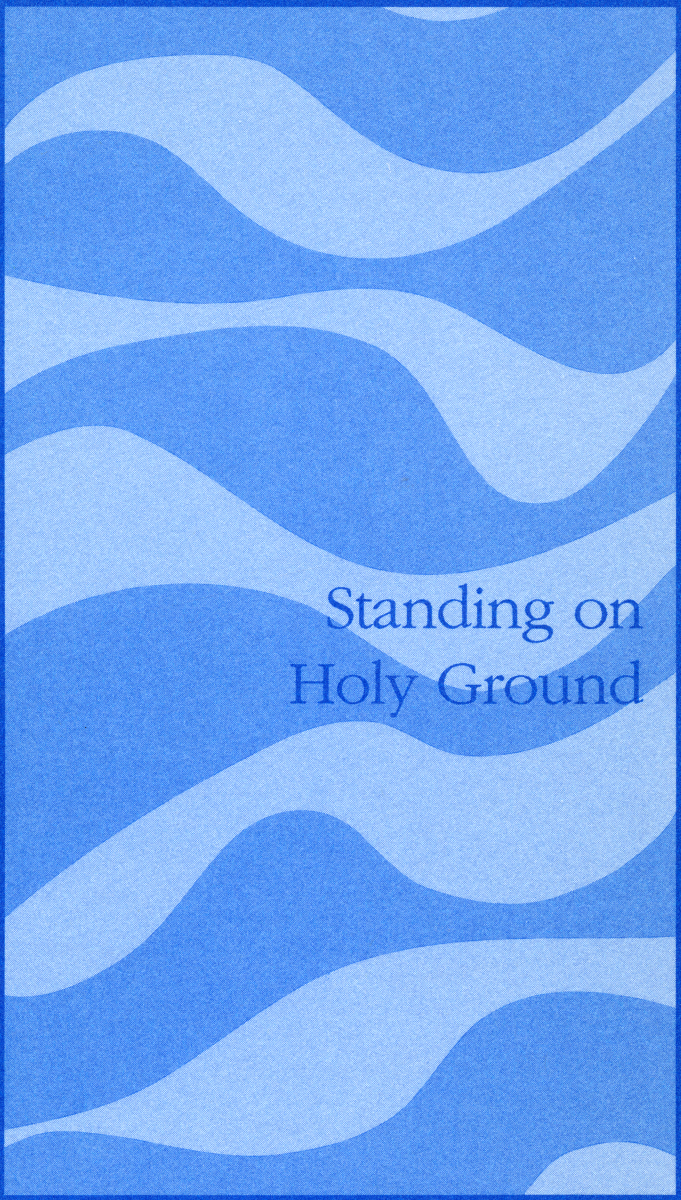
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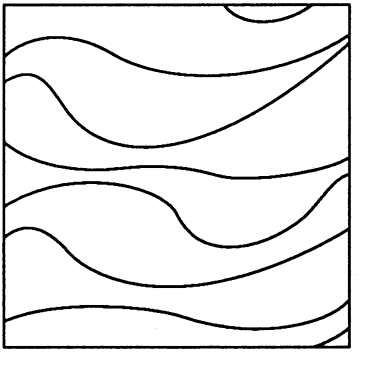
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Standing on Holy Ground

Recently I heard a stirring address by James Alexander Forbes, Jr., pastor of Riverside Church in New York, that defined the holy ground in Moses' and our calls as the place of turmoil where God's invitation to service meets and mixes with our resistance. The frail words of this editorial and my even frailer short term memory cannot recreate the power of that address, but they can remind us of the struggle God has to convince at least 51% of our being to say yes and not no. Whether dramatic or not, each of our calls represents a tension-filled dialogue with the invitation to ministry. Lest we be exalted above measure about the merit of our dedication, Forbes reminded us that there is always some resistance to God's call within us even if God keeps it at 49% or under in most cases. Never forget that the place where we wrestle with God about our call is holy ground, as it was with Moses and Jacob.

Martin E. Marty reminds us that the catechism is a "sounding down" of the teaching church to a society that thinks it knows everything, or a "sounding over" from one part of the believing community to another. Reposed in memory, catechismal phrases permit people to begin speaking of God and the things of God. Catechisms are designed to expound and reinforce particular understandings of the universal gospel. To present the faith to the estranged or those who have never heard, the church is stripped to its essentials, thrown upon the mercies of a sending God. The catechism will be ineffective unless the church and its members sound down, sound over, or re-sound the gospel as they teach this holy book.

Margaret Krych finds the climate ripe today for education which takes serious account of biblical and confessional theology. The

question is how we are to transmit the tradition, interpret the gospel for our day, and live in the light of the gospel. Since stages in cognitive development do not permit children to learn the catechism as a whole, we must increasingly teach the catechism—small and large—to adults. In order to re-evangelize through the catechism we need pastors who love the catechisms and can teach them to others, who invite the faithful to study them with enthusiasm, and who recruit and train laity for catechetical teaching.

James Limburg offers an ecological reading of Psalm 104, which provides a wondrous picture of our living space and the planetary rhythms of time. Both the dominion model and the integration model are useful in understanding the relationships between humans and the earth. To have dominion, of course, does not mean to bulldoze and exploit, and to be one of the company of the Lord's created creatures does not mean that the Bible views all creatures as of equal worth. Psalm 104 calls us to live alongside the other inhabitants of the earth in a way that loves and treats gently this beautiful and fragile blue planet that we call home.

John D. Vogelsang reports that some people want to address poverty by leaving it all to the self-regulating powers of the market while others call for more government spending to overcome income differences. The Communitarians are against rampant self interest and unbridled individualism, but seem unable to work for the common good without settling for a club-like good society. The church can bring the poor and non-poor together to build a network of mutual support and responsibility. Working for the common good means redistributing money, talent, time, and decision making. We need to reconstruct alternative institutions within the shell of the old society.

Paul J. Nuechterlein suggests that the primary theme raised in connection with the table sacrament in the New Testament is servanthood. The overdrinking and overeating about which Paul complained are evidence of the lack of the spirit of servanthood. Loss of the servant emphasis came about with the establishment of Christianity as the imperial religion at the time of Constantine. Our worship space, according to the servanthood understanding, should resemble a dining room rather than a temple of sacrifice. We also ought to make a clear separa-

tion between the sacrament of the table and the rites of confession and forgiveness, and we should welcome Christians of all ages to the table.

Phyllis Kersten uses the Indian metaphor of the "skin of God" to describe the presence of God. People find God in church and on vacation, but what about the other six days and the other forty-eight weeks? Her message to the Association of Lutheran Older Adults points to the needs of the neighbor as an ideal place to discover God's presence. Active older adults can become involved in Matthew 25-type ministry. In such service they see and become the skin of God.

Ron Dwyer-Voss hopes to move us beyond empowerment. As a community organizer, he wants to release that power that is already part of the people of God. Releasing people's God-given power will allow the power of God to be effective in our communities. We need to ask where power hides in others and what activity on our part will release it.

Dr. Forbes reminded preachers at the LSTC summer school that their time away from home was also holy ground, where their charism of preaching was being deepened and broadened through Doctor of Ministry courses. He imagined these preachers returning home, refortified, and striding into their congregations with the words: "Now I am really on holy ground."

That's it, right there amid the successes and failures, the glamor and banality of parish ministry is where God keeps renewing us in our call and helps at least 51% of our being to say yes and not no.

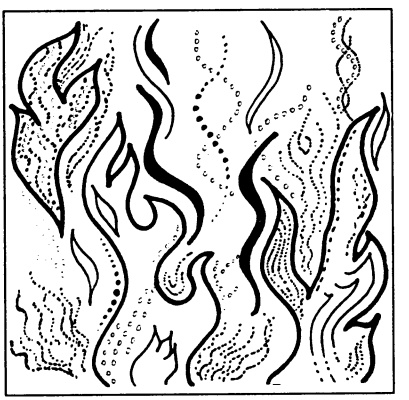
Keep on standing on and in that holy ground!

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

The Future of the Catechism[1]

Martin E. Marty
Chicago, Illinois

It is hard to picture anyone awakening on a typical day and placing "The Future of the Catechism" on the agenda. Exceptions could be the handful of people in any confession who must market books named "the Catechism;" some church members afflicted with nostalgia for good old days when tough old teachers and pastors forced them to memorize chunks of a catechism; a few who worry about the future of everything, of anything; fighters for and against the new Roman Catholic catechism which is supposed to help whip people into line.



[1]This article was originally presented at a conference on this subject at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, and reflects something of the oral style.

I had better stop naming exceptions, before what was to have been a minyan becomes a quorum of the church. Let it only be said that those of us who take up the topic assume that it is nowhere near as high an agenda item for the people in the churches' trenches as are lay indifference, clerical abuse, church growth intentions based on market-research, the weekend distractions from divine worship, or the threat of burnout.

The future of the catechism, however, can become an issue of both some intrinsic and greater symbolic or connectional value. Leaders, including parents, who care about how people are saved, healed, consoled, served, motivated toward change; people who care about Christian basics and impulses and momentum; those who want Christ-centered teachings and life to become more dynamic in the future, have reason to re-explore issues surrounding catechismal teaching and teachings.

Nothing in the culture will help them. Walk through a mall, enter video arcades, look at the images on television sets for sale, pass a counter where a pagan Mars Hill of magazines is being offered, study the faces of the milling population, especially the young, and look at the Want-Ads: nothing is supportive of efforts to discipline, order, express, and make attractive the Christian life through anything related to catechism. Books which include or infer that word in their title and concept, in the midst of modern pluralism, would look subcultural and beside the point; boring to a profane world; useless to the reformers.

And yet, and yet: there on the shelves or desks of the thoughtful in many communions there will be handbooks of doctrine, vademecums of teaching, digests of the substance of faith, codified question-and-answer books which were designed to be of help to believers, some of which have become classics: Luther's catechisms and others named after Heidelberg or Baltimore or wherever.

I have deliberately chosen this comma-filled style, one that bears the mark of the catalog, not to weary the reader but to suggest something of the confusion around catechismal thinking and the difficulty of revivifying it. Now it is time to begin to make the case for this hard subject on more substantive grounds. And beginning should mean confronting "the catechism"—let Luther's stand in for them all in this exercise—as classics. After the technical definers are finished probing what a classic is, I hear them saying: it is a writing (or other expression) or event which, after it has been expressed by a genius or with genius, and has made its point, does not permit one to get back behind it again.

No one (who is respectable) admits to being Marxian, Darwinian, or Freudian today—but we cannot "get back behind" Marx, Darwin, or Freud. We may be Aristotelians, but cannot reconceive a world before or apart from Plato, and vice versa. The Gospel of John is classic in all these senses, and no biblical critics can take away its status.

One visits these classics as Machiavelli visited his library: dressed in garments "regal and courtly" one goes to converse with them, and their authors out of the generosity of spirit open themselves for conversation and impart of themselves so that one knows no boredom or despair. Line one of Heidelberg is enough to set one thinking and living for years; many lines of Luther do the same. One goes ahead to them, the way Pablo Casals, the century's great cellist, went to his piano each morning and set his day by playing and reflecting on one of Bach's Two-part Inventions. The catechism is the basic "two-part inventions" of the Christian Church, the Da Vinci sketchbook, the Son-

nets of Shakespeare, but born for community and not only for the individual reader.

Do not romanticize: in no age did the faithful and the wayward come running for a classic conversation with catechisms. Social histories have discovered and displayed, for example, accounts of mass and massive indifference to the teaching and learning of the catechism in the decade and near the site of Luther's expression. Luther & Co. were tempted to call on the magistrates to force parents to force children to learn the catechism and to attend classes where it was taught. Whoever does market analysis today in order to let the unbeliever set the agenda and determine the ethos for the believer would not think of putting catechismal teaching and content on the menu of questions asked of the market. Yet there it is, to be repudiated or somehow positively regarded: an issue for the church today. We can accent catechismal themes in respect to etymology, "conversation," theology, and mission.

The *etymologist* is our first helper. The *kata* behind "catechism" signals the intensive and the *exein* (which includes echoes of our word "echo") captures a sense of what re+sounds. *kata* + *exein* can imply to "sound down." This means that there is a hierarchical—and thus, to many, an offensive, connotation: someone "sounds down" to another: a teacher who knows something to a child who does not; a teaching church to a culture that thinks it knows everything; a parent to a young one; the church of the past speaking "down" through the ages; the catechismal elite to the uncatechized and indifferent. But after one has heard protests against hierarchy and—since these protests are not always out of place in the history of catechism—patriarchy, we are still left with the understanding that in Christian faith it is not only Who you know (the big one) but what you know, and how you come to know what you know remains important. Think of catechism, then, as implying less of "to sound down" and more of "to sound over"

Do not romanticize: in no age did the faithful and the wayward come running for a classic conversation with catechisms.

from one part of the believing community to another; from a teaching part that is always learning and a learning element that keeps teaching.

Catechism is used for initiation into the substance of community life, so that the feelings of the moment do not by themselves have to sustain community after they become familiar. Catechism "sounds over" to those at the entrance. It is used for instruction for lifelong use by the believers in community. Martin Luther sounded arrogant or falsely humble when he said he had to study each day the catechism (even though he wrote it); he *did* have to. And it is used for worship: catechism stands behind or alongside liturgy and hymnal as a marker and inspirer of the church devotional: it "sounds over" to those in prayer and praise.

Catechism by itself does nothing; it is usually inert and hard to render "ert." Britain's Roman Catholic Cardinal Heenan warned of misconceptions concerning the

In a world of chaos and confusion, catechismal thinking does not end but it starts conversation; it does not rule out though it helps define.

place of catechism-in-isolation: no modern teacher, he said, would defend the old mechanical use of the catechism. (The old mechanical use was no doubt the dominant one everywhere and always). It is doubtful, he went on to say, if the catechism by itself ever led people to love their religion. (I would take issue with him once one gets past "old" and "mechanical" and "use" concepts: many Lutherans respond most warmly to classic lines like those in the explanation to the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism, for one, and have come to "love their religion" in its sacramental life thanks to insights from that catechism's teachings on the Lord's Supper and Baptism.) Something has to happen to help the catechism be "sounded down" or "sounded over" to another part of the community in order that it help that community be vital.

Modern thinking about and against the old mechanical use began in Catholicism with the Munich Congress of 1928, an event comparable in matters of "sounding down" the faith to the recovery of liturgy at Solesmes, or the biblical researches Catholics undertook in Jerusalem long before Vatican II. In one of the early post-Vatican II revisitations of catechism, Australian R. M. Rummery[2] built upon Munich and the Council to undertake a historical and systematic review, one that helps non-Roman Catholics in their attempt to find categories for understanding. His was a five-fold unfolding, a roughly chronological sequence.

First was the *traditional* approach, the one being re-tried in the new Catholic catechism propagated by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and other hierarchs. This implies the "Frisz, Vogel, oder stirb," "Eat, bird, or die" approach to catechism. Tillich would call it "heteronomous." It amounts to a "this you must believe in order to be considered orthodox" as opposed to "this is what we believe and you had better know it to understand us." Next came *pedagogical* approaches, when the educational psychologists brought what they knew to the subject. Rummery finds this soon supplemented and enhanced by the *kerygmatic* approach: the church not only insists on certain truths and presents theories about how to inform lives, but also to proclaim. The catechism is an instrument that can be of help in the prophetic, critical, and saving announcement by the church.

Not long after the *kerygmatic* approach began to win its way, there was reaction against its implied revelational "bolt-out-of-the-blue" understanding: it seemed unresponsive to the anthropological dimensions of faith that characterized much modern Catholic and other Christian thought and life. So the *anthropological* came into play as an approach: now one had to be "life-centered" and "situational," as the faith always is. Yet life is not lived in isolation and one does not face situations alone. So a

[2] R. M. Rummery, *Catechesis and Religious Education in a Pluralist Society* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1976).

fifth approach came to make its way: the *group-centered*, which could easily degenerate into what was dismissed soon as "touchy-feely," but which also offered possibility in a time when spirituality, religion, faith, and even Christian faith, so often gets confined to the private and "do it yourself" realm.

A truly catholic thinker does not have to see these as mutually exclusive emphases, or as stages that obliterate what preceded them. It is quite possible to see them intersecting and overlapping, being mutually complementary and correlatable, to those who care about the "sounding down" or "sounding over" of faith. In a time of shipwreck, one reaches for all the planks in sight to fashion a raft. It is quite possible that the church can retrieve something from each of these approaches for the task tomorrow.

The catechism can also be regarded as part of the church's *conversation*. Admittedly, the catechism's version is a bit artificial: it is conversation as one finds it in the script of a play, and not as in ordinary life. The fact that questions and answers come precut and prefiguring distorts one of the elements of conversation. Yet in the hands of the proper pedagogue, classic catechismal form can be the primer and prompter of conversation. It can set forth models and help initiate the speaking up of partners that conversation implies. Reduced to memory, or reposed in memory, catechismal phrases do not represent conversation. Yet they permit people to begin speaking of God and the things of God.

Michael Oakeshott, the British philosopher who has done much to help us understand conversation, always stressed that it implied elements of both "knowing *that*" and "knowing *how*." Many advocates of the catechism fall under the criticisms of observers like Heenan by treating it as a book of "knowing that's" alone: for imparting, transmitting, and "sounding down" in a one-way direction. But catechisms at their best are also promoters of the "knowing how's" of the faith: these are imparted not as from dogmatist to instructee but as from master to apprentice. Christian "conversation," as we knew when King James English dominated, means "way of life" or "walk." It is designed as a mode of finding through the mazeways of life. The structured learning implied in catechism is part of what promotes the "knowing how" through the mazeways.

Those who conceive of conversation amply see the world as conversation. Conversation can be "teleocratic," with an aim too specifically in view and teaching-and-learning arranged toward merely pragmatic ends. But conversation is an end in itself: thus catechismal question-and-answer and the talk and life that grow from it are like worship and praise and prayer: irrepressible expressions of love for the Word of God, of God. Conversation has an element of play to it; it exists for its own sake, as does friendship. Conversation, we are reminded, is not argument or debate, though it may include such. It is not examination. One does not say, "I won that conversation" or "I flunked that conversation." Conversation is guided not by the answer one defends, the proposition one debates, the test one must pass, but by the question. That is key to the catechism.

In a world of chaos and confusion, catechismal thinking does not end but it starts conversation; it does not rule out though it helps define. The simplest parent or teacher, pastor or catechist, is a "master" of arts of conversation who uses the catechism as basis for promoting talk and inquiry among "apprentices," including herself.

Catechism and catechismal thinking, next, are *theologically* conceived. The catechism, we remind ourselves, is not the experience of God but the systematization of thought that interprets this experience of the Christian community. The depths and riches of God and God's knowledge and wisdom and teaching are so profound that one stumbles: Augustine said that the necessary teaching of the Trinity, for instance, appeared not because it was satisfactory or final but because it was preferable to mere silence. Life is fired at us point-blank; Christian story and contemporary temptation and opportunity come point-blank: how make sense of them? If all things were made in and through and for Christ and if in Christ all things "hold together," how find some minimal measure of coherence to allow for at least a first word?

Catechism would help. Even in the mythical "ages of faith" we do not picture the catechism as having represented the only symbol system in cultures where it represented the established or privileged one. The more we know about the Middle Ages, the more we know that paganisms abounded in Christendom; the more we know about the Reformation, the more we know that, despite good preaching of the gospel, ordinary people still and also smuggled in non-gospel in plain brown wrappers. But today more than ever there is a temptation to take a little bit of this (e.g., my college Zen) and a dab of that (my roommate's Judaism) to which one adds ad hoc a portion of this (the way of family living admired in Mormonism) and that (Joseph Campbell mythology, grasped from a Bill Moyers television series). This is the postmodern situation—eclectic, given to collage and bricollage, pastiche and montage; plotless.

The Christian life, which bids one to conversation without limit, is not plotless; it is storied. But the stories make sense in community when patterned. One could illustrate this with the magisterial elaborations of the three articles of the Creed in Luther's Large Catechism. In speaking of Creation, one is not lost among billions of stars in billions of galaxies: immediately, the catechizee learns to look at his or her own body and mind to see the wonders of that creation ordered to size. The Third Article of the Creed has no room for the bibliolatry that characterizes so much of authority-seeking Christianity today; it speaks of the begetting community in which one hears the Word and is nurtured by it.

All catechismal thinking is hermeneutical. One who approaches texts of catechisms acknowledges that there is no naked encounter with a text: what one says first, or as a whole, or at large, or in the main, or in the light of one's communal preconceptions, determines what follows. In the case of Luther's catechisms, the "first" or "whole" or "at large" or "in the main" or "communal preconceiving" basis is the gospel of forgiveness. The Large Catechism, for instance, devotes a large minority of its pages to the Law as expressed in the Ten Commandments and explained by Luther. Yet there is never any doubt but that the focus of the catechism, its core and center, is the gospel, as portrayed in the comments on the Apostles Creed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

A formal hermeneutical assumption parallels the substantive one: it is an illustration of a theme set forth by Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. The catechisms show the Christian mind at work resisting the direct contemplation of God. There is in them no trace of knowing "how things are within the majesty of God." Everything instead derives from a confidence that the believer has all she needs, all he can know, by observing and receiving the "vis-

ible things of God," the tracks of God in history, in the wounds of Christ, in the material water and bread and wine wedded to the Word in the sacraments.

The temptation to do an exegesis of the Lutheran (or other) catechisms is strong at this point, but it is a temptation one must resist, given the nature of the present assignment. Our topic is the future of the catechism, of catechismal concepts and practical expressions. But such a restriction of the topic inevitably brings us up again and again to the point of catechisms in the Christian communions: they are designed to expound and reinforce particular understandings of the universal gospel, a confessional body's grasp of the whole message of the Una Sancta. In short, they address what would otherwise be a theological vacuum in the life of the individual, the church, the culture; they give order to a complex story which mediates God to humans. Such a vocation for a book suggests that there must be a "future for the catechism" or its equivalents and surrogates, or there will not be much "substance of things hoped for" in the faith and life of the community.

Missiologically, the catechism has a function made visible in or symbolized by the concept of "catechization" in "home missions" or the role of the catechist in what was once called "foreign missions." Foreign missions as a concept also deserves to live on, but not only as a picturing of the heathen world oceans away from Christendom, but of the encounter with the alien, the different, the "other," in whatever world it is that the believing community tries to confront and attract others.

Catechismal teaching, it has to be made clear, is very far from the purportedly objective, phenomenological approach to religion in religious studies as these occur on college and university campuses. In these studies, scholars and students are expected to expound, explore, and evaluate religious traditions and voices with some sense of externality (marked, one hopes, by empathy). Religious studies are "about" religion, about faiths. When such studies come to focus and center on theistic faith, they offer knowledge about God as it is received in the community and detailed by the particular author of catechisms. In catechismal teaching, the faith is commended and, as in gospel preaching, God is *offered* as the living option, the demander who attracts.

> The catechisms show the Christian mind at work resisting the direct contemplation of God.

So urgent is this task of condensing and ordering the faith for presentation to the estranged or to those who have never heard the message, that the Christian church has employed the catechist at the furthest frontiers of the corporate life of the church. Where there are not yet or any longer resources to build miniature exemplifications of "the tall towers of total Christendom"—which means, where the church is called upon to present its dependency on the divine alone, its dropping of pretenses and temptations to beguile or overwhelm—the catechist and catechism appear. Now the church is stripped to its essentials, thrown upon the mercies of a sending God.

The future of the catechism depends in no small measure on the catechist and cat-

echizing community. Insofar as the catechism by itself and in itself is just a book, it is inert; it only has a potential. But when the catechism connects with the word of witness and is bonded to the life lived in Christ, it becomes the living Word with potential judging, saving, healing, and motivating power. When Barnabas was sent to Antioch to address that church in its frail missionary status, he acted as catechist dealing with ordered essentials of the Christian testimony and message. But the author of Acts tells us that because he was a good person, full of the Holy Spirit, many believed.

In the recesses of memory in minds old enough to recall when "foreign missionaries" served as credible sermon illustrations in "back home" congregations, there lies recall of one of the many stories about missionaries that preachers used to tell. I remember it being told with Victorian linguistic forms and out-of-context "thee's" and "thou's" on the lips of the people called heathen or pagan. Translated, it went something like this: in one of the missions, beyond the point where resources give out, a catechist moved on further, beyond the horizons or into the densenesses where the church and its message had never been seen or heard. He was a shoemaker; catechists in such stories always had to have a secular or lay vocation. They were proverbial tentmakers. He lived in a village, out of contact with the missionary sending station.

