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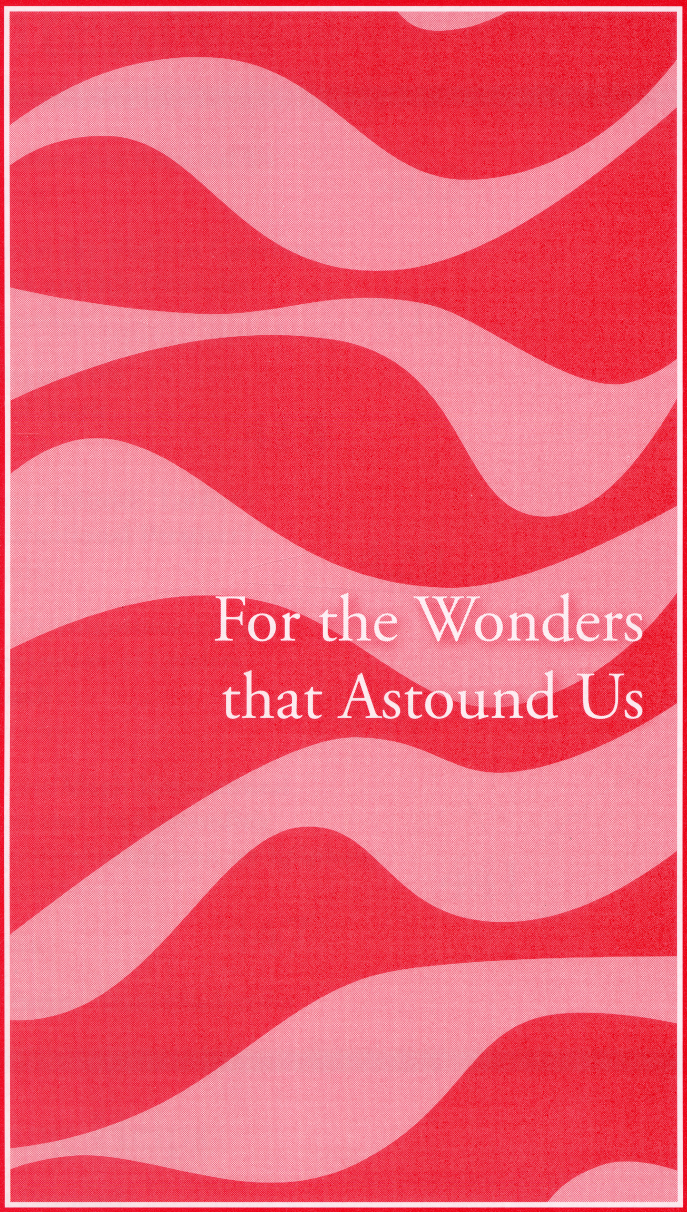

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Contents

Preaching Helps

Photo on page 435 by Dirk van der Duim

For the Wonders that Astound Us

I am deeply grateful to **David Rhoads,** who edited the last two issues of *Currents* in my honor, and for my colleagues on the faculty at LSTC who wrote essays about doing theology for the sake of the church. But now I'm back once more as editor, charged with introducing the rich fare contained in these covers.

At my home congregation we have been singing "For the Fruit of the Creation" at the Offering, which contains in stanza three the clause printed above. These words of thanksgiving describe our daily discovery in the Christian church. The wonders of creation and the miraculously wondrous faith and life of those whom we serve come to us, like God's mercy, new every morning. During my thirty-five years at the editor's task I have often been astounded by new insights, new opportunities, and new admonitions that flow from the essays I read. In this issue the first two deal with Mark, the lead Gospel in 2008-2009, the second two are in honor of Mark Bangert, whose retirement we observed in the June issue, but for which there was not room for these two gems, and the fifth is a celebration of the conversation that made and continues to make Christianity.

Leroy A. Huizenga shows that the Gospel of Mark proclaims God's grace and mercy to those of us who, like the Markan disciples, suffer fear, incomprehension and faithlessness and are nevertheless kept in the circle of God's chosen. The stories in Mark 2:1-3:6 show rising tension between Jesus and his disciples on the one hand and the scribes, the disciples of John, and the Pharisees on the other. Mark 8:27-10:45 makes up the "discipleship" section, in which discipleship is taught by word and deed. The Gospel of Mark heightens the contrast between the faithful Jesus and the frightened Peter: at the precise moment Jesus is making a bold confession of his identity, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus. As the reader comes to the end of the Gospel, every human being has failed. Only Jesus endured to the end. The disciples in Mark do not function as foils, as if Mark were encouraging hearers to attempt to succeed in their discipleship when the disciples chosen by Jesus himself failed. Rather, Mark would have his hearers look to Jesus, who alone was faithful unto the end.

Nicholas Perrin observes that the word "beginning" in Mark 1:1 hearkens back to the story of creation and points forward to all the yet-to-be-taken journeys of those who would follow Christ. The first verses of Mark also point back to the Exodus, and Exodus images abound in the opening chapters. The climax of the new Exodus theme comes in the account of the Last Supper, where Jesus refers to

the blood of the new covenant. Messiahship according to Mark's Jesus was decidedly unlike anything anyone was looking for. Jesus is recognized as messiah by unlikely and peripheral characters: Blind Bartimaeus; the anonymous woman who anointed him; and the Roman centurion. In attempting to vitiate Jesus' messianic claim, his opponents are unwitting collaborators in establishing that claim. For Mark, the "way" is not just the path of Jesus, but it is also the path along which he invites us to follow. The disciples failed to recognize that God's plan extended beyond the borders of Israel. The centurion's confession confirms that Jesus is Son of God for the nations. Mark was answering two questions which his readers must have been asking themselves: If we followers of Christ are the people of God, why are we suffering such hostility? In the face of such hostility, should we pull back?

Kurt Hendel discusses Luther's views on the Eucharist as he expressed them in his debate with Zwingli and Oecolampadius about the real presence. According to Luther the "right hand of God" does not denote a specific location but, rather, God's power. Luther insisted that all material things are God's good creation in which God is intimately present. On the basis of John 6:63 the Swiss reformers had argued that the physical presence of Christ in the sacrament is neither necessary nor beneficial. Luther countered that if Christ's flesh is not beneficial in the sacrament, it is also not beneficial on the cross. Precisely by means of flesh Christ has accomplished God's redemptive work. Luther warned that questioning the reality of God's presence in the material has dire consequences for the heart of the Christian message. Luther was convinced that the physical and the spiritual are intimately yoked in God's saving and life-giving work. Body-and-blood and bread-and-wine are present in the Eucharist. Luther was an ardent proponent of the spiritual nature of the material as the unique means of God's intimate presence in the world and as the instrument of God's redemptive and justifying activity. Luther's idea about the finite being the vehicle of the divine has implications for the arts, both visual and musical, and for the ecological crisis today.

Craig A. Satterlee points out that while worship practices are adiaphora, they are also the ritual through which God accomplishes salvation. Chapel at a seminary forms leaders for the church and that formation is enhanced by the shape of the worship space itself. The new Augustana Chapel at LSTC has students enter under a map of the world, reminding them that Christians worship for the sake of the world. Windows to the north reveal a Presbyterian seminary, those to the south, a busy city street and the world. These windows remind worshipers of the holy catholic church and the world's need for God's mission. The large baptismal font reminds future leaders that they are a community of the baptized. When the gospel is preached, the sound of the baptismal waters is amplification and applause. The chapel has one reading desk, for lectors and preachers alike, symbolically breaking down the distinctions between laity and clergy. The table around which worshippers gather clarifies and transforms relationships. Through music and song the

Spirit provides the community with words to address God and confess its faith.

Jennifer Hockenbery assures us that Epiphany celebrates the fact that Christianity from the beginning is not about one culture, one custom, one tradition, and that the future of understanding in the church depends on continued intercultural conversation. The Gospels are influenced by Jewish culture, Roman tradition, and Greek philosophy. Augustine said that the writings of the Platonists were the first to bring him from skepticism toward understanding. Philosophically, Christianity says that conversation between cultures is possible. Much of this characteristic of Christianity is rooted in the incarnation: The true God does not reside in a separate realm of thought, but walks with us in space and time. When truth can speak in human words, human words can speak the truth.

The hymn referred to above stuns me every time I sing its next grateful clause: "for the truths that still confound us." Clauses like this race through my brain: I am God's child. Christ died for all. In Christ there is neither male nor female. God's final word is always yes. Just one more surprise. After all the great thoughts I have read (and a few I have had), these truths still leave me both speechless and eager to talk. A college professor once told me about his first trip to Berlin. As the tour bus passed the church where Paul Gerhardt had been cantor, the fellow across the aisle was sleeping. How could one sleep at a time like that? How could one not be confounded?

Still confoundedly yours,

Ralph W. Klein, *editor*

With this issue we welcome Ann Rezny as Assistant Editor. Ann, who has already served LSTC and ELCA publications in a number of capacities will assume the role previously taken by Peggy Blomenberg.

Solus Christus: the Markan Contrast between Jesus and his Disciples

Leroy A. Huizenga
Wheaton College

Of all the portrayals of the disciples in the Gospels, Mark's is the most severe. Indeed, Mark's story presents an ever increasing contrast between the fidelity of Jesus on one hand and the faithlessness and frailty of his chosen disciples on the other.[1] Time and time again the disciples display dullness, fear and pride, while Jesus calls for and exemplifies understanding, faith and sacrificial service. One may understand this contrast in two ways. On one hand, the portrayal of the disciples may function to present them as negative examples. Mark would be suggesting to his readers that they can and should be faithful, unlike the disciples. On the other hand, the disciples may function as narrative reminders that all human striving comes to naught, that only One has ever been truly faithful, Christ alone.

Avoiding mere moralism, this second option is theologically and pastorally fruitful and also enjoys the advantage of refraining from suggesting that later readers or hearers of Mark can prove faithful when the very apostles chosen by Christ himself did not. In short, Mark does not finally call us to emulate Jesus instead of the disciples. Rather, the Gospel of Mark is indeed Gospel, proclaiming God's mercy and grace to those of us who, like the Markan disciples, suffer fear, incomprehension and faithlessness and are nevertheless kept in the circle of God's chosen.

In the beginning

At the outset of the Mark's story, John the Baptist and Jesus each enjoy profound success. John's message meets with a positive response: "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him" to be baptized (Mark 1:5). Jesus also proclaims the gospel (1:15) and calls four fisherman who "followed him" ("following" being a Markan concept concerning discipleship) and did so "immediately" (1:16-20). Every time in the Gospel someone "follows" Jesus, they serve as an example of what discipleship should be.

Jesus enjoys immense popularity. An exorcism brings "fame" (1:21-28); "the whole city gathered around the door" (1:29-34) as a result of Jesus' healings and exorcisms. A leper cleansed by Jesus announces it with the result that "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter" (1:45). Truly, Jesus is popular. It is easy to follow Jesus under such conditions. But the situation will soon change, as Jesus rapidly meets with increasing op-

1 The classic treatment is Robert C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," *JR* 57 (1977): 386-405.

position, which culminates in a murderous conspiracy.

A darker turn: conflict, conspiracy, incomprehension

In Mark 2:1-3:6, we encounter five short stories which evince rising tension between Jesus and his disciples on one hand and the scribes, the disciples of John, and the Pharisees on the other. In the first story (Mark 2:1-12), the conflict is subtle: Jesus forgives the paralytic (2:5), which prompts the scribes to question Jesus' action "in their hearts"—not out loud (2:6-7). Jesus perceives this "in his spirit"—he does not overhear them—and asks, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?" (2:8). But in the final story (3:1-6), the conflict is open: "They watched him to see whether he would cure [the man with a withered hand] on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him" (3:2). Jesus brings the man forward, asks his hostile audience the rhetorical question about the purpose of the Sabbath, and, in a most provocative fashion, heals the man's hand. The healing precipitates a murderous conspiracy: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (3:6).

Thus Jesus begins falling out of favor. In the third chapter Jesus begins withdrawing from the public and building a small, loyal band around him. A "great multitude" follows him (Mark 3:7) but Jesus makes plans to escape them by boat (3:8). He ascends a mountain and calls "those whom he wanted" (3:13), of whom he chooses twelve apostles (3:14-15). Not only have the scribes, Pharisees and Herodians turned on Jesus; even his family attempts to "restrain him," for people were saying "he is out of his mind" (3:21). Jesus in turn asserts that his true family consists of those who are seated "around him" who do the will of God (3:34-35).

In the fourth chapter Jesus begins excluding people. Although many find it scandalous, the purpose of the Parable of the Sower (4:3-9) is to keep outsiders outside:

> When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (Mark 4:10-12; see Isa 6:9-10).

Those "around him" (as in 3:34-35) and the twelve have been given the mystery; truth is for insiders, not outsiders for whom "everything comes in parables" precisely so that they will not comprehend and repent, which is the essence of Jesus' proclamation ("repent, and believe in the good news," 1:15). Jesus employs a significant Isaianic text[2] concerning hardening to make the point that parables are for insiders, not outsiders, for those who stick close to Jesus, not for general consumption.

Some have tried to correlate character groups in Mark with the four categories of seeds and soils given in the parable and its explanation (Mark 4:14-20).[3] None of the potential character groups—the disciples, the crowds, the religious officials, parties and sects, the women—ever bears any significant fruit, however. The categories and

2 Isa 6:9-10 was important for early Christians who sought to explain Jewish rejection of Jesus as messiah. See, for instance, Acts 28:23-29.

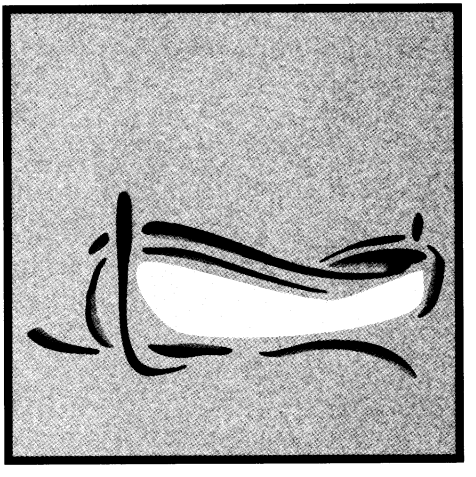
3 See Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989).

characters do not line up well. In fact, the parable indicates that the one group we might expect to show promise, the disciples, with those "around him," lack comprehension: "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" asks the Markan Jesus with mild exasperation (4:13). Immediately after Jesus suggests that lack of understanding involves divine hardening, he suggests the disciples may lack understanding. They display the characteristics of outsiders.

Darkness on the deep: the Markan boat scenes

Three remarkable boat scenes portray the disciples' growing incomprehension. In the first (Mark 4:35-41), Jesus again attempts to escape the crowd by boat (as in 3:9). A storm threatens to sink the small craft (4:37). The disciples panic and wake Jesus (4:38). Jesus "rebuke[s] the wind" and a "dead calm" results (4:39). Jesus asks the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (4:40). Here, as elsewhere, Mark portrays fear and faith as diametric opposites (see also 5:33-34 and 5:36). The disciples are terrified and ask, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (4:41). Fear and faith, then, concern Jesus' *identity*.

The answer to the disciples' question is given subtly in a subsequent boat scene in Mark 6:47-52, which reveals the identity of Jesus as God. This may seem counterintuitive, for many think that Mark has a "low" Christology, while the Gospels of Matthew or John have "high" Christologies. As the great scholar Vincent Taylor once said, however, "The sheer humanity of the Markan portraiture catches the eye of the most careless reader; and yet it is but half seen if it is not perceived that this Man of Sorrows is also a Being of supernatural origin and dignity, since He is the Son of God…Mark's Christology is a high Christology, as high as any in the New Testament, not excluding that of John."[4]



Allusions in this boat scene reveal this.[5] The disciples are in the boat while Jesus is alone on land (Mark 6:47-48a). Jesus, now walking on the sea, "wanted to pass them by" (6:48b). The disciples mistake Jesus for a ghost, reacting with terror (6:49-50a). Jesus tells them, "Take heart, it is I (*egō eimi*); do not be afraid" (6:50b). In light of Job 9 LXX, Jesus' walking on the water and the strange remark concerning "pass[ing] them by" suggest the scene is a theophany. Jesus is revealed as the God of Israel. Job 9:8 LXX reads, "[God] alone stretches out the heaven and walks on the waves of the sea as on dry land," while Job 9:11 LXX states, "If he were to pass by me, I would not see, and if he were to pass me by, neither would I know it," which coheres well with the disciples' incomprehension. As Job

4 Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 121.

5 See Richard B. Hays, "Can the Gospels Teach Us How to Read the Old Testament?" *ProEccl* 11 (2002): 409-11.

declares he would neither see nor know it if God were to pass by, so do the disciples mistake Jesus for a ghost (Mark 6:49) and lack understanding (6:52). In light of this, one may hear an echo of the divine name of Exod 3:14 LXX ("I am," *egō eimi*) in Jesus' utterance of "it is I" (*egō eimi*). In short, by means of the subtle yet powerful mechanism of allusion calling forth theophanic motifs from the Scriptures of Israel, Mark 6:45-52 reveals the identity of Jesus as God. The disciples lack the faith and understanding to perceive it, however.

Immediately prior to the final boat scene in Mark 8:13-21, the disciples display their dullness in wondering how Jesus might actually feed the four thousand (8:1-9, esp. v. 4); apart from his many exorcisms and healings, Jesus had recently fed five thousand (6:30-44). Then, having arrived by boat at Dalmanutha, the Pharisees test Jesus by demanding a sign, which Jesus refuses to perform (8:10-12). This final boat scene involves both these passages. Jesus warns the disciples, "Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod" (8:15). The disciples, having forgotten bread and now down to their last loaf (8:14), foolishly believe their lack of bread explains Jesus' enigmatic counsel. Jesus is not pleased, and his questions to them again employ the language of the dread prophecy of Isa 6:9-10: "And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?'" (Mark 8:17-18a). He asks if they do not remember the abundance of the feedings of the five and four thousand, closing with the question, "Do you not yet understand?" (8:18b-21). Lacking understanding, the disciples are at grave risk of becoming outsiders.

The Markan discipleship section

Mark 8:27-10:45 makes up the famous "discipleship" section, in which discipleship is taught by word and deed. Further, the section has as bookends two stories concerning the healing of blind men. In 8:22-26, Jesus heals a blind man from Bethsaida in two stages, while in 10:46-52 Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus. This framing indicates that discipleship—"following" Jesus "on the way" (see 8:27, 9:33-34, and 10:52)—involves understanding. One must "see" to "follow" and "follow" to "see."

The first of these healing stories in Mark 8:22-26 provides an interesting introduction to the discipleship section and its first component story, Peter's confession of Jesus as Christ. Prior to that healing story, Jesus had berated the disciples in the boat for their lack of understanding, as we have seen—"Do you not yet understand?" (8:21). Then comes the healing story: Jesus lays his hands on the man and puts saliva on his eyes, but the blind man informs Jesus that he can only see people who "look like trees, walking" (8:24). The narrator then informs us that "Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly" (8:25). This story suggests that even though the disciples lack understanding, understanding will be given to those who stick with Jesus on the way.

Consider Peter's famous confession of Jesus as Messiah. Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). Peter gets it half right, like the blind man of Bethsaida who has just been half healed: Peter replies, "You are the Messiah" (8:29). Peter has the answer right in formal but not material terms. After adjuring the disciples to silence about his Messiahship and informing them that he, Jesus, the Son of Man, "must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the

elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:30-31), Peter begins to "rebuke" Jesus (8:32), who returns the favor, rebuking Peter (8:33) and delivering his famous words about the necessity of taking up the cross and following (8:34). Like the blind man, Peter will need his "sight" healed so that he might fully understand and accept the divine necessity of Jesus' death.

"On the way" (a Markan metaphor for discipleship) to Jerusalem, the disciples show themselves gravely frail, faithless and filled with pride, while Jesus, leading them, marches with determination ever onward towards his goal. In the story of the boy made mute by a violent spirit (Mark 9:14-29), the faithless disciples fail to exorcise it (8:18-19). Jesus predicts his death and resurrection (9:30-31) but the disciples "did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him" (9:32). The disciples argue among themselves which of them is the greatest (9:33-37). They mistakenly rebuke an exorcist (9:38-41). They err in keeping children from Jesus (10:13-16). They are afraid and amazed (a negative concept) as they are following Jesus "on the way" (NRSV: "road") to Jerusalem as he predicts his passion and resurrection for the third time (10:32-34). Finally, the section closes with James and John seeking prestige, requesting to sit at Jesus' left and right in glory (10:35-37). Jesus uses the ill-informed request as a teaching moment to emphasize the necessity of self-sacrifice grounded in Jesus' example: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (10:43b-45).

The discipleship section is followed by the healing of blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52), who refuses to cease seeking Jesus' healing mercy (10:47-48). His persistence is rewarded; Jesus says to him, "Go; your faith has made you well," and "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way" (*en tē hodō*, 10:52). Thus, in contrast to the disciples, Bartimaeus showed no concern for status, rank or propriety. He sought Jesus earnestly in spite of the crowd's entreaties that he remain silent; he received his sight as reward for his persistence; and in response he "followed" Jesus "on the way"—he becomes an eager disciple.

The Passion Narrative

In the Markan Passion Narrative (chapters 14-16) all the followers of Jesus fall away. Everyone fails, even though Jesus had warned everyone to "keep watch" in what is generally known as the parable of the Doorkeeper (Mark 13:32-37). Mark 13 is not so much about the end of the world but the calamity which will befall Jerusalem, which will culminate in the destruction of the temple. The beginning of the chapter finds the disciples marveling at the buildings of the temple precincts, in light of which Jesus predicts they will be destroyed (13:1-2). Four of the disciples (Peter, James, John and Andrew) later ask Jesus when "these things"—the destruction predicted in 13:2—will take place (13:3-4). Similarly, the parable of the Doorkeeper at the end of the chapter does not so much concern the end of the world but events more immediate than the disciples could fathom.

Jesus says that no one—not the angels, not even the Son, but only the Father—knows about "that day or hour" (Mark 13:32). Thus, the four do not know (13:33).[6] And in light of the absolute hu-

6 This passage should prevent any and all from expending too much time and energy attempting to divine the time and events of the eschaton. Only the Father knows.

Through all this, Jesus is faithful. Even if Jesus has some sort of psychological struggle in Gethsemane, he yields to the will of God.

man ignorance of "that day or that hour," all one can do is "beware" and "keep alert" (13:34), holding steadfast at all times, come what may. Jesus then tells them:

> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake (13:34-37).

Ignorance thus demands perpetual vigilance. But in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), a passage to which Mark 13:32-37 is tightly linked, three of the four disciples (Peter, James and John) fail to keep vigil. Mark 13:32-37 concerns "the hour" (v. 32), while in Gethsemane Jesus prays "the hour" might pass from him (14:35) and the disciples are found sleeping when "the hour" comes (14:41). In Mark 13:34, 35 and 37, Jesus tells the disciples to "keep watch" (*grēgoreē*; NRSV: "be on the watch," "keep awake," and "keep awake," respectively) at all times, while in Gethsemane Jesus asks the three to "keep watch" (*grēgoreē*; NRSV: "keep awake") with him (14:34). In Mark 13:36, Jesus had warned the disciples not to be found sleeping, while in Gethsemane the disciples are found sleeping three times (14:37, 40, 41). Having failed to heed Jesus' words in 13:32-37, the disciples fail to keep watch and are caught sleeping and are thus unprepared for the hour when it comes a mere half-chapter later.

What is more, Jesus' passion takes place according to the four-watch schema of Mark 13:35 ("evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn"). Jesus eats the Passover and predicts his betrayal at evening (14:17). Gethsemane (14:32-41) occurs at midnight (although the term does not find mention, the event fits the sequence). Jesus is denied by Peter at cockcrow (14:68, 72) as Jesus predicted (14:30). And Jesus is tried by Pilate and crucified at dawn (15:1; see 15:25). Truly, the events spoken of in 13:32-37 were fulfilled in some way nearly two thousand years ago.

Through all this, Jesus is faithful. Even if Jesus has some sort of psychological struggle in Gethsemane, he yields to the will of God. The disciples, however, do not. They flee (Mark 14:50-52). Peter, however, follows at a distance, and in parallel scenes of dramatic beauty, the Gospel contrasts Peter's denial with Jesus' bold confession before the high priest. Mark 14:53-72 comprises two simultaneous stories unfolding in an A-B-A-B structure. The first "A" section consists of Jesus being taken to the high priest's court (14:53). The first "B" section consists of Peter having followed right up into the courtyard of the high priest with the guards (14:54). We return to Jesus in the second "A" section, in which he is tried before the high priest (14:55-65). When asked if he is the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One (14:61), Jesus responds with confidence and boldness, "I

am" (14:62), along with words about the Son of Man. After recounting Jesus' conviction, mocking and beating, the narrator turns back to Peter in the second "B" section (14:66-72). Peter denies he knows Jesus three times, the last time with great emphasis: "But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about'" (14:71), at which point the cock-crow fulfills Jesus' prophecy (14:30), causing Peter to break down and wail (14:72).

The contrast between Jesus and Peter here is as strong as could be, for the story of Jesus' trial before the high priest's court and the story of Peter's denial of Jesus occur *simultaneously*. In Mark 14:66, the narrator simply states, "*While* Peter was below in the courtyard"; the narrator gives no indication that Peter's denial occurred *after* Jesus' bold confession before the high priest's court. Why does this matter? It appears the Gospel of Mark is heightening the contrast between the faithful Jesus and the frightened Peter: at the precise moment Jesus is making a bold confession of his identity, Peter is denying he even knows Jesus. Jesus knows exactly who he is and freely admits it; Peter refuses to admit he even knows who Jesus is.

