rule in terms diametrically opposed to those of Revelation. Instead of vilifying Rome as "a harlot drunk with the blood of the saints" (Revelation 17), 1 Peter and 1 Timothy encourage their hearers to accept the authority of the emperors at Rome and of their governors in the provinces (1 Pet 2:13). In Christian freedom readers are exhorted to "honor everyone, love fellow believers, fear God and honor the emperor" (1 Pet 2:17). They should pray for "kings and all who are in high positions" (1 Tim 2:2) and be "subject to rulers and authorities" and obey them (Titus 3:1).

Of course, these documents also have much in common. In terms identical to those of Revelation, 1 Timothy confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16; 1 Tim 6:15). All these authors agree, using one set of words or another, that Jesus alone is "the blessed and only Sovereign" (1 Tim 6:15), even while they disagree in their thinking about the Roman emperor and life in the Roman empire. 1 Peter and 1 Timothy sound less like Revelation and more like Jesus ("Render to Caesar..., Mk 12:17) and Paul ("be subject to the governing authorities..., Rom 13:1).

What's the difference?

What difference does it make whether we picture John in a situation of state persecution or read his apocalypse as part of an inner church controversy? Our viewpoint does have practical consequences for preaching and teaching.

The traditional (persecution) model pictures our earliest Christian ancestors as one big happy family, united among themselves as they faithfully confronted an evil empire. That picture is probably untrue and certainly dangerous.

It is a romantic untruth. It glamorizes early Christians and makes heroes of them all. It can make Christians today feel good

John raises a timely question: What does Christian faith require of us in the context of a secular culture?

(too many people today are desperate to claim their victimhood). Or it can make contemporary Christians feel guilty that we fall so far short of alleged apostolic unity.

Or it may encourage Christians today to think of themselves uncritically as being, like their persecuted ancestors, on the side of God in the great cosmic warfare between God and the dragon. And to be hypercritical of secular culture, and even to demonize "the world" including its arts and laws and sciences.

The traditional view reads John's words as the full truth about the situation in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. John speaks the whole truth and all other voices, inside the church as well as outside, are a lie. Accepting that view might sanction name-calling of the worst sort: everyone in the church who disagrees with John (that is, with our interpretation of John) is a seducer, a Jezebel, a Balaam, since all "real" Christians are united with Michael and his angels—with John and with us—in the war against the dragon.

But the situation, then and now, is actually more interesting than the persecution model suggests. It should be obvious that John's is only one voice among many Christian voices at the end of the first century. Certainly other Christian writings circulated and were read. It is intriguing to imagine the authors of the Pastorals, of 1 Peter, and of Revelation as contemporaries, all three of them active leaders in the same Christian communities in the same place (Asia Minor) at the same time (late in the first century).

Picture John hearing his fellow Christians proclaiming the kind of message found in 1 Peter and the Pastorals. He would have judged them to be too worldly, insufficiently anti-Roman. Theirs could very well be the voices he denounced as "Jezebels" and "Balaams."

Chains or no chains?

Were the churches actually persecuted by a monstrous state? Or was the state with its seductive culture a "killer" of Christian values in the mind of the Seer?

Did John write to encourage Christians hard pressed in the uneven combat between church and empire? I think instead that John wanted to see more of a clash between the church and the state. From John's point of view the churches were too comfortable, too much at home in a culture that he judged to be in league with the dragon.

Whether we like his answer or not, John raises a timely question: What does Christian faith require of us in the context of a secular culture? John's stance is combative, and his tongue is sharper than a two-edged sword. 1 Peter and the Pastorals are more accommodating and speak far more gently. And yet all of them have been included in the pages of our New Testament.

How often we hear the cry that we must be "biblical" in our culture wars. That's fine, as long as we remember that honoring the New Testament means honoring different voices, recognizing that John's is only one stance and only one voice in a very lively chorus.

Preaching To and From the Center, Continued

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Preaching is a means of grace the Spirit employs to create and nurture the Christian life and community. In this series of articles dealing with preaching the power of the gospel, the basic assumption as stated in the first article (*Currents*, February 1995) is that the good in good preaching is the grace of God in Christ the preacher offers the hearers.

The question, "What is the gospel?" was raised in the second article (April 1995). Three basic rhetorical clues mark the preaching of the gospel: God is the subject of the sentence; God is acting in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ; God's benefits of grace in Christ are freely offered to the hearers.

Preaching is the application of the word of God to the hearers today. How does the preacher think about word and the hearers' lives today in a way that the gospel is the center of the whole sermon? Preaching to and from the center is a process of meditation that seeks to apply the power of the gospel in the hearer's situation.

Meditation toward the center involves a "diagnosis" of the hearer's needs as exposed by the preacher on the basis of the critical word of God already at work in the hearer's life. The preacher clarifies why nothing less than the proclamation of God's grace in Christ is necessary for the hearer.

The third article (June 1995) isolated four interactive levels in diagnosis: acts—sin; person—sin; powers—evil; and creation under judgment—God. Beginning with the hearer's behavior, the question "Why?" is employed until it becomes clear why the gospel is necessary in the sermon.

Now we move to consideration of the "prognosis" in which the preacher seeks to clarify how the gospel restores, nurtures, empowers and forms the hearers in their faith lives.

Meditation from the center: prognosis

Meditation from the center involves the intention to proclaim God's unconditional grace in Christ by which the Spirit creates and nurtures the Christian life and community.

Just as the diagnosis of the hearer's needs must be understood by the preacher in four interactive levels, the gospel prognosis also has four levels.

Level 1: God's presence in Christ and the new creation. What is the new creation God works in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Level 2: The new power and order. What is the new order the presence of the

risen Christ works in the world today?

Level 3: New person. Who is the new person the hearer is through the presence of the risen Christ?

Level 4: New behavior. What is the new behavior the hearer can express through the obedience of faith in the presence of the risen Christ?

The specific answers to these questions are determined by the text for the sermon and the circumstances of the hearers today. The task of prognosis is to make the interconnection between God's action in Christ through the Spirit and the response of the hearer in agape love.

Gospel prognosis is inherently more difficult than law diagnosis. Describing the "Inferno," Dante is more graphic and emotionally compelling than when he tells of the "Paradiso." The kingdom of God is eschatological, only realized in part, and then only to the eyes of faith. The gospel is a promise verified for faith in a story that is unique, scandalous, and foolish. The obedience of faith is a hidden discipline. That means the agape quality of Christian behavior also is seen only with the eyes of faith. Close examination of the behavior of saints also would reveal they are sinners. No wonder as preachers we are often long on diagnosis and short on prognosis.

The basic problem in gospel prognosis is the separation of the proclamation of God's deed in Christ from the new life of the Christian. As preachers we tend to separate what should only be distinguished: earth and heaven, faith and love, justification and justice, secular and sacred, kerygma and didache, etc.

Preachers often make an almost unconscious division between sermons that have saving faith as a goal and those that instruct and exhort the Christian life as a goal. The benefits of God's action in Christ are used to achieve the goal of faith. But the preacher appeals only to the will of the hearer, perhaps making some general reference to the Spirit in order to achieve the goal of Christian love. Since most sermons for the church relate to the nurture of the Christian life, the unique benefits of Christ often are never used.

When the continuum and interaction of the four levels of prognosis are severed, all dimensions are in danger of distortion. The gospel is in peril of becoming abstract. Its power is relegated to the next world or simply promulgated as the forgiveness of past failures. But God's unconditional grace in Christ is also the ground and power of the Christian life here and now. "Jesus died for your sins." So what? The answer cannot not simply be: "So heaven is your home." The answer is also: "So everything is new for you."

Conversely the exhortations to "love your enemy" and "forgive seventy times seven"—separated from the source and power of the gospel—can be deadly. The hearer in all honesty could think, "You ask for the impossible." More likely a hearer, too young to have experienced World War II, will domesticate the imperative and assess: "I'm okay. I don't hold any animosity against the Japanese for bombing Pearl Harbor."

The eulogy in a funeral address is a case in point. A Christian burial is a time for eulogy, literally saying the good word. Diagnosis is only implicit. The really good word is God's promise of grace in Christ and how the life of every Christian is an echo of God's grace in Christ. In that sense, the departed saint's life is the text for a funeral sermon.

The problem is that many eulogies separate the virtues and accomplishments of the departed saint from their source and the power of the presence of God's grace. The gospel is abstracted from this world or lim-

ited to the forgiveness of God for human weakness. The secret that determined the identity of the saint and the presence and power that was at work in his life remains a mystery. So the hearer thinks: "He was a good man and so am I" or "I'm not much next to this heroic woman." The implication is that our lives, in the final analysis, are justified by what we do.

I attended a memorial service recently where three eulogies were given for a successful corporation CEO. His virtues and accomplishments truly were many. As the service ended, we sang "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" I was struck by the apparent contradiction between these words and the rest of the service. The eulogists did not make the real connection between this man's self-reliance, sense of fairness, visionary management skills and "Amazing Grace." I don't mean simply witnessing to the assurance for his life beyond or forgiveness for his weaknesses. I mean proclaiming the presence that was his real strength in the exercise of his strengths. Gerard Manley Hopkins urges us to see how the just man

> ...Keeps grace: that keeps all his going graces;
> Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—Christ.
> For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Reading the face of God's grace off the face of the departed saint is often not easy to do. I have buried quite a few Lutherans who never verbally expressed how their faith in God's grace was at work in their work. In some cases they didn't consciously know. But the presence was present nonetheless. With the eyes of faith the preacher meditates on how God's amazing grace shone through the window of this person's life. That is the real eulogy that consoles and frees the hearers.

How does the preacher do gospel prognosis that maintains the continuity and continual interplay between God's action in Christ and the hearer's action in life? One can start from the center and ask: "What is the new reality in Christ and the benefits I am offering the hearer today?" For sermon preparation, start with a pastoral question: "What do I pray the hearer will be and do as a result of her encounter with God in Christ today?" Instead of thinking in terms of the hearer's need, the reflection is God's goal for the hearer. Instead of asking "Why?" the key is asking "How?" What follows is an extended illustration of this process.

> I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. —Phil 4:10-13

The text is actually an instruction in Christian giving and receiving of gifts. Recall from the diagnosis article, the man who forgot to bring flowers to his wife on their 25th anniversary. Assume he and his wife will be in the pew. Their marital problems are too complex, personal, and sensitive to expose directly in a worship service. Keeping them in mind, however, the preacher seeks to discover the secret of the giving and receiving of gifts for people who live in Christ. So the preacher may simply tell

Paul's story and let the Spirit lead the husband and wife to new possibilities. The strategies for application are determined by the situation.

The new behavior— agape gift giving and receiving

In prison in Rome, Paul has received a gift from his beloved congregation in Philippi. He wants the Philippians to understand how people in Christ give gifts and receive them.

Paul accepts the gift as an expression of their partnership in the ministry of the gospel. He actually thanks the Philippians for the joy of that partnership, not the gift itself. This is why he makes it clear he would be "content" with or without the gift. As Christians we are to receive gifts as if we did not need them to be content. We are to give gifts that are parables of the ministry of Christ in the world.

Now the preacher begins to meditate on what these goals of giving and receiving in this manner really entail and how this is possible. What kind of gift giving expresses the ministry of Christ? What is the nature of Paul's contentment? How does this happen to us? A complex meditation is needed to clarify what the goal for the hearer is and how it is possible.

Paul uses the term "contentment," or self-sufficiency, that was the cardinal virtue of the Stoics who lived long before Christ. Contentment is the acceptance, with equanimity, of things as they are. Many people—without the benefit of Christ—say, "What will be will be." Our bodies even produce a kind of anesthesia that induces resignation in the last stages of dying. Such contentment is not a peculiarly Christian virtue, nor the goal of the sermon. There also are unhealthy forms of resignation that signal cynicism and despair.

The cognate "self-sufficiency" also has healthy and unhealthy forms natural to all people. Most successful business people have a large measure of healthy self-reliance. Self-sufficiency can also express an unhealthy avoidance of pain by isolating oneself from other people. The persistent refusal to acknowledge need and to accept help from others is a prescription for burnout.

If the preacher uses Christ to do what a clinician can do just as well, the real benefits of Christ are not offered.

Gift giving is a natural and necessary behavior for human beings. People need to express the power of their being. People need to bond with other people by giving gifts. You do not need the benefits of Christ for this, either.

There are unhealthy forms of gift giving. Gifts can be guilt offerings. They can be designed to control or manipulate others. Or they can be the expression of a pathetic need to be accepted and liked. Psychotherapists do more than most preachers in helping people empower themselves so they can engage in healthy gift giving. If the preacher uses Christ to do what a clinician can do just as well, the real benefits of Christ are not offered. The primary goal of preaching is not achieved.

