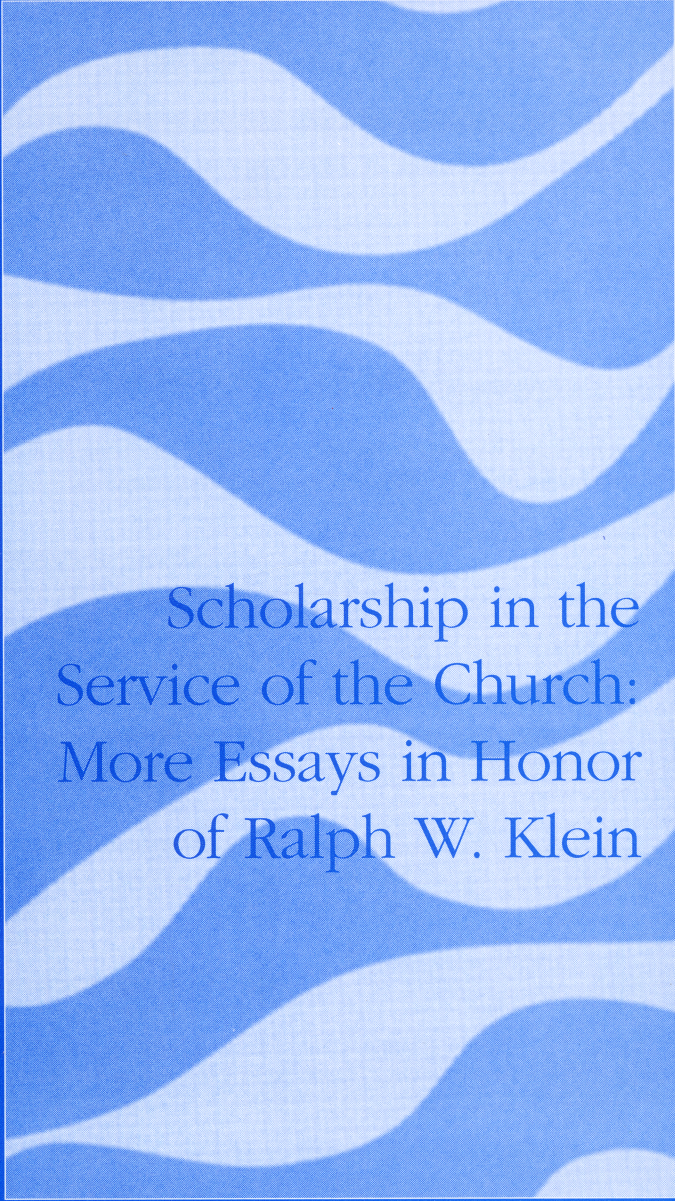


October 2008    Volume 35    Number 5



Scholarship in the  
Service of the Church:  
More Essays in Honor  
of Ralph W. Klein

**CURRENTS**  
in Theology and Mission

# Currents

## in Theology and Mission

Published by  
**Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago**  
in cooperation with  
**Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary**  
**Wartburg Theological Seminary**

Editor: **Ralph W. Klein**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*  
*rklein@lstc.edu*

Associate Editor: **Norma Cook Everist**

*Wartburg Theological Seminary*  
*ncookeverist@wartburgseminary.edu*

Assistant Editor: **Peggy Blomenberg**

*pbe@lstc.edu*

Editor of Preaching Helps: **Craig A. Satterlee**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*  
*csatterl@lstc.edu*

Editors of Book Reviews:

**Edgar Krentz**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0752)*  
*ekrentz@lstc.edu*

**Connie Kleingartner**

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0747)*  
*ckleinga@lstc.edu*

**Craig L. Nesson**

*Wartburg Theological Seminary (563/589-0207)*  
*cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu*

Circulation office: 773/256-0751

*currents@lstc.edu*

Editorial Board: **Pamela J. S. Challis, Connie Kleingartner, Randall R. Lee, Richard L. Ramirez, Susan Rippert, Barbara Rossing, Jensen Seyenkulo, Susan Swanson, Vicki Watkins, Fritz Wehrenberg, Vitor Westhelle.**

CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: \$18.00 in the U.S.A., \$23.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: \$35.00 in the U.S.A., \$45.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: \$51.00 in the U.S.A., \$65.00 elsewhere. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *ATLA Religion Database, Elenchus, IZBW, NTA, OTA, Religion Index I (formerly IRPL), Religious and Theological Abstracts, and Theologische Literaturzeitung.*

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

# Contents

---

**Scholarship in the Service of the Church:  
More Essays in Honor of Ralph W. Klein** 322

David Rhoads

**Ralph W. Klein: Superstar** 327

James Kenneth Echols

**Bach and His Secular Cantatas: A Case Study** 330

Mark P. Bangert

**A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the  
Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5:1–19)** 340

Esther M. Menn

**From the Sanctuary to the Street:  
The Vocation of a Theologian** 349

Richard J. Perry Jr.

**Diversity in the New Testament** 354

David Rhoads

**“Hastening the Day” When the Earth Will Burn? Global  
Warming, Revelation, and 2 Peter 3 (Advent 2, Year B)** 363

Barbara Rossing

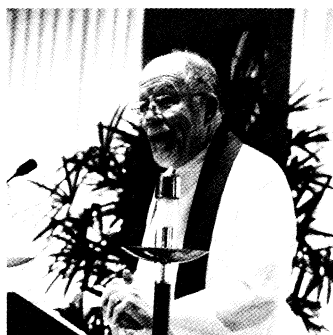
**Obscure Text, Illuminating Conversation:  
Reading *The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masih*  
(Qays al-Ghassānī)** 374

Mark N. Swanson

**Peggy Blomenberg—  
With Deep Appreciation** 326

Ralph W. Klein

Photos by Jan Boden and Dirk van der Duim



---

**Preaching Helps** 383

**A Christmas Feast**

Craig A. Satterlee

**First Sunday in Advent—Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Series B**

Contributor: Clark Olson-Smith

# Scholarship in the Service of the Church: More Essays in Honor of Ralph W. Klein

---

It is a delight to honor Ralph Klein because he does so many things well. He has been a scholar's scholar, a teacher's teacher, a dean's dean, a churchman's churchman, and more.

Not only do we honor Ralph for *what* he has done but we also honor him for the *way* he has done it. For example, Ralph has an unusual capacity to give attention to detail and at the same time to have the larger picture in mind. This was especially true of his work in various administrative capacities—such as his concern for the budgetary particulars of the seminary while having a vibrant overall vision for the school and its future. In scholarship, no one seems to be more fascinated by the details of the genealogies in *Chronicles* while at the same time keeping squarely in mind the overall scope of these books.

Also, Ralph has shown amazing discipline and efficiency. He is one of the most prodigious workers I know, able to get an enormous amount done in a short period of time—including the editing of this journal six (I repeat six!) times each year. The diversity of his activities and his capacity to be decisive also attest to this. And he is never behind on his e-mail correspondence!

In addition, as the Letter of James says, Ralph has a “gentleness of wisdom.” I can recall countless moments when in a faculty meeting or a committee meeting or a student examination Ralph has spoken a word of wisdom and grace. Many of us have depended on his counsel. We will sorely miss his full-time participation at LSTC.

Furthermore, I want to point to Ralph's generosity with humility. He has given of himself so much to every aspect of this school wherever he has been needed, and many of his contributions have gone unnoticed. He has mentored and encouraged many younger faculty members through the years. All this Ralph has done without pretension and with the humility of a person who at the end of the day simply says “I have done what I was called to do.”

Finally, I want to offer a special word of gratitude for Ralph's friendship. Many of us faculty members have benefited from Ralph's friendship through the years. He is always eager to ask how things are going, especially when

health or tragedy or other difficulties are at hand. This was certainly true for me and my family when my wife was going through a life-threatening illness. What also strikes me about Ralph's relationship with colleagues and students alike is that he is present to them. Every time I see him in the hallway and every time I approach his office, he puts aside whatever he is doing and gives full attention to what I am about to say. He is not distracted. He is not in a rush to get somewhere else. He is there for others.

There will be a gaping hole left here in Ralph's absence. On my way from Wisconsin last spring, just prior to the banquet honoring Ralph, I went through the underpass on 47th Street and discovered too late that I was about to go over (or into) the mother of all potholes. The experience jarred me, tested my tire to its limits, and bounced the chassis against the pavement. I was almost lost in the hole, and I came through it only with great peril. I thought of Ralph's impending retirement. His absence at LSTC will leave a gaping hole in the road as we journey ahead together. And we will have to negotiate the future carefully without him!

It is a pleasure to be the guest editor again for this second issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* in honor of its long-time editor. As mentioned in the first volume, the LSTC faculty wished to dedicate essays to Ralph on the occasion of his retirement. Our theme, "Scholarship in the Service of the Church," typifies Ralph's commitment to scholarship and to the faith. The faculty offered more contributions than one issue could hold, and we are delighted to present this second set of essays.

**James Kenneth Echols** likens Ralph Klein to a sports superstar like Michael Jordan who does it all and even makes those around him into better players. Ralph has "done it all" as a superb teacher, prominent scholar and writer, leader in educational technology, outstanding administrator, theologian of the church, dedicated editor, innovative archivist, and more. President Echols expresses his special appreciation for Ralph's humility in the face of these accomplishments and his commitment to live throughout as "a disciple of Jesus Christ." The institution and community of LSTC are clearly "that much better for Ralph's ministry."

**Mark Bangert** offers a fitting tribute to his colleague with commentary on a cantata *For a Dear Teacher* (dedicatee unknown) by Johann Sebastian Bach. The piece is extant in five versions, the result of a not uncommon redactional process called parody, by which Bach, after constructing a new poem for a new occasion, devised music to go with it that was based on an existing model. Bangert points out that Bach often transposed nonliturgical compositions into liturgical ones (but not vice versa). In Bangert's view, the ease with which Bach went from "secular" to "sacred" music was due to his Lutheran under-

standing of vocation, a view that did not distinguish secular from sacred but held that “Life should be experienced as a whole, faith propelling every facet.” The article concludes with words of appreciation for Ralph Klein’s wonderful sense of humor. An addendum renders in German and English the words to Cantata 36c, *Soar Joyfully Upwards*.

**Esther Menn** weaves a profound series of reflections on the importance of an unnamed servant girl in 2 Kings 5. Although she appears in only three verses, her presence exemplifies major themes for the story of Naaman, and her words are the driving force for the plot. As a refugee in foreign territory, she expresses her faith in God’s healing, shows compassion for an enemy commander, sparks a crisis between peoples in conflict, causes the crossing of ethnic borders, and triggers a healing of leprosy and Naaman’s subsequent embrace of the God of Israel. Menn points out that few commentators have focused on children as characters in the biblical stories. She notes that many children play significant roles, such as solving problems, expressing theological insight, and serving as agents of change in political and cultural conflicts. She challenges us to attend carefully to child characters as examples of “the weak and insignificant” means through which God works wondrous things.

**Richard Perry** offers a tribute to Ralph Klein with reflections on what it means to be a teaching theologian of the twenty-first century. In the context of a racially mixed and religiously pluralistic society, a theologian today needs to be a *public* theologian who is at home in both sanctuary and world. The finite eucharistic elements that “bear the infinite” and the concept of the incarnation (both of which are rooted in the sanctuary) lead one to see the presence of God in the concrete experience of people and cultures in everyday life. Perry cautions theologians against allowing the isolation of academic life and the pressures of publishing to prevent them from knowing firsthand the pain and struggles of poor people, listening to their stories, and walking with them in the streets of their neighborhoods. Only as we theologians walk with those who are strangers to us, learn from them, and genuinely feel at home with them will we grasp the magnitude of God’s grace. Perry affirms that Ralph Klein has been such a faithful public theologian.

**David Rhoads** claims that each of the writings in the New Testament reflects a distinctly different worldview—portrayal of God, view of the human condition, the understanding of Jesus, ethical standards, and image of true community. He briefly profiles seven New Testament worldviews: the empowerment to act in the face of fear (Mark); the exposure of hypocrisy and fostering of integrity (Matthew); the announcement of a new social order based on mercy for the least and the lost (Luke); the evocation of eternal life in the present experience of the believer (John); the freedom that results from justifi-

cation by grace rather than from human traits or effort (Galatians); the wisdom of seeking unlimited grace from above as liberation from the struggle for limited earthly resources (James); and the call to come out of the evil Roman Empire based on lies and oppression so as to live for the realm of God based on truth and justice (Revelation). Honoring this diversity, struggling with it, learning from it, and seeing our diversity mirrored in it will benefit church and world today.