The empty tomb

All of Jesus' disciples, whether part of the Twelve or not, have now deserted him. He is tried and executed by Pilate apart from any consolation of friends or family (compare both Plato's presentation of Socrates' death as well as the presentation of the Gospel of John, which presents three Marys (the Mother of Jesus, her sister the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene) and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross [John 19:25-27]). The Markan story, however, does say that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and a certain Salome were "looking on from a distance" (15:40), women who "used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee," along with "many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem" (15:41). Perhaps, then, we have a character group who will prove faithful to Jesus after all.

Yet such hopes come to grief. After Jesus' burial, the narrator records that the same three women make plans to anoint Jesus' dead body (Mark 16:1). After wondering about who could roll the stone away for them and arriving, they discover the stone already removed and encounter a "young man" and become "alarmed" (16:3-5). The young man announces that Jesus has in fact been raised (16:6). He then instructs them to "go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (16:7; see 14:28). Instead of doing so, however, the narrator informs us that the women "went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). And there the Gospel ends.[7]

Several observations are salient here. First, observe the note of great grace in 16:7: In spite of Jesus' difficult words concerning the ultimate rejection of those who are ashamed of Jesus (8:38), the young man at the tomb explicitly mentions Peter, whose denial of Jesus was recounted in great detail barely a chapter prior (14:66-72). From the divine perspective, he is

7 On how 16:8 functions as a fitting ending for the Gospel of Mark, see Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 107-21; and Morna D. Hooker, *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 11–30. In my opinion, Juel's work is indispensible. One might also see Juel's *Gospel of Mark* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

(again) an insider, one who stands under the aegis of divine grace.

Second, the phenomenon of irony plays a great role here. Although Jesus had attempted to conduct much of his ministry under a shroud of silence and secrecy, he had also indicated that the time for disclosure would indeed come: "For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light" (4:22). Now is the time for disclosure, according to the young man; but, unlike the leper who ignores Jesus' injunction to silence (1:45), the women say nothing to anyone.

Third, the one group of characters that Mark suggests might prove faithful in some small way by attending to Jesus' body fails. Perhaps that is to be expected, as they came to the tomb to perform burial duties; as such, they apparently did not believe Jesus' predictions about his resurrection, even though they "used to follow him...when he was in Galilee" (15:40-41). In other words, they lacked faith, and so it is no surprise when the narrator informs us that "terror and amazement seized them," that their fear rendered them silent (16:8). Thus, as the reader comes to the end of the Gospel, every human being has failed. At the very end of the narrative the story dashes any hopes the reader has entertained that someone somewhere might somehow prove faithful. Only Jesus Christ endured to the end.[8] Only he and the God who raised him from the dead are faithful.

Conclusion

Mark's negative depiction of the disciples does not stand alone but is meant to be understood in contrast with the positive presentation of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, a contrast exemplified most strongly in the simultaneous portrayals of Peter's denial and Jesus' confession. The disciples in Mark do not function as foils, as negative examples, as if Mark were encouraging hearers to attempt to succeed in their discipleship when the very disciples chosen by Christ himself failed. Rather, Mark would have his hearers look to Jesus, who alone was faithful unto the end.

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8 What of Jesus' cry of dereliction, however, when on the cross he quotes Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mark 15:34)? One possibility is that the reader should actualize all of Psalm 22, which turns from despair to confidence and hope. Another possibility would be to understand God the Father as the only one who is truly faithful; in spite of Jesus' despair, God raises him from the dead. Be all that as it may, Jesus nevertheless went through with his mission, dying on the cross. It is important to remember that the temptation to come down from the cross (15:30, 32) was a real temptation—would mere nails suffice to hold fast the one who has shown himself master of sickness, demons and nature throughout the Gospel?

Where to Begin with the Gospel of Mark

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The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Mark 1:1–3, NRSV)

"A symphony," the great composer Gustav Mahler once opined, "must be like the world–it must contain everything." For those of us who are struggling even now to get our heads and hearts around the Gospel of Mark for this coming church year, it may seem that Mahler's dictum could equally apply to our text. Much to our bewilderment and exhilaration, the Gospel of Mark seems to contain everything. But where does one start when it comes to "everything"?

Judging by Mark 1:1, the evangelist himself seems to think that the beginning is a very good place to start–quite literally with the word "beginning." It is unlikely that the evangelist intended the word "beginning" merely as marker for the reader (as if to say, "Start reading at this point!"), nor is it primarily saying, "This is where the story of Jesus really gets going." I believe that, first and foremost, the word "beginning" hearkens back to the story of creation (Gen 1:1) and then points forward to all the yet-to-be-taken journeys of those who would follow Christ. So, on the one hand, the gospel is the story of *the* beginning: the good news is the story of Christ ushering in that which was originally intended through creation. On the other hand, the ensuing sixteen-chapter account is only the first installment of and template for a larger story that remains to be told and lived out. With this in place we understand that this gospel is both a historical account and a dramatic script; it is a completed story, but it is simultaneously a story waiting to be worked out in the church. That, I believe, is how Mark intended his gospel to be read.[1]

But as far as *what* the evangelist wanted to convey, this is a slightly more complex matter. I submit that in rehearsing Mark's story we could do much worse than to settle on three key words: movement, messiah and mission. Like the opening measures of many a symphony, Mark's prologue gives us some hint of what is about to unfold. And, again, just as a symphonic theme recurs time and time again, so too do these Markan themes surface throughout the gospel. Such themes might well serve as sturdy con-

1 Some scholars, for example, N. Clayton Croy (*The Mutilation of Mark's Gospel* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2003]) contend that we have in fact lost the original beginning and ending of Mark. As compelling as some aspects of this argument may be, most scholars demur on this point.

ceptual pegs for congregants grasping for some kind of pattern over the weeks and months to come.

First, in Mark 1:1–3 we see a *movement*, a movement that just begins to take recognizable shape through the quotation of Isa. 40:3, where Isaiah, invoking the well-known story of the Exodus, promises a return from exile. As Isaiah saw it, it was God who was going to save his people from bondage, just as in the past; it was God who was going to give rise to a new movement and perform a new Exodus. This newly reconstituted people would come out from beneath the rod of their oppressors, regroup, and finally take up their calling. By quoting Isa 40:3 at the beginning of his gospel, Mark so much as tells us that God was in the process of doing the very same thing again–this time through Jesus Christ.

One cannot get very far into the Gospel before bumping into Exodus images. Just as Moses stretched out his once-leprous hand as authentication of his calling (Exod 4:6–7), so too Jesus stretches out his hand to the leper (1:40–45). When Jesus heals the paralytic "that you might know that the Son of Man has authority" (2:10), he does so in imitation of Moses who performs miracles "so that you [Pharaoh] might know" (Exod 9:14) there is none like the God of Israel. Just as Jesus calls twelve to himself (3:13–19), so did Moses; just as Jesus drives a legion of unclean swine into the sea (5:1–20), so did Moses send Pharaoh's troops to their watery death (Exodus 14—15); just as Jesus feeds the divided-up groups of people in the desert (6:20–44), so did Moses (Exodus 16, 18). Finally, when Jesus "passes before" the disciples on the water and says, "It is I!" (6:45–56), he is only replaying the drama of Yahweh revealing himself as the "I AM," walking on the water, and then revealing himself more fully by "passing before" Moses (Exod 33:19). These are but scattered examples of pericopes drawing on Exodus images, some more muted than others.[2]

When we come to the account of the Transfiguration (9:2–13), we find a number of connections with the giving of the Sinaitic law. In both cases the crucial event takes place after six days and on a mountain (Exod 24:12, 16; Mark 9:2); in both cases there is a voice coming from a cloud (Exod 24:16; Mark 9:6); finally, in both cases there is talk about building tabernacles (Exod 25:9; Mark 9:5). This strength of these parallels are confirmed on finding that Jesus, after descending the mountain, attributes his disciples' failure to exorcise demons to their membership in a "unbelieving generation" (Mark 9:19; cf. Deut 32:5, 20), an epithet Moses applies to the disobedient wilderness generation. Whereas the Mosaic Law, distilled in the *shema* ("Listen, O Israel ...." [Deut 6:4]), spelled out the terms of the relationship between the Exodus movement and Yahweh, in this scene we discern a new law revealed through Christ with its own *shema*: "Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). The new Exodus was to have a new focal point and, at least in some sense, a new law.

The climax of the new Exodus theme can be found in the Last Supper, more precisely, the point at which Jesus says, "This is my blood of the (new) covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24), in close parallel to Moses' words at Sinai when he

2 While we must cautious about finding Exodus behind every (burning!) bush, there are certainly a number of interesting if not tantalizing parallels. See, e.g., John Bowman, *The Gospel of Mark: The New Christian Jewish Passover Haggadah* (StPB 8; Leiden: Brill, 1965); Willard M. Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels: Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994); Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (WUNT 2/88; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1997; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

establishes the covenant (Exod 24:8). Here Mark is bringing the kaleidoscope of images into focus. For centuries, every first-century reader would have been well aware, Israel had been looking both backwards and forwards: backwards to the Exodus as the time in which God freed his people from oppression and forwards to a time in which God would do it again–decisively. Now, Mark is saying, God *has* brought about this decisive, long-expected Exodus in Jesus Christ. Through his life, death and resurrection Christ has once and for all conquered the "Egyptians"–not the Gentiles but the demonic forces inspiring the Gentiles. Christ has also brought his people out of bondage, an act constituting nothing short of spiritual, political and socio-economic liberation. Finally, Christ has established a new people under a new covenant who would in effect embody the new royal priesthood of God. Throughout his gospel Mark capitalizes on every opportunity to reiterate this theologically rich truth: in Christ God has brought to pass a new Exodus movement, a movement which if properly understood, should radically shape the self-understanding and goals of the church.

Whatever Mark's interest in highlighting the theme of God's movement, he is even more keen to show that Jesus is *messiah*. The gospel writer tips his hand to this effect when at the very get-go he announces "the gospel of Jesus *Christ*," that is, "the gospel of Jesus the Messiah" (1:1). As the evangelist's readers would find out soon enough, however, this was not quite the kind of messiah Israel was looking for. In fact, it would be fair to say that messiahship according to Mark's Jesus was decidedly unlike anything anyone was looking for.

On one level, the story that Mark tells has all the makings of a "messianic story," at least as it would have been commonly told in first-century Judaism. When John

appears in the first chapter wearing Elijah's garb (Mark 1:6; 2 Kgs 1:8), we have suspicions (especially in light of the quotation of Mal 3:1 in Mark 1:2) that he might be the anticipated Elijahan forerunner of the messiah.[3] But the disciples certainly would have been ambivalent about such an identification. After all, if the disciples had entertained the thought that John was the promised Elijah *redivivus*, they would have quickly dismissed it following John's rather bizarre death at the hands of Herod (6:14–29). Surely, they must have thought, the new Elijah would not have suffered such a humiliating death. Yet Jesus insists, "Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him" (9:13). And if the disciples were puzzled in the case of John, how much less sense did it make to Peter that the messiah would have to suffer and die (8:31–32). It all seemed rather backwards.

But that is just Mark's point. He wants to prove that Jesus is a kind of upside-down messiah, or more exactly, a right-side-up

3 This point has been disputed, in my view, without adequate warrant. See Morris M. Faierstein, "Why Do the Scribes Say that Elijah Must come First?" *JBL* 100 (1981): 75–86.

messiah in an upside-down world. Keenly intent on driving this point home, the evangelist masterfully draws together the threads of two incompatible messianic ideologies. The common notion was that the messiah would be welcomed by the reigning leadership of Israel. But when Jesus comes preaching the kingdom, it is only the demons who recognize who he is (1:23–24, 34; 5:7), even as the religious authorities reject him (2:1–3:6). Whereas Israel's authorities expect the messiah to drive out Satan, it is these same authorities who accuse the true messiah of colluding with Satan; it is also an accusation seemingly entertained, for a time anyway, by his own family (3:20–35). If Israel's expected messiah was to be received with awe and joy, this messiah is mocked (5:40, 15:31). If Israel's expected messiah was to be hailed for conquering the Gentiles, this messiah is most understood by the Gentiles (7:24–30). No wonder it takes the disciples a full eight chapters to come to conclude that Jesus is the Christ!

Once the disciples realize Jesus' messianic identity, Jesus dedicates himself to clarifying the nature of his messianic calling (e.g. 10:45). Towards this end, he enters Jerusalem with his disciples for the last time (11:1): it is time for him to reveal himself as the enthroned messiah and thus as the one who would rebuild the temple, a uniquely messianic task. Jesus' self-consciousness of his messianic status becomes apparent from his repeatedly, if not obliquely, referring to himself as the "Son of Man" before his disciples (2:10, 28; 8:31, 38, etc.), and then finally as the transcendent, Danielic Son of Man before Caiaphas (14:61–62). As for Jesus' intention to rebuild the temple, this may have been inferred from his cleansing the temple (11:12–19), but it was probably his identification with the "stone the builders rejected ... the cornerstone" (12:10) which provoked rumors that he intended to destroy the present temple and build another one not made by human hands (14:58; 15:29).[4]

Quite in keeping with Mark's portraiture, Jesus' messianic enthronement "breaks all the rules." There would be no influential figures to recognize Jesus as messiah, but only certain unlikely and peripheral characters: Blind Bartimaeus calling out for the Son of David (10:47), the anonymous woman who anoints him at Bethany (14:1–9), and the Roman centurion (15:39). Whereas others heroes in Israel's second-Temple history had received a kind of red-carpet treatment as they processed into the temple, the absence of Israel's leadership during Jesus' entry is conspicuous (11:1–11).[5] In some sense, Jesus' entry into the temple amounts to a thwarted enthronement scene, but this is not to say that Jesus' enthronement and exaltation never takes place. They do. It is only that Jesus' throne is not a conventional throne, but a Roman cross; his crown, a crown of thorns; and his only remaining subjects, Roman soldiers calling out to him as "King of the Jews!" (15:16–32). Little do Jesus' opponents know that they speak far more than they intend. Little do they know that it precisely in their attempt to vitiate Jesus' messianic claim that they are unwitting collaborators in establishing that claim.

By situating the conflict between the first-century powerbrokers and Jesus the Messiah within a larger interpretive framework, which affirms both Jesus' messiahship

4 See, classically, Donald Juel, *Messiah and Temple: The Trial of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark* (SBLDS 31; Missoula, Mont.: 1977).

5 For examples of such "other heroes" see David. R. Catchpole, "The 'Triumphal' Entry," in Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule, ed., *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1984) 319–34.

(1:1) and his resurrection (16:1–8), Mark is accomplishing several things at once. In the first place, the evangelist is–perhaps for very good reasons in his own day–prompting his readers to see that when people (whether disciples, the crowd or scribes) oppose Jesus, they do so because of their misguided personal commitments and wrong-headed assumptions. On one level, this provides explanation as to why it was not necessarily *fait accompli* for Israel to embrace the messiah. On another level, Mark seems to be suggesting that misguided personal commitments and wrong-headed assumptions will continue to threaten God's people and therefore must continue to be checked against the mysterious logic of a crucified and risen messiah. Second, as Mark recounts the story of Jesus against the backdrop of his messiahship and resurrection, there is not only a tragic undertone but also a sense of burlesque. In contrast to the dinner-party hosted by "King Herod," a grim and sordid affair (6:14–29), the subsequent dinner scene hosted by King Jesus (6:30–44) serves to underscore more than Jesus' moral superiority as king. Equally if not more to the point is the fact that Herod's kingship is only a kind of mock kingship. Just as Mahler's military marches acquire a mildly ridiculous air when heard within their larger symphonic setting, so too the aspirations and pretensions of Israel's rulers are shown up for what they are when viewed through the lens of cruciformity. Although the earthly powers scorn Jesus and seek to make an end of him, his messianic claim and resurrection demonstrate that such powers are finally unreal and temporary. Jesus' status as risen Christ provides a basis for both critique of unjust worldly powers and hope in the ultimately just and lasting power.

If "movement" encapsulates what God has done for his people and "messiah" describes the one through whom God does this, then *mission* sums up what God is now doing through his people, the church. One might even go so far as to say that Mark's ecclesiology is his missiology, and vice versa. This begins to become clear, again, in the third verse: "'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (1:3). Astute readers of Mark will keep their eye out for this word "way" (*hodos*), since it comes up frequently (2:23; 4:4, 15; 6:8; 8:3, 27; 9:33, 34; 10:17, 32, 46, 52, etc.). For Mark, the "way" is not just the path of Jesus, it is also the path along which he invites us to follow. His way is to be our way.

For their part the disciples are rather slow to pick up on all this. Again, their dullness can be traced to their inappropriate attitude. In particular, they were generally unwilling to accept a plan that did not to involve a religio-political coup within Israel (10:37, 13:1),[6] but instead an extension of God's kingdom activity to those beyond the borders of Israel. This emerges in the text on following Jesus' geographical movements back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, that is, back and forth in and out of Gentile territory.[7] As Mark describes it, those who were near-to-home were generally unresponsive (3:31–35; 6:1–6), while those were geographically distant responded in fairly dramatic ways (3:8; 5:1–20; 7:24–30). Likewise, Jesus' compassion on the Gentiles (8:3) contrasts markedly with the disciples' indifference. In my view, it

6 Along with several commentators, I see the disciples' admiration of the temple at 13:1 not so much as the sentiments of an awestruck tourist but as an expression of their expectation that they, as the new rulers of Israel, would one day soon occupy and control that temple.

7 On this see now Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: 'Even the Dogs under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs'* (LNTS 339; London: T. & T. Clark, 2007).

If before the disciples failed to share in the inclusive compassion of Jesus, now they had failed to testify.

is the Twelve's antipathy to the Gentile mission which explains their "forgetting" to take bread along with them (8:14–21): after all, the disciples knew well enough, no bread meant no more feedings for the Gentiles. Their hearts were hardened and they did not understand that their task as Israel's new shepherds coincided with a reconfiguring of Israel (8:17–21). They also failed to understand, as the seed parables of Mark 4 should have made clear, that a favorable response to the word of God did not depend on ethnicity but on the condition of the heart (4:1–20), which in turn was an outworking of inscrutable divine activity (4:21–34). For Mark, incomprehension coincided with spiritual failing–the disciples were prone to both.

The theme of mission continues to play out even as the narrative conflict comes to a rolling boil in the final five chapters. When Jesus cleanses the temple, he does so–at least in part–because the temple was not fulfilling its calling to be a "house of prayer for all nations" (11:17, cf. Isa 56:7). In his eschatological discourse, Jesus describes the tribulations to come and how in the midst of those tribulations the disciples are to stand fearlessly as witnesses, until the gospel is preached "to all the nations" (13:9–11). (This echoes the thrust of 8:35: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.") After Jesus is anointed at Bethany, he foretells that this anointing will be recounted "wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world" (14:9). It is apparent, especially in his final days, that Jesus has his eye on the mission to the nations.

As Mark and his original audience knew so well, this same mission was not without serious cost. It was a cost that Jesus countenanced and was willing to pay; it was cost that the disciples only dimly understood and were at best hesitant to shoulder. In the Passion narrative Jesus testifies (14:62; 15:2) and the result is condemnation. Meanwhile, Peter, as representative of the disciples, disowns Jesus (14:66–72) and as a result he saves his own life (only of course to lose it in the larger economy). If before the disciples failed to share in the inclusive compassion of Jesus, now they had failed to testify.

But human failure never frustrates God's purposes. After Jesus breathes his last, the temple curtain is rent asunder, an event symbolic of the fact that the God of Israel, who was once restricted to the temple, was now going out to the nations (15:38). Immediately, a Gentile centurion confesses (15:39) precisely that which was has established from the beginning (1:1, 11): this is the Son of God. More than that, as the tearing of the temple curtain and centurion's confession together make clear: Jesus is the Son of God for the nations. It is for this reason all the more fitting that the last command of the book requires going to Galilee (16:7), the Gentile frontier in which Jesus' task of preaching the kingdom first started (1:9).

In this connection, it is no small irony that the women at the tomb fail to heed (at least for the moment) their instructions to

go to Galilee and tell the disciples about the risen Christ (16:4–8, cf. 9:9). If up to this point Jesus had found both humans and demons uncooperative in keeping his messianic status a secret (Mark 1:23–25, 34, 43–45; 3:11–12, etc.), now once it made sense to proclaim him as messiah (9:9), the first witnesses of the resurrection resist the idea. Even as the story ends, the human agents have failed to carry out their part, in this case, their task of speaking to what they have seen and heard. Assuming the original text really does end at 16:8, it is extraordinary to contemplate how this story of God's triumph through Christ is not only shot through with frustrating half-starts (which I can hardly resist pointing out is also rather Mahleresque), but is also finally punctuated with a note of failure.[8]

Yet, in a paradoxical way, it is a comforting failure. No doubt as Mark wrote to the persecuted church at Rome, he knew that they would find themselves in the position very much like that of the disciples and the women at the tomb. They too would be tempted to remain fearfully silent in the face of strong opposition. But, Mark seems to be saying, "If you like the women have witnessed the empty tomb, you too must go to your own 'Galilee of the Gentiles'." The reader, in others words, must now go where the story first began, and try again. If we fail along the way, we have simply fallen into the faltering footprints of those who have gone before us. But our lapses and partial blindness do not disqualify us. It is still ours to begin the story again and to follow Jesus.

As should be clear by now, it was never Mark's intention simply to say a few interesting things about Jesus, what he said and did. Rather Mark's message, centering around the themes of movement, messiah and mission poses a sharp challenge for the church today. But how might we distill that challenge? At the risk of reductionism (and it is hard not be reductionistic when summarizing a gospel which seems to contain everything), I would offer that Mark has concentrated on these three themes in order to answer two questions, questions which his first-century readers must have been asking themselves. First, "If we followers of Christ are the people of God, why are we suffering such hostility?" Secondly, his readers would have also likely asked, although not necessarily aloud, "In the face of such hostility should we not pull back?"

How does Mark speak to these issues, as pressing now as ever? To the first question Mark might well answer, "Precisely *because* you are the new movement of God, and followers of the suffering messiah, you have been called to nothing less than to suffer for his gospel mission." In western culture, where self-fulfillment and the avoidance of personal suffering are viewed as the highest norms, these are hard words indeed. Answers to the second question ("Should we not pull back?"), the evangelist seems to suggest, will become clear soon enough, but only as we struggle through the mystery of the first question.

This is no easy task. But no one said that grasping, much less communicating, Mark's message would be easy. Why should we expect anything different from a story that, like a symphony, contains everything?

8 On Mark's ending, see the excellent and highly accessible treatment in Morna D. Hooker, *Endings: Invitations to Discipleship* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003) 11–30.

Finitum capax infiniti: Luther's Radical Incarnational Perspective

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The Word and the sacraments were crucial aspects of Martin Luther's biblically-normed and experientially-informed theology. The Reformer viewed these means of grace as the unique gifts of God to the church through which the Holy Spirit creates and nurtures faith. They are, therefore, the constituent elements of the church's life and mission. The Eucharist, in particular, captured Luther's attention because it was one of the great causes of dissension between the evangelical movement and the Church of Rome, as well as among the varied expressions of the Reformation. It was particularly in his conflict with fellow reformers, those to whom he referred in a derogatory manner as the sacramentarians, that Luther became an ardent defender of the physical presence of Christ in the sacrament. The notion of *finitum capax infiniti* was a central aspect of that defense and manifests the Reformer's radical incarnational perspective. The purpose of this essay is to explore Luther's literary debate with the Swiss reformers, especially Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531). That debate marks the high point of Luther's theological defense of the real presence and in it the emphasis on *finitum capax infiniti* becomes readily apparent. In addition to highlighting the theological significance of this notion, I will also suggest some practical implications of this sacramental emphasis for the Lutheran movement's attitude toward and participation in contemporary society.

As I have already noted, Luther's eucharistic thought was developed in an intensely polemical context. In the early 1520s the Reformer addressed the medieval church's sacramental theology and practices. In the course of his conflicts with the Church of Rome he rejected five sacraments and affirmed only baptism and the Eucharist. He militated against the notion of *ex opere operato* and stressed that faith is necessary for the efficacious reception of the sacraments. He dismissed the doctrine of transubstantiation as a philosophical explanation of a divine mystery and a misunderstanding of Aristotelian philosophy. He also advocated the distribution of both kinds in the eucharistic celebration and bitterly criticized the church's insistence that the sacrament is a sacrifice and a meritorious work.[1] By the middle 1520s, however, his major sacramental opponents were no longer the Roman theologians but the Swiss Reformer Huldreich Zwingli and his supporters,

1 See Luther's "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Luther's Works,* 55 vols. (ed. Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), vol. 36, pp. 3-126. Hereafter referred to as LW.

especially Johannes Oecolampadius.[2] The focus of the debate among the Reformers was the doctrine of the real presence. On the basis of his biblical interpretation, his humanist and rationalist tendencies and his own creative theological impulses, Zwingli proposed and defended a symbolic interpretation of Christ's eucharistic presence. While Oecolampadius, Andreas von Karlstadt (1480-1541), Martin Bucer (1491-1551) and others formulated their own particular formulae in conceptualizing the eucharistic mystery, they all stood at Zwingli's side in his conflict with Luther. Luther emerged as an ardent and inflexible defender of a materialistic understanding of Christ's presence in his debates with the Swiss, even though he continued to reject the doctrine of transubstantiation. He, therefore, found himself much closer to the Roman side with regard to Christ's eucharistic presence than he did to his fellow reformers.

