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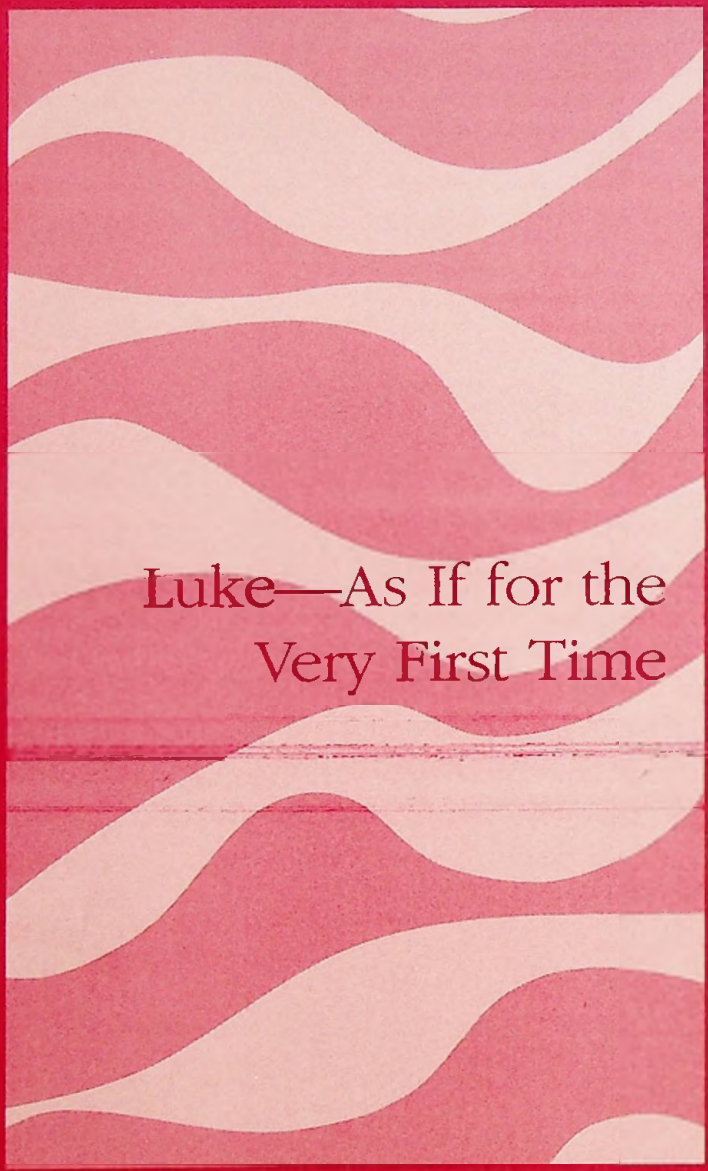

Luke—As If for the Very First Time

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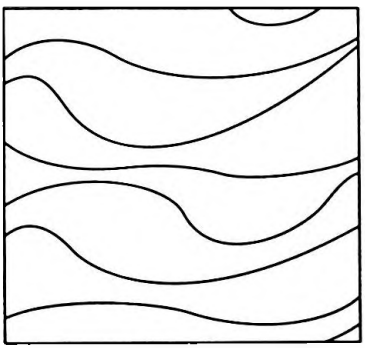

Preaching Helps 459

Luke—As If for the Very First Time

From Luke 21:25-36 on the First Sunday of Advent to Luke 1:68-79 on the Sunday of the Reign of Christ (Christ the King), preachers who follow the Revised Common Lectionary are about to reintroduce themselves and their hearers to the Gospel of Luke and the theology of Luke-Acts. A recent book by Marcus Borg invites us to meet Jesus as if for the first time, and as I read the five essays on Luke in this issue I often felt like I was meeting Luke anew, if not exactly for the first time. The February issue will provide three additional essays on Luke by names familiar to and therefore keenly expected by our readers: James L. Bailey, Frederick W. Danker, and Richard A. Jensen.

Sarah Henrich notes that interpreters of Luke's gospel must operate in at least two contexts in addition to their own: the narrative world of the evangelist and the historical world in which the narrator and audience participated. Luke is a narrative presented in an orderly fashion and so attention to plot is important. Scripture teaches, according to Luke, that trust in the God of the Jews is now lived out through Jesus. Luke uses Scripture, our Old Testament, to interpret what God is up to and who both Jesus and God are. The evangelist knew history that had not occurred in Jesus' day. Luke's context was more tumultuous and polemical than that of the Galilean Jesus. Luke was interested in possessions, how one gets them, how one uses them, and how they shape one's fundamental relationships. God is the primary benefactor in the patronage system and God's subjects are to treat one another without thought for acquiring clients or setting obligations. At the same time, Luke uses terms descriptive of friendship in ways that undercut the patronage model.

Robert L. Brawley asks, Did Luke write off the Jews? He believes that at the end of Luke-Acts the stance of Jewish people with respect to the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah is open-ended. At the beginning of the two-volume work, Gabriel predicted that John would turn many children of Israel to their God while Simeon predicted a division in Israel over Jesus. Thus he reiterates Gabriel's prediction and qualifies it. The theme of a division in Israel over Jesus continues in Luke' s account of Paul's ministry. The prophecy at the end of Acts is not a final verdict on the Jews for Paul still has a measure of success among Jewish people. If Luke-Acts leaves a gap because it does not explicitly

resolve the question of the hardening of some Jewish people, and if it is left to readers to fill in the gap, then the final ethical issue is not whether Luke-Acts betrays a pejorative view of the Jews or not, but how we the readers of Luke-Acts see things.

For **David L. Tiede** the pluralism of the present time recalls the historical crucible in which Luke' gospel was forged. While Luke's narrative comprises almost a third of the New Testament, readers sense that the story is still unfinished at the end of Acts. Luke' narrative structure holds diverse materials together so that the individual pieces gather new meaning in the truth of the whole. The historical sweep of the narrative resists temptations to confine the story in the church's liturgical year or to domesticate the canon in the weekly bulletin excerpts. In Luke-Acts the cross is a theodicy, pressing the question of the meaning of history, and proclaiming God's will and purpose in human history will provoke the principalities and powers. Finally, the conviction that God has a story gives hope to the post modern world with its fears that there is no one out there but us. The rediscovery of Luke's Jewish identity matters for those sent to preach because the theological wealth of Luke's narrative is drawn from Israel's story and because the truth worth telling is that what God promised to our ancestors has been fulfilled for us their children by God's raising Jesus. It is not possible to understand what is happening at Easter until the resurrection of the Messiah is grasped as God's act of self-vindication.

Barbara Reid focuses on the parables in Luke, twenty-three of which appear in the lectionary, and provides a number of clues for their interpretation. In the parable of the woman mixing dough, for example, it is important to know that in every instance in which leaven occurs in Scripture, it represents evil or corruption. The startling message of this parable is that the reign of God is like a batch of dough that has been permeated by corruptive yeast. God's realm thoroughly incorporates persons who would have been considered corrupt, unclean, or sinners. But this meaning has quite different consequences for those who are on the fringes, or who are privileged, who are Gentile Christians or Jewish Christians. The parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) has been seen as a ludicrous picture of a powerful judge cowering before a helpless widow, or a suggestion that if you badger God long enough you will get what you want. But perhaps the widow is portraying something of how God acts. Like God, who champions the cause of the poor, she persistently confronts the judge with her request for justice. The widow shows us that godly power is revealed in vulnerability, just as God's power is experienced in the crucified Christ. Finally, this parable shows godliness in female form. God is like a woman hiding leaven in bread dough or a woman searching for a lost coin. The entry of women into ministries traditionally reserved

for males is not the ruination of the "unleavened bread," but the fermentation that causes the whole loaf to rise. One thing is certain: parables told well never evoke a neutral response.

Turid Karlsen Seim observes that the story of Jesus is brought to an apparent end by his disappearance into heaven at the end of the Gospel, but continued in Acts through the Holy Spirit poured out by Jesus on his disciples from his exalted place. In Luke *Jesus and his words* are to be remembered, but now *the words of the Scriptures* are to be opened up in his remembrance. Her glimpses of the Gospel include consideration of the genre of this book and the relationship of the author to the Roman authorities, to Judaism, and to the Hebrew Scriptures. Preachers this year will have to wrestle with what ascetic discipline might mean in twenty-first century North America, but also with the good news that well-being is achieved not by personal discipline, but by divine intervention. Is Luke to be praised for including more traditions about women and giving them a rare visibility, or was his strategy to silence and subordinate them? Luke does not suggest that servants should rule, but that leaders should be like those who serve. Jesus insists on an inclusive practice, where hospitality is offered without an expectation of a return from those who are invited.

Carol Gilbertson uses scenes from Hamlet and the Greek play Agamemnon and from the parable of the ten maidens to explore the possible meaning of "watching" as our stance in Advent . Are we watchers like men ready to pull a spear or gun, or like women with full lamps waiting for the bridegroom to arrive? Or is "pregnancy," particularly of the Marian kind—achieved by listening to words—a better metaphor for Advent waiting? Pregnancy is active waiting, with a certainty that something will happen. A host of women in the Bible were watchful in their serenity, pregnant with hope and open to God's unpredictable, mysterious coming. The author recalls her family's pregnant watch at her father's death bed: serene in their sense of God's closeness and of their father's good-news faith. We are to be watchful in Advent, pregnant with a mystery we, always alert and serene, must continue to tell, a mystery for which we must continue to find words that conceive births.

One of our essayists suggests we read Luke-Acts in one sitting in one afternoon—it might be interesting to do this before reading *Currents*—and then to do it again afterwards. One goal of our three-year lectionary is to undo some of the mischief of Tatian's *Diatessaron*. Tatian produced the first influential harmony of the gospels in the second century by removing duplications, reconciling contradictions, and integrating slightly differing parallel passages. Today we rejoice in the specificity and uniqueness of Luke's take on the gospel. And the ongoing mission of *Currents,* as we complete our twenty-

seventh year, is to encourage, support, and deepen the preparation of our readers for their work of ministry, living out the year of Luke—as if for the very first time.

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

P.S. One of our authors (Paul J. Nuechterlein, "The Work of René Girard as a New Key to Biblical Hermeneutics," *Currents* 26 [1999] 196–209) has established a web site with Girardian tips on the lessons of the lectionary. Check it out: *http://www.execpc.com/~paulnue/*

NOTICE

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago seeks candidates in Old Testament to replace Professor Walter Michel, who is retiring. LSTC strives to live up to the promise of its urban, ecumenical, and university-related context. Candidates should apply to Ralph W. Klein, Chair of the Old Testament Search Committee, 1100 E. 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615.

Please include the following:

* A curriculum vitae
* A two- to three-page statement by you that addresses two issues: the role of the Old Testament as a resource for the life and ministry of the church; the gifts you bring as a teacher in this seminary context
* Names of two or three references (or the packet of references on file at the institution that granted your degree should be forwarded to us)

narrative events occur or words are said has significance for understanding. The plot of Luke (and Acts) literally thickens. The perceptions and behaviors of all the characters change as things move along and pile up.

To interpret Luke-Acts in accord with the evangelist's own clues, then, leads us to watch plot before pericope. We cannot, for example, understand the Pharisees in relation to Jesus in the same way from beginning to end. More important, the story of God's action unfolds in the world before Jesus, at the time of Jesus, through the events of Jesus' life, and in a world where Jesus is no longer an earthly presence.[8] Understanding of Scripture changes.[9] Luke's narrative makes its point in part by attending to the order of events, that all this happens in a way that makes sense because it comes from God's own plan.[10]

To speak of order and God's plan raises questions of where in this cosmic and universal drama Luke's Gospel itself stands. This question can be answered in two ways, bearing out the interplay of narrative world and "real" world. First, the evangelist writes as things continue to unfold "among us" (Luke 1:1 and Acts 1:1–8 as a setup for ongoing activity). The reader/hearer is in the midst of God's unfolding story. Secondly, it is generally agreed that the Gospel is written after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Roman war in Palestine, that is, after 70 C.E. The shadow of that destruction lies over the Gospel and Acts, raising all kinds of questions. Among them, as Johnson so eloquently writes, is the question of God's trustworthiness.[11] Does God keep promises or break them on whim? Additional questions include connection to Jews; whether and how to interpret Jewish Scripture; and the probability, timing, and style of Jesus' second coming. Luke's Gospel is an apology that claims right and proper connection to the God worshipped by the Jews while at the same time disavowing most of the behaviors associated with Jewishness that pagans found unintelligible. It is an argument made in complex historical circumstances about reading Scripture.[12] Scripture teaches, according to Luke, that trust in the God of the Jews is now lived out through Jesus. Of the utmost theological importance is this reimagining of the way God has always been working.

Acts as context. To speak of order is also to raise up the importance of the Acts of the Apostles as a companion volume to Luke's Gospel. While there is still disagreement about the genre of Acts, there is little disagreement that the same person wrote both Luke and Acts. This connection, to which the prologues of each book offer the best witness (see Lk 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2), is important to interpreters. It has been said that Acts is the first commentary on Luke's

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[7] I do not develop here all those qualities of Luke's Gospel that contribute to good interpretation. That the Gospel was primarily heard rather than read, given ancient literacy rates and the probable composition of early communities of believers, is important to keep in mind when working on themes and rhetorical style.

[8] He does continue to pour out the Holy Spirit from on high (Acts 2:33).

[9] Consider the very important example of Peter's need to radically reinterpret Scripture in Acts 10, where the Levitical codes about eating, given in Scripture as God's own words through Moses, are undone.

[10] Note the importance of order again in Acts 11:4. See also Acts 3:24, and for in-order applied to geographic movement see Luke 8:1 and 18:23.

[11] Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 219.

[12] See Acts 3:17–26 for Peter's description of theological events and timing as they shape human history.

Gospel. Given Luke's commitment to an order in which prophecy is fulfilled,[13] theological continuity is to be expected. He must deal with the question of how the kingdom of God is expressed "among us" if Jesus has not returned and the Jews reject his messiahship. Luke shows such continuity, for example, by moving from Simeon's prophecy from Isaiah (Lk 2:29–35) to Jesus' prediction that his own message would be heard by Gentiles (Lk 4:24–27) to the event of Lk 7:1–10 where Jesus does not enter a Gentile house, through to Peter's entrance in Acts 10.

Reading Acts as a commentary on Luke's Gospel is an important method of interpretation. Often all that is required to start is a concordance search. If one were to look up Pharisees and find traces of them in Acts, one would find that many Pharisees did in fact become believers. Luke offers no monolithic "other" to demonize. One of Luke's salient qualities is an ability to keep an audience off balance. That is, there is no simple, straightforward recipe for being a disciple. Such activity is always contextual.[14] Even when one story, the Good Samaritan, for instance, may suggest *a* way, the very next section presents the story of Martha and Mary. In their story, sitting in studious attention rather than serving is held up as a model.

Scripture[15] *as context.* It is no stretch to say that Luke's interest in the orderly unfolding of God's plan includes abundant reliance on Scripture. There is an "aha!" quality in Luke's work, a sense of "now I've got it."[16] This stems from Luke's use of Scripture (again, our Old Testament) to interpret what God is up to and who, in a word, both Jesus and God are. Two clear "aha!" moments for the characters within the narrative show up in Acts 3:24–26 and 15:16–18. In each of these episodes the speaker (Peter and James respectively) identifies a prophecy from the Septuagint that not only explains present circumstances but also has serious implications for future conduct. We dare to understand what God is doing because we can trust that God foretold what God's purposes were. It is only now that we fully understand them. The scriptural verses gathered up in the Canticles of Mary and Zechariah (Lk 1:45–

One of Luke's salient qualities is an ability to keep an audience off balance.

[13] The fulfillment of prophecy works on both a literary level and, as Luke has it, on a historical level as well. Thus, within the text, at times within a given story, prophecy is spoken and fulfilled, enhancing the credibility of characters. This kind of fulfillment also arches over the long story of God and God's people, not least as it appears in Luke's two volumes. On this structural principle of Luke's, see Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 221–22.

[14] Note John's very particular words about discipleship in 3:8–14 fulfilled in Zacchaeus. Note also the distinction between the rich ruler in Lk 18:18–23 and Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10). Note also the difference between Barnabas (Acts 4:36) praised for sale of his field and the retention of a house by John Mark's mother in Acts 12:12–14.

[15] Scripture in all cases refers to the Septuagint, commonly abbreviated LXX. This was the Old Testament that Luke and other New Testament writers used.

[16] Consider Peter's sense in Acts 10:28.

55, 67–79) recall the promises of God by which Mary and Zechariah understand the words of Gabriel and imagine the future.

These promissory words of God in the Canticles also serve to identify the character of God and of God's Messiah. The connection of the kingdom to the well-being of God's people, whom no overlords will any longer oppress, is echoed over and over throughout the gospels. Jesus speaks of freedom from various oppressors in Lk 4:18–19 and again in the Sermon on the Plain in 6:20–38. Luke also speaks openly and often about the response of God's people to these pronouncements and promises. There is a life in the kingdom for disciples that corresponds to who the kingdom's Lord is. Luke does not miss a beat in his Gospel or in Acts as he indicates what God is doing and how one might best live in accord with God's activity, the more fully to experience that famous "messianic joy" of Luke's Gospel.[17] Stories from Scripture illustrate the continuity between the work of God in the history of Israel and the work of Jesus among the Jews in his own day. The sequence of Jesus' speech in Nazareth where he speaks of God turning to non-Jews in 4:25–27 is followed by his similar behavior in 7:1–15.

Luke Johnson suggests that a typology of Jesus and Moses provides a continuity that structures the gospels and Acts. In brief, the typology depends on Stephen's description in Acts 7 of how Moses was received and the purposes of his coming (we might also consider Luke 1:73 again here next to Exodus 5:1; 7:16). It is the pattern of being sent and being rejected, returning and offering another chance for deliverance that Johnson sees as important. Whether or not Luke had this typology fully in mind as he worked, it is one that provides useful insights on both the work Jesus was to do (liberation from evil oppressors who do the devil's work) and the work of disciples who continue to commit themselves to the pardon and liberation of God's people, now extended to include Gentiles.[18]

Finally, Scripture is sometimes a context to be refuted—or at least interpreted in very unexpected ways. In Acts 1:6, the disciples cite deeply held beliefs that stem directly from the restoration of and to Jerusalem promised in much of Scripture. This concept of restoration is a particularly poignant problem for Luke and Matthew, given that Jerusalem lies in ruins when they write. The disciples are surprised to learn that Jerusalem is the center *from which* they will go out to proclaim what God is up to. God can act differently than people have understood and believed. This is not always the source of negative comment on people's belief and devotion; rather it is an invitation to imagine and trust another way of interpreting Scripture and life. This theme, developed through the Gospel and Acts, could hardly be more timely.

The question of Jerusalem as the organizing center of Luke's Gospel and Acts read together suggests to us the importance of geography in Luke. How do we "read" it? Geography is both part of the narrative world and part of a real historical world. Let's move to consideration of that larger world of Luke's hearers and begin to consider what some of their assumptions might be as they hear geographical descriptions as well as other things.

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[17] On "joy" as a characteristic of Luke's Gospel, see Lk 1:14, 44, 47; 10:21; 24:52; Acts 2:26, 46; 16:34, just for starters. Note that these verses mark the beginning and ending of the Gospel and Acts, thus providing a frame around both these narratives.

[18] For a fuller development of this very interesting and fruitful connection, see Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 222–25.

The contexts of Luke's hearers

Luke's social world as context. One of the ways in which the social and narrative worlds of any text overlap is in the chunks of language that are commonly used to refer to specific topics in real life. These *topoi*, or commonplaces, evoke for those who know them, all sorts of connections that those not in the know miss completely. We know this, of course, from the highly specialized frames of reference that prevail among groups in our own time, groups defined by age or job, avocation, or even geographical location.[19] In the ancient world many collections of speech patterns were public property because of the importance of the oral culture and the rhetoric that supported it. This support of cultural "realities" by rhetoric was the more powerful in the first century because of the widespread Hellenization of the Mediterranean world. This Hellenization did not fully define but did indeed shape all the cultures around the Mediterranean basin, including Judaism. One cannot read Luke-Acts without attention to these defining cultural realities as understood in the time of the Roman Empire.

Every New Testament interpreter must remember that for the ancients, particularly but not only Jews, theological and political (i.e. geographical) realities were bound together. The exact nature of these connections in the first century is, however, not clear. "There is no real agreement at this point on the context of Jesus' mission and message, let alone the mission and message itself."[20] Some scholars hold, on the basis of newer research, that Galilee was a highly troubled area, filled with very oppressed peasantry. This oppression came about mostly through taxation but also because of the lack of respect for Jews held by the ruling aristocracies and bureaucracies, a coalition that included Jewish leaders. Galilee was home to peasants who sought opportunity to rebel, often in the conviction that God was doing a new thing and bringing in a just kingdom as long promised. Jesus operated as a leader in this context. Paula Fredriksen offers a more nuanced reading of historical material. Her work suggests that the time of Jesus and the time of Luke were two different times indeed.[21] Galilee was fairly quiet and relatively prosperous in the time of Jesus himself, organized around village life, primarily Jewish and agricultural.

She carefully distinguishes Galilee in the time of Jesus from Judea at the same time and Galilee at a later time. The complexities of who ruled what and what religious behavior was required or accepted was a more tumultuous reality in Judea and later in Galilee. Luke's Gospel and Acts come from a later period, after the various rebellions took place that led to the finale of the "Jewish war" in 70. When interpreting Luke's Gospel it is important to remember that the evangelist knew a history that had not occurred in Jesus' day. Luke's context was more tumultuous and polemical than that of the Galilean Jesus.

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[19] One clear and noncontroversial example of this difference is suggested by Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 97. He talks about the difference between the way a Chinese and an American child would ask about the process of reproduction. For the American, the question is phrased in terms of how we "make" a baby. For the Chinese, the question is asked, "How does a baby grow?"

[20] Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 155–65, 173–84.

[21] Fredriksen, 165–73, 173–84.

When interpreting Luke's Gospel it is important to remember that the evangelist knew a history that had not occurred in Jesus' day.

Such careful distinctions also need to be made in terms of our understanding of the religious life of first-century Jews. While small proportions of the Jewish population fell into somewhat distinct religious groups, most Jews were not so defined. Many Jews were fractious[22] but not sectarian or denominational, and for the people of the first century, including Jesus, the idea of religion meant concern with sacrifice and purity almost universally.[23] She finds no evidence that Jesus set himself against the whole sacrificial and purification system of Judaism based on the writings of Luke, Paul, and John. It is very important that interpreters *not* understand Jesus in some anachronistic, anti-Jewish, spiritual way that disavows his entire tradition. Rather Luke's Jesus and his arguments are at home within a Jewish context of critical prophecy and differing interpretations of Scripture. What Luke has selected for our attention is also at home within the real first-century world in other ways as well.