**Barbara Rossing** opens her essay with a list of threats about to come about upon Earth as a result of global warming and an account of several disasters that have already taken place due to the melting of ice. Scientists give us about ten years to make dramatic changes in our use of carbon fuels or face irrevocable damages. Rossing details the anti-creation viewpoint of 2 Peter—that heaven and earth are destined for complete destruction by fire, and believers should “hasten” this day of God’s retribution. She notes that this is the only text that prophesies destruction of creation; the text is primarily meant to induce repentance; and the promised new heaven and earth are merely “a reward for the righteous after the wicked have been destroyed.” By contrast, Revelation honors creation itself and envisions an imminent end to the Roman imperial order when God will “destroy the destroyers of the earth” (11:18). Revelation calls for urgent withdrawal from the empire and an allegiance to the counterimperial city under God’s lordship. So, too, this generation should withdraw from our destructive ways in the face of a possible end to life as we know it due to global warming—before it is too late.

**Mark Swanson** brings to light a story in Arabic about a ninth-century Christian martyr, preserved in a manuscript from the St. Catherine Monastery at Mount Sinai. Swanson introduces the text and then offers a full English translation of it—a powerful account of an Arab who grew up Christian, then for thirteen years joined Muslims in a war against the Byzantines, repented and returned to Christianity to become a monk and eventually the superior at St. Catherine’s. He was martyred by Muslims as an apostate from Islam when he was recognized for his former life as a Muslim warrior. Swanson argues that the story served to encourage Christians to remain faithful even in a time when many were converting to Islam. The story also counters a common practice of voluntary martyrdom when, in the middle of the story, God thwarts Qays’s efforts to bring martyrdom upon himself. Swanson points out that his own teaching of this story over many years has led to rich conversations about the relationships between Christians and Muslims, then and now.

*David Rhoads, Guest Editor*

# Peggy Blomenberg— With Deep Appreciation

---

Ralph W. Klein

For the last twenty years Peggy Blomenberg has served as Assistant Editor for *Currents*. That title does not begin to express what she has meant to our faithful readers and to me.

Her primary responsibilities have involved copy editing and arranging the essays, book reviews, and Preaching Helps on the page so that the printers can use these electronic files to print up each issue in an attractive and timely fashion. She has also correlated meetings of our editorial board, helped with subscription campaigns, and acquired the art work that enhances the appearance of *Currents*.

During her tenure the digital revolution has taken place for which she was more

than ready. Back when she started working for *Currents*, most articles had to be re-typed for publication, but now everything comes to us in a word processing file. Still these materials have to be conformed to our style for capitalization and footnote format, wedged into our two-column format, and double checked by the authors for emendations we have made. Peggy has handled all of that with ease and as a self-starter. I can only describe what she has meant to you readers; her service to me has been truly remarkable. What a gift!

But now Peggy is marrying and leaving Chicago. We wish her God's richest blessings in this new phase of her life. How we will miss her!



# Ralph W. Klein: Superstar

---

James Kenneth Echols

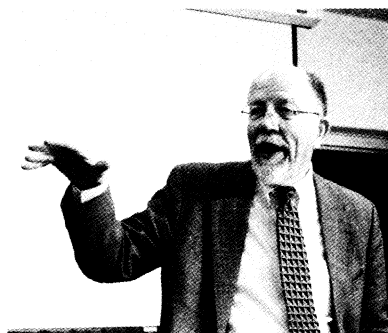
*President*

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

On Wednesday evening, May 14, 2008, LSTC's faculty gathered for its annual end-of-the-year banquet. Traditionally, it is the event at which anniversaries are recognized, leave-takings acknowledged with appreciation for service rendered, and retirements celebrated with thanksgiving for lives dedicated to the ministry of theological education.

This year's banquet included the rich opportunity to thank Ralph W. Klein, Christ Seminary–Seminox Professor of Old Testament, for his numerous contributions over twenty-five years at LSTC and forty years of teaching.

Surrounded by his wife, Marilyn, two daughters and their spouses, and five grandsons, Ralph's remarks delivered toward the end of the evening were both elegant and eloquent. And he concluded his very moving comments by simply invoking the words of Simeon, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace" (Luke 2:29).



As Ralph departs in peace to retirement from full-time service, the term that comes to mind that characterizes his extraordinary ministry is “superstar.” In the sports world here in Chicago, the term superstar is equated with basketball great Michael Jordan. In athletic jargon, Jordan could do it all. He could score and rebound, play excellent defense and pass the ball with precision, encourage his teammates, and exercise effective leadership. By all accounts, he made everyone around him a better basketball player, and together the Chicago Bulls won a number of NBA championships.

In theological education, Ralph has been a superstar, doing it all in the various arenas of service. The classroom has been a labor of love as Ralph has taught and interpreted the Old Testament to students preparing for rostered or teaching ministries in the United States and around the world. Students express profound gratitude for his instruction. The excellence of his teaching has been grounded in steadfast scholarship that has yielded an impressive list of publications and kept him current with developments in his field of expertise.

The excellence of his teaching has been wonderfully enhanced by his embrace of educational technology as evidenced by his incredible Web site, use of other technology teaching methods, and the development of one of the seminary’s first online courses. LSTC’s faculty has looked to Ralph as its Academic Technology Leader, and he has generously shared his expertise. Ralph has done it all in the classroom!

In addition to the classroom teaching and study scholarship, Ralph has been an institutional leader, sharing his considerable competence, insight, and wisdom with LSTC. When I arrived at the seminary in 1997, Ralph was serving as Academic Dean, and he did everything possible to welcome

and support me. I remain deeply grateful for his partnership. In the previous issue of *Currents*, current Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs Kathleen D. Billman paid tribute to him for his support of her at the beginning of and throughout her tenure in office, and this witnesses to the kind of person Ralph is. Since completing his own term in 1999, he has gone on to chair the successful 2007 Association of Theological Schools’ Ten-Year Reaccreditation Visit, chair the Faculty Executive Committee, and serve as a member of the current Strategic Planning Leadership Team. Through these and other assignments, Ralph has consistently offered his time and talent to LSTC in its institutional life, and the seminary is substantially stronger because of his dedication. Ralph has done it all in key seminary leadership positions!

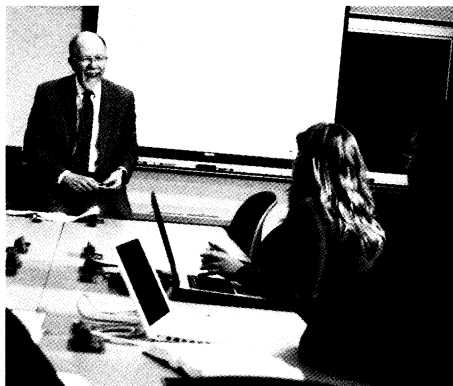
Programmatically, LSTC owes Ralph a deep debt of gratitude for his work with a traditional commitment and recent initiative. For many years, Ralph has served as Editor of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, the publication of LSTC, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, and Wartburg Theological Seminary. Through the journal, subscribers have been kept abreast of the church’s best scholarship and thinking. Ralph’s work with the publication reflects his love of the gospel and of the church and his desire to equip lay and rostered leaders for the faithful and effective proclamation of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century. Recently, Ralph has devoted himself to advocating for, cataloguing, and heralding the Gruber Rare Book Collection at LSTC, which includes a number of Luther materials and biblical manuscripts. In characteristic fashion, his passion for this jewel led Ralph to fully involve himself in the effort to appropriately preserve and display this collection, and he has agreed to spearhead this effort

for the next three years. Ralph has done it all in these important initiatives!

In the wider academic, church, and professional world, Ralph has been widely recognized and celebrated for his involvement and gifts. He has been a regular attendee and presenter at the Society of Biblical Literature that annually brings together North American and other biblical scholars. In the academy, he is very well known and highly respected for his knowledge and scholarship. His reputation has brought distinction, students, and support to this seminary. As a theologian of the church, Ralph has spoken at numerous gatherings of lay and rostered leaders and been received as an important pastoral and prophetic voice. Professionally, Ralph has served on the Association of Theological Schools Commission on Accrediting as well as on a number of ATS reaccrediting teams whose mission is to insure the quality of theological education in North American and Canadian theological schools. In all of these endeavors he has brought his experience and expertise to bear in ways that have strengthened the ministry of theological education. Again, Ralph has done it all!

Classroom teacher and scholar . . . institutional leader . . . editor and collection director . . . significant figure in the academy, church, and ATS. Ralph Klein's ministry has demonstrated, with a sense of profound humility rather than any sense of triumph, that he is a superstar in his service to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I give thanks to God for his life, calling, and witness.

But there is one more thing to which I must testify, and it is this. Ralph Klein is a disciple of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in his loving interaction with his family. I have seen it in his carefully crafted and deeply meaningful sermons in chapel. And I have seen it in his ministry to me and other



members of the seminary community. Indeed, one faculty member shed tears at the faculty banquet when he recalled the care of Ralph in a challenging moment of life.

Ralph W. Klein has been a superstar in the life of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and the institution is much better because of his ministry.

At the faculty banquet, Ralph concluded his remarks by invoking the words of Simeon. By way of response, I invoke the words of the concluding prayer of the Service of Farewell and Godspeed:

*Eternal God, we thank you for Ralph W. Klein and for our life together in this seminary. As he has been a blessing to us, so now send him forth to be a blessing to others; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

# Bach and His Secular Cantatas: A Case Study

---

Mark P. Bangert

*John H. Tietjen Professor of Pastoral Ministry:  
Worship and Church Music, Emeritus*

*For a Dear Teacher*  
“Wearing the silver decoration of age”  
(Cantata 36c. 4)

At the age of seventeen Johann Sebastian Bach composed two keyboard pieces as tributes to people who were beloved by him in his comparatively young life. With one, the *Capriccio on the Departure of the Beloved Brother*, Bach likely intended to recognize a schoolmate by the name of Georg Erdmann, and with the other, *Capriccio in Honor of Johann Christoph Bach*, he acknowledged his elder brother who both fostered Sebastian in Ohrdruf and was his first keyboard teacher.<sup>1</sup>

These two pieces are some of the first, if not the first, musical gestures that come from the composer’s pen. They are certainly not the last. Seventeen years before his death in 1733 Bach sent a letter of fealty with music for a newly written *Missa* (Kyrie and Gloria) to Elector Friedrich August II in Dresden, the successor of August I after the latter’s death a few months earlier. In the letter Bach wrote:

To Your Royal Highness I submit in deepest devotion the present slight labor of that knowledge which I have achieved in *musique*, with the most wholly submissive prayer that Your Highness will look upon it with Most Gracious Eyes, according to Your Highness’s World-Famous

Clemency and not according to the poor composition; . . . grant me the favor of conferring upon me a title of Your Highness’s Court Capella.<sup>2</sup>

The title didn’t arrive until three years later, and the *Missa*, composed to honor the Elector (and to prompt a longed-for title), turned out to be the core of the famous b-minor Mass that Bach assembled during the last few years of his life.

Learning how and when to attach the names of specific individuals to compositions seems to have been a part of the curriculum at the time for would-be composers. Dedications and the bestowal of musical tokens were common to Bach’s generation even as they were expected from court composers of preceding generations. A newly minted composition was the perfect token of affection for one’s patron, even as it might serve to observe a birthday, a wedding, a funeral, the election of new officials, the dedication of an organ, the

---

1. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach the Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 74–75, explains the relationship of these two pieces and argues for Georg Erdmann and not Sebastian’s brother Jacob as the recipient of the first *Capriccio*.

2. George B. Stauffer, *Bach: The Mass in B Minor* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 33–34.

consecration of a church, or, as in the case of Bach, the visit of the Elector to Leipzig. It is clear from Bach's own attempt that not all dedications derived from completely altruistic motives. In any event, the music as audible sign worked well in the culture to confer a sense of importance upon an individual or event.

Nor did the practice go out of style. Brahms gestured appreciation with his Academic Overture and Beethoven composed the three "Rasumovsky Quartets" in order to honor Count Rasumovsky, the Russian Ambassador to Vienna. To bring this closer to home, the 1989 hymn "So Much to Sing About," with text by Jaroslav Pelikan and tune by Paul Weber, honored Paul Manz on his 70th birthday, and the Te Deum of Daniel Kallman honored former LSTC president William Leshner.

Fragments, references, and actual scores indicate that Bach wrote at least fifty cantatalike pieces during his lifetime that utilize nonliturgical texts, about a fifth of his total extant cantata output. They fall into various categories: (1) Festival Music for courts, (2) Festival Music for the court at Cöthen, (3) Italian solo cantatas, (4) Festival Music for the University of Leipzig and other school celebrations, (5) Wedding Music, (6) Works for common occasions, (7) Music of Homage, and (8) Festival Music for the Elector of Saxony.<sup>3</sup>

In most cases the individual or event being feted is either indicated or easily inferred. For a few of these works the identity of the person is elusive. One such piece is Cantata 36c (the *c* is explained below), *Schwingt freudig euch empor*, written in 1725 for the birthday of a "dear teacher" presumably from the University or another school in Leipzig. There have been several attempts to identify this dear teacher, but the person honored remains unknown at this point. In the fourth move-

ment of the cantata<sup>4</sup> the librettist—probably Christian Friedrich Henrici, also known as Picander—writes that the honoree is worthy to wear the "silver decoration," presumably the gray hair that adorns his age.