Luther and his opponents addressed a variety of issues in their sacramental writings, including the proper understanding of the words of institution, the meaning of the biblical concept of the right hand of God, the notion of ubiquity and the relationship of the two natures of Christ. I will focus particularly on their debate regarding the meaning of Christ's words in John 6:63. It is in his interpretation of this passage, which was central to the Swiss argument, and in his response to the Swiss position, as he understood it, that Luther formulated a highly positive understanding of the spiritual significance of created matter.

Prior to exploring the meaning of John 6:63 Luther made an important point regarding physical matter while addressing the Zwinglian interpretation of the right hand of God[3] and defending the scholastic notion of ubiquity. The Reformer noted that the biblical phrase "the right hand of God" does not denote a specific location or place but, rather, God's power. It is by means of this mighty power that God "... creates, effects, and preserves all things...."[4] Because it is God's work, all of creation is good and, therefore, neither condemned nor rejected by God.[5] As creator and preserver, God is also immanently present in all things. Luther is quite insistent:

> Therefore, indeed, he himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outer-

2 The most important scholarly discussions of Luther's conflicts with the Swiss theologians are Walther Köhler, *Zwingli und Luther: Ihr Streit über das Abendmahl,* 2 vols., Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, vols. 6-7 (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1924 and Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1953) and Hermann Sasse, *This is my Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959).

3 Note, for example, Oecolampadius' assertion: "The nature of a body is to be in one place. That body which can be in many places at the same time will not be considered to be a true body. A body has one location, unless it can be taught otherwise from Scripture." "Reasonable Answer to Dr. Martin Luther's Instruction Concerning the Sacrament," in Johann Georg Walch, ed., *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften,* 2nd ed., 23 vols. in 25 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880-1910), 20:603. Hereafter referred to as St. Louis edition. Zwingli noted: "...this word [until] binds him to the right hand of God until the predetermined day, so that we may easily understand that he will never be anywhere else than at the right hand of God until the judgment is completed..." "Reply to the Letters of Theobald Billican and Urban Rhegius," in Emil Egli, Georg Finsler, Walther Köhler and Oskar Farner, eds., *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Schriften,* vol. 4 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1982), p. 907. [reprint of *Corpus Reformatorum,* vol. 4]. Hereafter referred to as *Zwingli's Sämtliche Schriften.*

4 LW 37:57.

5 LW 37:237.

most being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.[6]

While God is present everywhere and in everything, it is also crucial to recognize that God is not circumscribed by any part of or even by the whole creation. After all, the divine "...Majesty is so great that neither this world nor even a thousand worlds could embrace it and say, 'See, there it is!'"[7] Although he is careful to avoid the charge of pantheism, Luther insists that all material things are God's good creation in which God is intimately present. There is a creative and salvivic relationship between the infinite and the finite. Obviously, this assertion was crucial for Luther's defense of the real presence. It also serves as one of the theological explanations for his positive view of matter.

Both Zwingli and Oecolampadius, who were Luther's chief sacramental antagonists, agreed with him that Scripture must be the ultimate source and norm of the church's teachings. Indeed, they attacked Luther by citing scriptural texts and drawing particular sacramental implications from them. Thus Luther and the Swiss theologians agreed on what the norm of their theological positions should be. However, significant differences and disagreements emerged in their interpretations of that scriptural norm. In addition to the eucharistic passages and Eph 1:20[8], John 6:63 was a pivotal text in the sacramental debates between the Lutherans and the Swiss.

The sixth chapter of John, especially verse 63, was of particular importance as the Swiss theologians addressed the question of Christ's presence in the sacrament and the manner and significance of the believers' sacramental eating. The passage reads: "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."[9] Jesus' discourse in John 6 regarding the bread of life, his comments about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, the spirit/flesh dialectic which he develops and especially the phrase "the flesh is of no avail" in verse 63 raised important questions for the Swiss theologians and significantly shaped their understanding of the Lord's Supper, especially Christ's presence in that Supper. They argued that since the flesh is of no avail, the bodily, physical presence of Christ in the sacrament is neither necessary nor beneficial. Secondly, they stressed the flesh/spirit dichotomy and lauded the spirit while denigrating the flesh. Thirdly, they maintained that spirit and flesh are such radically different entities that they cannot be united. Finally, they focused on spiritual and physical eating and noted that the spiritual eating was much more crucial than physical eating. Luther devoted a substantial portion

6 LW 37:58.

7 LW 37:59. See also LW 37:228: "He is a supernatural, inscrutable being who exists at the same time in every little seed, whole and entire, and yet also in all and above all and outside all created things. There is no need to enclose him here, as this spirit dreams, for a body is much, much too wide for the Godhead; it could contain many thousand Godheads. On the other hand, it is also far, far too narrow to contain one Godhead. Nothing is so small but God is still smaller, nothing so large but God is still larger, nothing is so short but God is still shorter, nothing so long but God is still longer, nothing is so broad but God is still broader, nothing so narrow but God is still narrower, and so on. He is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that can be described and imagined."

8 The passage speaks about Christ sitting at the right hand of God.

9 John 6:63 (RSV)

of his two major eucharistic treatises, "That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics" of 1527 and his "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper"of 1528,[10] to his own interpretation of the sixth chapter of John. In doing so, he examined and rejected the sacramental implications drawn by the Swiss theologians on the basis of these passages. What follows highlights crucial aspects of Luther's argument.

Since Jesus said that the flesh is of no avail, Zwingli and Oecolampadius concluded that Christ's flesh would not be sacramentally efficacious and is not present in the sacrament.[11] Luther responds that this passage is not applicable to Christ's flesh and, therefore, has no implications for the sacrament. He points out, first of all, that Christ says that "flesh is of no avail," not "my flesh is of no avail."[12] Thus, if the Swiss want to apply the passage to Christ's flesh, they must offer scriptural warrant for doing so. Of course, he implies that they are unable to provide such scriptural support.

Secondly, Luther argues that Christ's flesh is not "fleshly" but spiritual. He notes that Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the second part of John 3:6, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit," applies to Jesus' flesh, not John 6:63.[13] Luther also recalls the promise of the angel to Mary that her child "...will be called holy, the Son of God."[14] Thirdly, he warns that denigrating Christ's flesh will lead to dualism and docetism, as has happened in the past.[15] Finally, Luther points out the devastating implications of the Swiss assertion for the incarnation and for soteriology. He asks:

> If the flesh of Christ is not spirit, and therefore is of no avail since only the Spirit is profitable, how can it be profitable when it was given for us? How can it be useful if it is in heaven and we believe in it? If the reasoning is correct and adequate, that because Christ's flesh is not spirit it must be of no avail, then it can be of no avail on the cross or in heaven either! For it is quite as far from being spirit on the cross and in heaven as in the Supper. But since no spirit was crucified for us, therefore Christ's flesh was crucified for us to no avail. And since no spirit, but Christ's flesh ascended into heaven, we believe in an unprofitable flesh in heaven. For wherever Christ's flesh may be, it is no spirit. If it is no spirit, it is of no avail and does not give life, as Zwingli here concludes.[16]

The point is clear. If Christ's flesh is not beneficial in the sacrament, it is also not beneficial on the cross or even in heaven. Then the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation have neither been won for us by Christ

10 These two writings are the content of LW 37.

11 Zwingli insisted: "The flesh of Christ profiteth very greatly, aye, immeasurably, in every way but...by being slain, not eaten. Slain it has saved us from slaughter, but devoured it profiteth absolutely nothing." "Commentary on True and False Religion," Clarence Nevin Heller, ed., *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1929), p. 209. Hereafter referred to as "Commentary," LWZ 3. He articulates the same argument in his "Reply to the Letters of Theobald Billican and Urban Rhegius": "The flesh of Christ is of no avail if it is eaten. Therefore those words of Christ, 'This is my body,' cannot be understood as if through them the flesh of Christ is eaten." [Translated in LW 37:130, footnote 225]. *Zwinglis Sämtliche Schriften,* 4:898.

12 LW 37:79.

13 LW 37:98-99; 236-237.

14 Luke 1:35 (RSV)

15 LW 37:99

16 LW 37:246-247. See also LW 37:85.

In the course of his conflicts with the Church of Rome he rejected five sacraments and affirmed only baptism and the Eucharist.

nor are they dispensed in the eucharistic celebration. Luther hoped that his readers would follow his logic, recognize both the error and danger of the Swiss position, reject the biblical interpretation proposed by his opponents and conclude with him that Christ clearly did not refer to his own flesh when he proclaimed that the flesh is of no avail. In light of his incarnational and soteriological perspective, Luther argues that the flesh is, in fact, essential since it is in the flesh and by means of flesh that Christ has accomplished God's redemptive work. Hence the passage from John cannot be used to justify a rejection of the real presence, according to Luther. It also does not warrant a negative understanding of flesh or of created matter in general.

The Reformer clarifies his thinking further as he examines the spirit/flesh dialectic in greater depth. He notes that when flesh and spirit are placed in opposition in Scripture, flesh always refers to our sinful nature which is born of the flesh (John 3:6).[17] On the other hand, all that comes from the Spirit or is used by the Spirit for spiritual purposes, including flesh and other material things, is spiritual.[18] Luther summarizes his argument in the following passage:

> ...we do not call "flesh" that which can be seen by the eye or touched by the fingers, as the fanatics do when they call Christ's body useless flesh; but...all is spirit, spiritual, and an object of the Spirit, in reality and in name, which comes from the Holy Spirit, be it as physical or material, outward or visible as it may; on the other hand, all is flesh and fleshly which comes from the natural power of the flesh, without spirit, be it as inward and invisible as it may.[19]

Because the Holy Spirit works in and through the Word of God and faith, everything that is connected with them is spiritual as well, no matter how physical or material it may be.

> Thus, all that our body does outwardly and physically, if God's Word is added to it and it is done through faith, is in reality and in name done spiritually. Nothing can be so material, fleshly, or outward, but it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith. "Spiritual" is nothing else than what is done in us and by us through the Spirit and faith, whether the object with which we are dealing is physical or spiritual. Thus, "Spirit consists in the use, not in the object," be it seeing, hearing, speaking, touching, begetting, bearing, eating, drinking, or anything else. For if a person serves his neighbor and does it physically, it is of no avail to him, for the flesh is of no avail. But if he does it spiritually, i.e., if his heart does it out of faith in God's Word, it is life and salvation.[20]

The Holy Spirit, the Word and faith thus determine whether an object or a deed are spiritual or not, not the object or deed itself.

It is important to note that a basic per-

17 LW 37:95.

18 LW 37:94-95.

19 LW 37:99.

20 LW 37:92.

ceptual and theological difference between Luther and the Swiss reformers is emerging here, namely, how they respond to the critical question of whether the finite is or is not a vehicle of the divine (*finitum est capax infiniti* or *finitum non est capax infiniti*). The fact that the two sides gave different answers to this central question largely explains their different sacramental theologies, especially with regard to Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Their answers also had crucial implications for their attitude toward and perception of the material.

It is with these definitions of flesh and spirit, or of the fleshly and spiritual, in mind that Luther also addresses the Swiss claim that it is not fitting that Christ's body and blood are present in bread and wine.[21] Here the issue of the finite holding the infinite comes to the forefront. Karlstadt had apparently set the stage for this debate in the following statement attributed to him by Luther: "My friend, you will not persuade me that God is in the bread and wine."[22] Oecolampadius also raised this central issue when he rejected the notion that Christ "...is enclosed in the loaves and falling crumbs on many altars,..."[23] The Basel Reformer challenged Luther particularly by referring to the God of the Lutherans as a baked God, a bread-God, a meat-God and other similar terms.[24] From the Swiss perspective it was not consistent with Christ's divine glory to be physically present in the sacrament. Hence, they argued that it is neither fitting nor necessary that Christ's physical body and blood be in the bread and wine.[25] Luther retorted that if this is true then the incarnation and Christ's other saving acts are also not fitting or reasonable. And so he writes:

> To this first point I might say equally well that it is not reasonable that God should descend from heaven and enter into the womb; that he

21 Zwingli claimed: "She [the church] will not even brook the question whether the body of Christ is in the Sacrament of the Eucharist in actual, physical, or essential form." "Commentary," LWZ 3:212.

22 LW 37:52. Luther asserts that Karlstadt said these words to an unidentified person, presumably someone who affirmed the doctrine of the real presence.

23 Quoted in LW 37:65, Footnote 108.

24 LW 37:52-53. See also LW 36:336; LW 38:29, 293, 295, 305. Oecolampadius argued that his description of his opponents as *gotsfleischesser* and *gotsblutsauffer* and of their God as *brötenen* and *gebachnen* was defensible. See his "Reasonable Answer to Dr. Martin Luther's Instruction Concerning the Sacrament," St. Louis edition 20:582ff. Zwingli, too, argued that Lutheran sacramental theology suggested that God should be described in terms such as "edible," "impanated," "baked," "roasted" and "ground-up." *"Si autem esculents deus, impanatus, coctus, frixus, aut pistus nusquam est."* "Reply to Letters of Theobald Billican and Urban Rhegius," 1526, *Zwinglis Sämtliche Schriften*, 4:934.

25 LW 36:338. Oecolampadius asked: "What need have we of his body to be in that bread? I do not see what benefit accrues to us from this." [Translated in LW 37:127, footnote 216] "Reply to Willibald Prickheimer on the Subject of the Eucharist," *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe,* 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883-), 23:315. Hereafter referred to as WA. He notes further: "Moreover, the bodily presence of Christ is not necessary. As our adversaries themselves admit, the soul receives this [strengthening of faith] as often as the Word is preached in the gospel and received with faith." [Translated in LW 37:138, footnote 236] "Reasonable Answer to Dr. Martin Luther's Instruction concerning the Sacrament," St. Louis edition, 20: 633. Oecolampadius notes further: "Moreover, we do not at all need the bodily presence of the Lord in order to receive the spiritual gifts...." "Reasonable Answer to Dr. Martin Luther's Instruction concerning the Sacrament," St. Louis edition 20:603.

who nourishes, sustains, and encompasses all the world should allow himself to be nourished and encompassed by the Virgin. Likewise, that Christ, a king of glory [Ps 24:10], at whose feet all angels must fall and before whom all creatures must tremble, should thus humble himself below all men and allow himself to be suspended upon the cross as a most notorious evil-doer and that by the most wicked and desperate of men. And I might conclude from this that God did not become man, or that the crucified Christ is not God.[26]

Questioning the reality of God's presence in and use of the material thus has dire consequences for the very heart of the Christian message and puts the salvation of humanity into doubt. The Swiss did not intend or envision such consequences, but Luther insists that these are precisely the implications of their eucharistic theology.

With regard to the Swiss contention that it is not necessary that Christ's body and blood are physically present in the sacrament, Luther cautions that they should let God decide what is necessary and what is not. If we start questioning God regarding Christ's sacramental presence, we might well question why Christ was necessary at all since God could easily have overcome the power of sin by simply speaking a word. We could also assert that it was not necessary for Christ to be born of a virgin or that he be God since God could have enabled a human being to save us. This is what happens when people do not trust and believe God's clear word and draw conclusions about God's will and activity on the basis of their own reason. "Therefore," Luther insists, "one must close mouth, eyes and all the senses and say: 'Lord, you know better than I.'"[27]

The Swiss asserted that Christ's bodily presence in the sacrament was neither fitting nor necessary because they considered it to contradict Christ's glory.[28] Informed by his theology of the cross, Luther instructed his opponents what Christ's glory truly is. Christ's glory does not consist of sitting at the right hand of God "...on a velvet cushion...,"[29] insists Luther. Rather, his glory is manifest precisely when his body and blood are present in the Supper, when he permits the learned to become offended and hardened by his foolish words and works, when he makes the wise fools so that they are blinded precisely where they desire to be most wise. It is also Christ's glory to be so concerned about poor sinners and to show them such love that he is not only present among them but gives them his

26 LW 36:338.

27 LW 36:343-345.

28 Oecolampadius cautioned: "If Christ is in the bread, then wherever the bread is placed or carried, it will be necessary for the body also to be carried to the same place, for it is bread; and one will be at liberty to play with it, so that it will be borne up and down, forward and backward in the bread, according to the whim of the administrant." "Reply to Willibald Pirckheimer on the Subject of the Eucharist," d 1; quoted in LW 37:65, footnote 108. Oecolampadius rejected the notion that Christ is "...enclosed in the loaves and fallen crumbs on many altars" or that bread is a "wrapping" for Christ. See his "Genuine Exposition of the Words of the Lord, 'This is my Body,' According to the most Ancient Authors," E 7, A v; quoted in LW 37:65, footnote 108. Oecolampadius also stated the position of the Swiss concisely in his "Apologetics": *"Scio hodie gloriosorum Christum, quam ut ab illis vel tangi vel edi carnaliter sinat."* "I know today a more glorious Christ than one who permits himself to be touched or carnally eaten." [Translated in LW 37:71, footnote 118]; "Apologetics," H 8 in WA 23,303.

29 LW 37:70. Luther suggests that the implication of Oecolampadius' position is that Christ's glory consists of sitting "...at the right hand of God on a velvet cushion...."

own body so that their bodies might have eternal life. Thus the glory of God "...is precisely that for our sakes he comes down to the very depths, into human flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, our heart, our bosom; moreover, for our sakes he allows himself to be treated ingloriously both on the cross and on the altar, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor 11[:27], that some eat the bread in an unworthy manner."[30] It is once again crucial to note Luther's incarnational perspective and his emphasis on the material as a means of God's immanence and of God's saving activity.

While Christ's eucharistic presence contradicts his glory according to the Swiss, Luther believes that his surprising, foolish, offensive divine glory is manifest particularly as he takes on flesh, suffers for us, is present in the sacrament and nourishes us with his own flesh and blood. The Reformer was so adamant and certain about this not only because of his theology of the cross but also because he was convinced that the physical and the spiritual, the material and the divine, are not irreconcilable opposites but are intimately yoked in God's saving and life-giving work. While the Swiss had difficulty imagining and, therefore, believing that the body could be in the bread, Luther insisted that God has specifically chosen to be present in and to work through the material. Hence, the Reformer can make the radical assertion that the Holy Spirit cannot be present with believers "...except in material and physical things such as the Word, water, and Christ's body and in his saints on earth."[31] He also points out that God's word, which makes objects and works spiritual, is always accompanied by the physical or the material. Luther gives the examples of Abraham to whom God gave Isaac together with the word, of Noah to whom God made a promise and sent the rainbow and of the Supper where the word is accompanied by Christ's crucified body. And so he concludes: "You find no word of God in the entire Scriptures in which something material and outward is not contained and presented."[32] Luther presses his point even further and asserts that, as is the case with the Holy Spirit and the Word, faith, too, is always connected to a physical object.[33]

The philosophical law of identical predication, which stated that two differing substances cannot be united, had long challenged sacramental theologians as they sought to reconcile the presence of bread and wine as well as of body and blood in the Eucharist. The medieval scholastics resolved the problem posed by identical predication through the doctrine of transubstantiation, which asserted that the substance of bread and wine is replaced by body and blood. Hence, only body and blood are present in the sacrament. During the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe rejected transubstantiation, spoke of the elements as signs, suggested that Christ's body and blood are present "sacramentally," not physically, and argued that the sacramental elements remain bread and wine.[34] Not surprisingly, Zwingli, who also agreed with the law of identical predication,[35] cited Wycliffe in support of his rejection of the

30 LW 37:72.

31 LW 37:95.

32 LW 37:135-136.

33 LW37:292.

34 LW 37:294ff.

35 "The saying, 'this is bread and is, additionally, my body,' has no safeguard at all, either in God's word or in philosophy, for two substances cannot be one thing." "Friendly Reminder," St. Louis edition 20, 1111.

real presence.[36] Luther not only disagreed with the scholastics, as well as with Wycliffe and Zwingli, but he also argued that the law of identical predication is irrelevant to the sacramental discussion. While reason and philosophical principles suggest that two diverse substances cannot become one, Luther argued that this is clearly a possibility, indeed, a reality, in divine matters. He points particularly to the incarnation in support of his position that bread and body and wine and blood, which are obviously distinct and different substances, can be united in the sacrament. While the physical elements are relationally changed by the sacramental union, they are not transubstantiated or destroyed. Body and blood as well as bread and wine are, therefore, present in the Eucharist and together they are a new sacramental substance.

> For even though body and bread are two distinct substances, each one existing by itself, and though neither is mistaken for the other where they are separated from each other, nevertheless where they are united and become a new, entire substance, they lose their difference so far as this new, unique substance is concerned. As they become one, they are called and designated one object. It is not necessary, meanwhile, that one of the two disappear or be annihilated, but both the bread and the body remain, and by virtue of the sacramental unity it is correct to say, "This is my body," designating the bread with the word "this." For now it is no longer ordinary bread in the oven, but a "flesh-bread" or "body-bread," i.e. a bread which has become one sacramental substance, one with the body of Christ. Likewise with the wine in the cup, "This is my blood," designating the wine with the word "this." For it is no longer ordinary wine in the cellar but "blood-wine," i.e. a wine which has been united with the blood of Christ in one sacramental substance.[37]

According to Luther, then, the law of identical predication simply constitutes another fallacious argument in support of a denial of Christ's bodily presence in the sacrament. Divine truth obviously transcends philosophical principles. Hence, identical predication is irrelevant in divine matters and does not necessitate either a scholastic position, which rejects the presence of bread and wine, or a Zwinglian position, which denies the presence of body and blood. It also cannot be cited as justification for arguing that the divine and the material cannot be united.

While the Swiss continued to celebrate the Eucharist and expected the people to participate in that celebration and partake of the sacrament, their sacramental theology caused them to emphasize spiritual, rather than physical, eating as the essential sacramental action of the believer.[38] Such spiritual eating, or faith, does not necessitate Christ's bodily presence in the sacrament. They also feared that the Lutheran stress on the real presence and on the physical eating and drinking of Christ's physical body and blood would lead to what was termed "Capernaitic eating." Indeed, they accused

36 "I hear (to mention this first) that Wycliffe earlier held and the Waldensians today hold this view, that 'is' was put here for 'signifies,' but I have not seen their Scripture basis for it." "Commentary on True and False Religion," LWZ 3, 224.

37 LW 37:303.

38 Martin Bucer speaks in Christ's stead as he interprets John 6:63: "If faith and hence my spirit are lacking, you will not receive life, and the eating of my flesh will be of no avail. I have been speaking of that spiritual and life-giving eating of myself." "Apology,"18. Quoted in LW 37:84, footnote 144.

Oecolampadius stressed: "We exhort to faith...rather than to the eating of bread." "Reply to Willibald Pirckheimer on the Subject of the Eucharist," c 2. Quoted in LW 37:86, footnote 146.

Luther and his followers of this error.[39]

In response to these assertions and concerns of his opponents, Luther defended the value of physical eating. Such eating, when done in faith, is, in fact, spiritual. Because Christ's body is eaten, the promise of forgiveness is also fulfilled through such spiritual physical eating.[40] Furthermore, as it partakes of the everlasting food which is the body and blood of Christ, the human body is also assured that it will live forever.[41] For Luther, then, the Eucharist is not only spiritual food for the soul but also bodily nourishment which literally assures everlasting life to the body. Physical eating is, therefore, essential and beneficial, but it is not sufficient. Those who partake must also eat spiritually. As they eat the bread and drink the wine physically, they must also believe that they are eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ.[42] Both physical eating and spiritual eating, or believing, are necessary if the sacrament is to be beneficial to both body and soul. Luther explains his position concretely:

> The mouth eats the body of Christ physically, for it cannot grasp or eat the words, nor does it know what it is eating. As far as taste is concerned the mouth surely seems to be eating something other than Christ's body. But the heart grasps the words in faith and eats spiritually precisely the same body as the mouth eats physically, for the heart sees very well what the uncomprehending mouth eats physically. But how does it see this? Not by looking at the bread or at the mouth's eating, but at the word which is there, "Eat, this is my body." Yet there is only one body of Christ, which both mouth and heart eat, each in its own mode and manner. The heart cannot eat it physically nor can the mouth eat it spiritually. So God arranges that the mouth eats physically for the heart and the heart eats spiritually for the mouth, and thus both are satisfied and saved by one and the same food.[43]

Luther clearly rejects the Swiss accusation that the Lutherans stress physical eating and neglect spiritual eating, and he also ardently denies the charge of Capernaitic eating. Although the Lutherans insist that the body and blood of Christ are physically present in the sacrament, they do not teach or envision a materialistic devouring of Christ's flesh in the eucharistic partaking, nor does their theology imply or lead to such a false understanding of the sacramental action. Luther explains, therefore, that when Christ's physical body is eaten physically in the Supper it is not torn into pieces, divided, corrupted, destroyed, chewed or digested. Christ's body is blessed, divine and incorruptible flesh which is unlike any other food. It is not consumed by the one who eats it, but it transforms that person into what it is, namely, something "...spiritual, alive and eternal;..."[44] The charge that the Luther-

39 Oecolampadius asserts: "They are Capernaites, who promise themselves a fleshly table, as if the flesh of Christ were contained in the bread." [Translated in LW 37:93, footnote 153]; "Genuine Exposition of the Words of the Lord, 'This is my Body,' According to the Most Ancient Authors," A 6; WA 23, 308. Zwingli rejects any notion of physical eating: "That the symbolic bread is the flesh of Christ is so abhorrent to the mind of all believers that no one of us has ever truly believed it....This idea of mangling the flesh the mind so rejects that one would not dare to chew but would spit it out of one's mouth." "Rearguard or Supplement Concerning the Eucharist," *Zwinglis Sämtliche Schriften,* 4:493.