What then is the primary goal the preacher has in mind for the hearers in terms of behavior? It is a new quality and extension of gift-giving that is impossible apart

from the encounter with the Spirit of the risen Christ. It is agape love.

Paul tells us agape love never ends because this love is of God: God is agape Love. This love "...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7). It extends the boundaries of love that the natural limitations of being human place on the hearer. It is the expression of total freedom from doubt, despair, adversity, guilt, shame and every spiritual bondage. It transforms every other gift into something full of grace.

The behavioral goal of the preacher for the hearer is clear: giving and receiving gifts with agape love. Now ask, "How is such love possible?" Most clinicians doubt that unmotivated love—what Christians call agape love—actually can exist.

Simon Weil observed one reason why human beings are limited in their love for others:

> What we love in other human beings is the hoped-for satisfaction of our desire. We do not love their desire. If what we loved in them was their desire, then we should love them as ourself.

The new person in Christ

No one is more realistic about human limitations than Paul. On what ground did he exhort the Philippians to give agape gifts in total freedom? His own encounter with the risen Christ. The encounter did not simply change how he thought or what he willed to do, but the person he was. Now he was a person in Christ.

Paul takes the stoic virtue contentment—a habit of the heart developed by a fated human being—and sees it as an outcome of a relationship with the risen Christ. The presence of Christ in his own presence makes Paul's body the temple of the Spirit. His life is "in Christ." That changes who he is and what he can do.

So what is new about the self-sufficiency of this new person in Christ? Paul reveals some of this in an earlier section of his letter to the Philippians:

> For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes from faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. —Phil 3:8-9

Paul's self-sufficiency in Christ is paradoxical. By surrendering himself to the righteousness of God given as a gift of grace through Jesus Christ, he became totally self-sufficient. The total surrender to God, the giver of unconditional grace, means freedom from the power of sin, flesh, law, death, principalities and powers. This trust that "I am what I am by the grace of God" is freedom of faith.

The Christian life is obedience to this faith. Every moment is lived in response to God's grace in Christ that compels him to act in freedom. Once he lived by the self-generated power of his will to create meaning, find happiness, be accepted, be a winner, survive death, etc. Now in Christ he lives in the power of the resurrection and shares Christ's sufferings and death (Phil 3:10).

Paul's contentment in Christ reveals a faith that accepts everything that happens as God working for his good. He believes that nothing can separate him from the love of God. This presence of Christ is enough for him whether he is alone in prison, or visited.

Paul calls the Philippians to the obedience of faith. They are bidden in every moment to surrender to God's unconditional grace in Christ and then to act, empowered by that presence. "Let your gift be the expression of the freedom of your faith

as God's grace in Christ compels." The gift itself then becomes a means of grace to those who receive it.

Now let's look again at the forgetful husband sitting in the pew. What does this mean for him? The preacher's goal is not simply to get him to bring flowers to his wife on their next anniversary. Perhaps he should, and it would be good if he did. However, such modification of behavior could be achieved through a system of rewards and punishments with more immediate results. No, the preacher is interested in the possibility that the husband give gifts that have the quality of genuine care and affection. Care happens when a person offers the power of his person for someone for their sake.

But the preacher's goal is not even just to bring about an expression of human care. It is that the gift be given from agape love. Agape love is the quality of a giver's absolute freedom within the gift. Agape is the expression of a person who is content or self-sufficient in every circumstance of life. The person acts in obedience to the faith. The preacher's goal for the hearer is this faith that surrenders unconditionally to the God who is unconditionally good. The unconditional surrender of the hearer to the unconditional grace of God is the ultimate goal.

God's presence in Christ and the new creation

Preachers often fix on a goal that relates to enabling the hearer to cope better in adversity, to realize personal potential, to achieve happiness or "to do the right thing." All of this may happen in response to a sermon. But the ultimate goal is the hearer's unconditional surrender to the unconditional grace of God which produces faith active in agape love.

Now the crux of the prognosis: How can unconditional surrender happen? A sermon is not simply about the subject "Christian gift giving," but itself is a means of God's unconditional grace in Christ. When that takes place and the hearer unconditionally surrenders, Christian gift-giving can happen.

Unconditional surrender can only happen in response to the promise of God's unconditional grace. Paul Tillich sounded this note in his famous sermon, "You Are Accepted." He said: "Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."

If a single condition had to be met by the hearers, they would not be acceptable. That is why Tillich's call is for the total surrender of all self justifying mechanisms by proclaiming, with no ifs, ands or buts, "You are accepted."

This seems easy enough. Just say, "You are accepted." The hearer will accept acceptance. So what's the problem?

Now we are back to the diagnosis which exposed as the ultimate problem the absence and the judgment of God. What makes total surrender a continuing struggle, even for the believer, is the hearer's actual life experience. The hearer's acceptance is at every level of life based on conditions of acceptance. He lives in a world that, at its best, is a moral world based on a system of rewards and punishments. For that world the primary function of religion is to insure that people maintain conditions for acceptance. Most disturbing of all is the warning in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Those who receive God's unlimited forgiveness and don't forgive the neighbor face the judgment of God. How can we unconditionally surrender to the unconditional grace of God when there is no eloquent proof that there can be unconditional

acceptance in this world?

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." (John 3:14a). God authorizes Moses to place a new reality in the midst of an unfaithful people, snake-bitten by the consequence of their lusting for the flesh pots of Egypt. Their only hope was to look away from all that toward the new thing. Somehow God would heal and liberate them.

So now every Sunday the preacher of the gospel proclaims God's new reality through the cross of Christ that heals and liberates the people of God: "...and the Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The incarnation of God in Christ is the new thing. The grace is new as unconditional grace. The truth of God is God's reliability and faithfulness.

"The Kingdom of God is at hand!" That is new. The eschatological rule of God's grace already is at work through Jesus the Christ. The moral world of the elder son (Lk 15:11-32) transcended by the transmoral world to God's unconditional forgiveness, finding the lost and restoring the dead to new life.

"Christ is risen!" That is new. This is the event that confirms God's power in his suffering, self-giving to the world in Jesus is greater than the power of evil and death. The spirit of the God who is crucified and raised from the dead in Christ is present at work in the world. That is new. The Spirit rebirths a person through water and the Word. The Spirit joins the bread and wine with the Body of Christ and creates the Body of Christ in the world. This is the new community where being Jew or Christian, black or white, male or female means nothing. There is one new humanity in Christ. Here the politics of God's unconditional grace are practiced. This all is new.

No wonder Paul declares, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). It is the cross and empty tomb that are the ground for declaring God's unconditional grace, for leading the hearer to live in unconditional surrender to God's goodness.

Maintaining the connection and interaction between God's action in Christ and the hearer's response to that action must be the chief concern for the preacher in gospel prognosis. One way to insure this is to start with the ultimate behavioral goal of the hearer—agape love— and then work back to the gospel source and power. Ask, "How is such love possible?" Agape love is possible when the hearer is free in faith. Such faith is possible because of the presence of God's unconditional grace. Unconditional grace is verified for faith in God's deed in raising Christ from the dead: This is the center that holds all things together.

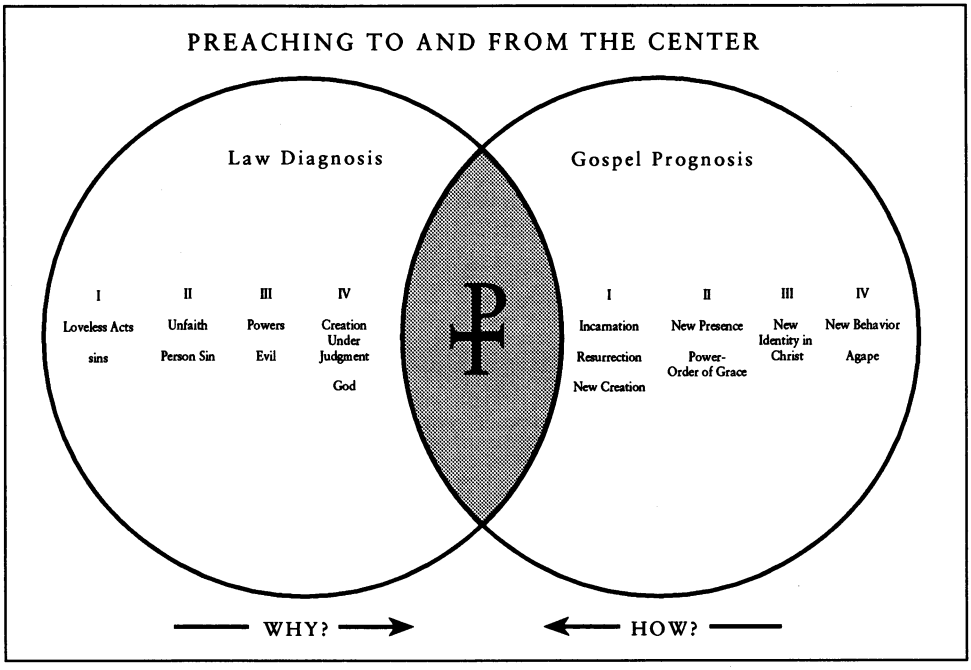
The point of reference that tests this prognosis is the word "new." What is new about the new life, the new person, the new order, the new creation? This question pushes the preacher to maximize the grace of God in Christ on the one hand and the possibilities of the hearer's works of love on the other hand.

Preaching for commitment presupposes preaching from commitment. Before the sermon that calls for total surrender to God's unconditional grace in Christ, there is the preacher's own surrender to this grace. Meditation to and from the center as the spiritual formation of the preacher is the subject of the next article in this series.

The following short devotions* serve as examples of preaching that emerge from meditation to and from the Center:

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*The meditations are from "Echoes of Grace" by Andrew M. Weyermann, Creative Communications for the Parish, St. Louis, MO. 1993; printed by permission.



The Hyphen. St. Paul regards love as God's greatest gift because "Love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8). Everything else passes away; only love remains. Love is eternal, for God is love. Love is the permanent in the midst of the passing.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote of love as a "Hyphen" that remains forever. The relation "lover-beloved" is created by that hyphen which is love. Even if the beloved separates and leaves, what remains is "lover-." The hyphen signals that the love does not end. You can leave a lover, but only the lover can end the love.

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." These words of our Lord on the cross are the hyphen that is the love of God. Though it may be lost in our rejection of God, God's love for us never ends. "As I have loved you, so love one another." Live your life with the hyphen of divine love. By faith we receive the love that never ends. This gift is the source of our power to continue to love even when the one we love may be lost.

Forgetting in spite of remembering. "Why do you keep talking about my past mistakes?" said the husband. "I thought you had forgiven and forgotten."

"I have indeed forgiven and forgotten," said the wife, "but I want to make sure you don't forget that I have forgiven and forgotten."

It's hard to forgive in such a way that resurrection takes place. Resurrection is a life after death that is better than a life before death!

The husband was unfaithful to his wife. An affair of the heart gone awry in a midlife crisis. The special and precious promise was broken. Her trust spilled out on the floor in dismay and anger. How can one begin again? Is resurrection in this situation really possible? Is there a life after this kind of death that is better than the life before?

We say "to forgive is to forget." That's too simple. In a sense we can never forget. Every past mistake is carried with us into the present and can be seen in the lines on our face. There is a sense in which the Nazi-inspired Holocaust in which so many people, mainly Jews, died must be remembered because we human beings are capable of doing such evil again. Forgiveness is forgetting in spite of having to remember.

Holding hands. "Love is patient." George visits his wife, Ruth, in the nursing home almost every day from one to five. Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Ruth recognizes almost no one—except her beloved George. One day I went with George on his visit. As we came into the lounge, Ruth was sitting in a chair, depressed and alone. When she saw George her eyes brightened as she called out, "George. George, I didn't think you were coming."

He hugged her and responded jovially, "You know you can count on my coming. If you can't count on that, what can you count on?"

Ruth seemed to recognize me. We sat down, and George, a great story teller, proceeded to regale us with tales of his war years and work years. But after a short while, I noticed that Ruth had fallen into a deep sleep. What a shame, I thought. "Ruth is asleep," I said to George. "Shall we wake her?"

"Oh, no," he answered confidently. "She always falls asleep. You see, she has trouble sleeping. It must have to do with anxiety and not feeling well. But when I take her hand like this and tell her stories, then the world is all right again, and she falls asleep." I shall always remember that scene: George holding Ruth's hand and, by this patient care, making her world beautiful again.