Today's dear teachers or dear professors find various ways to let their hair signal the honor that comes with experience. Nevertheless, this nameless musical homage of Bach presents an opportunity to connect the cantata with my dear colleague Ralph Klein (without trying to time-machine him back to the eighteenth century!), both imagining an actual audible tribute while at the same time providing a chance here to contextualize the work and to address questions about Bach and his involvement with what many have called secular music.

### Cantata 36—A work in progress

Cantata 36 is known in five different incarnations, an indication perhaps that Bach was very fond of this piece. The first of these (36c) consists of nine movements: three arias, each with its own preceding recitative, framed by two choruses, the last itself introduced with a brief recitative. In 1726 Bach had his librettist Picander redo the text slightly (36a, *Steigt freudig in die Luft*) in order to use the work for the birthday of Princess Charlotte Frederike Wilhelmine of Anhalt-Cöthen. Then, about ten years later in 1735, the text was reworked again (36b, *Die Freude reget sich*) for the

3. Christoph Wolff, "Bachs Weltliche Kantaten: Repertoire und Kontext," in *Johann Sebastian Bachs weltliche Kantaten*, vol. 2 of *Die Welt der Bach Kantaten*, ed. Christoph Wolff and Ton Koopman (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1997), 19–27.

4. The full text and translation follows, on pp. 336–37.

birthday of University professor Johann Florens Rivinus.

Sometime between 1726 and 1730 Bach used some of the musical material from these various versions in order to create a five-movement Advent cantata (36-Kirnberger). The title of this liturgical work remained the same as 36c, the unknown librettist easily drawing on the birthday themes to shape a text anticipating the birth of Christ. For this new Advent cantata the librettist chose from the 1725 version the first chorus (music is identical) and all three arias (without their accompanying recitatives) and added a closing chorale. Of course, except for the chorale the text was new, though clearly inspired by the older text. Still Bach was not done with the cantata. In 1731 he expanded it into a two-part work (36) by adding two more chorale stanzas, one of which is quite elaborate, and involving the use of an additional oboe d'amour.

It is worth noting that for each of these incarnations the composer kept the music of the first chorus almost intact. He did the same for two of the three arias, although some textual revisions occasioned by the new honoree necessitated here and there some related changes in musical phrasing. The second aria underwent more large-scale remodeling for the liturgical version of the work. Assuming that larger revisions reflect some deliberation, we will want to probe Bach's attention to this second aria.

### Perceptions of parody in Cantata 36 and beyond

Tracing the evolution of the 1731 version of Cantata 36 brings one to Bach's use of a composing technique called parody. In the broad musical spectrum parody refers to three different practices. First, the term denotes the incorporation of a part of or an entire existing work (often a secular motet,

madrigal, or chanson) into a new composition. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries this was a favorite way to construct a mass setting, requiring of the composer only the task of retexting older music. Those who employed this method had to be prepared for ecclesiastical criticism, especially if the incorporated piece was well known and distracting via its remembered original text.

Second, parody refers to the long-standing craft of adopting a musical style or piece for purposes of humor or satire. Rebecca Wagner Oettinger released an astonishing collection of parodied songs used as propaganda during the German Reformation. She cites the very popular *Judaslied*, itself based on a fourteenth-century Latin hymn used on Good Friday and then expanded to include stanzas addressed to Mary as well as Judas. Later still during the Reformation an anonymous author, using the *Judaslied* (*O, du armer Judas*) as model, constructed a twenty-four-stanza diatribe against Duke Moritz of Saxony titled *O du armer Moritz*.<sup>5</sup> More than four hundred years later parody of this kind inspired the popular 1950s London music concerts called the Hoffnung Festivals, during which the likes of virtuoso Dennis Brain, for instance, would play the Mozart Horn Concerto on a piece of garden hose. Bach too employed this version of parody when he poked fun at the social status of various characters in his Peasant Cantata through the use of culture-bound musical styles.

Finally, parody designates the common eighteenth-century practice of constructing a new poem based on an existing model. Should that older poem be set to music, changes to the music made neces-

5. Rebecca Wagner Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda in the German Reformation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 112–14.

sary by the new text are also considered to be parody. It is this final version of parody that fits the processes accompanying the evolution of Cantata 36.

Our birthday piece for a “dear professor” turns out to be one among many in this respect. Martin Geck has recently suggested that at least a quarter of all the vocal works of Bach are in one way or another a result of the parody process.<sup>6</sup> That suggests that any admirer of Bach needs to come to terms with the fact that beloved pieces such as the Easter Oratorio or the Christmas Oratorio contain large parodied sections. For the latter work it has been suggested that the three “secular” cantatas from which Bach used music were in fact conceived with the parody process in mind.

One example from Cantata 36 can serve to illustrate how the process works. In the second aria of 36c, the bass soloist sings:

*Der Tag, der dich vordem gebar,*  
The day which gave birth to you in days past  
*Stellt sich vor uns so heilsam dar*  
Stands for us as salutary  
*Als jener, da der Schöpfer spricht:*  
As the one on which the creator said:  
*Es werde Licht!*  
Let there be light!

In the parody, Cantata 36, the bass sings:

*Willkommen, werter Schatz!*  
Welcome, worthy treasure!  
*Die Lieb und Glaube machet Platz*  
Love and faith make room  
*Vor dich in meinem Herzen rein,*  
For you in my pure heart.  
*Zieh bei mir ein!*  
Move in with me!

The syllabic scheme for 36c is 8 8 8 4, and that for 36 is 6 8 8 4. With the schematic alteration one might think the parody will create some major difficulties for the com-

poser should he want to use the same music. Bach, demonstrating his talent, deftly connects notes of the melodic line in such a way that text and music for the parody seem to fit perfectly together. Further examination of the model and its parody reveals that the newer version has ten more measures than 36c. The extra measures occur in two places, both housing the second and third lines of text. A closer look at the extra measures reveals that he has rewritten the solo line to exclude a high F# (perhaps accommodating a different soloist) and, more significantly, that he has redesigned the figured bass (the compositional foundation) while adorning it with new material in all the parts. The revisions add additional interest compared with the model. In light of this cantata’s other arias that he reused with very little alteration, this particular movement stands out as favored.

To see Bach at work revising his own material is instructive by itself, but even more interesting is to ask the question: What prompted the new material?

Any answer is conjecture, but surely the new text is, in comparison, far more significant to its home, the total libretto, than the aria of 36c is to its own home. Again and again in the Christmas works of Bach (in the first part of the Christmas Oratorio and in Cantata 91, for instance) the plea for the baby Jesus to reside in the believer’s heart is the central message for the listener. In order for Bach to carry that theme into Cantata 36 he may have been moved to add a few measures for purposes of emphasis.

When Bach employed the parody technique he apparently acted out of deliberated principles. In the 1950s, scholars Georg

6. Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach Life and Work*, trans. John Hargraves (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2006), 431.

von Dadelsen and Alfred Dürr independently determined that the traditional chronology of the entire Bach output required revision. One of the ripples from this academic splash clarified the extent of the parody process for Bach and the directions it took. Not only

---

**B**ach felt free  
to borrow  
liberally from nonliturgical works for other  
nonliturgical works or  
for liturgical works.

---

did he retext nonliturgical music with poetry meant for churchly use, as was the case with Cantata 36, but he also found ways to use new “sacred” text for pieces that were from the first conceived as liturgical works. In the b-minor Mass, for instance, Bach uses the same music for the Gloria text *Gratias agimus tibi* and the *Dona nobis pacem* of the Agnus Dei.

Occurrences of parody in his works reveal some patterns. One of these is noteworthy: Bach felt free to borrow liberally from nonliturgical works for other nonliturgical works or for liturgical works, but there is no extant example of the opposite direction, that is, the use of liturgical music for nonliturgical music. Unlike his contemporary George Frederick Handel, who borrowed from himself regularly and who had no apparent problem with moving music in any direction, Bach seems to have had an unspoken hesitancy to construct a “secular” piece from his own liturgical output.

In his very recent biography of Bach, Peter Williams ventures several reasons for Bach’s behavior in this respect.<sup>7</sup> Strongest among them are Bach’s nod to existing convention (but then what about Handel?), a sense on Bach’s part that some things simply were not appropriate, and recognition of the difference between one-time usage and the element of repetition endemic to the liturgical works. Williams seems to suggest that in the latter case parody and model would always be in people’s memory generating a certain confusion with respect to both.

### **Bach and the secular**

Parody process is a compositional issue; when questions are asked about motivations behind the process, the issue migrates to a theoretical level that becomes entangled with assumptions about the composer’s psyche and sense of vocation, often mixed together with biographical valuations projected from other times and circumstances. Answers to questions concerning Bach’s motivations behind his parody practice hover about two poles. The fields of each pole are energized by a late–nineteenth-century tendency toward distinguishing portions of his repertoire. His influential biographer Phillip Spitta was one of the first to spell out these inclinations.<sup>8</sup> In his widely read work he identified the nonliturgical cantatas as *weltlich* (worldly or secular) while the remaining cantatas he

---

7. Peter Williams, *J. S. Bach A Life in Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 370.

8. Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (New York: Dover, 1951; reprint of the 1880 edition, 3 vols. in 2), 2:621–45. Wolff, “Bachs Weltliche,” 13, contextualizes the importance of Spitta’s observation.



considered to be *geistlich* (sacred).<sup>9</sup> As we will see, the bifurcation that such a term introduces only serves to complicate the parody issue. But the appellations persist.

Those who are attracted to one or the other of the poles hold on to basic assumptions. To one side are those who hold Bach in high esteem, elevating him to a kind of patron saint for church musicians, attributing to him a near priestlike gift for dispensing sacred music at its best, romanticizing his life by dwelling on the anecdotes that showed genius in the face of great odds (such as copying music by moonlight) and by exaggerating his European superiority. From this exuberance came the notion of Bach as the Fifth Evangelist. Not as influential as Spitta but nevertheless one who felt himself pulled by Bach's churchly output was Wilhelm Rust, one of the editors of the first critical edition of Bach's works. Struggling midcentury with the two repertoires of cantatas, he solved the issue for himself by suggesting that Bach must have composed the nonliturgical cantatas merely as a step toward their finished sacred state. Spitta, who was more reasoned about the composer, nevertheless concluded similarly that the secular cantatas simply could not have been very successful since Bach's church work was "his own special province [and] pervaded all he undertook."<sup>10</sup> Feeling the necessity to choose between the sacred and the secular, both authors, typical of a powerful trend, sided with the churchly.

The other pole draws a more skeptical gathering that focuses on Bach's sense of vocation, or, rather, his seemingly conflicted sense of vocation. In 1963 Friedrich Blume (now famously) proposed that the fuss over Bach's faith, piety, and commitment to the church needed to be tempered by a more realistic understanding of his dedication to music in general, his apparent vocational crisis around 1730, and his per-

sistent desire for acknowledgment and rank.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently Blume's specific conclusions were challenged, though recently there has been a new call for a more balanced view of Bach's commitments. In a study of politics in Bach's Leipzig, Ulrich Siegele has alerted us to Bach's official titles for his Leipzig position, suggesting that Bach was caught between factions among the city's elders. One group viewed him as more of a city *Kapellmeister*, or general head of all music in the city.<sup>12</sup> The other understood his vocation to be that of the *Kantor*, or church musician. Siegele cautions that Bach acted as if he desired to be the *Kapellmeister*. In the same vein, Martin Geck thinks Bach moved from a narrow Christian outlook toward a more humanistic posture during the last decades of his life.<sup>13</sup>

With that, the bystander who desires fairness is invited into a personality pictured as one who moves from one phase of life to another, and then to another, now invested in the sacred and then in the secular. Just as with the demigod makers, sacred/secular bifurcation results in a kind of schizophrenia that is not only uncomfortable but possibly oblivious to other factors.

---

9. The pervasiveness of Spitta's construct is apparent in the title *Johann Sebastian Bachs weltliche Kantaten*; see note 3 above. Williams, 369, thinks that better terms need to be found.

10. Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 623.

11. Friedrich Blume, "Outlines of a New Picture of Bach," *Music and Letters* 44 (1963): 214–27.

12. Ulrich Siegele, "Bach and the domestic politics of Electoral Saxony," *The Cambridge Companion to BACH*, ed. John Butt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22.

13. Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 418.