40 LW 38:46-47.

41 LW 37:71, 87, 93-94.

42 LW 37:85.

43 LW 37:93.

44 LW 37:100.

ans are Capernaites or that their eucharistic theology implies Capernaitic eating is both false and unfair, protests Luther.

In responding to the Swiss assertion that the flesh is of no avail and that it would be inconsistent with Christ's glory to be present in bread and wine, Luther formulated a theology of creation and incarnation which affirms matter as God's good creation, which emphasizes God's immanent presence in all created things and which maintains that God accomplishes God's saving work precisely through material means. The Reformer thus clearly differentiated himself from his sacramental opponents by insisting that the finite is capable of holding the infinite, *finitum est capax infiniti.*

As has become apparent, this crucial affirmation is informed by and confirms central themes in Luther's theology. The confession that God is the creator and preserver of all that is; the crucial importance of Christ's incarnation for God's self-revelation and God's saving acts; a conscious affirmation of Chalcedonian Christology, with a particular emphasis on the unity of the two natures; a focus on the means of grace and a physical, material understanding of Christ's eucharistic presence all reflect and necessitate his positive view of created matter and his insistence that the divine and the material are intimately and necessarily related. Luther was, therefore, an ardent proponent of the sacred, spiritual nature of the material, not only as God's good creation but also as the unique means of God's intimate presence in the world and as the instrument of God's redemptive and justifying activity. The Reformer's soteriological perspective obviously necessitates an intimate relationship between God who is Creator and Redeemer and the creation. While he strives diligently to avoid pantheism and panentheism, he also rejects all dualistic and iconoclastic tendencies which have, too often, manifested themselves within the Christian tradition. The Reformer's stance has crucial implications for God's nature and work. Luther's God is a relational, immanent God, and this God works through means, the material means of God's creation. The notion that the finite is a vehicle of the divine also necessitates a particular attitude toward and relationship with the material and has very practical implications for the life and ministry of people of faith. For illustrative purposes I will note two such implications, one from the Lutheran historical heritage and one which suggests that the church should assume a leadership role in addressing one of the great challenges faced by our world today.

Luther's notion that the finite is a vehicle of the divine clearly shaped the Lutheran community's attitude toward and use of the arts. From its very beginning, the evangelical movement did not promote or tolerate iconoclasm.[45] Although the side altars, used primarily for the celebration of votive masses, were often removed, the churches which became Lutheran houses of worship were not stripped of their art work. Even when new evangelical churches were built, they did not differ significantly from already extant structures except that the pulpit was often located in

45 See the eight sermons Luther preached when returning to Wittenberg from the Wartburg, LW 51:70-100. See also Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols. The Reformation and Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). This is a fascinating study which compares the responses of the various Reformation movements to images. The author explores the different attitudes of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions and suggests that those differences are explained by their disagreement over the question of whether the finite holds the infinite.

the midst of the congregation. Quite obviously, this architectural feature reflected Luther's theological emphasis on the centrality and efficacy of the living Word and, hence, of proclamation in Christian worship. In light of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and his insistence that the sacrament was Christ's gift to the whole community, not a possession of the clergy, Luther also advocated that the altar should be moved away from the wall and that the priest should face the people during the sacramental liturgy.[46] In spite of its theological warrant, this innovation was generally not implemented among Lutherans until more modern times. With these minimal changes, Lutheran church buildings looked very much like those of the Roman church and retained the traditional artistic expressions, although these were informed by evangelical theology. Any fear of idolatry was transcended by the conviction that the material could be used to express a spiritual message and to celebrate God's saving acts.

The visual arts, especially woodcuts, were promoted by the Lutheran reformers, although primarily for didactic rather than aesthetic purposes.[47] The Bible, which was translated into German by Luther and his colleagues and was first published in 1534,[48] was not only an important theological, devotional and literary accomplishment. It also had artistic merit with its illuminated initials and 124 woodcuts, some in color.[49] The Scriptures themselves, which were to have a central place in the church's life, thus became a means of affirming and promoting artistic endeavors, especially the visual arts. Luther's German Bible concretely demonstrated the Reformer's contention that the word pictures in Scripture are quite naturally formed into mental pictures by the believer and, in turn, foster the artistic depiction of biblical themes and scenes.[50] Woodcuts were also prevalent in the pamphlet literature of the time. This literary genre became a popular means of communicating Lutheran theological insights to the general public. The woodcuts portrayed the central message of the pamphlet in pictorial form. Thus, both the learned and those who could not read were taught the essentials of the faith. Albrecht Dürer and his school were particularly adept at this specific artistic medium. Unfortunately, the polemical and scatological use of pamphlets and of woodcuts also became quite popular during the Reformation period. It must be noted, however, that

46 LW 53:69.

47 The best and most thorough discussion in English of the German Reformation's use of and impact on artistic expression is Carl C. Christiansen, *Art and the Reformation in Germany,* Studies in the Reformation, Vol. 2 (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 1981).

48 The New Testament was translated by Luther in eleven weeks during his stay at the Wartburg. The first edition was published in September, 1522 and is generally known as the "September Testament." However, the whole Bible was not published until 1534 when it also appeared in a Low German version. For insights into Luther's work as a translator of Scripture see Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965). Both the 1522 and 1534 Bibles, the latter with hand-colored woodcuts from the studio of Cranach, are part of the rare books collection of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

49 Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era* 1500-1650, second edition (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1973), p. 186.

50 LW 40:99-100.

pamphlets, with their woodcuts, were often effective didactic and communication tools, even when they were employed in negative ways, and that they had an important impact on the culture and society of the time.

Artists, particularly Lucas Cranach the Elder and Lucas Cranach the Younger, not only provided posterity with portraits of the reformers and of contemporary ecclesiastical and political personalities, but they also produced religious art.[51] The altarpieces in St. Mary's Church, the city church of Wittenberg, and in St. Peter and St. Paul Church in Weimar are prime examples of evangelical sacred art. Important theological themes, such as the priesthood of all believers and the centrality of Word and sacraments, were presented in pictorial form by these artists. For example, in one of the panels of the altarpiece in St. Mary's Church, Philip Melanchthon, who was a layperson, is depicted baptizing one of his children. While the scene has no historical basis, it was a striking and effective visual depiction of Luther's doctrine of the universal priesthood which asserted that all the baptized have sacramental authority.[52] Artistic endeavors and visual images were affirmed by the evangelicals on the basis of Luther's theology, and they became integral parts of the worship spaces and worship experiences of God's people. The finite was clearly viewed and used as a vehicle of the divine.

The celebration and implementation of this theological principle was perhaps most readily apparent within Lutheran circles in the composition and use of sacred music as an essential part of worship, as an effective means of spiritual expression and as an important catechetical resource.[53] The long and illustrious tradition of Lutheran church music ranges from the popular hymns of Luther during the sixteenth century to the Christo-centric and spiritually moving hymnody of Paul Gerhardt in the seventeenth century to the majestic compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach in the eighteenth century, particularly his cantatas, organ preludes, passions, short masses and Mass in B Minor. These compositions proclaim the central themes of Luther's biblical message and reflect his theological and spiritual conviction that the material can be used for spiritual purposes.

The church no longer dominates society and culture as it did in medieval Europe or in the time of the Reformation. Theology no longer defines the contemporary world view nor does it play a major role in inspiring and shaping artistic expressions. Yet, the church continues to be a community which is called to be of service to the world. Christians continue to confess their faith and express that faith in worship, theological documents and practical witness. The church's theology thus continues to be a resource to the Christian community as it seeks to be the body of Christ in any particular time, place or culture. The confession that God is Creator, that God has taken on human flesh, that the creation is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and that God remains immanently present and active through such material means as water and bread

51 A fine collection of Cranach art is exhibited in the castle museum in Weimar, Germany.

52 LW 44:127-130; LW 36:112-113, 116; LW 40:18-35.

53 For Luther's and Lutheranism's contributions to sacred music see Paul Nettl, *Luther and Music* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Publishing House, 1948) and Patrice Veit, *Das Kirchenlied in der Reformation Martin Luthers: Eine Thematische und Semantische Untersuchung* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner Verlag, 1986).

and wine continues to enliven people and bring them hope. Therefore, these crucial theological affirmations which are so intimately related to the notion of *finitum capax infiniti* can still inspire the church to be an agent of cultural critique, transformation and expression. It will be precisely that when it again becomes a catalyst for artistic endeavors, whether sacred or secular, and when it opposes all forms of dualism which denigrate the material and justify its neglect and abuse. This last point brings me to the second implication which I want to highlight.

In addition to fostering artistic expression, and even more importantly, the church catholic and surely the Lutheran community should provide leadership in contemporary efforts to address the greatest and most fundamental challenge facing our world today, namely, the ecological crisis. There can be very little doubt that two centuries of industrial and economic activity has affected the earth in profoundly negative ways. God's wondrous gift of creation which has sustained life in its diverse complexity for so long has been compromised so radically that its very existence and, hence, the existence of life as we know it are endangered. Of course, Luther did not envision the contemporary ecological crisis nor does he address specific aspects of that crisis. However, because of his theology of creation, incarnation, redemption and the means of grace, the Reformer was profoundly respectful of all material things, and his love for the beauties of nature is readily apparent in his writings. The heritage which he articulated in such creative and passionate ways gives Lutherans a sound theological basis and serves as obvious inspiration for ecological consciousness and commitment. We are called to care for God's creation, not only for our sake and for the sake of future generations but also for God's sake. After all, the material continues to be a vehicle of the divine, and God continues to take simple water, connects it to God's Word and transforms it into life-giving water. Christ continues to add his promises to bread and wine and offers us his body and blood to nurture the gift of life within us. The Holy Spirit continues to be present in the means of grace and uses them to create and strengthen faith. When we respect and preserve the material world around us, we are stewards of the material vehicles of the divine. From a Christian perspective, the ecological movement is ultimately not a matter of political correctness, of practical necessity or of an altruistic sense of morality. It is a spiritual matter, a matter of faith, a divine matter, and we are reminded of this every time we come to the table, take the bread and wine and are assured that we receive Christ himself. *Finitum capax infiniti.*

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"That Room": Augustana Chapel and the Preparation of Leaders for the Church

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[1]At least once a week, Mark Bangert and I chat about how worship forms Christians and, more particularly, about how seminary chapel does and does not prepare our students for ministry. As professors of liturgy and homiletics, we are very skilled at opining on how preparation did and did not happen on any given day. When I was a student in Notre Dame's doctoral program in liturgical studies, my Lutheran colleagues and I often mused that we were devoting our lives to the study of adiaphora, "ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word but that were introduced in the churches for the sake of good order and decorum."[2] Are the adiaphora that happen in chapel really worth worrying about? Wading through the often conflicting demands of seminary worship, I am frequently tempted to approach chapel as an auxiliary, even secondary, part of the curriculum, and to submit that "the community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God."[3] Taking this approach to the extreme, worship becomes a *reflection* of the community; anything goes as long as "the Gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."[4] While this approach is certainly theologically sound, it overlooks the power of worship to form Christians, communities, and leaders for the Church.

Worship as formation

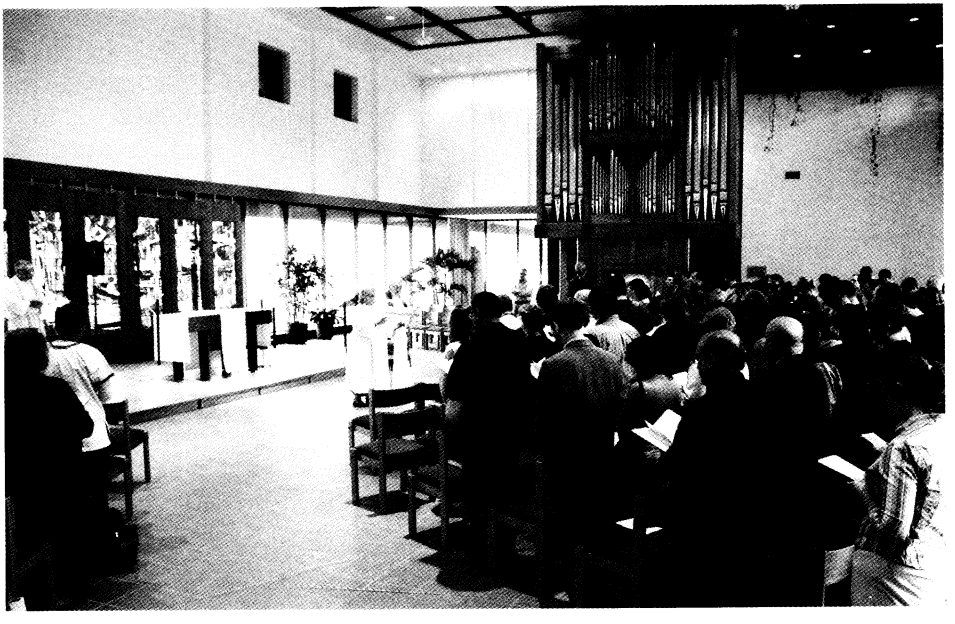
The "ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices" that are part of Christian worship *form* us in at least three ways. First, what we call adiaphora frequently proclaim (or contradict) the gospel more convincingly than what is preached, regardless of the sermon's gospel purity. For example, when people come to

1 Mark Bangert, to whom this essay is dedicated, played a major role in designing Augustana Chapel.

2 Formula of Concord, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 515.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Augsburg Confession, VII, *Ibid.*, p. 42.



worship and everything is done for them by the professionals, they receive a message about the nature of the church and mission that contradicts the good news that, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Second, what we call adiaphora are also known as ritual. In every area of life, ritual powerfully shapes both individuals and communities. Ritual creates families, defines one's identity in a community, exemplifies behavior, and reinforces societal values. We have rituals for celebrating birthdays, responding to school shootings, maintaining hope when children are missing, and electing a president. As Clifford Geertz observes, "In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined . . . turn out to be the same world."[5] To dismiss what is done in worship discounts the power of ritual.

Third, and most important, God works in and through the ritual of Christian worship. Worship is "primary theology."[6] In and through the liturgy, individuals and the community encounter, experience, and celebrate the God to whom the rest of their intellectual, contextual, and ministerial activity is directed. Thomas H. Schattauer, professor of worship at Wartburg Theological Seminary, argues that worship is not primarily an activity of the church or the Christian. Rather, worship is the *missio Dei*, God's work of salvation and recreation.[7] This view

5 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112.

6 The language of "primary theology" or *theologia prima* to describe worship (as distinct from the *theologia secunda* or "secondary theology" that constitutes formal or systematic theological reflection) is borrowed from Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 74.

7 Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 2-3.

of worship understands "the life and history of Israel, the saving work of Jesus, and the mission of the early church as these events are proclaimed in Scripture to be connected to one another and to the church's worship . . . as the single, continuing story of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ."[8] God's work of salvation, recorded in Scripture and accomplished in Christ, continues to our day in the church's worship. The church witnesses to and is drawn into God's own purpose of reconciling the world to God's own self. Worship is the way God gathers people to witness to and participate in God's work of reconciliation. Even more, orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann argues that the liturgy of the Eucharist is best understood as the church's journey or procession into the presence of Christ and the dimension of the reign of God, where we "arrive at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world."[9] As I have reflected elsewhere, "The judgment and mercy of God, proclaimed and enacted in worship, signify God's ultimate judgment and mercy for the world. In this way, God's people worshiping in the midst of the world enact and signify God's own mission for the life of the world."[10] The worshiping congregation is the location where God carries out God's mission.

Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination, the report of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Preparation for the Professions Program, a comparative study of professional education in medicine, nursing, law, engineering, and preparation of the clergy, attests to the importance of seminary worship in the preparation of church leaders. The report describes chapel or common worship as "a primary site for cultivating shared or communal spiritual practices." Chapel "provides, to some extent, a locus of community interaction, training (implicit or explicit) in performance, and a (or the) symbolic center of the school. . . . In common worship, the community members together weather its crises and those of the world, share needs, celebrate joys, mourn losses and other tragedies, and observe the ritual cycles of the tradition."[11]

The question, then, is not *whether* chapel prepares leaders for the church, but *how* seminary worship does this. Mark Bangert does not need a report to convince him of the importance of this question. Bangert so instinctively knows that common worship is essential to preparing leaders for the church that exploring how this happens is a central focus of his ministry. Bangert's approach is more than academic or theoretical. One of the things that I admire most about Mark is his commitment to attend daily worship, even after he completed service as dean of the chapel and regardless of how he feels about what happens there on any given day. Professor Bangert continually considers what chapel teaches about God, church, faith, mission, and world, and regularly cajoles colleagues and students to consider this question as well.

Describing how the LSTC commu-

8 Craig A. Satterlee and Lester Ruth, *Creative Preaching on the Sacraments* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001), 17.

9 Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1963), 27.

10 Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007), 53.

11 Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Goleman, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Franscisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 275.

nity worships on any given week, let alone during the course of an academic year, is difficult. There is a rhythm: Monday preaching, morning prayer on Tuesday, Wednesday Eucharist, and a service with a senior preaching on Thursday (we operate on a four day week at LSTC). But even this rhythm is fluid. Last year, a group gathered early each morning for matins and late in the evening for compline; in other years, it's been an evening praise service or communion service for commuters. The transient nature of the community, in which, for example, two-thirds of the Master of Divinity students were not on campus the previous year, requires that we continually build consensus. The pendulum is perpetually in motion. Word and Sacrament are enacted and celebrated in diverse ways. Traditional patterns, such as morning and evening prayer, are given creative forms and expressions. The festivals and seasons of the church year are augmented and sometimes replaced by commemorations and concerns important to the community, church, nation, and world. The style of worship ranges from "the highly structured, formal, and symbolically complex . . . to the devotional, emotive tone."[12] Since untangling this knot is an ongoing process, I will confine my reflections to one way that common worship prepares leaders for the church, namely the worship space, Augustana Chapel or, in Mark Bangert's parlance, "that room."

Augustana Chapel and the preparation of leaders

In 2003, LSTC's chapel auditorium and undercroft were transformed into Augustana Chapel. During my time at LSTC, participating in the design of the chapel, preparing for and anticipating its completion,

12 *Ibid.*

> I am continually grateful for what our chapel tells me about God and the church, and teaches me about worship.

liturgically leading the seminary community on a pilgrimage during the construction, and caring for and helping the community to learn to use the space were hallmarks of Mark Bangert's ministry and service. His was not the work of a curator, but the considered judgment and careful actions of one convinced that a seminary's worship space itself contributes to the preparation of leaders for the church.

James F. White, one of my professors at Notre Dame, comments on the role played by liturgical space in the formation of seminarians. "Indeed, I am quite willing to say that during a student's years in seminary, the seminary chapel building will probably teach more about spirituality than any single faculty member."[13] According to White, the chapel space is so influential that seminary graduates have a propensity to build the same worship space they knew in seminary when they become pastors. White observes that the source of the chapel space's influence is that the seminary chapel is students' most familiar worship space. White therefore encourages seminaries to determine what fun-

13 James F. White, "The Seminary Chapel Building as Spiritual Formation," *Theological Education* 38, 1 (2001): 103.

damental theological statements about the nature of God and the church the chapel building makes, and how the worship space teaches (or fails to teach) the meaning and practice of Christian worship.

Worshiping, preaching, and presiding in Augustana Chapel, I am continually grateful for what our chapel tells me about God and the church, and teaches me about worship. Indeed, some things I do not like. The sound system is my enemy. Certain arrangements of the furniture cause me to get lost going to or coming from communion; as one who is legally blind, I am not a fan of the chapel's capacity to project songs and prayers on the wall. Sometimes the chapel functions too much like a laboratory for me, either because students experience themselves as mice being observed or because experimentation with worship yields unanticipated results. Nevertheless, picking up Jim White's analogy of the seminary worship space as a member of the faculty, Augustana Chapel has earned tenure.

We pass under a map of the world as we enter the space, a visible reminder that Christ died for the world and that Christians worship, not for themselves, but for the sake of the world. We gather in a space that requires God's people to give it life. The strong directional emphasis is to the community and to the world beyond. The space's flexibility invites many possibilities for arranging the assembly in worship, permitting the community to experience God in its midst in many different ways. While providing a place where worshipers can look for guidance in their common action, the seating for the worship leaders suggests that they are part of the community. As White observes, "The more the presider sits, the more he or she is delegating leadership roles to others: readers, singers, preachers, etc."[14]

14 *Ibid.*, 104.

Augustana Chapel lifts up the New Testament understanding of the church as the Body of Christ, richly invested by God with a variety of gifts (1 Corinthians 11-14). The overall effect is to make the community see itself at the center as participants, not as observers.

Sitting in this Lutheran chapel, we look out the north windows at a Presbyterian Seminary, and are reminded of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, a treasure not to be taken for granted, but cherished and protected. Looking out the south windows, we see the street, the world, the reason we are here. The space teaches us that worship is no dress rehearsal, no mere academic exercise. We proclaim Christ Jesus for the sake of the world.

Augustana Chapel gives "central things"—the things the catholic churches use, the things given to us by Jesus Christ, the things that provide the "words" that the assembly uses to speak of God—center stage.[15] We are never far from water, which speaks to us both of drowning and new birth. The baptismal pool, which satisfies Luther's preference for immersion, is a visible reminder of the baptismal covenant that joins the worshipers together. Even though a seminary may not be a baptizing community, it is a community of the baptized who need to "regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: 'But I am baptized. And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.'"[16] I am impressed with the number of people

15 Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 90.

16 "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 462.

who dip a hand into the water and mark themselves as they enter and leave worship. We did not teach them to do this; the baptismal space did.

The baptismal space also teaches about Christian community. An assembly of teachers and students, faculty and staff, spouses and children, needs the visible reminder that "there are not multiple categories of Christians; there is not a hierarchy of spiritual standings before God; rather, in baptism, we are all members of one body, serving one another though our respective and differing vocations."[17] From the perspective of a preacher and, more important, a hearer of the gospel, when the gospel is preached, the sound of the running water is amplification and applause. When something other than the gospel is preached, the sound of that water is correction and comfort. The baptismal space extends beyond the chapel into the seminary's quadrangle courtyard, teaching that both God's gift of life in baptism and the church's baptismal vocation extends beyond worship to the world. The prominence and location of the baptismal space make it a central symbol of the campus.

The reading desk and table make clear that, in this space, Word and Sacrament are the core of Christian worship. Rather than a separate pulpit and lectern, which exaggerate distinctions between clergy and laity, Augustana Chapel has the testimony of one place of God's Word. Scripture is read where Scripture is preached. The authority of God's Word does not come from being high and elevated; instead, God's Word dwells among us. The pulpit's open front makes clear that preachers stand vulnerably

We gather in a space that requires God's people to give it life.

before God and neighbor; there is no place to hide. The parade of proclaimers, which passes through this place of God's Word, provides comfort, correction, honor and humility, as every preacher realizes that her or his voice is but one in the gospel chorus. I was not as mindful of this perspective as a seminarian as I am as a seminary professor. As a seminarian, I was exhilarated by preaching in chapel; as a professor, I grow more and more intimidated, an indication, I think, of my increasing appreciation of the power of God's Word proclaimed from that pulpit.

The table around which we gather in worship proclaims that community is Christ's gift before it is anything we do or make. Eating and drinking at that table clarifies, even transforms, relationships. We are all forgiven sinners; we are all sisters and brothers in Christ. Mark Bangert would remind us that our tablecloth, paraments from around the globe, signify our connectedness with Christians throughout the world, and call us to expand our celebration around the table, "begging God to bring the time of the great universal feast, giving a name and a history and a future to our eating and drinking."[18] This table hallows

17 Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Baptism and Life Passages*, Using *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Volume 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 29.

18 Gordon Lathrop, "At Least Two Words: The Liturgy as Proclamation" in *The Landscape of Praise: Reading in Liturgical Renewal*, (ed. Blair Gilmer Meeks;Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 184.

all our other tables, those in the refectory, apartment, office, and classroom.

To these "central things," Mark Bangert might add the organ, a tangible sign and expression of what Luther called "an excellent gift of God."[19] Through music, particularly congregational song, the Spirit teaches the faith, builds community, provides the assembly words with which to address God and profess its faith, and unites the congregation with the church of all times and places. Daniel E. Schwandt, LSTC's cantor, observes that recent incoming classes reflect a generation of students who, for many, have limited exposure to the pipe organ in their faith formation, because either the pipe organ is heard rarely, if at all, the instrument does not have the exceptional tone and quality of the Manz organ, or well-trained organists are not available. The seminary organ exposes students to the rich treasury of traditional church music combined with the diverse offerings found throughout the church. As a leader of singing, the organ serves as a flexible and gracious partner in song. As a concert and recital instrument, its eclectic blending of various historical tonal styles has lent itself well to presenting authentically and musically a wide diversity of organ literature—from the music of traditional Lutheran masters to cutting-edge new music.

For those who take the time to learn, Augustana Chapel invites and teaches individual devotion. The stations of the cross afford a pattern for walking with Christ. The adjacent prayer chapel invites visitors to try many ways of praying, from lighting candles to meditating on the cross. Greenery proclaims God's love and will for all creation, and invites worshipers to partner with God in renewing the earth.