George comes to the Lord's house every Sunday where, kneeling at the Lord's table, he receives the Presence of Christ for the forgiveness of sin. He will tell you another story—the story of God's grace in his life—if you ask him how he is able to wait with Ruth so patiently.

Willing surrender. There is a difference between a surrender of the will to an inevitable fate and a willing surrender to the invitation of God to participate in his plan of salvation.

The fatalist reasons, what will be, will be. The task is to resign oneself to the inevitable with as little passion as possible.

The mother of our Lord responded differently, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Hers was a willing surrender to the Spirit who empowers.

The angel came with a call, not a prescription. He came with an invitation. Oh, yes, the Lord planned the event before the foundations of the world. Nevertheless, Mary is invited to participate. She could have refused. There is a moment of suspension as Gabriel waits for her answer.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." "Yes, Lord, yes!"

Dag Hammarskjold in his autobiographical work, *Markings*, writes an entry that is headed "Whitsunday 1961":

> I don't know Who—or what—put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

God's advent invitation is first and foremost an invitation not to willful self-salvation but willing surrender to this Spirit over-shadowing us with grace.

Preaching Helps

First Sunday in Advent—Transfiguration Sunday, Series A

On the Lookout

It was a bit unnerving. Garrison Keillor was in the area and had agreed to make an appearance at my home congregation, St. Mark's in San Francisco. A very active committee had labored for months putting together a fabulous fund-raising event to benefit our earthquake-damaged building. Keillor signed on as guest host for the event, scheduled to start at 2 p.m. sharp on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 1995.

At 2:05 a packed church sat waiting. Committee members paced the sidewalk outside, looking anxiously in every direction for any sign of his coming. Joanna, the coordinator, screamed at her husband, "Call his hotel! Tell them it's an emergency!" Inside people restlessly checked their watches.

Just then a small white car nosed into the parking lot. Very slowly Keillor emerged from the vehicle, stretched, closed the door, and took his time moseying toward the front of the church, stopping to glance up at the aging brick facade, arms folded across his chest, brows furrowed.

As though he were ready to settle in for a long unhurried chat, he asked the folks there on the sidewalk outside the church, "So tell me what's wrong with this place."

Looking back, folks marveled that he had driven himself, in fact had insisted on not being picked up or chauffeured. He came his own way and at his own speed with none of the hoopla associated with stardom. No escort. No groupies. No press. No razzle-dazzle. Well, he was wearing his trademark red socks and he sported a matching Pentecost red tie.

All Advents, all arrivals have their own pace, their own tension and excitement, their own significance for those who are on the curb waiting, their own recognition signals. And every person waiting has his or her own answer to the question, "So what's wrong with this place?"

Magi scanned the sky looking for signs, but they had to tilt their heads downward to find in a manger the goal of their hoping. John found himself behind bars and cried out to Jesus, "How can you be my Messiah if I am not free?" Four disciples on the Mount of Olives asked Jesus for the timetable of his coming and for dependable warning signs. They did not want to be caught short any more than we do.

Instead of times and signs Jesus said, "Stay awake!" (Mark 13), "Lift up your heads!" (Luke 21), "Feed the hungry!" (Matthew 25). Those words of Jesus summarize for me the "Little Apocalypse" as it appears in each of the synoptics. And those words are literally "basic" in the sense that they serve as fundamental building blocks for constructing lives for these times and all times.

As we enter Advent (or Advent enters us) this year, we are working with the Revised Common Lectionary. It has been adopted by Augsburg Fortress for all its publications, and we want to make sure we are in sync with its calendars and bulletins.

For this entire Year A, the Year of Matthew, I have asked the people writing the First Readings to focus especially on the Old Testament selection. The October 1989 and 1992 issues of *Currents* carry material on Year A with a greater emphasis on the second reading and the Gospel. (Copies of these issues are still available: send $3 for one or $5 for both to *Currents*, 1100 E. 55th St., Chicago, IL 60615.) It occurred to me that you might be better served if some Old Testament profs would go to work on the First Readings. So far, so good!

Richard Simon Hanson has taught at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, since completing his doctoral work at Harvard in 1963. He has published a number of monographs and articles on the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Hebrew language, and Judaism. His latest work bears the title,

The Grace of God in Jewish Tradition (Mellen Research Univ. Press). An energetic and popular teacher and conference speaker, Professor Hanson here contributes studies both exegetical and pastoral on the Advent and Christmas texts.

Another popular Iowa professor, **Fred Strickert** of Wartburg College in Waverly, has written studies of the texts for Epiphany. Right now (summer 1995) Fred is in Israel. That's where I really first got to know Fred, when we were both digging at Caesarea Maritima some 20 years ago. Fred keeps his teaching fresh in part by his frequent travels in Israel where he continues to work close to the ground. It's delightful to be working together with him once more in this current project.

Jean Lebbert, one of the pastors of Emanuel Lutheran Church in Lodi, California, has written Pastoral Reflections for Epiphany. Jean has a very practical side, evidenced by her service in the Lodi Police Chaplaincy program and in a stewardship task force of the Sierra Pacific Synod. But I asked her to write for these pages because of her poetic and imaginative side. She is in demand at conferences and conventions because of her astonishing gifts as a Bible storyteller and teacher of storytelling.

Lucy Kolin is pastor of Resurrection Lutheran Church in Oakland, California. She has often contributed Pastoral Reflections, but this time I asked her to try something different. "See if you can find some very short quotations, prose or poetry. Something to illumine the season or the Sunday. Something that might give a preacher a fresh angle on the texts." I think she has fulfilled that request very handily. Let me know what you think. I'm always on the lookout for ways to improve these offerings.

Meanwhile, God bless you as you stay on the lookout for signs of Christ's presence and for the full appearing of God's sovereignty.

Robert H. Smith
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First Sunday in Advent
December 3, 1995

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

> *They watch for Christ who are sensitive, eager, apprehensive in mind, who are awake, alive, quick-sighted, zealous in honoring him, who look for him in all that happens, and who would not be surprised, who would not be overagitated or overwhelmed, if they found that he was coming at once....*
>
> —John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4 (Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd.)

First Reading

"The mountain of the House of the Lord" (Isa 2:1-5) was a powerful symbol of God's presence. It was only a little knoll on which Solomon had constructed the first temple, but it came to signify the divine presence in the world of the early Jews. And they would carry that presence to the entire world. The picture of all nations coming to that hill is a picture of world peace.

This vision of world peace (found also in Micah 4:1-5) came out of a time of war, when Assyrian armies conquered all of Israel, all of the little nations of their mideast neighborhood, and destroyed most of the towns of Judah. Visions of peace speak most meaningfully when and where one's world has been at war.

Both New Testament lessons articulate the hope of a new age that was to fulfill this hope for peace. Yet in Mt 24:36-44 the words of Jesus sound like a warning because he used the ancient story of the flood as an analogy. "You do not know the day when your master is coming" makes it clear that the new time coming is the coming of the Lord. It is also the coming of "the son of man," his own enigmatic name for himself. Julia Ward Howe captured the sense of this message for Americans in her "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The coming is for judgment as well as for salvation. In the biblical announcements judgment and salvation almost always come together. Matthew emphasizes the warning, while Rom 13:11-14 emphasizes the positive with its line, "Our salvation is nearer now than it was." It is to be the dawning of a day, yet preceded by struggle that requires the donning of armor.

Psalm 122 speaks of going to the temple on the little hill called Mount Zion. That hill was a hill of hope, and this psalm is the third in a series of psalms sung by pilgrims making their way to the temple there in times long past. In this psalm and in the Isaiah text we see movement, people moving to where the presence of God is felt to be. In the New Testament texts there is also movement, the movement of God's "coming," coming as Judge and Savior.

Pastoral Reflections

The centrality of *peace* in the texts makes that a most inviting theme for preaching. Surely the longing for peace must be somewhere in every human soul. But because it may be easy for most Americans to take it for granted, the preacher may have to portray some of the horrors of war in order to heighten the precious importance of peace.

It is important to show that peace is a miracle, as both the Isaiah text and the psalm make it to be. And being a miracle, it must be brought or wrought by God. It is God who creates peace, who alone provides what makes peace possible, who alone creates salvation, as the Russian choirs sing it. The

word "salvation" is the old Latin word for health or wholeness that means the same as the Hebrew *shalom.* Whether we say it as shalom (peace) or salvation, it is for God to give and for us to receive.

Readiness is central in both of the New Testament texts. How does one get ready for the coming of salvation? Julia Ward Howe says we must allow "the sifting out the hearts of men before the judgment seat" before we can experience "the beauty of the lilies." This means daring to be vulnerable before the searching gaze of the divine eye, open to examination, to purging, to change that may be necessary in our lives and in our societies. To be ready for the truth of salvation one must first be ready for the truth of judgment. Healing is only possible for those who know their need.

The biblical texts all come out of context of widespread stress or suffering. For Isaiah it was the Assyrian invasions that left only one-tenth of the country intact. For the psalmist who composed Psalm 122, both poet and companions were coming out of enforced exile for an all too brief pilgrimage to visit Jerusalem. For Jesus and his generation, it was the time of Roman rule that could so quickly turn ruthless. Such times are now here for many parts of our world today, of course. Yet something can also be said for individuals, families and communities that may make the longing for peace a genuine yearning to which these texts may speak with power. There are many kinds of ordeals that test both strength and patience, where hope for God's judgment and prayers for God's salvation are real. RSH

Second Sunday in Advent December 10, 1995

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

> *The Advent mystery is the beginning of the end of all in us that is not yet Christ.*
>
> —Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration,* c. Abbey of Gethsemani. (Reprinted by Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

First Reading

As we read Isa 11:1-10 we realize that the disaster had occurred. Assyrian armies had swamped the land with destruction and foul boasting. To recapture that moment in history, one should read the succinct account either in Isaiah 36-39 or 2 Kings 17-20. Seeking a metaphor to articulate what had happened, Isaiah portrays a tree that has been cut to its stump. Yet out of that stump, just to the side, a newly sprouted branch appears from its roots. The message of the metaphor is simple: the life of the future grows out of the death of the past. That new growth was the hope of peace.

The prophet's portrayal of peace may seem to be overdone. Is the peaceable kingdom truly to be an alteration of nature that causes predators to cease being predators and carnivores to become grazers of grass? Perhaps the wolf, the leopard, the lion, the bear, the cobra, and the viper were metaphors for human kingdoms that bit and tore at little countries and the little people, who are here represented as the lamb, the goat, the calf, the child, and the cow.

To Isaiah and Micah, the descendants of the great King David were still viable symbols of hope. Somehow out of that line of

messiahs should appear a single messiah who rules as a good king should rule. And how is that? Psalm 72 explains it. We notice as we read that royal psalm that he is not only to protect his country in time of war and guarantee economic well-being for the nation. He will also deliver the needy and the afflicted, take pity on the weak, and understand the preciousness of the poor among his people.

The Gospel portrays John, the announcer of the new age. The emphasis is on the need for judging, purging, and preparation. John's baptism of turning, the simplest word for repentance, was to give way to a harsher cleansing by fire. Baptism, the Greek term for washing, was practiced by Jewish people of that time as a cleansing from impurity, as a preparation for sabbath or other holy occasions, and as a purification for Gentiles who wished to join a Jewish community. But John came proclaiming that even the pious Pharisees needed it. Jew and Gentile alike needed to be cleansed in order to endure the inevitable ordeal of the fire.

It may be important to notice that the cry for "turning" comes out of the desert. This is a theme that runs through both Old and New Testament records.

Romans 15:4-13 is about the universalizing of the Jewish tradition. While most Pharisees considered Judaism an ethnic religion, Paul worked to universalize the message of the messiah. The root from Jesse was to produce peace in a larger community of the world.

Pastoral Reflections

Certainly the hope for universal peace is a major theme in these texts, but along with it are realistic declarations of what that requires from those who want it. In Isa 11:1-10 we catch a glimpse of the ideal ruler, who is filled with the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and reverence for God, one who judges fairly and gives decisions that help the poor, one who "slays the wicked," one who is righteous and faithful. John calls for followers who will produce fruits in keeping with repentance, who will live as persons turned to God. The apostle calls for a spirit of unity in which we accept one another. The psalmist portrays the good king as like the ruler described by Isaiah. Together these texts explain some of what peace requires of us, both citizens and rulers.