## Bach, the Lutheran

While at St. Michael's school in Lüneburg Bach the mid- to late teen learned his Lutheran systematic theology from the *Compendium Locorum* of Leonhard Hütter. It was a popular book, used also in Leipzig while he was at St. Thomas. Article XXVII of this hefty catechism deals with civil authority and civil affairs. The fourth question in the section asks: "The Gospel, then, does not abolish civil constitutions?" Hütter the author responds:

No: for the Gospel treats of the kingdom of Christ, which is spiritual, and begets faith, piety, love, and patience in our hearts. . . . As long as this life lasts, it nevertheless permits us to make use of the laws, the order, and the classes of society, which exist in the world, according to every one's calling, just as it permits us to use medicine, to build and plant, to use air, water, etc.<sup>14</sup>

Presumably this embracing view of life shaped Bach's very being. At the heart of Lutheran teaching lies the sanctity of every person's vocation, a lesson Luther never tired of providing: "A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops."<sup>15</sup> Within the Lutheran scheme of things one need not separate out the "sacred" from the "secular." Life should be experienced as a whole, faith propelling every facet.

Just as Bach moved freely between the *stile antico* (the earlier Renaissance style of polyphony) and the *stile moderno* (the Italian and French Baroque compositional style), showing his prowess in both, so he likely found no disparity between what was called by subsequent generations the sacred and secular. Instead his formation as a Lutheran asked of him to encircle every aspect of life as gift of God.

It is time, then, to jettison the notions of sacred and secular, because they come

laden with time-bound baggage and emphasize the necessity of making choices between what is churchly and what is not. Reading such categories back into the life of Bach blur our understanding of him. More helpful would it be to imagine him joyfully embracing all kinds of music, trying his hand at every idiom available, and enjoying good fun along with the rest of the citizens gathered at the local coffee house for outdoor musical experiences. Chances are he understood also that to be a part of his vocation along with writing music for the liturgy.

In 1754, four years after Bach's death, Lorenz Christoph Mizler published an obituary of the composer, known also as the *Nekrolog*, in which he quoted liberally from information provided by Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach, Sebastian's most famous son. Tabulating his father's works, Emmanuel sorted the compositions into two categories: items that had been published and items not published. In the latter division there are sixteen subcategories, the first of which is *Fünf Jahrgänge von Kirchenstücken, auf alle Sonn- und Festtage* (Five yearly cycles of church pieces for every Sunday and Feast Day); the second is *Viele Oratorien, Messen, Magnificat, einzelne Sanctus, Dramata, Serenaden, Geburts-Nammenstags, und Trauermusiken, Brautmessen, auch einigen komische*

14. Leonard Hütter, "Compend of Lutheran Theology," trans. H. E. Jacobs and G. F. Spieker, in *Compendium Locorum Theologicorum ex Scripturis sacris et Libro Concordiae*, ed. Johann Anselm Steiger (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2006), 2:1086.

15. Martin Luther, "To The Christian Nobility of the German Nation," in *The Christian in Society*, ed. James Akinson, *Luther's Works* 44, American Edition, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966): 130.

*Singstücke* (Many oratorios, masses, a Magnificat, a single Sanctus, dramas, serenades, birthday and name-day [pieces], and music for mourning, weddings, and a comic piece for singing).<sup>16</sup>

Worth notice is Emmanuel's way of thinking about these diverse works. On the one hand he lumps together the five cycles of cantatas, probably recognizing a corpus of works that can be repeated on a regular basis. By contrast, a second subcategory includes all kinds of pieces (a Sanctus together with a comic piece for singing, for example) the unique character of which seems to be their occasional usage.

Would not this kind of differentiation be a better way to think about the total repertoire? Just as the church has a calendar that is designed to be repeated, just as it also has a series of occasions, lesser festivals, and commemorations that are available for intermittent use, so it will benefit us, perhaps instruct us, when we think of Bach as provider of music for regulated use and music for occasions. There is nothing sacred or secular about any of it. Instead the musical legacy of Bach is the product of a person who understood that all his music

making was a singular vocation, even burdened as it was with the political dynamics of leading and managing musical organizations.

The extended happy birthday for a dear teacher, complete with its lightheartedness and levity, provided Bach and others an opportunity to hold up a friend and colleague as a gift from God. That was possible apart from the formality of liturgy, but certainly no less "holy."

Dear Professor Klein has elicited the laughter of his colleagues and students for many years. Humor, laughter, and levity are the play dough of his most serious and insightful building up of the Body of Christ. His vocation is singular. He wears the silver decoration of age with honor and acclaim. He is Bachian to the core.

---

16. Lorenz Christoph Mizler, "Denkmal dreyer verstorbenen Mitglieder der Societät der musikalischen Wissenschaften," *Musikalische Bibliothek* (Leipzig: Mizlerischen Bücher=Verlag, 1754), facsimile edition by Christoph Trautman as *Der Nekrolog auf Johann Sebastian Bach* (Leipzig: Neuen Bachgesellschaft, 1965), 168.

**Kantate 36c**

**Schwingt freudig euch empor**

1.  
Schwingt freudig euch empor und drängt  
bis an die Sternen.

Ihr Wünsche, bis euch Gott vor seinem  
Throne sieht!

Doch, haltet ein! Ein Herz darf sich nicht  
weit entfernen,

Der Dankbarkeit und Pflicht zu seinem  
Lehrer zieht.

2. Recitativo

Ein Herz, in zärtlichem Empfinden,  
So ihm viel tausend Lust erweckt,  
Kann sich fast nicht im sein Vergnügen  
finden,

Da ihm die Hoffnung immer mehr entdeckt.

Es steigt wie ein helles Licht  
Der Andacht Glut im Gottes Heiligtum;

Wiewohl, der teure Lehrerruhm  
Ist sein Polar, dahin, als ein Magnet,  
Sein Wünschen, sein Verlangen geht.

3. Aria

Die Liebe führt mit sanften Schritten  
Ein Herz, das seinem Lehrer liebt.

Wo andre auszuschweifen pflegen  
Wird dies behutsam sich bewegen,  
Weil ihm die Ehrfurcht Grenzen gibt.

4. Recitativo

Du bist es ja, o hochverdienter Mann,  
Der in unausgesetzten Lehren  
Mit höchsten Ehren  
Den Silberschmuck des Alters tragen kann.

Dank, Ehrerbietung, Ruhm  
Kömmt alles hier zusammen;  
Und weil du unsre Brust  
Als Licht und Führer leiten muß,  
Wirst du dies freudige Bezeigen nicht  
verdammen.

5. Aria

Der Tag, der dich vordem gebar,  
Stellt sich vor uns so heilsam dar  
Als jener, da der Schöpfer spricht:  
Es werde Licht!

**Cantata 36c**

**Soar Joyfully Upwards**

1.  
Soar joyfully upwards and press on  
to the stars,  
You desires, till God sees you before  
the throne.  
Yet, cease! A heart need not wander far  
To extend gratitude and duty to its professor.

2. Recitative

A heart, with sweet sentiment  
So awakens for itself desires a thousand-fold;  
It can barely find itself amidst its delight,  
Since hope detects always more for it.  
The glow of devotion, as a bright light  
Rises to God's sanctuary;  
Though the fame of a dear professor  
Is his pole, to which, as to a magnet  
His wishes and desires are attracted.

3. Aria

Love leads with gentle steps  
A heart that loves its professor.  
Where others cultivate a dissolute life  
He will move about cautiously,  
Because respect provides boundaries for him.

4. Recitative

You are indeed the one, highly deserving  
person  
Who by undistracted teaching  
With highest honors  
Can wear the silver decoration of age.  
Praise, veneration, fame  
All come together here;  
And because you our hearts and spirits  
Must lead as light and leader,  
You will not refuse this joyful expression.

5. Aria

The day that gave birth to you in days past  
Stands as beneficial for us  
As the day on which the Creator said:  
Let there be light!

## 6. Recitativo

Nur diese Einzge sorgen wir:  
Dies Opfer sei zu unvollkommen;  
Doch, wird es nur von dir,  
O teurer Lehrer, gütig angenommen,  
So steigt der sonst so schlechte Wert  
So hoch, als unser treuer Sinn begehrt.

## 7. Aria

Auch mit gedämpften, schwachen Stimmen  
Verkündigt man der Lehrer Preis.  
Es schallet kräftig an der Brust.  
Ob man gleich die empfundene Lust  
Nicht völlig auszudrücken weiß.

## 8. Recitativo

Bei solchen freudenvollen Stunden  
Wird unsers Wünsches Ziel gefunden.  
Der sonst auf nichts  
Als auf dein Leben geht.

## 9. Chorus/Recitativo

Wie die Jahre sich verneuen  
So verneue sich dein Ruhm!

*Tenor*

Jedoch, was wünschen wir,  
Da dieses von sich selbst geschieht,  
Und da man deinen Preis,  
Dem unser Helikon am besten weiß,  
Auch außer dessen Grenzen sieht.  
Dein verdienst recht auszulegen,  
Fordert mehr, als wir vermögen.

*Baß*

Drum schweigen wir  
Und zeigen dadurch dir,  
Daß unser Dank zwar tritt dem Munde nicht,  
Doch desto mehr mit unsern Herzen spricht.  
Deines Lebens Heiligtum  
Kann vollkommen uns erfreuen.

*Sopran*

So öffnet sich der Mund zum Danken  
Denn jedes Glied nimmt an der Freude teil;  
Das Auge dringt aus den gewohnten  
Schranken  
Und sieht dein künft'ig Glück und Heil.  
Wie die Jahre sich verneuen,  
So verneue sich dein Ruhm!

## 6. Recitative

Only this one thing we worry about:  
That this offering be too imperfect:  
Yet might it only,  
Dear professor, be kindly received by you.  
So it ascends—that of so inferior worth—  
So high, as our earnest intentions desire.

## 7. Aria

Also with muted and weak voices  
One can proclaim praise for the professor.  
It echoes mightily in one's heart,  
Even though one knows not how to  
Fully express the experienced pleasure.

## 8. Recitative

In such joy-filled hours  
Our desired goal is reached  
Which consists of nothing less  
Than (celebrating) your life.

## 9. Chorus/Recitative

As the years renew themselves  
So may your fame be renewed!

*Tenor*

Yet, what do we desire?  
Since this happens all by itself,  
And since one sees your praise—  
Which our Helicon\* knows best—  
Also beyond these walls.  
Your merit rightly reckoned  
Exacts more than we can offer.

*Bass*

Therefore we grow silent,  
And with thanks we sign for you  
That our gratitude comes not from our mouths  
But much more from our hearts.  
The sanctuary of your life  
Can perfectly gladden us.

*Soprano*

So our mouths open for thanksgiving  
For every member takes part in the joy;  
The eye penetrates beyond its usual limits  
And seeks your future fortune and happiness.  
As the years renew themselves  
So may your fame be renewed!

\*A mountain of Boeotia, home of the Muses,  
here meant to refer to Leipzig.

# A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5:1–19)<sup>1</sup>

---

Esther M. Menn

*Professor of Old Testament and Director of Advanced Studies  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Children figure prominently as characters in a surprising number of biblical narratives. Some of these child characters have names, are well known, and play central roles. The boy David defeats Goliath. Joseph has a splendid embroidered coat. Rebekah dares to leave her family. Samuel is called to be a prophet. Other child characters are named but play seemingly minor roles in the story. Moses' sister Miriam finds the nursemaid for her brother. Jacob's youngest son Benjamin never says a word. Others are not named at all and are dwarfed by adults who are named, and yet these children also play a role in the story. Jephthah's daughter consents to be sacrificed to fulfill her father's vow. The Shunammite's son returns to life through the prayerful healing of Elisha. A boy shares his meal when Jesus speaks to a hungry crowd.

Although the Bible includes many examples of child characters, they are rarely the focus of biblical interpretation. Minor characters are sometimes overlooked. Major characters might be treated, but their particular roles as children in events or stories are rarely examined in depth. The tales of the young David, for example, are well known but often regarded as a prelude to the "real" story of his actions as an adult

king. As a result, some of the child characters in the Bible are ignored in biblical scholarship and highlighted primarily in children's Bibles. Perhaps because they are small, child characters are easy to dismiss or to stereotype as simple, innocent, and insignificant. This oversight is dangerous, however, because it mimics a common tendency to discount children as less than fully human and not entirely worthy of respect as bearing the image of God.

The little Israelite girl who serves the wife of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army (2 Kings 5:1–19), is a minor character who would be very easy to overlook. Her role is so small that she has no name, and she never reappears as an adult later in the

---

1. This essay is dedicated to Ralph Klein, dear colleague and friend, on the occasion of his retirement from full-time service at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. It is adapted from Esther M. Menn, "Child Characters in Biblical Narratives: The Young David (1 Samuel 16–17) and the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5:1–19)," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge, Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, 324–52, copyright © 2008 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, all rights reserved.

narrative of Israel's history. Yet, this child plays a pivotal and inspirational role in the narrative. The biblical narrative depicts her suggesting a solution to a difficult problem, intervening when adults are threatened and ineffectual, offering theological insight into God's ways, and acting within the context of international conflict between cultures and national identities. These are complex and surprising contributions to the story by one so young and seemingly unimportant. She is far from unique, however, as there are many children in other biblical stories who play similar roles.