Finally, as I work with students to plan and lead worship, for me, the sacristy has become a holy and liminal space, and a gracious partner and teacher. We are blessed with a "ready room" large enough that all who lead worship can comfortably gather. In that sacred space, we pray, mutually allay each other's fears, answer questions, review, and remind. While the content is the same as the classroom, the atmosphere is different. On the seminary campus, I am nowhere more aware of my identity as pastor than in the sacristy with my students before and after worship. Like the liturgy, in which God leads us to see more deeply into the reality of the world, the sacristy enables me to look more deeply into my students and see our church's leaders, those who will preach the Word, administer the sacraments, love and lead God's people, and serve the world.

In these and many other ways, Augustana Chapel teaches leaders about the nature of God and the church, as well as the meaning of Christian worship, by pointing beyond itself to God's saving activity in and through the assembly, the things the assembly does (gathering and sending, singing and praying, speaking and listening, remembering its washing in Christ, and eating and drinking in Christ's name), and the world, for whose sake the assembly worships. Mark Bangert would remind us to take "that room" seriously, to spend time in it, to take care of it, and to permit it to shape us before we undertake to shape it.

19 Martin Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's Symphoniae iucundae," *Luther's Works*, Volume 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 321.

The Gift of the Magi: Intercultural Conversation and Understanding

A philosophical mediation on Epiphany

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In Matthew's Gospel, the first people to understand the importance of the birth of Jesus, after Mary and Joseph, are people of a different ethnicity and culture than the Jews. Wise men seeking wisdom in the stars suddenly realize that this Wisdom is seeking them. Epiphany celebrates the fact that Christianity from the beginning, when Christ was still at the breast, is not about one culture, one custom, or one tradition. Christ is the Truth which all cultures seek. As importantly, Epiphany says that through Christ, the Truth becomes accessible across culture lines and barriers. The metaphysics inherent in the doctrine of the incarnation explains the fruitful possibility of conversation between people of differing creeds and customs. The history of the church is evidence of the possibility of such conversation. The future of understanding in the church depends on continued intercultural conversation.

Remembering the magi

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ...When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."[1]

Poets and preachers have hypothesized who the wise men were. Were they Taoists from China looking for the Way that cannot be spoken and finding the wordless infant who will preach that he is the Way? Were they Hindus seeking Brahma who infuses and transcends the world, and finding a child that they can hold in their arms? Were they astronomers seeking the laws of physics that guide the stars, and finding the creator of those stars lying in a manger? Were they Platonists who worshipped the One that resides beyond matter and found the Father of all embodied in flesh? Whoever they were, whatever creed they had followed, whatever their culture had taught them, Matthew is clear. They worship this tiny baby and give their treasures to him. They recognize him as great before many of his own creed and culture hear of his birth. Their story reminds the reader of the Gospel that Chris-

1 Matt 2:1-2,9-11 NRSV

tianity is not going to be the story of one people and one culture, but a multicultural story that tells of a transcendent Truth.

Christianity is a product of multicultural understanding

Christianity is a product of an intercultural exchange. The very Gospels that we read in our own language, and that many medieval doctors of the church read in a vulgar form of Latin, are translations of Greek, which were at the time of their penning translations of conversations in Aramaic and Hebrew. There is no text in the original language for scholars to decipher. The Scriptures are translations of translations. Moreover, the content of the Gospels are influenced by Jewish culture, Roman tradition, and Greek philosophy. And at times, the ideas from these traditions challenge other ideas in the same Scripture. This is perhaps even more true of the Acts, epistles, and Revelation that make up the rest of the New Testament.

These facts do not devalue the authenticity of the Scripture as the word of God. Christian Scripture is not one linear account of God, but a conversation about God. This does not mean the Scriptures are fallible or to be taken lightly, as sometimes students of history fear or assume. God is in that conversation. In that challenging conversation is the fullness of Truth.

If the Scriptures themselves are products of conversation it is expected that the traditions surrounding the Scriptures be as well. The practices and customs of the church descended from traditions inside and outside of Jewish culture; many are obviously pagan in origin. Too often, when archeologists and historians discover these facts, people of faith fear that the practices that mark their religion are inauthentic. But these discoveries only further reveal that the Christian faith is founded on conversation. Thus, these practices are authentically reverent. Christianity's understanding of God and worship of God has arisen from multicultural conversation. Such is appropriate for a religion whose sacred Scripture begins with a story of wise people from a distant culture discovering the Truth they sought in a Jewish stable.

Scripture and practice having been born of conversation, philosophers are well aware that much of what is considered Christian philosophy is, and must be, the result of conversation. For example, the fourth century African bishop Augustine says the writings of the Platonists were the first to bring him from skepticism towards understanding. And the stamp of Platonism is clearly on his writings. But this was not to the detriment of his understanding. Indeed, the conversation between schools and cultures, even when incongruent, increased not only Augustine's understanding but also that of all who inherited his writings on God, the Trinity, grace, free will, and other important elements of Christian philosophy. Similarly, the medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas' study of Aristotle, increased his, and through him our, understanding of human nature and its relation to its creator.

Indeed, remembering such fruitful work, Pope John Paul II, in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio,* urged all Christian thinkers to study the philosophies of other traditions, such as the Hinduism and Buddhism of India, in order to learn more about the Christian God they worship. Throughout history, Christian thinkers have sought to better understand their Scriptures and dogma, which themselves are products of intercultural conversation, by examining it through the lens of different cultures and viewpoints. And the future of Christian theology lies in the same process.

Thus, Christianity claims that conversation is possible

When Christianity is recognized as the product of dialogue, something important is declared. Philosophically, Christianity says that conversation between cultures is possible. This is a radical statement today, when many wonder if there can be any fruitful conversation between opponents at all.

Today, in an era of relativism and skepticism, many academics and people on the street believe that fruitful conversations can only occur between people who share a radically similar web of belief. When the 20th Century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein asked if a human being could understand a lion who could talk, the resounding answer was No. A creature from such a fundamentally different world as a lion could never share ideas with the human species. Agreeing too easily, undergraduates shrug their shoulders when asked to question a law, tradition, or belief of a people from another time or place. Well entrenched in their psyches is the idea that we cannot judge others whom we do not understand, and we cannot understand others who do not share our background or even our opinions.

To such a pessimistic view, which declares we are all imprisoned by our upbringing and incapable of conversing meaningfully with others, Christianity replies with its own history. Christianity itself is a product of intercultural conversation. Clearly, conversation is possible. People from different traditions can discuss and come to a fruitful conclusion. People can grow in their own understandings by talking to other people. The Scriptures, the creeds, the traditions, and the philosophy of the church are examples.

This is good news for philosophers, who have been told by Socrates that the best chance of discovering truth is through a process of dialectic. Socrates, according to Plato's description, seemed to believe that Truth is best found through the conversations in the marketplace. Opinion wages against opinion until something understood rather than believed is found. But many philosophers have harbored doubt that the Socratic method can work. Even Socrates himself seems to despair that the only knowledge he can find is that he knows he does not know. After the death of Plato, his nephew Speussipus who inherited the Academy, took this despair as the heart of academic philosophy, claiming that the purpose of dialectic is to show only how little is known. Speussipus' view is dominant in many academies today.

But, Christianity declares otherwise. Christianity says by its very being that religious understanding grows out of conversation. And Christianity can point to itself as an example of just such a conversation that has resulted in understanding. The Christian religion is a fusion of cultures and traditions that continues to grow. Rather than alienate Christianity from its roots, each new conversation results in growth. The conversations increase understanding of Christianity's fundamental principles and present new customs to exhibit this understanding.

Christianity explains how conversation is possible

While it is obvious that Christianity is a result of conversation, from its philosophy to its traditions to its creeds to even its sacred scriptures, the question remains whether this conversation is legitimate. As stated earlier, students in historical courses often begin to question Christianity's authenticity when they realize that the customs and beliefs they had been taught have come from conversation between many peoples from many different cultures with many

When Truth can speak in human words, this means that human words can speak the truth.

different agendas. Somehow these students believe that religious thinking should be from a central source without the taint of human interpretation. But this is precisely what is philosophically fundamental to Christianity. In other words, not only is Christianity a religion that shows marks of interpretation and conversation from its inception, but Christianity is a religion whose very metaphysical stance explains why such conversation is possible and has merit.

The Incarnation claims that a specific moment in history, a specific person, an event, a sermon on a mountain, can contain truth. The true God does not reside in a separate realm of pure thought, but walks with us in space and time. Thus, the eternal Truth can be present now. This is different than the proclamations of many religions and philosophies which state that the transcendent and the eternal are separate from the immanent and present moment. But the separation between the transcendent and the immanent is simultaneously upheld and collapsed in Christianity.[2] The Incarnation declares to the Christian that Truth is transcendent but is, also, present in specific moments in history.

Specifically, the Incarnation holds that the fullness of Truth is present in the body of Jesus. The fullness of his wisdom is spoken in his words. And this has radical consequences for words in general. Saint Augustine explains this beautifully. He writes,

"All other things may be expressed in some way; He alone is ineffable. Who spoke, and all things were made. He spoke, and we were made; but we were unable to speak of Him, His Word by Whom we were spoken is His Son. He was made weak, so that He might be spoken by us, despite our weakness."[3]

When Truth can speak in human words, this means that human words can speak the truth. Humans can converse and learn about Truth. To explain via contrast, the Platonist believes that words are only pale images of any truth they might reflect, and thus something truly mysterious happens if learning occurs. Indeed, the possibility of transferring knowledge is dubitable as we see in Plato's dialogues the *Protagoras* and the *Meno.* But the Christian has the belief that learning is possible, because human words can contain wisdom. Wisdom can

2 In the words of Remi Brague, "Christianity unites the divine and the human just where it is easy to distinguish them; it distinguishes the divine and human where it is easy to unite them." Remi Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization,* trans. Samuel Lester (St. Augustine's Press: South Bend, IN: 2002). p. 155. For an interesting contemporary analysis of Christian metaphysics and its consequences for understanding culture see the whole chapter of *The Roman Church* in *Eccentric Culture*, pp. 152-179.

3 Augustine, *Ennarration in Psalmum,*xcic,6,CC,39,1396.

For further analysis of this quote as well as an in depth explanation of Augustine's theory of language see Marcia Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

be imparted from one human to another via words that are redeemed by the incarnation of Truth who as a human spoke with a human tongue in a way which human ears could hear.

Thus, something as fleeting as human words, which are so often slurred and misunderstood, can contain the Truth. And yet, as unbelievable as such a metaphysics of language might seem, Christianity bears witness that it seems to be the case. The Magi can communicate with Mary and Joseph and Herod. They can show reverence and homage in a way that proclaims to the Jews they meet that they recognize greatness in this baby. Later, Matthew can tell the story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ in human language translated into other human languages. And people understand elements of the story. The story grows because of the conversation. Sermons grow from this story, and people hearing the sermons gain new understanding. The story of Christianity itself seems to be phenomenal evidence that communication is possible between people and cultures. And Christianity contains in its story a metaphysics that explains this communication.

Further, Christianity also explains why this metaphysics is so. God is not separated from humans as absolutely as the transcendent is usually separate from the immanent. This is because the Truth wants to be known by them. Personally interested and graceful, the Great I am, but also the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, speaks in burning bushes and pillars of fire. Christianity insists upon a God of grace, a Truth that wants to be understood. This Truth is willing to work to redeem the structures of space and time in order to be understood. Not content to remain a noetic principle, the Word becomes flesh, walks among humans and speaks to them. And the Word says, "Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened."[4]

St Augustine writes, "These are your promises, and who need fear to be deceived when Truth promises?"[5] Augustine, who feared skepticism, was stunned into hope by the idea that God, who is the Truth, not only spoke in a human voice to human ears, but made a promise to reveal itself to those who seek. This is a promise that we see accomplished in the Magi's fulfilled quest to find the principle that guides the stars. The material temporal stars themselves are used to guide the wise men to the principle who lies in a manger as a baby but recognizable as that which transcends the world.

If we believe Christianity to be true, we, as seekers of truth, can proceed in conversation with great hope of further understanding. We need not fall silent out of fear that our words will be incoherent to our interlocutors or theirs to ours. We can press through cultural differences that seem to bar our understanding with the faith that the Truth that all cultures seek is seeking to be known. And by exploring the customs, traditions and philosophy of others we can hope to enrich our own understanding of the wisdom that seeks us.

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4 Luke 11:9-10 NRSV

5 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961) XII.1.

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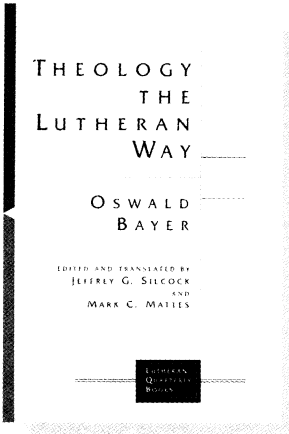

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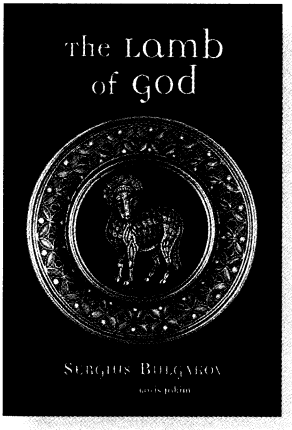

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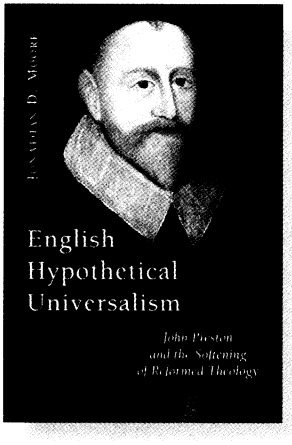

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Book Reviews

A Time for Confessing. By Robert W. Bertram. Edited by Michael Hoy. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008. Xix and 220 pages. Paper. $30.00

Bob Bertram, as lifelong colleague Edward Schroeder writes in the foreword, "is perhaps the most unpublished major Lutheran theologian of the twentieth century." Many of Bertram's essays through the years have been published in journals, *Festschrifi*, conference papers, etc., and he edited books of writings of others, e.g., *Theology in the Life of the Church* (Fortress, 1963) and *The Lively Function of the Gospel* (Fortress, 1966). But, writes Schroeder, perhaps because of his perfectionism, Bob never published his own writings in a book before his death at 82 in 2003. Bertram was a classroom teacher and his legacy includes thousands of "living letters," his students.

Hence this book. Former student and editor, Michael Hoy, with great dedication has painstakingly drawn together Bertram's work on *status confessionis* as lived out in recent times such as Nazi Germany, the Civil Rights movement, apartheid, and the Philippine revolution. Bertram understands times for confessing to be unique events when Christians disobey the authorities, including the church's own, in order to testify to the integrity of the church's confession of the one gospel of Jesus Christ. Central to these times for confessing are two issues: how our sins become predicated to Christ and how Christ's righteousness becomes predicated to us sinners; and the proper distinction between God's law and God's gospel.

In each of the case studies one sees six characteristics: 1) witness to the Gospel; 2) protesting; 3) inviting the whole church to this confession; 4) needing to re-prioritize God's law and promise for both church and state; 5) appealing to and for the oppressed to join in this confessing movement; and 6) recognizing one's own "ambiguous certitude" (p. xvi-ii). Although this book recounts global confessing movements, one sees in these pages Bertram's own confessional stance in the chapters of his life: teaching at Valparaiso University and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; being a theological leader of the LCMS exile which lead to establishing Christ Seminary, Seminex and his teaching at LSTC; and through the Crossings Community.

Bertram examines Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" which confesses a gospel of freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). Bertram contends that oppressors, anything but superior, are unfree to assume the onerous weight of guilt (p. 51). Their call to "wait" for freedom almost always means never. To this day the denial of the deep malignancy of racism denies the tragic separation, estrangement, sinfulness of humankind. King and his colleagues witnessed to the very essence of the cross in their suffering. The Gospel means freedom.

In another chapter Bertram examines the "people power" of the Philippine revolution of 1986. Although limiting himself to "forensic justification" as a sotieriological formulation and Christian *confessio* as appeal "for" and "to" the oppressed rather than "by" them, (p. 98-99) Bertram does describe well how in the vulnerability of the cross was the Filipino people's power to rise as a people. Corazon Aquino, acknowledged as one of the Roman Catholic Church's most notable lay leaders, as President grew to appreciate the godly necessity of political power not only for war but for compassion rather than coercion.

There are dangers in claiming a time for confessing. Bertram, on a public day of recognition for the ministry of Seminex at LSTC in 1987, noted the risks of a confessional movement (p. 148-9). Certainly there were the obvious risks of being misunderstood, of being fired, put out on the street, of lawsuits, self-pity, weariness, or turning cynical. But, he said, the greatest risk of all is the risk of blasphemy. By confessing so loudly, so publicly, by speaking judgment on others as enemies of the gospel, might we be misrepresenting God? But trying too hard

to avoid blasphemy is to run the opposite risk of apostasy. What if at a *kairos* moment one remains silent? One cannot truly know. Bertram called for commending the outcome, including one's own outcome, to Christ who risked everything, "who died for us all (also the opponents) and rose again."

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Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment. L. Shannon Jung. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. x and 197 pages. Paper. $15.00.

In his earlier book ***Food for Life: The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating,*** a development of a working theology of food with attention to disordered eating, environmental and ethical problems of our food production and delivery systems, and a new vision for the church's ministry regarding food and eating, he wrote, "We [the church] [must] begin with practices that shape us as we participate in them. We do best when we practice in church and community." (128) In other words, this present book, ***Sharing Food,*** is the necessary companion volume to ***Food for Life.*** It is not that the earlier volume is the theoretical, theological examination of food and eating, and this later volume is the "how to" manual for the church's food ministry. Rather, Jung directs our attention from God's activity (examined in the earlier volume) to *our* practices, and asks us to extend our mindfulness to such common activities as praying before meals, hospitality, fasting, feasting, and even cooking, as well as considering the political and economic implications of culinary choices, food distribution ministries, and local and global action.

Through it all, Jung recommends the themes of sharing and gratitude to elevate our common food behaviors to spiritual practices. He discusses the Lord's Supper as the "master practice" of Christian eating, the model that transforms people, builds community, and reminds participants of our own materiality, connecting us to body and world. Most importantly, "what the Eucharist as an eating practice adds to the whole body of eating practices," he writes, "is the aspect of mission." (139) This book, as the previous one, is a survey, designed to be used in churches for reflection, discussion and action. Chapters are concluded with reflection questions and suggested activities. The footnotes, bibliography and selected websites direct readers to a wealth of additional resources—they alone are worth the price of the book. Food is an increasingly central environmental and theological issue. A congregation could do no better than begin its food and eating ministries by studying (in community, with food!) Shannon Jung's work.

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In the Beginning...Creativity By Gordon D. Kaufman. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, xv and 127 pages, Paperback. $29.00

Looking for an entry into the timely conversation surrounding science and theology, Fortress Press turned to Gordon D. Kaufman, an emeritus professor at the distinguished Harvard Divinity School, an award-winning author, an international scholar and an ordained Mennonite minister. In a postmodern world, science has provided ample and convincing evidence of cosmic evolution, the vast span of cosmic time, the fortuitous assembly of conditions that made the universe, Sol and its planetary system, and the emergence of evolving life including the human being and self-consciousness. There does not seem to be a place for the supernatural personality known as "God" in this system, given that it is both self-creating and filled with dangerous, even violent, realities as a part of the creativity that is present.

Gordon Kaufman wants to avoid finding gaps in the cosmic drama for God to slip into; instead, Kaufman notes that one unifying reality stands at the core of these processes. That reality is neither a personality, nor a being in the ontological sense; but creativity itself, the mystery and truth that entirely new forms of existence come into being without any model or logical precursor. Kaufman argues that God and this creativity

can be thought of as the same ultimate truth.

Kaufman's book provides a serious challenge to any theologian seeking an incarnational way of discovering God hidden in both the creativity and the cross of the natural world and human life. Kaufman's constructive work comes off as a fascinating thought experiment, akin to Einstein riding a wave of light, which is provocative but has no practical application in the lived world where Newton's laws seem to hold just fine. Creativity may delight, and it may explain the chaotic outcomes of the unfolding cosmos, but it provides no comfort. Creativity cannot be invoked as a presence, except for the inherent symbolic creativity of the human actors present. He also precludes divine incarnation since there is no divine person who might be present in Jesus, only a fuller expression of the creativity that is everywhere in the universe.

Creativity seeks to place the symbol of God both at the center of novel realities in the natural world, while preserving the complete mystery of the aseity of God. On this front it succeeds. Creativity is everywhere in the universe, and it does give the reader pause to consider how many diverse trajectories needed to appear in order for the reader to exist and be at the task of wrestling with the text to begin with. What is worrisome though is that the shift from theism to creativity may prove too harsh for many people who have come to rely for their very existence on a God who is capable of being, in spite of the tremendous cost to God, because the possibility for relationship would exist.

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Storms Over Genesis: Biblical Battleground in America's Wars of Religion. By William H. Jennings. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007. 149 pages. Paper. $17.00.

The author, emeritus professor of religion at Muhlenberg College (and a distant relative of William Jennings Bryan of the Scopes trial), states that "No words ever recorded have had more influence upon human affairs in more diverse ways than the words of the first three chapters of Genesis (ix)." His book provides an excellent overview of why this is so.

The text of Genesis 1-3 is printed in full before the study actually begins, but the use of the NRSV translation illustrates some of the problems of interpretation. Appendix A spells out two of these: the existence of matter before God began creating (no *creatio ex nihilo*), and the use of inclusive language (*human beings* instead of *man*).

Chapter One "Interpreting the Creation Stories" begins with a brief rationale for two creation accounts, the Priestly (P) and the Yahwistic (J). The author then goes on to compare and contrast them: *God's names and characteristics* (Elohim, transcendent, Yahweh, immanent); *Pre-existent material* (watery chaos, dry dust); *Male and female* (P–both created together in God's image, J–male first, animals next and finally female; *Method of creation* (P–by word, J–by actions. Chapter 3 raises a number of issues concerning sex and sin. But though the stories are separate and cannot be harmonized, they relate to each other and should be studied together.

The historical-critical approach to these chapters has generated a great deal of controversy in both Christianity and Judaism. The author limits his study to these two faith traditions and to the debates and disagreements which still take place in the United States.

A chapter is devoted to each of three controversies: the challenges of feminists; the critiques of environmentalists, and the claims of creationists. In each of these Jennings deals fairly in presenting both sides of the issue (though there is usually no doubt about where he stands!).

The Epilogue deals with the creation stories in the public arena. Among the many issues cited are the use of the pledge of allegiance in schools, the reading of the first chapters of Genesis by the Apollo 8 astronauts and the natural history museums which stress evolution (countered by the Creation Museum which takes the creation accounts literally). Appendix B lists a number of court cases involving Genesis.

This is an excellent book and could be used

as a text or required reading in a variety of biblical courses.

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Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony. By Richard Bauckham. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006. pp. xii + 538. ISBN 0-8028-3162-1. Cloth. $32.00.

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses has two primary theses: first, the canonical gospels are close to the eyewitness reports of the words and deeds of Jesus and, second, 'testimony' is the appropriate category for the gospels as history and theology.

Reflexively some may reject the first thesis as an apology for a pre-modern understanding of the gospels. Such critics will be impoverished by not engaging this very modern analysis. It draws on the rehabilitation of Papias in German scholarship. It studies proper names in the gospels. It incorporates insights from oral history, recollective memory, and the epistemology of testimony.

Along the way, Bauckham offers exegetical insights. For example, he argues that Mark 14:1-11 is a Markan sandwich of the anointing at Bethany between the plot to kill Jesus and Judas' betrayal. By placing the anointing in the center of the 'sandwich', Mark suggests that Judas reported a messianic anointing to the high priests. The corollary to Bauckham's thesis is that the woman is anonymous because she was alive when Mark wrote his gospel and needed her identity protected.

Bauckham's case is based on numerous similar decisions. Some will be challenged. The most important will stand: the eyewitnesses of Jesus did not vanish after bequeathing their testimony to the community. They were present to continue telling their stories, even as the evangelists wrote.

With such a far-reaching thesis, Bauckham cannot address every issue and objection. The role of the so-called 'Q' material is unclear. Matthew is only treated lightly, while Mark and John hold center stage. Some objections are weakly addressed.

I suggest that Jesus and the Eyewitnesses is a must-read for pastors and scholars. Bauckham synthesizes many recent developments in biblical studies. For those trained that the gospels emerged from anonymous oral tradition, Bauckham offers a provocative and compelling challenge.

Peter Perry
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A New and Right Spirit: Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Culture. By Rick Barger. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005. ix and 154 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Rick Barger's thesis is simple, compelling and provocative: "The treasure of the church is its story". (21) The church's authenticity rests in it taking "seriously the ancient story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that launched the church, shaped and sustained its pre-Constantinian life, and put[ting] it to work in today's context with integrity, precision, passion, and cultural relevance". (18) The integrity and health of the church lie in nothing more, and nothing less. Barger speaks out of the work of Stanley Hauerwas, seeing in the collapse of the Constantinian synthesis of church and culture the return of the church to its rightful role as a contrast culture. But he is more clearly the Lutheran, understanding the church to be the community which bears witness to the choice *God* has made and continues to make in Jesus Christ: There are no choices or decisions we need to make or can make to save ourselves or the church.