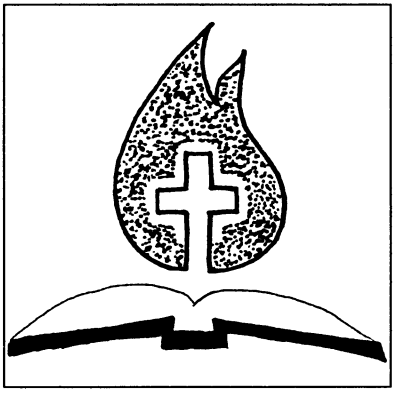
While he was establishing his credibility as a villager and performing services as shoemaker and guest, but before he could tell the story behind the catechism that he would teach, something happened that he felt disgraced him. The disgrace would, he thought, have set back the proclamation of the gospel among people who had never heard the message; he did not know that his imperfection or what he did that compromised him was not visible or known among the villagers. But he lapsed into silence about the gospel and chose only to try to live it in his relations to villagers. Years later, after his death, the village was reached by the church in its circle of expansion. The missionaries—I suppose the first ones were catechists, too—began to tell the story of Jesus. They made the words and works and ways of Jesus very vivid. In due course, with a clarity and appropriateness that often came in punch lines of missionary stories, some of the townspeople spoke up. "Oh, the person you talk about? He has already been here. He was the old shoemaker, who . . . ."

Stripped of its archaic and stereotyping outer layers, the innards of such a story survive as pointers to clues about "the future of the catechism." Whoever would take the ancient story and order it for pedagogical or missiological purposes has to know that devotion to the catechism *as book* or catechetical teaching *as method* will be pointless unless there be accent on the community and its exemplars who "sound down," "sound over," or "re-sound" the gospel in its catechismal expressions. The future of the catechism is there and thus at stake.

The Future of the Catechisms in Teaching

Margaret A. Krych
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

The catechisms are treasures—but not to be locked away in safety deposit boxes. They are only treasures in so far as they are used. Fortunately the climate is ripe for recovering serious catechetical work, especially with youth and adults.



A new climate

Christian education often follows the fashions of education in general. In the last thirty years, the climate has not been too favorable for teaching catechisms, especially to older youth and adults. In the 1960s, small group theory and people's feelings were paramount. Content played a secondary role to process, dynamics, and emotional involvement. By the early to mid 70s emphasis was on individualized procedures, open education, and interest centers. In adult education, the importance of self-directedness translated into choice of topics in a smorgasbord approach to adult learning.[1]

In the late 70s and 80s came imagination/aesthetics education, societal issues education, liberation education, and faith development education; and more recently, life transition learning and cooperative learning. All of these trends served to direct attention to important issues. But they also directed attention to matters other than the serious teaching of theological content to youth and adults.

Along the way in the late 70s and early 80s came the back-to-basics movement with more cry for content, especially at the

[1] Cf. Leon McKenzie, *Adult Religious Education: The Twentieth Century Challenge* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1975), chapters 6-7.

children's level. More Bible courses were taught to children, and more "basics" were emphasized in catechism courses for early adolescents. Some notable in-depth scripture courses were produced for adults which helped participants examine the Bible as a whole. But still not as much attention was paid to catechetical instruction for older youth and adults.

Recently, a number of voices have been calling for a new trend which will emphasize serious theological learning for youth and adults. This movement may serve to highlight the importance of teaching the catechisms.

Early forerunners of the trend might be seen in Walter Brueggemann and Sara Little. Brueggemann's *The Creative Word*, published in 1982, uses biblical canon as a model for Christian education. Brueggemann argues for a core in Christian education that has firmness, graciousness, and authority, a mode of knowing that is unauthoritarian but utterly authoritative, as indeed is the case of Torah for Israel.[2] Combined with education that is a disruption for justice (as in prophets)[3] and with education that reflects reason and passionate trust in God which is the character of the Wisdom literature, Brueggemann believes that a significant approach to curriculum can be developed.

Sara Little's *To Set One's Heart* appeared in 1983, in which she builds on the assumption "that belief is important for us today, and belief formation is an appropriate organizing center for the church's teaching ministry."[4] Her thesis is that

> beliefs which engage the thinking powers of the person as they emerge out of and inform faith, sustained, reformed, and embodied by the faith community, can be an important factor in bringing integration and integrity to life. Teaching that contributes to the formation of this kind of belief necessitates the selective use of a variety of models with clear purposes, and presupposes the existence of a context that supports and interacts with intentional teaching.[5]

These and other writers in the early and mid 80s helped raise consciousness of the need for content in religious education for youth and adults.

More recently, other voices have swelled the chorus. Kay Kupper Berg decries the biblical, doctrinal, and liturgical illiteracy in the church and in society in general and calls for a core curriculum for the urban church. She writes:

> As late twentieth-century Christians, we have extricated ourselves from some of the confining doctrine and narrow biblical interpretation of the past, but too often, instead of taking our ark with us, we have set it down and are wandering around in a theological wilderness out of sight of the promised land. We need to reclaim the ark. We need to name the Name, recite the certainties of our faith, testify to the changelessness of God in a universe of options. In other words, we need to teach the basics—simply, directly, consistently, energetically. A core curriculum can help us do that.[6]

The "Effective Christian Education" study of the Search Institute, published in March 1990, also served to raise consciousness of the importance of education for all

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[2] Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 15-17.

[3] Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, 40ff.

[4] Sara Little, *To Set One's Heart: Belief and Teaching in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 9.

[5] Little, *To Set One's Heart*, 9-10.

[6] Kay Kupper Berg, "Christian Literacy, The Core Curriculum, and the Urban Church," in Donald B. Rogers, *Urban Church Education* (R. E. Press, 1989), 50-59.

Educators are taking seriously what the church traditionally has regarded as important for its members to learn.

age levels and of current biblical and theological illiteracy in mainline Protestantism.

Richard Osmer has probably expressed the concern most lucidly and has proposed practical ways to deal with it. Osmer posits three tasks of the teaching office. The first is the determination of the church's normative beliefs and practices, "the transmission and preservation of the core elements of the heritage of a church community, those items upon which its identity is based."[7] The second task is "the ongoing interpretation of the church's normative beliefs and practices in the face of shifting cultural and historical contexts."[8] This task focuses on intelligibility—setting forth the faith today in ways that are understandable at the end of the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first. The third task is to form and sustain educational institutions, processes, and curricula by which the church's normative beliefs and practices are taught, "allowing them to be appropriated by each new generation and grasped with deeper understanding by individuals as they move through life."[9] So Osmer is concerned with children and youth and adults in this transmissive and interpretive task. He calls for churches with a confessional heritage to use and teach that confessional heritage. And he argues that to be well done, the task of Christian education demands the cooperative effort of seminaries, national staffs, congregations and pastors.[10]

The climate then is ripe, in a variety of Protestant circles, for education with persons of all ages which takes serious account of biblical and confessional theology. Rather than merely surveying people's interests and wants, educators are now taking seriously what the church traditionally has regarded as important for its members to learn. Adult education is dealing with the churchly question: How are we to transmit the tradition, to interpret the gospel for our day, to live in the light of the gospel? And of course for Lutherans that means teaching the catechism seriously.

Claiming the heritage

Lutherans have a great heritage of teaching in the church. The catechisms cannot be taken out of Luther's entire concern for education for service in both kingdoms—evident, for example, in his treatise "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools."[11] Councils and authorities, he argues, must provide for good education so that the biblical languages are taught which are the sheath in which the sword of the

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[7] Richard Robert Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 16.

[8] Osmer, *A Teachable Spirit*, 17.

[9] Osmer, 18.

[10] Osmer, 179.

[11] Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989).

Spirit is contained, so that the scriptures may be interpreted and taught correctly and the gospel preserved. Education is needed so that preaching will not be flat and tame. Education is needed for the salvation of souls. And good education is needed so that Christians can perform the functions of the temporal governmental offices. So Luther advocates education for both boys and girls and for the gifted who fulfill special roles of leadership in society and especially the church. He also calls for good libraries as sources of education.[12]

Likewise, in "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," Luther argues for education both to prepare persons for preaching and also for governing, for serving God in both spiritual and worldly estates.[13] In the churchly realm he wants education for pastors, teachers, preachers, lectors, chaplains, sacristans, schoolteachers,[14] education so that persons can snatch souls from the devil and speak the gospel to the neighbor. He pleads for "ordinary pastors who will teach the gospel and the catechism to the young and the ignorant, and baptize and administer the sacrament"[15] and for Christians who will establish law and peace and worldly government, serving God and the world in their various stations.[16]

The catechisms

The promise of justification by grace through faith lies at the heart of Luther's concern for teaching: all believers are priests who proclaim the Word, intercede for each other, bear one another's burdens, and serve each other. All Christians are called in baptism to announce the good news of justification by grace through faith. All are called to intercede for the church and the world. All are called to serve the neighbor in daily relationships and stations of life. Underlying this calling is justification. One serves because of the gospel. One prays because of the gospel. One speaks the gospel which one knows and which one is ready to communicate. The presupposition of course is that the believer has learned the good news of the gospel.

Luther expected that Christians should know what God has done in Christ for our reconciliation. We all know Luther's horror at the state of the Saxony churches in the 1528-29 visitation in which laity were ignorant and clergy unfit to teach them, and following the visitation his writing of the Small Catechism for use in families (households of plain people) so that the young and uneducated could be instructed. He wrote the Large Catechism also in the same year primarily for pastors, teachers, and adult laity.

Luther considered the catechism "the minimum of knowledge required of a Christian.... Whoever does not possess it should not be reckoned among Christians nor admitted to a sacrament."[17] Nor does Luther consider that the Small Catechism is sufficient. In the Preface to the Small Catechism he urges those responsible that after they have taught the Small Catechism to "take up a large catechism so that the people may have a richer and fuller understanding." Luther then was thoroughly serious on evan-

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[12] Luther, "To the Councilmen," 717-30 *passim.*

[13] Martin Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," *Luther's Works* (Fortress, 1967) 46: 215.

[14] Luther, "A Sermon," 220.

[15] Luther, "A Sermon," 231.

[16] Luther, "A Sermon," 256.

[17] Martin Luther, Preface to the *Large Catechism* #2, in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

gelical grounds about Christian education for Christians of all ages. For those who couldn't grasp more, the very basics of the catechism were acceptable. But he expected most baptized persons first to learn the parts of the catechism, then to be instructed in their meaning, and then to study a large catechism. In the latter context, Luther urges pastors to emphasize those aspects which are particularly pertinent to their flock whether it be laborers and shopkeepers, farmers, and servants, and so on.[18] In other words, serious study of large catechism material was not something Luther thought would be reserved for the academically elite, but rather would be engaged in by those in regular daily occupations.

Serious study of large catechism material was not something Luther thought would be reserved for the academically elite.

Teaching today

Today we know that Luther was optimistic about the amount conceptually able to be grasped by children. Luther did not have access to modern research into children's cognitive development. We now know that the catechism is not suitable in its entirety for children. Children think qualitatively differently than adults. Jean Piaget and subsequent cognitive research tells us that the human brain develops in relation to age just as the rest of the human body does. Thinking is related to brain development. Children go through a number of stages which are roughly related to age although there are many variations in age. However the stages are invariant, universal, and sequential. Three stages prior to age two are often grouped as the sensorimotor stage. From roughly 2 to 7 years is the preoperational stage, from 7 to 12 years the concrete thinking stage, and from about 12-plus the young adolescent develops the kind of thinking which is typical of adults and which is variously termed abstract thinking, formal operations, logical operations. The catechism presupposes the latter kind of thinking, which is logical and can relate doctrinal assertions one to another.

If we teach too much at early stages, children distort the meaning to fit their own level of understanding. And that distortion remains part of their theological framework—a distortion which later must deliberately be untaught or they as adults will misinterpret sermons and whatever else they read and hear. So how do we minimize misinterpretation so that pastors do not spend most of the time in teenage catechetical classes unteaching what has been mislearned?

In preschool years, we need to teach simple, basic notions about God and the church which build on experiences of trust, security, love, and relationships in the community of faith. In elementary school years, some carefully chosen phrases from the catechism may be useful. By and large, concrete thinkers are developing more complex foundational learnings about the Bible,

[18] Martin Luther, Preface to the *Small Catechism* #17-18, in Tappert, 340.

Jesus, the church, God, the gospel, and their daily life. Teachers might use themes from the catechism up to seventh grade along with solid biblical storytelling of concrete stories rather than metaphor and parable. Catechisms can form topical areas of curricula; they clearly will form normative standards for writers and teachers so that what is taught is not contrary to the catechisms. But formal learning of the catechisms as a whole is beyond most elementary children.

Most children reach abstract thinking about the age of twelve-plus. Slower developers may be fifteen before they think abstractly. David Elkind[19] says that children are ready for formal operations when they can do algebra. Usually, it takes up to two years of practice in general abstract thinking before teenagers are able to think theologically with ease. We may expect that most eighth graders will be able to handle some serious theological reasoning and that ninth and tenth graders will be ever more capable. In these years we should teach solid catechetical instruction and biblical theology using plenty of metaphor and parabolic illustrations. We shall need carefully to explain vocabulary, review often, and expect that students will revert to concrete thinking every now and again. It will be helpful to proceed from concrete concepts to abstract concepts, and to check for understanding. We may well have students memorize parts of the catechism so that in time of personal need and in ritual these will come to mind. I would reverse Luther's sequence: first teach for understanding, then commit to heart.

Luther's teaching methods were rather rigid—word for word repetition. Nowadays we have additional helpful methods which are more engaging and facilitate retention. It is important that students hear the catechism as relevant to their lives—use a law-gospel approach, in which students are called to reflect upon their human state before God and the gospel answer of God's gracious mercy and forgiveness.

The Confirmation Taskforce Report adopted by the 1993 ELCA Assembly gives new emphasis on confirmation in the congregation, the role of the catechism in the lives of young people, and the importance of lifelong catechetical learning. This report is very significant.

There is indeed need for review of the catechism after early adolescence. The Small Catechism is eminently suitable for use in later adolescence and in adulthood also. And youth and adults then can go on to study the Large Catechism. How valuable Luther found it for himself!

> As for myself, let me say that I too am a doctor and a preacher— Yet I do as a child who is being taught the Catechism. Every morning and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly.[20]

Luther had harsh words for pastors and preachers who thought they were beyond the catechism because of their learning or were simply too lazy to teach it.

So by all means teach the catechisms to adults. Offer courses regularly, not only for new members but for long-standing members to review their learning. Expect that people will love the catechisms, read them,

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[19] David Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984), 151-2.

[20] Martin Luther's Preface to the *Large Catechism* #7-8, in Tappert, 359.

and retain their gems as they reinterpret them for today. Across the country we find that some students enter seminary to learn about the faith—to get basic catechetical instruction. Yet that should be the right and heritage of all the baptized which they should receive in their local congregation!

Laity need to be well-versed theologically: not only so they can teach their children, but so they can speak the Word to others, intercede for others, serve God and the neighbor in church and world. For those tasks they need theological training beyond the adolescent years—indeed they need refresher courses through life.

Evangelism is one of the important tasks that face the church. When youth and adults have solid grounding in the faith, they can talk with their neighbors without being tongue-tied, and can speak the Word appropriately. Parents can communicate with confirmands. Youth can talk to other youth. Luther in effect used the catechism as a tool for re-evangelization in the sixteenth century. We today can do no less.

We need to recapture the role of pastor as primary theological teacher in the congregation. Luther was correct in placing responsibility for teaching squarely on the shoulders of the pastors—pastors who themselves love the catechisms, and who are able in turn to teach them faithfully to others and interpret them for 1994, 1999, 2020, and beyond. Pastors who invite the faithful to study with enthusiasm, rather than approach the congregation with a tentative, "Do you think you might possibly be interested in...?" Pastors who recruit and train laity for catechetical teaching. Pastors who help families to be centers of education as Luther envisaged. With such pastoral leadership in education, the future of the catechisms in teaching can be truly a means of equipping the people of God for ministry.

We need to recapture the role of pastor as primary theological teacher in the congregation.

Down-To-Earth Theology: Psalm 104 and the Environment

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In June of 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, representatives from the nations of the world met for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Earth Summit. The purpose of the gathering was to focus the energies of world leaders and non-governmental groups on the task of "protecting the earth and providing a sustainable and just future for all people."[1]

The World Council of Churches sponsored a meeting during the Earth Summit, with representatives from 52 nations on hand. In concluding their work, these participants wrote a letter addressed to churches around the world, dated Pentecost, 1992. The letter begins with a reference to Psalm 104:

> With you we have prayed for the Holy Spirit to fall gently upon the peoples gathered for the Earth Summit, to inspire our sons and daughters to prophesy and to fill the young with visions of justice and the old with dreams of healing this wounded world. This very same Spirit leads us to recognize, in creation, the One who "makes springs gush forth in the valleys," who "brings forth food from the earth," who "stretched out the heavens like a tent" and "set the earth on its foundations" (Psalm 104).[2]

The letter concludes with a call to discover

> what it means that God's covenant extends to all creatures, by rediscovering the eco-centric dimension of the Bible. This means a modest material life-style that loves and treats the earth gently, as God does.[3]

This essay intends to contribute to such a rediscovery of the "eco-centric dimension of the Bible" by offering an ecological reading of the first biblical text to be cited in the letter, Psalm 104.

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[1] "Searching for the New Heavens and the New Earth; An ecumenical response to UNCED (Geneva: WCC), 6.

[2] "Searching for the New Heavens," 8; the letter also appears in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Redeeming the Creation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), 70-73.

[3] "Searching for the New Heavens," 10-11; also *Redeeming the Creation*, 73.

Canonical context. Psalm 104 is the second in a series of four hymns that conclude Book IV of the Psalter. Psalms 103 and 104 are formally linked with beginnings and endings that occur only here in the Bible, "Bless the LORD, O my soul." The contents of the two psalms, however, are quite different.

Psalm 103 centers on the steadfast love (Hebrew, *hesed*; 4, 8, 11, 17) and mercy/compassion (4, 13) of the LORD, described in terms of motherly affection (4, 13) and also a father's love (13). As it concludes, Psalm 103 describes the LORD as heavenly king and calls upon all the "works" of the LORD to join in praise (22), thus anticipating the theme of Psalm 104 ("works," 104:24).

Psalm 104 picks up the picture of the LORD as king in heaven (1-4) but then moves quickly to describe the LORD's involvement with the earth and its creatures (5-30).

These two psalms are complementary in what they say about God. According to 103, the LORD is the parent—compassionate and healing, merciful and forgiving—and, in the concluding section, also the king (19-22). In dogmatic terms, 103 is a second-article psalm, describing the *saving* acts of God toward the individual and toward people. In 104, however, God is the king, the creator, the cloud rider, but also the sustainer of all life on the earth, including human life. God is even portrayed as a farmer, feeding animals by hand (27-28). Psalm 104 is a first-article psalm, dealing with the LORD's *creating* and *sustaining* work. With its talk about "your spirit" that "renews the face of the ground," it is also a third-article psalm, as the churches have recognized by assigning a portion of it as the reading for the Day of Pentecost.

Taken together, these two psalms describe a God active in the lives of people, and also involved in the processes and works of nature.[4]

Structure. The broad pattern of Psalm 104 is that of a hymn, consisting of a call to praise in the imperative introduction and conclusion (1a; 35b) and reasons for praise in the main section. Odil Hannes Steck has called attention to a number of biblical passages that divide creation into heaven, earth, and sea, such as Ps 136:6, Ps 146:6, and Neh 9:6.[5] If such a division lies behind this psalm, then its structure may be seen as follows:

1ab Call to Praise and Thematic Statement
- 1c–4 God in the heavens
- 5-24 God and the earth
- 25-26 God and the sea
- 27-30 LORD, these all depend on you
- 31-35ab I will praise God!

35c Call to Praise[6]

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[4] James Barr contends that Psalm 104 indeed presents a theology of nature but is also to be considered as evidence for natural theology, "in focusing on the existing cosmos as evidence and manifestation of the divine beneficence.... No other biblical passage so strongly emphasizes that it was the beneficent effects of divine sustenance for animals and for humanity that signify the nature of God." *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 84-5.

[5] "Der Wein unter den Schöpfungsgaben," *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 87 (1978): 173-91.

[6] Similarities to the Egyptian "Hymn to the Aton" have long been noted. These suggest some sort of literary connection between the two, perhaps via Canaanite hymns in Israel's environment. For the text and an indication of parallels, see James B. Pritchard, *ANET* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 369-70. For recent discussions see Peter Craigie, "The Comparison of Hebrew Poetry: Psalm 104 in the Light of Egyptian and Ugaritic Poetry," *Semitics* 4 (1974): 10-21, and Jon Levinson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 53-65.

An ecological reading

We have noted that the WCC letter addressed to churches of the world leads off with a reference to Psalm 104. Now let us ask: What does this psalm say about the relationships among God, people, and the earth and its creatures?

1-4 *God in the heavens.* The psalm begins by linking up with the conclusion of Psalm 103. The LORD is the heavenly king (103:19-22), clothed in honor, majesty, and light, constructing the heavens, riding on the clouds and wind, using lightning and wind to carry out his purposes.

5-9 *God and the earth: water.* So much for the heavens. Now the spotlight is on the earth, the word "earth" occurring seven times in the remainder of the psalm (5, 9, 13, 14, 24, 32, 35). The LORD placed the earth on its foundations and separated the land from the waters (Gen 1:9-10). The psalmist describes the mountains, the streams and rivers and the rolling thunder which is "your thunder" (7). The LORD places the waters over the earth as one would place a blanket on a bed. The section concludes with a word of comfort to all creatures inhabiting the earth: never again will there be a world-wide flood (Genesis 6-9).

A recent film using photographs taken from outer space is entitled "Blue Planet."[7] The film states that 75% of the earth's surface is water and demonstrates that, viewed from space, ours is indeed a blue planet, "covered with the deep as with a blanket."

10-13 *God and the earth: water and habitat.* In this scene everything is in motion, a motion initiated and controlled by the LORD. Water gushes forth from springs and runs down through the valleys. Wild animals make their way across the plains to the streams to drink. Birds sing as they make their nests (12). The LORD sends rain and, says the psalmist, "the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work" (13). The LORD is both creator and sustainer, responsible for the initial gushing of springs and flowing of streams, but also for the continued sending of rain.

14-18 *God and the earth: bread, wine and oil, habitat.* This section describes the LORD's care for the creatures of the earth. For the cattle, the LORD provides grass. Now, for the first time in the psalm, humans appear on the scene.[8] The LORD gives them grain that yields bread for sustenance. One does not, however, live by bread alone! (Deut 8:3; Mt 4:4). The LORD also provides wine to add joy to life (Eccl 9:7; 10:19; Sir 40:20) and oil which contributes beauty and fragrance (Amos 6:6; Esther 2:12; Eccl 9:8).

But enough said about humans! In this psalm, they are only one species among many. Psalm 104 also indicates that the LORD is involved in forest management, planting the huge Lebanon cedars that provide a home for the birds, including the

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[7] "Blue Planet," an Imax Film produced by the Imax Corporation, Toronto, Canada, 1990. See also the illustrated book, *Blue Planet: A Portrait of Earth* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991).

[8] Note the comments of Rüdiger Bartelmus: "It is worth noting, first of all, that the poet describes the beauty of creation and the usefulness of all that it includes for 13 verses, without a single syllable making reference to human beings. Mountains, valleys and the water that flows through them, appear to be created primarily for the animals (10-12a). When the poet finally speaks of humans in v. 14, there is no talk of the 'crown of creation' but rather of an equal among equals, as the synthetic parallelism indicates: 'You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use....' In sum, Yahweh's ongoing care is for all creatures—whether human or

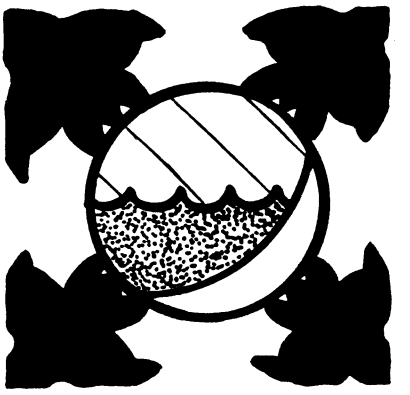
stork. The high mountains provide habitat for the wild goats and the rock badgers.

19-24 *God and the earth: sunset, sunrise.* After these descriptions of living *space*, the focus shifts to the planetary rhythms of *time*. In biblical fashion (Genesis 1), the psalm speaks first about the night. The choreography is impressive. The sun sets, darkness descends and the animals go out into the forest. Then, when the sun rises, the animals withdraw and humans step onto the scene until evening, when the next day begins. A summary statement addresses the LORD, marveling at the great number of "your works" (103:22) on the earth.