Examining just one of the many possible examples of child characters in biblical narratives helps us to uncover often neglected aspects of scripture. The lens of the child enables readers to see familiar stories and characters in fresh ways and to recognize the amazing range and depth of the Bible's youngest characters and their essential contributions. Children's agency, insight, and presence determine the course and outcome of many stories, whether they dominate the front stage of the narrative or appear briefly and remain for the most part behind the scenes. Their speech often articulates the central themes of the narrative and provides a theological witness otherwise absent in the story.

Children emerge as leaders, protagonists, and witnesses in the Bible perhaps not in spite of their youth but because of it. Close attention to child characters in the Bible can challenge some of our own contemporary conceptions about the vulnerabilities and strengths of children and about what it means to be a child.

### The little Israelite servant girl

The child character that we will get to know here lives during a time of war. She is the little Israelite girl who serves the wife of Naaman, commander of the army of Aram

(Syria) featured in the narrative of healing and conversion in 2 Kgs 5:1–19.<sup>2</sup> The nation of Aram was Israel's greatest enemy during the reign of the Omride kings in the ninth century B.C.E. According to the biblical story, none other than Israel's own God gave victory over the Israelites to the Arameans through the leadership of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1). Yet despite Naaman's greatness as a military strategist and mighty warrior,<sup>3</sup> he suffers from leprosy.<sup>4</sup> The little Israelite girl is able to identify to her mistress a source of healing for Naaman's dread skin disease: "She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy'" (5:3).<sup>5</sup>

Naaman reports the little girl's words to the king of Aram, and this king in turn sends Naaman to the Israelite king in Samaria with rich payments and a document demanding healing for the commander. When the king of Israel despairs because of his inability to comply with such an impossible request, which he takes as a provocation to further battle, the prophet Elisha comes forward to remedy the situation.<sup>6</sup> Elisha's simple cure of dipping seven times

2. See Cogan Mordechai and Hayim Tadmor, *The Anchor Bible, II Kings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 61–67; and Jean Kyoung Kim, "Reading and Retelling Naaman's Story (2 Kings 5)," *JSOT* 30 (2005): 49–61.

3. Like the warrior (גִּבּוֹרִים, 1 Sam 17:51) Goliath, Naaman is a mighty warrior (גִּבּוֹרֵי חַיִל, 2 Kgs 5:1).

4. Naaman's name means "pleasant," which accords with his success in life but contrasts with his leprous condition.

5. Biblical quotes will generally follow the NRSV, although I may translate particular words differently to stress a point.

6. Elisha's name means "My God Saves," which resonates with the "salvation" that the LORD gave to Aram through Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1).

into the Jordan river initially insults Naaman, but his healing is immediate once he complies. Naaman then acknowledges Israel's God as the only God "in all the earth" (5:15) and makes arrangements to bring back a cartload of earth from Israel upon which to offer his burnt offerings to the LORD, even from his home in Aram (5:17).

### Valuing things big and small

The nameless little Israelite girl appears in only three verses (5:2–4) of the story of Naaman's healing and conversion to the worship of the LORD, the God of Israel (5:1–19). In her minor role, she has only one brief appearance and one spoken line. Her small role matches her insignificance as a spoil of war and a house servant for the wife of the commander who defeated her people. Her marginality as a child captive in enemy territory represents the weakness of the northern kingdom of Israel, which was unable to protect her and no doubt many others like her in time of war. Yet, in her vulnerability as a captive in a foreign land, the little girl's words challenge the pretensions of the mighty and offer hope for healing and life.

This narrative presents a sustained and ironic contrast between what appears big and important and what appears small and insignificant that ultimately inverts their usual valuation. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, is introduced up front as a "big man" (אִישׁ גָּדוֹל, 5:1), whereas the child captive from Israel with no name is described as a "little girl" (נַעֲרָה קְטַנָּה, 5:2).<sup>7</sup> This initial contrast between size and gender accentuates the small female child's placement within overwhelming world events dominated by men, involving armies and kings, commanders and prophets. In the big world into which the conflict between Israel and Syria has

forced her as an enslaved captive of war, the child is introduced simply as "little," as if that is the one thing that matters, her smallness in the midst of everything mighty, powerful, and gross.

As the story progresses, we find other remarkable uses of the adjectives "big" and "little." When Naaman balks at the simple instructions that Elisha gives through a messenger, his servants note that if the prophet had given him a "big" task to do (דָּבָר גָּדוֹל, 5:13), he would have simply done it. A big demand from the prophet would have been in keeping with Naaman's important status as a big man (5:1). His servants' observation overcomes Naaman's resistance to washing in the waters of the Jordan, which initially seem much less to him than the waters of the Abana and the Pharpar rivers flowing through Damascus (5:12). After he dips in the Jordan, Naaman's flesh is restored, like the flesh of a "little boy" (נַעַר קָטָן, 5:14). Naaman becomes like the "little girl" at the beginning of the story in his pure flesh, and also ultimately in his recognition of the God of Israel who works for healing through the prophet in Samaria (5:15–19).

### The power of a wish

What is "little" in this narrative is certainly not to be dismissed. As the narrative spotlight turns to the little Israelite servant girl for the briefest moment, the display of everything grand and significant in the world of war suddenly comes to a halt. Although she is small and lacks any official power, the girl's few words are the first spoken in the narrative. All subsequent

7. For the Hebrew term נַעֲרָה, see Carolyn S. Leeb, *Away from the Father's House: The Social Location of na'ar and na'arah in Ancient Israel*, JSOTSup 301 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000).



action of the more important characters hinge on them, so they are worth repeating: “She said to her mistress, ‘If only my lord were with (לְפִנֵּי) the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy’” (5:3).

What kind of words does the little girl offer to Naaman’s wife? Her single line contains no lament or complaint, no whining or cursing, which we might expect from a diminutive captive of war forced to serve the enemy. Her words are also not a command, or report, or any other kind of speech that would have its place in times of war and in the high circles that manage war. Instead, the little girl’s words express a wish contrary to fact: “if only” (אִם־כִּי, 5:3). The girl has a heart full of compassion and wishes only for the enemy commander’s healing, despite his role in defeating her people and taking her into captivity. She also wants to make known the power for life that is among her own people, through the prophet in Samaria. In a time of killing and destruction, she focuses her attention on healing and restoration, even for the military leader on the other side.

The little girl no doubt wishes that many things were different. She would certainly like to be at home, with her parents and neighbors and country people. But the only words that we have in this story express her wish that Naaman could be with (לְפִנֵּי) the prophet in Samaria. Simple presence is what she wishes for Naaman, just as proximity and immediacy are what children want most from their parents and others whom they love and trust to make things right. Her words express confidence that this kind of closeness to the prophet would lead to the commander’s healing.

The words that the little girl speaks suggest a childlike, indiscriminate hope that things might be better for everyone, everywhere. Her wish envisions a world

without sharply drawn national borders and without clear-cut divisions between enemies and friends. Her words lack rancor or resentment for what has happened to disrupt her life. They are a magnanimous expression of trust that there is a force for life and healing more powerful than any army. If only the power of healing and life possessed by the prophet in Samaria were the power that was recognized and respected in international relations!

### **From wish to international crisis**

The information about the healing power of the prophet at Samaria presented in the little girl’s wish causes something of an international crisis when it falls into the hands of the military leader Naaman and the king of Aram. These important adults take a child’s wish and attempt to turn it into an economic and political transaction, as if impressive amounts of silver, gold, and expensive garments could buy the healing that the little girl’s words locate in enemy territory. The adults also bully a child’s wish into a command, and not only a verbal command but a formal, written command, carried in a letter by none other than the leprous leader of the Aramean army himself.

Although the Aramean king demands that the king of Israel perform a healing for his leprous commander, the power of healing is not the power of kings. Their area of expertise is war, killing, and death. To his credit, the king of Israel realizes that the power to restore the health of a leper belongs to God alone. He tears his clothes as a sign of mourning and extreme distress and asks: “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” (5:7).

But even though the king of Israel recognizes God as the source of all healing

and acknowledges that he is not God, still he is unable to see the real human need that the enemy commander embodies in his leprous flesh. He panics because he cannot see behind this clumsy international pressure the sincere desire for health, concluding only that it must be a pretext for more conflict: “Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me” (5:7). The crisis in the palace in Samaria indicates a fear that the enemy’s search for wholeness is yet another cause for violence and killing, a prelude to further defeat. The little girl’s wish for the enemy’s health becomes in the king’s palace an impossible order and an international crisis.

By contrast, the little girl was able to see the humanity of the Aramean general, his basic frailty and mortality, even though he was so great a man. She also pointed to the power of God’s prophet in Samaria. The prophet Elisha himself similarly desires to show Naaman that there is a prophet in Israel through his healing, as he tells the Israelite king: “Let [Naaman] come to me, that he may know that there is a prophet in Israel” (5:8). Elisha’s words confirm that the little girl spoke the truth when she located the power of healing in the prophet in Samaria.

The role of the prophet in healing is entirely overlooked in the international crisis caused by the search for Naaman’s cure. The Aramean king demands that the Israelite king heal his leprous commander, and the Israelite king knows that he does not have that power. But neither of them, nor Naaman himself, acting as a messenger conveying the order for his own healing, remembers the little girl’s wish that Naaman could be with the prophet in Samaria (5:3), nor do they seem to comprehend that the power of healing lies with God’s prophet (5:8).

## Conjuring the prophet

It is not within the power of kings to command the prophets, who have their independent source of authority through their direct relationship to God, as spokesperson, intercessor, and conduit of divine power, including the power to heal. Elisha is not summoned by the king in Samaria, but rather he must send his own message to the king (5:8). This prophet apparently becomes involved in the situation because the Israelite king acknowledges his own weakness and impotence by rending his garments. Elisha acts to bring the focus back on the role of the prophet, which is what the little girl had stressed in her wish for her master.

Elisha summons Naaman to his home but then does not go out to meet the military leader personally when he arrives with his horses and chariots in a display of military might and political importance (5:8–10). Naaman does not get the big fanfare that he no doubt expected. Nor does he receive the healing ritual or the “big” therapeutic protocol that he anticipated (5:11). The prescription is simply to dip seven times in the Jordan (5:10). This modest regimen is in keeping with the theme of the power of small things, exemplified also in the power of the “little” girl to recognize the healing gift of the prophet in Samaria.

Naaman is angry that he is not treated as the “big” important man that he is, that the prophet does not officially welcome and acknowledge him as powerful and worthy of a private audience. He is also angry about the commonness of the means of healing that the prophet identifies; the Jordan is insignificant in comparison with the larger rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar (5:12). Naaman’s servants observe that if he had been given a difficult task, some “big thing” (וְדָבָר גָּדוֹל, 5:13) to do, he would have done it immediately.

The commander is used to mounting major operations, to moving large companies, to bearing up under strain and duress. He does not seem to be able to accept a small assignment for the sake of health and life.

Once Naaman does acquiesce to being treated as a person of no special consequence, as a child might be treated summarily, once he acknowledges the modest river of the Jordan as a potential means of healing and dips in the river seven times, he is healed immediately, and his skin becomes like that of a little boy (נָעַר קָטָן, 5:14). This comparison of course emphasizes the complete healing of his skin, because there is no finer and more beautiful skin than the skin of a child, without blemish, even in tone and in texture, with quick-healing properties. In this context, where the little girl wished her master good health, it also seems significant that when he taps into the power for healing that she articulates, he himself becomes childlike. He becomes a little boy, the counterpart of the little girl, at least skin deep.

### Dirt and worship

The mighty Naaman becomes a worshipper of Israel's God through his experience of the power of small things. He attended to what his wife's little servant girl said, he was healed through contact with the humble river of the Jordan, and his skin was transformed from leprous to pure, like that of a little boy. Naaman's reaction to the effectiveness of what appears insignificant is to return with the rest of his company to stand "before" the man of God who restored his flesh (לְפָנָיו, 5:15). This action at last fulfills the little girl's wish that her master were "before" this prophet in Samaria (לְפָנָיו, 5:3). Elisha the healer in turn stands "before" the LORD (לְפָנָיו, 5:16), whom Naaman now also recognizes as the only God.<sup>8</sup>

Naaman urges Elisha to accept a reward (5:15–16). The prophet's refusal reveals that the economy of healing is distinct from the plunder of kings and armies.<sup>9</sup> Because Naaman cannot give anything, he requests instead to take something for himself. He plans to take back a load of soil from Israel, in keeping with the understanding that each land had its own deity who was worshiped in that particular territory.<sup>10</sup> Naaman's mule-cart load of earth seems like a small gesture, but it is symbolic of his total allegiance to the God of his wife's little slave girl. At the end of the narrative, the big Syrian commander and the little girl from Israel recognize the same God.