More starkly, Barger drives home the contention that "because of the market-driven aspects of the culture today, the church seemingly continues to be stuck in the perception that its role is either about deals, causes or spiritual services". (16) Much of this book demonstrates how the church is not its programs, schemes, deals

or causes. The vision is compelling both from a theological and human perspective. The devil is in the details. *How* do we give up the programs which we know and at some level comfort us? *How* do we decide which elements of worship are matters of style or substance? *How* do we come through the inevitable whirlwind of controversy such a revision will inevitably unleash intact? And perhaps most importantly, *how* do we agree on the *meaning* of the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—a story not even unified in its telling (as the existence of four canonical gospels attests) much less its interpretation over the millennia? This is not to disparage Barger's project. It is to say, with Barger, an authentic (and thriving) church requires courage and perseverance.

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Imaging the Journey... Of Contemplation, Meditation, Reflection, and Adventure. By Mark C. Mattes and Ronald R. Darge. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2006. Cloth. $40. 120 pages.

Savor this book! *Imaging the Journey* is the collaborative effort of two teachers at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa. Ronald Darge provides richly meditative photographs that adorn the right hand pages, while Mark Mattes has composed probing, insightful texts that explore the contours of life in relationship to the images. This oversize book is no ordinary coffee table volume for two reasons. First, the images themselves are beautifully conceptualized, many of them highly abstract and fascinating for the eye to ponder. Second, the texts quickly engage the reader in reflection on themes that penetrate to the very fiber of existence in the world. Taken together, photos and meditations retrieve the essence of the Grundtvigian vision of creation as worthy of the reader's own commitment.

While the photos invite deliberate contemplation, the concise texts creatively juxtapose Scripture, the thought of Luther, and the stuff of life: "Some wounds cannot be hidden. They are simply too definitive of one's life, too real. To succumb to the shame of such a wound is to be consigned to relive and replay the role of victim. The answer is not to mask such pain, but to rise up and walk. It is to live in the promise of God, even if one never receives a reason for the pain. The Crucified understands our plight." (p. 46).

The book is organized around seven themes that elaborate the Christian life: A Spirituality of Communication, The Newness of Life, Fragmentation and Wholeness, Ministry as Service, Renewal in the Midst of Conflict, Vocation, and Alpha and Omega. The themes combine to offer a condensed and prayerful systematic theology for living. I used this book devotionally, reading one meditation and reflecting on one image each new day: nourishment for the soul!

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Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Polemics and Apologetics. By Adam S. Francisco. Leiden: Brill. 2007. xiv + 260 pages. Hardcover. $169.00.

In recent years the dialogue between Christianity and Islam has been pivotal in both the religious and political spheres. Historically, the roots of the Protestant conversation with Islam began with the writings of Martin Luther. In this volume, Francisco presents a case for Luther's theological engagement with Islam (p.3). *Luther and Islam* is volume eight in the *History of Christian-Muslim Relations* series published by Brill. The book is divided into two major sections, the first being "Islam and the West, 1095-1546" and the second "Martin Luther's Engagement with Islam, 1529-1546." The first sets the background, while the second specifically deals with Luther's writings on Islam.

In the first section the author provides an excellent contextual foundation for Luther's interaction with Islam. He begins by reviewing works on Islam that preceded Luther, no-

tably those by Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (pp.12-15) and Nicholas of Cusa (pp.17-18). In summary, for the medieval world, "...Islam was viewed as a product of a conniving false prophet and son of Satan named Muhammad" (p.29). In the sixteenth century, the proximity of Muslim lands to the Christian West was closer than ever before, and solicited different responses from Catholics and Protestants (p.64). Luther approached the Turkish threat differently than Catholics of the past, in large part because of his "disdain for the ideology behind the crusades" (p.94).

In the second section, Francisco delineates how Luther interacted with Islam theologically. In a nutshell, Islam threatened Luther's doctrine of the three estates (Dreiständelehre): "Lies destroy the spiritual estate, murder destroys the temporal estate, and disregard for marriage destroys the estate of marriage" (p.132). Luther was also deeply concerned that if people were put under Turkish rule, they would eventually convert to Islam because Muslims were more pious and devoted than the Christians of the West (pp.159-162). He viewed the Turks as an eschatological threat, equating them with "Gog and Magog" and the prophecy of Daniel and Ezekiel (pp.83, 148). Luther did, however, seem genuinely concerned for the Islamic Turks, and felt that Christian mission work should take place "from within," i.e. while Christians lived with Muslims (p.237).

Luther and Islam reads smoothly for an academic text, and is an excellent source for the contextual, historical basis of Luther's interaction with Islam. Pastors may find this a valuable research tool, and academics will enjoy the depth of the footnotes. Most of the untranslated German and Latin words have little bearing on the reader's understanding, keeping the text fairly accessible. In a pluralistic society, and with the world political scene as it is, Christian-Muslim dialogue is as valuable as ever. This text provides a historical foundation for Luther's approach to Islam, and helps to explain why Christians and Muslims approach the dialogue the way they do.

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Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen, editors. Harvard Theological Studies 53. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xiv and 523 page. Paper. $35.00.

This is a must-read for anyone interpreting Paul's Corinthian letters. The seventeen papers, first presented at a conference at Harvard Divinity School in 2002, fall into two groups. The first ten (pp. 3-304) orient one to the site and describe the religious life of the Roman city. The writers are (or were) excavators of significant sections of Corinth. The present director of the Corinth excavations, G. D. R. Sanders, provides an excellent orientation to the site, supplemented by David G. Romano's essay on the Roman plan of the city. L. Michael White shows what can be learned of the city from the rhetorician Favorinus' Oration 37 (delivered at Corinth about in the time of Hadrian, preserved as no. 37 in the corpus of Dio Chrysostom).

Nancy Bookidis, excavator (along with Ronald Stroud) of the Demeter precinct on the north slope of Acro-Corinth, provides an excellent overview of the extensive number of religious cults in Corinth from Hellenistic through Roman times. Elizabeth Gebhard, director of the excavations on the Isthmia, describes the rites of Melikertes-Palaimon at the site of the Isthmian games. There are also discussions of burial practices, cultic facilities east of the Roman theater, etc. In short, this is the best orientation to religion in Roman Corinth available anywhere.

So what does this mean for early Christianity? The last seven papers (pp. 307-457) all relate to Corinthian Christianity. The papers individually are good, but, to my surprise, make little or no use of the outstanding articles in section 1. Thus one wonders what impact, if any, the archaeological data so well presented in the first section has on the study of the Corinthian letters. For example, Margaret Mitchell discusses the order, relation and integrity of 1 and 2 Corinthians. Only in the last section, pp. 336-38, does she raise some questions, which might be answered from the earlier material, but without

showing how one might use the archaeological and cultural date offered in the first section to answer them. Helmut Koester, Steve Friesen, and James Walters do make use of social and cultural resources, but not of archaeological findings. G. D. R. Sanders does summarize the archaeological data for early Christianity's presence in Corinth, a welcome contribution.

I was surprised to find little use of Pausanias' description of Corinth. And there are a few errors: on p. 5 the plan of the form in Hadrian's time is misdated B.C.C, rather than C.E.P. 354 has "Roum of Appius" for Forum of Appius. It is the material in section one that will be most informative to New Testament scholars. No student of the Corinthian letters can overlook this volume. It encapsulates in brief form a great deal of useful information about the city and its religious life. The challenge is to use this data for the interpretation of the letters.

Edgar Krentz

Mark: A Commentary. By M. Eugene Boring. The New Testament Library. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. xxxvii and 482 pages. Cloth. $49.95.

Boring appreciates Mark as a narrative Christology, a story to be experienced by the hearer and reader. Boring's primary goal is not innovation; he justifies his efforts in writing yet another commentary on Mark's gospel by suggesting that his work encompasses multifaceted research for those who may not have experience with many commentaries on Mark. Such comments come from a range of three disciplines: historical—retaining a tension between not only the historical Jesus but also that of the historical setting in which Mark is composed; literary—demonstrating rhetorical strategies to engage its audience in the transformative events and experience of the Christ event; and theological—reflecting Mark's agenda to portray Jesus as both the powerful, authoritative miracle worker and the suffering Messiah.

The front matter of the commentary includes an extensive bibliography on Mark with a ten-point introduction to the critical issues of the gospel: structure, genre, sources, date, provenance, purpose, etc. The structure of the commentary follows the plot of Mark. The broad structure, however, portrays the binary presentation of Jesus: following the prologue of 1:1-15 Jesus' powerful ministry in Galilee up to 8:22 at which point begins the transition section where Jesus is "on the way" towards Jerusalem; the second part beginning at 11:1 presents the suffering Jesus in Jerusalem, with chapter sixteen as epilogue. Throughout the commentary there are six excursuses: The Way; Kingdom of God; Crowds, Followers, Disciples, and the Twelve; Miracle Stories in Mark; Jesus the Teacher versus the Scribes; Markan Christology; The Messianic Secret; Mark and the Scriptures. These prolonged discussions highlight themes of Mark that Boring makes reference to throughout his commentary.

Boring aptly distinguishes between historical realities of antiquity and anachronistically projected interpretations of the modern world. He also ably differentiates between ancient historicity and the narrative world enlivened by Mark's agenda and theology. Whereas one might interpret Mark through the lenses of other biblical writers, Boring resists, committed to Mark's world as cultural and theological subjects are thoughtfully discussed. Such clarity and distinction become helpful guides to judicious students of Mark.

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Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology. By Rowan Williams. Ed. by Mike Higton. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans. Xxv + 305 pages. Paper. $28.

As a spiritual leader, Rowan Williams, 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, exudes a charismatic aura as both a sage and a prophet. He is no less gifted as a prolific, talented twenty-first century Anglican theologian, whose wide-range of theological interests is ably testified in his many works. This collection of fourteen previously published essays engages the writings of thinkers

as diverse as Vladimir Lossky, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Bonhoeffer, von Balthasar, Barth, Maurice Wiles, Gillian Rose, Marilyn McCord Adams, and others. Many theologians simply would not be able to offer the generous appreciation that Williams gives to each of these thinkers but for Williams these many thinkers appear as friends. In a postmodern key, Williams is able to discern the best in even those theologians with whom he is at odds.

Engaging Lossky's Eastern Orthodox "apophatic approach" to theology, Williams indicates that for the Western theologian, Augustine, human ignorance about God results in the proper knowledge (unknowability) of God, while for the Eastern theologian, Dionysius, in contrast, it is true knowledge of God which issues in ignorance (3). The triune God of revelation is "beyond being" in the Eastern tradition. And, theology can best learn this truth in the art of *ascesis*, a mystic practice of crucifixion that leads ultimately to an ecstatic ascent to God (14).

Not as enthusiastic as some theologians about appropriating Hegel in theology, Williams respectfully builds on Hegel's abstract and influential philosophical work for both a doctrine of God and community. Thereby, the incarnation is not merely a picture of God but an "enacting of the divine poverty" (32). And, Hegel's "Logic," a conceptual vision of the unity of all truth-in-its-manifold-diversity, the unity between the finite and the infinite, offers a helpful presentation of reality, when it is expressed in tandem with its concrete embodiment as history and community (45). The lesser known but influential, Hegelian-inspired theologian Gillian Rose is seen as acknowledging the rapport between metaphysics and politics (65). In this light, the postmodern concern for the "other" can be viewed as the modern "distraught subject" searching for its substance, which can be found only in the "other" (59).

With respect to Roman Catholic theologians, von Balthasar's affirmation of the difference between God and creatures, a still greater dissimilarity between God and creatures within such great similarity, following the Fourth Lateran Council [1215], is best interpreted in light of the crucified Jesus as the ground of analogy between God and humanity (80). Likewise, Williams gets at the core of the distinction between Karl Rahner, who reinterprets the Medieval scholastic "agent intellect" in terms of German Idealism's notion of *Vorgriff*, and von Balthasar for whom ontology, understood with the "analogy of being," affirmed in the Fourth Lateran Council, takes precedence over epistemological theory.

Williams offers two important essays on Karl Barth, one examining his view of the trinity, noting especially that the ground of communication itself is in God (112) and another examining Barth's grounds for resistance to the state. The state can be regarded as just when it defends the freedom both to proclaim and to hear the gospel (157). The doctrine of justification leads to the quest for justice, a responsibility for political freedom.

With respect to Rene Girard, noted for his theory of mimetic desire and violence, Williams affirms Jesus' powerlessness as evidence for his divinity (181). And, at the level of theological method, Williams draws a parallel between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: the ground for discipleship is found less in one's "inner life" and more properly in the patterns of behavior as discipleship unleashed by the gospel (191). In closing essays, Williams takes on the mystic theology of Simon Weil, the atheism of Don Cupitt, and the theodicy of Marilyn McCord Adams.

In this book of essays, one can expect challenging, meaty fare written in a gentle, thoughtful, affirming style.

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Turning around the Mainline: How Renewal Movements are Changing the Church. By Thomas C. Oden. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006. 272 pages. Paperback. $17.99.

In recent years, confessional movements have been building support within mainline denominations. These movements look to reclaim and renew their respective churches with a more traditional brand of Christianity. This is the claim

of Thomas Oden in *Turning around the Mainline.* He states early on that "This book is written primarily for a lay audience" and both "the faithful within the so-called *mainline* churches" and those orthodox Christians looking in from the outside (p.12). The author presents what he sees as a growing discontentment with the liberal direction that mainline churches and seminaries have taken in the past half-century. He writes this volume to serve as a record of these confessional movements. Oden states, "I see my own task first as an archivist, and only secondarily as an interpreter" (p.14).

The book is divided into six parts, the first three focusing on the problems of mainline denominations and the need for confessional movements within them. Oden juxtaposes mainline ecumenical movements with historically confessional ecumenical movements, claiming that the former fail in being truly ecumenical. For Oden, the "old" ecumenical movement supported by mainline denominations focuses on general inclusiveness rather than on shared truth (pp. 111–112).

The fourth and fifth parts of the book present excerpts from confessional documents in the mainline traditions. This proves helpful in creating a small reference section for these document portions and defining what it means to be confessional. The sixth part is a case study that deals with ownership of church property. What happens to local church property when the congregation and its leadership are at odds over doctrine and church polity? The author gives an example using his own church, the United Methodist Church.

Oden clearly sides with confessional movements and the reclamation of the mainline denominations from their current wayward path. Whether one agrees with this stance or not, these types of confessional movements are a growing force within the church today, and members must be aware of their presence. Although aimed at a lay audience, this book is a useful read for clergy, especially those in mainline denominations. The author lays out a challenge to readers, one that must be taken seriously, no matter what one believes about the current state of these churches. In closing the book he states, "Today many Christian believers are called upon to have a spine within a mainline church tangled in spin. The story we have told is about believers with spine" (p.262). This challenge leaves the reader with a choice: take up the cause or put it down, because the future of mainline denominations may be in the balance.

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Reading the Torah Out Loud: A Journey of Lament and Hope. By Marc H. Ellis. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. ix-xii and 183 pages. Paper. $20.00.

This volume emerges from Marc Ellis' continuing struggle as an American Jew with what he labels Constantinian Judaism and the brutal treatment of Palestinians by an empowered Israel. University Professor of Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Baylor University, he ponders deeply the meaning of Jewish identity in this time.

In the opening chapters, Ellis reflects on how his relationships with significant Jewish (Richard Rubenstein and Martin Buber) and Christian (James Cone, Dorothy Day, and Gustavo Gutiérrez) thinkers and activists have influenced him. For all, the Hebrew Scriptures played a prominent role, particularly the prophetic tradition, which reinforces Ellis' increasing sense that the prophetic is not only "the essence of what it means to be Jewish" but also "the center of the human journey" (ix).

The rest of the volume (chapters 6-12) charts Ellis' journey, often intellectually agonizing and personally painful, with the issue of Israel and the Palestinians. For him, contemporary Jews come after the Holocaust *and* after Israel, the second reality most often ignored by American Jewish thinkers (e.g., Elie Wiesel). In multiple ways he explores the absence among American Jews of the biblical prophetic critique against Israel's misuse of its power. But he also takes note of Jews of Conscience (in contrast to Constantinian Jews) who take their stand in the struggle for a Holy Land where Jews and Pal-

estinians can live together. Clearly Marc Ellis is among Jews of Conscience and understands he participates within a larger community of prophetic voices that includes Christians, Muslims, and even religious secularists. He devotes an entire chapter to one of his role models, Palestinian born Edward Said, who died in 2003.

If you have studied the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the years, as I have, you must read this book. To do so is to join Marc Ellis' insightful yet sobering journey into the complexities and nuances of Jewish, Christian, and now Muslim interconnectedness in the past and present.

His final chapter provides the book its title as Ellis describes his thoughts as he read the entire Hebrew Bible out loud to his two sons, Aaron and Isaiah. He was faced with the contradictory movements within its pages—toward peace and hospitality and yet toward violence and the raw use of power. Ellis painfully understands that every religion will seek to tame prophetic dissent, but he also understands that "[i]n our time, dissent is necessary to break through religiosities that support and enable empire" (168). Read this book and join the community of dissenters.

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Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM. By Richard A. Jensen. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005. xi and 155 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Is it really true that one picture is worth a thousand words? Or is it the other way around: One good word is worth a thousand pictures? Who is in charge of the answer?

Thanks are due Richard Jensen for venturing into territory that has yet to be fully dissected: the relationship between word and image for preaching the gospel. By exploring the dualism of the early Greeks, the iconoclastic controversies of the 16th century, the aesthetic battles between "poetry and painting," and defining preaching as "speaking promissory words of God to people in need" (page 132), *Envisioning the Word* argues for turning ideas into *actual* images.

Jensen joins those who, for a while now, have urged preachers to adapt to a technologically changed (i.e., "visually-oriented") assembly more comfortable—more able—to hear the Word with pictures. Jensen weighs the options, offers practical advice, and grounds his case in the promise of growing congregations.

Yet, preaching may remain unsuited to the use of both words and images at once. Some questions:

1) When faced with the need to speak of life-and-death matters, is it natural to say, "Please turn your attention to the screen above?" ("Stop the car!" or "I love you!" are more like preaching than "Please consider this...")

2) At a time when nations are waking up to global warming, is it good stewardship to encourage churches to use more energy?

3) This study focuses on sermon structure, yet recently homileticians have begun to resurrect theological questions for preaching: On what ground are our sermons based? What are we, in fact, saying?

4) How exactly does explicitly visual image add to the image available to the mind through words?

Preaching is the *kerygma* of the risen Christ. It is, for many adherents of both Luther's and Calvin's teachings, the very presence of Christ. Insistence on the primacy of word does not deny appropriate and faithful use of imagery in catechetical and devotional uses. The primary and final question about using visuals in preaching is to ask: What's it really for?

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Briefly Noted

The New Proclamation Commentary on the Gospels, edited by Andrew F. Gregory (Fortress Press, $35.00) offers in hardcover "a commentary of the four Gospels as they are read in the three-year lectionary cycle." (p. 1) David Bartlett, American Baptist does Matthew; Morna D. Hooker, British Methodist, does Mark; Andrew Gregory, British Anglican, does Luke; and Henry Wansbrough, British Catholic monk, does John. Each writer introduces a gospel and offers brief comments on each passage in the lectionary, which stimulate textually responsible preaching. These are helpful, practical interpretations. I look for parallel volumes on Acts and the epistles in lectionary preaching.
EK

The Future of the Christian Tradition, edited by Robert J. Miller (Polebridge Press, $22.00) contains essays illustrating the theological results of the radical scholarship fostered by the Weststar Institute, best known for the Jesus Seminar. Gives good insight into radical theology in the twenty-first century; not an easy read, often disturbing for confessionally oriented theology.
EK

Richard J. Cassidy uses narrative criticism in ***Four Times Peter: Portrayals of Peter in the Four Gospels and at Philippi*** (Liturgical Press, $15.95) to identify the unique stress on the role and character of Peter in each of the four gospels. The final chapter is a highly speculative, imaginative reconstruction of how the Christians at Philippi might have reacted to each gospel's portrait of Peter. One can neither prove nor falsify Cassidy's interpretation in this chapter. Each discussion is carefully done and well worth reading; clearly written, informative, carefully documented.
EK

Edwin Mullins traces the rise, massive influence, and decline of a major monastery in ***Cluny: In Search of God's Lost Empire*** (Bluebridge, $24.95). The largest and most influential monastery for about 500 years, rich beyond belief, its history is in large measure the history of the church, as it controlled some 1500 dependent monasteries. Destroyed in the 19h century, Mullins recovers its history in a carefully researched, though popularly written work detailing its abbot, culture, music and influence. Good popular history.
EK

Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts (Westminster John Knox Press, $19.95) is not a comprehensive Pauline theology. Rather, Jouette Bassler of Southern Methodist University probes central themes in Paul's thought: Grace, Jewish Law, Faith, "in Christ," God's righteousness, Israel's future, and eschatological future. The chapters on justification and Israel are outstanding. A good read, a trustworthy guide. Read it.
EK

Reading Paul by Michael Gorman (Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, $22.00) is a helpful introduction to Paul's thought in thirteen brief chapters, each ending with questions for reflection. Terse, yet readable, it sketches the contours of Paul's radical gospel of peace and power. Gorman is a good read for a course on Paul or an adult forum in a parish. Add it to your parish library.
EK

Peter H. Davids ***The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude,*** The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Wm. B. Eerdmans, $34.00) interprets these two letters (on the fringe of the New Testament, often ignored or even disliked) as valuable sources that show us "communities coming to terms with teachers who were rejecting the ethical teachings of Jesus but who still claimed to be followers of Jesus." (p. 2) He hesitantly accepts the epistle of Jude as written by the brother of Jesus, dated pre-A.D. 70 in Palestine and 2 Peter as dated likely before A.D. 110. The commentary proper is helpful, written so that Greekless readers can use it, and stresses the theological value of the text.
EK

In ***Sailing Acts: Following an Ancient Voyage*** (Good Books, $14.95) Linford Stutzman narrates his experiences in 2004-05 when sailing to every ancient site Paul visited by sea. Illustrated with 60 color photos, anyone who likes travel narratives and Paul will enjoy this book. Could be a useful addition to parish libraries.
EK

The Least of These: Selected Readings in Christian History by Eric R. Severson (Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, $31.00) contains 29 selections from Christian writers, primarily from the patristic period—though citations from Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley and Whitfield complete the list. All are, in some way, related to Matt 25:31-46, which gives unity to the volume. Each selection has a brief introduction, questions about the text to ponder, and a brief bibliography. It could be a useful secondary text in a church history of doctrine course.
EK

John Elliott 's two essays reprinted in ***Conflict, Community, and Honor: 1 Peter in Social-Scientific Perspective*** (Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, $14.00) provide both a good introduction to the letter and illustrate how the categories of social-scientific criticism (family structure, honor and shame, etc.) advance the understanding of this important text. Written in clear English, this volume should be required reading in any course on 1 Peter; it is also a good addition to any parish library.
EK

Bread for the Day: Daily Bible Readings and Prayers (Augsburg, 2008, $8.95) is a wonderful resource for daily prayer building upon the daily lectionary and hymns of the *ELW.* Each page provides a complete Bible text (NRSV), suggested additional Bible readings, a hymn, and a brief prayer. The book concludes with biographical information on lesser festivals and commemorations and short forms for morning and evening prayer. A useful resource for practicing and encouraging daily prayer and devotions, commended by the ELCA Conference of Bishops. The price makes this an attractive resource.
CN

Psalms Through the Year: Spiritual Exercises for Every Day by Marshall D. Johnson (Augsburg, 2007, $14.99) provides devotions for every day of the year based on the psalms. The renewed use and appreciation of the psalms is one of the most constructive aspects of recent liturgical renewal. Each page of this book includes the reference to a psalm text, a meditative reading, and sentence prayer. Many psalms are divided and assigned to consecutive days (Psalm 119 for 22 days!). The meditations provide Johnson's invitation to understand the psalms in their biblical context and to claim them anew as our own prayers.
CN

Two recent books offer the writings of Bonhoeffer as the foundation for spiritual practice. O.C. Dean, Jr. has translated from the German ***I Want to Live These Days with You: A Year of Daily Devotions,*** edited by Manfred Weber (Westminster John Knox, 2007, $19.95). This devotional reader offers a carefully selected text from Bonhoeffer for each day of the year, arranged according to seasons of the church year. An index of the sources of the texts is provided, based on the German edition of Bonhoeffer's works. The other resource is ***40-Day Journey with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*** edited by Ron Klug (Augsburg, 2007, $11.99). This text provides instructions for a comprehensive set of spiritual practices with Bonhoeffer as "guide," including journaling. The daily regimen includes a reading from Bonhoeffer, a Bible text, silence for meditation, questions to ponder, a psalm fragment, directions for journaling, suggested intercessions, and a brief concluding prayer. The readings from Bonhoeffer are from *Discipleship* or *Life Together.* Both books extend the popularity of Bonhoeffer for spiritual formation.
CN

Preaching Helps

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany–Fifth Sunday in Lent

Trust God's promise!

When I was in fourth grade, my Sunday School teacher was obsessed with the word covenant. Almost every Sunday, she would ask, "What is a covenant?" We were to respond, "A promise!" "Whose promise?" She would ask. "God's promise!" We were to answer. My fourth grade Sunday School teacher willed the gospel, God's promise, into us. Our job, all that we could do, was trust God's promise. Trusting God's promise, we would live differently.