Luke was interested in possessions: how one gets them, how one uses them, how they shape one's fundamental relationships. In Luke's Gospel the use of possessions is a theological matter. Possessions in Luke's first-century Mediterranean culture are part of a complex system that includes two important conceptual and linguistic systems: patronage and honor/shame. Both of these are a common part of the world in which Jesus and Luke lived. Patronage, taken from the Latin word for father, has to do with the system based on unequal power between individuals (or cities, or city and empire), where someone (a benefactor) is able to bestow what is needed on someone who has no other access to it. The patron or benefactor receives in exchange for whatever goods (including protection) are granted an obliged client who is called upon to be loyal and support the benefactor. The Roman world was organized in this way. This kind of organization consisted of a web of personal relationships all the way up to the emperor, who was the prime benefactor of his subjects. Gifts, invitations, and public recognition were part and parcel of this set of relationships that defined everything from marriage to diplomacy. One finds insights in this patronage model for interpretation of the story of the centurion (Lk 7:1–10), Zacchaeus (19:1–10), the steward of unrighteousness (16:1–13), and the Banquet parable (especially 14:12–14).

One also finds insight in the patronage model for thinking about God as the primary benefactor in a different kingdom, founded on a very different ethic for which Jesus "makes friends." The radicality of

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[22] For reasons well laid out by Fredriksen, 62.

[23] Fredriksen, 52–73. See also Stanley K. Stower, "Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of Greek Religion," in *The Social World of the First Christians*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 293–333.

this central ethic of God's kingdom—where God is the benefactor and God's subjects are to treat one another without thought for acquiring clients, setting obligations, and establishing public value—is missed when one does not realize the pervasiveness of patronage as "the way things are."

Along with patronage the honor/shame model shows us the most important goals (to approach or to avoid) in the ancient world. Honor publicly recognized was the great good of ancient life; shame, its horrifying opposite. In the hierarchical world of patronage and obligations owed, honor had to be maintained in carefully nuanced responses to those in higher and lower positions. The best work on this shows us how loss of face, that is, loss of honor, is at the heart of the human stories that Jesus tells and, perhaps, at the heart of his own story about God. Because this is a different dynamic from the ones primarily at work in our own culture, an interpreter needs to be attentive to the role it plays in Luke's work and then to what contemporary ethos stands in equal need of address. For both the honor/shame model and the importance of patronage see Joel Green's commentary and the fine book edited by Jerome Neyrey.[24]

Alongside patronage as a *topos* of major importance in the New Testament is the use of friendship language. As friendship was spoken of in the ancient world it both served and undercut the patronage system. Friendship served the system by providing an honorable alternative designation for those being patronized whose honor or face needed to be saved. Friends were understood as equals. They supported each other through thick and thin. To be called a friend was a title of honor, not of emotion. (Think of our *amicus curiae*, or friend of the court, as a formal designation today.) But Luke uses the titles and terms descriptive of friendship activities to describe the early Christian communities in ways that pick up the equality and care emphases and undercut the patronage model. This very important motif is being uncovered in studies of the ancient world and in the New Testament. Johnson, among others, is alert to it in his Luke and Acts commentaries.

Ancient friendship, like ancient marriage or ancient purity and uncleanness, is not like modern friendship, marriage, or uncleanness. Nor is ancient religion like modern religion, which is generally more separable from other areas of life, a matter of spiritual adherence, usually self-chosen, and seldom geographically bound. The kind of historical work that has been done helps us differentiate ourselves from our first-century forebears, the more clearly to be able to hear Jesus' summons as it would have called them to reshape their lives and worlds. Hand in hand with careful literary work and attention to other early Christian writings as part of the context of the development and interpretation of the life, death, resurrection, and promise of Jesus of Nazareth, we are aided in hearing our forebears' best interpretations of God's historically given calling to us, the better to sort it out for our own time and place.

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[24] *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1991). See especially pages 25–66 on honor and shame, 241–70 on patronage. See also Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 202–3, 269–75. A good example of the importance of the honor/shame ethos can be found in David Landry and Ben May, "Honor Restored: New Light on the Parable of the Prudent Steward (Luke 16:1-8a)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119:2 (Summer 2000): 287–309.

Luke-Acts: Selected resources

The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting. Six volumes. Bruce Winter, series editor. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995 and following. This excellent series of essays by well-known scholars from a variety of disciplines is a treasure chest of fascinating and useful information for anyone working in Luke-Acts.

Danker, Frederick W. *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field*. St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1982. Out of print, but an excellent source for seeing how "benefaction" worked.

Fredriksen, Paula. *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999. A very carefully thought-through work of interpretation of newer historical evidence.

Garrett, Susan B. *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989. An excellent example of working of the narrative world, the larger social world, and the world of other literature in Luke.

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Ethical Borderlines between Rejection and Hope: Interpreting the Jews in Luke-Acts

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In a relatively close analogy to the so-called Nazi "solution for the Jewish problem," some prominent German interpreters of Luke-Acts in the twentieth century contended that in the first century Luke gave up on the Jews. According to these interpreters, Luke wrote at a time when most Jews had refused to accept the proclamation about Jesus, and the church had become predominantly gentile. This interpretation has gained adherents outside Germany with strong proponents also in the United States. One of the keys to this construct is the ending of Acts, where the Jews allegedly reject the gospel and come under the harsh judgment of a quotation from Isaiah 6: "For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes . . ." (Acts 28:27). According to this view, the quotation from Isaiah announces the hardening of Jewish hearts, and the Lucan Paul announces that the gospel is passing from Israel to Gentiles. This would mean, consequently, that Luke wrote off the Jews.

In an earlier issue of this journal, Robert Tannehill called attention to the ethical responsibility that readers have with respect to the way they fill in gaps.[1] With the provocative question "Should we love Simon the Pharisee?" Tannehill notes that the encounter between Jesus and Simon in Luke 7:36–50 is open-ended. Readers could assume that Simon remains suspicious about Jesus and judgmental toward the woman who was a notorious sinner. On the other hand, they could assume that Jesus was persuasive. Was Jesus able to convince people like Simon to change? How readers answer such questions is a matter of ethical responsibility. Is it ethical to vilify either the author or characters beyond what the literature itself expresses?

I wish to follow a similar line of thought with respect to the Jews in Luke-Acts. I suggest that at the end of Luke-Acts the stance of Jewish people with respect to the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah is open-ended. Accordingly, this article follows the development of the motif of the acceptance and rejection of Jesus and of the

[1] R. Tannehill, "Should We Love Simon the Pharisee? Hermeneutical Reflections on the Pharisees in Luke," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 21 (December 1994): 424–33.

proclamation of him by preachers in Acts. It also examines anew the ending of Acts in light of this thematic development. It then raises the question of how the literary picture in Luke-Acts fits the thesis that by Luke's time the gospel was a failure among Jews but a success among Gentiles. Finally, I make some suggestions about how social location has a bearing on interpretation and about how this is an issue in the ethics of reading.

Development of themes of acceptance and rejection

According to Gabriel's proleptic prophecy in Luke 1:16, John the Baptist is destined to be an agent in turning many of the *children of Israel* to God in preparation for the ministry of Jesus. So Gabriel anticipates not the failure of Jesus among Jews but his success. What Gabriel has to say in Luke 1 was hardly problematic for Hans Conzelmann. According to him, the birth and infancy narratives represented independent traditions that were likely tacked onto the beginning of the Gospel without genuine literary connections with what follows.[2]

But the development throughout Luke-Acts of themes introduced in the first two chapters can hardly be denied—God's promise to give Jesus the throne of his ancestor David (1:32–33), Mary's anticipation of the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham (1:55), Zechariah's prophecy of a savior for Israel (1:69), the angel's confirmation of the same by their announcement to the shepherds (2:11), and Simeon's prediction of a division in Israel over Jesus (2:34).[3] The thematic coherence of Luke 1–2 with the ensuing narrative means that the birth and infancy narratives form a literary whole with the rest of Luke-Acts, Conzelmann notwithstanding.

What then becomes of Gabriel's prediction that John the Baptist would turn the hearts of many of the children of Israel to their God? Is it possible that Gabriel's prediction of the turning of many Israelites to God anticipates a story beyond the end of Acts, a story yet in the future of the author of the two-volume work? Or can unbelief and infidelity thwart divine promises of success and turn God's promises into ironic tragedy? Is the success among Jews in the ministry of Jesus and the early church eclipsed by Jewish refusal to believe?[4] Or is there something inadequate with the theory that Acts ends with the Jewish rejection of Jesus?

Gabriel's prediction of the turning of many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God appears to be simple. But the thematic development soon takes on complications. Simeon's prediction of the falling and rising of many in Israel (Luke 2:34) partially reiterates Gabriel's prediction but also qualifies it. Not only will Jesus' ministry produce success, it will also encounter

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[2] Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), esp. 118, 172.

[3] On the coherence of the body of Luke with the first two chapters see P. Minear, "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. Keck and J. Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 111–30; R. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986–90), 1:1–9; U. Busse, "Das 'Evangelium' des Lukas: Die Funktion der Vorgeschichte im lukanischen Doppelwerk," *Der Treue Gottes trauen; Beiträge zum Werk des Lukas: FS Gerhard Schneider*, ed. C. Bussmann and W. Radl (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 169–79; B. Kahl, "Lukas gegen Lukas lesen," *Bibel und Kirche* 50 (1995): 222–29.

[4] All of these solutions are proposed in separate essays by D. Tiede, R. Tannehill, and J. Tyson in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, ed. J. Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).

opposition. From Simeon's point of view, Israel's verdict on the ministry of Jesus will be a split decision.

At the beginning of the story of John the Baptist, Mark cites Isa 40:3: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Matthew and Luke quote the same text. But Luke does not stop where the other two do. He continues to read from Isaiah: "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." This reiterates Simeon's words in Luke 2:30–32: ". . . for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel," which are themselves an echo of Isa 49:6. Luke is, therefore, building a theme of the universal significance of Jesus' ministry. But especially in these allusions to Isaiah, readers most assuredly expect Israel to be a part of "all flesh" and "all peoples."

John the Baptist is not finished, however. He himself also outlines Jesus' task among the descendants of Abraham to be one of sifting and gathering "wheat into his granary" (Luke 3:17). So John is reiterating Simeon's second point to the effect that Jesus will produce a division among many in Israel. At the outset of Jesus' ministry, readers receive their first impressions of such a division. A brief narrator's summary informs readers that "everyone" praises Jesus when he preaches in the synagogues of Galilee (4:14–15). In stark contrast to this brief summary, readers then encounter a dramatic scene of the rejection of Jesus in his hometown (4:16–30).

Many interpreters take the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth to be a foretaste of Israel's rejection of Jesus, and reciprocally the rejection of Israel by Luke. Indeed, Jesus draws a certain kind of parallel between himself and Elijah and Elisha, who in their ministries turned to Gentiles rather than to their own people (Luke 4:24–27). Three pieces of evidence, however, speak against the notion that Jesus is claiming a parallel for his *ministry*. (1) The point Jesus wishes to score is that a *prophet* is not accepted in his own homeland. Elijah and Elisha, prototypical prophets, prove that point. (2) Luke gives no account of a *ministry* of Jesus among Gentiles that would parallel the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. (3) There is no warrant in the text to take the people of Nazareth as representatives of all Israel. Readers, however, cannot help but be struck by the dramatic, caustic rejection of Jesus by the people of his hometown.

But the drama shifts immediately back to the other side of division anticipated by Simeon. In the very next incident in Capernaum Jesus amazes people with his teaching in the synagogue and with his power to cast out a demon (Luke 4:32–37). By the end of the chapter, the response to Jesus' ministry is enormous. "All" who have any who are sick bring them to Jesus, and crowds seek him (4:40–42). After Jesus cures a leper in 5:13–15, more than ever crowds come to him. The press of the crowds is so great in 5:18–26 that men carrying a paralyzed man cannot get close to Jesus except by lowering him through the roof of a house. When Jesus preaches the sermon on the plain, there is a "great crowd" of disciples and a "great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" (6:17). Something of the split decision is reflected, however, in controversies that some stereotyped scribes and Pharisees have with Jesus (5:21, 30; 6:1–11).

The theme of Jesus' sifting and gathering a people for God is continued in the following chapters. When Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain, a large crowd proclaims him a great prophet of God (7:16). But by the end of the chapter some stereo-

typed Pharisees and lawyers are characterized as having already rejected God's purposes for them in John's baptism (7:30). On the other hand, Simon the Pharisee is congenial enough to host Jesus at a dinner in his home (7:36–50). To be sure, Jesus and Simon have entirely different perspectives toward a woman who is a notorious sinner. But as I indicate above in concert with Tannehill, perhaps Jesus persuades Simon to share his perspective.

An allegory interprets the parable of the sower in Luke 8 in terms of a mixed response to the "sowing" of the word of God. But the parable is essentially optimistic in that in spite of cases of failure, the sowing produces a hundredfold yield (8:8). Crowds are attracted to Jesus in 9:11, 37. The mission of the twelve meets with success (9:6, 10). So does the mission of the seventy (10:17). By 12:1, the number in the crowd is "myriads," literally "tens of thousands." When Jesus heals the woman bent double, the entire crowd rejoices at all the wonderful things he is doing (13:17). On the other hand, Jesus anticipates some who will "be ashamed" of him (9:26), others who will lack the commitment to follow (9:57–62), and some who will not welcome the mission of the seventy (10:10–12). Some accuse Jesus of being in league with the ruler of demons (11:15). Jesus anticipates opposition to his followers from some synagogues (12:11; 21:12).

The parable of the wicked tenants in Luke 20:9–19 also manifests the split decision in Israel. The vineyard is stock imagery for Israel. Significantly, against the destiny of the vineyard in Isaiah 5, in Luke 20 it is not destroyed but given to other tenants. The supposition is that the vineyard, namely Israel, will be fruitful. But the scribes and chief priests read themselves into the parable, presumably as the tenants. Thus, the "vineyard" in the parable anticipates a positive response whereas the "tenants" anticipate a negative response.

The opposition to Jesus from the high priestly coterie (Luke 22:2) continues through the passion narrative. Though the chief priests and their allies must avoid offending the masses among whom Jesus is popular, they hold sway over those people who appear with them before Pilate (23:13). Together these people and the high priestly coalition demonstrate for the crucifixion of Jesus. Some interpreters suggest at this point that the Jewish people as such have turned against Jesus. Luke, however, is still able carefully to distinguish leaders from the people (23:35). In addition, after the crucifixion the crowds who had witnessed the miscarriage of justice beat on their breasts as a sign of grief and repentance (23:48).

But if Jewish people are split over Jesus at the end of the Gospel, the group that is gathered into his granary is pathetically meager. It is the eleven and those with them, about 120 people as we learn from Acts. If they were to represent the harvest, and if this were the end of the story, what would have become of Gabriel's prediction that John the Baptist would prepare the way for many of the people of Israel to turn unto God? With the turning this scanty, if this were the end, we would almost be compelled to conclude that unbelief can reverse God's promises.

But is this the end? Is it not rather a kind of new beginning? Pentecost marks a new period of history that Acts, in dependence upon Joel, names "the last days" (Acts 2:17). In addition, again in dependence upon Joel, Acts interprets Pentecost as the pouring out of the Spirit. Not only is the coming of the Spirit part of the prophecy that John the Baptist originally spoke in Luke 3:16; John himself is revived literarily in Acts 1:5 as the one who, in

contrast with Jesus, baptized with water. Acts does not allow readers to forget John but keeps him before them in a second flashback (10:38). Yet another flashback in 19:4 keeps the memory of John alive as the one who prepared the way for the people of Israel to believe in Jesus. Thus, when the narrative refreshes readers' memories of John, Gabriel's prediction about John's role in preparing the way for many in Israel to turn to God stays alive and well.

Acts 3:25 identifies the Jews whom Peter addresses as the children of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Peter issues them a call to "turn" (*epistrephō*, 3:19) and claims that God has sent the risen Christ to them precisely to "turn" them (*apostrepho*), close parallels to Gabriel's prediction of "turning" (*epistrephō*) in Luke 1:16 (see also Acts 9:35). Within the framework of Gabriel's prediction and the memory of John the Baptist, people who proclaim Jesus meet with remarkable success among Jewish people. Many of the people of Israel do turn to God through the proclamation of a message that interprets Jesus as God's Messiah for Israel in fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham.

Indeed the initial proclamation of the followers of Jesus generates an extraordinarily positive response. About 3,000 Jewish people are baptized and become a part of a community committed to the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:41–42). The healing of a lame man at the Temple provides a new opportunity for proclamation to the masses. Another 2,000 are added (4:4). But there are also manifestations of the division in Israel that Simeon had predicted. Sadducees and the high priestly party oppose the proclamation of followers of Jesus (4:1, 5–6). Further, they attempt to keep the movement from spreading among the people. But they accommodate their strategy in dealing with Peter and John because of the support the movement has among the people (4:21). Although it soon becomes perilous to join the new movement, "Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women" (5:14).

Gabriel's prediction about John's role in preparing the way for many in Israel to turn to God stays alive and well.

A trial of the apostles before a ruling council that is dominated by the high priestly party continues to express a division in Israel. The outcome of the trial rests largely on the advice of the highly regarded Pharisee Gamaliel (Acts 5:34–39). Gamaliel's counsel suggests from historical parallels that the movement will fail like the flash-in-the-pan incidents of Theudas and Judas. From the perspective of the actors in the story, Gamaliel's recommendation represents commonsense advice to rely upon God's providence and let things run their course. But from the retrospective point of view of the narrator and implied readers, who narrate and read after Paul arrives in Rome some thirty years later, the success of the new movement confirms Gamaliel's deduction that if it is from God, "You will not be able to overthrow them" (5:39). Gamaliel's wisdom functions positively in Acts because from the point of view of the implied readers (after Paul's arrival in Rome) the movement is already a success.

Almost immediately, therefore, two narrator's summaries indicate progressive, intensive numerical increases in Jerusalem (6:1, 7). Along with this there is opposition from "some" of the members of the Synagogue of Freedmen, elders, scribes, and members of the ruling council (6:9–12)—an altogether neat emplotment of Simeon's anticipation of a division in Israel.

From this point on the setting of Acts moves from Jerusalem to Samaria, Damascus, Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. The new settings take the focus off the Jerusalem community. Further, the movement has success among Samaritans and Gentiles. Consequently the reiterations of the growth of the Jerusalem community fade out. Nevertheless, there are Jewish disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19), and believers in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria continue to increase in number (9:31). There are also Jewish believers in Antioch, and particularly through the ministry of Barnabas, many others come to belief (11:24). The death of James in Jerusalem at the hands of Herod Agrippa I shows that not all is positive in that this pleases "the Jews" (12:30). Jewish people in a similar vein expect the execution of Peter (12:11). But on the other side of the division "the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents" (12:24).

Particularly in the ministry of Paul the theme of a division in Israel continues. Many interpreters speak of the *failure* of Paul's mission among Jews. Actually Paul's enterprise follows a rather consistent pattern of success as well as failure. Paul finds success and then opposition among Jews in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:43, 45, 50), Iconium (14:1–2), Thessalonica (17:4–5), Beroea (17:11–13), Corinth (18:2, 5–6, 8), and Ephesus (19:5, 9).

With such a focus on Paul's mission in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, it is true that the growth of the Jerusalem congregation fades into the background. But not entirely. When Paul returns to Jerusalem in Acts 21:20, James informs him "how many myriads" among the Jews have believed (literally, "how many tens of thousands"). To be sure, Paul soon encounters tempestuous opposition among Jews in Jerusalem, notably because of charges, which he considers to be false, arising from Jewish accusers from Asia Minor (21:28, 30). The riots of Jewish people in Jerusalem over Paul are one side of a division that the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah makes in Israel. But the other side is the tens of thousands who have believed.

Paul's consistent pattern of success and failure among Jewish people continues in Rome. When he meets with Jewish leaders, "Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe" (Acts 28:24). This clearly portrays a division among Jews in Rome. But this is also precisely the point where Paul relates the harsh prophecy from Isaiah 6 to his Jewish hearers. It is significant, however, that Paul quotes from the Septuagint of Isaiah 6. In contrast to the pessimism of the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint anticipates that a remnant left in the land will multiply, and the citation ends with a promise of God in the future: "And should they return, I will also restore them."[5]

What warrants do interpreters have for taking the prophecy as a final Lucan verdict on "the Jews"? In its context, it refers not to all Jewish people but first to some Jewish leaders in Rome and second only to the part of them who refuse to believe. To be sure, a related consequence of their unbelief is Paul's announcement that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles (Acts 28:28). This also represents a consistent pattern in Paul's ministry. When he encounters opposition from Jews, which ordinarily is in

tandem with success among Jews, he typically turns to Gentiles. But turning to Gentiles in the previous cases does not mean an end to Paul's mission among Jews. On the contrary, at the end of Acts Paul still has a measure of success among Jewish people. Thus, a number of pointers indicate that, as harsh as the quotation from Isaiah is, it does not mean that Luke writes off the Jews.

As a matter of fact, at the end of Acts the proclamation of Jesus still has a measure of success among Jewish leaders in Rome. Whatever may have been true in the historical world at the time when Luke wrote, in the narrative world the mission of those who proclaim Jesus as Messiah is not a failure among Jews. Although it produces a division among the people of Israel, it also meets with astonishing success.[6] At the end of Paul's mission in Asia Minor and Greece, James informs him that tens of thousands among the Jews have believed (Acts 21:20). Moreover, after this Paul persuades some of the Jewish leaders in Rome. Finally, the allusion to the Septuagint of Isaiah 6 makes room for God to heal those who turn to God.

Social location and the ethics of reading

Just as at the end of the story of Simon the Pharisee the question of his response is left open, so also at the end of Acts the response of Jewish people to the proclamation about Jesus is left open.[7] It is obviously possible for readers to fill in the ending with the conclusion that Luke-Acts rejects the Jews. But my reading above is evidence for the possibility (I would actually contend "probability") that Luke does not close the door on the Jews. I confess that my optimistic reading of an open-ended Acts may have a great deal to do with my social location. I am in no position to place the inverse of my confession on the lips of interpreters who have claimed that Luke closes the door on the Jews. But I am in a position to raise such a question for their consideration.

> Particularly in the ministry of Paul the theme of a division in Israel continues.

Social location in hermeneutical discussion today usually means locating ourselves in a Marxist class analysis. In these terms I am a Euro-American male, relatively privileged in the upper middle-class. But this is not the social location that I think has an impact on my reading of Luke-Acts. Rather, I spent my years from infancy through college and seminary in the southeastern United States. During this period I

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[5] English versions almost universally translate the future "I will also heal them" as a subjunctive. For a more detailed exegesis see R. Brawley, "The God of the Promises and the Jews in Luke-Acts," *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honor of J. Tyson*, ed. R. Thompson and T. Phillips (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 294–96.