This scene is bursting with joy: there is singing (12), happiness at table (15), and appreciation of beauty and strength (15). As humans can find life satisfying (103:5), so also can the trees (16; Hebrew, "the trees of the LORD are satisfied") and even the earth itself (13)!

25-26 *God and the sea.* The sea is huge, filled with a variety of forms of life coming in a variety of sizes (Ps 69:34). Humans have a place in this scene, too: they have built ships and pilot them on the seas. There is a note of joy and playfulness in this section. What purpose does the mysterious sea monster serve, swimming and leaping through the waves (Ps 74:12-17)? "You formed him," says the psalmist to the LORD, "just to play."[9]

27-30 *LORD, these all depend on you.* Now the psalmist reflects on the array of creatures that have paraded by. The LORD made them (24) and they depend upon the LORD for food and for life itself (27-30). In contrast to the royal imagery in vv. 1-4, the LORD is portrayed as a farmer, going out to feed the animals, giving each its assigned portion of grain (also Ps 145:15-16). The eyes of these cattle fasten on the eyes of the one who feeds them. If the divine caretaker does not show his face, these creatures are



terrified.[10] When the LORD removes their life-support system, they die. When the LORD sends his breath/spirit, new creatures appear on the scene! God is also active in causing plants to grow, renewing the surface of the ground each springtime.[11]

31-35b *I will praise God.* The psalm ends on a (mostly) joyful note, expressing hope that the LORD will be happy with all his works and with this poem (31), and telling of the writer's happiness (34). But

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animals (27-28)." "Die Tierwelt in der Bible," *Biblische Notizen* 37 (1987): 31, my translation. This essay is now also available in B. Janowski et al., *Gefährten und Feinde des Menschen: Das Tier in der Lebenswelt des alten Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993). See also G. Liedke, "Tier-Ethik—Biblische Perspectiven," in this same volume.

[9]The JPS translation even suggests that the monster is the Lord's pet, "Leviathan that you formed to sport with."

[10]Cf. 1 Sam 28:21 for the verb.

[11]This view of God continually at the task of creation is unique here in the Hebrew Bible; see the comments of Walter Harrelson, "On God's Care for the Earth: Psalm 104," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 2 (1975): 19-22.

the psalm is in touch with reality, too. Verse 32 is a reminder of the potential for natural disaster. With but a glance, the LORD can make the earth quake. With only a touch, the LORD can cause volcanoes to erupt.

The psalm has spoken of the LORD's work in nature. While there are hints of conflict and disaster in that realm (21, 32), the picture has been almost exclusively exuberant and positive. In a final reference to life on the earth, the psalm acknowledges the reality of sin and wickedness (35ab). The psalmist does not choose to dwell on these realities. Their mention, however, is an indication that the psalmist's theology is down-to-earth, revelling and rejoicing in God's good gifts but also aware of the pain and hurt that people, even God's people, must endure.

Down-to-earth theology: Psalm 104 and the environment

In surveying what the Old Testament has to say about relationships between humans and the earth and its creatures, we discover two models.

1. The first is the *dominion* model. The first words that God addresses to the human creature in Genesis 1 are a charge to "have dominion" over the earth and its creatures (Gen 1:26-28). The theme of human responsibility for nature is developed in Genesis 1-11 (2:15, 19-20; 6:19-20; 8:15-19), in Psalm 8, and it persists as late as the Wisdom of Solomon (9:1-2).

Properly understood, the command to "have dominion" portrays humans as royalty, responsible for earth care. The language is royal language, used when kings are charged to care for those over whom they rule (Ps 72:8; 2-4, 12-14; Ezek 24:2-4).[12]

Very often, however, this "dominion" model has been misunderstood and distorted in a radically anthropocentric manner. The charge to "have dominion" has been taken as a charge to exploit the earth, as providing "license for those who would increase radioactivity, create canals and harbors with atomic bombs, employ poisons without constraint, or give consent to the bulldozer mentality," as one writer put it.[13]

2. In contrast to this dominion model for the relationship between humans and the earth, Psalm 104 presents us with an *integration* model.[14]

The orientation of this psalm is not anthropocentric but rather geocentric, earth-centered. We have seen that the thematic

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[12] For further development of this theme, see my articles, "What does it mean to 'have dominion over the earth'?" in *dialog* 10 (1971): 221-3; "The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1-11 and the Care of the Earth" in *Word and World* 11 (1991): 124-30, and "Who Cares for the Earth? Psalm Eight and the Environment" in *Word and World Supplement Series 1* (1992): 43-52.

[13] Ian L. McHarg, *Design with Nature* (Garden City: The Natural History Press, 1969), 26. The classic misunderstanding of the biblical notion of dominion is found in Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7. According to White, "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen... [it has] insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends," 1205. For examples of recent statements along this line, see "The Responsibility of Royalty" (n. 12).

[14] For the dominion/integration model terminology as well as a most helpful discussion, see Erhard Gerstenberger, "Versöhnung mit der Natur? Anfragen an gottesdienstliche Texte des Alten Testaments (Ps 8 und 104)" in *Versöhnung mit der Natur?* ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 141-9.

word is "earth," occurring seven times in the psalm. If we were to designate a "psalm for the earth," this would be a good candidate. In his treatise on Hebrew poetry, Johann Gottfried Herder commented on the earthiness of the language of Psalm 104:

> ...this poetry is full of natural feeling, full of the universal providence and goodness of God in his wide empire. It was nourished in the bosom of nature and cherished in the lap of our mother earth.[15]

In Psalm 104, humans do not appear as royalty. In fact, they hardly appear at all. They are on stage only briefly, planting and enjoying the harvest (14-15), going about their daily work (23), and, in the far distance, piloting the ships on the great sea (26). In this psalm, humans simply take their places among the great company of creatures that the LORD has made and sustains.

This integration model, stressing that which humans and other creatures have in common, runs alongside the dominion model from the start. In Genesis 1, humans and animals are both creatures of the sixth day of creation. Both are "referred to the same table for food," as Karl Barth once put it (Gen 1:29-30). According to Genesis 2, all living things—plants, animals, humans—are made of the same raw material (Gen 2:7-9,19). Humans and animals are animated by the same God-given breath of life (2:7, 19).

An adequate presentation of the biblical notion of the relationship between humans and the earth and its creatures will bring together both the dominion and the integration models. To "have dominion over the earth" does not mean to bulldoze and exploit, but to act as responsible royalty, caring for the earth and its creatures. To be one of the company of creatures that the LORD has created does not mean that the Bible views all these creatures as of equal worth. "You are of more value than many sparrows," said Jesus to his human followers (Mt 10:31). Psalm 104 hints at the human position of superiority, pointing to human agricultural accomplishments (14) and technological achievements (the ships of 26). And, of course, the psalm itself was written by a human being in order to give praise to the LORD!

The orientation of this psalm is not anthropocentric but rather geocentric, earth-centered.

Finally, the linking of Psalms 103 and 104 in the canon is a signal that the two should be read together. This linking serves as a reminder that the God who creates and cares for the earth and its creatures is also the God who has shown special concern for humans, delivering and caring for the individual (103:2-5), the people (6-9), and the worshipping community (10-14).

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[15] *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (Naperville: Aleph Press, 1971, trans. James Marsh, 1833), 77-78. I owe this reference to V. Stephen Parrish, "Psalm 104 as a Perspective on Creation Thought," Vanderbilt dissertation (1989), 1.

The land of sky-blue waters?

I conclude with a personal comment. This piece was written in the state of Minnesota, which, in the language of the native people, means "land of sky-blue waters." I am saddened to report, however, that the waters of my home state are no longer so sky-blue.

A feature story in a recent Sunday edition of the local newspaper told the story of the polluting of our Minnesota River. As a boy I boated on that river and fished it, first with my father and then later with friends. But now, because of pollution from both factories and farms, the fish can no longer be eaten.[16] An article in the magazine published by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources indicates that dioxin, PCBs, mercury, and other pollutants have made it inadvisable to eat the fish from thousands of Minnesota's ten thousand lakes.[17]

Once again, a quotation from the "Letter to the Churches":

> All life today is endangered to a far higher degree than twenty years ago. We are fearful about even more brutal facts twenty years from now. For we continue to assault the planet. Consumption of energy continues as though it were limitless in content and benign in effect. Many animal and plant species have been brought to extinction. Pollution of water, soil, and air is greater than ever. Desertification and deforestation accelerate.... And the children, what shall we say to the children and to generations to come?[18]

In this time of ecological urgency, the considerable collection of biblical texts dealing with earth care ought not be confined to consideration in academies or learned journals. These texts need to be studied, given a fresh hearing, and then set loose in the world. Rightly understood, they can light some fires, ignite some concern, and indicate a direction for our communities, our churches, and our synagogues.[19]

In this time of ecological urgency, the biblical texts dealing with earth care ought not be confined to consideration in academies or learned journals.

Psalm 104 takes its place alongside other biblical texts in calling us to live our lives alongside the other inhabitants of the earth in a way that "loves and treats gently" this beautiful and fragile blue planet that we call our home.

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[16] "Despite laws, wastes foul the Minnesota," the *Minneapolis Tribune* (June 6, 1993), 1A.

[17] Tom Dickson, "The Catch to Eating Your Catch," *The Minnesota Volunteer* (May/June 1992), 8-19.

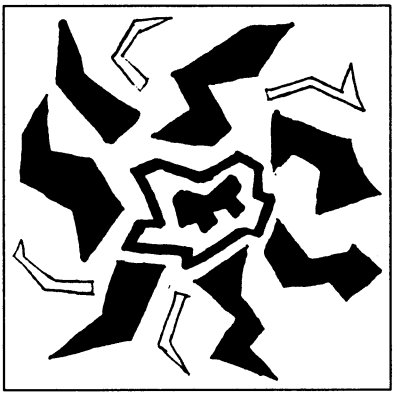
[18] "Searching for the New Heavens," 9, and *Redeeming the Creation*, 71.

[19] For an interesting discussion of the "burgeoning Jewish environmental movement" which finds its roots in the biblical tradition, see "Earth Sabbaths and Eco-Kosher: Activists rediscover Judaism's Green tradition," *Utne Reader* (July/August 1993), 34-36. Note also that 1994 has been designated the "Year of the Environment" by both Arabs and Israelis in the Middle East; see *Israel Update: Focus on the Environment* (Embassy of Israel) 1:9, 1993.

Working for the Common Good at a Critical Juncture in Time

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Reports abound about the continuing and growing income disparity between the top 10% and the rest of the U.S. population. Our major urban centers are trying to survive massive financial crises. In Los Angeles we experienced one of the worst urban riots in U.S. history. The national poverty rate since 1980 has continued to fluctuate between 13% and 15.2%, reversing the steady decline that occurred during the years of the War on Poverty. As government money for anti-poverty programs has diminished, churches have been asked to fill the gap. Politicians offer the familiar debate between self-regulating markets and government intervention. Social scientists propose systemic changes that will contribute to a more just society. A group calling themselves the Communitarians talks about regaining traditional values. Denominations issue economic justice statements, and local churches wonder what can they do to work for the common good.



Two editorials that appeared before the Los Angeles riot present examples of the familiar debate that has stalled efforts to alleviate poverty and to work for an agreed upon common good: *The Wall Street Journal* (April 14, 1992) and *The New York Times* (April 19, 1992). *The Wall Street Journal* attempts to show that many of the poor are not really poor because they own homes and cars. The deprived reality of the

"underclass," a name with pejorative connotations used to categorize many of the poor, is produced mainly by a culture of dependency and deficiencies in personal behavior; therefore, the government can do little. Churches need to lead the poor to take moral charge of their lives by helping them reconstruct a work ethic, a desire for lawful behavior, and a commitment to family responsibilities, and by encouraging their members to become part of voluntary efforts to assist the poor. The government needs to make policy changes that break the cycle of dependency for poor families, such as giving them a choice of schools for their children. Those who advocate the viewpoint taken in the *Journal* article want to guarantee the self-regulating powers of the market and limit government intervention.

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During the Reagan and Bush era a number of government funded research projects examined the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs. The research indicated that the condition of the poor was not improving because of low self-esteem, fatalistic dependency on welfare, and lack of motivation. The World Bank still believes that markets can do little wrong and that any kind of economic growth, even that which benefits the wealthy few and not the poor majority, is for the better.

The New York Times editorial calls for more government action to overcome income differences. They would like to see massive commitments to Head Start, job training programs, primary, secondary and higher education. The labor market has changed, and we now need educated workers. Advocates of this view criticize how welfare eligibility requirements may discourage people from working and contribute to dependency, but they still want the government to play a larger role in helping people to be contributing members to society.

Both sides tend to downplay the situational, structural, and systemic effects of discrimination. They minimize the lack of job opportunities that provide more than a minimum wage even when one has an education. They do not fully consider the escalating costs of housing, food, and medical care, and that there are limited resources. Both sides tend to focus on the individual: individual poor will overcome their character defects and make it in the market, or individual poor will be temporarily sustained through welfare till they gain the skills and education they need to make it in the market. Both sides also place their trust in the power of experts to determine what the poor need.

Other voices have arisen calling for systematic changes in our society. Michael Harrington, whose book *The Other America* was influential in launching the Great Society and War on Poverty programs of the sixties, has attempted to re-envision the socialist agenda.[1] He argues that our cur-

[1] Michael Harrington, *Socialism: Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Group, 1990).

rent economy is based upon casino capitalism and competition at the expense of the vulnerable. Money is used more and more for speculation which enriches the few and not for wealth producing assets which increase jobs and increase the number of those who share in the wealth. And contrary to the widely held belief that the individual consumer influences what products are produced in the market place, monopoly capital produces what will yield the largest profit. Unlike the former authoritarian collectives of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union which offered planned economies as opposed to market economies, Harrington favors the use of a market system, one not based upon individual striving, but rewarding that which benefits others. Consumers would be provided the best information to choose wisely and affect what products are produced. The market would reward the most innovative producers rather than the most ruthless investor. It would express social goals rather than private interests, and the surplus product would not enrich individuals but be used for the work of social justice.

Gar Alperovitz offers a systemic vision of a cooperative commonwealth where "the social principle of involvement, of participation, of subsuming strictly economic goals to larger social goals, must be given priority."[2] Large and unmanageable political unions would break up into smaller countries. The result would be a society of equals where the field of action is local communities cooperating with other communities in joint projects, and directed by a citizenry free to participate in the decision-making process.

John Friedmann in *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*[3] offers a similar systemic vision he entitles, "Recovery of the Political Community." Small communities and the households within those communities need "to gain their autonomy and to transform themselves into politically active, producing units." They must decolonize themselves from the system that keeps them in servitude and establish a self-empowering, democratic decision-making process where every member "is a valuable contributor to the well-being of all the other members" (359). The aims of a political community are, as Friedmann describes:

—to equalize people's access, both individually and collectively, to the bases of effective social power, among them, the time and space, knowledge and skills, social and political organization, instruments and tools of production, information, social networks, and financial resources that are needed for the collective self-production of life.

—to enhance people's capacity for independent critical thinking and acting.

—to assert people's sovereign will at all levels of territorial life, subordinating both state and economy to the political community as the ultimate source of legitimate power in the public domain.

—to selectively de-link from the dominant system of market relations, substituting a rich mix of development objectives—social, environmental, economic, cultural, and political—that stress quality over quantity and point the way to an achievement of a just world order.

—to generate the main energy for such a development through self-reliant action

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[2] Gar Alperovitz, "Building a Living Democracy," *Sojourners* (10, 6, July, 1990), 15. Alperovitz helped shape the U.S. Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on the economy.

[3] John Friedmann, *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

It is not enough to legislate proper behavior or design laws aimed at a common good; we need also to rediscover a sense of purpose...

from within each territorially based community. (348)

In Alperovitz's vision of cooperative commonwealths, instead of "throwaway cities" that are produced because of poor planning and an economy based solely on making a profit in the market place, there would be planning that would look at ways to support local communities and address both human and ecological needs. Instead of a top 10 percent receiving roughly the same income as the bottom 70 percent, wealth would be returned to the community through investment and community inheritance. People would be guaranteed economic security so that they would have the liberty to participate in democratic processes. The work week would be reduced and communities would be small so that people could participate directly in decision making.

Friedmann sees the need for local self-reliance with economic and resource agreements with other communities. This self-reliance can be fostered by developing small businesses, including joint ventures, with community capital and worker-owned enterprise. Each locality needs to create and expand community based services such as child care centers, store front health centers, legal aid centers, services for foreign immigrants, local community and neighborhood newspapers, arts and crafts centers, and shelters for battered women (371-72).

For Harrington, Alperovitz, and Friedmann, working for the common good means constructing a society that supports both basic human and environmental needs and provides social encouragement for people to be politically active producers of that which benefits others. External changes and controls will influence people to choose that which will contribute to the common good.

Another group, which fosters images of a good society and includes a political movement called the Communitarians, sees many of current social problems as stemming from rampant self interest, individualism, irresponsibility, and lack of values that are focused on what is best for others. It is not enough to legislate proper behavior or design laws aimed at a common good; we need also to rediscover a sense of purpose and acquire orientations toward social interactions that will enable us spontaneously to choose the good. Rather than self-interest driven individuals for whom society is a regulating authority, people are social beings who cannot be understood separate from their social roles yet have a distinct unity and purpose of their own as part of a larger social purpose. How people live depends upon how people have chosen to answer what is the best kind of life they as human beings can live. This best kind of life is sought and sustained by virtuous practices which must be learned. Through retelling the community's stories of seeking and sustaining a way of life, through moral education, and through training in citizenship, people learn how to promote a good society, how to avoid that which does

harm, and how to rationally judge what is the right thing to do in the right place at the right time and in the right way.

Amitai Etzioni, a spokesperson for the Communitarian movement, argues that society needs to be reconstructed so that families, schools, and other institutions are forming character, encouraging reciprocal obligation and personal responsibility, and teaching civility and citizenship.[4] He states that if we could strengthen two-parent families and make them less stressful, teach the values American share—respecting individual dignity, abhorring discrimination, and resolving conflicts without violence—and instill the virtues of citizenship, we could transform the populace and better be able to build a transformed society.

Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*[5] talks of the need for communities of memory where moral virtue underpins government actions, and private aggrandization is changed to public contribution. In *The Good Society*[6] he calls for economic striving to be replaced by moral virtue, training in citizenship, government intervention into the market to favor long term investments, regulations to limit irresponsible and destructive activities, and efforts to bring about economic justice. Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, challenges ethics based upon personal preference and offers an Aristotelian concept of virtues and a good society. "Virtues include that required to sustain the kind of households and the kind of political communities in which men and women can seek for the good together and the virtues necessary for the philosophical enquiry about the character of the good."[7] The practice of the virtues for a good society can best be carried out by constructing local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and the moral life can be sustained. Stanley Hauerwas, in *A Community of Character*, calls upon the church to be itself amidst the totalitarian strategies from the left and the elitist strategies from the right to reconstruct society. Instead of offering theories of government or strategies for social betterment, the church's task is to form a community "shaped and informed by the truthful character of the God we find revealed in the stories of Israel and Jesus," and "to form a people sufficient to acknowledge the divided character of the world and thus necessarily ready to offer hospitality to the stranger."[8]

Another version of this effort to construct a good society is the Eco-Village or Sustainable Communities. The term "sustainable community" is used by environmentally conscious community developers and urban designers who are concerned with developing and redeveloping cities that reduce resource waste, balance long-term consumption and production, and produce long-term social and ecological health.[9]

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[4] Amitai Etzioni, *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the 21st Century* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1983).

[5] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[6] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 219.

[8] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 92-93.

[9] See Sim Van der Ryn and Peter Calthorpe, *Sustainable Communities: a New Design Synthesis for Cities, Suburbs and Towns* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986); and *In Context: a Quarterly of Humane Sustainable Culture*, particularly issues 14, 25, 26, 28, and 29.

Robert Gilman in his article, "The Eco-Village Challenge,"[10] talks about the challenges that face efforts to form sustainable communities. Sustainable communities need to find ways to integrate harmlessly into the natural world. They need to build in ways that are friendly to the environment and that support healthy human development. There needs to be significant and non-exploitative economic activity. There needs to be a system of governance that supports the underlying principles of the community. And there needs to be a "glue" that holds the group together. That glue is shared traditions, values, and dedication to a common purpose.

Those who foster a good society lead us to the precipice of modern life through an analysis of the woes produced by the ethics of self-interest and individualism. They remind us of the need for a sense of purpose and an education of the heart along with social reconstruction for there to be a good society. When it comes to how to construct that good society, however, they often offer planned communities which are structurally different from what currently exists but only serve particular groups of people; or small communities where certain virtues are taught, people are mutually responsible to a like-minded social group, and everyone is being formed in the traditions, teachings, and principles of a particular culture or church. The challenge of diversity is met with a return to exclusive and close-knit community. The challenge needs to be how to have diversity and value informed actions, while working for the common good without settling for a club-like good society.

Religious institutions are struggling with that challenge. The U.S. Catholic bishops in their 1986 Pastoral Letter on Economic Justice[11] consider poverty the denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one's life. Poverty is a violation of community and human dignity; thereby, a violation of the common good.

They ground their conclusions upon a biblical concept of basic justice—people have the right to a minimum level of support at the same time they are expected to give in return a minimum level of participation. Society is responsible for the economic rights of life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, basic education, and the right to earn a living; individuals have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society. As the most vulnerable are enabled to participate in society, all of society is strengthened.

As practical ways to work for a just society and the common good, the bishops propose full employment, a guaranteed livable minimum wage, expansion of job training and apprenticeship programs in the private sector, direct job creation projects, self-help programs, tax reform, and welfare reform that will support people in reaching self-sufficiency through employment.

Other denominations have developed their own statements on economic justice, notably the Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, and the Episcopalians. In a variation of the U.S. Catholic bishops' concept of basic justice, the Episcopal bishops offer a definition of a just society. Such a society respects God's creation and affirms the dignity of all people, guaranteeing their "divine right" of access to a reasonable and nutritious diet, a decent shelter, adequate medical care, freedom to express oneself

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[10] *In Context*, No. 29 (Summer, 1991), 10-14.

[11] Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1986.

and to worship, and a chance to participate in helping shape the society in which one is placed, equipped with sufficient education and the training necessary to do so. Similar to Harrington, they argue that our society has recently produced increasing poverty because we have moved from the making of products to the making of money. They suggest focusing God's judging word on oppression and holding to account those who bear responsibility for relieving it. They recommend rebuilding a sense of community and entering into the pain of those who are poor or afflicted by standing with them in their struggle for justice. They call the church to challenge the systemic causes of poverty and to advocate that the government renew its responsibility to assure economic justice for all. They also support renewing a theology of labor, fostering collective bargaining, and guaranteeing the right of workers to organize.

The Episcopal bishops' letter was translated into specific recommendations with an economic justice resolution that was passed at the 1988 Episcopal General Convention. The resolution calls for:

1. Socially responsible investing—Churches can cease to support organizations that are involved in the nuclear arms race, generating hazardous environmental waste, unfair labor practices; and they can support organizations such as the South Shore Bank in Chicago which are involved in social renovation.

2. Community development credit unions—Churches, through making long term deposits, can help extend the opportunity of credit union membership and services to low and moderate income members in a specific geographical community so that loans can be dedicated to the economic development of the community.

3. Community land trusts—Churches can provide loans and grants, and donate

Our society has recently produced increasing poverty because we have moved from the making of products to the making of money.

services to enable groups to purchase tracts of land and develop it according to the needs of the community.

4. Housing cooperatives—Churches can support the development of low and moderate income cooperative housing where each member owns a share in the building by providing loans for purchase and rehabilitation of housing, grants for start up costs, and direct volunteer involvement.

5. Employee-owned businesses—Churches can support efforts in the local community to form worker cooperatives.

6. Public policy—Churches can advocate for more comprehensive health insurance, welfare reform to encourage self-sufficiency, public works programs, creation of local and regional economic development authorities, ways to assist workers with plant closings, and effective banking regulations.

In New York City and Los Angeles, many churches from different denominations are sponsoring the Nehemiah Project, a land trust and community development effort to build low to moderate cost single unit housing. In Portland, Oregon, an orga-

nization representing fourteen Catholic and Protestant churches wanted to promote home ownership in deteriorating neighborhoods. Taking advantage of the federal Community Reinvestment Act which requires banks to make loans in low-income neighborhoods where they have branches, they formed a partnership with local bankers to grant mortgages to those who would not normally qualify. The mortgages are insured by United Guaranty Co., and the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation agrees to purchase the mortgage securities. The project has been successful for the people it serves; but even the project leaders call it a "first step."