Abigail Zang Hoffman makes this same point in this series of Preaching Helps as she reflects on the readings for Lent. Covenants abound in these readings! We hear of God's covenant with Noah and his descendants and God's covenant with us in baptism, both of which are God's initiative and neither of which depends on human response. We hear of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah and how Paul counted them righteous, not because of anything they did, but because they trusted God's promises. We hear of the covenant God made with Israel when God led the people out of Egypt and gave them the ten commandments, and the new covenant God will make with God's people, when God will write the law on our hearts.

Preaching about God's covenant, God's initiative, and God doing regardless of human response is a necessary balance, even corrective, in Lent. In a culture that encourages us to be concerned about ourselves, our needs, our desires, and our feelings, Lent can become a time when we focus on us–on our sin, on the ways we have failed Christ, on the things we have done and left undone, on what we are giving up–with the church's blessing. On Ash Wednesday, Jesus tells us, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matt 6:1). Frequently, Jesus' instruction only drives our introspection, self-absorption, even self-obsession, underground. It does not make our concern with ourselves any less. We do a good job of using the forty days of Lent as a time for a probing consideration of our human condition, including sin and its deadly consequences for both individuals and society. What we need, I think, is to use Lent as a time for an equally intense consideration of the new possibilities offered to us in Jesus Christ and their implications for practical living. Biblical covenants provide both an occasion and a frame of reference for such proclamation.

Preaching God's promise, God's initiative, God doing regardless of human response, and inviting people to trust God's promise, might provide an incentive for those who have departed from the faith or fallen away from the church to embrace the Forty Days as a time for restitution and restoration. In many places, the "inactives" have all but been abandoned by the church. Their names are periodically expunged from the active membership rolls with the explanation that they are "no longer interested." Sometimes, this conclusion is reached because they have not made donations of record in a specified number of years. More often, this assessment is made after pastors call, contact, visit and listen to no

avail. Maybe we've made it too much about responding to, defending, or apologizing for what the church (or someone in the church) did or failed to do. Maybe we could make it more about responding to what God has done, is doing, and will do, regardless of human response. The conundrum, of course, is finding ways to get the proclamation of God's baptismal covenant out of the pulpit and into places where inactive members will hear it. Perhaps this could be the congregation's Lenten discipline.

Abigail Zang Hoffman graduated from Cornell University in 2002 with a BA (cum laude and with distinction in all subjects), and from the University of Chicago in 2006 with an M.Div. and an AM in Social Service Administration. I came to know Abby when she showed up in my Advanced Homiletics seminar, a course for seniors that often attracts a pastor or two. That semester, the class overwhelmingly consisted of very bright, younger women. The one male student and I quickly realized that we were in over our heads! When we relaxed and contented ourselves with treading water, we learned much about preaching.

Pastor Hoffman was ordained in 2007 and serves Bethany Lutheran Church in Elmira, New York, a congregation of the Southern Tier Conference, where I served my second call. She describes writing these Preaching Helps as a privilege and muses, "As is usually the case in my weekly preparation for preaching, the task was daunting at first but the process was enriching. I experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit as I realized (again and again) how the task of preaching is the work of the community. The voices of other preachers echoed in my ears and I know these writings reflect the many perspectives and insights that have shaped my own (including yours). What a gift." Perhaps preaching, like keeping Lent and being righteous, is all about trusting God's promise.

Have a blessed Lent!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, Preaching Helps
http://craigasatterlee.com

P.S. - You may notice that the possessive pronoun "His" is sometimes used in reference to God in these pages. This is the way I received these pages from Pastor Hoffman. Many of my students who are younger women, as well as my daughter, tell me that they sometimes use masculine pronouns for God as a deliberate choice and that it is inappropriate, even offensive, for me to change them. Like so many other things, inclusive language for the divine has become more complicated.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 4 February 1, 2009

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

First Reading

In our first reading, Moses assures the people that God will "raise up" (Deut 18:15) another prophet to lead them, so the people need not resort to following those who "practice divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts and spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead" (Deut 18:10-11). God will not leave the people abandoned but will speak through another prophet like Moses (Deut 18:18) and lead God's people. God's voice will not be silent among the Israelites.

Paul addresses a series of concerns that the early Christian community in Corinth had as they tried to find their way in following Christ. Practical questions arose about how to live into this new covenant that Jesus Christ established. This particular passage deals with the question of whether or not to eat the food sacrificed to pagan gods, which was often sold in the marketplace.[1] Those who know there is only one true God, and Jesus Christ has given the sacrifice of His life once and for all (1 Cor 8:6), know that the food sacrificed to idols is fit to eat and yet some struggle with whether it is appropriate for Christians to eat such food. Having lived in the context of idols and pagan worship for so long, some cannot reconcile eating such food, as though it undermines their monotheistic faith (1 Cor 8:7). Paul writes that love—not knowledge—"builds up" (1 Cor 8:1) God's people, the body of Christ, community. So, it's not about coming up with the right answer to the questions about living out one's faith—in this case, what food is appropriate for Christians to eat—but the questions must be considered in the context of supporting God's people. The deciding factor for Paul is whether one's actions help to build up the faith of our brother or sister in the body of Christ, or whether we participate in causing that person to stumble.

Our passage from the Gospel of Mark comes at the beginning, following only the preparatory call of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience, and Jesus' calling of his disciples. So, this is Jesus' first public act of healing in Mark's gospel. He teaches in the synagogue and the disciples' are amazed at the authority He commands. (Mark 1:21-22) As Jesus is teaching, a man afflicted with an "unclean spirit" yells out that he knows who Jesus is and what he is all about. Jesus reveals His authority once again, this time over the unclean spirit and commands the spirit to leave and it obeys. (Mark 1:23-26) It is the power of the Word—the power of the Word spoken to Moses and the prophets to follow; the power of the Word became flesh, the final and ultimate sacrifice, that makes irrelevant what food we eat, and it is the power of the Word that brings life to this man afflicted with unclean spirits.

Pastoral Reflection

Each of this Sunday's readings deals with the relationship between knowledge, God's Word, and our lives. In Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the Israelites to heed the

1 Bruce Meztger and Roland Murphy, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.* New Revised Standard Version. New York: University Press, 1994. page 237.

words of the prophet, the one filled with God's Word. Listening and heeding this Word of God will lead them safely to the promised land. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he entreats the people who have knowledge of God—the knowledge that God is one, supreme God rather than one among many deities—to live in a way that encourages people to trust in that knowledge, to grow in faith. And finally, in Mark, we learn that even the unclean spirits know this God incarnate. This is about a supreme knowledge—a supreme Word that cannot be compromised by the things of this world and that is not changed as a result of what we do and how we live. It is a Word of life—the only Word that brings life. It is a Word that frees us from the unclean spirits and all that separates us from abundant life with God. It is a Word grounded in relationship, calling us to place our trust in God's promises and God's chosen people.

Yet, it is a Word we often ignore or cannot hear. How much easier it is to hear the cacophony of voices from culture and the world rather than the Word of God, the only Word that sustains life! Our freedom in Christ is a freedom to—a freedom to live for God, rather than a freedom constricted by following certain rules or social customs. But our sin is in establishing other gods—other voices, other rules, other customs—to live by. Sometimes, those other voices threaten to define us as Christians more characteristically than the Word that claims us in baptism and adopts us as God's children no matter what. How often are we as Christians defined by whether or not we consume alcohol, whether we condone dancing, whether we label homosexuality as a sin, our stance on abortion, our political affiliations, whether we claim the title "evangelical" or "liberal" or "fundamentalist"? How easily do we make it all about us and what we do and who we are instead of about the Word that claims us as God's beloved children?

Moses reminds us in Deuteronomy and Paul in Corinthians that the only voice with the power to free us from the wildernesses we are lost in and the boundaries of custom, culture, and class that trap us is the voice of God. Even when the power and volume of the voices of this world threaten to drown out God's voice, God has a Word to silence those voices, too: "Be silent, and come out of him!" We are freed to become voices for God's Word, so that we might help and encourage others to discern God's voice in the noise.

Jesus shows us that this is a Word we can stake our lives on. As we follow Jesus to the cross, we discover that this is a Word that will carry us through even death, that this is a Word more powerful than the world's unclean spirits, overcomes the world's temptations, and forgives our sin. This is a Word of hope. We do well to heed its voice. AZH

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 5 February 8, 2009

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 147:1-11, 20c
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1: 29-39

First Reading

The reading from Isaiah and the psalm both emphasize the power and sovereignty of God. Isaiah reminds us that the Holy One rules over all things of this world from the natural order to the humanly established order. The prophet invites us to look around and see

all the glory and power that is the creation of God. This is the omniscient, ever-living God. This is the Lord who strengthens the weary and upholds the weak. The psalmist also emphasizes God's mighty power and preference for the weak and lowly.

In the second reading, Paul writes about God's power to free, to unbind humankind through the gospel. But with this freedom comes the responsibility to proclaim the gospel. This is not a choice as much as an obligation, a freely undertaken obligation. Freedom comes through the gospel, and Paul uses his freedom to choose to do things that, while not required, may help another come to believe.

The passage from the Gospel of Mark follows from last week's account of Jesus teaching in the synagogue and casting out unclean spirits (Mark 1:21-28). This week, Jesus and his disciples leave the synagogue to go to the home of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus freed her—healed her—from the disease that held her body captive. And in response, "she began to serve them" (Mark 1:31). It is interesting that just as Paul used his freedom in Christ to serve others by proclaiming the Good News, Simon's mother likewise uses her freedom in Christ for service. It also seems to indicate that she was healed quickly and completely enough to serve her guests immediately. Then, Jesus shares his healing ministry in the whole community. Again—as in last week's gospel—the demons also know who Jesus really is (Mark 1:24; Mark 1:34). They too recognize the greatness and power of God that Jesus possesses and directs.

As happens throughout Scripture, after all that teaching and healing, Jesus takes time by himself to pray. Jesus too needs time to recharge and gather his strength for ministry. When Simon and the others find Jesus, they tell him that "everyone is searching" for Him (Mark 1:37). I would imagine that someone with such incredible power to heal so completely and quickly would be in great demand! But instead of resuming his work there in Simon's town, Jesus says they are to go to "neighboring towns" to continue proclaiming the message and casting out demons (Mark 1:38). Jesus' ministry is bigger than the power to miraculously heal. Jesus' primary ministry is to "proclaim the message" (Mark 1:38). This sounds like a reference to the beginning of the chapter, after John the Baptist is arrested, when "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mk 14-15). The good news, the message that we are called to proclaim is the coming of the Messiah. The good news for us is this same Messiah—crucified and risen. This is the source of our freedom and healing.

Pastoral Reflection

Themes of power, freedom and service wind through all of today's readings. Our power and strength come from God, as the readings from Isaiah and Psalms remind us. God's power is the source of healing, the source for overcoming all that binds us in this world: illness, disease, troubled relationships, disbelief and doubt, shame, guilt, expectations, even our illusory quest to live perfect, blameless lives. In our congregations, the demons tempt us to put on the façade of being perfect, obedient, and sinless. Leave your real-life troubles at the door. Put on a happy face. Do not reveal the truth that you, too, are actually in need of any grace, forgiveness or healing.

Jesus came to free us from these things and more: all that binds us, all that keeps us weak and lowly, all that threatens us from claiming our identity as children of God,

all that separates us from the abundant and eternal life promised by God. In Christ, we are freed from everything that binds us.

And there is plenty that binds us in this world. All three readings assume that we will be faint and weary. We will encounter demons and illness. We will be mired in the trappings of expectation and tradition. But will we hear the proclamation of freedom? Do we trust that God is powerful and strong enough to unbind us? The promises flowing through these readings remind us and comfort us with the assurance that it is not by our own power that we are saved. Our own will, our own striving, and our own perfection do not make us free. In fact, believing they do only continues to bind us and trap us in an inexhaustible pursuit for the impossible. Paradoxically, by recognizing God's strength (not our own), God's power (not our own), and God's great compassion and love for us, we are freed from our trappings and restored to life. And restored to life, we are free to help others hear the Good News.

We are free to proclaim the gospel! Free to tell others what God has done! Free to continue Christ's work of proclaiming the message and healing others! This is the ministry Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians. He meets people where they are to encourage and witness to them of the freeing power of the gospel. Paul uses his freedom for service.

It is often said among those who study and teach about evangelism that the pastor is the least well-equipped person in the congregation to do evangelism. The people sitting in the pews each Sunday spend the other six and a half days per week outside the church walls, engaged in the community, in conversation with others, in places we pastor-types can't even access. The people sitting in the pews live out their callings in the world as factory workers, teachers, farmers, truck drivers, professors, bankers, and prison guards. Living fully in the world, they have so many opportunities to live the gospel in the midst of life. They are there living and working alongside others, in the midst of the trials and tribulations that threaten to consume them day after day. From this context, they are able to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, because they can speak as ones who have been bound in the same ways, who have been slaves to the corporate workaholic system, who experience the pressures of cultural expectations, who have faced the same temptations and trappings. The people in the pews can speak with the authority of living and working in the same trenches of this world. From this perspective, they can witness to the power and possibility of God to free us from all that binds.[2] One who has been there speaks with a different authority than the one giving direction from outside. This is the reason that twelve step recovery programs depend on the mentoring and leadership of those who have been addicted to alcohol or drugs themselves. Paul reminds us that our freedom in Christ also gives us the freedom to choose to be fully present in this world, for the sake of others. This means stepping into the murky waters of life with difficult dilemmas and no easy answers. This means going to where there is hurt, pain, illness, disease, addiction, and brokenness. It means fully immersing ourselves in the trappings of this world in order

2 Author's note: I do not mean to say that clergy have any less experience living in and of the world, or that clergy should remain cloistered within the church, but I do think that the office of one "set apart for Word and Sacrament ministry" creates a relationship with a different character and different opportunities than the peer relationship that I describe.

to share the good news. It means living the freedom to shed the bindings of this world and claim our new life in Christ.

Paul writes that he has "become all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22). This is not the same as compromise or condoning every way of life. It is about being able to speak from the inside, from the experience of living within the socio-cultural context, rather than speaking from outside or above it. How well do we communicate the gospel to those who are not like us? How have we defined what it means to be a Christian in ways that have more to do with our cultural identity than our identity as children of God? How many churches still define themselves primarily by their ethnic heritage? How many congregations actually reflect the age and socioeconomic demographics of their surrounding communities? For those of us who have been part of the church our whole lives, it can be tempting to remain with others like ourselves. Our congregations may not make room for those who have troubled lives or those who are different from us or those who have simply never heard and experienced the good news. This Sunday's readings remind us that our power is God's power, our faith is God's gift to us, and our salvation is through Christ. It's not about us. It's all about us proclaiming what God has done for us. AZH

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany / Lectionary 6 February 15, 2009

2 Kings 5:1-14
Psalm 30
1 Corinthians 9:24-27
Mark 1:40-45

First Reading

Naaman is powerful and well-respected, since he has recently led his army to victory, but he also suffers from leprosy. Naaman hears from his wife's servant of a prophet in Israel capable of curing his disease, so he asks his king to help him. What a surprising choice that this servant—a captive from war—chose to share this information about a prophet that could cure Naaman! The king writes to the king of Israel and Naaman sets off on his way, with plenty of coin and riches for the transaction. But the king of Israel feels powerless to help Naaman. "Who am I to choose life or death for this man?" he wonders. When Elisha overhears the exchange, he tells the king to send Naaman to him, "so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:8). Naaman arrives at Elisha's house and Elisha does not greet him. Instead, Elisha sends word to Naaman that he should wash in the river Jordan and be made clean. Naaman feels too high and mighty for these instructions. He feels worthy enough that Elisha himself should have come to see him. He seems to expect a showy act of might by the prophet, not a quiet, barely noticeable event. He even snubs the Jordan River. Ultimately, Naaman heeds the servants' encouragement to do as Elisha instructed. And when he does, he is indeed made clean. By listening to the voices of the most lowly—first, his wife's servant who told him of the prophet Elisha and then his servants who prompted him to follow Elisha's modest instructions—and by setting aside his own inflated expectations for how healing would take place, Naaman was made well.

The Gospel of Mark also deals with a story of healing that defied expectations. Jesus healed a man with leprosy by speaking the word of healing and a simple touch. By doing so, Jesus ignored the cultural ex-

pectation that he refrain from touching one who is "unclean." After healing the man from leprosy, Jesus tells him to go and show himself to a priest, in accordance with Mosaic law but not to tell anyone else what he has done (the Messianic secret that drives Mark's gospel). But the healed man could not contain his story and instead tells everyone in the surrounding towns and villages what Jesus has done for him.

Mark also tells us that "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country" (Mark 1: 45). It may have been that he was no longer welcome in town because he violated the cleanliness codes when he touched the man with leprosy, thereby making himself unclean. It also may have been Jesus' choice not to be known as a miracle-worker. He wanted people to understand that the healing he brings is not a cheap or easy or quick fix. He did not want to simply be known as the latest fad or superstar. He wanted to reveal the One who raises us from death—hopelessness, hurt, despair, illness, brokenness—to life. The fullness of that revelation would need to wait until his crucifixion and resurrection.

Pastoral Reflection

These two stories of God's power to heal raise so many questions and provide a multitude of directions for a sermon.

Like Naaman, how often does our pride get in the way of doing what would make us well? How often do we believe we are somehow entitled to healing? How often do we expect healing to come in the form or through the means we expect? What else do we let get in the way of our healing? What are we not willing to let go of (expectations, pride, security, status) in order to receive healing?

Naaman heeded the wisdom of the slaves around him. What are the least among us telling us today? What are the slaves of this world—those who live in countries who are encumbered by debt and who must follow the rules of the world's superpowers –telling us in the United States? What are they telling us about what we need to do to be made well? What are they telling us about what we need to do to make the world well, attending to the environmental degradation and pollution and energy crises? What are they telling us about how we might truly live—not by wealth or oil but by caring for the environment and the least among us?

There is significant debate about the phrase in the NRSV: "moved with pity" (Mark 1:41). While most ancient manuscripts use the word *splagchnistheis* ("pity, sympathy"), at least one other authoritative manuscript uses the word *orgistheis* ("anger, indignation, wrath"). How does the reading of this text change whether it is anger or pity that moves Jesus to action? How does it change the perception of who God is in this story? Does it matter which emotion moved Jesus to action? Does it matter what motivates our actions?

Sometimes, I take comfort in the reality that as a pastor, my ministry does not depend on how I happen to feel about it at any given moment. The reality is that I do not always feel like preaching when Sunday morning comes. I do not always want to make a late-night hospital visit. Yet, I am sure that the Holy Spirit has intervened to use me even when I didn't particularly feel up to it. Because it is not by our own power that we serve. Neither is it by Jesus' own power that he heals.

Naaman ultimately found healing through an act that he was not even so sure would really work—washing himself in the dirty Jordan River. Yet, in the waters of the

Jordan, he was made well. Likewise, in the waters of baptism, we are restored to life. Whether we know what's happening or not, God's water and the Word rush over us to claim us and cleanse us and make us whole. This is not by our own doing—thanks be to God. AZH

Transfiguration of Our Lord February 22, 2009

2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

First Reading

Each of the readings assigned for this day point to the power of God working through God's people. In 2 Kings, we hear the story of Elijah's ascent to heaven and Elisha's commitment to continue his work. Throughout their journey, Elijah offers Elisha a chance to opt out, to go no further, and each of the three times, Elisha refuses. Eventually, Elisha asks Elijah to be blessed with his spirit and Elijah promises it if Elisha sees him being taken to heaven. Elisha sees the chariot of Israel and its horsemen and Elijah ascending to heaven. At some level, Elisha recognizes that in order to follow as Elijah's successor, he needs more than simply his natural charisma. Elisha recognizes the demand that the call entails and that he needs to be led and empowered by God's spirit.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul is aware of our great need to hear the gospel. If the gospel is hidden at all—or veiled—it is hidden for those who need it most, those who are dying without it. This is the gospel that we proclaim for the world to see and hear and experience. This is the gospel of a God of love and compassion. This is the gospel that shines even in the darkness of this world.

Paul references "the god of this world who has blinded the minds of the unbelievers" (2 Cor 4:4). What "gods of this world" might be at work in our lives, communities, even the church, that keep people distanced from the good news? The gods of distraction and busyness: "I don't have time for Bible study"; "Sunday morning is our only time together as a family." Prestige and status: "If I work seventy hours a week, I will be promoted. I have to work at this job so I can afford the lifestyle I want." Fear: "If I begin thinking about God, I might begin to notice the parts of myself and my life that I feel guilty about." Irrelevance: "They don't talk about real things at church. They don't deal with the problems I face in my everyday life. What does God have to do with it?"

In Mark, God's glory is revealed through Jesus Christ. Jesus went up on the mountain with close disciples, Peter, James and John. Then Jesus became transfigured, while he was talking with Moses and Elijah. Peter responds by holding on tightly to the experience: Don't go anywhere! Let me get my camera! We'll make a few huts for you! We can capture this forever! Mark tells us that this response was out of fear. Fear of what? Fear of whom? Fear that this intense experience wouldn't last? Fear that it would? Then came a cloud and a loud voice claiming: "This is my Son, the Beloved listen to him!" (Mark 9:7) Then poof! Everyone was gone and Jesus was standing there in his ordinary clothes before them. As they came down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to silence.

Pastoral Reflection

Have you ever had an intense experience of

God's presence, of God's leading, maybe of God's promise? I've experienced this at times of crisis, at times of heightened emotion. Recently, I sat with a family whose loved one was actively dying. As we reflected on it later, even though we all knew death was near, even though we knew the world as we knew it would never be the same, we shared the sense that God was present in the doctors, nurses, hospice care workers, family members, even the pastor and we all simply got out of the way for God to do God's thing. It's a blessed gift of peace at the most disorienting of times. But the experience doesn't last forever. The profound trust in God's leading hand and the faith in God's promise don't seem to last. The chorus of people working as God's eyes and ears and hands and feet and voices all go home. They stop bringing the meals. The family members get on one another's nerves. The medical bills come. The glorious moments when the heavens opened and the stars were aligned seem like nothing more than a dream.

In the midst of the experience, we can do nothing other than what Peter did. How can I hold on to this? How can I memorialize this moment, this experience forever? How can I make sure never to forget, never to lose this? After all, we do lose it. We come off that mountain, bickering with one another, forgetting the fear and awe instilled in our hearts at hearing the voice of God. We begin to doubt—maybe it wasn't the voice of God after all. We begin to wonder—could we have done something differently? Why couldn't it stay like that forever?

There's more work to be done. There's more healing, more witnessing, more revealing to do. It is not yet finished. This is only a glimpse, a foretaste of a feast to come. There's a world of people out there who haven't heard this voice, who do not know God, who have never recognized the face of Christ reflected in another. There's a world of people who walk in darkness and do not know there is a great light. There's a world of people who depend on us to carry the flame, to shine the light of Christ, the light of God's love for the whole world, in the dark corners of life.

The Transfiguration is not just about how Jesus was changed in those moments on the mountain, but also how his disciples were changed because of their experience of God. God's presence does not change. God's glory does not change. God claimed Jesus on that mountain and those chosen few witnessed it with their own eyes. We, too, have been claimed children of God, through water and the Word. Whether dramatic or hidden from our sight, God has chosen us.

As we prepare to enter the season of Lent, we most certainly are coming down from the mountain—from the bright lights of Christmas and the season of Epiphany to the trenches of our faith. But having glimpsed the revelation of our God means this world is never the same. Neither are we. AZH

Ash Wednesday
February 25, 2009

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

First Reading

The reading from Joel is full of fanfare and commotion. We hear the warning: Blow the trumpet! Sound the alarms! Emergency! Emergency! The day of the Lord is coming—that's the emergency! Watch out! It's

full of judgment. Be afraid, be very afraid. This is like nothing you've ever seen before. But all is not lost. There's still time. Return to me, says the Lord. Learn my ways of compassion and mercy. Follow me. Blow the trumpet! Call everyone together—the whole community—that they may be received by the mercy of God.

The reading from Isaiah provides an alternate focus on worshipping God and repenting through mending their unjust practices of communal life. God reminds the people that the fast called for is not one of show, but one that transforms the community. The fast God calls for is one that creates acts of justice, that provides food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless. The kind of repentance—turning from one's ways—that God wants are not empty acts of piety, but acts of service that reflect God's compassion and mercy for God's people.

The psalm fits nicely with either reading, calling us to confess our sin while reminding us both of God's sovereignty in judgment and God's ways of compassion and mercy. It is a plea/prayer for God's pardon and a recognition of God's power.

While the other readings focus on us, on our need for salvation, Paul's letter to the Corinthians addresses how the power of Christ not only saves us but transforms us. It is through—and only through—Christ that we become clothed in the righteousness of God. Here, Paul offers a description of one who is clothed in that righteousness (the effect of dying and rising in and with Christ).

Finally, the gospel of Matthew returns to the call to repentance. Like Joel, this passage begins with a warning: Beware! But this time, it's not a loud siren for the community. It's a whisper. Psst! You, over there. Don't draw attention to yourself! Don't let anyone know what you're up to! Give alms, pray, fast—but don't do it for the sake of others. Don't do it for the recognition. Don't do it for show. This is just between you and God. This is not about convincing others that you are worthy and righteous. This is about serving your God. This is about remembering that you are in fact not worthy and righteous. It's about what God has done for you through Christ that you are made worthy and righteous. Set your heart upon these things. Turn towards God. Because it is not by your own action and it's certainly not by the approval of others' that you are made worthy. The real treasure lies in what God has done. Dwell on this. May your hearts and minds rest in Christ Jesus.