[6] J. Jervell establishes this point in *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 44–45, 48).

[7] Recently V. Lehnert has argued persuasively for the open-ended conclusion of Acts in *Die Provokation Israels: Die paradoxe Funktion von Jes 6,9–10 bei Markus und Lukas* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999).

At the end of Acts the response of Jewish people to the proclamation about Jesus is left open.

was a part of a social order that segregated an African-American minority. Though I am grateful that my family strongly resisted racial bias, we were inevitably participants in systems that were racist. By contrast, during this entire period I knew only two Jewish people. There were two Jewish students in my high school among 1,600 students. In short, my culture had no appreciable Jewish minority against which to build a bias.

The first time I ever heard that Christians call Jews "Christ killers," I was 38 years old and living in Philadelphia. I heard this for the first time, ironically, in a lecture given by a Jewish rabbi at an interfaith retreat. Since then I have also heard it a number of times, I am sorry to say, from people who claim to have a Christian identity, including a spokesperson in the Vatican. In my environment with virtually no Jewish minority, my attitude about the death of Jesus was shaped in the fashion of the hymn, "Herzliebster Jesu": "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon you? It is my treason, Lord, that has undone you. 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied you; I crucified you." Though this is a theological interpretation rather than a historical one, we blamed ourselves rather than Jewish people for the crucifixion.

In addition, before I was in my late 30s, the term "the Jews" had no pejorative ring for me. Unfortunately, I have now heard the term used pejoratively so frequently that I ordinarily seek to avoid it. Right or wrong, it now seems to me that "the Jewish people" does not have the pejorative connotation that I sense exists in my culture with the term "the Jews."

Due at least partially to my social location in my formative years, when I read Luke-Acts and encounter *hoi Ioudaioi* (usually translated "the Jews"), I do not hear a pejorative ring from Luke.[8] Or when I read that in Thessalonica "the Jews became jealous" (Acts 17:5), I do not take the reference as stereotyping all Jewish people. I find it incredible to conclude that if some Jewish people were involved in the crucifixion of Jesus, the continuing Jewish people as a whole are to be held responsible. Again, I state that I am in no position to claim that something of the reverse is true for those who interpret Luke-Acts quite differently from me. I do, however, want to ask: Do some interpreters, in whose environment "the Jews" seems instinctively to cloak a cultural bias, surmise that the Lucan term also has a pejorative ring? In fact, there are efforts today to render the Greek with "the

[8] In my opinion none of the five uses of *hoi Ioudaioi* in Luke can be classified as pejorative. Of the 69 appearances of the term in Acts, I judge that 29 cases either are or could be associated with a point of view or actions that oppose the ideological perspective of the narrative. The vast majority of the uses in Acts are either neutral (e.g., a geographical designation) or outright positive. These statistics speak against J. Tyson's claim that *hoi Ioudaioi* characteristically refers to opponents in "The Problem of Jewish Rejection in Acts," *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, ed. J. Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 131–32.

Judeans" in order to avoid the pejorative cultural bias that exists in many English-speaking circles today.

After World War II and the Holocaust a climate of deep guilt appropriately has pervaded many Christian circles not only in Germany but throughout Christendom. Are some interpreters who are quite ready to recognize the pejorative overtones of "the Jews" in our cultures also ready to attribute the same to Luke-Acts? Are some who are ready to acknowledge their anti-Judaism and repent of it also ready to claim that Luke was anti-Jewish and to offer a vicarious repentance for Luke by renouncing an alleged anti-Judaism in Luke-Acts?[9]

On the one hand, I admire my colleagues who wish to repudiate an alleged Lucan anti-Judaism. It is indeed a courageous ethical move to disavow negative stereotyping of human beings because of their ethnicity, even (perhaps especially) if it is found in documents that Christians consider to be canonical. On the other hand, it is also a serious ethical issue to disavow readings that vilify authors and characters beyond what is true in the narrative world. I wish to value the features of the text that are a component in determining our readings. I wish also to suggest attention to our social location as an influence in the way we fill in the gaps in a text. Reading texts ethically places profound and consequential responsibilities on us with respect to how we fill in gaps. If Luke-Acts leaves a gap because it does not explicitly resolve the question of the hardening of some Jewish people, and if it is left to readers to fill in the gap, then the final ethical issue is not whether Luke-Acts betrays a pejorative view of the Jews or not, but how we the readers of Luke-Acts see things.

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[9] G. Wasserberg has a outstanding discussion that shows the anachronistic inadequacy of using the terms "anti-semitic" and "anti-Jewish" to characterize the authorial perspective on the Jewish people in Luke-Acts in *Aus Israels Mitte: Heil für die Welt. Eine narrativ-exegetische Untersuchung zur Theologie des Lukas* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 16–30.

"The God Who Made the World!" Preaching Luke's Gospel in an Apostolic Era

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"Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Lk 12:56)

Preaching is a holy venture, a divine means of speaking a word into the hearts and minds of people, directly or edgewise. The Scriptures prompt this proclamation by their witness to God's commands and promises. The written word authorizes the church's preaching and attests the Incarnate Word who is the ultimate definition of reality. God uses the living voice to judge, redeem, and love human lives and the affairs of history.

Like scriptural interpretation, preaching is also a mundane task, sanctified in its service to God. Preoccupied with the tasks at hand, the preacher's words may confine God's saving action to the themes of the season and the lives of the faithful, as if the divine word could be domesticated to the cultus of the converted. Meanwhile, "the present times" which are to be interpreted are unbounded by the doors of the sanctuary. The Holy Spirit is at work in the larger world, awaiting a witness.

Even as the Christian faith is regularly privatized, people in the world and in the church press theological questions, although their speech may be more that of the street. The late night talk show hosts refer to God constantly, even allude to Jesus Christ, but almost exclusively in expletives. "What in hell is happening?" Indeed what? And "What in heaven's name is going on?" Is there a word of the Lord for this time? The postmodern quests for Jesus of Nazareth fill the weekly magazines in print and on television with interviews with historical rationalists intent on proving what could not have happened. The present time is marked by the rise of new age religions and fascination with spiritual consciousness. The signs are evident of both a cynicism and a spiritual hunger in the present time to match the era of Christian mission in the Roman order.

This is not the predicted era of the "secular city," but neither is this the time of the church's privileged status in Christendom. This is an era into which the church of Jesus Christ is called and sent anew to the ends of the earth with a living word of promise.

This is a remarkable moment for preaching, a new era for apostolic witness. Those who are sent (Gk *apostolos*: an offi-

cial emissary) into the present time bring the distinctive message of the gospel of Jesus Christ into a world of many cultures and religions. Paul's letters to Corinth speak well to the church in Chicago. The pluralism of the present time recalls the historical crucible in which Luke's Gospel was forged.

The coming Advent will mark the church's first reading of St. Luke in the new millennium. The world may have forgotten that this calendar is a public, if not precise, measure of the years since the birth of Jesus in the days of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2). Cornerstones may still be inscribed with the year the building was constructed, but only a few will still add "A.D.," marking the date by the "year of our Lord" (*anno domini*). Even Christians are lulled into counting the hours of our daily lives by rhythms of the evening news, numbering our days with flat, secular sensibilities, as if we have forgotten that the Lord has made every day, and Sunday signals the hope of the resurrection.

As the Holy Spirit opens mouths to speak and ears to hear, Luke's Gospel can stir the church, awaken hearts, and lay claim to the world and the present time as arenas of God's action. The God who made the world (Acts 17:24) is giving the church a renewed apostolic commission, and careful study of Luke's Gospel will direct the preachers to tell us the story, to ground us in Scripture, and to send us into the world.

"An orderly account . . . that you may know the truth!" (1:1–4)

Technically speaking, Luke did not write a "gospel," as did Mark (Mk 1:1), but an "account" (Lk 1:1–4), a "narrative." The word the third evangelist used to describe this literary project was common among the Hellenistic historians to identify their efforts not only to get the record straight, but also to communicate the story's larger significance, meaning, and truth. Extending through the book of Acts, Luke's narrative comprises almost a third of the New Testament. It stands apart in its magnitude. No matter how the cryptic ending of Mark's "gospel" is to be understood, almost no one suggests that it had a sequel. But readers have sensed that Luke's expansive story is still unfinished at the end of Acts. "The sense of an ending" is anticipated differently from the beginning of Luke's "orderly account" and extends into the "hope in God" to which Paul continues to bear witness through the final chapters of Acts (see 24:15; 26:29; 27:25; 28:31).

Why should those who preach Luke's Gospel be interested in its narrative? Three reasons come to mind, each of which will matter in interpretation and proclamation.

1. Luke's narrative structure holds diverse materials together in an "orderly account" so that the individual pieces gather new meaning in the truth of the whole.

This insight dawned anew upon the redaction critics when they rediscovered the gospels as theological constructions, instead of mere treasuries of tradition that could be mined for what might be historically verifiable. For example, Luke's extensive story about John still puts him in jail before Jesus' baptism (Luke 3), which is not historically plausible since all the sources indicate that John baptized Jesus. Luke's surprising sequence dramatizes his conviction that what truly happened was the anointing of Jesus as Messiah with the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:21–22; Acts 10:38). Luke does not deny that John baptized Jesus, but he draws the reader's attention to God's action, not the human means.

Luke's larger narrative structure is

A reader may gain a lively sense of the whole simply reading through Luke-Acts in an afternoon . . .

more than a collection of traditional sources. It is also a story with a plot, tension, characterization, and movement, perhaps even character development, although not in a modern sense of internal or psychic histories. The first four verses of the narrative manifest Luke's bold confidence of writing in the public mode of the Greek and Roman historians. Luke 1:5, however, shifts sharply into Jewish scriptural historiography, expressing the conviction that God's light to the nations will redound to the "glory of Israel" (2:32). Anyone who will be preaching for most of the year from this source needs to invest time in the whole, lest complex and powerful dynamics in the parts be lost or lest the hope for all people be detached from God's distinctive relationship with Israel.

The stories in Luke 1–2 of the annunciations, births, and growth of John and Jesus create a literary dyptich in which the parallels tell as much by what they say about both as by what they do not say about John. These stories are also full of scriptural memories of the births of wonder children such as Samson and Samuel. In biblical stories, children of divine promise also confront God's people and the world with judgment. When old Simeon receives the child Jesus in the temple, the fundamental conflict is revealed between God as the protagonist and sinful humanity as antagonist so that Jesus is marked as "a sign to be opposed" (2:34). Thus the violent response of Jesus' townsfolk to his sermon in Nazareth (4:14–30) is no longer a surprise, but it is still a frightening sign that the devil is not the only adversary (4:1–13). Furthermore, when Satan enters Judas who becomes an active conspirator with the temple officials in Jesus' execution, the reader has been warned (see Lk 4:13, "an opportune time," and 22:6, "an opportunity").

Many fine studies have been published concerning Luke's narrative method, including Robert Tannehill's volumes on *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Fortress, 1986, 1990) and Luke Timothy Johnson's commentaries on *Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles* (Liturgical Press, Sacra Pagina, 1991, 1992). A reader may, however, gain a lively sense of the whole simply reading through Luke-Acts in an afternoon with a set of consistent questions about plot, characters, major phases of the story, and curiosity about what it all means in Israel's history, God's reign, and the world context. The horrendous tension of Luke's passion narrative in chapters 22–23, including the charges against Jesus, will only make sense in the light of the whole. As I wrote in The Augsburg Commentary on *Luke* (1988, p. 412), "The relationships among the various groups are critical to the dynamic of the narrative. Jesus' words punctuate the story with constant clarity as to what is truly 'happening' in God's will and plan, while the words of his adversaries are a foil, ironically filled with truth. And 'the people' who have just joined in calling three times for Jesus' crucifixion now come to a new realization of the tragedy."

At the risk of oversimplification, try reading the whole of Luke-Acts like a sermon in which the preacher tells you what

the message will be, delivers the message, and then tells you about the consequences of the message. Or, to put it more bluntly still, read Luke 1–2 as the overture to the work in which the critical themes are sounded, read Luke 3–24 as the foundational narrative, and then read the speeches in Acts to find out what all of this means in God's economy for Israel and the world.

2. The historical sweep of the narrative resists temptations to confine the story in the church's liturgical year or to domesticate the canon in the weekly bulletin excerpts.

This point may be too negative, since the virtues of the lectionary are abundant. Still, the literary whole is needed to diminish the church's hazard of dealing only with the season's "snippets" (the Greek word for *pericope*). The prophetic and historical character of Luke-Acts turns the reader's attention outside the cultus toward the census of Caesar, the threats of Herod, the vicious cunning of Pilate, and the petty self-interest of the Roman procurators. Luke's stories of the Jerusalem temple express the complex significance of this institution from the tender account of Zechariah the priest (1:5–23), through Jesus' return there to teach (2:41–51; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37), to Jesus' oracles of its impending doom (21:6), and unto Paul's arrest (Acts 21:27–36). His knowledge of Jewish synagogues gives glimpses into their practices and scriptural piety in varied locations throughout the empire (Lk 4:14–30; Acts 13:15; 17:2, 11). Luke insists the story is public! As Paul says to King Agrippa in Acts 26, "This was not done in a corner!"

Luke is deeply aware that Jesus was executed in a naked display of Roman power complicit with all of the cynicism, intrigue, greed, and ego of Rome's puppets in Jerusalem. Some interpreters have even argued that Luke lost the expiatory character of Jesus' death in a moral or political interpretation. This seemed to be a telling critique in the era of Christendom when "the separation of church and state" became a civil dogma which seemed highly compatible with the distinction between the two kingdoms and the meaning of Jesus' death was often limited to its benefits for individuals. Christian traditions that understood the death of Jesus primarily as a cultic sacrifice for the salvation of believers then made Luke's account seem less than a "theology of the cross."

But in Luke-Acts, the cross is a theodicy, a trial of God's justice, pressing the question of the meaning of history to which the narrative gives a profound prophetic witness. Human history is the arena both where Jesus brings God's kingdom of mercy and where God's righteous Messiah is assaulted. As is evident in the synchronism of Lk 3:1–2, Luke projects Jesus' life, execution, and resurrection boldly on the backdrop of Roman and Jewish history. Jesus' death is not only "innocent," but this is the suffering righteous one (Gk *dikaios*, Lk 23:47) whom God long promised to protect. In Luke's account, the adversaries are testing both Jesus and God, playing out the script of Wisdom 2:17–20: "Let us see if his words are true and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous is God's son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. . . . Let us test him with insult and torture. . . . Let us condemn him to a shameful death."

God's salvation and redemption are personal. They are also social and historical. As Peter's sermon in Acts 2:23–24 attests, those who handed Jesus over for his crucifixion "by the hands of those outside the law" were already contending with God (see also Gamaliel in Acts 5:39, Saul in

Acts 9:4, and Peter in Acts 11:17). When "God raised him up," therefore, this was God's direct action in human history, a divine vindication of the righteous one who is truly God's Son and Messiah.

Luke projects Jesus' life, execution, and resurrection boldly on the backdrop of Roman and Jewish history.

Preachers who read the whole of Luke-Acts will not simplify their work. Personal religion is tolerated in polite society, as long as it remains "spiritual." But proclaiming God's will and purpose in human history will provoke the "principalities and powers." Disputes are to be expected. The particularities of Jesus' conflicts with religious and civil leaders, therefore, are not only moral illustrations but signals of a confrontation with God's mission or purpose. Preachers, teachers, and healers may know that whether their apostolic work is received or not, "the kingdom of God has come near" (Lk 10:1–12).

3. The conviction that God has a story gives hope to the postmodern world.

Our deep anxiety is seated in the fear that there is no one out there but us, neither God nor the devil, heaven nor hell. What if "science" and "progress," good and evil, are only mythic constructions of the human mind, and all the varied spiritualities of our age are but explorations of the inner psyche? What if the "hidden hand" of the market economy finally determines the value of everything we hold dear? Then our stories are tales filled with events and occasions as we move inexorably from birth to death, but our lives have no meaning beyond our passing relationships, achievements, and possessions.

Our philosophers, performers, and media pundits insist on exposing this fear. As the pluralism of this age emerges in its globalization and communications revolution, the noise of a consumer economy provokes anxiety at even the prospect of silence, let alone its practice. We are told we are "born to shop." We are surrounded in a pervasive sitcom that runs and reruns day and night on the air and on the net, and the story of our lives is in jeopardy of signifying nothing. The amusing despair of the richest older generation in history is manifest in the long, well-lighted hours of the casinos. The story line of "survival" in "reality" television is but voyeurism behind the unblinking eye of the camera, with people who look like us pitted against each other until only one "wins."

This is also an era of immense benefits of prosperity, health, and communication. In these blessings, God offers us unmatched opportunity and deep spiritual callings. In the modern world, the discovery of difference compelled traditional, more homogeneous communities to come to terms with new neighbors in a world of many cultures and religions. The churches of Christendom still deal with that challenge. The spiritual specter of the postmodern world, however, is the obliteration of difference in a global culture of power fueled by an economy of consumption. That script is as pervasive as the pocket testament of our credit cards, and its hope as transient as the techno-icons on the electronic hearth through which our children gain access to

the world and vice versa. These instruments may be used for good or ill, and how shall we know the difference?

Our present time needs a narrative deep in truth, with living witnesses who remember the promises of old to Israel and how God kept them in Jesus. Because it is God's story, the narrative to which we witness stands within and apart from the world God created and loves in the midst of human defiance. We who know the story also know the threat that the God of Abraham will raise up children, from the stones if necessary (Lk 3:8), to be apostles of this story of hope and salvation. We have learned to trust the promise in Luke's account of Jesus' last words on earth, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And so we are bold to declare the truth.

"He opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (24:45)

To tell God's story, Luke not only constructs a narrative, he also embeds the story in Israel's scriptures," beginning with Moses and all the prophets (Lk 24:27). The truth of the story does not rest on its being a well-told tale. Nothing is more "true" in Israel than God's faithfulness as remembered and attested in the scriptures. Because the Jews in the Beroea synagogue understood this, they both welcomed the message and immediately "examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Let me encourage those of you who preach the message to follow their example.

In the past half century, the Jewish character of Luke's witness has been rediscovered. The old commentaries were filled with descriptions of Luke the "Gentile" or "Hellenistic' Gospel, often reading the story of Luke-Acts as reinforcing the cultural conviction that Christianity had superceded Judaism, just as Rome superceded Greece.

In the 1960s Jacob Jervell and Nils Dahl began a protest against the prevailing anti-Jewish interpretation of Luke-Acts, especially in the Bultmann school. The Bultmann school had captured the thoroughly Hellenistic rhetoric and argumentation of Luke's narrative and the speeches in Acts, but they missed Luke's rich intra-Jewish argument of how the promises God made to Israel were fulfilled. The church's common understanding of Luke-Acts had sustained this same anti-Jewish bias at least since the times of Constantine and Eusebius, if not all the way back to Marcion. But reading Luke's narrative without constant reference to Israel's scriptures robbed its strength. Luke's story was even more at home in the scriptural piety of the synagogues of Israel than the works of such Hellenistic Jewish authors as Philo of Alexandria or Josephus.

A recent collection of essays by seventeen scholars entitled *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*, edited by David P. Moessner (Trinity, 1999), marks the "sea change" toward this understanding. Luke's two-part narrative claims Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's true heritage and enduring legacy to the world. Let me give two reasons why this rediscovery of Luke's Jewish identity matters for those sent to preach in a new apostolic time.

1. The theological wealth of Luke's narrative is drawn from Israel's story. Or, to put it sharply, the only God to whom Luke bears witness is Israel's God.

From the annunciations to Zechariah and Mary (Luke 1) to Paul's parting words to the Jews in Rome, the convincing truth

of the story about Jesus comes from "both the law of Moses and from the prophets" (Acts 28:23). The preacher who seeks to bear witness to God's work in the world will do well to enter the treasury of Israel's testimony through Luke. At a minimum this means working with a Bible with good references and notes. Reading the prophets, the Psalms, and Deuteronomy closely will draw you close to God.

When Zechariah breaks into his blessing of "the Lord God of Israel," his *Benedictus* lays claim to the prayer tradition of the psalms (see Pss 41:13; 72:18; 106:48), and the inspired blessing of the one who has just regained his speech is a public witness to the wonderful works of God throughout history. This witness is the context for God's answer to the question the people have raised, "What then will this child become?" And when Paul cites the hard text from Isaiah's call story (Isa 6:9–10), he again identifies what God is doing in the midst of the rejection of Paul's preaching. But neither the beginning of Luke nor the ending of Acts makes sense without this scriptural context.

Patient attention to Israel's story draws the interpreter deep into God's pathos. This discipline is not merely a practice of "proof from prophecy," as if human history were either under rational control or fated. Those philosophies were well known in Luke's world too, but Israel's scriptures bore witness to a dynamic, empassioned relationship between God and humanity. Composed in their final form largely in the wake of the first destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. by the neo-Babylonian empire, the law and the prophets had been compiled into an authoritative collection by the time of the second destruction by the Romans in 70–73 A.D. The scriptures were the common ground for Israel's faith in the midst of the terrible trials of the era, and they were the battle ground for varied claims concerning the fulfillment of the promises God made to Israel.

The long "season after Pentecost" in the liturgical year gives a unique opportunity for sustained attention to a major segment of Luke's Gospel that has been variously identified as "the central section," "the travel narrative," or "the way of the Lord." Noting Luke's use of the metaphor of the extended journey with many episodes and comparing this literary construction to Homer's *Odyssey* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, I have previously described this section as "the Gospel for the duration." Luke's repeated reminders that Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem (see 9:51–56; 13:22–33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28; see also "going on" in 9:57; 10:1, 38; 11:53; 18:35; 19:1) provide a framework to hold disparate stories and encounters together and build awareness that Jesus is leading his followers on a purposeful journey. The way of the determined Messiah both reveals God's distinctive dominion of mercy and justice and offers a catechesis in discipleship.

But this story also has a past for Israel, and Luke specifically links Jesus' travels from Galilee to Jerusalem with testimony of Moses and Elijah concerning the "exodus" (Gk *exodon*) he was to fulfill in Jerusalem (9:31). Moessner's study of these chapters demonstrates how profoundly they are embedded in the prophetic and deuteronomic understanding that Israel's history is alive with the power and anguish of God (see *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Trinity, 1998). Thus Jesus' intensity, warnings, and tears at the beginning, middle, and end of this journey express his messianic mission ("he set his face to go," 9:51–62; "Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often have I desired to

gather your children, 13:31–35; "They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you . . . because you did not recognize the time of your visitation," 19:41–44).