Both the U.S. Catholic bishops' and the Episcopal bishops' letters see the church's role in working for the common good as providing: a vision of justice for its membership and the larger society, direct financial support, volunteer help, political influence, and legitimacy to the efforts of community based organizations.

Religious institutions, however, are facing massive fiscal crises and criticism of their involvement in controversial social issues. In response they are moving their focus from social transformation to gaining and retaining members and increasing contributions. Many are returning to the conviction that churches be tradition-formed communities where people are nurtured in particular beliefs and values; churches can provide the community of character in a world ravaged by self-interest and doubt. Work for the common good becomes restricted to financial support for other organizations, direct services, and volunteer help. While needed, this mode of operating broadens the gap between the good society being developed within the walls of the religious institution and those who struggle for the common good in the larger society.

Churches can come together to be tradition-formed communities and can help to contribute to the common good, if they view their task as three-fold: *revitalization*, *redistribution*, and *reconstruction*. Instead of reconstituting a lost community, they can *revitalize* a community of discourse and a network of support and mutual responsibility. A community of discourse is where people can gain full recognition of the values by which they act, question whether those values contribute to the destruction or building up of the common good, and learn to negotiate. Through the give and take of discourse, people have their traditions and values challenged as they suffer and celebrate with those who are different from them. They also develop, as a result of negotiating with each other, new versions of their values and new visions of the common good.

Churches can help to revitalize a support network for the poor. The poor can be invited into the church community in a meaningful way. Just as the churches can send missionaries to the poor in their own communities, the poor can be missionaries to the non-poor. The poor and non-poor can be brought together to build a network of mutual support and responsibility. The non-poor can help the poor gain access to lost opportunities, act as a buffer between the poor and the government, and be advisors on how to make the system work. The poor can help the non-poor gain new insights into the workings of the social system, and gain different perspectives on what is it to be human in our current society. Through their continual meeting in discourse both will have the opportunity to be personally transformed, to be nurtured in the traditions and teachings of the institution, and to be better able not only to cope with the uncertainties of the world but also to modify and take responsibility for that church's vision of the common good.

We can continue to feed the tired debate, or commit ourselves to the hard work of revitalization, redistribution, and reconstruction.

Working for the common good means *redistributing* money, talent, time, and decision making. It means reclaiming the call of the various statements on economic justice to provide direct financial support, volunteer help, political influence, and legitimacy to the efforts of community-based organizations. It means involving more of the people who are affected by a church's justice projects in decision making. It means finding also more ways to hold decision makers accountable. If churches agree to collaborate with community development, they need to share decision making with the community. If churches are expected to fill the gap left by diminished social services, not only do they need to be held accountable for doing their part, but they need to hold government decision makers accountable for decisions that affect the community and place unrealistic burdens on religious and community agencies.

Working for the common good means also staying within society, avoiding a club-like good society, and keeping faith through a long process of *reconstruction.* Rosemary Ruether recommends not trying to build a communitarian system outside society, but working on aspects of the vision of a new society separately so that eventually this mosaic replaces the present reality with a new vision.[12] Reconstruction is not the substitution of one order for another, one good society for the current society, but an alteration of relationships within the current social order, and the emergence of a new regime from people's struggles for the common good. It is the gradual, piece by piece, building up of Friedmann's political community, Alperovitz' commonwealth, the bishops' restored community. Alperovitz describes reconstruction as

> a slow, steady elaboration of alternative institutions, building "within the shell of the old society" step by step until enough experience, vision, moral energy, and political organizing has occurred—enough social and political momentum has been built up—to allow a more general "perestroika" to take place. (22)

As we live into this critical juncture in time we can continue to feed the tired debate between self-regulating markets and government intervention, offer visions of a transformed society and transformed persons, build alternative good societies—or commit ourselves to the hard work of revitalization, redistribution, and reconstruction.

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[12] Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 233.

Holy Communion as the Means of Grace to Serve

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Several years ago the parish I served discussed opening "first communion" to children younger than the current age of fifth grade. I myself favor a return to the practice of giving first communion immediately following baptism, even for infants. So I was disappointed when our congregation as a whole was not yet ready to make any changes in the current practice. Yet it was also a very positive experience for me, because it became the occasion to examine my own communion piety. The result has been a renewed and refreshed experience of the Lord's Supper, probably more so than at any time since I took my first communion on Confirmation Day in the eighth grade.

Why are Lutherans so resistant to full participation for children at the altar? I propose that it is because we approach Holy Communion with such a decidedly confessional piety. The most commonly cited reason for excluding younger aged children from first communion has to do with their not being capable of a proper understanding concerning such things as the true presence of Christ in the sacrament. I have generally countered such reasons with theological arguments (ones that I still stand by). But now I would begin by questioning whether or not that is the real, underlying reason in the first place.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, for instance, emphasize true presence in an even more fastidious fashion than we and are quite comfortable with allowing first communion at second grade. And our Episcopal friends are also in line with Lutheran doctrine on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and have made the change back to infant communion in recent years. And most Lutherans are not even aware of the fact that our fellow Orthodox Christians, who venerate the mystery of Christ's presence in the sacrament as much as anyone, have practiced infant communion in an unbroken tradition for virtually the two thousand years of the church. So could a proper understanding of such matters really be our point of contention for justifying the exclusion of our children? Is that really why we are still so resistant to change on this matter when fellow Christians, who share our basic understanding, do not share our resistance?

No, it has occurred to me that the real difference in the way most Lutherans experience Holy Communion lies in the priority of our experience of confession and forgiveness in this sacrament. Actually, this 'occurred' to me in conversation with my wife, who was raised Roman Catholic. We were discussing our training in such matters, and I remarked that we (meaning Lutherans) were taught that Communion is about receiving God's forgiveness. She was surprised. That had not been her training. It was my turn to be surprised: how could Holy Communion not be mostly about forgiveness? The shock lasted only a moment before the difference became obvious to me: Roman Catholics have a separate sacrament for confession and forgiveness, so they do not need Holy Communion to carry that freight. And it seemed equally obvious, then, that that is also why Lutherans *do* focus on forgiveness: we have ceased practicing a separate sacrament for experiencing an ongoing confessional piety.

My Lutheran experience of Holy Communion was put in a new light. It seemed plain to me that the approach to Holy Communion with which I had grown up was largely akin to that of a Corporate Confession and Forgiveness.[1] That is what it has felt like. The guilt for sins committed, instead of being unloaded in a confessional booth, has been brought to Sunday morning Eucharist for unloading. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* has tried valiantly to insert some additional themes.[2]

But having a ritual to help us experience our confessional piety is a necessary part of our being human; and so we probably will not be able to significantly change our experience of Holy Communion as bearing that confessional piety until we provide other rituals to carry it. Moreover, we likely will continue to resist opening it to younger ages, because the confessional piety of unburdening a load of guilt is quite properly a piety for people of more mature age.

Yet these insights have been only the beginning for me. I was forced to ask myself: If I am to relinquish forgiveness as the heart of the table sacrament, then what should move into its place? Here, I did what I think a 'good Lutheran' is taught to do: I turned to scripture. The Bible study that follows, in suggesting an original heart of the table sacrament, is really the centerpiece of this essay. What I found, however, points to the underlying motivation for this article: If we were to assume that weekly celebration of the Eucharist is the primary shaper of our identity as a church, one which prides itself on Word and Sacrament, then what does a renewed sense of the sacrament mean for that identity? A personal 'renaissance' in communion piety has led me to no less than a renewed sense of

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[1] *Lutheran Book of Worship*, prepared by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1978), 193-95. The *LBW* has given us a good liturgy for such a need, but the vast majority of Lutheran congregations have no need to use it, because we approach the settings for Holy Communion as if they were a Corporate Confession and Forgiveness, almost never doing without the "Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness" as part of the Eucharist.

[2] The *LBW* made a bold move by relocating the order for confession and forgiveness to the beginning as optional for the Eucharist. It then highlights numerous other themes within the settings for Holy Communion. Among those themes: joy and thanksgiving for the victory of the "Lamb who was slain"; the eschatological dimension of having a "foretaste of the feast to come"; being strengthened for witness and service when we "tell everyone what he has done" and "Go in peace; serve the Lord." All these pieces are new in comparison to previous Lutheran hymnals in this country.

what the church is. As we struggle for our identity in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I therefore humbly offer these personal discoveries (with the help of many friends!) as a proposal for how we might come to see ourselves as a church of Christ.

The table sacrament as means of grace to serve

When we read Christian writers subsequent to the biblical period, we may find a number of differing emphases and focuses concerning the table sacrament. But what do we find when we look to the New Testament itself? The primary focus for Holy Communion that I grew up with in the Lutheran tradition was on the "forgiveness of sins." But do we find that focus in scripture? I will contend that the primary theme raised in connection with the table sacrament in the New Testament is that of servanthood.

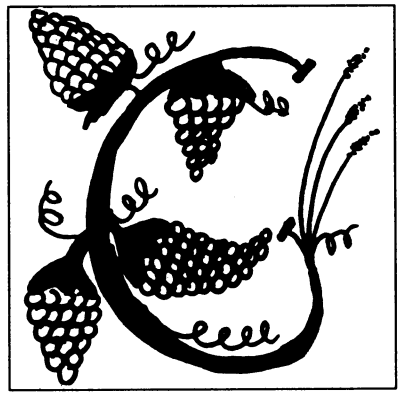
The five passages that deal most directly with the institution of the Lord's Supper are: the four Gospel accounts of the last supper and St. Paul's scolding of the Corinthians for their malpractice of the common meal (1 Corinthians 11). And the focal point of four out of five of these passages are the "words of institution." It has presented some difficulty that the fifth passage, the one that differs, is John's telling of the last supper in John 13; but we will address that issue later (especially since John's obvious focus on servanthood with the footwashing episode will anchor our whole argument).

When we take a look at the four versions of the words of institution—Mt 26:26-29, Mk 14:22-25, Lk 22:14-20, and 1 Cor 11:23-26—is there a theme that obviously comes forth? The Lutheran candidate of "forgiveness of sins" might seem to present itself. Our most frequently used version of 'the words' in the liturgy includes that phrase in connection with the cup: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people *for the forgiveness of sin.*" But how many of us take it for granted that the reference to forgiveness is common to all four versions? It is not. In fact, *only Matthew* specifically includes the words "for the forgiveness of sins"!

Luke's version is the one that stands out as significantly different. Luke adds an insertion to Mark's narrative immediately after the institution of the Lord's Supper: It is a parallel version of the "dispute about greatness" (Mk 10:41-45). Whereas Mark's version comes near the middle of his story (i.e., following his account of the third passion prediction and the ensuing dispute over the sons of Zebedee's request to share Jesus' glory), Luke has placed it at the climax of his story as part of the passion narrative, *adjacent to the institution of the Lord's Supper.* Listen to how Luke weaves the theme of servanthood together with the table sacrament through the words of Jesus: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (22:25b-27). I would suggest that Luke's notable and major editing of his Markan model testifies to an early emphasis on the theme of servanthood in connection with the table sacrament.

Luke's more obvious conjunction of the two passages causes one to wonder if the connection can also be traced back to his synoptic partners, Matthew and Mark. A look there at the context of the "dispute about greatness" shows some obvious sacramental language. When the sons of Zebe-

dee ask to be seated at Jesus' side when he comes into his glory, Jesus responds, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Mt 20:22) Mark goes one better by adding a reference to baptism: "or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mk 10:38) Placing the "dispute" passage near the story's midpoint, with both a reference backwards to Jesus' baptism and ahead to the Lord's Supper and passion, Mark has placed both sacraments under a banner of servanthood: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."



The evidence of a connection between the table sacrament and the theme of servanthood goes beyond the synoptic Gospels. By itself, the link between the Dispute and Supper passages, even in Luke's version where they are conjoined, might not constitute sufficient evidence for servanthood as the dominant theme of the table sacrament in the New Testament. But we also have relevant passages from St. Paul and St. John. We can first put Paul's version of the words of institution in their wider context of 1 Cor 11:17-34, namely, his scolding of the Corinthians for their abuses at the Lord's Supper. The abuses that Paul accuses the Corinthians of are quite specific: contrary to modern worries about including the wrong people, Paul claims that the Corinthians are wrongly excluding people from their meal—specifically, those of lesser material means. The more well-to-do members of the congregation are overdrinking and overeating, while poorer members go without anything. In short, their problem is a lack of the spirit of servanthood. After outlining the problem, St. Paul invokes the words of institution, emphasizing the phrase "Do this for the remembrance of me." I suggest his point is that a more fitting memorial for our Lord would be to practice the kind of servanthood which our Lord himself lived, when he gave up his body and poured out his blood for us. St. Paul takes these words of the table sacrament and applies them to the proper practice of servanthood. The context makes clear that Paul commands them to 'examine themselves' (11:28) with regard to their behavior in not serving one another as our Lord. We can only "discern the body" (11:29), that is, the body of Christ, when we live in service to one another.

If Luke and Paul still seem only to imply the connection between the table sacrament and servanthood, John makes it explicit. John takes the tradition of the Lord's Supper and substitutes for the traditional narrative (i.e., one containing the words of institution) a narrative whose entire focus is that of servanthood. The focus is not on the eating of bread and the sharing of the cup, but rather on the master's kneeling down as a servant and washing his disciples' feet: "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." I maintain that these three passages together—Lk 22:14-27, 1 Cor 11:17-34, Jn 13:1-17—present a

strong case for servanthood as the single theme that is most closely connected with the table sacrament in the New Testament.

"Forgiveness of sins"

I was rather shocked to find that the actual phrase "forgiveness of sins" is used only 13 times in the entire New Testament. Two are in parallel verses from the "Deutero-Pauline" letters (Eph 1:7 and Col 1:14); and two are in Hebrews (9:22, 10:18). The other nine occurrences are in the synoptic tradition, but only one apiece in Matthew and Mark.

The most surprising finding, however, is that the phrase is not recorded in even a single instance throughout the entire Johannine corpus, nor in a single letter attributed with certainty to St. Paul. The latter is especially puzzling, since the Reformation theme of "forgiveness of sins" was supposedly founded on the theology of Paul. The only times that Paul talks about forgiving at all (2 Cor 2:7,10; 12:13) are exhortations of our need to forgive one another—not to cite God's act of forgiveness. He never uses the phrase "forgiveness of sins" to circumscribe a major theological theme. St. Paul does, of course, make liberation from the power of sin a central theme in both Romans and Galatians, but he is there using the language of the Judaizers he is struggling against. He uses the juridical language of the law, namely, that we are declared righteous, or justified, by a gracious act of God in Jesus Christ. We must then decide how well our simple, common use of "forgiveness of sins" translates this complex Pauline idea of an imputed righteousness. Does "forgiveness" translate into "make righteous"? And does our common view of sins as individual misdeeds translate into Paul's apocalyptic view of Sin as the primary power of this world which enslaves us?

My underlying concern here is that our common use of the phrase "forgiveness of sins" is only part of the New Testament picture of salvation. Paul's picture of our liberation from sin's power is couched in terms of nothing less than the radical baptismal imagery of being put to death and rising again to new life. The New Testament speaks first and foremost of repentance, so that a new life might emerge, a life "in the Spirit." That new life is marked by having the same mind of Christ who, though he was equal to God, took the form of a servant (Philippians 2). And if we are to live that new life, then we must be nurtured in it: we virtually are offered the body and blood of Christ for that nourishment. Isn't being fed by the substance of Christ's servanthood, for our own life of service, more to the point of the table sacrament than "forgiveness of sins"?

Loving servanthood as God's alternative to violent domination

What happened to these New Testament emphases over the centuries? Why is the theme of servanthood now so distant to our practice of the Holy Communion? And why has forgiveness of sins become so central? What happened to the apocalyptic dimensions of the New Testament that experienced Sin as a power of domination and enslavement over others, as a power more directly linked with causing death?

It is risky business to speculate about why certain things have happened over so long a span as two thousand years. But my candidate for the most significant event—the one that interrupted the connection between Holy Communion and servanthood—was the ascendancy of the Christian faith to the throne of being the imperial religion at

the time of Constantine. It was then that the Christian faith became the religion of one whom Jesus' warned his disciples not to become, one of those "kings of the Gentiles" who "lord it over them" (Mk 10:42-43 and parallels). It was then that the apocalyptic dimensions of the early Christian experience had to be forsaken. For that apocalyptic dimension was precisely about confronting the powers of Sin and domination which were intertwined with human powers! From the perspective of the Book of Revelation, for example, those powers *were* the Roman Empire. But with the emperor Constantine that had to change, because now the Christian experience was to be somehow merged with those human powers. The Christian faith was put under the forced servitude to a system of domination over others, the very antithesis of God's politics of servanthood in Jesus Christ! The theme of servanthood could not help but begin to take a back seat within such a system of domination.

I would propose that the practice of the table sacrament, and its dominant influence on the Christian faith, have been inverted since that time. Rather than mostly being faithful to the theme of servanthood with unfortunate, occasional lapses, the church has become dominated by themes sometimes opposite to servanthood with too infrequent glimpses of its true nature and calling. The servant church became the church-to-be-served, unfaithful to the One who came not to be served but to serve. The identity was no longer that of the church serving in the world but of people coming to serve the church, whose service occasionally spilled out into the world. And that service of the church became increasingly a coerced servitude under the threat of a God whose wrath demanded the appeasement of good works. In the extreme, serving in the church even became a way to escape the world, either in the present or at least in the afterlife, rather than a means of grace to serve *in* the world.

A good illustration might be Augustine's influence on the Christian doctrine of sin. Did he not successfully flatten out the apocalyptic dimensions in favor of an individualistic/existentialist orientation? Living in the new context of the Christian faith merged with an imperial system of domination, Augustine conveniently missed the point of sin as violent domination over others—I say "conveniently," because that meant he would not have to so pointedly counter the violent and dangerous essence of the Empire. Instead, he was able to focus our interpretation of sin almost completely to a matter of individual disobedience of God, and he did so by focusing on the story of 'the Fall' in Genesis 3.

> Contrary to modern worries about including the wrong people, Paul claims that the Corinthians are wrongly excluding people from their meal...

Yet the biblical interpretation of Sin goes far beyond Genesis; and even within Genesis, the account of 'the Fall' itself extends beyond chapter 3, all the way to Genesis 11. A common Judaic interpretation of sin centers on Genesis 4, the story of

God does not require Christ's sacrifice; God is not violent! We do, and we are!

Cain and Abel.[3] According to this latter view, Genesis 3 gives an account of individual disobedience and the subsequent separation from God, but the sinful result of that disobedience begins with Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4 and continues in the downward spiral into greater violence in the subsequent passages. In essence, "sin" *is* the violence. The stated consequence of eating the forbidden fruit is death, yet Adam and Eve do not immediately die. In fact, they apparently live long lives. Abel is the first person to die, and it is a violent death. The death of Adam's and Eve's second son at the hands of their first son is the tragic result of their disobedience and separation from God.

The story of the great flood continues this emphasis on violence. It shows us a grieved and desperate creator who sees that "the earth was filled with violence" (6:11). Yet, at the same time, it is a story that gives us a look into the nonviolent, compassionate heart of God (6:6 and 8:21), when God considered responding to our violence with divine violence and made a promise never to do it again.[4] This pre-Augustinian interpretation of sin looks at all of Genesis 3-11 and so views sin as more than just disobedience to God but also, and even primarily, as the forces of violence and domination that lead to death. The human enslavement to violence and the divine commitment to abstain from violence are at odds from the beginning of time.

"Altar sacrament" or "table sacrament"?

The reader may have noticed the references to Holy Communion as the "table sacrament" rather than as the more familiar "altar sacrament." I would like to make my preference clear. In Holy Communion, I believe our Lord to be offering us nourishment for a different way to live, namely, that of loving service to others instead of violent domination over others. "Table sacrament" more appropriately conveys the sense of nourishment toward a new life. But I also want to question whether "altar sacrament" bears a link to violence with its base in the blood of sacrifice.

In recent years, Rene Girard has put forward a brilliant and far-reaching thesis regarding the links between religion and

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[3] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 127-8, who references Martin Buber, *Bilder von Gut and Bose* (Cologne: Olten, 1953), 29, 32ff. Modern Christian Old Testament exegetes are also beginning to recover this connection in the stories of sin. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), essentially makes the same point we are trying to make here about Augustine's step backward into individualism when he says, "It is endemic to the Christian explanation of the 'Fall' that it has given practically no significance at all to the social aspect" (318-20).

[4] See Walter Brueggemann's wonderful commentary on this passage, *Genesis* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching [Atlanta: John Knox, 1982]), 73-88.

violence. Without going into his entire theory,[5] we might briefly consider the most obvious point of that linkage: rituals of sacrifice. Is not sacrifice, practiced at some point by most religions, a ritualized form of collective violence? Girard contends that there are overwhelming cultural and anthropological forces which make it difficult for religions to free themselves from such violent underpinnings.

The question relevant here is whether the Christian "religion" succumbs to sacrificial language and ritual. Do we run the risk of such connections with violence, for example, if we make a sacrificial reading of the cross as a means to atone a wrathful God? And would such a sacrificial reading of the faith manifest itself in the table sacrament being turned into an *altar* sacrament? In other words, rather than being a means of grace to feed us in the alternate life of servanthood, the "table sacrament" becomes an "altar sacrament" whereby we may bring our "sin offerings" (i.e., sacrifices) to appease an angry, vengeful God. That sacrifice is in the form of the ultimate, substituted victim, Jesus Christ. But, according to the Girardian viewpoint, it is essential to see that Christ is *not* the ultimate sacrifice in the sense that we project our violence onto God by making Christ satisfy some need for vengeance in the Godhead. (Was it St. Anselm's theory of the atonement that especially started us on a vector back under a sacrificial system by making God the chief sacrificer, who demanded the sacrifice of God's own Son?) God does not require Christ's sacrifice; God is not violent! We do, and we are! It is *our* violence that puts Christ on the cross, not God's! It is Jesus' faithfulness to God's nonviolent alternative to living in community that causes us to desperately try to push it out of this world on the cross. But through God's power of resurrection and new life, we only succeed in exposing our violence for all time. Our sacrificial victim is God's Vindicated One. At the same time, God succeeds in offering us Christ's very Spirit of faithfully living an alternative to violence. Through means of grace, such as the table sacrament, we are empowered to live with *agape*-love.

Holy Communion as the means of grace for faithfully living lives of service

How can practice support the fresh insights we have gained here regarding a theology of the table sacrament? Basically, I think that many of the suggestions, already made in recent years by advocates of "liturgical renewal," are right on target. Perhaps what we have done here is to provide additional or deeper theological support for many of their recommendations for changes in practice. I would highlight four of those recommendations:

1. Modify our architecture of worship space to reflect a dining room rather than a temple of sacrifice. We gather around a

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[5] For the reader who would like to learn more about Rene Girard, he has published three major books outlining his theory translated into English: *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977), *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986), and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, 1987). Girard also has a volume using his theory as a biblical hermeneutical tool: *Job: The Victim of His People* (Stanford, 1987). More recently, Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly has done close exegetical studies focused on Sts. Paul and Mark, respectively: *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) and *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

table to be fed, not approach the altar in the Holy of Holies to kneel and make our sacrifice to God. Modern buildings have begun to move away from the rectangular or cross-shaped structure with an altar placed against the back wall of the chancel. For those buildings that have the traditional shape, chancels are being redesigned and altars are being made into free-standing tables. These architectural adjustments are crucial to moving away from spaces designed for sacrifice to spaces designed for being fed.

2. For Protestants who moved away from the weekly, and even daily, mass, continuing to work on the frequency of celebrating the Eucharist is a high priority. Space is crucial; so is time. Our partaking of the table sacrament should also reflect the theme of eating more than of sacrifice. Basically, we should need to be nurtured with the body of Christ nearly as often as we feed our own bodies.

3. Bring more separation between the sacrament of the table and rites of confession and forgiveness. The latter is more properly connected with baptism, really. It is through the daily living out of our baptisms that we remember we are washed clean to live in God's new community. The Holy Communion is the nourishing common meal by which we find ourselves fed to live in that community of service. The commentaries to the *Lutheran Book of Worship* suggest that we use the "Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness" only on occasion.[6] But, as I suggested in the introduction, it will be difficult to relinquish our close connection between forgiveness and Communion without offering other rituals through which to express the necessary confessional piety. I would suggest offering separate liturgies on a regular basis—for instance, a Corporate Confession and Forgiveness one Saturday morning a month. Pastors might also offer regular office hours for counseling, the opportunity to use the Individual Order for Confession and Forgiveness.