Congregations of disciples gathered to learn and practice the teachings of the Master at the beginning of our Christian story. Those congregations seemed to be seedplots for a world of peace. But alas, Christianity fell short of fulfilling the promise, and our history is bloodied by many a war caused by Christians or even declared in the name of the church. The topic raises serious questions about ourselves and our story. It seems that where and whenever Christianity gained political dominance, it lost the ability to demonstrate peace. These texts present the occasion to anticipate the Christmas message of peace on earth.

In a conference "On Peace and Justice" some years ago, a certain speaker asserted that peace is what God gives while justice is what we are required to practice. Peace, explained the speaker, is the wholeness and well-being that rely purely on God's sustaining gifts and divine forgiveness. Justice is in our hands. It is how we must live as governing and governed in order that peace may be shared by all. RSH

Third Sunday in Advent
December 17, 1995

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

Mountains and valleys will have to be prepared;
new highways opened, new protocols declared.
Almost here! God is nearing, in beauty and grace!
All clear ev'ry gateway, in haste, come out in haste!

—Alberto Taulé, trans. Madeleine Forell Marshall, "All Earth is Hopeful," *With One Voice* (Augsburg Fortress), Hymn #629 st. 3.

First Reading

Isaiah 35 again picks up the theme of Mount Zion. It surely was a powerful symbol of God's presence for all Jerusalem's children. The prophet adds to that the powerfully symbolic story of the exodus, of his ancestor's journey from slavery to freedom. He announces a repetition of that event. Once again his people are to experience being the *redeemed*, a term here rooted in the old Israelite custom of requiring that a kinsman provide for the family of a deceased brother. The implication is that God is the great Kinsman.

Psalm 146 connects appropriately to this. Because God is the great provider, we praise God rather than human governments. The Maker of heaven and earth does far more for our providence than any government could. Without the God-given gifts of nature, nothing would exist. Nature's laws transcend all the laws our governments can ever make. This psalm, echoing the lines of the Isaiah passage, helps us to determine priorities of praise.

As God is known by what God does, so persons are known by their deeds. In the Gospel text John asks about Jesus, and Jesus responds by telling John's disciples to report what they see. His deeds were the works of one who redeems.

We need to beware, however, of simplistically repeating what we always say about John. "Are you the one who is to come?" does not necessarily mean that John saw him as the possible messiah. He may have been looking for a successor in his own prophetic mission of preparing people for the wrath to come. He may have been an Elijah looking for an Elisha. If one reads the narrative of Matthew with the relationship of these two men in mind, one sees Jesus adding a judgmental tone to his message after this episode. It appears as though he had to incorporate John's message of warning into his own message of redemption.

James reveals the clear expectation of the early Christians that the One who first came as Prophet (cf. Acts 3:17-26) will return as Messiah (compare 1-2 Thessalonians). In their expectation the followers of Jesus were learning to be patient in their waiting.

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus' coming to enact God's redemption, to be the great Kinsman, is a possible theme for preaching these texts. One can use Lukan material from the opening nativity chapters to enlarge it, material such as the Magnificat or the Song of Simeon. To understand the concept of kinsman, we can appeal to the Book of Ruth in which Boaz plays the role of the kinsman, thus preserving the family and the inheritance of his brother Elimelech and permitting both Naomi and Ruth to fulfill their respective roles in life. The kinsman is

as much an enabler as a savior. The ministry of Jesus was like that. He didn't only save people, be that from blindness, leprosy, guilt, shame, deafness, or madness. He enabled them and the healthy to live lives that respond to the will of God. In the Old Testament texts we see God leading Judah back out of exile to a new beginning that centered around the temple in Jerusalem and the sacred traditions that became the Bible. Through this, the rule of God in their lives came to mean more than the rule of governments, as we read in the psalm for the day.

The twin ministries of Jesus and John were for the purpose of lifting the shame of Israel to glory, of demonstrating that the little has-been nations of Israel and Judah had more to offer the world than the militarily powerful empire of Rome. That John's ministry was a ministry in its own right is shown by the fact that as far away as Alexandria of Egypt and Ephesus of Asia Minor, disciples of John were encountered by the apostle Paul (Acts 18:24–19:7). John, playing the role of the voice that cries in the wilderness, preceded Jesus in the same mission of announcing the approach of the kingdom of God. While John emphasized the necessary judgment, Jesus demonstrated more the power of redemption. Yet the two are remembered as united in a single cause.

Jesus' deeds declare who he is. Surely that is true of all of us. What we do *is* our message to the part of the world that is most nearly around us. In our own various ways we, too, can demonstrate the message of compassion, of healing, of redemption.

The theme of patience and patiently doing what God wants us to do can permit the weaving of a sermon out of James 5:7-10. Since "the times" are in the hand of God, it is for us to do God's will while we wait, be that waiting short or long. This text is simple but worthy, and it fits well with what the prophet John proclaimed. RSH

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 24, 1995

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

> *In the psalms of David, in the words of the prophets, in the dream of Joseph, your promise is spoken, eternal God, and takes flesh at last in the womb of the Virgin. May Emmanuel find welcome in our hearts, take flesh in our lives, and be for all peoples the welcome advent of redemption and grace.*
>
> —*The Roman Missal*, c. 1973, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, Inc. (ICEL).

First Reading

The sign of *Immanuel* requires honest consideration. It is not a prediction of Jesus. If it were that simple, then Jesus' name should have been Immanuel rather than Jesus. We must stop preserving the false notion that the task of the Old Testament prophets was to predict Jesus and that *his* task was to see that what they predicted came true. As we read Isaiah 7 we must notice that its events took place in the years when the powerful Assyrian army was grinding its bloody way southward. As that was occurring the little nations in the path of the invasion were frantically trying various means to avoid its coming. The prophet spoke his words to king Ahaz in order to assure him of the following: (a) God is with us and (b) before the child Immanuel is old enough to know good from bad, the kingdoms of Samaria (=Israel) and Damascus (=Aram) would be taken over by the Assyrian invaders. The prophet was giving simultaneous comfort and warning.

Psalm 24 (*LBW*) joyfully and stubbornly proclaims that God is earth's true Owner and King. It is another version of the Immanuel message. Jesus will, in his time, proclaim the power and the coming of God's kingdom, asserting the same message.

In Matthew 1:18-25 we hear the evangelist choosing the Immanuel sign from Isaiah to explain the significance of Jesus. It was not that no other child preceding Jesus' time had borne the name or represented God's presence. It was only that in Jesus' birth this truth was realized again. Throughout his version of the gospel Matthew points out the various ways in which Jesus relived and fulfilled the story of his people. Jesus was a mini-version of the entire history of his people, living out the truth of the two great collections of sacred literature already completed at the time, the Torah and the Prophets.

Fulfillment means living up to ideas that are present in words but begging to be real. Jesus was living his brief life as a realization of the sacred tradition of his people. That is a major feature of Matthew's telling of the story.

In Romans 1:1-7 we encounter Paul's idea that this fulfillment was not merely for the sake of the survivors of ancient Israel, the Jewish people, but for the sake of all humanity, "to call people from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes through faith." Earlier in Jewish history, in the fifth century B.C.E., there had been those who wanted to universalize the message. The stories of Ruth and Jonah and the 56th chapter of Isaiah are evidence of that. But leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah insisted on ethnic purity. For then, only people of legitimate Jewish heritage could be members of God's people. The apostle Paul understood the brief career of Jesus as indicating God's intention to embrace all humankind.

Pastoral Reflections

It may be that the birth of every child is a sign of God's presence among us, for the child is the gift of life and life comes only from God. Such a sign is all the more dear and significant when it occurs in the midst of war or in the face of death. Every birth is a miracle.

One can use Psalm 24 to articulate a similar message. One can say that the birth of Mary's son was God's claim of ownership and kingship in our world. The claim appears ridiculous, of course, for when we hear the chorus sing, "Lift up your heads, O gates," we expect kettle drums and trumpets of a military band escorting a grand person to the fore. The incongruity of a child emerging from the mother's body in response to such a fanfare adds strength to the image. The fanfare for the child may be a scream from the mother and that, too, adds strength to the image.

Another possible preaching theme is the doubt of King Ahaz in the Isaiah text. "I do not want to put the Lord to the test," he said. But that did not prevent the delivery of the sign. Perhaps all the signs of God's presence come despite our doubts, to counter our doubts. Martin Luther's explanations to the petitions "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" assert the same. Yet doubt can keep us from seeing or accepting the signs.

In connection with the epistle, the preacher should point out that the gospel was already in the messages of the prophets who preceded Jesus. They were not merely predicting gospel. They were preaching it. Jesus reaffirmed and thus fulfilled their gospel, and his followers took it to a larger world. RSH

Christmas Eve
December 24, 1995

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

> *Awake the sleeping world with song,*
> *this is the day the Lord has made.*
> *Assemble here, celestial throng,*
> *in royal splendor come arrayed.*
> *Give earth a glimpse of heavenly bliss,*
> *a teasing taste of what they miss:*
> *sing bliss, sing bliss, sing endless bliss,*
> *sing bliss, sing endless bliss!*
>
> —Jaroslav Vajda, "Before the Marvel of This Night," *With One Voice* (Augsburg Fortress), Hymn #636.

First Reading

Isaiah 9:2-7 comes out of a time when the bad news was especially frightening and dramatic. The kingdom of Israel had been invaded by the powerful and cruel Assyrian militia. Then Galilee had been overrun. The rest of Israel and Judah awaited their portion of the disaster. In the face of this Isaiah spoke words of hope in a truly great poem. The theme itself is powerful: out of darkness shines the light; out of despair, joy; out of the bloodied dust, life. And again in Isaiah, the birth of a child signals this hope. There were four symbolic childbirths for Isaiah: *She'ar-Yashuv*, meaning "a remnant shall return;" *Mahar-shallal-hash-baz*, meaning "the plunder hastens, the loot goes fast;" *Immanu-el*, meaning "God with us," and now, a long name that means "God-of-a-warrior, Father-of-ever, Officer-of-peace, plans a miracle." Psalm 96 echoes the meaning of this birth name in mood and in message.

In Titus 2:11-14 we read a succinct statement of the early Christian message: "Salvation has appeared to all people." Yet this salvation calls for a commitment, for a lifestyle that says "no" to ungodliness and worldly passion, "yes" to redemption, the hope of Christ's appearing, and purification from wickedness.

And this is a commitment to joy, says the great text from Luke 2:1-10. Luke and his fellow followers of the Son of Man from Nazareth saw in the life and teachings of Jesus the promise of a new age, a better world, a purified population. As the text has been cut out of its matrix the climactic line is, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." The stories that follow are the teachings and deeds of the wonder child who amazed the master teachers in the portico of the temple at age twelve, that demonstrate the happy sovereignty of God to the people of Galilee and Perea and even in Jerusalem during his brief adult career. At his birth, however, only the parents and a few shepherds are aware of the special calling of this boy. Jesus emerges out of the little world of humble folk, traditional and faithful but perceptive people from the low income level of society. All the characters in the nativity stories of Luke 1-2 are from that little world.

Pastoral Reflections

The origins of Jesus, his emergence from the humble segment of society, can be a sermon theme. One can say something about perception and how we perceive and who perceives. Perhaps the wealthy tend to look where they see equal wealth, the powerful where they see equal power. Consider how parents might cast their eyes about toward a suitable marriage partner for their son or daughter. Is it not true that our own station in society determines where we look? Only the lowly would perceive a prophet or mes-

siah from lowly origins. How remarkable that a movement as mighty as Christianity has become would begin in such a place as Galilee!

The Galilee itself is a theme in these texts. Isaiah points out that the area first overrun by the Assyrian armies would be where the light would first shine. But then the metaphor of light moves into the theme of joy and rejoicing. This text is a study in contrasts, a recital of opposites. On the one extreme is the darkness of war with its oppression, its enslavement of peoples, its trampling of warriors' boots on the slain, its bloody garments. At the other extreme, the birth of a child and the promise of life, peace, justice and righteousness. This contrast makes the miracle all the more wondrous.

Salvation, a key term in Titus, is another word for the miracle. Whether it be the Greek *soterion* or the Latin term we customarily use, the word means "wholeness, health, a state of vitality." It is quite synonymous to the Hebrew word *shalom*. A newborn child is a fitting symbol. As fragile as that newborn appears to be, that is the miracle of life and peace that contradicts all warring and killing. "To us a child is born" is the opposite of "Let's declare war."