To serve this witness faithfully, the preacher must enter the prophetic vision of human history. Our lives and the world are not mere "darkling plains where ignorant armies clash by night" (Matthew Arnold), but arenas where the saving will of God is made manifest and where our faithfulness receives and our defiance contends with God. Preaching through the Pentecost season means drawing the people of God into this story of following Jesus, a story as old as Moses and still at odds with the idols of our times.

The banquet stories in Luke 14, for example, which appear in the 13th and 14th Sundays after Pentecost, are not mere morality stories of inclusive hospitality. They are revelations of the radical generosity of divine election, anticipating the banquet at "the resurrection of the righteous" (14:14–15). Their themes of judgment on those who assume their invitation are the converse of the Luke 15 parables of God's extravagant mercy for the lost (15th Sunday after Pentecost and 4th Sunday in Lent). These stories are filled with a messianic conviction of God's holiness perfected in mercy for sinners, which seems unkosher to a righteous Pharisee and inappropriate to an establishment Protestant.

To grasp the depth of this witness to God's mercy, the preacher needs to attend to both the literary whole of the story and the scriptural claims it advances. If the righteous (including the preacher) are not surprised or disturbed by this messianic mission, they have probably missed its power. Week by week, honest listeners will identify with either the leaders who conspired to eliminate Jesus or "the people who hung on his words."

Instead of reverting once again to readings from the Gospel of John in Holy Week, consider following Jesus from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem through his confrontations with the Pharisees and Sadducees in Luke 19–20. The scriptural jousting of these encounters is not merely scholastic, although a preacher of this age may need to spend time investigating the scriptural texts and the interpretative arguments of Jesus and his adversaries. Jesus' life is on the line, and Israel's, too. Jesus' messianic interpretations of the scriptures captivate the people and enrage the Temple authorities.

The Easter lessons highlight the importance of this scriptural substance. In the texts appointed for Easter evening (Lk 24:13–49), the risen Messiah repeatedly

Preaching through the Pentecost season means drawing the people of God into this story of following Jesus . . .

"interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (24:27). It is not possible to understand "what in heaven's name is happening" at Easter until the resurrection of the Messiah is grasped as God's act of self-vindication. This is how God has kept promises made long ago (see also Acts 2:14–40). The "restoration of the kingdom" will not be a failed promise, but it will take surprising forms as history un-

folds, as the book of Acts bears witness (Acts 1:8; 3:21; 10:34–43). The martyrs and apostles bear the two edged sword of this promise, confident of its mercy but aware of its threat for those who reject God's vindicated Messiah, Jesus (Acts 71–53; 20:18–35).

2. Jesus of Nazareth is the apostolic promise of this message.

Peter's sermons are shocking in their particularity. "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah who is appointed for you, that is, Jesus" (Acts 3:19–20). They remind us that the "truth" worth telling in Luke's whole narrative is that "what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus" (Acts 13:33).

Is this truly the message we are "sent" to proclaim?

Preachers may worry that lifelong Christians who have "heard it all before" will be bored by sermon after sermon about Jesus. Or they may fear rejection by a politically correct world where tolerance is a supreme virtue and religion is an amenity. Imagine what public radio would do with Luke's consistent refrain that "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12)!

The problem, however, may not lie with the message or with the audience, as if the preacher is exempt. Reasons for not delivering the message are often thinly cloaked self-concerns, while those who are desperate for a living word of hope go wanting.

The messenger must first ask, "Is this message I am sent to proclaim true?" This is a crucial question. The truth to which all the gospels testify commands both the head and the heart. Luke's narrative also teaches that those who are sent to be witnesses to the reign of the resurrected Jesus must first "turn" or "repent" or "be converted" to follow "this Jesus" themselves. And turning is hard for people of standing (see Peter: Luke 22:61–62; Acts 10:13–15; 11:17–18; and Paul: Acts 9:1–31; 22:6–16; 26:12–18).

To identify the present time as an era of apostolic mission is to enter into the mission of the Triune God for the world. It is not a license for abusive power or manipulation in Jesus' name. Surely the church has sinned in its arrogance, and many preachers have turned the sweet promises of God into threats. But in the stories of Jesus' ascension or departure, the apostolic mission he authorized is to call all people to faith in the God who made the world and kept the promises made to Israel (Luke 24; Acts 1).

How did God keep those promises?

God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him as ruler of heaven and earth. That particular truth is God's most inclusive promise for the world. It gives Christian preaching its power and accountability. Then the hard work begins of communicating this promise to those who have and to those who have not heard it before.

"You are witnesses of these things" (24:48)

Over the past twenty-five years, I have fallen in love with Luke-Acts. Every year, I have written at least one book or article or a set of critical notes on Luke or Acts for a new Bible. And I have preached many sermons on these texts, although not as many as those of you who are pastors in

congregations. I am grateful for every text from Acts that crept into the lectionary, and I can hardly wait for the year of Luke to begin in Advent.

To summarize this essay, let me give four reasons why I hope those of you who preach will find joy and renewal in proclaiming Luke's Gospel in the coming year.

1. Luke will challenge you to communicate that "God is great." This is not only a phrase from a child's table prayer. It is a central confession of Islam. The Muslims are increasing in the Western world, and their sense for the greatness of God can astonish those who have lost the biblical vision of God's role and rule in the big picture. So you, dear preacher, will open the windows of their hearts week by week to see the greatness and presence of the kingdom of God through the words and deeds of Jesus. And Luke will constantly point beyond the petty or the merely pious to the public world with all of its conflicts, evil, and promise. Luke's Christianity is not sectarian or apocalyptic, but it is prophetic in its conviction of God's empassioned desire and determined will in history.

2. Luke will lead you "to examine the scriptures" to test the truth of the message. Once you find your way back into the Psalms or Isaiah, take time to explore what is going on. Luke's allusions are keyholes through which you hear snatches of a profound conversation among people of faith over centuries. What was their experience of God, in their times and facing their challenges? Then how does what Jesus was up to touch their hope for what God promised? If you get lost for a few weeks and preach four sermons on Jeremiah's oracles to the city, it's good. Some of the immediate allusions that Luke makes may seem arbitrary at first. You are not a first century scribe! But the scriptural faith in the God who keeps promises will inspire you with deep consolation.

3. Luke will show you God's love for the poor, the outcast, and the ill. When you read story after story, your embarrassment for not caring more yourself is swept into awe for this loving God and Jesus the Messiah of God's kingdom. Jesus is God's way of loving the world, with priority for those who need it. That will include you! Let it be. Let God's passion for justice stir you to action. God calls, loves, and sends, in God's time.

4. Luke will teach you that the resurrection of Jesus gives all the world its hope. In chains before the Roman governor, Paul declares, "I have a hope in God!" (Acts 24:15). There is nothing easy about this hope. It is tried in death, even the Messiah's execution. It is scorned by all who deal in terror and denied by those who hide their fear behind their possessions. But God's final word for all who trust in the Messiah God raised from the dead is "Yes!"

Lucan Parables for Preachers

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Every three years as we enter Lectionary Cycle C we are treated to a rich fare of parables in the Gospel selections. The Gospel of Luke has the most parables (twenty-four of them, depending on one's definition of a parable[1]) and all but one of them (the parable of the vineyard and the tenants in Luke 20:9–19) are found in the lectionary. Lucan parables are assigned for the Gospel reading on seventeen Sundays of Year C. Fifteen of these are unique to Luke; seven are shared with Matthew, and three of Luke's parables are taken from Mark. The lectionary for Year C provides many opportunities for contemporary preachers and teachers to become more skilled in using the same dynamics of storytelling as did Jesus, and thus engage their listeners more effectively with the gospel message.

Dynamics of parabolic preaching

The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as a master storyteller who used parables as the primary vehicle in teaching his disciples and confronting his opponents. In fact, Mark 4:34 says that Jesus did not speak to his disciples except in parables. Attention to how Jesus' parables worked can provide insight for preachers and teachers of parables today. Following is a description of some of the dynamics of the parables.

Invitations to conversion. Parables are not nice stories. They are often puzzling, their meaning not always immediately apparent. Or the meaning is easy enough to grasp, but acting on what they demand is difficult. Parables usually invite the hearer to conversion. Sometimes Jesus did this by telling stories with fictional (but true-to-life) situations, which allowed his listeners to back away from a sensitive topic and enter into a story world where they could see more clearly what was right. Examples of such are the parables of the two debtors (Luke 7:40–48) and of the lost and found sheep, coin, and sons (15:1–32), which are set in confrontations with Pharisees. In these instances Jesus' technique is similar to that of the prophet Nathan, who used a parable about a rich man taking a poor man's lone ewe lamb to confront King

[1] The Greek word *parabolē*, like the Hebrew word *mashal*, covers a range of figures of speech, including proverbs, such as "physician heal yourself" (Lk 4:23); wisdom sayings or riddles, such as the saying about defilement from within in Mark 7:15, dubbed a parable in 7:17; and similitudes, such as the lesson of the fig tree (Mk 13:28–29), as well as more extended stories.

David with his sin, which brought him to repentance (2 Sam 12:1–12).

The familiar radically twisted. The subject matter in Jesus' parables was always familiar. The images and situations he painted in his stories were from the fabric of daily life of his audience. He told how God is encountered in sowing and reaping (Lk 8:4–15), in baking bread (13: 20–21), in searching for what is lost (15:1–32). In this way he would capture peoples' attention and draw them along with him to the end of the story. In Jesus' parables all life is a locus for the sacred; nothing is outside the realm of the holy. But there is usually a twist, as the story veers away from what is expected. As John Dominic Crossan puts it, "You can usually recognize a parable because your immediate reaction will be self-contradictory: 'I don't know what you mean by that story but I'm certain I don't like it.'"[2] Thus parables remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God.

The riddle of interpretation. The meaning of a parable is not always self-evident. The stories are often left open-ended. For example, at the end of the story of the father with two difficult sons (Luke 15:11–32), does the elder brother go in to the party after the father pleads with him? Or does he remain outside, angry and resentful? Jesus does not give the answer but leaves it up to the hearer to determine the rest of the story. Only two gospel parables are explained: that of the sower in Mark 4:11–20 and parallels and that of the weeds and wheat in Matthew 13:36–43. These allegorical interpretations are most likely not from the lips of Jesus but represent the efforts of the early Christians to explain these puzzling parables. Over the ages believers have had to work out their responses to the challenges of Jesus' teaching; this task is no less incumbent upon believers today. Just as Jesus did not give the interpretation of his parables, neither do effective preachers provide pat answers.

Because they are told in figurative language, the parables are capable of conveying distinct messages to different people in diverse circumstances. For instance, to a person in need of forgiveness, the parable in Lk 15:11–32 is the story of a lost son or daughter, who is invited to let him- or herself be found by God and be lavished with love that cannot be earned. For a person in authority, the same story may serve as a call to emulate the character of the father who searches out ones who have embarked on a destructive path. A parent who runs to meet them and bring them back, at great personal cost, acts as God does. For persons who try always to be faithful to following God's ways, the story invites them to let go of joyless resentment and slavish attitudes in their service of God and to delight in the freely offered gratuitous love. The point of the story depends on one's point of entry and the character with whom one identifies.

Telling the story slant. The preacher always tells the story slant, inviting the hearers to take a particular position in the narrative. Jesus often did this in telling his parables. And the stance to which he invites his hearers is with the marginal. It has long been recognized that Luke most strongly portrays Jesus as crossing boundaries to extend the good news particularly to those who are poorest and those who are outcast. At this time in the church when we are particularly aware of issues of diversity and inclusion the Lucan parables can be powerful vehicles to lead us to new understanding of the gospel in our day.

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[2] John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1975), 56.

Women in Lucan parables

The role of women in the Gospel of Luke has gained much attention in recent scholarly studies.[3] Interest in this is fueled by current debates about positions of women in ministerial leadership in the church. Three Lucan parables, two of which are unique to Luke, feature women characters. A new look at these with insights from feminist hermeneutics can offer a life-giving word with a different slant.

A woman mixing dough (Lk 13:20–21).[4] Because the parable of the woman mixing dough is paired with that of the mustard seed in both Luke (13:18–21) and Matthew (13:31–33),[5] the interpretation of the latter has influenced that of the former. The most common interpretation of the parable in Luke 13:20–21 focuses on the small amount of yeast that one would mix with flour to produce a loaf of bread. The point is said to be the astonishing growth of something small into something that permeates a large entity. In this interpretation, the leaven is thought to be Jesus' preaching, or the word of God, which grows phenomenally in its efficacy throughout time and history.[6] In the version of the saying found in the *Gospel of Thomas* there is a clear contrast between the "bit of leaven" used and the "big loaves" it made. However, there is no reference in the Lucan version of the parable to the amounts involved. Knowledge of Paul's proverbial statement, "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (Gal 5:9; similarly 1 Cor 5:6), may also influence one to read a contrast of amounts into the parable.

Important to the meaning of the parable is the fact that in every other instance in Scripture in which leaven occurs, it represents evil or corruption. In Exodus 12:15–20, 34, the Passover ritual prescribes that unleavened bread be eaten for seven days. This recalls the Israelites' hasty departure from Egypt, with no time to wait for dough to be leavened. Eating unleavened bread becomes a sign of membership in God's holy people. Grain offerings are to be unleavened (Lev 2:11), equating unleavened with sacred. In Mark 8:15 (similarly Matthew 16:6, 11, 12) Jesus cautions his disciples, "Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." In his version of this saying Luke (12:1) defines the leaven of the Pharisees as "hypocrisy." Twice Paul uses leaven as a symbol for corruption (1 Cor 5:6–7; Gal 5:9).

The startling message of the parable in

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[3] There is still much debate about whether Luke is favorable toward women or not. Early studies viewed Luke as promoting equality for women because of the abundance of stories that feature women in the Gospel and Acts. More recent feminist studies have examined the limited roles that Luke assigns women and have warned that he reinforces silent passivity for women. For a liberative use of such texts contemporary Christians would need to read against the grain. See Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), and Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 363–80.

[4] See further Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers, Year C* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 293–307.

[5] Mark does not have the parable of the leaven. Mark 4:26–34 pairs the mustard seed parable with that of the growing seed. It is likely that the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven were already paired in the Q source, but the fact that they have parallels in *Gos Thom* §20 and §96 that are not joined indicates that at one time they circulated independently.

[6] See Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 116–17.

Luke 13:20–21 is that the reign of God is like a batch of dough that has been permeated by what societal standards would consider a "corruptive yeast." In other words, Jesus' story presents an image of God's realm as one that reverses previous notions of holiness: no longer unleavened, but leavened is the locus of the sacred. It proclaims that God's realm thoroughly incorporates persons who would have been considered corrupt, unclean, or sinners.

To understand the parable this way accords well with Jesus' other teachings and actions, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus continually extends himself to people who are poor, outcast, or marginalized. The challenge of the parable for those who are on the fringes is to begin to see themselves as "leaven," a vital component of the believing community. For those who are privileged, it is a summons to change their attitude toward those they consider "corrupt" and to see them as the very ones who provide the active ingredient for the growth of the community of God's people.[7]

As Luke's predominantly Gentile community retold the story in their day, they may have been thinking of how Gentile Christians, who began as a hidden minority mixed into the batch of predominantly Jewish Christian communities, were now beginning to permeate the whole. To Jewish Christians, this "corrupting" influence would have had a disturbing effect on their prevailing theology and praxis. Having let a few Gentiles mix in, these now were changing the character of the whole community!

For the believer today the parable offers an opportunity to envision God in female form and to regard women as equally able to embody the holy. As a consequence, women would be seen as equally capable of leadership in ministry, which energizes and transforms the church like the action of a woman mixing yeast into bread dough.

Diligent searching (Lk 15:7–10). The parable of the woman searching for the lost coin also offers a female image of God. This parable has the same structure and tells the very same story as that of the shepherd and the sheep (Luke 15:3–6).[8] In both stories the main character loses, searches, and finds the lost object, and then celebrates with friends and neighbors. Both conclude with a comparison to the heavenly joy over a repentant sinner.

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[7] So, e.g., Robert W. Funk, "Beyond Criticism in Quest of Literacy: The Parable of the Leaven," *Int* 25 (1971): 149–70; Susan Praeder, *The Word in Women's Worlds: Four Parables* (Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament [Wilmington: Glazier, 1988]), 32.

[8] Susan Durber, "The Female Reader of the Parables of the Lost," *JSNT* 45 (1992): 59–78, sees subtle but significant differences from the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd's rejoicing is compared with "greater joy in heaven" (v. 7), the woman's with "joy among the angels of God" (v. 10). For her this circumlocution signals that the woman is less easily compared with God. The address in v. 4 is "If one of you . . ." whereas in v. 8 it is "if a woman. . . ." She sees the reader invited to take the position of the shepherd but not that of the woman. The woman is just a woman, someone different from the reader. On this point, Kenneth Bailey (*Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1992], 93–94) also recognizes the difference between the addressees in verses 4 and 8, but remarks that in a patriarchal Middle Eastern culture a speaker cannot compare a male audience to a woman without giving offense. But is that any more offensive than comparing religious leaders to shepherds? Durber concludes that women discover that they must either read as men or admit that they are excluded. Her cautions are well taken. However, I propose that there is a third option: recognizing the male perspective of the text, women can read against its intent and unleash its liberating potential for inclusivity.

In Jesus' parables all life is a locus for the sacred; nothing is outside the realm of the holy. But there is usually a twist . . .

Despite these obvious similarities, some commentators depict the woman as miserly[9] or her action as trivial, important only to her women friends.[10] Rather, it portrays a poor woman[11] who goes to great lengths to find one drachma, one day's wage, because it is extremely valuable. For people living at subsistence level, one drachma means the difference between eating for a day or going hungry. Women in the first-century Mediterranean world exercised control over the private sphere of the home and derived support from female networks. The woman in the parable has charge of the household finances. Her power and status derive from maintaining orderly household management.[12]

Another interpretation that has become popular is that the lost coin was part of a set of decorative coins on a bridal headdress or a necklace. This approach makes the coin valuable because it is part of the woman's dowry, or because the whole necklace loses its value if it is missing one coin. This imaginative interpretation, however, comes from practices of modern nomadic Bedouin women, not Jewish women of the first century. Of the myriad coins that have been unearthed in excavations, none has yielded evidence of being used in this decorative way in antiquity. Moreover, this line of interpretation assumes that there must be a special motive for the woman's search. The point of the story is that the woman has lost a valuable coin and she expends every effort to find it, just as the shepherd who loses the prized sheep and the father whose precious sons are lost.

Godly householder. Like the shepherd in the previous parable, the woman goes to great lengths to seek[13] the lost. Since houses in first-century Palestine were dark, with small, high windows, she has to use precious oil to light a lamp for her search. Floors of houses were usually of packed dirt. Some were paved with stones, between which were cracks where a coin could easily lodge. She expends much energy in sweeping the house and searching carefully in the cracks and corners. Like the shepherd in vv. 3–7 and the father in vv. 11–32, she extends herself greatly to find the lost and restore it. Her celebration with friends and neighbors similarly replicates the joy of heaven over a sinner who repents.

The trio of lost and found parables in Luke 15:1–32 presents images of God which both serve to justify Jesus' inclusive table practices and pose a challenge to religious

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[9] Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 1080.

[10] The nouns *philas*, "friends," and *geitonas*, "neighbors," in v. 9 are feminine.

[11] Susan Praeder, *The Word in Women's Worlds: Four Parables* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1988), 42.

[12] Carol Schersten LaHurd, "Rediscovering the Lost Women in Luke 15," *BTB* 24 (1994): 66–76.

[13] In v. 8 the verb *zēteō*, "seek," is the same used in 19:10, were Jesus tells Zacchaeus he has come to seek the lost in order to save them.

leaders. Like God who shepherds the flock with great care (Psalm 23), so should religious leaders go out in search of the lost. And like Woman Wisdom who seeks out the simple ones among all humans (Prov 1:20–23; 8:1–5) and invites all to her banquet (Prov 9:1–11), Jesus, by eating with toll collectors and sinners, reaches out to the lost in the same way, to bring them to restored life. Implied is a critique of Pharisees and scribes for not acting thus, akin to that of the prophet Ezekiel (34:1–16), who had harsh words for Israel's "shepherds" who cared only for their own comfort and not the good of the people. Furthermore, in order to be good shepherds of God's flock, they needed first to be able to accept the kind of costly love God offers them. But thinking themselves righteous (*dikaiois*, v. 7), they did not see themselves as needing what God had to offer them through Jesus.

Persistently pursuing justice (18:1–8)

This parable, situated in the eschatological section of Luke 17:11–19:44, is unique to the Third Gospel. Like many parables, it paints a vivid picture of two opposing characters, one of whom is exemplary and who invites the hearers into a new understanding of the realm of God. But which of the characters does that in this parable? A sampling of titles shows that there is no consensus among commentators and translators on which character is the focus of the story. For many it is "The Parable of the Unjust Judge."[14] For others the focus is the "Persistent Widow."[15] Some give it a title that keeps both characters in view, labeling it "The Parable of the Widow and the Judge."[16]

Nor is there a consensus about what message the parable conveys. Is it about how "You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down"?[17] Or is it about "Persistence in Prayer"?[18] Is it a comic parable meant to make us laugh at the ludicrous picture of a powerful judge cowering before a helpless old widow? Or is it a deadly serious portrait of one small victory for justice in the face of shameless systems of rampant injustice? What were the hearers of this parable supposed to hear? What in this story is a disciple of Jesus supposed to emulate?

Layers of interpretation. Some of these questions can be resolved by recognizing Luke's hand in the earliest layers of interpretation of the parable. Although we have no other version by which to trace Luke's redactional changes, it is clear that v. 1 and vv. 6–8 are secondary additions that reflect early Christian attempts to understand the story. Most scholars agree that the original parable of Jesus is found in vv. 2–5.

There are telltale signs of Luke's hand in v. 1. Luke alone among the evangelists consistently introduces parables with an expression that uses the verb *legein*: "he told (*elegen*) them a parable.[19] Also, in this

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[14] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1954), 248. Similarly, Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1175, who names him the "Dishonest Judge," and Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 411, who has "the Unrighteous Judge."

[15] As titled in the *NAB*.

[16] Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 223.

[17] Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 175.

[18] F. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 294.