4. Broaden our "open" Communion policy, opening it to baptized Christians of all *ages* as well as of all denominations. St. Paul's reprimands to the church at Corinth were for excluding the most vulnerable members of the community. Proper servanthood stands by the most vulnerable, those most susceptible to being victims of powers of domination, those most vulnerable to being made the sacrificial scapegoats in our society. Are not our children generally the most vulnerable?[7] How can we thus exclude them from fully participating in this means of grace for serving? The powers of domination which our children face are countless: consumerism, racism, patriarchalism, fundamentalism, alcoholism, to name but a few. I would like them to fully participate in God's sacramental promise that God empowers and nurtures us to live together, free *from* the ultimate effects of those 'isms,' and free *for* a different kind of living, that of service.

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[6] Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), 195-6. Notice, too, that this discussion of the "Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness" is located in the chapter on Holy Baptism rather than Holy Communion.

[7] Hamerton-Kelly designates the scene where Jesus places the child in their midst (Mk 9:33-37) as the interpretive center of Mark's entire gospel story (*The Gospel and the Sacred*, pages 107-8). He writes: "The place at the center of the circle is the place of the victim during a stoning. Jesus and the child take that place. The gesture of taking the little one into his arms reverses the order of the Sacred. It dramatizes the inclusiveness of the new community by embracing rather than stoning or expelling the powerless one."

The Skin of God and Neighbor

Phyllis Kersten
Chicago, Illinois

This devotion was delivered at the November 1993 board meeting of the Association of Lutheran Older Adults (ALOA), an inter-Lutheran organization that seeks to help Lutherans 50 and older celebrate the gift of aging and serve their neighbor. ALOA annually sponsors Faith Ventures in Learning educational events across the U.S. and publicizes service opportunities. Write ALOA, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383 (The Rev. Karl E. Lutze, Executive Director) for further information.

I read recently about an isolated Indian tribe in South America that was approached by missionaries and given a Bible. They had never seen or heard of a book before, let alone the Bible, and they didn't know what to call it. Finally, they named it "the skin of God."*

I have been unable to get that image of "the skin of God" out of my mind ever since. Or other skin images either, for that matter.

A whole slew of those images are negative. A "skin flick," of course, is a pornographic movie. A "skin flint"—a cheapskate, the kind of guy who would take a woman to a "skin flick" on a date and then make her pay for it! "Skin heads"—we have an image burned into our minds of them and the scary, racist violence they're dedicated to, in the U.S. and in countries like Germany overseas. A "skin game" is something we don't want to be unwittingly involved in; it's designed to fleece some unsuspecting person. We criticize people who are "thin skinned"—who can't take constructive criticism. And those who are "thick skinned"—imperious to criticism, or insensitive or uncaring about the suffering

*This story is told in an article by Vitor Westhelle, "Creation Motifs in the Search for a Vital Space: A Latin American Perspective," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlewaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1990), 135. Westhelle's thesis is that the "'skin of God' is being formed in Latin America, giving evidence to the presence of a God who is in solidarity with the displaced in their pursuit of a space where life might flourish." His thesis obviously sparked my application of the "skin of God" to the Matthew 25 text and to the needs of "the least of these."

of those around them. We don't like people who irritate us, who "get under our skin." "Skinny dipping" isn't necessarily a negative thing, I suppose, depending on where and when it's done, and exactly how "skinny" the person is who's doing the dipping. We've all had situations where we've gotten by, just by "the skin of our teeth." And a few instances—probably not fun to remember—where we got "skinned alive," as the Chicago Cubs pretty much do, season after season. And most of us have wished or tried one time or another to "get inside someone else's skin," to better understand what makes them tick. Or tried, unsuccessfully, to "save our own skin."

But still... I keep thinking about that wonderful image coined in the middle of the rain forest: of the Bible as "the skin of God."

I keep thinking, for example, of the fall of our first parents—and of God's gracious act there, looking for Adam and Even in the Garden, announcing sin's inevitable consequences, for sure, but also covering up their nakedness and shame, and clothing them, it says, with "garments of skin."

And I keep thinking of God's great gracious act in the New Testament: God choosing and the only begotten Son acquiescing to being clothed with "a garment of skin," to entering history in a backwater Bethlehem shed as the incarnate "skin of God," to heal the breach, to restore us to God and one another.

But that was then and this is now. How and when and where do people today sense and see the presence of God, "the skin of God"?

One of my professors quoted a survey done in the ELCA a year or so ago, and the results weren't very encouraging. Most of the people surveyed listed only two places where they experienced the presence of God: in church (that's good, of course) and on vacation—which, I assume, means when they were enjoying the glories of nature, God's good creation. Yes, it's hard *not* to sense the presence of God, "the skin of God," when we're looking at an Arizona sunset or the magnificent trees and mountains of the Pacific Northwest, or walking the sandy beaches around Sarasota, Florida. Or when we're in church—and stirred by the Spirit's presence in word and water and song, in community fellowship and support and prayer. Or nourished there, by the real presence of the Risen Christ, in, with and under simple bread and wine.

But the problem is the 48 or 50 weeks of the year when the church's members are not on vacation. The problem is the six days out of seven when a member is not in church. The problem is when members of the church get too old or frail or sick to get out to church at all. Where, in the majority of our working life; where, in the largest segment of our average week; where, in our declining, final days, can we sense and experience the presence of God? Where can we see and touch the "skin of God"?

I think that for many older people today, that isolated rain forest tribe was right on target with their description of the Bible as the "skin of God." I think that for my 97 year-old mother, reading her Bible or her daily devotions, listening to the Lutheran Hour on Sunday mornings, playing the tapes of hymns over and over again, were ways in which God was truly present with her, ways in which God was not "shut out," when she was shut in.

But there's still more. Like the picture given of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25. That parable lets us in ahead of time on a remarkably well-kept secret, on something which it seems from the parable that neither the righteous nor the unrighteous knew "diddley" about: a most surprising way in which we can see and touch the "skin of

God," a most miraculous way we can experience the presence of the Risen Christ within our lives. For Matthew 25:31-46 tells us, I think, that there's a better place even than nature to discover the presence of God, and that's *in the needs of our neighbor*. "When did we see you, Lord?" "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you've done it as to me!"

Matthew 25 reminds us of the most natural place in the whole world to find the Risen Christ. After we, like Thomas, have put our fingers to Christ's wounded skin, into the nail marks, after we have recognized Christ as "God and Lord," we, too, are sent with God's own Spirit upon us to find the Risen Christ once more out in the wounded world where he has already gone before us, and where he waits to meet up with us again in the skinned knees and scarred lives of wounded, hurting people.

"I have a dream," Martin Luther King once said. It was a hope—still only partially realized today—that his children would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the character of their deeds. And I have a dream, too, for ALOA at this stage of its development, as I had at its beginning. The dream is that ALOA truly becomes an effective vehicle for Lutheran older adults to see and touch "the skin of God" in the needs of their neighbors.

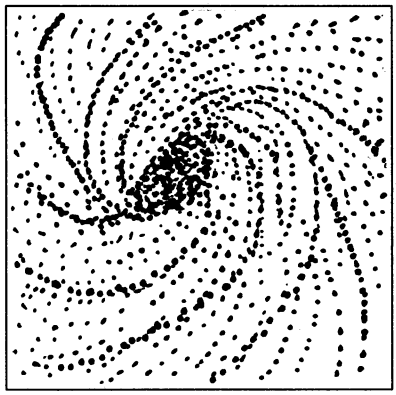
The avenues for service are limited only by our imagination, I believe: providing respite care and support groups for caregivers of the frail elderly or persons with AIDS; being confirmation sponsors or faith partners for youth; mentoring mothers of young children; being Foster Grandparents or Rocking Readers for children in public school already labeled as failures in kindergarten or first grade; serving as Stephen Ministers; reading to shut-ins; befriending or tutoring women or men in prison; going to hospitals to cuddle, rock, and feed infants with cocaine addictions or AIDS, many of whom will live and die without ever leaving the hospital; being a nursing home ombudsman; serving on disaster response teams; being a Mission Builder or Laborer for Christ or Habitat for Humanity volunteer; serving as a short-term missionary overseas; participating in an intergenerational servant event with church youth or grandchildren; and so on. To me, the greatest challenge for ALOA and its greatest God-given opportunity is to get the 80% or 90% of active Lutheran older adults involved in Matthew 25-type ministry, linking them to church-related programs, to community-based public and nonprofit programs, to already-in-place national service programs, or projects that ALOA itself develops—where people can sense anew the presence, and actually touch, "the skin of God."

> There's a better place even than nature to discover the presence of God, and that's in the needs of our neighbor.

When did we see you, Lord?

Jesus said, "Truly... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

"For I was hungry. My skin was stretched taut by malnutrition and you could



see my ribs poking through. And you gave me food."

"I was thirsty. My throat and skin were parched. And you gave me something to drink."

"I was a stranger. My skin was another color, I spoke a strange tongue, I had a different lifestyle than yours. And you welcomed me."

"I was naked. My skin, or sins, or most basic needs and hopes and dreams, were exposed. And you 'clothed me'—with a fresh, dry nightgown, with dignity, with love."

"I was sick. My skin was hot and feverish. I had open sores, and lesions. I had deep black and blue and purplish bruises caused by abuse. And you noticed and cared for me."

"I was imprisoned—in jail, in a nursing home, by preoccupation with my own needs and fears rather than the needs of others. I was held prisoner within my own skin, by a body that was failing me, but a heart that kept beating strong; or by a mind and memory I could no longer depend on. And you came to visit me."

And what will happen as God's people touch and serve the least of these from God's family?

The prophet Ezekiel, writing among the children of Israel in exile in Babylon, perhaps gives us a clue. For Ezekiel, of course, also had a dream, a vision, of how things could be—of dry bones with new life breathed into them by the Spirit of the living God.

"Mortal, can these bones live?" the Lord God asked the prophet. "O Lord God, you know," Ezekiel responded.

And the Lord God spoke to the dry bones: "I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." (Ezek 37:1-6)

And that's exactly what will happen, I believe, as the Spirit of God leads people with creaky, arthritic bones out from the valley of the shadow of death into the world again. In their serving, they will somehow see and be "the skin of God." And in the process, their own dry, brittle bones will somehow become supple and agile and strong again. And they shall live, and know and see the skin and face of God.

"Take Your Mat": Beyond Empowerment

Ron Dwyer-Voss
Holden Village
Chelan, Washington

At the controversial national "gang summit" in October 1993, Louis Farrakhan told his followers and gang leaders from around the country that urban African-American communities needed to economically *empower* themselves. Earlier that week Jack Kemp, former Bush cabinet member, told a group of businesspeople that the Clinton Health Care Plan did not *empower* the American consumer. Whether you are coming from the right or the left (religious or secular), or caught in between, for the last several years empowerment was what you were supposed to be doing.

What is this empowerment? Briefly, *Webster's* defines empower with the words "authorize," "license," and "commission." One who has been empowered can be un-empowered by whoever has the power to empower. If, to have the power to drive legally, you need to be licensed by the state, then the state has the power. Not you. You simply have been empowered by the state to drive legally, and the state can un-empower you if it does not like the way you are using that power.

As a community organizer I am constantly training churches and their members how to take and exercise their power in the community. By power I mean nothing more than "the ability to act." I am not working for empowerment. I am working to *release the power* that is inherently a part of them as people of God. When I meet people in the 'hood I make a simple assumption: God is in them, therefore they have power. Period. From that starting point we have a chance of making a difference.

Jesus heard many requests for empowerment: Empower us to overthrow the Romans. Empower us to become the holy Israel of old. Empower my child to be healed. Empower me to walk again. The power to walk was something a man had been missing for 38 years as he helplessly waited for the healing waters of the Bethzatha pool to stir (John 5).

Jesus does some unusual things when confronted with this last situation. First it must be noted that he was on his way to a festival of the Jews, a gathering of those with power... maybe our equivalent to a black-tie cocktail party where decisions are made and political schmoozing is the standard behavioral demeanor.

Jesus stops and engages in conversation with the man. He does three things key to building an intentional relationship: he relaxes, relates, and responds. It is his

response that turns empowerment inside out for Christians. Instead of staying within the confines of the rules or norms, as if stirring the pool is the key to the man's ability to walk, Jesus eschews the normal Bethzatha Empowerment Program. He recognizes the power within the man and simply says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

That's all. Jesus did not empower the man. He did not give him the authority to walk. He did not commission the man to walk. He did not use his own power to help the man into the pool, thereby maintaining the paradigm of dependency. No, Jesus did not empower. He released the power.

To add to the simple drama of the story, *John* points out that this was on the Sabbath. Jesus had violated the law by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus, again, did not keep to "the way things are done" or abide by the rules of the pool of the law. Jesus courageously, without fanfare, simply engaged the man and released the power that was within him.

This story resonates well with Lutheran theology and practice. In releasing the man's own power, Jesus freed him unconditionally and irrevocably. Jesus said "walk." The man *walked*. Jesus' ministry in this story created ownership, by the man, over his ability to walk. Jesus simply told him he could and, I imagine, gave moral support as the invalid skeptically and shakily rose to his feet, mat in hand.

This perspective on the story by no means discounts or demeans Jesus' role in the healing. If Jesus had not come by, the man very well would have remained an invalid and eventually died at the Bethzatha pool.

As we go about our respective ministries it is important to remember some key lessons and go beyond empowerment.

Empowerment can be a tempting trap if we think all the time that we will/can



snatch power back if "it's not being done right."

"Releasing" people's God-given power means allowing the power of God to be released in our communities.

To deny or block this amounts to a denial of the Holy Spirit.

Going beyond empowerment can be more difficult than empowerment because it requires us to engage and respond with a high level of sensitivity to where power hides in the other and what activity on our part will help release it.

Go in peace, beyond empowerment, and serve the Lord.

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Book Reviews

The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology. Edited by John Reumann. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991. x and 214 pages. Paper. $12.95.

Biblical theology is a discipline that many think is in crisis. The stress on variety in the biblical books suggests that the writing of biblical theology is an exercise in futility. This collection of essays implies otherwise, as editor John Reumann says in his introduction to the volume.

The first five essays were lectures on "The Promise of Biblical Theology: Some Current and New Perspectives" delivered as part of the 125th anniversary of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Georg Strecker discusses the law in the Sermon on the Mount as an example of critical biblical theology, while Phyllis Trible raises the question of a feminist biblical theology. The two pages on "Contours and Context" for such a theology are among the most creative in the volume. D. J. Harrington surveys the recent stress on the Jewishness of Jesus as a resource for contemporary Jewish-Christian relationships. I found this in some ways the least illuminating essay in the book, while J. A. Sander's revisiting of "Canon as Shape and Function" is provocative and full of insight. Finally Ulrich Mauser's "Historical Criticism: Liberator or Foe of Biblical Theology?" contrasts Greek *historia* with biblical *tôledôt* and *dabar*, critical investigation with the telling of a story as a participant. Here I think Mauser falls prey, as so many do, to a misreading of Greek antiquity. Herodotus is anything but a critical investigator, as his schema of *koros, hybris, atê* makes clear. There is here, I fear, too much Nachklang of Plato and too little reading of later historians and historical essayists, such as Plutarch. (There is one typo on p. 103, where *Phaedus* should be *Phaedrus*.)

In Part II, "The Practice of Biblical Theology: Biblical Theology as Practical Theology," five members of the Philadelphia faculty respond to some of the themes in the invited lectures. Robert Bornemann seeks a unity for biblical theology in the commitment of the interpreter to God, while Robert Robinson argues that narrative theology is a method in line with the Reformation to rescue the Bible from a professional elite and restore it to the laity. Robert Hughes follows a similar line of reasoning in his use of the parables in preaching. Robert Kysar suggests that proclamation which exegetes modern community and ancient text may provide a key for homiletical method that respects the integrity of the biblical text. Finally Margaret Krych correlates biblical theology with the teaching task of the church. All these essays have valuable notes which refer one to other discussions and engage in some debate with alternative positions.

John Reumann's "Introduction: Whither Biblical Theology?" and "Afterword: Putting the Promise Into Practice" provide the unity and cohesion that the book would otherwise lack. He traces the history of biblical theology, gives a morphology of current approaches, and finally offers his own personal assessment. Readers will do well to read both before tackling the essays. As usual, Reumann's notes are a veritable bibliography of recent research. Careful appropriation of this volume will do much to illumine present day biblical studies—and aid in recovering their utility for the life of the church.

Edgar Krentz
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

New Testament Commentary Survey. By D. A. Carson. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993. 92 pages. Paper.

This small paperback is an up-to-date interpretive bibliography of resources for the interpretation of the New Testament books. The "Introductory Notes" describe different approaches taken by commentators, characterize and evalu-

ate some of the better known series, and warn against simply purchasing all the volumes in a commentary series. A short second chapter titled "Supplements to Commentaries" evaluates New Testament introductions and New Testament theologies. His favorite introductions are written by Donald Guthrie and W. G. Kümmel, while Leonhard Goppelt's Theology gets the palm. Chapter 3, "Individual Commentaries," lists and evaluates commentaries and monographs for each book of the New Testament. He characterizes each volume, usually with a brief comment. While he makes no secret of his commitment to more traditional, conservative historical conclusions and evangelical theological positions, he does not hesitate to recommend commentaries written by critical scholars—though usually with a blunt personal evaluation of their position without precise details. The commentary lists are comprehensive for material published in English, mention French and German works now and then. The listing of monographs is much weaker, omitting many recent works that deserve mention, e.g. Adela Collins' *Crisis and Catharsis* on Revelation. Chapter 4, "Some 'Best Buys,'" gives his short list of one or two commentaries for each book.

Carson nods a few times. He characterizes Karl Barth's commentary on Romans as written in the Lutheran tradition, an evaluation that would surprise Karl Barth quite a bit. In general, when he describes a work as Lutheran, it is a put-down term, e.g. he describes Käsemann's *Romans* commentary as "brilliant and infuriating, alternating theologically between the insightful and the tradition-bound (he writes in the modern Lutheran tradition)..." (p. 54). Beare's commentary on Philippians is not a part of the New Century Bible (as stated on p. 68), but the Harper New Testament Commentary, while Robert Jewett did not write his doctoral dissertation on Hebrews (see p. 79), but on Paul's anthropological terminology at Tübingen University, and F. J. A. Hort's comments on James did not appear in the International Critical Commentary (p. 80).

Nonetheless, I recommend this bibliographic essay highly. Readers of differing theological orientation will still find this a helpful list to put into the hands of students and pastors. Prof. Carson, who is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, is concerned that commentaries aid in the proclamation of the gospel and the teaching of the faith, a goal that many who differ on critical issues will share with him.

Edgar Krentz

Reading Matthew. A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel. By David E. Garland. Reading the New Testament Series. New York: Crossroad, 1993. xvi and 269 pages. Cloth. $27.50.

This series seeks to present cutting edge research in a form accessible to a more general audience. It focuses on larger units of the text to present how an author thinks, how he communicates, and how he relates to his world—Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian. He seeks to set out the message of Matthew clearly to enable understanding and communication in our own age.

David Garland succeeds in meeting these goals well. A brief informative introduction suggests that Matthew writes for Syrian Jewish Christianity that has split from its parent Judaism and is now in conflict with it. He edits Mark to produce a fuller account of Jesus' life and teaching to meet a variety of needs in this community: to bolster faith, convince and refute, to exhort to life and arm for mission. The commentary itself is clear, written paragraph by paragraph, with extensive internal documentation [no footnotes] to ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman texts and occasional references to modern scholarship. The commentary is clear, helpful, and instructive, following the major structure proposed by Kingsbury. There are no great surprises in the interpretation (not a negative comment!). The comments on the Lord's Supper are surprisingly minimal.

Garland is Professor of New Testament at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, the author of a careful study of Matthew 23. His commentary should find wide use; it joins those on Luke, John, and 1 Corinthians by Charles Talbert in the *Reading the New Testament Series*. I commend it highly for use in sermon and adult education preparation.

Edgar Krentz

Briefly Noted

Song of Songs. By John G. Snaith (Eerdmans, $14.99). S. believes this book was included in the canon because it was a non-mythological, non-cultic, non-idolatrous, outright, open celebration of God-given sexual love. There was once a whole genre of this type of poetry in the ancient world, but examples survive only in some Egyptian lyrics and the Song of Songs. This helpful commentary in the New Century Bible Commentary series, based on the RSV, expounds the Song's "natural" meaning with little attention to later Jewish and Christian allegorical or symbolical interpretations. RWK

Leviticus. By Lester L. Grabbe (JSOT Press, $9.95). As G. notes in this latest volume in the Old Testament Guides series, "No other book of the Bible is less appealing at first sight... than Leviticus." His work does much to remedy that situation and to give a person a convenient update on current investigations. He carefully reviews the sacrificial system and shows that the "sin offering" was intended for misdeeds done unwittingly. The "guilt" offering was used in cases of sacrilege against God. He surveys various anthropological attempts to understand the purity laws and finds that the system of permitted and forbidden animals was a microcosm of the world: The many forbidden animals represented the surrounding nations; the few clean animals, the Israelites. Just as Israelites were not to eat certain animals, they were not to mix with other nations. Both the rabbis and the NT refer to Leviticus frequently, with over one hundred quotations or direct citations in the New Testament to this book. G. concludes: The renewal of interest in Leviticus is long overdue. RWK

Cambridge Annotated Study Bible. Edited by Howard Clark Kee (Cambridge, $36). After a 100-page introduction to the books of the Bible, this study Bible prints out the text of the NRSV with cross references in the inner margin and commentary in the outer margin. At the end of the book one finds a glossary, various tables, and maps (3 for the OT; 4 for the NT). The only trouble with this book is that it does not measure up to the competition of The Harper Collins Study Bible! Harper Collins is written by *many* leading scholars instead of by one person (Kee is a NT scholar and his notes on the New Testament are much longer than on the old), and the people who wrote the notes for Harper Collins have often published extensively on the book in question; Harper Collins includes the apocrypha; its notes are much much fuller—often half the page is notes; its type is much larger; it has 16 maps. Harper Collins should become the standard Bible used in parishes for the next generation. RWK

Beyond Form Criticism. Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism. Edited by Paul R. House (Eisenbrauns, $32.50). The last twenty-five years have seen a remarkable growth of literary approaches to the Old Testament, including at least rhetorical criticism (Muilenburg), structuralism, formalism (attention to plot, structure, character and themes in narratives), reader-response analysis (the text often seems to mean what the reader says it means), and new approaches to Hebrew poetry. All of these are explored creatively in the nineteen essays and the clear introductions printed in this volume. This book will help pastors understand the impasse in Old Testament studies today: literary critics are concerned with plot, character, and narration; historical critics stress form, source, and redaction analysis. It is not yet clear whether a new synthesis that combines the two approaches will emerge. RWK

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Preaching Helps

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

Pinned and Pining

I wonder whether young women still use that expression, "We're pinned." It strikes me as belonging to what we sometimes call "an earlier and more innocent time." They used to say, "We're pinned," when they meant, "We're not engaged and of course we're not married." But they were engaged to be engaged, and so pinning was full of romance and hope. Pinned meant pining for a glad tomorrow.

But "pinned" has other denotations (with some of the same connotations). One of our contributors was pinned beneath a tractor in a freak accident. It happened on his farm out of eyesight and out of earshot, so he spent some hours with heavy machinery weighing him down. Thus weighted, he waited. Thus pinned, he pined, I imagine, for liberty.

We're all pinned, freighted and weighted by our place in history. God failed to consult us about some of the fundamentals of our lives: What century would you like to inhabit? And of what race and nation would you most enjoy being born? Do you want to be a boy-baby or a girl-baby?

I think some of the existentialists used to say we were "flung" into existence, tossed out of the comfort of nothingness into the somewhere and sometime of life. A somewhere and sometime we did not choose. So here we are, pinned to this time and place, this skin, this face.

Pinned and pining. For we find ourselves creatures of hope, full of hopes. Good hopes and evil hopes, if truth be told. Advent is the season to help us reform our hopes, kill our bad hopes and breathe life into our

good hopes, our good pining and sighing. Advent should help us make of our lives, pinned as they are to this space and time, what Martin Franzmann dubbed "a high doxology."

Paul Bauermeister, more or less retired pastor (M.Div.) and psychologist (Ph.D.), living down on the farm in Saint Clair, Missouri, uses his experience beneath his tractor to speak of the meanings of Advent, hiding his identity under the language of "I know this fellow who had an accident one day, and let me tell you what it taught him." Well, pastors and psychologists can be counted on to say that "experience is a wondrous teacher." And we should pay attention.

Dennis Bolton (M.Div., D.Min.) is pastor of the Lutheran Chapel in Gastonia, North Carolina, and has contributed to Preaching Helps before (Easter 1993). It's good to welcome him back to these pages. Dennis here pins our attention to the Old Testament readings as he offers Pastoral Reflections for Advent and Christmas.