The shepherds of Bethlehem well betoken the ordinary people of earth who do not declare war but are drafted into it as soldiers and victims. That such a group of humble working men should behold the miracle of the newborn Jesus seems an image too beautiful for the mind to contain. It demands weeping, yes, weeping with joy. RSH

The Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Day, dawn December 25, 1995

Psalm 97
Isaiah 62:6-12
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

> *It is true, Lord, it is midnight upon the earth,*
> *moonless night and starved of stars.*
> *But can we forget that You,*
> *the Son of God,*
> *chose to be born precisely at midnight?*
>
> —Dom Helder Camara, "It's midnight," trans J. Gallagher, T. Fuller, T. Conry (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1984).

First Reading

The key lines for the text of Isa 62:6-12 are at the beginning of the chapter: "for Zion's sake... for Jerusalem's sake." There are two things we easily forget about the Jerusalem of the early diaspora, the time of Persians and Greeks as world powers. The first is its smallness and how limited was its importance in the larger world. The "city" was scarcely more than a small town by modern judgments, and it was important only to Jews. Yet for those Jews, be they of the Judean area, of Egypt or Babylon and its trade routes, it was of nearly cosmic importance. Following the construction of its second temple in the days of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and its local leaders, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, it was the center of their religious world and represented the presence of almighty God on earth. Therefore the safety and security of Jerusalem that is promised in vv. 6-9 was a matter of great concern to all the Jews of that ancient middle eastern world.

Yet Jewish people were only one of many minorities in that world now long past.

In vv. 10-12 we read of a miracle that would happen for those people: the miracle of redemption in which their worth to all the rest of the world could be proclaimed—and this is the theme we will find celebrated in the hymnic sections of the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel.

Psalm 97 echoes that theme, proclaiming that Jerusalem's true king is God, the eternal King of all the world.

Titus 3:4-7 is wrapped around the little pronoun "us." Much depends on whom the author meant by that pronoun. Most probably the "us" were the proliferating group of Christian communities. Yet they could be the Jewish component that were the core of those groups. The salvation spoken of here is not that of the Holy City and its temple, however, but of the people whose roots were once there but who are becoming a movement whose spirit is centered in the people themselves, a diaspora of newly vitalized communities.

In the light of the other texts, the central lines of Lk 2:8-20 (or 1-20) should be the angelic hymn of "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors" (NRSV). Earth is placed in contrast to heaven, the place of human dwelling in contrast to divine habitation, the limit of location in contrast to the unlimited presence of infinite God.

The bulk of the story keeps us focused on the specifics of one Jewish family in one small country. And what act could be more local and specific than the offering of a pair of turtledoves to fulfill the requirements stated in Lev 12:6-8? According to the text this was to signify the mother's purification, but there is also the possibility that the purpose of the custom was to avert what contemporary middle easterners call "the evil eye," to distract the angel of death and thus spare the child. The text speaks of "*their* purification" as though the whole family were in need of it following the birth. In Exodus 13 the custom is specifically for the consecration of the firstborn.

Pastoral Reflections

Out of all these texts together there emerges a theme of contrasts, of how something very specific and local can be of universal significance. The redemption of Jerusalem and Mt. Zion, the birth of Jesus and the customs of an old middle eastern community of Jewish people are balanced against the vision of peace and salvation for all the world. Posed as questions, one can ask: How can the redemption of one little sacred city and its temple that was important to one ethnic group in an ancient world... How can the birth and symbolic redemption of one Jewish boy and his mother or parents... be of universal significance or signify the redemption of all humanity? The question itself is a mystery. It remains a mystery because there is no logical answer to the question. It remains both question and mystery, demanding faith rather than rationale or explanation as an answer.

Psalm 97 calls to mind the formula which begins the most common prayers of our Jewish brothers and sisters: "Blessed are you, LORD our God, King of the eternal universe...." Those prayers conclude with such confessional statements as "Creator of the fruit of the vine" or "the One who brings forth bread from the earth." We have adopted that formula in some of the eucharistic prayers of our *LBW*.

One can also develop the theme of Jesus' mission or purpose on earth as that of laying the claim of divine ownership on all persons and on all the world. Again, it is the mystery: that this Jewish boy could make such a mighty claim for his heavenly Father. RSH

The Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Day, morning December 25, 1995

Psalm 98
Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)
John 1:1-14

> *God came to a world which did not mesh,*
> *to heal its tangles, shield its scorn,*
> *In the mystery of the Word made Flesh,*
> *the Maker of the stars was born....*
>
> —Madeleine L'Engle, "A First Coming," in *A Cry Like a Bell* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1987). Revised by Jann Cather Weaver.

First Reading

Isaiah 52:7-10 is one of those extraordinarily lovely passages from Isaiah that can invite response from all who appreciate such artistry of words as well as such hopeful content. In its original historical context it was about the marvelous opportunity that was provided the exiled people of Judah by the great conqueror Cyrus—as God's agent—to return and rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem. It is about the restoration of a city once destroyed, the redemption of a people once shamed, the validation of faith once shaken by grave doubts. So great was the event to the prophet and his people that it seemed worthy of public announcement to all the world. The text is a capsule of joy from a very sensitive time in the history of Judah.

Once again the psalm, Psalm 98, is a perfect response to the text from Isaiah. As a matter of fact, both texts are hymns. They could be read as antiphons, one with the other.

Hebrews 1:1-4 suggests that the event of Jesus' brief life was another moment like that of the return from exile, an unrepeatable display of God's glory, an event of singular consequence. In the life of this son, Mary's son, the stamp of the Creator's ownership of our world was imposed upon all. In this singular life the purification of the world is realized.

John 1:1-14 is also a hymn about divine glory. Volumes have been written about this passage and it is worth consulting the commentaries to find what good things have been said. One is tempted to simply reword it so as to further convey its meaning. In an earlier publication of a dramatic treatment of the Johannine material, I made this attempt:

> I am here to tell you of something
> primeval,
> of something so basic, so elementary,
> so important,
> that I must tell you it is our very
> beginning.
> It is something of God,
> something from God,
> something that is the very expression
> of God from the beginning,
> from before all that we know,
> which brought all else into being.
> It came to us as light in our darkness,
> as life in the midst of our death and
> dying,
> as truth to challenge all our deceptions,
> and yet, as flesh and blood.
>
> —*Journey to Resurrection*, Paulist Press, 1986

Here again we see contrasts and connections between what is small, local and seemingly insignificant and that which is of universal significance.

Pastoral Reflections

As I ponder the preaching of these texts I am reminded of two suggestive sources. One is the career of the great naturalist, Loren Eisely. He spent his life looking at things that are

specific and often small, yet out of that he came to a comprehension of the total ecology of life. He speaks of picking up a single small stone and seeing in that stone the entire universe. In that one specific representation he saw the whole of reality.

Another seer is Isaac Luria, a sixteenth century mystic who gathered disciples in and around the village of Tsefat (Safed on early maps) which crowns a hill in the beautiful upper Galilee. As he sought to understand creation he conceived the notion that in the process of creating, God sort of exploded and became trillions of sparks, each to be found in any of the amazing variety of forms of life and matter that we can encounter. To live religiously, Luria explained, is to live in this awareness, knowing that every encounter may be an encounter with God. He thought that a person can either exist without this awareness and thus miss God's presence in our world or walk in the midst of miracles and wonder.

Both of these examples are akin to what the evangelist was saying about Jesus: that this single Jewish man was somehow the fullness of God revealed. It is beyond understanding. It can be encountered as a mystery that invites the response for faith and praise.

Relating to a parable of Jesus recorded in Matthew 25, this Son of Mary can be met in the reality of our needy fellow humans, who, at the point of our positive response and action, become our way to the Father. RSH

First Sunday after Christmas
December 31, 1995

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

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Collect from Evening Prayer, *LBW*.

First Reading

The trip to Egypt "to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son,'" is an important feature of Matthew's narration. The prophet Hosea, speaking of Israel as God's son in one of the human metaphors for which that prophet was known, implies two things. One is that Jesus was God's son in the same way that all Israel was God's son, chosen from the many who are also God's (cf. Exod 19:5 and similar passages). The second is that Jesus, as a person, represented all of his own people, fulfilling their role and task among the peoples of earth. In Hosea the reference is to coming out of bondage to freedom.

Isaiah 63 also refers to that original event as the prototype of later events. It is a beautiful text, worth reciting for the sheer beauty and poignant truth of its poetry. Particularly moving are such lines as this one: "In all their distress he too was distressed." Considering its original context in the late

chapters of the great Isaiah scroll, it was meant to move its readers' and listeners' emotions. Indeed, all of Isaiah 56-66 is a passionate recital. Chapters 60-66 are a sequence of songs of prayer and gospel.

Psalm 111 (*LBW*) responds to all that is in Isaiah 60-66, though it is less eloquent. Like all acrostic psalms, it is meditative rather than passionate. As hymnody that can assist the outpouring of human feeling the Isaiah songs are more effective.

Galatians 4:4-7 (*LBW*) has long been dear to Lutherans and Protestants. But it is a dangerous text because it can lead us into thinking that *we* know the full scope of human history from beginning to parousia and this, in turn, can move us to pontificating from the pulpit about the great Plan of God. We need to avoid such hubris. We need to understand that all times are mysteries known only to God. It was not that the "fullness of time" was apparent to the apostle and his companions. No, it was a matter of their believing that *God* knew the right time and knows the right time for all things. And what was that time in the sequence of mysteries? It was time to show that through the Jewish son named Jesus we are all offspring of God, that the message of Jesus reveals to us what we most truly are.

Pastoral Reflections

How is a person moved to the point of desiring to say "Abba," which means "daddy" or "father"? One can be trained into saying it by rote, so well that one says it without even thinking. That is not the same as being moved to say it with meaning. To tie the idea to the fast-approaching Christmas gospel, one can speak of joining Jesus in the manger in order to be, as he was, God's child.

Or one can speak of going to Egypt as Jesus did, that is, of entering bondage in order to experience the truth of freedom. Perhaps there are some in the congregation who are, in fact, living in some kind of bondage but need the freedom. Picking up another theme, one can speak of time that is God's time in our communal or individual lives—times that have fully come for us to experience certain transitions or the next necessary stage of our growing. Birth itself is a time set by God, as are all natural times in our world, for God is the source of all that is natural. Things can be said about the differences and the contrasts between the times we try to set for ourselves and the times that can be set only by God. To live by faith is at least partly a matter of living by the times that are determined by God, and one can also say that to live by God's times is to live by grace. It is to be open and obedient to all moments that are given, be they times of testing or times of joy.

A sermon can be built around the character named Joseph, whom Matthew pictures as the dutiful husband of Mary. Like Mary, Joseph was one who allowed God's timing to govern his life. Among Roman Catholic Christians there is the idea of the holy family as a model of three together who do the will of God, Mary as mother, Joseph as father, and Jesus as son, each living obedient to God's will. Joseph is overshadowed by the other two and Mary is overshadowed by her son, yet all did God's will in God's good time.

The epistle text ponders the phrases "born of a woman" and "born under the law." Both phrases are true for all of us, for so we are all born without any choice about it. Jesus' humanity was the same as ours, and out of that mode of being his life redeems our lives. Redemption must be a matter of sharing the lot of another in order to lift the fallen or exalt what seems lowly. RSH

The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 1996

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

Beckoning God—
who called the rich to travel
toward poverty,
the wise to embrace your folly
the powerful to know their own frailty;
who gave to strangers
a sense of homecoming in an alien land
and to stargazers
true light and vision
as they bowed to earth—
we lay ourselves open
to your signs for us....

—Kate Compston, England, 1990 in *Bread of Tomorrow*, ed. Janet Morley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

First Reading

After Christmas has come and gone, now what? What difference does this celebration make now that we move in to the everyday march of life? The celebration of Epiphany makes that connection.

The focus of Isaiah 60 is: now what? What difference does the Lord's appearance make? Isaiah 1-39 focused on the calamities facing the people of God through the Assyrian threat. Isaiah 40-56 announced the great deeds of salvation carried out through the end of the Babylonian captivity and the homecoming to Jerusalem. Isaiah 57-66 now deals with the difficulty that salvation, already accomplished, does not appear as complete. It remains in the "not yet" category.

The solution is to center one's attention on the light—actually to center on Jerusalem where the light has dawned—which then compels an exciting and dynamic movement of interaction with the rest of God's creation, going out and at the same time coming in. Isaiah 60 has often been characterized as a "Zion poem"—similar to Isaiah 49-52—where attention is centered on the "God with us" city where pilgrims ascend, enter, and celebrate the manifestation of God. The irony is that the concentration of the roots of one's faith gives one wings to fly. The movement is outward, radiating to the ends of the earth, and also inward, as the return of exiles is made complete along with those considered on the outside. Indeed, the barriers of separation have been broken down.