Pastoral Reflection

Throughout today's readings, there is a tension between God's action and human action. God alone has the power to cleanse us from sin, and it is by God's grace that we are not simply condemned to death. Yet so often, we try to turn this around to be about us. Look, God. I did all the right things. I came to church every Sunday. I even served on Council for a couple of terms. That's gotta be worth something, right? These Scriptures remind us that we are nothing if not dependent on God's grace and forgiveness. Everything else we might say or do are nothing more than empty gestures until we embrace our need for God.

In particular, Jesus' words in Matthew remind us to pay attention to our intentions. Are we more worried about what our friends think of us than what God thinks? Jesus reminds us that it is not about doing what looks good and pious in the marketplace, but "return[ing] to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13). The true reward will not come from our peers. It will not come from the

people who look at our piety with envy. The true reward is being made right with God. The true reward is being welcomed as God's chosen, despite all the ways we've threatened that connection, all the ways we've denied God, all the ways we've lived as though we have no need for God, lived as though we are more than dust. The true reward is being able to live with a confidence as God's people, freed from the trappings of this world, which require the right clothes, the right actions, the right pedigree, the right education.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. This omnipresent ritual on this day grounds us in our humanity, from the newborn babes to the elderly. None of us is any more or any less than the creation of God, life breathed in through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's the ultimate conviction of our sin—our sin of pride, of arrogance—and the ultimate promise of grace. You are God's dust. This is not a statement that life is meaningless. It is a statement of perspective, of reminding us of the One on whom we depend for all of life—even our very breath and everything else that defines us, shapes us, sets us apart.

It's a reminder that we must first become dust—we must first die to the things of this world, the identities of this world, the trappings—before we are raised from that dust to new life, before we are filled with the power of God through the Holy Spirit. If we never face our mortality, if we avoid the reality that no one gets out of this world alive, we've missed the promise of the cross. It is only through death, it is only when we have died to sin that we are made alive to God through Jesus Christ. The death all around us—the poverty, the hunger, the despair, the depression, the hurt, the destruction, the terror—these tales of death do not tell the whole story. This world threatens to consume us, so that all we do hear is that we are nothing more than dust. But we are dust that has been formed and given the breath of life by our loving God. We are not God, regardless of our status in this world, our prestige, our piety. We do not have the power to become God. But when we remember who and whose we are, we are freed to be servants of God, transformed by God's grace and mercy, ready to be heirs to the kingdom. By opening ourselves to this truth, we begin to see this world for what it is—and so much more. We begin to see glimpses of God's gift of life in the midst of what seems to be certain death. We see hope where despair ruled. We see a way of peace in the midst of terror and violence. We see the power of God working through this world of mere dust, beyond our wildest dreams. We glimpse a world of hope. AZH

First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2009

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

First Reading

The reading from Genesis is the conclusion to the flood story, which recounts God's covenant with Noah and his descendents. We are told that God establishes this covenant. God takes this action (Gen 9:8-9). This covenant is not dependent upon human response. God promises never again to flood the earth and destroy the life of any living creature by water. The sign of this promise is the rainbow's presence in the sky after rain. This sign also serves as God's own reminder never to destroy creation again (Gen 9:15).

The First Letter of Peter makes a link between the story of God saving Noah and his family from the flood and God saving us from sin through baptism. The author of 1 Peter reminds us that Christ suffered and died for all the sins of humankind that separate us from God. God has chosen to save us through baptism. The death Christ died—and the death we share—is a death of the flesh (1 Pet 3:18). Christ now has dominion over all; salvation is given by God through baptism for all.

The Gospel of Mark also gives an account of baptism, of Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan River. Just last week, we heard about a king who thought he was too good for the Jordan River, but this week, this same place—an ordinary river, maybe even just the closest body of water—is the site for Jesus' baptism. The voice from heaven proclaims that Jesus is indeed the Son of God: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). The very next thing that happens is that "the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" for 40 days (Mark 1:13), which is also the same amount of time that Noah and his family are on the ark, at least according to one account (Gen 7:4, 12). It is interesting that the word used here for "driven out" is the same word Mark uses for "casting out" demons—*ekballo* (Mark 1:12, 34, 39). The word refers to being sent out with force. This was not a gentle act of the Spirit. While in the wilderness, the devil sends many temptations. Although Mark does not give us any information about either the temptations or Jesus' response, we know from Matthew and Luke that Jesus resisted these temptations (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). After Jesus' time in the wilderness, He takes up the proclamation of John (the Baptist): repent, for the time is near.

All of today's readings remind us that God has chosen God's people. God has chosen to be in relationship with us and to save us, beginning with the covenant with Noah and completed in the saving act of baptism. Even in baptism, we are not somehow insulated from temptation anymore than Jesus was. But we can hold fast to the promise that God has chosen us, saved us, and will be with us always.

Pastoral Reflection

Our readings for this first Sunday of Lent offer us multiple references to the time period of forty days as a time for trials (temptations in the wilderness) and tribulations (held captive on a boat in the midst of seemingly endless rain). This seems fitting as we begin our forty day Lenten journey into the depth of our sin and our great need for Christ. In the early church, these forty days were also a time of preparation for those seeking baptism at the Easter Vigil. How do we prepare and face temptation as our God did during His time in the wilderness? How does Jesus equip us to face that temptation in the world?

At the most basic level, the temptation to doubt God's Word is a constant threat. How do we reconcile God's promise to Noah and his descendents "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11) with the lives lost in the tsunamis and massive floods of the 21st century? Some look for answers by blaming the people's sin and corruption as the cause of calamities like hurricane Katrina that devastated the people of New Orleans in 2006. Since the fall in the garden of Eden, humankind has repeatedly given in to temptation and sin. None of us are above it, and the only deliverance we have from our sin is Jesus Christ. Calamities continue to happen; natural disasters plague all corners of this

globe; and yet none of this death and destruction has the last word, all because of God's covenant with Noah sealed in the image of the rainbow and God's promise to us sealed in the waters of baptism. First Peter also helps us to wrestle with these difficult questions by making a distinction between physical death and death of the spirit. The flood waters did not drown out human sin, but they also do not destroy humanity. We are held in the palm of God's hand in death and in life.

The Lenten journey carries us to the cross, so it is fitting that the gospel for this day is the beginning of Jesus' journey to the cross, his baptism. This is where Mark begins his gospel, with baptism. Mark spends just a scant few verses introducing us to John the Baptist before picking up today's gospel reading. Likewise, the beginning of our life in Christ is in the promises that God makes to us in baptism.

Jesus leads us into baptism, Jesus leads the way through the wilderness and temptations of our lives, through death, and through to eternal life. Those of us who live on this side of the resurrection can depend on the light that is Jesus to lead our way. AZH

Second Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2009

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16
Psalm 22:23-31
Romans 4:13-25
Mark 8:31-38

First Reading

In our reading from Genesis, we meet Abram at age ninety-nine. Twenty-four years earlier, he had been called by God and promised that a great nation would be made by him. Thirteen years earlier, he and his wife had already given up hope that they would have a child together and Sarai encouraged Abram to conceive a child with her slave, Hagar. Hagar did bear a son and was sent away by Sarai. When we meet Abram in this reading, he has been waiting for God's extraordinary promises to come to fruition. God approaches him, asking Abram to follow him and in return, God will make a covenant with him. Abram will be "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" whose name is no longer Abram but Abraham and God promises to be their God forevermore (Gen 17:4-5). Sarai will become Sarah and bear Abraham a son and "give rise to the nations" (Gen 17:16).

Much like the covenant God makes with Noah and his descendents that we read last week, this covenant that God makes with Abram is not dependent upon Abram's response. God still fulfilled God's promise even though Sarai and Abram became impatient and tried to bring about God's fulfillment on their own terms (through Hagar). God is faithful even when we are not.

Again this week, our epistle helps to explain our first reading. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he maintains that Abraham and Sarah were blessed through their covenant with God not because they kept the law but because they trusted God's promises. God's promises come to the descendants of Abraham also through this same faith, through trusting God as the one who "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17). What marvelous imagery for one who is able to make even those who are barren to bear children. Paul seems to relate this kind of faith to "hoping against hope" (Rom 4:18). The facts—his age, Sarah's age,

and many years of barrenness—did not dissuade Abraham's hope—or faith. His faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:22) and our faith in the God who called another thing into existence—namely, life from death in Jesus Christ—is likewise reckoned to us as righteousness. That is, we are made right with God through our faith, not by how well we keep the law, not by our own doing.

The Gospel reading also demands faith to believe the unbelievable. This reading is the first time in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus foretells his Passion. What a swift jump from Jesus' baptism last week to the verses that precede this gospel of Peter's confession that Jesus is indeed the Messiah to the reality that Jesus' fate will be persecution and death. To Peter, the one who has just confessed Jesus to be God on earth, the Messiah, this sounds just ludicrous. What do you mean you must suffer and die? You are the Son of God! And what's all this talk about rising again after three days anyway? Impossible! Jesus' short rebuttal to Peter is that God's ways are not human ways. We begin to glimpse the way of the cross.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, I can almost hear the author saying, "Wait for it..." as in, don't jump to any conclusions. You don't know what's going to happen yet. You don't understand. Wait for the whole story. And the story is not complete until Jesus has suffered, died, and been buried, then raised after three days. Until this happens, especially for the author of the Gospel of Mark, we cannot interpret Jesus' words and actions. Until "the rest of the story," as Paul Harvey would say, Jesus' miracles are just miracles, his healings, just healings, his words, just wise teachings. It's the rest of the story that makes Jesus not just a moral leader but the Messiah.

Pastoral Reflection

What Jesus predicts for his own journey was so unexpected to Jewish ears. I wonder whether those of us who have been raised with this story—those of us who stand on this side of the resurrection—have lost the shock value. Have those of us living in a country where Christians are the norm (at least nominally) lost the shock and power of this call to follow Christ to the cross? Do we have similar expectations of our leaders today that Peter had of Jesus (perform miracles, abolish governments not working for the help of the people, bring about healing)? What expectations do we have for ourselves? Are we content to be good enough people, living reasonably moral lives? In popular media, especially that which adopts the adjective "Christian", the prosperity gospel seems alive and well. Do we expect that following Christ will help us conform and even prosper in the established order? Deep down, do we really accept that following Christ means something totally different than the wealth and form of happiness promised by this world? Are we really ready to lose our lives in order to save them?

The reality is that our lives are temporal as are the success and perspective of this world. Jesus does not promise a life free of suffering, pain, or ultimately, even death. Jesus makes a promise for a life that nothing of this world can threaten, not even death. This is a promise that takes the long view. These are not Scripture readings for those who yearn for instant gratification. Abraham waits nearly a quarter of a century to begin to see the fruit of God's promise. The rewards of God's promise are not borne according to our timeframe and often not according to our expectations.

There is a great temptation to become smug with hindsight, as though we who

follow Christ today have anything more figured out than Peter did two thousand years ago. We, too, have at times glimpsed the Messiah and confessed his name. And we, too, have gone on to betray that name, to question where Christ is. We, too, have wondered where His power is in this world of suffering and mayhem. We, too, are on a lifelong journey to make sense of Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow him.

We have a rich legacy of those who have suffered for the sake of the gospel (not to mention some shameful history where we invoked the name of Christ to condone our sinful acts). Martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer have left us with powerful writings about taking up the cross of Christ, suffering for the witness of our faith (see *Cost of Discipleship* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*). He also left us with his personal witness and sacrifice when he was killed at the hands of the Nazi regime. Martin Luther wrote and spoke up about the call to follow the way of the cross when he experienced his church conforming to the ways of the world. He also reminds us that the way of the cross includes confronting one's own demons, never falling prey to the illusion that even our faithfulness is a product of our own doing, but always in spite of our sin by the grace of God. Other silent saints have sought to navigate the way of the cross, discerning what it means that "those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35). Yet, even significant examples like these remind us of the temptation to glorify this road, as though it is only for the most courageous, most faithful, most fervent of believers, or on the other hand to denigrate the gift that is our own life, as though one deserves to suffer or is worthless. The proclamation of the theology of the cross must carefully navigate the twin pitfalls so that self-denial does not become either self-hatred or self-glorification. AZH

Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2009

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

First Reading

For this third Sunday in Lent, God defines the boundaries for our relationship with God and one another. "I am the LORD your God" we are reminded in the beginning of the reading from Exod (20:2). We are not to forget that these commandments are given by our God, the one who "brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). God first showed compassion and mercy on the people in slavery by leading them to freedom; then God gives the commandments. The first three commandments define our relationship with God, beginning with the admonition that we are to have no other gods before this same God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt. The fourth commandment establishes our respect for Sabbath rest, imitating God who also rested from the labor of creation on the seventh day. The final commandments all govern our relationship with one another.

These commandments give us boundaries and parameters, mostly of what we are not to do. They are all expressed in the negative (do not have any other gods, do not murder, etc.). They describe the limits of our relationship with God and one another. Also, all the other commandments follow from the first one, which assumes

that there are indeed other gods that one might choose to worship. Everything else God commands flows from the basic requirement that we are to have no other gods—of this world or otherwise—before the Lord our God.

Paul leads us to the cross, where the law is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He writes that "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). "Christ crucified" is a stumbling block because the Messiah is supposed to be the salvation for Israel, not put to death. It is foolishness to believe that divine power is vulnerable to human frailties like death.

But those who are called—those who are in Christ—are filled with the wisdom and power of God. That is, they have a new perspective that reveals wisdom where once they saw only foolishness. This is the heart of Paul's message and our faith—God's promise rests in the cross and Christ's triumph over it.

The Gospel of John also refers to the centrality of the cross as we hear the first passion prediction that appears in this gospel. Jesus' prediction comes in the midst of driving out all those who are conducting business in the temple marketplace. There is much debate about what drove Jesus to this zealous act to drive out the money-changers and those who were selling goods in the temple. Again, we encounter the word *ekballo,* which has the connotation of being cast out with force, used in the case of casting out demons. It seems plausible that Jesus was concerned that the people had missed the point of worship. Perhaps the center of temple life had become so distanced from the worship of God that the temple itself had become an idol of the people. Certainly, that never happens in our own congregations, as we threaten to displace God by our debates over carpeting and pew cushions and raising money to restore the organ and fights over which hymnal is in the pew. Actually, we do not fully know what was happening in the temple that prompted Jesus' heated response: People selling animals for sacrifice? Profiteering? Exploitation? Focus on something other than God?

Ultimately, Jesus conflates the physical temple with the metaphor that His own body is the (new) temple when he challenges the Jews to "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). This becomes a sign for the Jewish people that Jesus himself comes as the fulfillment of the law. No longer is it necessary to perform ritual sacrifices and exchange money at the temple. Jesus is preparing to offer the sacrifice once and for all.

Pastoral Reflection

There are so many directions that a responsible preacher might take with these texts. God's love for God's people seems to be a theme woven throughout. The Gospel reading seems a bit harsh at first sight, and the love of God might not be the most immediate word heard through it. But I remember a sermon that my homiletics professor—and the editor of these Preaching Helps—preached on this gospel. He likened Jesus in the marketplace to his own reaction to walking into his daughter's room to say goodnight: get all this junk out of here. Clear away the distractions. Let nothing come between me and you. This becomes a Gospel about God's love for us through Jesus and God's desire to be in relationship with us, not entangled in all the extra stuff that gets between us and God.

This is primarily what the first reading is all about as well. God establishes the commandments out of love for the people and a desire to reach them and be in relationship with them. These commandments simply

provide parameters for such a relationship to exist between a perfect loving God and wayward, disobedient humans.

This summer, I spent some time in Tanzania, where I was surprised to experience how differently the collection of offering happens in worship. Many people bring offerings other than money—goats, chickens, bananas, household goods. These nonmonetary donations are then auctioned off at the end of the service to other members of the congregation and members of the surrounding community who show up. Sometimes these auctions are held outside of the church building, but I also experienced it within the sanctuary itself. Yet, I don't think this would provoke the same vehement reaction from Jesus, because I don't think that John tells us this story to issue a prohibition on selling things or auctioning things off at church. Today's readings invite us to dwell on the basis of our relationship with God and our call as disciples rather than provide absolute answers.

This is the context in which Martin Luther understood the ten commandments as well. He interpreted them much more broadly than a clear-cut list of household rules. He rephrased them all positively. For example, the prohibition against murder becomes an invitation to do everything in your power to encourage life for our brothers and sisters, not just simply avoid killing each other.[3] His explanation of all ten commandments are based in God's love for us and the recognition that even if we follow the letter of the law, we do not consistently make life-giving decisions with the freedom God has granted. Thus, for Luther, the law becomes also that which convicts us of our sin.

The Gospel reading seems to be a passage for which many scholars have focused on the historical accuracy of the presence of the temple and the particulars of the marketplace that might have been held there and why. Perhaps the temple had become a stumbling block for true worship and following God and Jesus' anger about it was justified. But looking at the narrative itself, what do we learn about Jesus? What do we who stand on this side of the resurrection learn about from where salvation comes? We learn that Jesus fulfills the law and makes the temple obsolete by becoming the ultimate sacrifice to make us right with God.

I'm constantly amazed at the various churchly accoutrements that many companies are willing to sell. The catalogues that cross my desk in any given week range from bizarre to outright sacrilege. Entire businesses have sprouted up so that the church becomes nothing more than another vendor in the marketplace. But in case we are to be led astray, Paul's letter to Corinthians grounds us in the truth: our message is Christ crucified and risen. What corrupts that message in our churchly enterprises today? Are we staying true to the centrality of the cross? AZH

3 See Martin Luther's *Small Catechism.*

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2009

Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

First Reading

This week, we hear from the book of Numbers. We meet the Israelites in the midst of their complaining and whining. They question God's faithfulness to pro-

vide for them. They don't like how God has chosen to provide for them ("we detest this miserable food" = manna; Num 21:5). God sends serpents that attack and kill many of the people. Then the people repent by coming back to Moses, and confessing their sin. Moses prays on their behalf and God gives instructions for how to bring about healing to the community. Moses follows these instructions and no one else is harmed by the serpents.

How do we make sense of this God who sends such plagues and wrath on His people? How prevalent is this view of God in today's culture, when people proclaim accidents and natural disasters as "acts of God"? In this case, how do we reconcile this God who seems to be the cause of disaster or hardship and the One who redeems the people from their foe?

Paul's letter to the Ephesians underscores that sin equates to death. All of us were at one time children bound to sin—all ones who lived among trespasses and sin. But God chose us, each and every one of us. God chose to raise us from our death in sin to be made alive with Christ. We are saved through faith but it is "not our own doing" (Eph 2:8). It is a gift, pure gift, from God. Not our own works, not our own glory, not our own wisdom or effort or anything attributable to us, but purely God's action in our lives. We are created for good works and God saves us for that purpose.

The Gospel of John makes an explicit reference to the OT passage about Moses lifting up the serpent. This is also the way the Son of Man—Jesus—is to be lifted up. Moses' lifting up of the serpent brought life to those otherwise doomed to death from the bites of the serpent. Likewise, Jesus' lifted up on the cross—Jesus' death—and his rising from that cross brings life to all those otherwise doomed to the death in sin. Those who believe in the cross and the resurrection are inheritors of eternal life. Those who believe shall live.

The Son did not come into the world to condemn it, as a punishment for sin and all the ways we have strayed from God. This sounds different from the God portrayed in Numbers who sent the serpents upon the grumbling people. This is a God who came to us, in the midst of human flesh, in the midst of death brought on by sin, to provide a healing way to new life. That new life—the eternal life—comes through believing in Christ's death and resurrection.

The condemnation does not come through this Son. The condemnation is the death that those who do not believe are already living in the midst of their sinful lives. They are condemning themselves. They are choosing their own fate. They are choosing the darkness of death rather than the light of life. Perhaps this raises not so much a question about whether we have been saved but whether our actions reveal that we believe in God.

Pastoral Reflection

In Numbers, we hear the story of a symbol transformed—a symbol of the snake that had been the source of pain and suffering and even death for many of the Israelites—into a source of life, healing. In John, we hear the prophecy of another symbol transformed—the stick on which Jesus would hang will become a symbol for Christians for centuries to come. Now the cross is a symbol of our belief in Christ—no longer only a symbol of torture—but the symbol of the One who has been crucified and has risen.

There is also a strong message that our God is a God of love. We hear this reminder throughout these readings, from

Paul who reminds us that our salvation is purely a gift of grace from God and from Jesus himself in the Gospel of John. Jesus reminds us that His presence on earth, and the giving of His life for us is an act of God's great love. This is the basis for all of God's dealing with us, even with the grumbling Israelites.

I'm sure many parents are familiar with the oft-repeated gripe of children or teenagers: "We don't have anything to eat in the house." It is an obvious exaggeration when the real problem is that there is nothing I want/desire to eat. It was the complaint of the Israelites. We don't want manna. We'd prefer something with a little more flavor. It raises the question: Do we want the life that God offers or do we want our lives made to order to our own specifications? Would we rather remain trapped in our own sins of selfishness, self-centeredness, and pride than live into the unity and peace and ultimately, salvation that only God provides?

God's purpose, God's job is not to condemn us. We have condemned ourselves by resisting the way of life. How do we continue to condemn ourselves today? In what ways do we continue to live trapped by prisons of our own making?

God is the only source of all life. We join in the prayer of the hymn, "Healer of Our Every Ill" (*With One Voice* 738):

Healer of our every ill,
light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear,
and hope beyond our sorrow.

AZH

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:1-12 or Psalm 119:9-16
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

First Reading

Our reading from Jeremiah looks to the day when there will be a new covenant between God and the people. He tells us it will not be the same as the covenant he made with Moses when he led the Israelites out of Egypt because that one was broken by the people. This time, the Lord will write the law "upon their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). All will know the Lord, who forgives our sin and erases it from memory. This new covenant is less about rigid laws and more about the love of God written on our hearts. It is no longer simply about what we do but about who we know (or who knows us, rather). It's about a relationship.

Today's psalm is very familiar because it is set to music in our liturgy, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps 51:10). Throughout, the psalmist demonstrates an awareness of the depth of human sin and God's willingness to cleanse that sin, to wash it away, to save. The psalmist emphasizes that he has sinned against God, and recognizes the brokenness in relationship between the psalmist and his God and the psalmist's desire to right that relationship. This psalm has likely been our refrain and prayer throughout the Lenten season, if not in worship, then in spirit.

The letter to the Hebrews identifies Jesus according to the priestly tradition. Support for Jesus as high priest includes: being claimed by God as Son; accordance with the

order of Malchizedek; prayers and supplications to God; submission to God; obedience through suffering; perfection through obedience. Eternal salvation (or eternal life) then is for all who are obedient to the way of Christ. Jesus' priestliness—and the salvation he brings—is forever, unlike the temporal power that high priests would have in the Jewish tradition.

The writer of Hebrews assumes that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). This raises question about the purpose of our suffering: is suffering what God asks of us or is suffering the natural consequence of seeking to follow God in a world so utterly turned against God? How does Jesus' experience of suffering transform the inevitable suffering and death we all face in human life and make possible new life to spring forth?

The Gospel of John begins with visitors who ask to "see Jesus" (John 12:21). What does it mean to really see Jesus? For John's gospel, it means seeing the one who came to this earth in order to suffer obediently and be raised up—to see the Son of God. Jesus makes an analogy between a grain of wheat (a seed) which must fall the earth and die in order to bear fruit and himself, who similarly must die in order to bear the fruit of believers drawn to the Father. We must also remain detached from this world, enough so to let go of this life to enjoy eternal life.

Pastoral Reflection

John's passion prediction takes a very different form and tone than we hear in the other gospels. This is a Jesus who is fully in charge and sees each step along the way as the fulfillment of Scripture. This is not a Jesus who seeks to be rescued from His time of trial, not a Jesus who says, "Father, save me from this hour" but a Jesus who understands that even in suffering, He is fulfilling His call to bring glory to his Father's name (John 12:27). God's glory comes through Jesus' obedience.

Jesus invites us to follow him to the foot of the cross, to the paradoxical place where His whole mission is fulfilled by obediently giving His own life. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor" (John 12:25-26).

We often talk about "losing ourselves." We lose ourselves in our work. We lose ourselves in romantic relationships. We lose ourselves when we are consumed by caring for an ailing spouse or child. We lose ourselves in our hobbies or on a special project. We will lose ourselves to illness, to addiction, to difficult relationships, to unfulfilled dreams. We lose ourselves in ways that are damaging in communities, too. We dig in our heels, wanting everything to go our way. We lose ourselves in our own perspective and fail to see the other sides. We even lose ourselves in arguments, in longstanding disagreements, or worse, we lose ourselves in apathy, because we've forgotten or no longer believe that our lives or our communities or our relationships can be different than they are right now.

Jesus asks that we "lose ourselves" in Him, and tells us that it is the only way to truly save our lives. Because the reality is that no matter how hard we try, we can't avoid losing ourselves in something or someone. Jesus hopes that we lose ourselves in the only promise that truly brings life: the sovereign God's promise of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

So, our lives become all about Christ: living and acting as Christ, treating one

another as Christ in our midst, forgiving and being forgiven in Christ's name, even becoming Christ's body for the world. This is our prayer when we gather around the table for Holy Communion each week, so that we might become Christ's body for the world. That our brokenness, our wounds, our holes, becomes Christ's wounds from his suffering and death. That we become the bread of life for the world, broken for the sake of the world, healed by the power of God's Word made flesh. Because it is only when we are lost in Christ that we experience and share with the world the joy of life abundant that God has promised. May it be so. AZH

Volume 35 Index

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