The author of the Pastoral Reflections of Epiphany is **Tom Dorris**†, a rostered ELCA deacon, presently serving as communications director of the Life and Peace Institute in Uppsala, Sweden. Previously he was editor for the Ecumenical Press Service in Geneva, Switzerland, and before that he worked with the Lutheran Council in the USA and at Religious News Service, both in New York. Tom suggested that I call his offerings "Diaconal Reflections" rather than Pastoral Reflections. (Whatever you say, Tom! And, Thanks!)

Mark Mattes is pastor of St. John's and Arbutus Lutheran Churches on Highway S in Antigo, Wisconsin. He is the author of the First Readings for Epiphany. When he is not pastoring those two Northern Wisconsin parishes, Mark is probably at his desk grinding out pages of his University of Chicago dissertation. He is working on the thought of Eberhard Jüngel and has David Tracy as his advisor in the process. Many thanks to Mark for taking time out to write for Preaching Helps!

Pinned and penned and pining. Exactly fifty years ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer was spending Advent and Christmas in a prison cell. Reading

in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* gives an eerie and yet exhilarating sense of life lived in hope with the liturgical year as groundwork. This whole time from Advent till Easter will be a marvelous time to review his life and thought and martyrdom.

Pin their hopes on God, whose son moved to crib through life to cross and beyond!



A week after composing the above, I received a letter from Sweden indicating that Tom Dorris died there on July 9 from injuries sustained in an automobile accident. He was 47. A colleague of his at the Life and Peace Institute expressed "sadness at our loss, joy in the faith which guided and sustained Tom through all his days, and gratefulness for Tom's presence among us." We comfort ourselves with the conviction that he has passed from times of waiting to the fullness of God's Life and Light.

Yours,

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

First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 1994

Psalm 25:1-9
Jeremiah 33:14-16
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36 *or* Luke 19:28-40

First Reading

I know a man of mature years who turned his tractor over on himself and survived. The tractor actually did a "wheelie" while he was pulling a tree that a storm had knocked down. The tractor came to rest with its wheels in the air against a branch of the tree he had been pulling. That tree branch no doubt saved the man's life, but it also pinned him because he managed to get his left hand between the tractor and the branch just as they came together. The poor guy's hand was badly mashed with broken bones and tendon and nerve damage. It did not hurt much, but he sure was stuck. During the four hours he waited for help, he claims he became an expert on anticipating the future.

Like Jeremiah's Israel, he knew help would come. Like Jeremiah's Israel, he did not know how soon. The man under the tractor says at one point he was ready to swap the whole farm for three minutes with a cellular phone.

Jeremiah gives us a running start at this year's Advent adventure with a strong prophetic "Behold the days are coming...." To the man under the tractor Jeremiah's words sound like the wail of the first siren he heard. He was no longer just waiting for help to come, help was coming and it was coming for him! The siren provided a kick start for his anticipation similar to the one produced in Israel by Jeremiah's "Behold...!" Jeremiah gives Israel new information. This coming help is the help promised long ago. We even learn two names for this help: "Righteous Branch of David" and "The Lord is Our Righteousness." Strong names!

Liturgically Jeremiah's "Behold...!" may be the jolt we need to rouse us out of our post-Thanksgiving-autumnal-snooze and boost us into Advent and another whole church year.

From Jeremiah to 1 Thessalonians is a giant step. No poetic prophecy and multi-word symbolic names here! Paul deals with a lively, returning Jesus and our need to abound in love and in unblamable holiness before God when he appears. How's that for a personal agenda of spiritual rehabilitation for your Advent? We never said Advent was going to be easy.

Jesus in Luke 21 moves us another giant step with talk of signs and distress and perplexity, people fainting for fear because the powers of heaven are being shaken. He is talking about a one time event that is both cosmic and worldly, one shaking every foundation, but note: it is not one intended to shatter the believers (here comes the Gospel!), but the world-shaking event is to delight us. We are invited to look up and to lift up our heads because our redemption draws near. The world of the faithful of course includes sun and moon and stars, sea and waves, plus people with all their fears and forebodings. But because the world of the faithful also includes God our Father and our Lord Jesus, the faithful can look up, raise their heads and be glad even while all others are distressed. The message of the first Sunday in Advent is that help is on its way to the world.

The lectionary offers us an alternate Gospel, St. Luke's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We find there an earthy Messiah, riding a borrowed burro draped with hand-me-down clothes as it moves toward a Jerusalem that sleepily yawns at his coming. He is greeted by a cacophonous pep squad of his well-intended followers shouting royal greetings on one side of the street and by haughty Pharisees giving free advice on the other side of the street. Jesus' response to the Pharisees is the only majestic part of the whole scene. Contrast the donkey-riding Messiah with the one whom Paul knows, the Messiah who asks unblamable holiness of his saints. In that contrast we can see how God works among us.

Of course our man under the tractor got out. No more waiting for help for him, no sir! He is out of there! Now he is waiting for healing. PJB

Pastoral Reflections

Before worship, they introduced him as their cousin who was visiting for the weekend. He looked to be in his late 20s, well-dressed and self-assured.

"I might as well tell you that I don't believe in all this Bible stuff," Don said as he shook my hand. "I mean, who cares about an old prophet talking about a 'righteous Branch'" (as he pointed to the lesson insert). "Come on! What does this have to do with everyday life? The Bible is full of Star-Trek language. It's outlandish, other-worldly, and impractical. Tell me, pastor, what does Jeremiah have to do with the practicalities of my life in November 1994?"

"Well, Don, during the season of Advent, we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with certainty, hope, and, I pray, the practicality of Jeremiah. You see, Jeremiah was a prophet who lived near the end of the monarchy and during the fall of Judah to Babylon in 587."

"So," said Don, "what's that got to do with the practical aspects of the Bible?"

"Just bear with me, Don. The world, as the Jews knew it, was coming apart. The enemy was ready to invade the Holy City of Jerusalem and all would be lost. Jeremiah saw this action as the judgment of God against Judah's sinfulness. He said as much and soon found himself in jail as a traitor. After all, every Jew believed that God lived in the temple in Jerusalem and would never let the city be destroyed."

"Okay!" Don's voice sounded irritated and impatient as we moved toward the front of the sanctuary.

"Being the practical prophet that he was, Jeremiah bought a piece of land in response to Babylon's invasion—from behind bars."

"What!" Don seemed startled. "He bought a piece of land, and that seems practical to you? But why?"

"Because, Don, Jeremiah was so biblically practical that he believed what the scripture says in the first lesson:

> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is Our Righteousness."

"You see, Don, like Jeremiah, we Christians believe that God's promise to Jeremiah was not only fulfilled in his time but reached completion in Jesus Christ. The Lord God is faithful to this promise and will never abandon His people, no matter what is going on in the world. Biblical faith is always a practical faith. Say, Don, how about lifting up that *Branch* on the Advent wreath so we can light the first candle. The Lord is Coming." DB

Second Sunday of Advent December 4, 1994

Psalm 126
Malachi 3:1-4
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

First Reading

The man from under the tractor lay on the ER examining table, his smashed left hand resting lightly on a pillow as the experts from the healing arts told him about his future. Morphine had both soothed and dulled him. "Surgery," they said, "tonight." "Thank God," he said. They spoke of pins and plates and grafts and physical therapy. "Crushing is worse than broken bones and takes longer to heal," they said. "Whatever," he said. He had anticipated help. Getting help he began to anticipate healing.

This time it is Malachi who jolts us with his "Behold...." A messenger is coming whom we recognize as John the forerunner. He comes suddenly, but who can endure, who can abide the day of his coming? I hear strains of Handel in the background. Just in case anyone has not caught

on to the fact that a test or a trial or an ordeal is coming, Malachi spells it out for us. This one comes as a refiner's fire, hot enough to separate precious metal, to purge away worthless slag. He comes as fuller's soap, caustic enough to take off your skin. These are to purify and refine the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem, starting with the Levites. The only good news is that once this purification is complete, the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will again be pleasing to the Lord. That is not enough good news to last very long.

St. Paul sweetens the offerings for today with his gentle, faithful thanksgiving for the saints at Philippi. He does not really need to justify his affection for these partners in the gospel who partake with him of God's grace. As with last Sunday's Thessalonians, Paul fixes the Philippians' vision on the coming day of the Lord and on their own holiness. They will be pure and blameless, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ. Would that we preachers could have more of that same faith in the power of the gospel!

Paul almost makes it sound as though the gospel forms a bridge between Christ's first coming and his second coming, a bridge the faithful can walk with delight, expecting both help in the midst of the cosmic ordeal and healing following it.

St. Luke shows us Malachi's messenger in the flesh. John is his name, son of Zechariah. Luke nails it historically for us in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar and then nails it in Israel's *heilsgeschichte* with the quote from Isaiah about a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the Lord's highway which will be straight, filled, leveled, straight once more and smooth because all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Again I hear strains of Handel in the background.

The message of the second Sunday in Advent is that help is coming, but this help will change things. Who can stand at his coming? Where do we crooked ones and rough ones go when God straightens and smooths everything for his coming one? Perhaps toward God, because the Gospel tells us that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The man with the smashed hand made it through the surgeries with the help of some clever anesthesiologists and then made it through months of the pushing, pulling, and stretching called physical therapy with the encouragement of his therapists and ended up with a hand that could move and bend. It took a long time of waiting. Unfortunately, his fingers were weak. He could almost type with both hands again, but some letters wouldn't work. Also silverware and tools slipped away from him. No more waiting for healing for him! Now he must wait for strength. PJB

Pastoral Reflections

He was 17 years old, in love, and walking to his car in the mall parking lot with his girlfriend. Another 17 year-old boy confronted him over a previous incident. The first young man refused to fight and as he turned to leave was jumped from behind and beaten to death as the screams of his girlfriend filled the air. It was 2:30 on a Saturday afternoon. The killer gave no reason for the murder and offered no repentance.

Two sisters, ages 13 and 14, ran away with their older boyfriends and disappeared. Days later, foul play was suspected and the "boyfriends" confessed to stabbing the girls to death and burying them in the woods outside of town. No motives were given and no repentance offered.

A local public figure, while running for office, lied on his resumé. His wonderful education and sterling background was greatly embellished. The lie was discovered; he said he was sorry—while still remaining a candidate. "Everyone does it," he said, "only I got caught!"

These local stories are routine throughout America and can be found in every city or town. One can only wonder if this routine of violence, greed, and moral laxity hasn't numbed us into believing that God is absent in our world. "Where is the justice of God?"

The prophet Malachi asked the same question. The post-exilic Judeans had forgotten their covenant with God and were living lives of disobedience. They believed God was so absent that they called "good" what God called "evil." It was after all: routine. Their sin was total indifference toward God so no reasons were needed; no repentance required.

But in this text Malachi reminds the people that God is coming and his coming will be preceded by "the messenger of the covenant." This will be a frightening experience for anyone who thinks God is absent from the world.

Repentance is the call of Advent to our sinful indifference and the world's lie that God is absent. Repentance is always the first word in our lives in response to God. It is a decision to change our hearts through prayer and the Holy Spirit and to move our feet toward the true reality of God.

> Elie Wiesel, in referring to the stories of the Hasidim, says that in the tales by Israel of Rishim one motif comes back again and again: a traveler loses his way in the forest; it is dark and he is afraid. Danger lurks behind every tree. A storm shatters the silence. The fool looks at the lightning, the wise man at the road that lies—illuminated—before him. (Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 26)

May the second candle in Advent illumine our paths as we present the prophet Malachi to the people of God, for the Lord is Coming. DB

Third Sunday in Advent December 11, 1994

Isaiah 12:2-6
Zephaniah 3:14-18a
Philippians 4:4-7 (8-9)
Luke 3:7-18

First Reading

To strengthen his recovering hand, our man from under the tractor must exercise it. On purpose he carries the bucket of feed or the pail of water or the stack of firewood on the left, on purpose he puts both hands on the fence post driver even though each blow makes all the fingers on his left hand tingle. Even though five fence posts is a day's work. Strength is coming back, but slowly. Strength comes, but he must work for it, and encourage himself, and hurt and wait. He had learned to wait for help and for healing, and now he learns to wait for strength. Each step has its own curriculum and its own timetable.

Zephaniah invites us into a new, welcome mood change for our Advent adventure with his first words. "Sing aloud," he says, "shout, rejoice, exult with all your heart!" Sounds like we might be past the thunderous "Behold!" of the last two Sundays. Zephaniah's joyful tone is welcome to our Lutheran ears. "Sing aloud," he says, meaning sing the way we sing at the opening Eucharist of our Synod Assemblies when we flail the timbers of some cavernous sanctuary unaccustomed to trying to contain that kind of jubilation. And what is all of Zephaniah's shouting about? "The Lord has tossed out your enemies. The Lord is in your midst, the mighty one who gives victory."

But we haven't arrived yet. Notice the future referents. "On that day it shall be...."

St. Paul continues both the joyful theme and the waiting theme. "Rejoice, rejoice! The Lord is at hand!" And then he talks about peace, the votum peace "which passes all understanding." Interesting juxtapositioning of waiting and peace. Our man from under the tractor knows about that kind of peace. It was his when he was under the tractor because he believed someone would come to help him. It was his again as he waited for healing and for strength because he believed healing and strength would both come, however slowly. If you think I am pushing for a vital connection between peace and faith here, you've got it.

Take this connection to the next level of meaning and try it out on the man under the tractor. He had a temporary peace because he believed help, healing, and strength would come. One level up he also believed in God. Which means that he could not be threatened ultimately. If something were to go terribly awry, if the tractor that pinned him caught fire and he fried, right there, or if he got to the hospital and picked up some ghastly infection that snuffed out his life, or if he had a stroke on the operating table and expired, God still knew his name and God had claimed him long ago. There is no such thing as an ultimate threat to those who know God through our Lord Jesus Christ. None. How's that for a

brand of peace which passes understanding? Christian people have this kind of peace, and when they display it the world will notice.

Today's Gospel moves us right into the middle of one of John the Baptizer's sermons. Maybe we should call him John the Baptist because he preaches like some of our more enthusiastic brethren. "Brood of vipers! The axe is laid to the root of the trees [and some will be]... thrown into the fire." Furthermore he has handy answers ready for all who get spooked and come to him with questions about their behavior. The rich get to keep one Armani suit and one pair of wingtips, but the rest of the wardrobe goes to the shelter. Cheating tax collectors are not going to be on the take any more. Violent, lying soldiers are to cease and desist. No more putting the muscle on law abiding citizens and no more bogus reports. They are not even allowed to grumble about their hourly rate or their benefits package. The message is, "Clean up your act! All the way!"

The final line of the Gospel offers a conundrum worth considering. Summarizing all this fire and brimstone from John, Luke says that John preached "good news" to the people. Where is the good part? In the unquenchable fire? Or in the baptism with fire? How about the winnowing fork? None of the above. The good news is that the Christ is coming. God is about to do something, and John is sure of that. So sure, that he jumps out into the desert and rattles people's chains. There is the good news. The goodness of the news lies in the Coming One. I guess part of the good news for them and for us might be that the Coming One is not this scary, rambunctious John.

Our man with the strengthening hand has learned to wait for help and healing and now learns to wait and work for strength. Once he is strong, is he finished waiting? Of course not. There are four Sundays in Advent, but you knew that. PJB

Pastoral Reflections

The scene is remarkable. The prophet Zephaniah sees a carnival of God's people dancing in the streets of Jerusalem because God rules over them. He is the warrior who "will hold his peace in love" and silence the war cry of destruction. The book of Zephaniah ends in absolute joy and celebration for the Lord is coming.

I like what Eugene Peterson says about joy in the life of a Christian:

> Joy is not a requirement of Christian discipleship, it is a consequence. It is not what we have to acquire in order to experience life in Christ; it is what comes to us when we are walking in the way of faith and obedience. (*A Long Obedience*, 92)

Advent is the season of joyful waiting for the people of God. We have much to be joyful about even in our suffering, hurt, and pain because God's promise is certain and his love steadfast.

A dean in a theological seminary routinely calls students into his office to speak to them:

> You have been around here for several months now and I have had an opportunity to observe you. You get good grades, seem to take your calling to ministry seriously, work hard, and have clear goals. But I don't detect any joy. You don't seem to have any pleasure in what you are doing. And I wonder if you should not reconsider your calling to ministry. For if a pastor is not in touch with joy, it will be difficult to teach or preach convincingly that the news is good. If you do not convey joy in your demeanor and gestures and speech, you will not be an authentic witness for Jesus Christ. Delight in what God is doing is essential in our work. (*A Long Obedience*, 191)

As the acolyte lights the third Advent candle, we sing:

The King shall come when morning dawns
and light triumphant breaks,
When beauty gilds the eastern hills
And life to joy awakes.

Yes! "Life to joy awakes," for the Lord is Coming to the music of the carnival. DB

Fourth Sunday in Advent December 18, 1994

Psalm 80:1-7
Micah 5:2-4
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

First Reading

It happened shortly after our man from under the tractor began to try to work with his injured hand. It surprised and baffled him at first. He found himself hesitating! He caught himself reaching across with his uninjured right hand to do tasks better done with the left. He just found himself unwilling to put his left hand in places where it was hot or where there were sharp points or moving parts. His first guess was it had something to do with all the pain he had known on the left. Later he realized that his position sense on the left had diminished. His brain no longer automatically knew where his left hand was! He had to retrain it. So he got intentional about it, bit his back teeth together and stuck the left hand in. It worked! Slowly he got over his hesitance, and his position sense improved. He had waited for help, for healing, for strength, and gradually the free use of his once injured hand returned.

I know a little boy named Micah. He is a wonderful little fella, a second son, a bit more openly curious and expansive than his very bright and conforming older brother. But one thing little Micah knows for sure is that he should never spill the beans about anything. Big Micah, the author of our first lesson for today, almost spills the Christmas beans on this fourth Sunday in Advent. We hear Bethlehem and we think baby Jesus! Micah did not know Jesus, but he did know a new ruler for Israel was coming. And Micah had to wait. Micah also mentions labor and a birth which further entices those of us too eager for the end of Advent. Our anticipation has been heightened, but Christmas is a full week away. So we wait too. One more week, or does Advent prepare us to wait a lifetime? Many new mothers will gladly tell you that the final week of their first pregnancy was absolutely the pits. "You are huge, you can't move, you are full of questions and wonderings, you catch each breath, it's awful!" But Big Micah waits and Israel waits and we wait.

I have a private idea why we have four weeks of Advent before Christmas. If we just slipped right into Christmas without all those Beholds and all those prophecies of cosmic cataclysms, if we did not learn again how to hang on to such gospel as we could find in St. Paul, we would run the considerable risk that Christmas would become only another birthday party for baby Jesus instead of the high and holy celebration of the incarnation of God in our midst. That would be terrible because there would be no powerful, universe-changing Christmas gospel, and furthermore all the Christmas songs would have to be sung to the melodies of lullabies. A sorry mess theologically and liturgically, not to mention where it would leave you and me spiritually.

The meaning of the lesson from Hebrews unfolds much easier if one reads a bit of the context. I recommend reading 10:1-5 and then the lesson. This lesson offers very rich gospel in the Christ who abolishes the first (law) to establish the second (grace) and does so by coming through on his promise, "Lo, I have come to do your will," and by offering his body once for all. The writer to the Hebrews moves so rapidly theologically here that it sounds like an outline rather than the full text. We have an obedient Christ, a Christ who offers his body, a Christ who sanctifies all of us, which echoes some of St. Paul's talk of holiness on earlier Sundays. Christ's radical obedience in this lesson sounds a strong note, one worthy of expansion, especially if your hearers are surrounded day after day by those who softly but insistently urge them to "do their own thing."

Micah named Bethlehem and spoke of labor and delivery. Luke names even more important names, Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah, and we all know the name of Elizabeth's leaping unborn baby and of the child that Mary carries. Elizabeth's "Hail Mary" is as sweet as ever, full as it is of obedience and faith and humility. For Lutherans the reading ends with Elizabeth's greeting. Episcopalians and Roman Catholics include the opening verses of Mary's Magnificat in their Gospel for this day. Perhaps Lutherans can stand only so much bean-spilling before they lose control and

begin the Christmas celebration early. Put me in charge and I would take my chances and include those verses of the Magnificat and treat us Lutherans to the beauty of the Magnificat and to Mary's faithfulness as well as Elizabeth's faithfulness.

Perhaps you have noticed how our man from under the tractor moved from passive waiting to increasingly active waiting. First he just waited; he could do nothing else. Later it was up to him to do all the strengthening and the retraining of his injured hand. There is a similar progression in the lessons of Advent. We begin with the prophetic exhortations and warnings to which we listen, almost passively. At most, we might find ourselves searching for a way to discover some delight in them. Then we move to John, preaching in the desert, calling for changed lives, Elizabeth and Mary, each bearing a child of promise. Notice how the human participation has increased. As a counterpoint to this move from prophecy to action we have first St. Paul, interpreting all the prophecy for the comfort and holiness of the believers, and finally we have the writer to the Hebrews connecting for us the Christ, his body, his obedience and our holiness. We are ready now to celebrate the incarnation of God among us. PJB

Pastoral Reflections

We talked after Wednesday morning coffee while the other pastors were leaving. Her frustrations and her emotional swings were demonically connected to numbers: the number of people at worship, the number of youth at a high schoolers event, the number of new members since June, the numbers in the budget. In her head, she was acutely aware that numbers were no reflection of her pastoral abilities, but in her heart, it was difficult not to feel the number sickness.

All our mail slots are bombarded with brochures about programs, workshops, and strategies on how to increase the numbers. Some of these approaches are valid and may speak to us. However, the majority of pastors serve small to medium size congregations. The danger that lurks in ministry is our own sinful envy of larger churches and our unfaithfulness to the people we've been called to serve in joy, respect, and awe.

Micah calls us to a renewed sense of surprise and unexpectedness at God's presence in the least, the little, and the small numbers. For Micah claims that the Shepherd-King will emerge not from the Holy City of Jerusalem, but rather from the little backwater town of Bethlehem.

> But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Carl Dudley, who writes about small congregations, says,

> In a big world the small church has remained intimate. In a fast world, the small church has been steady. In an expensive world, the small church has remained plain. In a complex world, the small church has remained simple. In a rational world, the small church has kept feelings. In a mobile world, the small church has been an anchor. In an anonymous world, the small church calls us by name and by nickname! As a result, small churches have survived where others have failed. (*CONTEXT*, June 1994)

Light the fourth Advent candle in hope and joy, even if the wreath is small, while humming "O Little Town of Bethlehem," for the Lord is Coming. DB

The Nativity of our Lord Christmas Eve December 24, 1994

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

No more waiting! No more stories of men under tractors. Put all thoughts of waiting behind you and celebrate the central event of human history: The very incarnation of God among us!

Isaiah gives us an energizing start for our Christmas Eve celebration. The church is resplendent with decorations and bright white paraments, finally! A glowing tree exudes the smell of warm pine. There is an even brighter glow on the faces around us. We have sung a favorite Christmas hymn or two and felt the release and peace those old songs bring. We have intoned the Kyrie and sung the Hymn of Praise. We have prayed to the God who "caused this holy night to shine...." The next words we hear are among the most powerful and sweet that Isaiah ever wrote. It is a grand song of jubilation! Old Isaiah's song needs to be set to the kind of music that repeats each phrase over and over with different melodic and harmonic inventions, thus allowing us time to savor each truth, allowing the text time to impact on the fullness of our living and our relationships to God and to one another. A quick listing of the themes is moving and current: light for those in darkness (try any classroom, anywhere, for starters), the joy of the harvest which means no more want (tell 'em in Africa), the joy of the victor which means no more war (Bosnia, North Korea, Pentagon, United Nations peacekeepers), the yoke and the staff and the rod of the oppressor is busted once for all (remember the cost of the recent liberation in South Africa), it is a child who brings this (Mary's child, one of us), one called Prince of Peace (a name he will earn) who begins his endless reign of justice and righteousness (tell 'em in every legislature, judiciary, board room, union hall, and nursery). The final line speaks authority, "This is no less than the Lord of Hosts talking! So listen up!"

St. Paul gives us and Titus a long, almost academic, definition of Grace. Yup, Grace is the subject of this longish sentence. Which puts a different spin on what at first glance appears to be a lot of law about "renouncing irreligion and worldly passions... to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world." So that's how you do it! Grace! Grace does not demand such things. Grace makes them possible for us, and what better lesson could we learn on this "most holy night?" Christmas is about changed lives, holiness! There goes baby Jesus' birthday party and all those lullabies.