[19] In Luke 18:1 as well as 5:36, 13:6, and 14:7 the verb is in the imperfect (*elegen de parabolēn autois*). In Luke 6:39, 8:10, 12:16, 15:3, 18:9, 19:11, 20:19, and 21:29 the verb is in the aorist (*eipen*); in 20:9 it is in the infinitive (*legein*). In only one instance each do Matthew (22:1) and Mark (3:23) use the

verse composed by Luke he introduces one of his favorite themes, prayer.[20]

The concluding verses, 6–8, add various other applications and secondary interpretations of the parable. The absolute use of *ho kyrios* ("the Lord") in v. 6 is out of step with the narrative flow and is a sign of later interpretation. Calling Jesus "Lord" is a post-resurrection insight that has been retrojected into the time of Jesus' ministry. Verse 7 wrestles with the disturbing portrait presented in the parable and at the same time relates the story to the situation of the Lucan community.

Narrative and theological difficulties. Traditionally, interpretations have focused on the judge, imagining him to be a figure for God. But the difficulties this presents are insurmountable. In 2 Chron 19:6–7, where Jehoshaphat is appointing judges, he instructs them to take care what they do, for they are judging not on behalf of human beings but on behalf of God, who judges with them. He explicitly admonishes them to let the fear of God be upon them. He reminds them to act carefully because with God there is no injustice, no partiality, and no bribe taking. Yet twice in the parable the judge is described as neither fearing God nor having any respect for people (vv. 2, 4). While the original hearers of this parable would undoubtedly know well the reality that judges' decisions that were bought were tilted in favor of the most influential supporters, it would be startling to have a judge so portrayed in a story. And in patriarchal cultures one would automatically look for a powerful man in the story to represent God.

There are not only narrative difficulties but theological ones when the judge is looked to as the Godlike figure. With Luke's addition of v. 1 the story would convey the message that if people badger God long enough, then God will relent and give them what they want. But this flatly contradicts texts such as Sirach 35:14–19, which says that God "is not deaf to the wail of the orphan nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint . . . the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right. God indeed will not delay" (see also Luke 11:5–13).

A solution. What if, instead, it is the widow who is portraying something of how God acts? She is an unconventional figure, taking bold action to pursue the cause of justice day after day. Like God, who champions the cause of the poor, she persistently confronts the judge with her request for justice. The widow is not cast as vulnerable and in need of special care, as in Deut 24:17–22; 27:19, but more with the spirit of Deborah or Judith, who take strong, unconventional actions for justice for their people. The widow's only weapon, however, is unrelenting articulation of the need for justice.

Seen from the slant of the widow, the parable, like the whole of the Gospel, tells of how godly power is revealed in vulnerability. It gives a foretaste of how God's power is experienced in the unjustly condemned and crucified Christ. It also shows how the work of justice is accomplished through dogged persistence and how it be-

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verb *legein* with the plural *parabolais* ("parables"). Instead, Matthew and Mark use the verbs *lalein* ("to speak, express oneself") in Matt 13:3, 10, 13, 33, 34; Mark 4:33, 34; 12:1); *paratithēmi* ("put before," i.e., in teaching) in Matt 13:24, 31; and *didaskein* ("teach") in Mark 4:2.

[20] Luke, more than any other evangelist, shows Jesus at prayer as a regular practice: 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28, 29; 10:21–23; 11:1–13; 22:39–46; 23:46. The theme of prayer continues to be prominent in Acts, where mention of the disciples praying is made some 32 times.

gins with consistent confrontation by those who have been wronged.

Preachers who tell the parable from this slant can open the way for their congregations to identify what issues need persistent work toward justice in their communities. From this perspective they can also encourage those who think they are powerless to recognize their godly strength in vulnerability. Moreover, this angle on the parable shows godliness in female form, which is crucial for a church struggling toward gender equality.

It is important to recognize Luke's concern to tame this story of an unconventional woman and cast her in a docile and acceptable role as an example of praying always, much like Anna, who spent eighty-four years praying in the Temple (Luke 2:36–38). This parable of the widow and the judge is one more example of the mixed message that the third evangelist gives about women in the Christian community. Luke's redaction of this parable and the translations and interpretations of subsequent scholars have for the most part tamed, and even trivialized, a powerful portrait of a godly widow persistently pursuing justice.

Female images of God

The parables of the woman mixing dough (13:20–21), the woman searching for a lost coin (15:8–10), and the widow demanding justice (18:1–8) are three of the clearest instances in which Jesus invites believers to envision God as a woman. Although God does not have a gender, when we picture a personal God, our human experience of persons being either male or female enters into our imagination. All language about God is metaphorical; no image adequately expresses who God is.[21] God is *like* a woman hiding leaven in bread dough, a woman searching for a lost coin, a shepherd going after a lost sheep, but God *is* not any of these. But the language and images we use for God are extremely important because they work in two directions: what we say about God reflects what we believe about human beings made in God's image. Genesis 1:27 asserts that male and female are made in God's image. But when we use predominantly male metaphors for God, then being male is equated with being God-like. Consequently, women are not thought to be like God and are regarded as less holy than men. Jesus' teaching and praxis contradicts such a notion and invites believers to envision God in such a way that women and men are both seen to reflect God's image equally.

Jesus invites believers to envision God in such a way that women and men are both seen to reflect God's image equally.

Preaching possibilities. The parable of the leaven provides a rare opportunity for the preacher to speak of God in female terms and of the ministry of women as

[21] See Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); and Sandra Schneiders, "God is More Than Two Men and a Bird," *U.S. Catholic* (May 1990), 20–27, and *Women and the Word* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

leaven, the critical ingredient for vitality and transformative action in the life of the church and the reign of God. The image of the agitating action of leaven could be a vehicle to articulate how women's entry into ministries traditionally reserved for males and the use of female images of God is not the ruination of the unleavened bread, the church, but the fermentation that causes the whole loaf to rise and be transformed into fulfilling fare for the whole community of believers.

Likewise, a preacher who enters into the figurative world of the woman searching for the lost coin can invite both female and male believers to expand their repertoire of images for God and thus more fully apprehend the divine mystery. The woman seeking the lost coin is a metaphor that is equally apt for speaking of God as is "shepherd" or "father," but is seldom chosen as the central image for preaching from Luke 15.

There is also great liberating potential in the parable of the widow pursuing justice. By abandoning futile attempts to make the judge into a God-figure, preachers can unmask sexism and help their congregations take one more step toward greater gender inclusivity. The preacher can help dislodge sexist stereotypes such as that of Jeremias who portrays the judge as a beleaguered man who is "tired of her perpetual nagging and wants to be left in peace."[22] When preached as a widow persistently pursuing justice, the parable can serve to animate women who have been socialized not to put themselves forward and to wait patiently in hope and with prayer, to take bold, public steps toward the pursuit of justice.[23]

In a culture that measures power in terms of acquisition of wealth, this parable underscores the paradoxical power of seeming weakness. It shows that the initiative in seeking justice comes from the one who has been wronged, and her power in doggedly raising her voice day after day after day. The parable portrays not violence[24] but persistent naming and confronting injustice as the means to accomplish righteousness. Further, the widow can encourage those who are intimidated at the enormity of the challenge in dismantling interlocking systems of racism, sexism, militarism, and economic imbalance. A seemingly helpless widow has power far beyond that of a corrupt judge. This image is not so foreign to biblical readers, who know of Ruth and Tamar—widows who took bold steps that ensured God's plan for the continuance of Israel.

Liturgical interpretation. Studying the parables with new methods of biblical scholarship is a first step in preparing to interpret Gospel parables in a liturgical context. Preaching from the parables must also take into account the other biblical readings juxtaposed with the Gospel, as well as the other liturgical texts (the prayers, acclamations, and hymns), and the theology of the liturgical season. In addition the preacher's interpretation of the parable will be in dialogue with the human story of his or her particular congregation and that of the global family in current world events. It then remains for the preacher to pray and discern which of the possible interpretations conveys the needed message for the particular assembly gathered at this specific place and time. Finally, a preacher of parables can anticipate a response similar to that experienced by Jesus. Some will be moved to deeper conversion and will be strengthened to continue following in faith, while others will become solidified in opposition. One thing a preacher of parables can be sure of: parables told well never evoke a neutral response.

the Parables of JESUS

ARLAND J. HULTGREN

A COMMENTARY

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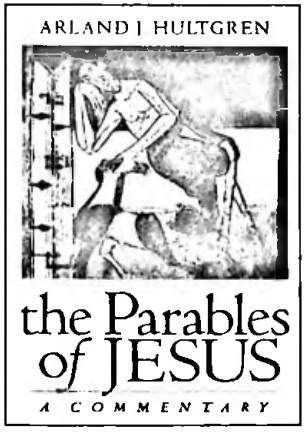

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Approaching Luke: Glimpses of a Gospel

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Two writings in the New Testament have been ascribed to the same author, whose name in the early tradition of the church was said to be Luke: the Gospel which later tradition named after him, and the Acts of the Apostles. In spite of scattered attempts to prove the opposite, the two writings most likely belong together even if they never occur back to back in any known manuscript. Each of the writings has a formal preface dedicating both volumes to the same person, Theophilus. This is the only mention of him in the New Testament, and he may be the patron who sponsored the work or he may be "the ideal reader" from a literary perspective.

From Luke to Acts

The preface to Acts presents that volume as a continuation of a previous book, which is then summarized. There is, however, nothing to indicate whether the first volume was written with the intention that it be continued. But today most readings of the Gospel of Luke are influenced by its companionship to Acts, and we tend to speak not of Luke but of Luke-Acts.

Acts begins by reiterating the story which ends the Gospel. The risen Jesus withdraws into heaven and disappears from the disciples' sight, and this prepares for the sending of the Holy Spirit from on high as the distance between heaven and earth is re-bridged and the disciples are empowered for their mission. As one book closes, another opens.

This close connection means that the Gospel of Luke is not open-ended like the Gospel of Mark, with its abrupt ending in fear and silence. Nor is it transparent in the same manner as the Gospel of Matthew, where the living Lord remains ever present with his disciples, implying that the story of Jesus and his disciples never becomes past tense but is as much a story about the Lord and the Matthean community.

For Luke the story of Jesus, his life, words and deeds, is brought to an end by the disappearance of Jesus into heaven. The Holy Spirit, who was exclusively attached to Jesus in his lifetime, is now poured out by Jesus on all of his disciples from his exalted place. Luke does not collapse the distinction between the story of Jesus and the situation of his community even though there is an interaction between the two. What had happened when he was still with them, assumes the character of remembrance—Jesus in the memory of the disciples.

It is therefore not incidental that the women at the empty tomb when Jesus himself is not there, are exhorted to remember

how he told them while he was still in Galilee (Luke 24:6–8). This may allude to a customary or almost technical term in the early church for the transmission of oral materials about Jesus, especially to introduce a word of the Lord. In Luke it has a specific function in recalling the instruction of Jesus entrusted to the disciples. Jesus and his words are to be remembered, while the words of the Scriptures are to be read, interpreted and expounded, opened up in the light of this remembrance. This is not simply a matter of balancing oral transmission/tradition with written sacred texts; it reflects, as the Emmaus story shows (Luke 24:13–35), a core task of theological hermeneutics.

What is Luke?

Language and style reveal that Luke was a well-educated author who mastered the literary conventions of his time. He corrects the Greek language of his sources such as Mark; he adopts several styles dependent on the character and circumstance of the narrative. The Semitic flavor of the infancy narrative in chapters 1 and 2, with its rich use of the language of the Septuagint, is characteristic of his narrative skills and does not necessarily reflect a Hebrew or Aramaic source. This does not mean that he did not use written sources, which in fact the preface (Luke 1:1–4) conveys he did and that with care. His purpose is to examine the reports already available in order to write an orderly account so that his reader (Theophilus) can be secure in his knowledge about "the events that have been fulfilled among us."

The preface accentuates a theological as well as an historical interest and has stirred the question about the genre of Luke's Gospel. Did Luke's rendering of the memories about Jesus, as maintained by eyewitnesses and servants of the word, assume any of the conventional literary forms of Hellenistic antiquity? What would this involve concerning the intention of the author on the one hand and the expectations of the readers on the other? The issue is much discussed. The position that "gospel" is a unique Christian invention and a separate genre is today regarded as an expression of Christian exclusivism and is counterbalanced by an emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of Christian witness. But no consensus has been reached on the various forms such as historiography, biography, apology, and even novel. Luke's work seems to resist rigid classification, and a cautious assessment would be that Luke attests an historical orientation which does not preclude biographical and novelistic features or theological and edifying interests.

Luke and the Roman authorities

There is in Luke-Acts an apologetic attitude toward the Roman authorities presenting them in a favorable light. Herod, the client king, in whom Luke also elsewhere shows a particular interest, is introduced as a key player in the Passion narrative. Luke adds a hearing before Herod to the trial of Jesus (23:6–15), and even though Herod joins in the mocking of Jesus, he becomes, together with Pilate, a witness to Jesus' innocence.

Another apologetic feature is the reassurance that Jesus and his followers are not a subversive group indulging in clandestine activity. Luke asserts the *public* character of Jesus' ministry; what Jesus says and does takes place openly for everyone to hear and see. This is reaffirmed in the first speech in Acts at Pentecost (Acts 2:22). The assertions about public openness shows

similarities to the way in which philosophical movements might defend themselves, and Jesus himself and also the protagonists of the apostolic times are featured by Luke to resemble the ideal image of a "sophos." Jesus' teaching often takes place in the setting of meals that resemble "symposia"; he does not give in to emotion and desire, and even in times of trial and suffering there is self-control and fortitude. His last word is not the scream of Godforsaken desolation as in Mark. After he has forgiven his executioners and promised paradise to a repentant criminal, he utters a loud proclamation as he, in the words of Ps 30:6 (LXX), commends his spirit to God (23:46).

Luke, Judaism, and the Hebrew Scriptures

Luke represents a Christianity deeply embedded in Jewish tradition as well as defending itself on Greco-Roman grounds. The work most probably stems from an urban environment, perhaps Syrian Antioch or somewhere in Asia Minor. It represents an interesting case of religious and cultural hybridization, already well prepared through Hellenistic Judaism. Luke's interest in the group of so-called God-fearers has nurtured the suggestion that he might be one of them himself. The term itself occurs only in Acts. But it has been suggested that the Roman centurion, who according to Luke has close connection with the Jewish elders and had sponsored the building of a synagogue (7:1–10), is portrayed as a God-fearer as well as the centurion at the foot of the cross who glorifies God (23:47). Attempts at proving that "God-fearers" is a Lukan construction and that there never was such a group of people has now been defeated especially by new epigraphical evidence in Asia Minor. The God-fearers probably were well-off citizens who were attracted to the Jewish way, especially its monotheism; they were affiliated with the synagogue, attended the services, and supported it financially. But they stood back from becoming proselytes, which in the case of males involved circumcision. Because they were not obliged to follow the full set of Jewish requirements, they could uphold their public responsibilities to the city. Women also belonged to this intermediary group.

Luke repeatedly appeals to the ancient history of the Jews. The infancy narratives, which are permeated by biblical phraseology and resonant of well-known biblical stories, place Jesus into this history, and there is never any secrecy concerning his messianic significance, which is proclaimed especially in the many hymns. Apologetically, this serves to legitimate the Christians as adherents of a religion with old roots since the seniority of a tradition was a test of truth in Greco-Roman society. Theologically, Luke interprets history as salvation history, marked by a constantly recurring pattern of prophecy and fulfillment. Through history the divine promises are successively fulfilled, and the prophecies support the conviction that the historical events happen according to the will of God.

This pattern in Luke has been characterized as "proof from prophecy," though that may be a misleading term. It is not primarily a matter of proving exact correspondence through a logical exercise. The story of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (24:13–35) may exemplify how expectations based on Scripture may lead to nothing but disappointment and frustration because when fulfillment comes it is not recognized as such. The Scriptures need to be reopened—and the eyes of the disciples as well. It is not so much a listing of specific proof texts as it is all of Scripture

that is fulfilled. Fulfillment is portrayed as something at the same time old and new, predicted and yet unpredictable. It is not easily recognized; it involves elements of surprise and of overcoming opposition and misinformed expectations, human objections and prejudices.

When fulfillment is recognized, experience blends with the reading of Scripture, and present history is made to encounter the past. The issue addressed is one of theodicy. It is a search for God, a groping for consistency in God's words and acts, for how God remains faithful to Godself. Ultimately, it represents an insistence on God's unswerving authority beyond all human manipulation.

Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies as well as a prophet himself. This means that in him and by him new promises are made, so that the pattern of promise and fulfillment continues. His divine mission is to restore the people of God, even if he does so in divisive ways. Most interpreters think that the work of Luke is directed to Gentile Christians in a situation where the mission to the Jews has failed. The life of Jesus is "die Mitte der Zeit," the dividing line in the midst of salvation history. Because the Jews would not receive the good tidings, a church of Gentiles who do receive it becomes their replacement, although it is open to Jewish Christians also.

Some have, however, contested this and insist that Luke-Acts defends the Jewish people as the people of God and does not at all support a supersessionist position. Luke supports the privileged position of Israel in salvation history, and at the last supper the twelve apostles are charged to be rulers and judges over the twelve tribes (22:28–30). This is what effectively happens in the first part of Acts when the fallen dwelling of David is restored (cf. Acts 15:14–18) preparing the way for all other peoples to seek the Lord. The Jews may divide over Jesus, but they remain the people of God and are not replaced by a church of the Gentiles. The Jewish believers therefore play a crucial role without which the universal mission is futile. Luke-Acts is an account of how God in faithfulness ascertains that the history of the people of God continues toward its universal purpose. Salvation of all people was God's plan from the beginning and part of God's promises to Israel. This is clear already with the words of Simeon, who recognizes in the child Jesus the salvation God has prepared for all people (Lk 2:31–32). This is the guiding principle for Luke's universalism.

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Geography and history

The plan of salvation is reflected in the geographical outline of Luke-Acts. The Gospel narrative has an orientation toward Jerusalem. It begins in the Jerusalem temple where Zechariah is serving. A substantial part of Jesus' public activity happens while "his face is set to go to Jerusalem" (the so-called travel narrative in Luke 9:51–19:19). In the Passion narrative the disciples do not flee but stay in Jerusalem, which is also the

Asceticism becomes a way of life whereby the eschatological excitement is both suspended and maintained.

place where the risen Lord appears to his disciples. The Gospel ends in the temple where the disciples continually bless God. This geographical design strengthens the sense of purposeful movement, and the self-designation of the Christian group in Acts is a metaphor of mobility, The Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23).

In Acts the movement continues from Jerusalem to "the ends of the earth" (1:8)—in fact it ends in Rome, the capital and center of the Roman Empire. Another aspect of universalism, which also reflects the historiographical interest of Luke, is the way in which salvation history is placed in the context of world history, using chronological references to key events, most famously in 2:1–2.

Luke's historical orientation means that the end of time is no longer perceived as imminent. Compared to the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke weakens the apocalyptic elements and "stage props" and reinforces a parenetic thrust aimed at conversion and perseverance. In this sense Luke-Acts is an early reflection of how Christians accommodate themselves to a prolonged life in a world whose termination is suspended. As the believers are sustained by the memories of God's action in the past and guided by the Spirit in the present, eschatological excitement is tempered by parenetic reasoning and philosophical discourse.

Ascetic discipline

This does not mean that the Gospel of Luke entertains an ethos marked by worldly compromises and a convenient lifestyle. Luke shares the tradition common to all the gospels about family conflict and the transfer of traditional family ties and kinship terms to the community of "those who hear the word of God and keep it." This Synoptic ethos of abandonment is not easily reconciled with the reinforcement of conventional household virtues in some of the Pauline and post-Pauline letters. Luke's version (8:19–21) may be more inclusive of Jesus' mother and brothers, but even they are redefined by virtue of changed requirements.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is in fact cast both as a prophet and as an exemplary disciple. Motherhood is shaped by discipleship and discipleship by motherhood. She is among the small ones, the lowly on whom God has looked with favor (1:48); in response to the messenger's word about the overshadowing of the Spirit (1:35), Mary presents herself as the maidservant of the Lord and a prototype of those obedient to God's will. This is further marked by the way in which she listens to the divine messages, treasures them up in her heart, and ponders on them (2:18–19; 2:51). Mary's role is converted prototypically from the conventional rights of a mother to a motherhood constituted by the fruitful reception of the word of God (8:21; 11:27–28). This is not limited to her but becomes a possibility for all women followers who receive the seed of God's word and bear its fruit.

In Luke the common Synoptic ethos of voluntary abandonment is intensified to an

ascetic discipline where sexual renunciation is essential. The philosophical influence of a form of Stoicism in the literary characterization of main figures was already mentioned above. But there is in Luke a remarkable absence of common philosophical terms. Passion or desire is not how Luke would name the evil. The evil is rather named in mythological terms. Only by the intervening action of Jesus, his healing touch, can people in bondage be released from sin and enslavement, that is, from the power of Satan and the demons. In Luke's Gospel the healing narratives typically involve exorcism so that they take on the character of a liberating act. This reflects a worldview marked primarily by cosmological dualism rather than anthropological dualism, and it corresponds to a relocation of the role of asceticism in Luke's adaptation of a Stoic paradigm. Well-being is not achieved by personal discipline but by divine intervention. Such discipline is transferred from playing a role in the achievement of salvation to becoming an ongoing care for the soul. By means of daily exertion the Christian may counter the many threats to perseverance. The list of remedies include prayer, alertness, and breaking the grip of desire for possessions, for family, even for life itself.

Perseverance makes sense only if it leads somewhere, and in Luke ultimate survival is the willingness to give up life to gain life immortal. The ascetic ethos of abandonment in Luke represents a way in which the goal itself may be proleptically reflected and even realized. The ascetics already live according to the requirements of the life to come, they are "the children of the resurrection." In this perspective, some ascetic features are especially important as a sign of the heavenly life, that is, of immortality. What did Noah's generation do wrong (17:20–37)? There is nothing to indicate heedlessness; they were engaged in normal, everyday activities aiming at preserving life and securing their future. If this is subject to judgment, the implication must be that the usual strategy for survival is inadequate. In the parenetic exhortation Luke has included a special variant of the logion about keeping life by losing it (17:33). Human beings can ultimately not secure their life; only those willing to lose it will keep it.

The Lukan version of Jesus' dispute with the Sadducees about the resurrection (20:27–40) is developed into a treatise on the ethos of resurrection and immortality. Abstention from marriage is a specific sign of an angel-like immortality, and is as such a state of constant eschatological readiness. The eschatological focus in Luke is transferred from the future to the present, but this present life is marked by an assimilation to the life of the eschaton. Asceticism becomes a way of life whereby the eschatological excitement is both suspended and maintained. To Lutheran ears these may be very disturbing words given our traditional emphasis on marriage and family. But it does explain why the Gospel of Luke was favored among later ascetics in the church, and a later Anti-Marcionite prologue to the Gospel alleged that Luke himself died childless and without a wife.