The dynamic character of the text is established by a series of contrasts: symbolism of light vs. darkness; verbs denoting completed action vs. future tense; words spoken by Yahweh vs. words about Yahweh; focus on Jerusalem vs. the whole of creation; focus on God's people vs. all people.

Verses 1-2 are structured in such a way that emphasizes that dynamic vitality. The words about darkness (1b) are enveloped by words about light (1a and 2a) so that it is clear the darkness (covering earth and peoples) is being overcome by light. The past accomplishments—"has come"/"has risen" (1a)—lead forth to future action—"will arise"/"will appear" (2a). Although Yahweh is at the center of the action, the reader is incorporated as a full partner so that the personal pronoun "you" occurs four times in 1a and 2a alongside Yahweh (in contrast to 2a where there is no Yahweh, no light, no "you").

The energizing power of the light achieves its purpose in verse 3 when the reader ("your light") and the world ("nations" and "kings") are brought together, barriers are removed, and the procession of

visitors begins.

The remaining verses (4-6) establish the comprehensiveness of this picture. Now that the light has dawned and the reader can see clearly, the visual image of the revelation of God's mystery is overwhelming: embracing sons and daughters far away; strangers and citizens of every land; the animal world; and natural resources from land and sea—and all "proclaim the praise of the Lord." FS

Pastoral Reflections

In the beginning, God hung up the stars and said, "Let them be for signs and for seasons." Some people got hung up on the stars. When Israel, then Judah fell, they too were worshiping the stars and ended up in the oppressive darkness of exile.

"Arise! Shine!" The prophets cried. "Kings will come to your glory, to your light."

In the east, shaman who worship the stars espy one in the sky, check their charts, and call it a king star. "Slave! Saddle the camels! We're off to make the manger scene."

The star-worshiping shaman follow the king star to search for the king. Along the way, they stop and ask directions from another king. King Herod, who falls into a panic and calls in his shaman who check their charts and concur, but Herod doesn't trust his own religious practices and sends someone to follow the foreigners. Follow? The foreigners, in the meantime, continue following the king star, trusting *their* religious practices. When the star stops, so do the camels, and I like to imagine the upward-gazing wise men in the back piling into the front ones who've already stopped. Keystone Magi. Then, they all rejoice!

Note, they haven't checked out the king yet. They rejoice because the star stopped, because their religion worked! They party *before* they go in for the baby shower. Then they go in, exchange gifts, have a piece of cake, and set out for home, still believing in their religion and not seeing a better way (even though they just paid homage to The Way!). They continue to worship the signs, even though they just visited the Son of the Sign Maker. For them, the sky's the limit. Maybe they catch on later; we're not told.

Herod's religion would have led him to the infant king, too.

Sigh. You can lead 'em to the light, but you can't make 'em glow.

We have the Word and signs and creeds. We have history and testimony. We know who the baby was. Yet, do we stand firm? Do we arise and shine? Or do we stop at merely worshiping? Is believing only going to church on Sundays? Some believe only going once or twice a year is enough. And—get this—one regularly worshiping parishioner told me the only reason for going to church is so one would have a pastor who could give him a good funeral. Do we settle for the sky and then the sod? Are we in the oppressive darkness of only believing in believing?

Arise! Shine! The King of the eternal has come to us! The glory that the glorious Creator breathed into us drew Christ to us. We have worth because we are the issue and the loved of the Light. Light from light from light. This is our chance to be a shining star, to live before we die and to die so that we can live eternally. Let's chuck the charts, take a breath, and glow. JEL

The Baptism of Our Lord First Sunday after Epiphany January 7, 1996

Psalm 29
Isaiah 42:1-9
Acts 10:34-38
Matthew 3:13-17

The Savior came to be baptized—
The Son of God in flesh disguised—
To stand beneath the Father's will,
And all his promises fulfill.

—James P. Tiefel, "To Jordan's River Came Our Lord," *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), Hymn #89 st. 2.

First Reading

Who is the servant? Every treatment of Isaiah 42 begins with that question. For over a century the debate has centered around the identity of the figure described in the four servant songs of Second Isaiah: an individual or a group? Cyrus or Israel? The prophet himself? Although this is helpful information no congregation yet has found the debate very stirring.

Perhaps the preacher can turn this around for a good purpose. Who is *not* the servant? Who is *not* called to carry out justice? Who is *not* empowered by the Spirit?

The Gospel lesson identifies the servant as Jesus. The description of his baptism in the Jordan River is shaped in form by this presentation of a new King: announcing him; empowering him; clarifying his task; describing his manner. The parallels in language are obvious.

Acts fleshes out the tasks of the anointed and empowered Jesus as Peter proclaims the message to Gentile Cornelius. The words "no partiality" dominate. That fits well the emphasis on "the nations" in Isaiah 42. There is no partiality in who is called to be servant and what is expected. Peter, moved by the Spirit, put aside previous reservations to find himself in a Gentile home playing servant to one formerly shunned. Cornelius—identified as the Gentile outsider, the powerful centurion, and even the representative of the oppressive occupying forces—now joins the servant ranks receiving the Spirit while Peter is yet speaking (v. 44)—that parallels God's choice of Persian Cyrus in the sixth century.

Ultimately, the theme of baptism brings every hearer or reader into the role of servant so that it is not only Jesus who took upon himself the suffering for all, not just Peter and Cornelius but every Christian who is called to bring justice to the nations. The term mishpat (משפט) is central to the Isaiah 42 text, occurring three times. It represents the wholeness of God's vision for humanity: truth, justice. It comes about when the listeners experience their own deliverance from blindness, the prison of darkness, the dungeon (v. 7) and open the door to those around them. Ironically, it takes place in a quiet, gentle manner. It takes place through the power of the Spirit.

Sometimes the concept of "servant" is understood in a degrading fashion, but not here. The servant is "my chosen in whom my soul delights." The Septuagint even chose to use the term παῖς which denotes the figure as both servant of God and child of God. FS

Pastoral Reflections

This is the day we preachers can all be thankful we had to do Greek.

A wise seminary professor, who loves the gospel, especially in Greek, teaches stu-

dents to pay attention to the first words in each of the Jesus stories: the opening words of the story, the first words spoken, and the first words spoken by Jesus. Here is Jesus' first word in the Matthean version: "*apheis*."

John the Baptist takes a break from his high-pitched preaching, turns to Jesus, and makes a statement that perfectly, cleanly tells the whole gospel message: "I need to come to you, and you come to me?" And Jesus replies, "*Apheis*. Let it happen."

It's from ἀφίημι. What a word. It's a letting-go and letting-God word, the "Let it be" word (Mt 3:15). It's the "Forgive our sins" word (Mt 6:12). It's the "Wait, let's see" word (Mt 27:49), the "cried with a loud voice" word (Mk 15:37), the "yielded his spirit" or "breathed his last" word (Mt 27:50). It's a first and last word. It's a gospel word, and it's a Trinity word—in the name of the one who uttered, "Let it happen.... It is finished.... Be forgiven and forgive each other." (It's a bear to conjugate.)

The greatest speeches that would sway us to another story cannot out-sound this one word, uttered by Jesus, lived out by Jesus, spoken for us by the One sitting on the throne aching in love for us and aching for our love in return, the One we all need to come to who came to us.

We learn about this word in this temporary existence, in those times when it's better to "let it happen" than to set your jaw and fight it, to choose acceptance over fear and to maintain a good humor. It's a Murphy's Law word. I've witnessed it in the elderly and in the extremely ill who can still smile, from the 92-year-old woman who accepted four days in a convalescent hospital as the consequence of her falling to the 2-year-old who, all on his own, invented the game of passing out the potato chips to everyone else after his doctor told him he couldn't eat food anymore, instead he has to be hooked to an I.V. for 14 hours a day. It's like the "it" in "let it happen" gets them out of bondage to their personal anxiety: "The world doesn't revolve around me; there's always 'it.'" And it is God incarnate.

We hear this word as we ponder this day what word and water hold for us. Can anyone, can anything withhold the water for baptizing? Hear the word of the Lord, "Let it happen." You need a Savior, and one has come to you. *Apheis*. Amen. JEL

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 14, 1996

Psalm 40:1-11 (antiphon vv. 9-10)
Isaiah 49:1-6
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

> *Lord God of our salvation, it is your will that all people might come to you through your Son Jesus Christ. Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection. We pray in his name. Amen.*
>
> —Collect for the Mission of the Church, *LBW*.

First Reading

For the second week, the Old Testament lesson makes use of one of the servant poems of Second Isaiah. Here the focus is on the call to servanthood. It is a call which took place even before the birth of the prophet while he was still in his mother's womb. This is a concept so significant that it is mentioned twice: at the beginning in verse 1a and again in 5.

Three biblical figures share this notion of calling. As a youth Jeremiah reflects back to his shaping from birth (Jer 1:5). In mid-career as Paul reflects on his Damascus road experience, he also notes that the molding hand of God began to work in him before he could conceive of it (Gal 1:15). Unlike these two figures, little is known about the character and personality of the Isaian servant of God. However, all three share a number of characteristics.

The call to servanthood centers on spoken proclamation: "He made my mouth like a sharp sword." The imagery fits well the piercing speech of both Paul and Jeremiah. Although 1 Corinthians focuses on the positive results as salvation begins to reach to the ends of the earth, a reading of Paul's missionary activity in Acts is a sober reminder that the penetrating message cuts both ways.

True to his calling, Paul made as many enemies as friends and often found himself on the receiving end of hostile response. For Jeremiah, this was almost always the case, especially when he spoke out against an attitude of self-reliance or complacence of persons being privileged because they were on God's side. Isaiah 49 is not a church-growth text. The servant feels the frustration of a career true to his calling and speaks of having "labored in vain... for nothing and vanity" in v. 4. The servant is overworked and burdened by unreasonable expectations. After having labored unsuccessfully among his own people, he is now expected to expand his focus to include all nations and to expand to the ends of the earth (v. 6).

Nevertheless, the servant shows confidence in his calling. He receives strength from the Lord and is honored in him (v. 5). He stands secure and certain: "my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God" (v. 4).

The Gospel points to the irony of success in the servant who speaks the piercing word. For John the Baptist, the result of his proclamation is a loss in membership. In the middle of his sermon, his two disciples walk out on him to follow Jesus (Jn 1:37). Andrew continues in his calling by speaking to brother Simon and thus quickly finds himself playing second fiddle to the one who will be the rock (Jn 1:40-42). In both cases we see lived out the adage: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Perhaps the key to this kind of success ironically is in the giving of oneself through speech. Some criticize the speaker who constantly speaks in the first person—the me generation. Yet the first person speech of the servant in Isaiah 49 shows the agonizing struggle of one who takes calling seriously and is not afraid to open up to his audience. The security of his position is not in success, but in the calling from mother's womb. FS

Pastoral Reflections

Yesterday, my friend told me this true story: As the congregation arrived for worship, the pastor handed each a helium balloon. The instructions were given: Whenever the people experienced a "God moment," they were to release their balloons, like a mini-Pentecost celebration. It could be whatever in the service: a hymn, a prayer, a scripture lesson, the sermon—whatever moved them in the Spirit. After a while, a balloon floated up. Two and then three more followed. The service continued. At the end of the worship service, over half of the people were still holding their balloons.

This morning in the paper there's an article about a Southern California man, 56, whose truck got stuck in the snow in the Klamath Mountains of Oregon. He was a Christian, and, so, trusted his fate to God (there's an interesting phrase!). For nine weeks, *nine weeks*, he sat in the truck, trust-

ing God and writing letters about it, until he died. There was no evidence that he had ever gotten out of the truck. If he had gotten out of the truck and walked back down the road around a corner, the article said, he would have reached clear pavement and safe passage out. The man had been a fund-raiser for World Vision, but he didn't have the personal vision to try getting out of the truck.

Jesus' first words in the Gospel According to John sting in my ears in the light of these stories. "What are you looking for?" Jesus asks John's two disciples who had followed him like sheep.

Now, they could have answered, "Well, John said you are the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We're looking for that. Are you the one John was sent to testify to? Do you baptize with the Holy Spirit?"

And Jesus could have replied, "Yep, I am!" and believing would be a whole lot different.

But, they answered him, "Where are you staying?"

Jesus, are you that feeling in my heart? Can I release my balloon? Jesus, are you in the truck? Will you walk with me back down the road? Are you really the Light? Can I open my eyes now?

And Jesus answers, "Come and see." Let go and believe. You'll lose your balloon, but you'll gain your heart. JEL

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 21, 1996

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

You have come down to the lakeshore
seeking neither the wise nor the wealthy,
but only asking for me to follow.
Sweet Lord, you have looked into my eyes;
kindly smiling, you've called out my name.
On the sand I have abandoned my small boat;
now with you, I will seek other seas.