Have you ever wondered how many worshippers on Christmas Eve might be able to recite the Lukan Christmas Gospel word for word? It really is familiar to the faithful. Luke again nails the event historically with Augustus' enrollment, then takes us immediately to the human details, Joseph, out of his shop in Nazareth, all the way past Jerusalem to Bethlehem with Mary, with child. There the birth, there the expected swaddling cloths, there the unexpected manger. There, on the Bethlehem hills, the expected shepherds and the unexpected angels. It is a simple cast, easily found in any Hallmark shop: Good old Joseph, sweet Mary, her baby, the shepherds, and the angels.

Each character is worthy of our consideration. Pick any one. Joseph does not get much play in the story, and frequently his statue gets lost or falls over in the creche and nobody notices, but think of how his tidy, orderly life was disrupted by this birth. He makes an interesting and oddly welcome picture of fathering. Or take Mary, as her body gives up this baby growing inside her for the past nine months. Consider her waiting and her wonder, her birthing pain, her urgency as she accepts a stable as a birthing place, her loneliness, her fear, her relief, her joy. Together Mary and Joseph make a superb picture of the expensive way the race is continued. You might even allow yourself to see the event through the eyes of one shepherd: pick the 13 year-old who got stuck with the first watch of the night, eight p.m. till midnight. While the others snored, he shivered, until.... Or allow your fantasy further flight and consider the heavenly host. Was this a planned, divinely sanctioned angelic celebration, designed to scare the wits out of some sleepy

shepherds, or did angelic joy become irrepressible and things get out of hand in a lower echelon? Of course the Creator of the Universe smiled, but how did the ruckus start, and did it warrant an immediate investigation by the committee on angelic propriety? Or, in a more careful way consider the divine babe, the creator who participates *this way* in creation, exactly the way each creature participates. How much more powerful the risk, how much more complete the identification, how much more humbling to him and exalting to us this incarnation than the Greek way or the adoptionist way. This newborn is the one we came to worship tonight. Do you like miracle? Shout it! "Deus incarnatus est!" Do you like mystery? Whisper it, "Deus incarnatus est!" so you don't wake the baby. PJB

The Nativity of our Lord Christmas Day December 25, 1994

First Reading

Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-9
John 1:1-14

No more waiting! Isaiah sees the feet of the messenger on the mountains. His message is, "Your God reigns!" Singing is the appropriate response to this messenger. All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God!

The messenger's feet offer an interesting visual. Isaiah calls those feet beautiful. Remember, these are the feet of a courier who brings a message from a distant battlefield. He has run almost to exhaustion and without his Nikes. His feet are thickly calloused by his training, bloody and scarred and caked with dirt from this run. But his message of peace and deliverance is so welcome that these gross-looking feet become beautiful. The message he brings makes his feet beautiful.

The writer to the Hebrews sees more clearly than Isaiah. No more messenger, this one is a Son! God speaks directly. Make no mistake, this is the one through whom God created and sustains the world, the heir of all things. He bears the very stamp of God's nature. Interestingly, in the mind of the writer to the Hebrews, this Son does not simply come here to tell us something. He comes here to *do* something. He makes a purification for sins. He does not come with another set of regulations for us, nor with a message of our doom. No new threats to mold our behavior, no promises of reward to lead us onward. This one comes to make a pur-i-fi-cation-for-sin. Our sin. No mere angel, this one. This one is a Son, an heir whose years will never end. One can almost hear the writer to the Hebrews ask, "Are you beginning to get the picture?"

As though the writer to the Hebrews had not said it all, we move to the opening verses of St. John's Gospel for John's beautiful, circular, Hebraic Christology. Notice the absence of the Lukan historical anchoring. John begins "in the beginning" with the creating Word who made everything. John leads us into human history with another man named John, a witness bearer. Finally in the last verse of our Gospel, John makes the crucial identification: "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." This is where John was taking us: Incarnation! "We beheld his glory...." Revelation! Together they mean that Grace now has a human face, no sound and light show is necessary. Grace now speaks human language with a fully human voice, no cosmic P.A. system needed. Grace is now palpable in a human story, in a Bath and a Table, all residing in a fully human, sometimes woefully human, community. Such is the glory of the only Son from the Father. Lo, how different is the glory of God from that fashioned by Spielberg with wind machines and lasers melting wax faces. No more waiting. The glory of God is among us in the incarnate Christ. A new beginning, finally! PJB

Pastoral Reflections

Isaiah 62:10-12
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:1-20

The evangelism committee thought it would be a great idea to serve refreshments following the midnight Christmas candlelight service. People could stay and visit awhile, share some Christmas treats and enjoy the spirit of Christmas with their friends in the congregation. During the discussion, someone asked if coffee would be available. Oh, yes, responded the committee members, but make sure the coffee is "decaffeinated." After all, we don't want anyone tossing and turning all night from the side effects of caffeine.

Hearing the conversation, I remembered a phrase from Anglican Bishop Michael Marshall, "decaffeinated Christianity." Bishop Marshall contended that many so-called believers have accepted a "decaffeinated Christianity"—it promises not to keep us awake at night. Of all nights, Christmas is the time to stay awake and watch with Isaiah's sentinels for the coming of salvation.

Isaiah 62:10-12 is a call for preparation, action, and anticipation for "salvation is coming."

> The Lord has proclaimed
> to the end of the earth:
> Say to daughter Zion,
> "See, your salvation comes;
> his reward is with him,
> and his recompense before him."

For Christians, our salvation arrives in the birth of the Christ-child.

Yet, many of us have forgotten or have become numbed to the routine of Christmas. Therefore we would rather sleep than stay awake from the effects of a cup of caffeinated Christmas coffee. What we need is to adopt the "Sugar Rule of Abstinence" as practiced by Rev. Emmett of the Church of the Second Chance. Rev. Emmett is answering his critics who say the Sugar Rule is too hard and too complicated:

> What he said this morning—pacing behind the counter running his long fingers through his forelock—was that the Sugar Rule was *supposed* to be complicated. "Like error itself," he said, "sugar creeps in the cracks. You tell yourself you didn't realize, you were subject to circumstance, you forgot to read the list of ingredients and anyhow, it's everywhere and it can't be helped. Isn't that significant? It's not that you'll be damned forever if you take a grain of sugar; nobody says that. Sugar is merely a distraction, not a sin. But I feel it's important to keep the rule because of what it stands for: the need for eternal *watchfulness*." (Tyler, *Saint Maybe*, 220). DB

The Name of Jesus
January 1, 1995

Psalm 8
Numbers 6:22-27
Romans 1:1-7 *or* Philippians 2:9-13
Luke 2:21

First Reading

Happy New Year! Having taken care of that calendar nicety let's get on with the more important business of naming. Five years ago I baptized a baby boy named Zachariah. "Oh, my!" thought I as I poured the water, "what an awful moniker to hang on such a small person." But we have grown together, that little boy and I and his lengthy name, and he has become a Zachariah, one certainly remembered by God and by most people who meet him. His name is no longer an awful moniker but has become an accurate description of who he is with his bright eyes, quick words, and engaging ways. I'm not at all sure how that worked. Did the boy live up to his name? Did the name determine who the boy would be? Did God and the name and the boy work together to shape him? Or what?

The name God instructs Moses and Aaron to "put on the people of Israel" is "Yahweh," the only name Israel avoids speaking. The name

Yahweh sums up so much revelation of God's patience and mercy and power and wisdom that in order to avoid using it casually or disrespectfully, they avoid using it altogether. This Aaronic blessing, which most of us have been receiving and giving for all our lives, is perhaps taken too lightly among us with our too-easy translation of Yahweh into LORD. This lesson might sharpen our awareness to some of the power that is here. The revelation of God's name through Moses to Israel was a step along the way of God's larger revelation to Israel. This revelation was not to be Israel's private property, but rather Israel's gift to the world. Yahweh has benevolent intent towards all of creation, including all humans.

St. Paul shines an even brighter light on Yahweh's benevolence and power as he adds the name of "Jesus, the Christ" to our thinking and reminds us that both these names, Yahweh and Jesus, and the revelation that accompanies them, for which he uses the code word "grace," are for all the nations.

The Gospel, the shortest one in the lectionary, still gives the preacher plenty to work with. We say his name is "Jesus." They said something closer to "Joshua." The word means simply savior. It was a name given in hope and with prayer to all those who were thus named, expressing Israel's longing for the fulfillment of God's promises to them. St. Luke reminds us that the name was given by an angel to Mary before he was conceived. For nine months Mary carried the child and wondered about this name.

She gave him up for the first time at his birth, yielding him to air and independent breathing, to reliance on his own heart and lungs. Having given up her body's automatic care of him she must now calculate his care and wonder if she is doing everything the best way. Shortly after his birth she gave him up again to shepherds who told stories about angels. On this day she gives him up again, first to the people of Israel by his circumcision and second to God by faithfully giving him the name prescribed earlier. Ahead lie many more times for Mary to give up this boy child of hers. She will give him up to Magi, to the perils of a journey to Egypt to escape more certain perils in Bethlehem, to the Doctors of the temple, to those crowds of people up and down the land who love him and hate him. At last she will give him up to soldiers with whips and nails for his flesh, and then give him up to death and quick interment. Finally she would give him up to resurrection and ascension so that he might belong to all of us. She gives him up to an ever expanding circle until she has given him up to all. This expanding circle is a picture of Yahweh's plan and Yahweh's love. With this name we can be sure of the process. It was not his name that shaped him. Nor did he give the meaning to his name. Both the person and the name were from God, given in mercy to reach the expanding circle, the one that includes you and me.

The psychologist in me prompts me to add that Mary's giving up of her son is not a bad paradigm of motherhood or even parenthood. It is in fact a design to follow. PJB

Pastoral Reflections

The TV screen was filled with her smiling face as she proclaimed, "The Lord has blessed us." The news reporter was interviewing her about the miraculous change in her violent neighborhood where people were now sitting and rocking safely on their front porches.

"We were tired of being known as a drug-infested ghetto," she said. "We organized our neighborhood and the community renamed the whole place—*Genesis Park.* For God has blessed us and has given us a new beginning and a new name."

The next picture showed workmen removing old street signs and placing new ones while a group of neighbors clapped and cheered. The new street signs bore names like "Peaceful Way" and "Rushwind Drive." Her beautiful old face returned to the screen. She told the reporter, "There's power in a name. This street, Peaceful Way, will remind us to live up to its name. It will tell everyone that we are a new community of people."

The reporter closed by citing police statistics showing a 50% drop in crime since the new names were used in the neighborhood.

On this first day and first Sunday in 1995, we celebrate the Name of Jesus. The Old Testament lesson is the familiar Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6:22-27. The Jewish priests would

conclude the morning worship in the temple with this blessing. Today, many people know this beautiful benediction since it occurs at the end of most Christian worship services.

Yet, verse 27, which is never heard, is the most striking for this Sunday: "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." God's name will be put on the Israelites. They will be his people. God's name will be put on the people of the New Covenant. Their name will be "Christians" because God has named them in Christ. We are a community named by Jesus in our baptism. There is power in the name to change us, to change our churches and to change our communities.

As we begin 1995, I pray that each day will start with the name of Jesus on our lips and in our hearts. For who knows how different our world might be if we re-name it and live in it as committed Christians in Christ's world?

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;
25 The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
26 The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. DB

Epiphany, 1995

The Baptism of Our Lord January 8, 1995

Psalm 45:7-9
Isaiah 42:1-7
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

First Reading

The texts for the Baptism of our Lord focus on two aspects of Jesus' ministry: the *source* and the *character* of his ministry. The Gospel text looks primarily to the source of Jesus' ministry at its commencement. Here we see that Jesus is empowered to do ministry; God has anointed him with the Spirit at his baptism in the river Jordan. John the Baptist is the witness to rather than the agent of Jesus' Spirit-Baptism. His role is essentially passive. Indeed, Luke's telling us that John was eventually imprisoned by Herod has the literary effect of taking John out of scene of salvation history as well as (it seems) his direct involvement with Jesus' baptism (3:19-20). The real agent of Jesus' baptism, his anointing with the Spirit, is God.

Jesus' ministry, for Luke, ushers in the age of the Spirit, the fulfillment of OT visions, hopes, and expectations. If we read the OT lesson through Christian eyes, i.e., as referring to the ministry of Jesus Christ, we see the character of Jesus' messianic ministry as one of compassionately establishing justice on earth. Luke will further develop this theme in his Gospel.

For Luke, Jesus is primarily a "prophet mighty in word and deed" (24:19). Luke's Gospel should be read in tandem with *Acts*, Luke's expansion of Gospel history. Luke is interested, in other words, in developing the broad scope or panoramic view of things. The bestowal of the Spirit on Jesus in his baptism is, in this view, a prototype or foretaste of Pentecost—a bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon all people for ministry. Jesus' baptism thus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy that the Servant would have Yahweh's Spirit (Isa 42:1). More importantly, the gift of the Spirit empowers Jesus to be the chief agent of God's salvation.

If Jesus is the chief agent of salvation, then John can only be the preparer of the way of salvation. John is himself aware of his preparatory role in the eschatological history of salvation. He claims that he is not even fit to do the slave's work of unfastening a sandal strap (3:16).

Though not as dramatic as some OT theophanies, Jesus' baptism, it should be noted, is a kind of theophany (an appearance of God). Look at the signs: heaven opens, the dove descends, and the mysterious and somewhat distant Voice (of God) confirms Jesus' role as God's Son now anointed by the Spirit for the task of salvation. In Luke, this divine task entails putting all things right—whether spiritual, social, or physical—that aren't as they should be. John describes the messianic ministry as one of separation, cleans-

ing, and judgment. The presence of the dove as the symbol of the empowering Holy Spirit, alighting on Jesus, is a refreshing and surprising contrast to John's predictions of the Messiah's coming. The gentle dove seems to symbolize the hope of people for love, life, and peace. What then becomes of the judgment that John predicted? The days of judgment are not erased from the plan of salvation history. Jesus himself foretells that days of judgment will come on Jerusalem (21:20-24) and the nations (21:21-25).

What then can be said of the character of the new messianic social order? A hint of the flavor of the new messianic community is offered in our OT and NT lessons. In Isaiah 42 we see that God as the creator will liberate the imprisoned (the exiles) and in this way is sensitive to the "bruised reed." The new community is directed by God's compassion for the oppressed. In Acts 10:34-38 we learn that God's love for the new community is inclusive. If Jesus is "Lord of *all*" (Acts 10:36), then he is Lord not only of Jews—or Jewish Christians, such as Peter—but also Gentiles who are also in need of the good that Jesus does and the salvation he offers. In the OT God's "spirit" indicates empowerment for extraordinary redemptive work that is promised to the messianic king (Isa 11:2) and later given to the entire messianic community (Joel 2:28-29).

The theme of our texts is that Jesus, as the agent of salvation, is empowered from his Father for the task of establishing a new humanity of God. MM

Diaconal Reflections

Today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, a pivotal event in Jesus' growing awareness of his mission.

Yet the reference in the Gospel text to the baptismal act itself is startlingly skimpy. And it leaves unanswered both our journalistic queries—How many people were there? What was the weather like? Who were the sponsors? What did Jesus' mother wear?—and also our pseudo-theological concerns—Immersion? Pouring? Sprinkling?

Instead, all we get (in the NRSV rendering) is the smaller half of a subordinate clause: "...and when Jesus also had been baptized...." Indeed, in terms of the baptism itself, Jesus is just part of the crowd: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...."

But, of course, as is our wont, we stop too soon: "...and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened...." Do we not notice the heaven opened at baptism? Maybe we stop too soon. Maybe we make baptism too much an end, not enough a beginning.

The heaven was opened. And Jesus was powerfully reminded of his relationship to God: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," came the divine voice.

Jesus was also reminded of other things in other ways about his ministry and mission. In the view of the zealous Baptist, Jesus was far from gentle, meek, and mild: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." At the same time, the church has understood Jesus as the subject of Isaiah's prophecy about that servant who does not cry or shout, who breaks no bruised reed, who quenches no smoldering wick. And it also knows Jesus as the one who brings justice, who heals, who goes about doing good.

What do we discover in baptism about our relationship with God? As Jesus was one of the crowd, one of us—also in baptism—we too have, in that gentle but powerful flood, a corresponding promise of steadfast divine graciousness. And just as seemingly irreconcilable hopes and desires were (and are) laid on Jesus, we too are likely to live out our baptismal calling subject to contradictory demands and expectations.

But in all that, and much worse, the promise made to Jesus is a firm assurance as well to all of us the baptized, one at a time and all together: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." TD

Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 15, 1995

Psalm 36:5-10
Isaiah 62:1-5
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

First Reading

Today's Gospel is a favorite text for those parishioners who remember the days of prohibition—and hated them. Yet, more is going on here than a justification for Christians to be emancipated from the ideology of teetotalism in this familiar, though strange text. I read this text as an illustration of the contrast that the evangelist John made in the beginning of his Gospel that "the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). The six stone water jars for Jewish purification each had an estimated capacity of 20-30 gallons. Their emptiness indicates for John the spiritual emptiness of ritual purification, an important part of daily life and worship for the Jews of Jesus' day. The old faith of the law simply cannot satisfy. It lacks grace and truth.

Into this spiritually arid environment Jesus comes to bring grace and truth. Jesus does not shore up a faulty religious system, when he reveals the first of his "signs" (Jn 2:11). Instead, he creates a whole new way to eternal life, a way that actually delivers what it promises. Normally, as the steward notices, the good wine is served first, and then the bad wine, when the guests are inebriated. Jesus, however, provides only good wine and no bad wine. The truth he offers overflows the empty ritual vessels.

When Jesus' mother approaches him about the matter, Jesus seems to be unwilling to help. Jesus' only point is that with regard to the revelation of his uniqueness, he is guided by the Father's will alone, not by any human agency. This motif permeates John's Gospel; certain events cannot happen because Jesus' "time" has not arrived (7:6; 8:20). Jesus' time, which in John is contrasted with the time of the world (3:19-21; 7:7) is uniquely his own. It is the time in which he is glorified (12:23; 17:1), and the Father is glorified (12:27-28). In this time, Jesus is lifted up (3:14), he returns to the Father (13:1), he speaks plainly and not in figures (16:25), and God is worshipped as he truly is (4:21,23). Hence, the point of this story is: water becoming wine is not a nifty feat of magic, but a sign of the inbreaking of the excess of grace and truth which overcomes the empty world of false hopes and shallow promises.

The Gospel ties in with the OT theme of the vindication of God's people and the fulfillment of their deepest hopes (Isa 62:1). Marriage as a metaphor of covenant between God and the people is common to OT and Gospel.

In our second lesson, Paul offers guidance on the meaning of fellowship in the factious, "charismatic" atmosphere of the Corinthian church. He suggests that spiritual gifts exist for the common good of the church, for building up the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7). When this goal is kept in mind, there is no room for spiritual pride, self-denigration, or a factious spirit. The vindication, promised to God's people in Isaiah, is fulfilled in the glory of Jesus Christ. The new relation of God to people needs to be reflected in the life of the congregation, which should be a place for wholeness and well-being, not a place of pride and put-downs. This point is hammered home when we realize that Cana is a tiny farming village. Jesus shares his life with poor, simple farm people. This contrasts sharply with the social prestige that we often seek even in the church. MM

Diaconal Reflections

A strange and cryptic exchange is this, not at all the dialogue we would write for a model parent and offspring:

Mother to son: Our hosts have a problem.

Son: So? My time for action isn't now.

Mother to servants: Do whatever he says.

Maybe that's the bottom line when things don't make sense, also in the church: Do whatever Jesus says, confident it will turn out all right—somehow, someday, some way.

At least it did at Cana, though the crisis of

potential embarrassment at that wedding seems more up Miss Manners' than Jesus' alley.

Impressive as we might rate this inaugural sign at the natural-science level, as John details it, it was pretty ho-hum in the special-effects department: No public appeal to God to act, no exhortation to believe. No fanfare. Almost secretive. Just water in and wine out. And yet, even though nobody knew where this premium vintage came from—not the steward, not the bridegroom, not the guests—the evangelist says that in this, Jesus "revealed his glory."

But to whom?

Actually, of course, not quite nobody knew. The servants had insight the others lacked. (Of course, servants often know rather more than non-servants think they do. *Upstairs Downstairs* surely proves that.)

As attentive servants of a wine-making Lord not given to dazzle and glitter, part of our quiet call is to know where the wine comes from. So knowing, we may be of some help to those in the midst of crisis—be it trivial or profound—who would hear and see whatever it is that Jesus is saying and doing with and for them, within and through it. TD

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 22, 1995

Psalm 113
Isaiah 61:1-6
1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27
Luke 4:14-21

First Reading

Today's Gospel forms a natural unit with next Sunday's Gospel. Here, I deal with each Gospel as presented in the lectionary, in order to show how each connects with the OT and NT lessons that they are matched with. This story deals with Jesus' unfolding messianic program in his home town, and his first experience with rejection from among his own people, a foreshadowing of his later cross and resurrection. For Luke, we remember, the role of Jesus is best seen as that of a prophet (24:19). Prophets are always liable to rejection. By applying Isaiah's foretelling of the coming of a Spirit-empowered prophet to himself, Jesus caught his hometown fellow synagogue worshippers off-guard. This incident begins the undercurrent of opposition which ultimately leads to Jesus' death.

Luke tells us that Jesus already had a powerful reputation in Galilee for his ministry (4:14). Jesus' coming to Nazareth, and his worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom" (4:21), was completely predictable and ordinary. What is extraordinary is Jesus' address to the audience: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21).

That this is the time and that this is the place of prophetic, messianic fulfillment seems utterly fantastic. Nazareth was hardly more than a tiny village of fewer than 500 inhabitants at the time of Jesus. Furthermore, Israel was not a free nation, but under oppressive foreign occupation. Jesus, "Joseph's son" (4:22), was only too well known to be considered a possible candidate for the Messiah. In this chapter we see how Jesus is audacious enough not only to align himself with Isaiah's talk of a Spirit-anointed prophet, but also to offend his listeners. Jesus, in the long run, succeeds as a prophet, but fails as a salesman. On that day in Galilee he is heedless of the most basic law of rhetoric, i.e., that speakers must first analyze their audience and then present their message in an acceptable way to that audience. Instead, Jesus, as a Spirit-anointed, Spirit-empowered emissary, takes risks. What is at stake for Jesus is the truth of God's kingdom and the power it has to undo the evil forces of this age. It dispels those powers by bringing them under the aegis of God's new age. In Luke, there is no "messianic secret" as there is in Mark. On the contrary, we might think of Jesus as saying "I'm the One! Look at me and look to me!"

In our OT lesson today we see how the Spirit upholds and sustains the prophet to proclaim the good news of liberation, a salvation which is all-encompassing, spiritual, and yet not just spiritualized. It includes the social and physical aspects of life. In the OT, the coming of the Spirit upon

a person signifies God's special action upon that someone to fulfill the task that God has for that person (1 Sam 10:5-13). The Spirit was promised to the messianic king (Isa 11:1-2) and the messianic people (Joel 2:28-29; Zech 12:10). In Luke, Jesus, as filled with the Holy Spirit, is God's chosen agent to fulfill the meaning of this promise. In Luke, Jesus is well aware of the fact that he is Spirit-empowered. The sad fact is that not all people will accept God's new age and God's Agent of the new age.

In our Epistle, the metaphor of "the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:12) unleashes the truth that the members of the church are so closely related to each other that they have an organic bonding. They are not merely a voluntary association, as we so often think of the church. The dependency that church members sense that they have on each other in this body is one that frees them to share their lives with each other. One cannot have a relationship with God outside of this "ecclesial existence." One can have a relationship with God only along with others, fellow hypocrites and sinners, whose lives God reformulates through the narrative of the church's history and liturgy. This ecclesial existence is a fruit of the Spirit's ministry—foretold in Isaiah, embodied in Jesus—now unleashed in the church. MM

Diaconal Reflections

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing."

Would we—could we?—dare use that as our liturgical response to the proclamation of God's Word? Of course not. How could we be so presumptuous? Maybe Jesus could say such a thing, but we're not Jesus.

"Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it."

Not only that, but once baptized in, it's not so easy to get out. Even if we don't like our assigned part. Even if we don't think we have anything to offer. Even if we don't measure up. "If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body."

But if that ear or foot with low self-esteem is not allowed to call it quits, even less is the eye or hand allowed to exclude the non-eye or the unhand. And were that self-important member to attempt to do so, it would not make that "lesser" member any less a part of the body.

This Sunday comes in the middle of the annual celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. One way to understand our sorry visible state as the fractured body of Christ is that it is a consequence of efforts, however well intentioned, to unchurch this or that other part of the body: You aren't Lutheran. You're not born again. You don't love the liturgy. You won't shout hallelujah. You aren't heterosexual. You're not progressive. You aren't pro-life. You're not a pacifist. So you can't be part of the body.