Women in Luke-Acts

In the early church many women were attracted by an ascetic life, as it offered an alternative to their submission in marriage and family. It is therefore not surprising that the most ascetic gospel has more material about women than any other New Testament writing. Whether this is another expression of Luke's concern for the poor and marginalized, or of his universalism, or an example of the success of Christian

preaching among the noble and well off, is a matter of debate. All these aspects are present in the stories. However, most of the women appear to be peculiarly independent, acting and speaking in their own right.

This has led interpreters to think these women must be widows, since Luke shows an interest in widows that is matched only by the Pastoral Letters. We catch a glimpse of how the early church, inspired by Judaism, established a system of providing for widows (Acts 6:11; 9:39ff.). But while the Pastoral Letters are concerned about limiting this privilege and its costs, Luke is supportive. In his Gospel the term "widow" itself has kept a traditional denotation of devastation, poverty, and vulnerability. But the interest in widows is not narrowly determined by motifs of care and compassion. They appear to form a special and respected group always portrayed in a positive light. They transcend the role of victims and recipients and act in such a way that they become prominent examples of faith and piety—of prayer, sacrifice, and perseverance. The ideal widow is Anna (2:36–38), who is also a prophetess.

One of Luke's compositional features is parallel patterns, part of which are "gender pairs" in discourse and narrative material. Typical and dense examples are the parable of the man who sows a mustard seed, which is paired with the parable of a woman who hides leaven in the dough; the parable of the shepherd with the lost sheep corresponds to the parable of the women with the lost coin. In the infancy narratives Mary and Zechariah constitute such a gender pair, as do Simeon and Anna. The gender complementarity of epic material is consistent with the explicit mention of both men and women among those who follow Jesus. Perhaps this might reflect the social organization of the Lukan community in that it retained a gender divide where each group kept to its own sphere of life. The men went public, the women stayed (with a few exceptions) in the private sphere.

However, there is no doubt that in addition to the Twelve, a group of women also followed Jesus (Lk 8:1–3). The continuous presence and witness of the "women from Galilee" constitute the link between Jesus' ministry, his crucifixion, and the initial message of his resurrection at the empty tomb. But as the story of the empty tomb clearly states (24:9–11), the women's witness is met with men's disbelief and mistrust. In Acts women appear merely on the margin of a narrative that occupies itself primarily with the Christian witness in a public realm where visibility and accountability were a male prerogative.

This intrinsic ambiguity in Luke-Acts with regard to the place of women has made it a battleground for feminist discussion. Some claim that Luke included more traditions from women than most New Testament writers and gave them a rare visibility in a variety of roles. Others claim as strongly that his strategy was to silence and subordinate women, thereby effectively contributing to the oppression of women in the church.

The interpretation of the story about Martha and Mary (10:38–42) exemplifies this conflict. The active and serving Martha contrasts with her sister Mary who listens in silence to the words of the Lord. Some interpreters read this story as a rebuke of Martha and thereby of women's leadership functions in the house churches, especially at the Eucharist (*diakonia*). Instead, the silent and passive Mary is commended by Luke as the ideal female disciple. Clearly, the story sets a priority in a situation of conflict. But the conflict is not between hearing and serving but between hearing and agitated, troubled toil attempting to meet the demands of hospitality. The

cause of the problem is not Martha's service but her wish that Mary should assist her, thereby challenging Mary's choice. The implication is that, when conflicting interests develop, devotion to the word has priority over menial preoccupation. Indeed, the general requirement of a disciple, man or woman, is to "hear the word of God and do it" (8:21).

Diakonia

Another key issue in Luke-Acts is *diakonia*. Recent research has convincingly shown that the root meaning of the term in the Greek language is not to humbly serve at tables but rather to be a go-between, a messenger, someone with a commission to say or do something. The lowliness or honor of the task will vary according to the status of the sender and other circumstances.

However, in the Gospel of Luke, the service at table or providing for the needs of others seems to be the key connection (4:39; 8:3; 12:25–48; 17:7–10)—perhaps also reflecting the fact that food and meals are important in this Gospel. First, women are described as serving and then slaves/servants who wait on their master. But finally, in 22:24–27, Jesus waits on his disciples at the Last Supper. Leaders in the people of God should take a lead from those who serve rather than from those being served. Jesus sets himself as an example for his disciples: he is among them as one who serves.

The implications for Christian leadership are not that servants now should rule. Luke rather advocates a pattern of value reversal: the leaders should be like those who serve. The small word "like" modifies a potential social revolt and introduces a long and difficult rhetorical tradition in the Christian churches when the exercise of power has cloaked itself in the guise of service. But in the Lukan context there is always a resonance of the radical reversal, initially voiced in the Magnificat (1:46–56), where Mary prophetically proclaims a divine turnover of social order, distinctions, and status. Luke struggles to modify this into a *modus vivendi*. Yet the initial programmatic proclamation is maintained in the Gospel as the sounding board or normative test point for any modification.

Luke advocates a pattern of value reversal: the leaders should be like those who serve.

The poor and the outcast

There is no doubt that Luke has a special compassion for the poor and outcast. The Magnificat makes this clear, but Jesus' public ministry begins programmatically with a speech (4:16–30) in the synagogue at Nazareth, proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. In liberation theology this has become a key passage. Both Mary's Magnificat and Jesus' keynote speech are citations from Scripture now being implemented, and yet many find them hard to accept.

Does the Gospel according to Luke primarily speak to the poor to comfort and reassure them of their worth for God and their right to their fair share? If Theophilus is the first reader, he would most probably be a man of means. It seems more convinc-

ing that the gospel conveys a message to both rich and poor. It may comfort and encourage the poor, but the primary target group is the rich. They are confronted with the indispensable requirement to provide for the need of all. Poverty as such is not an ideal, despite Luke's asceticism; the issue is rather one of solidarity and justice. Some passages confront the practice of bad leaders (11:42–44; 21:45–47), who show off in the eyes of people, claim honor, and then exploit others when they cannot control their greed.

Poverty as such is not an ideal, despite Luke's asceticism; the issue is rather one of solidarity and justice.

Luke's Gospel envisages a redistribution of goods. Meals are not simply about nourishment but about social interaction and community. The Gospel relies on Jewish traditions about the messianic banquet, and eating is a metaphor for the joy, justice and satisfaction of the realm of God. The teaching about meal etiquette and hospitality (14:7–24) presupposes a practice of reciprocity. Nothing was given without the expectation of a return. Against this Jesus insists on an inclusive practice, where hospitality is offered to those outside the social boundaries of polite society without expecting a return from those invited—not even in the form of gratitude and praise. Ultimately, however, the benefactor will be repaid by God, who is the great benefactor and source of all gifts. In this manner God is the protector of the poor and the needy, and all gratitude is to be directed toward God. God's benefaction balances the accounts so that practices of reciprocities within the community no longer make sense. One main characteristic of the first, ideal community in Jerusalem is a sharing of possessions where everyone receives according to need (Acts 2:44ff.; 4:34ff.). This is an implementation of the divine reversal where benefaction happens without expecting a return from those who benefit. Because of God's compassion and justice, human community can change.

Advent's Pregnant Watch

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As the play *Agamemnon* opens, the dim stage seems empty. Slowly, a prostrate figure comes into view, raising his head to speak about his lonely, boring ritual of keeping watch. He is one of a string of watchers around the clock—watchers who wait for the coming of the light on a distant hill. There, another watcher waits for the light on an even more distant hill, where another watcher waits to see another distant light.

This beacon-chain, stretching from Greece across the blue Aegean to Troy, is the early warning system set up by the Greek queen Klytemnestra to warn her and her lover of the return of her husband Agamemnon, the Greek commander at the Trojan War. No one, the watchman tells us, talks about how much they hate the new royal couple, who have usurped Agamemnon's throne and threatened any challengers. The watchman knows things that he could talk about but is frightened into silence; he says, "an ox stands huge upon / my tongue."[1]

Hamlet also opens with a watchman scene, where the terror of seeing the recently dead King's ghost the previous night has made the sentinels jumpy. The opening line, "Who's there?" elicits a testy response—"Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself"—and then an ironic "Long live the King!" These watchmen are "sick at heart," and none wants to be left alone to face again the "dreaded sight."[2]

Neither scene leaves us long in mystery. The watchman in Aeschylus' Greek tragedy is shocked to see the long-awaited beacon-light appear even as he speaks, and suddenly his fear takes palpable shape. The watchmen in Shakespeare's play just begin to recount their previous sightings when the mute ghost eerily appears in full armor, "harrow[ing them] with fear and wonder."[3]

These are the scenes that flash to my inward eye as I sing, "The watchmen on the heights are crying; / Awake, Jerusalem, at last" (*LBW* #31). What the hymn's watchmen actually hear are "welcome voices" and a "thrilling cry." The "light" that has "stirred the waiting guard" signals God's miraculous coming to human flesh.

Nevertheless, I am not happy with the military watchmen—who spy on, guard against, and violently encounter a presumed enemy. I am not happy with this as meta-

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[1] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Richmond Lattimore, *Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), ll. 35–36.

[2] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Edward Hubler (New York: New American Library Signet, 1987), I.i.1–3, 25.

[3] I.i.44.

phor for our spiritual "watch" of Advent. The watchmen on the height, for me, are too tied up in stereotypical gender roles: what archetypal men must do to get ready for things is to stand on a high place, pull a spear or a gun, and watch out for danger.

Still, I am also not happy with the hymn's metaphorical version of women's "watch": we are to be maidens with full oil lamps, waiting until the bridegroom arrives to call the shots, telling us whether we are in the wedding party, whether we are prepared enough for the celebration. The gendered message here is that archetypal women should be young, powerless, and ready, waiting for that man to come and start the action: ask us out, propose marriage, make the laws, rule the country.

The bridesmaids in this parable, in my view, appear to lack what literary critics call "agency"—the human ability to choose and to act independently. These bridesmaids are so passive that they are, in fact, asleep. Some are readier than others, but all must simply wait. Other interpreters of this story have calmed me considerably when they argue that it is the *being there*, the *waiting*, that is crucial for us as Christians—being saved by God's grace rather than by the good works of getting our oil lamps filled and trimmed just in time. But I am still bothered by the image.

And so now you think I will have an androgynous metaphor to offer up—one that blasts these constricting gender roles out of the water. I don't. But I have an image that I find more compelling. When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary in Luke's account (1:26–56), she is at her business when he suddenly appears and says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary is "perplexed," and, as Luke says, she "pondered what sort of greeting this might be." She doesn't speak right away, but she's actively thinking. This is not the first time that Mary "ponders" things in the Gospels. Mary as active listener thinks about how the words *work* as well as what they say. But Mary as literary critic is not my metaphor, alas—much as I might have personal reasons to want it to be.

In what sense, Mary probably wonders, can I be called "favored one," and in what sense is the Lord "with" me? But Gabriel leaps in to comfort, just as the angels will comfort the shepherds nine months later: "Do not be afraid." Gabriel tells Mary what ranks as the most shocking news ever heard: though she is a virgin, she will bear a child who not only will "be great," but will be "the Son of the Most High," ruling over David's throne and Jacob's house forever. "Nothing is impossible with God," Gabriel concludes, informing Mary also of her barren cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Now, pregnancy as a metaphor for the Advent watch is an image I find more promising. It's true that men don't get pregnant, but until the twentieth century, women weren't watchmen or soldiers. Not all women get pregnant, either, but Mary's pregnancy removes our metaphor from human biological realities: there's no necessary ovulation, no penetration, no desperate rivalry among the millions of sperm to fertilize that one egg. Instead, Mary becomes pregnant by listening to words. In my favorite medieval illuminated manuscript, a long, furling ribbon of gilded letters enters Mary's ear, the ribbon bearing Gabriel's words scripted in pen by a medieval monk or nun. The word impregnates her ear to conceive the child.

Why is pregnancy my metaphor for the Advent watch? First, in pregnancy there is an active waiting, a certainty that something will happen—a different kind of certainty than fearful watchmen or impatient bridesmaids feel. That awaited something

might be fearsome and wonderful; it might be terrifying and tragic. But something will assuredly happen. Some pregnancies end prematurely, with sadness and loss. Some end in tragedy that almost blinds us. Still, pregnancy assures us that something will happen, just as Advent assures us that its end will come. And for most of us pregnancy is a hopeful watch—for fathers and mothers who await, alert and serene, a coming which they do not understand, the effects of which they cannot predict.

Mary does not sit around waiting with her lamps. First, she chooses to actively answer Gabriel, and again she draws attention to the facts that she has heard *words* that tell her what will happen, and that she has made a choice: "Let it be with me," she says, "according to your *word*" (Lk 1:38, emphasis mine). Mary then rushes out to the country to share her news with her older cousin. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, she feels the child in her womb leap for joy and proclaims it a sign: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus." Then she adds: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Elizabeth's words suggest that Mary's only at-home pregnancy test was her belief in the words she heard. And Elizabeth needs only Mary's hello to fill her pregnant womb with faith.

The serenity of *our* watch, like Mary's and Elizabeth's, can only come from a certainty which no chemical test can give; no visible evidence or logical proofs can declare its validity. Like that of Elizabeth's unborn child, it is a leap of faith. We can only serenely listen to the word and be alert to the spirit as it moves in us like an unborn child. We must trust that word; it's all we have.

We cannot know what our pregnancy will bring any more than Jesus' mother could predict that the water jugs she held would suddenly spill forth wine. We cannot know any more than Mary and Martha could guess that their dead brother would suddenly come stalking out from the death-cave; not any more than Jairus could imagine that his lifeless daughter would sit up, rub her eyes, and gaze at him again. We cannot know what will happen any more than old Sarah could predict the laughable reality that her shriveled womb could spring to fetal life. But all these believers were watchful in their serenity, pregnant with hope, and open to God's unpredictable, mysterious coming.

Elizabeth's words suggest that Mary's only at-home pregnancy test was her belief in the words she heard.

Of course, it is a rare thing for us to see the dead come to life. I remember the three-day watch at my father's coma-bed almost ten years ago. It was a watch that was alert for death, rather than for birth. The whole family, twenty of us—my mother, her children, in-laws, grandkids—we all sat watch by his bed, sometimes individually, sometimes together—reading Psalms aloud, singing hymns, communally praying and weeping.

But it was a pregnant watch: we were serene in our sense of God's closeness and of my father's good-news faith; we watched for the end, full of hope that that end would

really be a beginning. "And when the time came for [him] to be delivered," my father died to us. But we—blinking like shocked watchmen who have seen a ghost—felt him being born into a new infancy.

Some watches feel more like militant guarding or weak waiting than like active readiness, I know—partly because we do not know what is coming any more than did the Bethlehem shepherds on that lonely hill. Sudden destruction can come, as Paul says in 2 Thessalonians, "like a thief in the night," can come, he says, "as *labor pains come upon a pregnant woman*, and there will be no escape" (1 Thess 5:2–3; emphasis mine).

Here, even the pregnancy image is terrifying, but Paul goes on, and it is crucial to listen to the words that follow: "But you beloved," he says, "are not in darkness for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake" (1 Thess 5:4–6).

And for what are we watching in Advent—serenely alert, awake, filled with hope? For the birth of the swaddled infant, for spirit that might live within Hamlet's "quintessence of dust," for light in darkest tragedy, for faith despite death. "Behold," as Handel's great recitative sings out, "I *tell* you a mystery." We must remember, then, that though we may feel fear and doubt, *no ox stands huge upon our tongues*. We are watchful, pregnant with a mystery we—always alert and serene—must continue to "tell," a mystery for which we must continue to find words that conceive births.

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Book Reviews

The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary. By Arland J. Hultgren. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000. xxix and 522 pages. Cloth. $35.00.

What C. H. Dodd did to help a previous generation understand the parables of Jesus, Arland J. Hultgren bids to do for a new generation in this superb treatment of those parables. *The Parables of Jesus* is the inaugural volume in Eerdmans' series on "The Bible and Its World," edited by David Noel Freedman. The author is Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

According to Hultgren, "A parable is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between God's kingdom, actions, or expectations and something in this world, real or imagined." With that working definition Hultgren counts thirty-eight parables in the Synoptic Gospels. He groups the parables into seven categories: parables of the revelation of God, parables of exemplary behavior, parables of wisdom, parables of life before God, parables of final judgment, allegorical parables, and parables of the kingdom. For each parable there is a fresh translation, notes on the text and translation, an exegetical commentary, and an exposition.

Hultgren points out that, in addition to the crucifixion of Jesus, the second undisputed fact about Jesus is that he taught in parables. Anyone who preaches or teaches using the church's lectionaries has to come to terms with Jesus' parables. Hultgren's book is a rich resource for understanding the parables in general and for providing commentary and insight on individual parables in particular.

Hultgren's treatment of the parables is balanced. While allowing for the fact that the evangelists used Jesus' parables for their literary purposes, he argues cogently for Jesus as their source. While agreeing that it was wrong for interpreters in the past to treat the parables as allegories, he points out that there are allegorizing features in the parables; for example, the picture of a king or a shepherd would necessarily have been a metaphor for God for those who heard Jesus' parables.

A bonus in this volume is its treatment of the parables in the Gospel of Thomas and its analysis of the significance of that more recently discovered text. The volume includes extensive notes, bibliographies, and indexes.

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Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology. By John J. Pilch. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. xiii and 180 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Pilch, well-known advocate for a social scientific reading of the New Testament, and Professor of Biblical Studies at Georgetown, has collected for publication a series of his articles on healing in the New Testament. Material selected for this volume includes three chapters on a social scientific interpretation of healing in the New Testament (pp. 1–56) and then one each on the four Gospels (pp. 57–140). In addition Pilch offers discussion questions for each chapter (pp. 145–50), a useful, even necessary, glossary (pp. 151–59), and an extensive bibliography.

Pilch probably intended in the first three chapters to introduce the reader to medical anthropology and then apply that to each Gospel. While that would be a useful intention, I must admit his general discussion of anthropology throughout provides more insight than his discrete analysis of each Gospel.

Pilch argues, correctly in my opinion, that we cannot understand healing in the New Testament from a modern perspective. He starts with the distinction made by others (Malina, Neyrey, Crossan) between a medicocentric definition of sickness as a biological disease and a social anthropological definition of ill health as a social

illness (pp. 24–25). Jesus' healing narratives cannot be understood as the curing of disease but must be understood as the correction of social deviance (illness).

In the Mediterranean world of Jesus there were three taxonomies of illness: (1) those based on spirit possession; (2) those based on symbolic body zones; and (3) those based on purity and impurity (pp. 103–12). Pilch does very little with demon possession, except to say most cultures assume illness can be caused by an outside power. In the second taxonomy he argues that the healing of specific body parts actually reflects the healing of socially significant body zones. So healing of eyes and ears cures problems of perception and attitude. Healing of hands and feet cures problems of inappropriate action and behavior. Even more symbolic, impurities of a person's body (e.g., leprosy or a flow of blood) are mirrored in the community (corporate body) so that cure of the community depends on the exclusion of or cure of the afflicted person.

At times Pilch overplays his hand. For example, his distinction between three types of healers—professional, popular, and folk—seems strained as far as the Jesus material is concerned (pp. 77–86). What he calls popular and folk both deal with the social definition of illness. But used with a slight amount of caution every reader of the New Testament should be aware of this kind of study.

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Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence? By Lee I. Levine. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999. xiii and 227 pages. Paper. $24.95.

A half century ago the question was whether Judaism was or was not strongly influenced by Hellenism. Today, as Prof. Lee Levine makes clear, the question is not whether but to what degree and in what ways Judaism appropriated Hellenism. Levine first surveys earlier scholarly answers to these questions. He carefully distinguishes influence from assimilation. Then he discusses three test cases: Second Temple Jerusalem, Rabbinic Judaism in its Roman-Byzantine Orbit, and the Synagogue, illuminating each.

In the case of Jerusalem he finds Hellenistic influence in architecture (monumental graves, the Herodian temple, upper class houses), numismatics, entertainment structures (theater, amphitheater, hippodrome), ossuaries, general knowledge of Aramaic and Greek (to a lesser degree Hebrew, and minimal Latin), polis political structure. Jerusalem was both the most Jewish and most Hellenized of Palestinian cities.

In the case of Rabbinic Judaism he considers hermeneutical rules, the ketubah, the Passover seder, and the differing attitudes toward Greek sculpture (idolatrous in a Greek or Roman temple, mere decoration in a public bath!). He finds evidence of borrowing from Hellenism in each of these. In similar fashion he finds that the synagogue adopted aspects of Graeco-Roman architecture (atrium forecourt, for example), decorative motifs (in tessellated floors, use of the Helios figure and the signs of the zodiac), and in the synagogue liturgy. He also makes clear how a distinctive Jewish aspect ran through each of these appropriations. Sexes were not seated separately, and there was no developing hierarchy to lead synagogue worship.

All of this is done with extensive documentation, useful black-and-white illustrations, and helpful bibliography. Clearly written, with careful attention to divergent scholarly opinions, Christian scholars should pay attention to his work. It will enrich their understanding of the world in which a messianic Jewish sect developed into the Christian Church.

Edgar Krentz

Preaching Helps

Ash Wednesday—The Vigil of Easter
Series C

On the Road Again

In the spring of the year 587, two monks emerged from the monastery of Mar Theodosius outside of Bethlehem. That monastery (rebuilt at the end of the nineteenth century) still today marks the spot where the wise men are said to have rested on the first leg of their journey back to Persia after having honored the Christ Child with their precious gifts. John Moschos set off from Mar Theodosius with his pupil Sophronius. Their intent was to travel through the whole world of Byzantine monasticism, collecting the wisdom of all the monks and nuns they could find. John set down the results of their travels in a book called *The Spiritual Meadow*. John prefaced his book with these words: "From among the holy men, monks and hermits of the Empire, I have plucked the finest flowers of the unmown meadow and worked them into a crown which I now offer."

John and Sophronius traveled at a time when Constantinople still ruled vast stretches of Egypt and the Middle East. But in a few short years (614) a Persian army was to sweep through the Holy Land, torching most of its churches and monasteries, including Mar Theodosius. The skulls of the monks killed by the Persians are still displayed at the monastery in an ancient cave. The Byzantines were to beat back the Persians, but a new power, unknown to Persians or Byzantines of the year 614, loomed on the horizon. Sophronius in his later years was to become the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and he surrendered the Holy City in 638 to the invading Muslim Arab army under Caliph Omar. The Middle East was forever changed.

British writer William Dalrymple found himself fascinated with John's account of his travels, and in 1994 he set off to visit all the places that John wrote about nearly 1,400 years ago, meditating on John's adventures and his own as he went. Dalrymple has written an engaging and brilliant account of his journeying in his book, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (Henry Holt, 1997).