—Cesareo Gabarain, "Tu has venido a la orilla/You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore," tr. Madeleine Forell Marshall, *With One Voice*, Hymn #784 st. 1.

First Reading

Once again the imagery of light in a world of darkness pervades the epiphany text. Another more subtle image also comes through the readings of this Sunday. This is the image of the circle.

The Old Testament reading and Gospel are of course linked by the reference to the light shining in the Galilee. Galil (גליל) is, of course, the Hebrew term for circle. The complete term "Galilee of the Nations," which shows up for the first time in Isaiah 9, refers to the character of this area of northern Israel as encircled by non-Jewish people (הגוים). In this text, we have the image of the circle closing in, smaller and smaller. Through the conquests of Assyria's Tiglath-pileser III in 733 B.C.E., the Galilee, along with Dor (="The Way of the Sea") and

Gilead (="Beyond the Jordan," 2 Kgs 15:29), have become Assyrian provinces. The circular boundaries of purity, separation, strength, and security have all broken down so that the light has gone out and the inhabitants are groping in darkness. The only hope is conceived in terms of a messianic military conquest which will break off the burden of their yoke and provide a redistribution of the spoils of war.

For seven centuries the character of this territory does not change so that Simon Maccabee even carries out a rescue operation for the few Jews encircled by Gentiles in Γαλιλαία ἀλλοφυλῶν (1 Macc 5:15).

The Gospel proclaims the epiphany of the Messiah, not at the center of the circle of the religious world—Jerusalem—but in the Circle of the Gentiles (Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν). As he makes his way from Nazareth to the Sea, Jesus encircles (περιπατῶν) the territory and gathers recruits for his army. The only weapon is his word which nevertheless carries authority: "Follow me." As the Light moves from place to place, so does the center of the circle. The disciples on the lake are encircling themselves with a casted throw net (ἀμφίβλησιτρον), and by their association with Jesus they too are in the center. Only now they find themselves fishing for people. The Gospel thus begins with the inner circle of followers and continues with an ever-widening circle as the point of light radiates from the center.

Recent New Testament scholarship has focused on the character of Galilee as having a mixed population. It is significant then that Jesus' circle of friends includes two with Greek names: Andrew and Peter— even the Greek Simon stands in contrast to the Hebrew Simeon. They are from Bethsaida, which archaeologists have found to be not a conservative Jewish fishing village but a center of cosmopolitan culture. It is to be an inclusive circle, not a redrawing of old boundaries. That unfortunately became the problem in Corinth with competing circles who have forgotten the one baptism, one faith, one Christ and God of all.

These themes are underscored with the celebration of the conversion of Paul later this week: again an event taking place, not at the religious center of Jerusalem, but in nearby Damascus. Again the light shining in the darkness brought about a massive movement of missionary outreach with an ever-widening circle—a circle of the nations. FS

Pastoral Reflections

Let's look at things from the fish's point of view. We swim along, minding our own business, and then—swoosh—we're caught up, thrashing in the entanglement of net. In panic, we become aware that we are part of the food chain. It was fine when we were free and were the consumers; now we're heading toward being the consumed. Indeed, death consumes us as the net is tugged through the waters that were all our world only a moment ago, toward the boat, shaped (at least the way it looks from the bottom) terrifyingly like a coffin, slamming us into other helpless fish, our eyes bulging, gills flapping. We're going to die. We're going to die.

There are obvious nets: disease, oppression, unemployment, substance abuse, war.... And the panic comes.

Sometimes it's not that easy to recognize the panic, even to recognize that we are caught in nets, nets that make living, all our world, all consuming.

So we thrash (we call it "making a living") and look forward to retirement, like the 10-year-old son of one of my parishioners who has already figured out how many years he has to go before he can retire.

Then we are given freedom by a solitary soul, standing on the shore, saddened by the

death of John the Baptist, who got caught because Herod got caught in a net. "Follow me," the Savior says.

Peter and Andrew ceased mending their nets. (Isn't it a surprise that we mend our nets!) Why? How? We're not told. Possibly because it's up to us. "Immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Mt 4:20). James and John were *in the boat* mending *their* nets! "Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him" (Mt 4:22). They didn't give up their livelihood; these fishermen still fished for their families. But they left it as net, kept it as opportunity, found their Savior, and learned how to free others, how to fish for the fish's sake.

"Come, follow me," the Savior spake,
"All in my way abiding;
Deny yourselves, the world forsake,
Obey my call and guiding.
Oh, bear the cross, whate'er betide;
Take my example for your guide."

Then let us follow Christ our Lord,
And take the cross appointed,
And, firmly clinging to his Word,
In suffering be undaunted.
For those who bear the battle's strain
The crown of heav'nly life obtain.

—*LBW* #455, st. 1 & 5. JEL

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 28, 1996

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

Fortunate are the poor in spirit.
That means:
Fortunate are those who are willing
to let themselves be censured by
the word of God,
to reexamine their views,
to believe they haven't yet understood
a thing,
to be taken by surprise,
to have their mind changed,...
and everything they took for granted
swept out from under them,
and to face the fact, once for all,
that there's no such thing as a matter
of course
and that God can ask anything.

—Louis Evely, *That Man is You*, trans. Edmond Bonin (New York: Paulist Press, 1964).

First Reading

What does the Lord require of us? This is what everyone wants to know. It's why people are gathering in the pews each Sunday. In today's busy world, we want it short and sweet. So Micah 6:8 fits the bill nicely: "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." However, even such a beautiful, yet simple text needs unpacking.

These words are set in the context of a courtroom drama in what is called a covenant lawsuit. The people are the defendants and the prophet is the prosecuting attorney, with the surrounding world listening as judge and jury. In verses 3-5, the prophet announces the great deeds of God from the

Exodus through the settlement into the land to remind them where they have been and who brought them there. The defendant takes the stand in vv. 6-7 to plead their case: dutiful fulfillment of ritual actions which are stretched to hyperbolic proportions through a bit of sarcasm. In response words of the prophet in v. 8 summarize the essence of the covenant relationship.

One of the basic problems of the religious response to God is extremism in the direction of abstract ideas on the one hand and rote action on the other. The response of Micah provides a balance which emphasizes both concept (justice, kindness, humility/wisdom) and action (do, love, walk).

The concept of justice or judgment (עשׂות משׁפט) is appropriate to our courtroom setting. It focuses on what is legally expected, what rights individuals have as humans created in the image of God. The concept is thus intertwined with צדק (righteousness). Throughout the Old Testament many acts today described as charity were rights or acts of righteousness. Thus the prophets continually implore the people to look after the widow, the orphaned, the stranger. The poor are not to be despised. Their presence means justice is not being done. Micah therefore chastises the public for lying awake at night scheming how to take away what little the poor have (2:1-2), who "tear the skin off people" (3:2), who declare war against the hungry (3:5), and who survive the court system through bribes and make hefty contributions so that preachers will say nice things (3:11). The concept does not exist without individual actions. To do justice means that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

"Loving mercy" (אהבת חסד) is at the heart of the covenant relationship. It is the merciful attitude of God apart from which there could be no covenant. Luther therefore translated it with *Gnade*, the same term used for NT χάρις—grace. The phrase denotes acts of compassion which are undeserved and beyond the expectation of right. The rabbis enumerated certain deeds which are performed wholly out of goodness, unselfishly, without ulterior motive such as burying the dead, comforting mourners, visiting the sick, restoring peace between disputing parties. In combining חסד with the verb "to love" one should perhaps focus on the root meaning which is "to burn, kindle, set on fire." One is to have a passion for acts of mercy.

The concept of walking humbly before God (הצנע לכת), unlike the others, is less common and less certain. The concept of walking is related to the Jewish term *Halacha* which summarizes all ethical activity. Although translators since Luther have taken the rarer modifier as "humbly," Hillers suggests it refers to "employment of discretion, prudence, and wisdom." Thus the NEB translates "wisely." It is a caution against seeking after simple answers concerning what the Lord requires. FS

Pastoral Reflections

The crowds gather for the first time around this intriguing character, Jesus. Seeing the crowds, he goes up on the mountain and opens his mouth to teach them. The crowds lean in, expecting to hear a great testimony of the mighty acts of God and marvelous expounding on the law and the prophets that will make them move to faith. We lean in, too.

"Don't you just love those who, when the going gets tough, are able to put everything into God's hands? They are living in God's realm.

"Don't you just love those who ache when they turn away from God, those who are genuinely sad when they sin? God will scoop them up and give their little hearts

such a sense of peace and hope.

"Don't you just love those who worship God, who still believe that God is in control? They never experience the devastating disappointment of seeing God fail them. Change will never be a threat to them.

Don't you just love those who strain to hear God's call in their life? They are affirmed in whatever they do.

"Don't you just love those who care about the issues and who can still be compassionate toward the evildoers? Because they are forgiving, they will know and understand how God can forgive them. They believe that God loves them.

"Don't you just love those who make their relationship with God the first priority in their life? They always know that God is with them.

"Don't you just love those who care and listen to others and don't try to fix them but let them find their own strengths? That's just what God does!

"Don't you just love those who don't think their faith in God is going to magically immune them from hard times? Their lives have full dimension.

"People will get all riled up at you when you show your faith. They'll say hurtful things; they may even do hurtful things, unfortunately. But bite your tongue and say prayers of thanks, because their reaction means that your faith touched them and made them think about God. The same thing happened to the prophets who kept the faith, kept the faith alive."

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount, not with long recounting of God's rescuing and re-rescuing Israel and not with forceful, legalistic words of hellfire and damnation, beatitudes that batter us into believing. Jesus begins with words of blessing and encouragement for acts of meekness and mourning and caring, actions of faith. Jesus' beatitudes recount how God rescues all of us. JEL

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4, 1996

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

> *You are salt for the earth, O people!*
> *Salt for the Kingdom of God!*
> *Share the flavor of life, O people!*
> *Life in the Kingdom of God!*
>
> —Marty Haugen, "Bring Forth the Kingdom," *Hymnal Supplement 1991* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1991), Hymn #821 st. 1.

First Reading

How do we let our light shine so that others might notice? Why is it that even God often does not seem to notice our light? Why is this the case even when we are very serious about our worship and carry it out with all sincerity to the best of our abilities? These are the questions which set the context for the Old Testament lesson.

This is not a reading about people who have neglected their worship or who have gone after other gods. It is about people who are very serious about their relationship with God. In Isaiah 58:2 the prophet refers to them as people who seek God "day after day" and who "delight to know God's ways" (v. 2). They "delight to draw near to God" and they seek advice concerning "righteous judgments." They sound like a congregation many pastors would desire. Nevertheless even in this situation the prophet does not hold back. Shout out from the pulpit! Blow your trumpets! (v. 1)

The specific issue addressed is that of fasting. It is interesting that there are no

comments about sacrifices and burning incense in the temple, which points to a time prior to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in 515 B.C.E. Following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. the practice of fasting was instituted in order to reflect on their status as the people of God and to preserve a sense of true worship (see Zechariah 7).

Nevertheless, ritual often leads to abuse and misdirection. Thus the reading for today begins with an attack on the institution of fasting itself, almost in tones of sarcasm: Is there something foolish about lying around in sackcloth and ashes or bowing down like a bulrush (v. 5)? This is best not taken as a total rejection of ritualistic action since it is clear the congregation has at times been successful in drawing near to God (v. 2) and their voices have been heard on high (v. 4). The real problem is that this congregation has not given itself wholly in worship. The fast is not complete because they have found loop holes and ways to get around the restrictions of the fasting days so that the result is still a quarrelsome attitude and an oppressive mindset.

Wholistic worship is that which combines fasting with compassionate deeds towards others. The prophet includes words familiar from Matthew's parable of the last judgment (Mt 25:31-46)—feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the lonely (v. 7). The prophet's audience has experienced the mighty hand of God in ending the exile and breaking their yoke of slavery. Now it is their turn to unlock the bonds of oppression in the community around them (v. 6). This is the fast that God chooses.

In this way God's people are a light to the world: not so much that they themselves are the light, but that the light shines through them—"breaking forth like the dawn"—the glory of the Lord behind them and his vindication before them (v. 8). They are enveloped in the light of God whose presence declares: "Here am I." FS

Pastoral Reflections

How much can we assume Jesus knew?