The little slave girl living on foreign soil testified to the power of healing that Israel's God offers through the "man of God" (5:15) living in Samaria. Her witness in a foreign land started a whole string of events that led finally to the Syrian captain's healing and to his acknowledgment of his enemies' deity. The little girl had wished something good for the foreign enemy of her people, and now this enemy has be-

8. To stand "before" (לְפָנָיו) indicates acceptance of the authority of a superior. Note that at the beginning of the story Naaman was an important man "before" (לְפָנָיו) his master, the king of Aram (5:1), and the little girl captured from Israel was serving "before" (לְפָנָיו) Naaman's wife (5:2).

9. The continuation of the story in 5:20–27 depicts the negative consequences of entangling the prophet's vocation with monetary transactions. Elisha's servant Gehazi secretly claims a payment from Naaman and as a result becomes afflicted with Naaman's leprosy.

10. In light of the narrator's acknowledgment that Israel's God was acting beyond the borders of Israel in giving victory to Aram through Naaman (5:1), this act of transporting dirt in order to be able to worship the LORD outside of the land seems superfluous.

come a fellow worshipper of the LORD, the God of Israel, and no other gods (5:17). Instead of the usual spoils of war, including captive children for servants, Naaman takes home dirt. He carries back a bit of earth from Israel upon which he plans to sacrifice to the LORD, the God of Israel (5:17), whom he acknowledges as God over all the earth, even if upon occasion he must accompany the king of Aram in his official worship of the Aramean god Rimmon (5:18).

Like the little girl, Naaman becomes a servant on foreign soil. As he makes plans to bring back his cartload of earth, this army commander repeatedly calls himself the servant (עֶבֶד, 5:15, 17, 18) of Elisha, the prophet of Israel's God who was able to heal him of his leprosy. The little servant girl had insight into the true power of health and life. She had made possible the crossing of national boundaries in search of these good gifts, even during a time of war when power generally means the ability to kill and defeat and establish new borders to be defended. She testified to God's power over all life, through her wish that initiated Naaman's quest for health and eventually led to the even bigger step of his acknowledging Israel's God as the only God in all the earth.

That a little Israelite servant girl should have such insight points to the perceptiveness of children about matters of faith. Much later in the rabbinic period, a midrash from the classic commentary on Exodus known as the *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael* portrays the perceptiveness of another servant girl. In remarking on the verse from the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, "This is my God, and I will glorify him" (Exod 15:2), Rabbi Eliezer claims that "a maid-servant saw at the sea what Isaiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets never saw."<sup>11</sup> The passage continues with an explanation

that, unlike the entire generation of the exodus from Egypt who perceived God directly at the sea, the Israelite prophets perceived God only in similitudes (Hos 12:11) and visions (Ezek 1:1). While the larger dynamics of this midrash would require more exploration than this essay allows, it is worth noting that later tradition acknowledges the spiritual astuteness of another nameless servant girl.

### Common threads

Several threads from the story of the little Israelite servant girl are especially worth noting, since other biblical stories featuring child characters also develop them in distinctive ways.

Perhaps most obvious is the little girl's intervention to identify a solution to a problem that confounds adults and threatens life. She alone offers insight into a source of healing for the powerful commander of the Syrian army. Her leadership is acknowledged by the adult characters of the narrative, as they take action based on her words.

There are other examples of young people in the Bible who solve difficult problems that pose a threat to life when their seniors for some reason are unable to intervene. Miriam, the older sister of Moses, takes personal initiative in negotiating with the daughter of Pharaoh an arrangement that spares her brother from Pharaoh's decree that all male infants must be thrown into the Nile (Exod 2:5–10). Miriam's solution of identifying Moses' own mother as his nurse until he is old enough to be taken as an adopted son into the palace is especially elegant. Not only is Moses spared from drowning, but Moses' mother gets

11. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 2, trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 24.

paid for caring for her own son, and the family relationship is preserved at least for the short term. Another example involves the young David, who came forward to fight the Philistine champion Goliath with his slingshot when all of the adult soldiers in Saul's army were too terrified to take action.<sup>12</sup>

Another main thread is that the little servant girl expresses theological insight and witnesses to her faith. Her words confirm that God is active in the narrative, even among the Arameans, the enemy of her own people. This child's testimony is central to the story and expresses a particular understanding of the community's relationship with God, especially as mediated by the figure of the prophet in Samaria.

The role of children's speech and theological insight could be fruitfully explored in other biblical stories. For example, Samuel was just a boy when he was called as a prophet (1 Sam 3:1–18), and “as Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground” (1 Sam 3:19). Daniel and his three companions are portrayed as youths when they are brought to Nebuchadnezzar's court in Babylon (Dan 1:4–7), yet they are full of wisdom and insight and have the courage to speak up about their religious convictions and distinctive practices,<sup>13</sup> in some cases bringing the foreign king to acknowledgment of the true God. When the young David confronts Goliath, he articulates that more than brute strength is at stake, because through his unlikely victory “all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel” (1 Sam 17:47).

Remarkably, the story of the little servant girl also portrays a child acting on the borders between cultures and national identities, negotiating divides that sometimes baffle and hobble older people. The Israelite girl is depicted not as an isolated and protected individual but rather as an actor

embedded within complex social and international structures and relationships. She acts with compassion and kindness not simply to a stranger and foreigner but to her people's enemy.

There are other examples in the Bible of children as agents of change in complex political or international settings and in relationship to strangers, foreigners, and enemies. A number of the examples already mentioned in this section exemplify this dynamic: Miriam negotiates with Pharaoh's daughter and her Egyptian maids, Joseph interacts with Pharaoh and his household, and Daniel and his companions are taken as youths to live in the Babylonian court, where they use all of their skills as counselors on behalf of the foreign power, while still maintaining their religious identity. Rebekah offers water to a stranger and his camels when they appear at the local well (Genesis 24).<sup>14</sup> The story of David and

12. Other suggestive instances in which young people, perhaps teenagers or young adults, intervene to preserve life include the work of Jonathan and Michal, the children of Saul, who work together to spare David from their father's anger and violence (1 Samuel 19–20). A “young Hebrew” named Joseph (Gen 41:12) interprets the dreams of Pharaoh and organizes Egypt to save lives in a time of famine (Gen 41:14–57). A less-known instance involves Jehosheba, princess daughter of King Joram (Ahaziah's sister), who hid Joash, son of Ahaziah, and a nurse in a bedroom for six years, sparing him from slaughter (2 Kgs 11:1–3). This boy becomes king of Judah when he is seven, as the only remaining heir to the throne of David.

13. See also Jeremiah, who was a youth when he was commissioned in his prophetic role, and yet God instructed him to speak wherever he would be sent (Jer 1:6–7).

14. In some cases, such as the teenager Dinah who visited the daughters of the land, children who cross borders become vulnerable to harm, rape, and violence between different tribes and groups of people.

Goliath is not only about “trust in God as a singular and isolated act of piety” but also “a faithful act with profound political consequences that changed the course of the nation and in doing so brought hope.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the little Israelite servant girl is an agent of change and hope amid international conflict, her story also illustrates children’s vulnerability and marginalization. She is tragically and permanently separated from her family and her community, as a captive of war now serving the wife of the enemy commander. Her story points to the precarious situation of children of all ages, who are too often caught in the violence and upset of communal or national conflicts.

Other children in biblical narratives also exemplify the vulnerability of children to become marginal or separated from their families and communities. Joseph was sold into slavery by his older brothers and taken down to Egypt, to the enduring grief of his father Jacob. Rebecca’s favorite son Jacob had to flee from his older twin brother Esau’s anger to live with his uncle Laban, never to see his doting mother again. The biblical narratives about Joseph and about Jacob present their separation from their families as an unwelcome hardship; however, God brings success and blessing to both of these youthful characters, even in their isolation and vulnerability.

## Conclusion

Each of these additional examples and others not mentioned would warrant further study in order to develop a comprehensive treatment of child characters in biblical narratives. The expansive list of examples that comes quickly to mind in thinking through some of the main threads in the story about the little Israelite servant girl shows that children in the Bible play important and sometimes unexpected roles.

Their noteworthy qualities can include intelligence, altruism, and ethical impulses. While children are vulnerable and dependent, they also show themselves willing to take risks and to become involved in situations that adults sometimes find overwhelming or even defeating.

Biblical narratives of children show God at work in families, communities, and nations not only through the mighty and the powerful by human standards but also through the weak and insignificant. It is “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech 4:6). God’s spirit is surprisingly present and active through what might appear to be weakness, vulnerability, and trust that children in particular represent so well. The little servant girl from Israel, as well as all the other child characters who act and speak in the Bible, challenge our concept of what it means to be a child. These small characters are by no means the least. In fact, they often appear as unexpected leaders within their communities. Child characters witness to the integrity and full humanity of children, both in the Bible and outside of its pages to our own day.

---

15. Stephen Tollestrup, “Children Are a Promise of Hope,” in *Understanding God’s Heart for Children*, ed. Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (Colorado Springs: World Vision, 2008), 192. Tollestrup adds in a footnote on the same page: “The transformational and social content of the David and Goliath episode is almost entirely missing in any Sunday school or children’s training material. Faithfulness and obedience are stressed above the possibility of social impact. Children need to know that they can impact and change their world.”

# From the Sanctuary to the Street: The Vocation of a Theologian

---

Richard J. Perry Jr.

*Associate Professor of Church and Society and Urban Ministry  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Howard Thurman, one of the twentieth century's great theologians, once said, "A man must be at home somewhere before he can feel at home everywhere."<sup>1</sup> What an apt description of Ralph Klein! Ralph radiates a sense of "at-home-ness." He is at home with his faith and church! Since settling into Lutheranism, Ralph has also been at home everywhere. He has a remarkable ability to relate to a diversity of people. His self-identity (child of God), his sense of playfulness (especially on the golf course), and his sense of vocation (a world-renowned biblical scholar and deft administrator) are all placed in the service of God's people in the church and the world.

Ralph's "retirement" from active teaching gives me and I hope the readers of *Currents in Theology and Mission* the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the vocation of a theologian in the twenty-first century. In my elaboration of Thurman's concept of being at home somewhere before being at home everywhere, theologians and their scholarship are called to a vocation that enjoys a lively reciprocity between the sanctuary and the street.

I want to suggest that the vocation of a theologian in the twenty-first century is combining the sanctuary (what we do in worship) with the street (walking with and connecting with "everyday" people). More-

over, I contend that the sanctuary and the street are no different. Both are sacred places. Both are places where God's word of grace, forgiveness, and power are met on the faces of the people. I believe that the vocation of a theologian—especially those who teach in our seminaries and colleges—in the twenty-first century is to be a *public* theologian. The life of the mind and the life of the street are necessary for putting one's scholarship in the service of God's people in their ministry of transformation.

A starting point for moving to a new understanding of the vocation of a theologian in the twenty-first century is a brief analysis of the North American context.

## **The context**

So, how does one conceive the vocation of the theologian in this century? I believe one begins with an honest appraisal of the context. Fact one: the United States of America and the Caribbean are racially and ethnically diverse. We live in a global nation. By the year 2050 we can expect that there will be population increases among communities of color and ethnicity. Fact two: the United States is a religiously plural nation.

---

1. *Famous Black Quotations*, selected and compiled by Janet Cheatham Bell (Chicago: Sabayt Publications, 1986), 54.

There are Christians, who constitute the largest religious group, along with Jewish, Muslim, and nonreligious adherents. These two facts impinge on our perception of the vocation of a theologian. We are not living in a 1950s world. Transportation and communication make the world a neighborhood. This type of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity challenges us to move beyond our particularities as we seek to understand the particularity of people in our neighborhoods and communities.

Theology from a Lutheran perspective, our home, helps us accept the concreteness of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. One such concept is the often quoted phrase “the finite is capable of bearing the infinite.” Grounded in what we do in the sanctuary—that is, celebrate the sacraments—we affirm the promise that God is at work in, with, and under the bread and wine. Through these earthy elements we experience the power of God to nurture, sustain, and empower us for ministry with our friends on the streets of our neighborhoods. In the sanctuary we are reminded that God’s power is at work.

A second theological concept that is meaningful for critical reflection on the vocation of a theologian is the incarnation. As Lutherans of African Descent say in *Many Voices, Tell the Story, Create the Vision: Build Our Future*,

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). God’s Word is a universal Word for all people in all places and for all time. God’s Word is also particular as witnessed in the diversity of God’s creation. “And the Word became Flesh and lived among us . . .” (John 1:14).<sup>2</sup>

This has deep implications for conceptualizing the vocation of a theologian. A prominent one is that all cultures can give witness and testimony to God’s promise. And they give this witness and testimony not only in

Germany or Sweden but also in Ames, Iowa, Chicago, New York City, Houston, San Francisco, Columbia, South Carolina, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and outside Fargo, North Dakota—very particular communities across the United States and the Caribbean. In those diverse places God’s mighty deeds are deeply felt and experienced. In order to more fully appreciate the thought and action of a racially and religiously diverse country, it is imperative, I believe, that we go to those places and spaces created by the people where they develop and articulate their interests and thoughts, both religious and political.