Dalrymple's book makes excellent Lenten reading. He talks in wonderful detail of the disciplines of ancient monks. Some of it must strike any modern reader simply as bizarre. Simeon and others lived for most of their adult lives on top of pillars and were therefore called "stylites." Some of their contemporaries took quite literalistically words of Jesus about being like the birds of the air. They constructed nests in trees and lived in those nests, earning the title "dendrites." In Jerusalem, Dalrymple heard of a monk living today—not 1,400 years ago—who compels his cats to observe Lent. He severely cuts back on their food with the result that a terrible meowing goes up for 40 days and 40 nights. And then there were and there are those who agree with St. Jerome that bathing is a pagan custom and that the washing we received when we were taken up into Christ is quite sufficient.

Space does not permit rehearsing Dalrymple's many acute observations on the terrors perpetrated by one religious or ethnic community against another not in the distant past but in the twentieth century in the lands visited long ago by John and Sophronius. Turks, Armenians, Syrians, Lebanese, Israelis, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Egyptians of every sort (secular, Catholic, Orthodox, Maronite, Muslim, Jew, and Copt) more frequently struggle against one another than with one another in a common cause. But Dalrymple's vivid story-telling reminds us, if we need reminding, of humanity's need for a season of repentance and renewal on a grand scale.

I don't know anyone who is likely to get on the road and travel the same route taken by John Moschos and William Dalrymple. But we are all of us on the road, journeying. Dalrymple's book can be read for the sheer enjoyment of reading a good book, or it can serve the preacher as a spiritual meadow from which many interesting flowers can be gathered.

Besides John and William we have two contemporaries named Peter to help us as we travel and teach and preach our way through Lent. **Peter W. Marty** is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, a 2,900 member congregation in Davenport, Iowa. After graduating from The Colorado College in 1980, Pastor Marty spent two years in Cameroun, West Africa, serving as the director of building crews for the Lutheran Church of Cameroun. Returning to the States, he entered Yale Divinity School and earned the M.Div. (cum laude) in 1985.

He writes that his homiletical habit is to jot down the first thing that catches his eye in a text. That's what he calls "First Observation." Then he searches for other arresting material and notes it in "Second Observation." Sometimes he can spot a connection between his first and second observations, and sometimes he cannot. He grants that these beginning glances, though they are more than casual, do not always lead him to big things! He then meditates on his observa-

tions and takes another long hard look at the text. What he sees at this point is what he describes in "A Final Look." I think you will agree that he has great eyesight!

Our second contributor named Peter is **Peter W. Rehwaldt**. I have enlisted him to write a brief paragraph for each of the Sundays of the year. Once again, as in the last issue, Peter Rehwaldt mulls over "faces" and plays with many of our idioms as he meditates on texts. Second Peter is aiding and abetting the work of *Preaching Helps* in other ways as well, thinking with me about contributors and format and other issues. If you have suggestions for him or for me, please send them to me at *rsmith@plts.edu* or write to me at PLTS.

I am grateful to Peter Marty and to Peter Rehwaldt for their willingness to share their thoughts and wrestlings with all the rest of us. Many thanks to both of them. And good traveling along the Lenten pathway to all of you.

Yours,

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Ash Wednesday
February 28, 2001

Psalm 51:1–18
Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
or Isaiah 58:1–12
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

First Observation

Joel's little word "rend" grabs my eye. "*Rend* your hearts and not your garments," says the prophet. Now, when is the last time you heard a child say to another child, "Hey, let's go do some rending, Sam!" It is certainly not a household word where I live. I've *rent*ed apartments and *rend*ezvoused with friends. But for the life of me I can't recall the last time I've done some good old-fashioned rending. So what's the prophet up to with this admonition?

Rending one's clothes was part of ancient lament liturgies. If you tear off something as near and dear to you as your own clothes, you are obviously in a pitiful state. At least the appearance of your suddenly naked body would indicate some measure of depravity or shame or hopelessness. Who knows, you might even be open to the workings of God if you are willing to let go of that which brings so much security, something as immediate as your clothing. To rend is to tear violently. It is to forcibly remove whatever happens to be in the way. There is nothing gentle about rending.

But in addressing the serious pain and calamity that is affecting his community of faith—a crisis of which scholars may never know the details—Joel has a fresh idea. He encourages the people to leave the stitches in their shirts. Keep your socks in one piece. Spare the world your nakedness! Instead, the prophet asks his troubled people to tear out something more insidious, more beguiling. They are to go aggressively after the source of their sins. They are to rend their *hearts*. They are to unseat that which is providing their waywardness too much comfort. Preachers should note, however, that this appeal to excise the sinful heart comes only *after* Joel's plea for the people to come around and come home. "Return to me," says the Lord. For God "is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness" (JB). This call home is not a dreaded trip to the principal's office. This is the gift of a fresh start from a God who wants to bring life out of death. Consciousness of the beauty of this gift will do far more to get us turned around than will any disgust over the sickness of our sin. Joel seems to understand this ordering difference. A preacher can highlight it.

Second Observation

If Joel leaves the people to determine for themselves what the nature of their alienation from God is—he never mentions a specific sin—Jesus is more direct. Matthew 6 is full of sharp command. Count the imperatives from Jesus and make note of how many times this reading uses the word "not," as in what we are *not* supposed to be and do. Jesus doesn't want us deceiving ourselves, believing that the appearance of faith is the same as the substance of faith. Theatrical displays of piety, trumpeted generosity, trust in material treasure—these all imply that we have mastered our relationship with God. They hint that faith is something we can figure out, manage, and even flaunt. There is no more spiritual growth to be had if people can *see* how religious they already are. Right? What these self-deceptions amount to are coverings for what God is fully aware of. God knows our penchant for tricking ourselves into believing that we are better than we are.

Ash Wednesday is the day for religiously

inclined people to get perspective on themselves. It's our chance to be candid about our human tendency toward self-deception. Speaking to God one day about his own self-deception, St. Augustine had this to say: "You placed me in front of myself, and thrust me before my own eyes, so that I might find my own iniquity and hate it. I knew what it was, but pretended not to. I refused to look at it. And I put it out of my memory." Ash Wednesday comes around every 365 days so we don't end up putting too many important things out of our memory.

A Final Look

A woman in our congregation had a most romantic idea of spreading her sister's ashes. She was going to go out with her family on a great blue-sky day, boat out to the middle of the summer cabin lake, and sprinkle Ellen's ashes gloriously into the wind. My friend either grossly miscalculated the wind, or she underestimated the uncooperative nature of ashes. But in a matter of seconds she and her family were covered with soot. It got into their eyes, blanketed their hair, and turned their sweaters a misty gray. I think she learned that day that ashes are not only messy. They're imposing. They get in the way of a good day. They leave a residue that can spoil the best makeup job.

If it weren't for the imposition of ashes, this Wednesday might look like any other Wednesday. We might go on living as blind as any other Wednesday. But as it stands, ashes on this day give us the chance to get some new perspective on ourselves. They provide a fresh excuse to look in the mirror and speak to God just like St. Augustine once did. If his words don't work for you, choose words that do: "Pardon my foolishness. But I'd like to start over again, Lord." Or, "I know America is a free country. But I am still in bondage to sin and can't feel real freedom, as hard as I try."

In D. H. Lawrence's poem, "Phoenix," there are these lines: "Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, canceled, made nothing? Are you willing to be made nothing? Dipped into oblivion? If not, you will never really change." Ash Wednesday may be for many of us the most uncomfortable day of the year. And it's the ashen soot that tells us something is not right. But if we're willing to erase all of the self-deception that keeps clogging our pores, we just might experience a beautiful capacity to change. PWM

Faces

"Look at the faces they put on," says Jesus. Some people disfigure their face so that you can see their piety "written all over their face." Maybe we do that because the face, the outward appearance, is so important to us. The words "showing partiality" in Acts 10:34 translate a Greek word that literally means "regarding the face" (προσωπολήμπτης). But God, we are told time and again, is the "knower of hearts" (καρδιογνώστης, Acts 1:24; 15:8), the One who sees beyond and below the surface. What does Jesus see as he faces us? PWR

First Sunday in Lent
March 4, 2001

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

First Observation

You can conduct an interesting experiment. Ask a Christian friend of yours to define what a temptation is. Follow that up by asking the same person to tell you what they know of the biblical story where Jesus was tempted. As for the second question, chances are they'll know at least the memorable stone-to-bread line. They may know the other two offers from the devil as well, and the location of the event. As for the first question, you're likely to hear all about the dastardly and wicked nature of temptation. What's odd about these responses? They're incongruous. Our common impression that temptation is ugly and evil does not correspond with the attractive and appealing offers of goodness that the devil plants in the ears of Jesus. Our inclination is to think of temptation as sin. This is "Temptation Sunday" in the minds of many preachers. But let's not get confused. Temptation is not sin. What we do with temptation is where our problems begin.

Make no mistake about it: the devil presents Jesus with three excellent offers. Each is loaded with possibility. There's not a hint of sin in any one of them. These are not invitations to murder a child, rape a neighbor, or rob the local Pizza Hut. Those would be enticements to *fall*. The devil is far more crafty than that, offering instead enticements to *rise*. It's too bad the lectionary doesn't have the Eden story to parallel our Gospel. For there the tempter does not ask, "Would you like to be as the devil?" No, the serpent says to an unsuspecting couple, "Do you want be like God?" It's an expression of upward mobility, which is exactly the incentive extended to Jesus, who now finds himself out in the middle of nowhere. No devil worth preaching about would approach a person and offer personal and social ruin. And no temptation lacking positive appeal and promise is worth calling a temptation.

Henri Nouwen says the three temptations of Jesus express three attractive compulsions that drive our quest for worldliness. Those desires—to be *relevant*, *spectacular*, and *powerful*—possess an innocent and positive look in our culture, no matter which direction we turn. The devil's coaxing manner may be ugly. But the temptations themselves are handsome.

Second Observation

Our faith takes shape in the wildernesses of life. That's where faith gets molded into something that can stand up to all the false lures that dangle freely. It's also where faith can capitulate to the collapsing pressure that emptiness causes. If you want to find out who you really are and what you're made of, lose all of the support scaffolding that props up your life. Let it go. Find out how you survive without the people and mechanisms that give you your identity. If you're the least bit human, it can be frightening. Emptiness is no fun.

I remember house-sitting in college for a couple who spent six months in Europe. The two days of orientation in their expansive home was a breeze. They walked me through every plausible crisis I could face with a detail that the building supervisor at Buckingham Palace surely never had. I knew the place so well I thought I had built it. Then they left. They boarded a plane and were gone. That night I heard noises I had never heard before. As far as I knew, packs of thieves were prying open different win-

dows and doors continuously through the night.

I've known parents who have faced a similar thing when their house is drained dry of their last child. Inexperienced empty-nesters are capable of pacing floors and double-checking locks on doors and hearing the phone ring when it's not ringing at all. Before rolling in for the night they may tiptoe into the son's or daughter's vacant room to smell the walls one more time. This is what you do when your comforts get knocked out from beneath you. You go nuts! You find out what you really miss. You discover new fears.

Paul can say in Romans 10 that faith assures us that "the Word is near you, on your *lips* and in your *heart*." This may be true and real on a good day. The trouble is that when you're out in your own particular wilderness, there is a whole lot else on your *mind*. Real hunger—gut-wrenching hunger of the forty-day variety—is not exactly cleansing. It's deadly. Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes says it can drive a person to desperate lengths. It can warp good judgment. It can radically alter one's personality. We go wild. We begin to entertain the notion that we can live without God. Little fancies become total fixations. And in the absence of our usual means of support, we find ourselves squaring off with our own egos, ambitions, and fears. No one is there to help.

A Final Look

Jesus had barely dried off from his baptism when he finds himself soaked all over again. This time it's spiritual sweat, the perspiration that shows up when there are none of your usual comforts left. Get this Son of Man alone with an empty stomach, and you have the chance to make him go nuts! That's the devil's ploy. Wrestle him to the desert floor and see if he still wants to refuse to be like God.

Eugene H. Peterson thinks one of the most impressive features of our language is our capacity to say "NO." He's awed by the power of the grammatical negative. It permits enormous freedom, Peterson writes. "Only humans can say no. Animals can't say no. Animals do what instinct dictates. The judicious, well-placed 'no' frees us from many a blind alley, many a rough detour, frees us from debilitating distractions and seductive sacrilege. The art of saying no sets us free to follow Jesus." There's a whole sermon tucked into the power of a well-placed NO. And if you're the one designing that sermon, be sure to recall the inspiration of the One who found the means to say no to every invitation to play God. As appealing as Jesus may have found those invitations to be, he was unmistakably one who "did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped." PWM

Faces

What is the face of temptation? What does real temptation look like? What face does the devil wear? Jesus faces the devil, who is armed with stones waiting to become bread, a temple ready to double as a diving board, and a mountain higher than all the dreams in the world. These do not sound like evil things. What is going on here, as Jesus and Satan go face to face? PWR

Second Sunday in Lent
March 11, 2001

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

First Observation

If you're tired of patriarchal images in the Bible for God and Christ, read no further than this Gospel lesson. But don't get excited too quickly. Jesus provides an image that's hardly the picture of maternal splendor. There is no majesty or dignity in this self-description. Jesus compares himself to a mother hen. Yes, you have read the passage correctly. This is not a textual mistake. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

I know a congregation that is working hard to develop a flashy logo for itself. Members are hoping for a symbol that would appear on everything from their yard sign to their stationery, beaming a distinctive image to the surrounding community. The pastor and design committee have high hopes for coming up with an expression that will instantly communicate "motion, energy, and vitality." Imagine what would happen if the artist took her creativity and independent judgment to new heights, jettisoning the common symbol of the Lord's cross and replacing it with the image of a chicken! Can't you see it now . . . passing motorists mistaking the church for a fried chicken outlet!

When Jesus hears that Herod the fox is out to kill him, he invokes the unsettling image of a squawking mother bird set to do battle. He foresees an imminent showdown. And a messy contest it will be. There is no way a mother hen will come away unscathed once a fox is set loose in the chicken coop. A betting person would be foolish to bet on the hen. Yet Jesus is ready to stand up to the evil and craftiness that Herod represents. He is prepared to stretch his wings out over his children, even if it means doing so on the crossbar of a tree.

This is what a hen does when she wants to protect her chicks. She spreads her wings and exposes herself to harm's way. It's the picture of vulnerability. But she also guards her offspring in the process. If you've ever seen a televised excerpt from a training tape for secret service agents, you can comprehend the picture. When the president of the United States comes under bodily threat, agents are primed to spread their arms out in birdlike fashion and immediately dive on top of the president. It's protection for another and personal exposure for oneself, all in the same move.

Second Observation

Look closely at the word *politeuma* in the Philippians text. You won't find it anywhere else in the New Testament. The NRSV translates it *citizenship*. The RSV employs a more English word, *commonwealth*. "Our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul here contrasts this beautiful heavenly citizenship with less attractive earthly forms. Bothered by the self-indulgence, boastful appetites, and materialistic tendencies of those who go wild with a sense of Christian freedom, Paul writes of a greater citizenship, one where *belonging* is fundamental.

Citizenship is more than having a country in which to reside, or a fixed address, or a house to inhabit. It is the possession of a sense of belonging. It's the eye contact a kindly employer gives a homeless person who wants the chance to earn a paycheck. It's the birthday invitation that arrives in the

hands of a little boy who has never been invited anywhere special. You matter to God. You belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Kansas City several years ago, the evening news featured an elderly woman who never paid her gas bill on time. This frail and close-to-home woman wasn't impoverished. She just refused to send in her gas bills with payment. Repeated utility company mailings to her didn't make a difference. But gas company policy required a personal visit to the house before shutting off the gas. Each time a meter reader checked on her for bill collection, she promptly paid the sum in full. One time a utility worker who noticed the pattern asked her why she never mailed in her payment. "Because you're the only visitor I ever get," she replied. Here was a woman who belonged to nobody. Her lonely existence was as good as having no citizenship, to use Paul's sense of the word.

A Final Look

In the small town of Wayne, Nebraska, people gather every year to have fun and poke fun at chickens. The annual Wayne Chicken Show even has a parade with floats. The Chickendale dancers (men in Bermuda shorts with grocery bags on their heads and beaks rubber-banded to their mouths) perform. There are clucking contests. There are food booths. The day concludes with an event where contestants see how quickly they can gather the greatest number of chicks in a box. This is no easy task. Little chicks trotting to their own individual drumbeats don't like to be gathered up.

"O Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing." Jesus laments the unwillingness of God's people to be gathered. Sometimes we don't even know what's best for ourselves. We're so busy locating God in our individual bellies (Phil 3:19), we don't care what the maker of heaven and earth has to offer in the way of a *common*-wealth. We may have a street address to our name. But that's not the same as having a sense of belonging in life to go with it. In these terms, Frederick Buechner thinks we're all a bit homeless. "To be homeless the way people like you and me are apt to be homeless is to have homes all over the place but not to be really at home in any of them. To be really at home is [to see] our lives so intricately interwoven that there can be no real peace for any of us until there is real peace for all of us." Jesus is determined to get that real peace for all of us. And he's willing to go head-to-head with a fox to make it happen. PWM

Faces

Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, and on the way he faces the foxes—foxes like Herod. And practically in the next breath Jesus is speaking of himself as a hen. Foxes are sly predators that love to get into the hen house. Hens jealously, zealously protect their brood, and everyone knows what happens when hens and foxes come face to face. But this is no ordinary hen, not by a long shot. Demons cast out, cures performed, and there's nothing any fox can do about it. What a divine joke: a hen facing down the fox! For now, anyway. PWR

Third Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2001

Psalm 63:1–8
Isaiah 55:1–9
1 Corinthians 10:1–13
Luke 13:1–9

First Observation

Prevalent in American culture today is a strong desire to have a sensible explanation for practically everything. Our Enlightenment smarts have gotten the best of us. Or our struggles with complicated suffering have become too much to bear. Either way, there are plenty of people who do not feel comfortable in their faith lives unless they can locate the reasons behind circumstances and events. Certainty is in. Complexity is out. Many of the fastest growing churches in America are known for their ability to reduce faith to an ambiguity-free level. And even in the broader Christian community, an almost superstitious form of speech has evolved around the idea of "God having a plan for every piece of my life." It is language that precludes the possibility of coincidence. Coincidence has almost become a dirty word.

Companions of Jesus in the first century were similar to us in this one important way. They wanted answers for human tragedy. They wanted to believe that there is a rhyme and reason to human misery. So it was natural to look for someone to blame when life took a nasty turn. If blame can be traced to someone or something outside of ourselves, then strangely enough we can get the impression that we're in control of our own situation. And control usually feels pretty good.

On this particular day, some companions of Jesus wanted to know if there was some obvious connection between tragedy and sin. Is there a correlation between misfortune and one's moral life? Between Pilate slaughtering some Galileans and a water tower crushing some innocent Jerusalemites, Luke covers all the bases. Human perversity and natural calamity are both considered. It seems, though, that Jesus' questioners, more than really worrying about the sins of others, are nervous about the potential for experiencing tragedy in their own righteous (translate: "good") lives. But as someone once said, "The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest the day they hung Jesus on the cross."

Second Observation

Jesus takes a desperate search for blame and turns it into a call for repentance. Then he tells a parable about divine patience. He uses a barren fig tree, of all things, to communicate his point. The point has to do with the patience of God, not with arbor care. Jesus may be eager to demonstrate that God will wait patiently for us to get past the fruitlessness of holding attitudes and beliefs that do nothing but justify our own preferences! This problem of believing whatever conveniently serves our own purposes is the subject of the verses preceding the parable. When people try to harness the unpredictability of suffering for the sake of constructing a comprehensible worldview, Jesus calls them to repentance. Then in the same breath he extends mercy to those who are slow to come around and grasp this call. He must know that old habits do not die fast.

Notice how patience is evidenced in the gardener more than in the owner of the vineyard. The gardener is the one closest to the life and possibilities of that hapless tree. The gardener is the one willing to believe against the odds. This is the way the mercy of God operates. It always comes in close to the stricken one, never at a distance. Henri Nouwen has a wonderful passage where he describes the difference between pity and

mercy. "Pity connotes distance, even looking down upon," he writes. "Mercy comes from a compassionate heart; it comes from a desire to be an equal." Jesus has no interest in looking down upon us. This is a parable of mercy. It is the story of a gardener who lives close to the soil, close to the roots of a tree that needs some patient love.

A Final Look

A parishioner lands in the hospital with an unexpected (and dangerous) illness, only to tell each visitor to her room, "I think God is trying to tell me something." One of the builders of the ill-fated Texas A & M bonfire log pile that killed nineteen people in November 1999 reported the following day, "It's a freak accident, that's all it is. God wanted it to happen so it happened."

As long as there is human suffering, people will be looking for a cause. In the case of some Galilean worshipers murdered by Pilate and some townspeople obliterated by the falling Tower of Siloam, the suggestion is made that sin in the victims is the culprit. In the case of AIDS in our day, some would like to believe it's God's packaged punishment for homosexuality. In the case of homelessness, claims of laziness and a lack of will to work often get mentioned as root causes. In the case of Ethiopian hunger, there are those who argue that "too many babies" create the suffering. Whether God or sin or something else altogether is blamed for chaos and suffering, locating a cause is what brings us comfort. Or so we think. This may be a good Sunday for preachers to explore the range of assumptions we employ to keep disappointment and a sense of unfairness at bay.

It's helpful that the lectionary includes the barren fig tree parable right after the discussion of tragedy and its cause. For in that little gardener we discover a merciful Lord. We see one who is willing to wait for us to catch up and catch on to those things that we can be so very slow to learn. PWM

Faces

The gardener wears a worried, wearied look on his face. What to do about that fruitless fig tree? With anger in his voice and on his face, the owner says, "Cut that thing out of here!" But the gardener pleads the cause of that tree. On the face of it, that tree is useless, good for nothing but chopping into kindling. What does the gardener see in that tree? PWR

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 25, 2001

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

First Observation

The story of the Prodigal Son, or the Waiting Father, as it is sometimes called, seems to pivot on verses 17 and 18. That's where the younger son shifts course and "comes to himself" or "comes to his senses," deciding to return home. In a wretched state of hunger and despair, it takes this moment of self-reckoning for him to determine the need for a new direction. Indeed he heads straight home after this mental look in the mirror. But is it a return home based on a repentant spirit? Probably not. There is no indication from the biblical text that he is interested in reconciliation. Nor is the language of repentance ever used. There is no verb to suggest any kind of Re-turning or turning around. Survival needs inspire this trek back home. The young man wants food. He needs an income. A fleeting look at the probable income of his father's servants tells him that he needs a job if he is even to come close to their standard of living. Having exhausted all possibilities in the far country, he sees his father as the best source for new employment or fresh income opportunities.