The thing is, salt is salt, whether it comes from the ocean or deep in the earth. You can't destroy it, change it, or make it into anything new. No microorganism can destroy it. It can't lose its flavor. It can't change its character. The only thing you can do is get it wet, and then its crystalline structure fuses into an indestructible, rock hard block. (How's that for a metaphor of the effects of baptism? How's that for the effects of the Holy Spirit blowing in on that Pentecost gathering in Acts 2?)

Another thing, salt is naturally occurring and omnipresent. Always has been; probably always will be (temporarily speaking, of course). So, every people, every culture, has benefited from its character. Salt is a flavor enhancer and a valuable food preservative in canning, pickling, drying, and freezing. In bread-making, a little salt controls the yeast so that the loaves turn out beautifully rounded. You have to pay attention in using salt. Too much and you'll spoil the soup, but if you completely deprive your body of it your electrical system will cease, a fatal cessation.

It's the same with light. Light is light. You can refract it, dim it, reflect it, redirect it, hide it, but you can't change it. A little light allows you sight; too much or none, and you're blinded.

Can we assume that Jesus knew about the properties of these common elements (after all, he was there from the beginning!)? If we can, can we then see that Jesus isn't making faith harder; he's teaching us that we have faith. He isn't making life harder; he's

teaching us that we have life and have it abundantly. He isn't pointing out our common-ness; he's teaching us that the ordinary is all we need!

We are the salt of the earth. (Maybe Jesus Christ is the salt of the cosmos!) The very idea that we could lose our flavor is absurd, but if we could, we could still be thrown down and make the earth weed-free and clear for a pathway.

The word 'fisherman' is derived from the word 'salt.' Interesting bit of Greek food for thought. While you're chewing on it, pass the salt. JEL

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 11, 1996

Psalm 119:1-8
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
or Sirach 15:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls
and bid resentment cease.
Then, bound to all in bonds of love,
our lives will spread your peace.

—Rosamond J. Herklots, "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive," *A New Hymnal for Colleges and Schools* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), Hymn #378 st. 4.

First Reading

"Happy are those who walk in the law of the LORD!" (Ps 119:1). How do we gospel-people understand these words—especially those of us influenced strongly by the law-as-a-burden attitude of Paul and Luther? Today's Old Testament lesson helps us to focus on law within the context of covenant.

The literary context is the third sermon of Moses (Deuteronomy 29-30) as the people of God stand at the boundary of the promised land of milk and honey and as they reflect on what it will take for them to live successfully in the land. The historical context is the period of exile as the people of God look back across the boundary to a lost and desolate land and they reflect on what went wrong that they failed to prosper in the land.

The answer is in the understanding of covenant. It is often noted that these chapters have the structure of covenant treaties with (1) preamble, (2) historical survey, (3) general principles, (4) detailed obligations, (5) a call for witnesses, and (6) a list of curses and blessings. The verses of today's Old Testament lesson (15-20) represent the sixth and final section: the blessings include life and prosperity, and the curse includes death and adversity.

The key point of the covenant relationship is that God as the stronger party has already acted with a mighty hand to make this relationship possible. The deliverance from bondage in Egypt, the rescue through the sea, the protection through the wilderness wandering, and the participation in settlement is good news for a people that once was no people. The covenant therefore is a response to a loving and gracious God.

The commandments, decrees, and ordinances are guidance, instruction, and teaching (*torah*, תורה) for a full life. The previous verses (11-14) note that they should not be viewed as too difficult or distant (quoted by Paul in Rom 10:6-10), but rather they are close to the heart. The tone is very similar to the new covenant of Jer 31:31-33, written on their hearts and based on forgiveness. The God of compassion and forgiveness (Deut 30:3) gathers and restores the people of God and sets before them the gift of life.

The covenant relationship finally is one that calls for daily renewal. Just as Israel became God's covenant partner in the day of Moses, so the exiles were called to renew their covenant affirmation. It is not something past, but something set before God's people today (v. 15).

Pastoral Reflections

I was forty years old the first time I went swimming in the ocean. I was in Hawaii with friends, and we had come to go snorkeling.

I am a native Californian, but I grew up in Northern California, where the waters are wild and frigid. Oh, I love wading in the waves; I can't go to the ocean and not put my toes in it. But there's a whole lot of difference between wading and swimming.

And so, I stood with my flippers and goggles and breathing tube in place and tried to convince my brain to make my body go into the ocean.

Little kids were scampering past me and diving in to the waves. Little kids!

Soon, one of my friends was at my side, laughing a little, but understanding. She showed me how to back in, and she came in with me. A wave pelted us, knocking us over, but my friend groped for my hand and held it. I was scared. Had to breathe in difficult gasps. "Don't let go of my hand," I said as we treaded water. "I just have to get over the panic." People who can't get over the panic drown.

In another moment or two, we put on our goggles and tubes and floated on the surface, above schools of gloriously painted fish and bright coral that you can't see wading on the shore; you have to go in deeper.

Have you ever asked students of a confirmation class to raise their hands if they've never broken one of the Ten Commandments? The hands shoot up. "I've never murdered." "I've never committed adultery." "I don't even know what 'covet' means." We tell them no one can keep all of the commandments, but, really, taking them on the surface, one could. A kid could.

Jesus would have us go deeper and grow beyond being babies in Christ. "You have heard it said, don't kill. But I tell you, don't lose control in anger of any kind. You have heard it said, don't commit adultery. But I tell you, don't lose control in sexual desires of any kind. You have heard it said, do not swear falsely, and follow through what you have sworn. But I tell you, do not bind yourselves to anyone or anything by oath."

Jesus is giving us a chance to live, not by the rules, to live by living. To go deeper into everything that we do and into our relationship with others. It's be scary at first. The panic may even take our breath away, for a moment or two. But I'll bet you a trip to Hawaii that the look of living and loving on the deeper side of Jesus' agape ethics is glorious and something no one can see if they stay safe on the shore. JEL

Transfiguration Sunday
Last Sunday after the Epiphany
February 18, 1996

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

Christ, our only true light,
before whose bright cloud
your friends fell to the ground:
we bow before your cross...
that we may refuse to be prostrated
before the false brightness of any other light,
looking to your power alone
for hope of resurrection for the dead,
Amen.

Janet Morley, Collect for Transfiguration, *All Desires Known* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994).

First Reading

This is the Sunday to focus on mountain-top experiences. As Mark Powell (*What is Narrative Criticism?* Fortress, 1990) notes, settings are an integral part of the story, just as are the events and the characters themselves. Mountain tops frequently denote nearness to God, a place for solitude and quiet reflection away from the hustle and bustle of the life below, a place for retreat and focus in preparation for a return to action.

In the year of Matthew the mountain setting is especially appropriate. Jesus as the new Moses preaches his Sermon on the Mount—revisiting the Ten Commandments—and commissions the disciples to cross into the promised land of all nations from a Nebo-like mountain in Galilee. Throughout the Gospel are periodic retreats to a mountain for all-night prayer sessions, and at the center is the Transfiguration experience.

The entire Epiphany season has in a sense been a mountain-top experience. This is fitting since a city built on a mountain cannot be hid, and Epiphany is about the light shining forth for the whole world to see. Thus we began our ascent with the Mount Zion poem of Isaiah 60: "Arise, shine, for your light has come." We sat listening to the words of the Light with Gospel texts from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). We stood high above on Mount Nebo to gain a wide-angle view of life on the other side and chose life in the covenant relationship. Today we straddle Mount Sinai in the south and the Mount of Transfiguration in the north. There we focus on the words of the Lord.

The cloud of glory envelopes both mountains—in reality every mountain wherever two or three are gathered in God's name. One of the surprising details of Old Testament history is that there never was an attempt to make Sinai a cult center for pilgrimages and worship. Rather the cloud of glory traveled with God's people even on the level ground in forty years of wilderness wandering and found a resting place at Solomon's Temple. The presence of the cloud on the Galilean mountain is a reminder of the God-with-us character of the gospel. Yet no matter how good it feels to be gathered together there, the task is in moving out where the disciples join with a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12) through every time and every place.

The mountain-top experience of Moses and Jesus is linked also by the reference to six days. In our age of instant access, it is a reminder that the realization of being in the presence of God includes time for preparation and time for reflection. In keeping the true Sabbath rest one finds energy for the

task below. With the notation that Moses remained on Sinai forty days and forty nights the transition to the Lenten season is complete. This mountain points ahead to one more mountain, Golgotha, and to the day when all the lights went out. FS

Pastoral Reflections

Actually, it's easy to accept Jesus' transfiguration. Although it's a cloudy issue.

Jesus led Peter and James and John up a high mountain top apart. Both the mountain top (God stuff happens on mountain tops) and the being set apart (it's natural to glow when one is set apart) heighten our expectation that something godly is going to happen. Actually, that there is a story to be told about this hike in our Holy Scriptures clues us in to expect something godly to happen. If nothing had, there wouldn't be a story about it.

So, when Jesus glows and when Moses and Elijah appear and even when we hear that booming voice from the clouds, the event merely fulfills our expectations. And it's easy to accept a god who fulfills our expectations. Sometimes, people yawn when this story is read.

What truly transfigures us, and what makes the whole event cloudy, is when Jesus comes back down the mountain, when his once-gleaming garments, after the dusty trek, need to be thrown into the wash along with all the other laundry to be restored to whiteness, and when he continues his hike to Calvary.

It's easy to accept a god who fulfills our expectations. It's easy to abandon a god who stays on a mountain. But it's not easy to accept or to abandon a god who stays with us in love, who even takes on death so that the staying will be sure. The best we can do on our own is to straddle acceptance and abandonment and spend whatever strength we can muster to let go and believe while yearning for certainty. The best we can do on our own is to admit we cannot do it on our own, to admit that we need to be transfigured as much as we need our Christ to be.

When Jesus comes down the mountain, we are transfigured into the freedom of being dependent believers. We are transfigured into needing faith by the grace of God to move us to continue on to Matthew 17, verse 10, into needing faith by the grace of God to move the mountain of our expectations so that epiphany can occur and so that we can clearly see the gospel of God's love for us.

Actually we are being transfigured. The weather forecast is "partially cloudy with clear, bright skies ahead." JEL

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On Worship

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This summer, while on vacation, I struck up a conversation about seminary worship with one of my brothers, who has been a pioneer in alternate forms of liturgy (and parish life) in the Lutheran Church. Not far into the exchange, he asked, "What would you like worship to be at LSTC?" I only had to pause for a moment, because I have given that question a good deal of thought over the last few years. I said, not surprisingly, "I want our worship at LSTC to be firmly grounded in the western tradition of Christian worship." The Lima document called it "the great tradition" that embodies the essential elements or, as some would say, the catholic substance of Christian worship. *With One Voice*, the new Lutheran resource for worship, identifies these essentials of Christian worship as follows: The *gathering* of the baptized to hear the *word*, to *pray* for those in need, to offer *thanks* to God for the gift of salvation, to receive the *bread* of life and the *cup* of blessing, and to be *sent* with the benediction of God for the daily witness of faith, hope and love.

I would hope that these essential elements of Christian worship become fixed in the life and piety of students during the time they spend in these unique, set apart communities called seminaries.

But this is just the beginning.

Once these elements are embodied, the style in which they are conveyed can vary widely. The style is truly a matter of culture, ethnic tradition, or preference. Just as Luther made God speak German, so contemporary Lutherans can do the liturgy in folk, or gospel, or jazz, or calypso, high or low, so long as worship conveys the essentials. One of the things that has impressed me as I worship in a wide range of congregations is the number of parishes that have, not one, but two or three or four different services, all attempting to convey the elements of Christian worship through different styles of worship every weekend. Increasingly, I hear pastors say, "You simply cannot build the church today around one form of worship; we need different strokes for different folks."

That is what I hope for seminary worship: a solid commitment to and a grounding in the western worship tradition, the catholic shape of worship as it has been recovered in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*—and then—a faithful, reverent, ambitious, creative, collaborative, community-wide attempt to experience in the seminary worshipping community, a variety of ways of making the essence of Christian worship cross the boundaries of cultures and speak its essential message and meaning with

authenticity and power. Is that not the way, in a multicultural, multipreferential church, to equip worship leaders to be both grounded in the essentials and open in style, so that ministry and worship can be truly contextual and effective?

My personal journey has brought me to this point: the style of worship is relatively inconsequential to me. I have my strong cultural tastes, and, when given the chance to construct or select a liturgical form, I know what I prefer. But ministry is not personal preference. It is communicating the Word—in whatever style it can best be heard. What I look for now is not the style, but how the essential elements of Christian worship, so necessary to heal us and instruct us and release us, are communicated to and understood by an increasingly varied audience, which is the Lutheran Church today.

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