This movement from the sanctuary to the street, however, creates a crisis in the fundamental understanding of the vocation of a theologian. There appears to be a prevailing ethos of careerism or professionalism. Some of this can be attributed to a desire to maintain the institution and exclude the contributions of those outside the institution. That certainly is to be expected. Institutions, like the church, have a personal stake in maintaining order and a certain ethos. The academy, or “guild,” as it is sometimes called, pushes publication and the generation of “new” knowledge that at some levels is disconnected from the pains and struggles of the people on the street. In addition, there is a perceived notion that if you are a theologian you have no idea what *practical* ministry is all about. Seminaries and colleges are viewed as “ivory towers” that lack sensitivity and openness to what people outside the institution have to contribute to the institution.

Moreover, there are those who think that the only authentic theologian is a “pub-

2. *Many Voices, Tell the Story, Create the Vision: Build Our Future* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2005), 5.



lic” theologian. That is, the more a theologian is engaged with the pains and struggles of people (some theologians would be more specific and say poor people), the more authentic the theologian. A public theologian is one who is willing to listen and to be transformed by what he/she is taught in the barbershops, beauty salons, political organizations, and fraternal clubs (I recall the movie *Barbershop*). And there are those who argue that everybody is a theologian, thus ascribing no privileged place to those who have earned a theological doctorate.

These perspectives are all valid in some ways. Yet, we cannot be at home everywhere as Thurman suggests without first taking responsibility for naming our struggles and identifying the complexities that prohibit or serve as obstacles to going to the places and spaces everyday people create for themselves.

### **Naming our struggle**

For the last thirty-plus years I have had the privilege of expressing my vocation as a teacher, church bureaucrat, synodical official, and parish pastor. During my doctoral study I had the wonderful opportunity of serving as interim pastor of two congregations. However, forty years ago I began my call to ministry by serving as youth director in a mission congregation on the East side of Detroit, Michigan. It was difficult in many ways because of my social location. Back in the day I was a young and naïve African American male raised in a middle-class community. I attended an integrated Lutheran congregation that became a symbol of “good” race relations, at least to the Michigan Synod. The pain and struggles of poor people were outside my experience.

Yet, the congregation and the community accepted me. There I learned the fundamentals of being an active participant in the neighborhood. I learned what it meant to

---

**I** saw, through the eyes of the people in the neighborhoods, what being at home with one’s faith meant.

---

work in a faith-based community organization. My political sensitivities were awakened by running for and getting elected to public office in the community where I lived. Members of the congregation and the neighborhood taught me to listen to their concerns, and that was done not in the sanctuary but at the pool hall next door to the church, on the basketball court behind the church, and on the front porches of neighbors in the community. African American Lutheran pastors (the Rev. Dr. Albert “Pete” Pero and the Rev. Dr. Rudolph Featherstone) along with several white pastors (Rev. Dennis Holmberg and the Rev. Tom Johnson) mentored me. I learned through trial and error what was appropriate for pastors and other church leaders to do—namely, spend time with the people of the community in the spaces they created and were in charge of. It was a struggle for me as a young person who was called to the vocation of pastor.

Looking back on those formative experiences as a young person also presented me with a sense of hope. I saw, through the eyes of the people in the neighborhoods, what being at home with one’s faith meant. Despite the pain and struggle, the call of the people was to develop strategies for transforming their community. That was their

hope, that in some God was going to make a way. To be sure, there were times when we sought refuge from the pain and struggle. And there were times when we studied the pain and struggle. There was a time when we organized to end the pain and struggle. Nevertheless, I learned to be at home on the streets. Those called to a vocation of teaching in seminaries and colleges, who are “at home” in the church yet uncomfortable with being at home on the streets of their neighborhoods, will fail to grasp the magnitude of God’s grace. We must name our struggle and be willing to be guided by a new way of embracing our vocation as theologians.

### “Jesus himself came near”

“Jesus himself came near and went with them,” records Luke the Physician in Luke 24. Further into The Walk to Emmaus, Jesus asks a question: “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” While there are some technical points that need to be more deeply studied in these verses, we have a model for the vocation of a theologian in the present century. I have already hinted at this, but let me put it plainly. *The vocation of a theologian in the twenty-first century is to walk with those we may consider strangers to us.* In fact, it may well be that theologians are the strangers.

Among the first tasks of a theologian is to become immersed in the neighborhoods and communities surrounding our institutions and our congregations. Following the model of Jesus, we do not go trying to bring the Word to the people. We go to listen to the stories about life in a particular community. I remember well an incident early in my pastoral ministry. I decided to visit one of our members at her place of employment. She worked at a hair salon. After we greeted each other, she said, “Pastor, what

do you want?” I replied, “I did not want anything. I just wanted to visit with you at your job.” She was somewhat surprised. The vocation of a theologian in the twenty-first century is to walk with people, both members and people outside the sanctuary. Walking with people moves us to accept the *imago dei* of the persons we are walking with.

One of my theological mentors, Pete Pero, has always described himself as a “descriptive” rather than a “prescriptive” theologian. A descriptive theologian is one who describes the conditions or circumstances he or she sees, hears, and feels. In other words, one receives confirmation and sometimes instruction about what one sees, hears, and feels. For example, take this Andre Crouch hymn:

The blood that Jesus shed for me,  
‘way back on Calvary;  
the blood that gives me strength  
from day to day,  
it will never lose its power.

It reaches to the highest mountain.  
It flows to the lowest valley.  
The blood that gives me strength  
from day to day,  
It will never lose its power.<sup>3</sup>

One way of approaching this is to ask, “If you are an African American Lutheran, why are you singing an Andre Crouch hymn? He is not Lutheran!” On the other hand, one could ask, “What is the significance of that hymn to you?” The principal difference between a descriptive theologian and a prescriptive theologian is a matter of emphasis. The former describes, and the latter says what should be and what we should believe. The vocation of a theo-

3. “The Blood that Jesus Shed for Me,” *This Far by Faith: An African American Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), #201.

gian in this century involves receiving and experiencing God's Word and the *imago dei* of the people we are walking with on the street.

Given the complexity of life on the street, the vocation of a theologian must intersect with other disciplines. It is clear that theology is not the end of all knowledge about the human being. To be sure, theology has something to say about the nature of the human being and the world. Human beings still sin and are in need of God's grace! On the other hand, the vocation of a public theologian calls for us to be interdisciplinary in our approach to what we want to say about the Triune God. Science, social science, political science, anthropology, and literature all have something to say about the human being and the world. This third task of the vocation of a public theologian helps us move beyond cultivating specialized knowledge toward the deep and troubling *public* questions of people we are walking with.

### **Conclusion**

I have briefly examined an understanding of the vocation of a public theologian in the twenty-first century. My understanding of the vocation of a public theologian is as more than a career. It is an attempt to

---

**L**et me put  
it plainly.

---

*The vocation of a theologian in the twenty-first century is to walk with those we may consider strangers to us.*

---

respond to God's call as to where I can best meet the world's needs. My understanding of the gospel, shaped by walking with others, necessitates that I am open to instruction by the people I am walking with. However, it all begins with having a sense of at-home-ness in the sanctuary in order to be at home everywhere.

Ralph, thank you for your faithful witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And thank you for your contributions to the church as a faithful yet playful public theologian!

# Diversity in the New Testament

---

David Rhoads

*Professor of New Testament*

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

I have struggled much of my career to understand and appreciate diversity among different writings in the New Testament. Each writing, including the different letters of Paul, has its own distinctive worldview: its understanding of God, view of Jesus and his work, depiction of the human condition, ethical standards, image of true community, and so on. The differences may be attributed to the author, locale, time of writing, background, audience, social location, cultural context, and circumstances addressed. Whatever the reasons for the diversity, the implications are significant. We cannot simply gloss over the differences (by looking only for common denominators) or harmonize them (as if they could be combined into one viewpoint) or level them under one perspective (such as law and gospel) or simplify them (by claiming a gospel in a nutshell that applies to all). Overlooking the differences will lead us to put things into a hodgepodge of ideas from the New Testament (selectively chosen by us) or simply to read selected New Testament passages in a modern framework. Either way, we end up with a gospel according to ourselves, whoever may be doing the interpretation.

We need to honor the multiple “gospels” in the New Testament. What follows is a very brief sketch of seven different writings in the New Testament, designed not to exhaust the themes and purposes of

these writings but to illustrate the obvious diversity that exists among them.

## **The Gospel of Mark**

Mark’s Gospel addresses the fear of taking risks by engendering courage and faithfulness. Specifically, Mark empowers people to take risks for the good news in spite of the threat of opposition and persecution. Mark’s audience lived just after the Roman Judean War of 66–70 C.E. At that time, followers of Jesus were threatened by authorities on both sides. They were persecuted by Judeans, who thought of them as traitors because they had refused to fight in the war, and they were persecuted by the Roman authorities, who thought of them as revolutionaries because, after all, their leader had been executed as a messianic pretender.

In this context, fear resulted in inaction. Mark believed that people avoided acting on behalf of Jesus (healing, exorcism, hospitality, proclaiming the kingdom of God) out of fear, because good actions might involve sacrifice, loss, rejection, and even risk of persecution and death. Mark’s Gospel leads followers of Jesus to face their fear and to act in spite of it out of their larger commitment to the kingdom of God.

Mark also believes that it was out of fearfulness that people were driven to dominate others. Out of fear, people want to save or secure their lives by accumulating wealth

at the expense of others, by seeking status while marginalizing others, by using power to control others, and by persecuting those who threaten their security. In Mark's portrayals, the Roman and Judean authorities reflect this fear, and so do the disciples.

Mark took a critical stance toward such people because their self-securing behavior generated an evil society of exploitation, domination, marginalization, and persecution by the powerful over against the vulnerable. Mark proclaims the news of God's power to heal, exorcize, forgive, transform, and restore community. Based on the security offered by the presence of God's rule, Mark believes that, in response to the good news of the kingdom, people could overcome their fearful need to secure themselves. In so doing, they could take risks on behalf of others. They could create a society in which people served each other ("Whoever wants to be great among you is to be your servant").

By inviting people into the rule/reign of God, Jesus is calling people to live for others—to relinquish wealth to the poor, to be willing to be least, to use power only to serve, and to be faithful to the rule of God in spite of the fact that those actions may result in persecution and death. Only by being faithful and taking such risks would they spread to others the gospel of power in service: "Those who will save/secure their lives will lose them, but those who will lose/risk their lives for me and the good news will save/secure them."

The death of Jesus as a relinquishment of self for others is a model for this behavior, a model that forged a covenant with all who would follow. The rhetoric of Mark's story seeks to empower hearers to have the faithfulness, in the face of very legitimate fears, to act on behalf of the establishing of God's kingdom.

## The Gospel of Matthew

Two decades after the Roman-Judean War, Matthew wrote in opposition to the burgeoning Pharisaic movement by proclaiming the alternative interpretation of the Judean law that had been inaugurated by Jesus. Matthew's goal was to tell the story in a way that would lead people to be truly righteous. Matthew understands true righteousness to involve *integrity*; he seeks to engender in people integrity of thought, word, and action—all oriented toward fulfilling God's will. Matthew calls people to be "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." To be perfect, in Matthew's view, is to be thoroughly single-minded, in both attitudes and actions, in the consistent expression of goodness and love for others—not only for family and friends but also for enemies, just as God "sends rain on the just and the unjust." Matthew seeks to demonstrate an interpretation of the Judean law such that the true goal of the law would be fulfilled, namely, that it would result in integrity in service to God's will.

Matthew opposes people who are not single-minded with integrity, who are double-minded or hypocritical—people who have the right actions but the wrong motives (they pray to God in order to be glorified by people) or who have the right actions but the wrong reasons for those actions (they love only people who love them) or whose inner attitudes betray their outward appearance (they do not commit adultery outwardly, but they lust inwardly) or who are not consistent (they love their friends but not their enemies) or who receive grace from God but will not share it with others (they are forgiven by God but will not forgive others). Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7) provides a positive portrayal of righteous people (in the blessings of the beatitudes), a penetrating moral exposé of hypocrisy (with example

after example of double-mindedness), along with guidance for living with wisdom and integrity. His “woes” (chap. 23) provide a powerful critique of those who have failed to live by integrity.