Actually, most of us these days tend toward less directness than that. Anathemas aren't usually our style. Most of us are unlikely to verbally excommunicate those with whom we disagree, theologically or politically. Indeed, we may even actively rejoice in the church's roominess, its internationality, its multicultural inclusiveness.

But, when was the last time any of us suffered—really, not only metaphorically, though even that would be something—when a member far away from us—in geography or theology or style—was in pain? When was the last time we rejoiced when another far-away part of the body was honored? For that matter, when was the last time either happened when the distance—in any sense—was much less?

If nothing else, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an annual challenge to stop the de facto proclamation that we have no need of those other members of the body—an exclusionary attitude which is a consequence of the koinonia-crippling individualism, congregationalism, denominationalism, and nationalism which affects us all to some degree.

This week is an annual challenge to live out the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer for unity—not only, but not least, by together proclaiming, in word and deed, the year of the Lord's favor. TD

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 1995

Psalm 71:1-6, 15-17
Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 12:27–13:13
Luke 4:21-32

First Reading

While for Luke Jesus succeeded as "a prophet mighty in word and deed" (24:19), he failed as a winner of a popularity contest. Better said, he failed with the power brokers of his day and succeeded with the poor and powerless, the "little flock" (12:32). Today's Gospel, which continues the story begun last week, shows that the power structures and social systems of Jesus' era will not easily accept the Spirit-led power manifest in Jesus. Hence, there is a struggle between the old and new ages that is manifest in the forces Jesus combats in his healing and prophetic ministry.

This struggle is illustrated in today's Gospel, as the people of Jesus' hometown attempt to take his life. The account is best seen as typical: a foreshadowing of Jesus' later encounter with the political and religious "powers that be," an encounter that will lead to his martyrdom. The story echoes Nehemiah's description of the ways of God with the people of Israel. Nehemiah 9:26-31 outlines a fourfold cycle: (1) God's people rebel against God; (2) God punishes them; (3) God sends mercy to the people by sending them a prophet; and (4) the people reject the prophet, which begins the cycle of rebellion again.

The synagogue worshippers, offended both with Jesus' self-description of his role in salvation history and with his point that God often goes to the Gentiles when Jews will not listen, became a lynch mob that sought to execute Jesus. Hypocritically, they are violating the Sabbath, to say nothing of civil law. The shadow of rejection hangs over Jesus' ministry from the very first. It culminates in Jesus' crucifixion. Yet Jesus, as we remember, is filled with the Spirit for the extraordinary task of messianic ministry. He exhibits virtually superhuman strength in his ability to walk through this mob. He continues his journey to God according to God's plan. Opposition cannot squelch that plan. It is Jesus in Luke who "sets his face" toward Jerusalem (9:51; see also 13:22; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11; 19:28; 19:41-44). He makes his journey to the cross according to God's own timing.

As we can see, prophets experience opposition, hardship, and social scorn. It is not an office that people seek. Instead, it is a office that seeks people strong enough to deal with its hardships. In the call narrative of Jeremiah we hear the reservations that a young prophet raises against the call to prophetic ministry (Jer 1:6). God's response to Jeremiah is that since he forms the young child in the mother's womb, he knows the human person fully. With insights even into that hidden, prenatal life, God can be counted on to uphold and protect the prophetic emissary.

Words are no trivial matter for Jeremiah, "mere words," as they often are for us. The word of God has power to pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, and build and plant. It is a power greater than that of the kingly authorities of this world, a power found ultimately in the words said by and embodied in Jesus. Prophets may feel completely isolated, but they are never alone. First, God stands behind them all the way. Second, the "goodly fellowship of the prophets," either contemporaries or noble figures from the past, upholds prophets in their ministry.

The ultimate fulfillment of the prophetic vision is described by Paul in our Epistle, the famous "love" chapter. We will at the fullness of time know God completely and experience full satisfaction. For Paul, we will know God comparable to the way that we are presently known by God. MM

Diaconal Reflections

Jesus, it seems, can't leave well enough alone. After his impressive performance at the lectern, his fellow worshipers speak well of him, remarking on his gracious words (albeit with some amazement, given his family background).

But instead of smilingly accepting the accolades of his fellow Nazarenes, Jesus turns provocative. He insults the town he grew up in, even seems to disparage the whole people of Israel.

Stunned and shocked and outraged, the congregation drives him out, and tries to do him in.

When was the last time we were provoked at worship, the last time we heard something—in a sermon or a reading, in a prayer or a hymn—that so outraged us that we wanted to kill the messenger?

Happily, rage is not an emotion we usually associate with worship. (And this reflection is no incitement to liturgical riot, no call for attacks on presiding ministers and worship committees.) But why is it that many of us are never much disturbed or upset at worship (except, perhaps, by the crying of cranky babies or the sour notes of soloists)? Maybe we aren't paying attention. Has overfamiliarity dulled our senses?

Consider today's second reading. So beautiful. They read it at Ken and Barbie's wedding. So poetic. I've heard it hundreds of times, though. And I really prefer the old translation, "faith, hope, and charity."

Without love, nothing counts. (Nothing?) Be patient. Be kind. (Even to people who are clearly in the wrong?) Don't envy. Don't boast. (Never? If you don't toot your own horn, nobody else will.) Don't be arrogant. Don't be rude. (Well, of course we shouldn't be impolite, but sometimes people really do deserve to be knocked down a peg or two.) Don't insist on your own way. Don't be irritable. (But we all get a bit touchy sometimes. It's only human after all.)

Don't be resentful. (But it's not fair.) Don't rejoice in wrongdoing. (But it wasn't really so awful.) Bear all things. (All things?) Believe all things. (But surely God doesn't want us to be gullible.) Hope all things. (All things?) Endure all things. (But sometimes you have to take a stand.)

If we find ourselves unprovoked at worship week after week, perhaps we need a little dose of literalism. It's unlikely to make us fundamentalists, and it might help us see in the mirror a bit less dimly. Such a clearer reflection of our perilous situation could help us conclude that not just Jeremiah of old, but also we today, stand in need of what is both divine promise and divine challenge: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. And before you were born I consecrated you... Do not be afraid... for I am with you to deliver you." TD

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 5, 1995

Psalm 85:8-13
Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)
1 Corinthians 14:12b-20
Luke 5:1-11

First Reading

The calling of Simon Peter, James, and John to the role of disciple in today's Gospel is nicely paired with the calling of Isaiah to the role of prophet in the OT lesson. Both callings are occasioned by a theophany, a disclosure of God.

For Isaiah, the call is directly from God as judge and king to speak God's word on his behalf. For Peter and company, the call is an indirect message from Jesus; basically, the message is to trust him. The fishermen in the Gospel have labored all night with no success. Now the carpenter turned prophet, who is probably not an expert fisherman, asks them to labor in the day. Jesus confronts them with this issue: trust me.

The locus for God's theophany that sets the occasion for Isaiah's call is the temple precinct. Isaiah probably hails from the priestly class of ancient Israel. He is possibly involved in the priestly temple service at the time of the call. The locus for Peter's call is the Lake of Galilee. He is simply doing his ordinary job as a fisherman. Jesus as the caller, empowered by the Spirit, is the agent of God's action and call.

The aspects of Isaiah's experience of theophany that evoke wonder and fright are the usual elements associated with theophanies, such as earthquakes and smoke, though here we have a somewhat less traditional vision that includes the Seraphs' praising the Almighty. This is an experience that renders Isaiah helpless, and no longer in control of his life. The theophanic experience for Peter and friends is the double surprise of the catch of fish being so great that (1) the nets begin to break and (2) both boats begin to sink from the weight of the caught fish. While quite different from the dramatics of traditional theophanies, this theophany apparent in Jesus' call has the

same effect on Peter and friends that theophanies previously had on Isaiah. Peter, like Isaiah, or Moses long before, senses his unworthiness in the presence of the divine, his sin and his finitude. When God enters human experience and speaks, people have no control over their lives.

Isaiah's call is to do the work of a prophet. Jesus shares this office along with Isaiah—though, unlike Isaiah, as the uniquely and incomparably anointed Son of God. Peter, though, is called, not as a prophet, but as a disciple to fish for people. The great catch of fish foreshadows the missionary successes of the earliest church, told later in detail in *Acts* by Luke. This story isn't about Peter's fishing, though. Rather, it is about Jesus, the fisher. It is Jesus who lures Peter. Peter takes this bait. Peter's life is transformed by Jesus. The fisherman is fished for (by a carpenter turned teacher) so that he might fish for the kingdom of God.

Our second lesson shows us why God calls people to witness to God's love. Paul does this in the context of admonishing the Corinthian church. Paul tells the Corinthian church to grow up. The bottom line about spiritual gifts is not to show them off. Instead, these gifts are to be exercised in such a way that they build people up in faith. The point of God's call—to Isaiah, to Peter, to the Corinthians—is indicated in this passage. It is to serve God's people and meet the needs of the world. MM

Diaconal Reflections

In at least some church circles, "user-friendly worship" is in these days. Like many such phrases, it's ok as far as it goes. And today's second lesson could even be used as a handy UFW prooftext, as Paul stresses the importance of "the outsider" being able to understand what's going on, so as to be built up and be able to take an active part in the community's gathering for prayer and praise.

But Paul is doing rather more than endorsing worship forms which are neither off-putting nor esoteric. More sweepingly, he suggests, when it comes to the faith, grow up. Don't leave your mind in the narthex when you take your seat in the pew: "I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also. I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.... Be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults."

The mind we are to bring to things spiritual is not, of course, that sort which always and thoughtlessly overrules the non-, the trans-, and even the irrational. Confronted with that vision of God enthroned, with all those many-winged critters flitting here and there chanting celestial praise, with the house shaking and full of incense, Isaiah's dazzled awe and deep sense of unworthiness—rather than cool, calculating, and critical rationality—are surely quite in order.

And, of course, if those first fisherfolk-turned-disciples had let their minds overmull all the possible implications and ramifications when Jesus invaded their lives, they might not, or at least not so readily, have left everything and followed him.

But to faithfully and fruitfully respond to Jesus' promise and command that they would be catching people rather than fish, they had to use their minds. As a fund-raising slogan for a group of colleges observes, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." That's no less true in the church. "In thinking, be adults." Not least in matters spiritual. TD

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 12, 1995

Psalm 1
Jeremiah 17:5-8
1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20
Luke 6:17-26

First Reading

The crowd assembles to hear Jesus. They look for the healing that only Jesus provides. Jesus has cast out demons and healed diseases. The people have great expectations of Jesus. They are entirely receptive to what he has to offer. In the "Sermon on the Plain" he extends this ministry of exorcising and healing, disabusing false views

that people hold of the God-human relationship. In this way, Jesus continues his ministry of healing people and society by conveying truth and blessing upon the poor, the hungry, the crying, and the persecuted. Jesus also condemns the false, ungodly spirit of the age, which aligns itself with power and wealth. Here, Jesus conveys the new age of the Spirit not only through actions but through words.

For us words are often cheap; we are saturated with messages and images in advertising on TV and the radio that seek to manipulate us to buy and consume. Words are often only so much hype. For Jesus, however, words convey authority and power. J. L. Austin taught us to be aware of the performative function of language, i.e., the capacity of words to *do* things. Also, the leaders of the "New Hermeneutic," Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, and Eberhard Jüngel, taught us to be aware of a "Speech Event" (*Sprachereignis*), in which it is language itself that transforms existence. From the perspective of the performative use of language and language seen as "speech events," we can say of the Sermon on the Plain, that the words of Jesus themselves help create the new age of the Spirit-led righteousness.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus redevelops the common biblical and ethical theme of the two ways or paths from the wisdom heritage of Israel, which is well-thematized in Jer 17:5-8 and Psalm 1. We learn that Jesus has been on the heights; he "came down" to give this sermon (6:17). The word "heights" carries the connotation of an encounter with God—like Moses on Mt. Sinai—and now Jesus is himself able to share wisdom with the people on the plain, who are hungry for an encounter with God through Jesus. While the good path—the way of discipleship—may bring scorn from the power brokers of this age, it offers life for those disciples of the age to come. In Luke, Jesus shows himself not only as a prophet, healer, and exorcist, but also as a teacher.

Here, the poor that Jesus refers to are so poor that they have to beg (see Ps 86:1; Ps 12:5). In Jesus' day, this term was a designation for pious, though humiliated, people. Power and wealth are intimately tied together. Jesus condemns a demonic attachment to wealth. However, it is not poverty as such, but counter-cultural discipleship that leads to salvation. Salvation is not found in a mere reversal of wealth to poverty, but in the promise that human need will be met by the fullness of divine salvation. For Jesus, real, authentic life, the kind of life that the deepest part of our personality hungers for, is life that is nurtured in God.

It is this new life that Jesus imparts through his speech. Words are powerful, at least in the mouth of Jesus. Jesus' words exorcise demons, convey healing, bring truth, reformulate life. MM

Diaconal Reflections

Luke's account of Jesus' beatitudes makes us squirm rather more than the version from Matthew's Gospel. Though it, too, may make us rather uncomfortable, most of us, even in first world congregations, have at least the possibility to be poor in spirit. Or to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

But the loopholes aren't there in Luke. There the beatitudes are more curt, and so the more unnerving: Blessed are the poor. Period. Blessed are the hungry. Period. Even in a relative sense, comparatively few who hear these words at worship in North America or Europe could claim with a straight face to be poor or hungry in the primary meaning of those words.

Even more is this true when the situation of most first world parishioners is compared with that of tens and hundreds of millions around the world of whose physical plight we are at least dimly aware (however much we are distracted or however little we are interested) thanks to CNN and the occasional international newsbrief in the local paper.

And if people don't always speak well of us, most of us have not been reviled or defamed recently (and probably not ever). What's more, not only are almost all first worlders far from poor and hungry, but virtually all of us are, at least relatively, rich and full.

Woe to us, says Jesus. What a downer. For most people in most North American and European congregations, this Gospel (assuming it is not spiritualized or metaphorized into inoffensiveness) is obnoxiously hearer-unfriendly. But more than on many Sundays, this text makes it crystal clear that in terms of righteousness, there

is absolutely nothing for us to hang on to. Or, rather, there's only one thing left to hold fast.

Of course, this is so always and for all. But the really poor and hungry, with no possibility to "make mere flesh your strength," may well be blessed with a clearer vision of that gospel truth.

The blessed, as Jeremiah reminds us, are those whose trust is the Lord. And, as Paul reminds us, our Lord is the one who has "in fact" been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are woeful unto death.

Woe is me. Woe are us. Little wonder "all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him, and healed all of them." TD

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
February 19, 1995

Psalm 103:1-13
Genesis 45:3-8a, 15
1 Corinthians 15:35-38a, 42-50
Luke 6:27-38

First Reading

Paul gives us a glimpse of the completed new cosmic order that God is creating in Christ. He writes, "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49). Unlike the first Adam who fled from God in guilt and shame when God paid him a visit, the completed new humanity in the Last Adam will be ever open to God. In the consummation, we will be able to reflect God in all that we say and do. This is the promised outcome of the gospel. Even here and now, in the experience of forgiveness and the reconciliation that accompanies forgiveness, the believer experiences a foretaste of the final outcome to the story of the universe.

The experience of forgiveness holds center stage in the story of Joseph and his brothers. The text records how "Joseph kissed his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him" (Gen 45:15). In forgiveness, one forgoes one's right or entitlement to extract compensations for injuries received. Forgiveness is a kind of generosity in which one chooses to live from love, the fountain of life, and not from hate. The theme of the depth of generosity is the key that unifies our texts today.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus addresses would-be disciples. His radical proposal of love of enemies flies in the face of the natural and conventional wisdom of putting self-protection first. Love of enemies, it should be noted, is not defaulting to weakness. Jesus, for example, bravely walked with strength and dignity through the crowd at the Nazareth synagogue which wanted to kill him (4:30). His radical ethic of love for one's enemy asks its disciples to live as if the coming new world had already arrived in its fullness. Though this new world is still in contention with the powers of this world, one proleptically senses its triumph in the radical discipleship of Jesus' ethic of love of enemies. For Jesus, one combats the powers of the old age not by using the weapons and laws of the old age, such as "an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth," but by stepping outside the old age entirely. For Jesus, it was inappropriate for his disciples to protect him at the time of his arrest by using the sword (22:49-51). One should overcome the ways of the old era by not playing the games of this world. Instead, one plays a different game, with different rules. This new game simply subverts the follies of the old era. When one exchanges love for wrongdoing, one lives not from this universe, but from a parallel universe, God's new era.

We can give and forgive because God so lavishly gives to us and forgives us. Jesus used several metaphors to describe this generosity. "Good measure" (6:38) means heaping portions, "pressed down" signifies that we need to make room for more, "shaken together" means to level off the portion in order to make room for more, which is then "overflowing," heaping amounts spilling over. "Put into the lap" means that we are dealing with an excess of good things, most specifically the love of God. God is never stingy with his love. MM

Diaconal Reflections

Joseph's brothers are "dismayed" to find their long-lost relative alive and doing quite well in Egypt. Perhaps they are distressed because they expect Joseph to apply one of Jesus' promises in today's Gospel: "The measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Fortunately for them, Joseph understands what they did rather differently than they do. The brothers thought they were disposing of an annoyingly self-important sibling, and turning a tidy profit at the same time. But Joseph reminds them they got it wrong yet again, for he perceives God at work in their misdoings: "God sent me before you to preserve life.... So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

But maybe Jesus' maxim is not disproved after all, for there is, after all, some kind of measure for measure, even in this story. It's just that the brothers see the wrong measure. Joseph's perception, it seems, is the truer assessment of what they did. And as he sees more clearly than they what was really going on, the retribution they rightly fear becomes a graciousness they could never have expected.

At the resurrection, Paul says, the measure in is not the measure out. The perishable is sown in dishonor and weakness. The imperishable is raised in glory and power. We give a physical body. We get a spiritual body.

Today's Gospel is a cascade of calls to transform our standards of measurement in human relationships, to make them more like God's. That is, like those of a God wont to be "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." Why would—how could—any baptized disciple of the one who reveals to us what God is like possibly want to wait till the resurrection to live this wonderful transformation? TD

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 26, 1995

Psalm 99:1-5
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Luke 9:28-36

First Reading

The transfiguration proleptically offers a glimpse of the outcome of that "exodus" (ἔξοδος) or "departure" (9:31) of Jesus from Jerusalem to the Father. This exodus will lead God's people out of captivity and into the promised land of salvation. Moses and Elijah, the spokesmen for the law and the prophets, were rejected by God's people; they are both eminently qualified to converse with Jesus about the persecution waiting for him.

Once again, we have theophanic glory surrounding Jesus. That Jesus is arrayed in dazzling light is a symbol of the transcendent God. The cloud indicated God's presence as on Sinai. As at Sinai also one must go up on the mountain to enter the presence of God. The Voice which confirms Jesus as "my Son" echoes Jesus' baptism. Here, our epiphany season has come full circle. Yet we are not at the same place at the end of the epiphany season where we were at its beginning. Instead, this new phase of God's revelation is that the one who returns to God does so via the cross.

In this text Jesus "glows" with the light of God. However, it is not this glow that makes him to be the Messiah. Rather, he is the Christ because he surrendered his life on the cross and was then raised to glory. This is what makes Jesus to be the "image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). It is interesting, though, that it is not just the light of the Father that radiates on Jesus, but Jesus gives light of himself. Jesus has a unique, irreplaceable position in salvation history. Human understanding cannot fathom the brightness of Christ's glory. Its excessive splendor subverts the mind's attempt to penetrate it. Jesus' transfiguration looks back to his baptism and forward to his passion. Jesus' true nature is revealed to Peter, James, and John, and to us on this mountain.

Jesus' transfiguration coincides with the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles. This festival recalled the 40 year long wandering of God's people from Egypt to the promised land, from slavery to freedom. This festival raised high nationalistic feelings amongst a people who were under Roman occupation. Some people of Jesus' day looked for a political salvation. This was not the full or complete salvation that Jesus came to offer. We can infer that salvation includes a social, political dimension. After all, in the consummation, at the eschaton, there will be social, hence political, wholeness. Clearly, however, salvation, as offered in Jesus Christ, cannot be reduced to the political realm. If it were, many people who live and die under political oppression would have to forfeit any hope of salvation. Instead, salvation transcends the political, to meet the deepest needs of humanity.

Jesus is "found alone" (9:36). He stands apart from Moses and Elijah. He is thoroughly unique in salvation history. He not only predicts salvation, as do Moses and Elijah, but he also imparts salvation as the Son of God. Jesus mediates God's mercy to us sinners. MM

Diaconal Reflections

The disciples fall asleep. (How typical of them!) And as they slumber, Jesus is transfigured. A glorious spectacle—a sound-and-light show Disney would envy, including guest appearances by two prominent personalities from the Hebrew Scriptures. Even tired disciples cannot sleep through all that.

Dazzled, Peter has a great idea: a three-part building program. (As Luke charitably says, Peter speaks "not knowing what he said.")

So it is with all spiritual highs. They tempt one to linger, to stay with the mountaintop experience. Impressed and awed—and perhaps not so comfortable with Jesus' prediction, a few verses before this text begins, that great suffering lies ahead—the disciples prefer a monument of their own devising to the motion of discipleship.

And that, of course, is a temptation not limited to the trio on Mount Transfiguration. Most of us would rather be on the heights as builders (or at least as watchers of builders) than at the depths as pilgrims. We'd rather not be Moses, thank you. To be sure, his pilgrimage had its great and exciting moments, even mountaintop experiences with the Almighty. But most of it was wilderness and wandering—year after trying year, 40 in all.

At the end, of course, he got a glimpse of the promised land, for he went up a mountain. But that mountain wasn't the promised land, and he died with only that glimpse of it.

We, too, have a glimpse of the promise—"the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." And however brief or dim that glance now, it is, nonetheless, light enough for us to come down from the dazzling mountain to join Paul and his colleagues in the dark trenches, as slaves of others "for Jesus' sake." TD

The December 1994 issue of Currents *will carry Preaching Helps for the season of Lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday, March 1, 1995.*

The Costly Legacy of Distrust

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This is written in the days following the five-part retrospective on Watergate, marking the 20th anniversary of President Nixon's resignation from office. Senior Commentator Daniel Schorr, who served as narrator, closed with the observation that we still live with a costly legacy of distrust, stemming in large part from Watergate. And he wondered, as do many of us, how long we are to be burdened by that legacy. Since then, public officials have been put under a different sort of scrutiny than before, motives have been more suspect, people are less willing to grant their leaders the benefit of the doubt.

Human nature being what it is, there are enough new illustrations of misconduct to fuel continuing distrust. But something destructive happens when the failures of some become the occasion for the distrust of all who seek to lead. All sorts of other agendas are conveniently subsumed under the one about keeping close watch on our leaders. Sectional interests, generational rivalries, gender biases, political prejudices—all of these and more are able to assert themselves in exaggerated form because of our propensity to believe the worst about each other and about those whom we have called to lead.

As members of American society, we need to be concerned about this continuing distrust. Our national ability to make enlightened decisions is hampered and our problems are allowed to multiply at a time when we should be addressing issues and solving problems. Instead of solutions, we too often get cynicism, smart remarks, and clever distractions. There is a high penalty for postponing action on pressing matters—they can grow until they threaten the very fabric of society.

Many have observed how this American distrust of political institutions and leaders has spilled over into other arenas of our life together. All sorts of institutions become embattled and their leaders have to defend themselves. It happens in education, in the professions, and in the church. In *Habits of the Heart* the authors report about the ways Americans have interiorized their lives, withdrawing (or at least withdrawing their support) from the political, social, and cultural institutions that gave meaning to life for prior generations. We've given credence to the assumption that life

can be lived as a private matter. Institutions become options, each judged by what it can offer the individual.

As members of the institutional church we need to be concerned with this systematic demeaning of institutions. It has always been easy for American churches to buy into an in individualistic understanding of Christian faith. It has been easy to locate the church only in local congregations and then to let local congregations become gatherings of the like-minded, rather than expressions of the body of Christ and outposts for the gospel. Now we pay for that acquiescence as Americans become blatant consumers of rewarding religion rather than disciples of Jesus. We need to recall ourselves and each other to a passionate commitment to the church—not just to an "invisible" one which can too easily be used to judge the visible one, but to that very visible one.

In some ways, the dilemma for the church is similar to the dilemma for the larger American society: How do we rediscover the importance of institutions for our lives and then reembrace our institutions and shape them for service? Daniel Schorr's lament speaks to the whole range of institutional distrust: How long are we to be burdened by this costly legacy of distrust?

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