If this is true, the son is not "lost" in the ways we have typically thought of him as lost. His biggest problem is not immorality. Plenty of translations speak of "riotous and dissolute" living, as if licentiousness is his *modus operandi*. But all we know for certain is that he went through a lot of money fast. He squandered the inheritance. He was a spendthrift. His true lostness may be found in his independent spirit. Believing that he doesn't need "a home," this young man turns out to be simply lost in himself. Even when he is in dire straits, he is determined to solve his own problems. Hence the idea arises that he will go back to his father with a prepared speech about the need for employment and a better standard of living.

A *New Yorker* cartoon depicts a husband and wife whizzing down a desert road, having left home on a vacation. The husband rebuts his wife's concern about being lost: "I know we're lost. But I didn't want to say anything about it because we're making such good time." How many of us are spiritually lost and unwilling to recognize it? We hum through life, making such good time, so much money, such important decisions. Who has the time or the will or the *faith* in the midst of all of this excitement to reexamine personal lostness? Immorality may not be our thorniest problem. Lost in ourselves and our own little worlds may be. Preachers might explore these matters, peering through the life of the younger son as they do so.

Second Observation

"Lost and Found" is more than the name of the junk table in the church office where stray combs and single earrings find their home away from home. It's essential vocabulary in the Christian life. Thanks to the popularity of "Amazing Grace," everyone knows that he or she has been lost but now is found. We should remember the pattern of this wording when reading Luke 15. The coin and the sheep do not find themselves. They are found. Kenneth Bailey notes that our text does not say that the younger son "was lost and came home." No, according to the father, he "was lost and is now found." The father is the grammatical subject who does the finding. He goes to find his son. He is the one who heads out the front door to embrace the son before the kid ever has the chance to deliver his prepared speech about

needing a job. The father goes to his lost boy "while he was still far off." This is travel to the other side. This is reaching out and extending love to someone who hasn't caught on yet to the need for repentance. This is leaving home in distinct pursuit of a loved one. (We should probably revisit Helmut Thielicke's famous title, *The Waiting Father*, and offer one that conveys less passive and patient behavior.)

"God made him to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21)—my favorite summary verse of what Jesus did—is exemplified in the action of the father greeting his son. Here we see the costliness of being open to a wayward son, sacrificing one's own standard of righteousness for the sake of a loving embrace.

A Final Look

A careful reading of today's Gospel will have the preacher more interested in the character of the father than in the moral condition of the sons. In fact, this story puts to rest the many troubling distinctions we like to make between who is "good" and who is "bad." Is the older son truly good in a moral sense? Conversely, is the younger son truly bad in moral terms? It's important that we recall that the father loves these boys because of the nature of who *he* is, not who *they* are.

Dennis the Menace and his friend Joey leave Mrs. Wilson's house with arms full of cookies. They are happy and smiling. Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this?" Dennis the Menace replies, "Look, Joey. Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because *we're* nice, but because *she's* nice." Grace always comes because of the greatness of the giver. No story in the New Testament tells this truth better than this gem from Luke. PWM

Faces

What is written on the faces of tax collectors and sinners who come to Jesus in endless procession? Puzzlement? Gratitude? Joy? And what about the Pharisees and scribes? Their "game face" is disapproval and righteous indignation. And what face do we wear? PWR

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 1, 2001

Psalm 126
Isaiah 43:16–21
Philippians 3:4b–14
John 12:1–8

First Observation

One can't help but notice the lavishness of Mary's act in emptying a jar of expensive perfume onto the feet of Jesus. Other details of the story may be up for speculation. But the profusion of Mary's generosity is unarguable. There is nothing stingy about her desires and nothing half way about her affection. Everything points to extravagance and abundance, whether it's the extravagance of her love or the abundance of the perfume she pours.

It is pure nard that saturates the feet of Jesus. This is the unpasteurized variety—90 proof! John tells us it's pricey, not some discount potion that one would have splashed on casually. It's the best of the best. Judas Iscariot's sudden interest in the poor, and his knowledge of the street value of this flask in providing for such poor, indicates just how precious the ointment really is. It's obviously an enormous amount, enough to last for years under normal circumstances. (Mentioned some chapters later is the extraordinary amount of ointment—75 pounds worth! —that Nicodemus uses to embalm Jesus. John doesn't pass off anointing scenes as incidental detail.)

The story has as much warmth as it has mystery. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus are all friends of Jesus, people whom he loved. It is mealtime, and that means conviviality and fellowship at the table. And, of course, Lazarus is alive. His presence, fresh from the morgue, would have been reason enough to pull out all the stops and celebrate—lavishly. But mystery seeps into the warm celebration at hand. Jesus' own death is pending. And whether or not Mary knows fully of the glory that would result from his going away, she at least understands that Jesus' time is limited. So without speaking a single word, she simply loves him in his mortality. She dispenses a whole flask's worth of ointment, dramatizing for all who care to see, that love is stronger than death. Not a drop is left. Sweet fragrance fills the whole house. Frugality never enters Mary's thinking. She can think of no better response to God's love, embodied here in Jesus seated just inches from her nose, than to give generously without counting the cost.

Second Observation

Turning to the Isaiah and Philippians texts, if those be of interest to the preacher, there is a common thread between them worth contemplating. Both share language that possesses a forward energy, just as they suggest a reticence to look backward. (I want to stand up and read these lessons with a body tilt, leaning forward as if I were a sprinter at the finish tape or a reader falling over the lectern!) Paul's forward look stems from his deep passion for wanting to know the riches of Christ. He has a consuming desire to attain something that is not yet his—the resurrection. His words all lean to the future, pressing on, stretching ahead. They push toward a goal. Second Isaiah's forward view expresses his hope that the people of Israel might wake up to the opportunities available to them in returning to their homeland. "I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth."

What could Paul mean by "forgetting what lies behind"? He does not count his personal distinctions or assets, as magnificent as they are, to be worth anything in comparison with the righteousness Christ offers. Leave these credits behind. They're

rubbish. They're filthy. They smell like my garbage disposal does after I return from a vacation. And because Christ surpasses the best in life anyway, the things we cherish most in life should be left behind. "My richest gain I count but loss," Isaac Watts penned in his great hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

Second Isaiah frowns similarly upon looking backwards. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old," he says. As strange as this language may seem for a prophet who regularly extols the blessing of a God who rescued a whole nation from Egyptian bondage, it fits the prophet's purpose here. Now freed from Babylonian captivity, it's time for the Israelites to open their minds to the future and stop clinging dolefully to the past.

A Final Look

John's account of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany differs from the synoptic renderings in several ways. The most notable difference is the application of perfume to the feet of Jesus instead of his head. This anticipates the remarkable scene of servanthood in the following chapter when John tells of Jesus stooping to wash the disciples' feet. (Like the anointing moment, there is the smell of a meal in the background of the footwashing event as well.)

Here's something fun to contemplate: the relationship between smells and social behaviors. Alan R. Hirsch, M.D., of the Chicago-based Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation, writes of study results that suggest a correlation between smells and associations. For example, he notes that those born between 1900 and 1929 associate childhood with the smells of pine, hay, and sea air. Those born from 1930 to 1979 are more likely to associate childhood with the smells of VapoRub, scented markers, and Play-Doh. For people in whose memories of childhood the smells of body odor, dog waste, sewer gas, and bus fumes dominate, there is a pronouncedly unhappy pattern to their experience of growing up.

A preacher might play with the merits of this research—not for too long!—especially as he or she reflects on the way the sweet fragrance of Mary's perfume filled the home of Lazarus. It could be that servanthood has a sweetness associated with it that we're too quick to overlook. Inasmuch as Jesus wanted to communicate the beauty of sacrifice, and the greatness of serving others, somewhere along the way we have gotten mixed up. We have come to look upon these acts of love as inconvenient and unnecessary burdens. The gospel says otherwise. Stooping to serve others is not unwelcome drudgery. It's supposed to be complete joy. Mary's lavish behavior, complete with her perfume still scenting the pages of our Bibles, can remind us to reexamine our servant ways. Think about it. PWM

Faces

Jesus comes face to face with his own dying. In a shocking breach of after-dinner etiquette, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfumes and then bends her face to the ground and wipes his feet with her own hair. Somehow she penetrates his secret, and he fends off his disciples who could see no deeper than the surface of her action. PWR

Palm/Passion Sunday
April 8, 2001

Psalm 31:9–16
Isaiah 50:4–9a
Philippians 2:5–11
Luke 23:1–49

First Observation

Many of the great passages of Scripture explode with even greater meaning when the verbs get scooped up and examined. Take Philippians chapter 2 as a prime example. The verbs become the key to understanding the power of this memorable passage. He "emptied himself," he "humbled himself," he "became obedient." *He*, of course, refers to Jesus.

Long ago someone taught me to think of Jesus' life in terms of two stages. Rightly or wrongly in this division, the first stage of his life was filled with activity and charged with initiative. He preached and he healed. He traveled and he spoke. The second stage is what happened to him after he was handed over to the authorities. This segment of life, known distinctly as "the passion," is when Jesus became the recipient of other people's actions. Among their many behaviors, they arrested, charged, crowned, and eventually crucified him. He was "passive," acted upon, usually in situations well beyond his personal control.

What is interesting about this passion experience of Jesus is that he *did* act in one important way. He chose the identity he would assume in the midst of other people managing his life and designing his suffering. We learn in these beautiful words from Paul that he emptied himself to take the form of a slave, when by all right and reason he had the opportunity to assume full equality with God. This was to be his identity. Jesus renounced every privilege and advantage that would have come along with being created in the form of God. In the words of J. B. Lightfoot, "he divested himself of the prerogatives of God." This relinquishing of divine grandeur, this impoverishing of himself for the sake of others, sets a wonderful theme for worshipers launching into Holy Week.

We have the chance to be "similarly minded" when it comes to choosing servanthood as a personal identity. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." "Think this way among yourselves when you think of Christ." How are we going to bend our lives into the shape of servanthood? That's the question! In Jesus Christ we see God's willingness to bend into the shape or form of a servant (see the footwashing of John 13 if you're curious about the particular shape of that bending). Jesus did not trade in his nature of being God for the sake of being a servant. No, he twisted his life to bear the shape of a servant.

Second Observation

"He humbled himself." No one else did it to or for him. When it comes to being humbled, this is something we must do ourselves. Others may be able to humiliate us, just as we could humiliate them. But when it comes to being humbled, no can do it in our stead. ("Whoever humbles himself or herself like a child becomes great in the kingdom of God," Mt 18:4.) Jesus chose to be earthed—*humus, humility*—in the form of a human being to show his obedience to God. He rubbed his nose in the reality of human weakness for the sake of doing the will of God.

Had Jesus opted for pride over humility, he could have positioned himself equal to God and treated this stature as some kind of prize. Instead he chose to empty himself of this notion that lordship is a matter of getting instead of giving. And he humbled himself. Søren Kierkegaard once said, "If I had a

humble servant who, when I asked him for a glass of water, brought instead the world's costliest wines perfectly blended in a chalice, I would fire him, to teach him that true pleasure consists in getting my own way." That is the recipe for pride: Getting *my* will done! Humility is "*thy* will be done."

For years, the Nike company has pushed the advertising envelope of self-centered desire with its "If it feels good then *just do it!*" campaign. (If Nike defined the language of faith, one wonders if there would be any gap at all between the Creator and creature.) Several years ago, in an ad that made a pitch for celebrating hedonism, Nike said of athletes: "Nobody lives in their bodies like athletes live in theirs. They deserve what feels good. They don't rent. They own." What a contrast to the self-emptying concept of life that Jesus lived and professed! We don't own our own bodies, much less our lives. This Jesus is one who "though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). What a perfect model of one humbling oneself to do the will of God.

A Final Look

I've never been persuaded that the emphasis on Passion Sunday texts should eliminate a treatment of Palm Sunday lessons as well. I like the collision of forces that can and should occur in worship on this day between the sentiments of praise and the words of condemnation that follow. What's wrong with trying to make sense of palms bending in adoration and reeds striking a thorn-crowned head, all at the same time? It's mysterious. But so is the strange idea of gaining life through death, something we wrestle with all through Holy Week.

For sermon possibilities, the Philippians passage is a nice alternative to lengthy proclamation on the passion narrative. Many chances will arise later in the week to do justice to the full passion. So what do we make of Philippians 2:5–11? Is it poetry? Is it an ancient hymn? We may never know for sure. But without question it is memorably rich in implication. This might be a day to consider the liturgical replacement of the creed with a congregational reading of this text. It could be introduced with Paul's line of encouragement, "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus." Then imagine the congregation bellowing out those great verbs that have to do with the identity of Jesus. People might just walk out with a whole new identity of their own! PWM

Faces

Sunday's cheers ("Blessed is the King!") become Friday's jeers ("Crucify him!"). They swore an undying love, but finally one of them betrayed him with a kiss on the face. Another, whose face looked familiar to a girl at the gate, denied ever having seen the face of Jesus before. Others placed a blindfold over his eyes and struck him on the face. But Jesus did not turn his face away from any one of them. PWR

Maundy Thursday
April 12, 2001

Psalm 116:1, 10–17
Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10) 11–14
1 Corinthians 11:23–26
John 13:1–17, 31b–35

First Observation

Many congregations pull out their favorite "chalice and bread" banner for Holy Thursday worship. And why not? It is, after all, a night to remember the last supper of Jesus and what that means for us. But wouldn't it be nice to put the banner away for a year and just set a basin of water and a stack of towels out in the middle of the chancel? These are more than symbols, though symbolic they are. They are actual tools, tools of the church's trade, we might say.

Every trade has its tools. Persons wishing to enter that trade need to develop a certain comfort level in working with those tools before they can really succeed. Usually this happens through time and by learning from the example of others who know the trade well. A cabinetmaker works the plane or the router. A baker manipulates the speeds of a mixer. A tailor threads a bobbin and loads it into the sewing machine. These are tools of different trades. For the apprentice, the day arrives when the master hands over the tools and says, in one way or another, "Now you do it." On this Holy Thursday, we learn from Jesus that a towel and a basin of water are indispensable tools for being the church. He demonstrates how to behave with these tools of the trade. Then he turns them over to us: "Now you do it."

"If you want to be my disciples," Jesus says in effect, "and live the kind of love that I am about, then grab a towel and a basin." And, as if to pass along this trade with the expertise of a professional guiding a novice: "If I have washed your feet, then you can do the feet of others just as I have done yours. Now that you have seen me, you can do it too. Pick up a towel and go to work."

The interesting thing about a towel is that it is flexible to the point of being shapeless. Whatever you wrap it around is what gives it shape. The ritual in our house, when our kids were young and finished with their baths, was to blanket their hair with a towel once out of the tub. For some reason they never dried their own hair very well, speeding right past it to dry their little bodies. I could have been blindfolded on those occasions and still known the difference between Jacob's head and Rachel's head. His skull stuck out slightly in back. Her ears happily protruded in a most distinctive way. The towel would always get form-fitted to their differently shaped heads.

Jesus has given the church a tool of servanthood in the form of a towel. It is a tool that is shaped not by our hands so much as by the people we choose to wrap up and include in the concern of our lives. The integrity of the church's trade will be determined by who we wrap our towel around and for whom we fill our basin. Maybe you know Ruth Harms Calkin's poem:

You know, Lord, how I serve you
with great emotional fervor
in the limelight.
You know how eagerly I speak for you
at a women's club.
You know how I effervesce
when I promote a fellowship group.
You know my genuine enthusiasm
at a Bible study.

But how would I react, I wonder,
if you pointed to a basin of water
and asked me to wash the calloused feet
of a bent and wrinkled old woman,
day after day,

month after month,
in a room where nobody saw
and nobody knew?

Second Observation

The power and possibility of serving other people is related directly to our personal sense of identity with God. If we have a secure sense of our rootedness in the Lord, we can do all kinds of unwieldy and sacrificial things, even things that challenge our most established comfort zones. Notice what John says about Jesus in the moments before he began washing the disciples' feet. During supper that evening, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things to him, and that he had come from God and was going to God," got up from the table and girded himself with a towel. Then he went to work.

There you have it. The strength for serving others comes from knowing who made us and who saves us. Jesus the master was able to do the unthinkable—assume the trade tools of a slave—because he knew where he had come from. All he had to do was recall the words spoken over his baptized body, *This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased*, and he knew his roots. And if he could be confident in the idea of eternity with the Father, he had all the security required for committing himself to daring and sacrificial ways of living.

A Final Look

Friends of ours belong to a Bethesda, Maryland church whose congregational slogan is *Wash More Feet.* It appears on church T-shirts, on sanctuary banners, and even in the congregation's mission statement. What a marvelous phrase for remembering the church's necessary identity in the modern world. It reminds me of a beautiful passage in Alan Paton's *Ah But Your Land Is Beautiful*, a novel about South Africa. In it, Judge Oliver, a white man, accepts an invitation of a black pastor to take part in the Holy Thursday footwashing ceremony. Oliver washes a black woman's feet and, following Jesus' example, kisses them. Tears filled the eyes of everyone gathered there at the Holy Church of Zion. The press gave the incident publicity. Oliver was denied a chief judgeship in Apartheidsville.

The black pastor called Oliver to apologize. Upon receiving the call, Oliver replied to him, "Taking part in your service on Maundy Thursday is to me more important than any chief judgeship. Think no more about it." And that is why the Holy Church of Zion was renamed the Church of the Washing of Feet. PWM

Faces

Facing the end, Jesus dines with his friends and leaves them with one last gift to ponder. He washes their feet. Peter wants to have his hands and face washed also. But Jesus says that the great washing he gives is enough. It is, shall we say, satisfactory. PWR

Good Friday
April 13, 2001

Psalm 22
Isaiah 52:13—53:12
Hebrews 10:16–25
or Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9
John 18:1—19:42

First Observation

Darkness. In one form or another, every Christian congregation ought to find a way to have their Good Friday service, or one of their services, saturated with darkness. "When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three o'clock, when Jesus cried out" (Mk 15:33). It's hard to picture experiencing the emptiness of the day without some means of darkness to assist us.

This is the day, like no other day, when the question of suffering gets focused in the crosshairs of the faithful. If God is love, why on earth is there so much suffering? Why do some kids die with brain tumors and some adults with Alzheimers refuse to die? Why would ethnic Serbian soldiers rape thousands of Albanian women during warfare, and call it victory? Why would a defective Firestone tire wind up on my friend's Ford Explorer to wreak its de-treading havoc? Good Friday worship is a place where we inevitably and sometimes unknowingly pose these kinds of questions. (If the preacher doesn't pose them, worshipers certainly do.) Frankly, one of the reasons we sit in darkness is because we don't have very good answers to all the tough questions about suffering. We figure that in the silence and darkness we might get a whisper of a response from God . . . if we're lucky.

The word "eclipse" in our language comes from the Greek for *abandonment*. It captures the sense of foreboding when the sun vanishes from sight. On Good Friday, we feel a different kind of *Son* vanish from sight. And we see how suffering and abandonment easily overcome all boundaries of reason.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, who has written one of the most profound books available on human suffering, in the wake of his own son's death in a mountain climbing accident prays: "I am at an impasse, and you, O God, brought me here. From my earliest days I heard of you . . . believed in you. On me your presence smiled. Where are you in the darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in the darkness I cannot find you." Good Friday worshipers get the chance to sit beside each other in the darkness and try to find God doing the same thing.

Second Observation

Silence. In one form or another, every Christian congregation ought to find a way to have their Good Friday service, or one of their services, experience true silence. Have someone read the close of John's 19th chapter effectively, and the whole church will be chillingly still. Guaranteed. Once Jesus breathes his last, the text oozes with silence. It's hard to picture experiencing the gravity of the day without some means of silence to assist our interpretation.

The silences of God can be as exasperating as they are consoling. They frustrate our comprehension. They elude our grasp. Much of the time when God is silent in Scripture we wonder if God has forgotten us altogether. But in time we discover that God's silence can be as emphatic as God's speech. Silence is a very commanding expression, if you think about it. It has a quality and dimension all its own. Barbara Brown Taylor thinks that there may "no silence as loud as the silence of death." If this is true . . . Golgotha was frightening loud with silence by the time Nicodemus showed up to do his embalming thing.

A Final Look

The Good Friday preaching assignment should make every preacher quake. How does one put meaningful words to suffering that is tinged with so much meaninglessness? I know many who choose not to preach at all on this day, letting silence, darkness, and Scripture do the work instead. If it's true, though, that believers are hungry for at least a *response* to human suffering and the sacrifice of Jesus, it helps to have someone craft words that lend shape to such a response. A preacher who works hard at the task can do this.

As for myself, the textual preaching that serves so well on other Sundays of the year doesn't work so effectively on Good Friday. There is too much territory to cover with a passion narrative that is very expansive. Besides, the cross forces us to see ourselves as we really are, and not just as we would like to be seen. And if we're going to get an inside look at this unpredictable and sin-filled life we know so intimately, it is going to require some broad thinking and some imaginative theological pondering on the part of the preacher. So I consider it my job to assume a place in the midst of all the mess of suffering and sin, and help pay homage to the numbing nonsense.

In the end, through all of the darkness and silence, Good Friday preaching gets to communicate that God suffers because God wants to love. All healthy love implies vulnerability. It always has and it always will. In order to be involved in our lives in loving, and thus vulnerable, ways, God is bound to suffer. As Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel says in so many places, the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. If God were indifferent and unfeeling, God would not love. If God were bound and determined to avoid being on the receiving end of arbitrariness and unpredictability, God would not care. But what makes Good Friday truly *good* is that God does not let any measure of pain interfere with his chief aim — to love and care for us without condition. So go and proclaim this Good News! It needs to be told. PWM

Faces

Jesus faces the crowds from two beams of wood, designed not just to take a life but to make a public statement about who has power and who does not. "Ecce homo," said Pontius Pilate. "Look at this face!" He becomes as "one from whom people hide their faces." But instead of averting our faces, we should look deeply at him and his cross. He was crucified because he disturbed the peace and subverted the old order. Can we see in his cross the inbreaking of God's new order? PWR

Vigil of Easter
April 14, 2001

Faces

On this most holy night, we gather to hear not just one or two but six or ten or even twelve God-stories. It's like a family reunion, where the most-repeated words are "Do you remember when . . . ?" Familiar faces pass in review: Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses and Miriam, Jonah, Ezekiel, and all the rest. In meeting our ancestors and in hearing their stories, we remember who we are. Facing the past, we are strengthened to face what lies ahead. PWR

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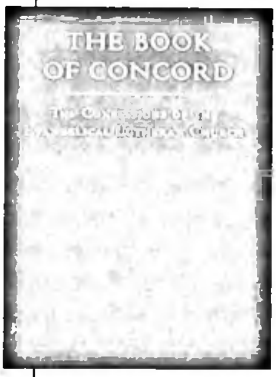

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