Matthew’s target is not so much the crass hypocrisy of those who intentionally say one thing and do another. Rather, he aims to enlighten those who have blind hypocrisy—who believe themselves to be good but who have deceived themselves about the ways in which they fail to live up to the very standards they espouse: “Do as they say,” Matthew says, “but not as they do.” Matthew’s rhetoric challenges people to have depth of character with integrity—made possible by the high moral standards of God’s will, the willingness to examine oneself and to repent, the powerful blessings of God for those who seek goodness, the death of Jesus for forgiveness when people fail, and the nurturing relationship with the risen Jesus. In fostering such a relationship with Jesus, Matthew seeks nothing less than to engender in his readers both a willingness to do a fearless moral inventory and a capacity to strive for moral excellence—so that they can fulfill their true purpose as human beings.

### **The Gospel of Luke**

Like Matthew, Luke wrote in the last decades of the first century after the Roman-Judean War. He wrote to show that followers of Jesus had a powerful vision of what it means to be the nation of Israel. More than any of the other gospels, Luke’s story of Jesus focuses on injustices in society and how to address them. Luke depicts society as a place with great inequities between the rich and the poor, the elites and the marginalized, the powerful and the oppressed. Luke’s Gospel calls people to counter a society that lives for wealth, loves honor, and uses power to oppress people. Luke’s

Gospel is a prophetic call for people to repent of their injustices and to create a new society through acts of generosity, humility, and service.

Luke has an alternative vision for society, a society driven by mercy. “Be merciful,” Jesus says, “as your Father is merciful.” Luke writes to liberate victims of a society gripped by poverty, degradation, marginalization, and oppression. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” says Jesus, “because God has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to recover sight to the blind, to free those who are oppressed, to announce the year of the Lord’s favor.” As such, Luke’s Jesus “came to seek and to save the lost.” In this regard, Luke’s Gospel is filled with a cavalcade of characters who get lifted up in the story—lepers, the sick, the Samaritan by the roadside, the poor beggar Lazarus, the bent woman, the woman who anoints him with her tears, the tax collector Zacchaeus, the widow of Nain, and the thief on the cross, among others. Luke’s Jesus seeks to liberate such characters from their down-trodden circumstances and to restore them to health, dignity, and empowerment in community. Jesus’ death, while not viewed by Luke as atoning, happened as a consequence of Jesus’ prophetic solidarity with the lost.

Luke’s Gospel bears a portrait of God determined to lift the lowly and feed the hungry, even if it means bringing down the powerful and sending the rich away empty-handed. In Luke, Jesus challenges the wealthy and powerful to join him in liberating the victims of oppression. Luke calls for people to repent and receive the Spirit of God, which will empower them to oppose oppression and thereby provide a countercultural community that models what the world *should* be like. Such an alternative society is depicted in Acts as a community that shares possessions, shows mercy,

and gives authority for the oppressed to be the leaders.

### The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John was written around the end of the first century when it was becoming clear that Jesus would not return soon. John's Gospel emphasizes the present nature of God's salvation in the experience of eternal life. John was written to engender in readers a profound religious experience of God through the risen Jesus. John seeks to promote mystical knowledge of God through Jesus as the foundation for life. He is not interested in doctrine or morality apart from spirituality.

John believes that knowledge of the world in itself is mundane and ultimately does not bring meaning, satisfaction, or morality to human beings. There is a temporality and death in this mundane existence. One can drink water or eat bread but will grow thirsty and hungry again. One can have sunlight but not be illuminated. One can travel but not know the way/access to life. Humans will come to fulfillment only if these created things became gateways to a deeper knowledge consisting of an intimate relationship with the force at the origin of life. Hence, wine, water, bread, sunlight, branches, pastures, gates, and paths become metaphors/vehicles for the more profound experience of the true wine, the water of life, the bread of life, the light of the world, the true vine, the door to life, and the way of life—all of which point to the reality of God and Jesus that lies behind and within these created things. This deeper reality, in John's view, is pure love. And in response to this reality of love, one can be led to lay down one's life for a friend, creating a community of people with profound love for one another.

John believes that the Word active in creation became flesh in the person of Jesus.

---

**J**ohn seeks for people not just to know about God but *to know God intimately and existentially*, in a way that is transformative and profoundly meaningful.

---

Jesus came from God to restore the relationship between human beings and the creator. Jesus' role was to bring life to fulfillment in harmonious interrelationship between creatures and creator. Because all creation bears the stamp of the creator and the Word, all created things potentially mediate the restoring of this relationship. A relationship with the creative power of life itself involves a way of knowing that goes beyond knowledge on a literal level and opens up a capacity to "know" at a deeper level—for people to "abide in God" and for God to "abide in" people. John seeks for people not just to know about God but *to know God intimately and existentially*, in a way that is transformative and profoundly meaningful. For John, this *is* eternal life—"to know God and Jesus Christ whom you sent." In John, Jesus dies and rises to secure even now an "abiding place" in God for those who will abide in Jesus.

Jesus came so that people might have abundant life. People who come into relationship with Jesus have themselves already passed from death into eternal life—not only an everlasting reality, but

also the fullness of life with God. For John, eternal life refers to that quality of life in relationship with God which is profoundly meaningful and fulfilling. In light of this experience of God through Jesus, the whole created order lights up as a sacramental witness to the source of life.

### **The Letter to the Galatians**

Paul develops a different theology in each of his letters in response to the local situation he is addressing in each church. In the early fifties of the first century, Paul wrote Galatians to claim salvation for the Gentile Galatians by grace through faith without having to follow the Judean law. In Galatians, Paul contrasts those who seek to justify themselves by their own efforts (in keeping the law) with those who consider themselves to be justified by grace as an act of God in Jesus.

Paul argues that people tend to justify their existence based on that which is human (flesh)—either by dint of birth (such as nationality, family, or inheritance) or cultural achievement (such as moral goodness, legal adherence, or wisdom). This self-justification is based on human traits or human efforts. It sets up human standards that people either meet or fail to meet. The result is that these standards become the basis for determining whether or not people are fundamentally acceptable as human beings and then grants the right to dominate those who do not meet the standards. Paul believes that self-justification is a prime source of evil in the world. The consequence of self-justification is either arrogance (for those who meet the standards) or envy/jealousy (for those who fail to meet the standards). Justifying existence based on human standards leads to comparison, competition, and conflict between individuals, ethnic groups, genders, and nations.

Furthermore, Paul argues, when we seek to justify ourselves, we manipulate other people to prove our worth. We do good mainly in order to benefit ourselves or our group. We love others for our sake rather than for their sake. We are interested in people only insofar as they serve our project to justify ourselves. In Paul's view, the opponents want the Galatians to be circumcised "so they may boast in your flesh." The key is this: Loving others for *their* sake is not possible when our actions are motivated by a self-oriented desire to prove *our* worth.

By contrast, a whole different life is possible when justification comes from God as a gift apart from human achievement or failure. Paul claims that, in Christ, God has justified people freely by grace, Judeans and Gentiles alike. Jesus' death led to the removal of the curse of the law and thereby the end of law itself (not, as in Matthew, to forgiveness of sins). People are called to trust this act of God and to live out of the freedom given—freedom from the burden of having to be someone or to do something before we can be acceptable before God and others. In Paul's view, if we are all equally justified by an act done by grace from outside of ourselves, there are no grounds for us to boast and no reason to be envious. And if we live out of the security of God's justification of us, we do not need to manipulate others in a project to prove our worth—because we have already been justified! Therefore, no standards based on human traits or human achievements can serve as the basis of our fundamental self-worth. Race or ethnicity or gender or family or appearance or health or ability or nationality or economic status or moral achievement cannot be used as the basis for arrogance or for envy. Nor can these standards be used as a basis either to dominate or to assimilate.



The consequence of justification is a freedom from the need to be self-oriented. People and groups are free to express their identity in ways that are consonant with the grace and love given in the act of justifying grace from God, mainly through the fruits of the Spirit. Communities of mutuality rather than hierarchy and subordination are now possible. When people live out of a self-worth already given with no need to prove anything, true goodness and mercy are rendered possible.

### **The Letter of James**

The Letter of James was written to Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world. Its purpose was to configure the followers of Jesus as a movement rooted on the wisdom of Judaism and the wisdom of the teaching of Jesus.

James considers that human problems are rooted in the limited resources of this world. The world's goods and status are clearly limited and in short supply. There is only so much wealth or honor or power or control to go around. So if one person or group gains, another person or group loses. Hence, there is a never-ending fight to get control and to keep control of these things for oneself or one's group. The mentality of scarcity dominates. Envy and ambition prevail. As such, the ills of the world can be attributed to the struggle over limited resources. This so-called wisdom of this world leads to behavior designed to look out for "number one," behavior such as gossip, false accusations, theft, withholding of wages, discrimination against the poor, murder, and war. When James warns readers to keep themselves "unstained by the world," it is this mentality and this destructive behavior against which he warns.

This worldly wisdom does not perceive the unlimited resources to meet human needs by means of the grace that

comes from above. While the resources of the world are in short supply, in James's view the resources from heaven, from God, are unlimited. James encourages people to get out of the zero-sum game by looking to God as the source of every good and perfect gift. It is wisdom from God that liberates one from the human struggle. From God, grace pours forth like a summer rain to bring growth and harvest. From God, there is honor and status and power and true wealth and the possibility of control (such as control of the tongue) for good purposes.

More than this, James understands that God is seeking to rectify and reverse the inequities in the world that result from the mentality of limited goods. Because Jesus lived and died and rose for the poor, the members of the community are to honor the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, use the tongue for good, repay good for evil, give a blessing in place of a curse, pray for the sick, forgive the sinner, and seek peace in all matters. This is why James defines true religion as caring for the vulnerable—the widows and the orphans. When every good thing is from above, there is no need to protect or to grasp. Rather, there are ample resources to turn the tide of evil and to produce a harvest of righteousness for the world, especially for the downtrodden and the oppressed. This "wisdom from above" is peaceable and gentle, and it results in righteousness.

James makes it clear that wisdom and insight are worthless without action. Right belief is useless unless it is followed by deeds. What good is it if a brother or sister is in need and you do nothing about it? In James's view, belief apart from works is barren, dead. Just as a tree was made to bear fruit, so humans were made to bear good actions. If people do not act in love on behalf of the poor and outcast, they fail to fulfill the purpose for which they were created.

## The Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation was written in the mid-nineties of the first century under the imperial oppressions of Emperor Domitian. This writing is perhaps the most politically radical of all the writings in the New Testament. Its purpose is to unmask the Roman Empire so that people will no longer see it as a powerful and wealthy empire blessed by God that cannot be opposed. The prophet John exposes Rome as a cruel beast and a seductive whore acting on the authority of Satan. This empire has established itself both by intimidation and destruction of all who would stand in opposition and by seductive and deceptive efforts to lure the kings and merchants of the earth into cooperating in order to receive the wealth and glory of the Empire. The sins of the Roman Empire, which are “piled as high as heaven,” are reinforced by the imperial demand to worship the emperor and to give unconditional allegiance to this “eternal” realm. John’s gruesome imagery and graphic portrayals are designed to unmask the beast so that people can see it for what it truly is.

John calls for people to “withdraw” from the Roman Empire—by refusing to engage in economic activity that has anything to do with the empire and its coinage, by ceasing all participation in social festivals that honor the empire or provide meat offered to idols, and by refusing to worship the emperor—even if these actions result in persecution and death. Such results were likely in light of the fact that local officials (John was written to Christian assemblies in Asia Minor) expected their residents to give unfettered allegiance to Rome as a basis for receiving many benefits from the Empire. If the residents of their regions refused to support Rome, or if they opposed Rome, the local authorities would persecute them. In John’s view, withdrawal is urgent, because God is about to bring this

Empire to an end. Since God will prevail, people must choose against Rome now so that it is clear in the end where their allegiance lies. John even portrays the burning of Rome and the grief of kings and merchants over the loss of Rome as a way to lead hearers to detach from their relationship with and dependence upon Rome. For John, Jesus’ death was the faithful victory over the forces of the Empire by one who refused to submit unto death, a victory that empowers others likewise to resist.

In place of allegiance to the Roman Empire John wants his hearers to give allegiance and worship to the God of all creation, who is in process not only of ending the old imperial order but also of creating a renewed heaven and earth. In the Jerusalem of this new world order, God will dwell on earth amidst God’s people, and there will be no more grief or crying or pain. There will be justice and peace. There will be harmony with nature. The river of the water of life will flow clear as crystal down the middle of the city streets, available to all free of charge. The tree of life will produce fruit all year round to assure that the hungry are fed. The leaves of the trees will be a cure for the nations. John enables his readers to imagine this new world and to live even now in such a way as to worship God, to celebrate this new world, and to live by its values of truth and justice.

## Reflection

It seems to me that these quite different writings witness to the explosion of creative reflection and transformation that went on in the first century in response to the Jesus event. This vital diversity, this ductility, this capacity for malleability of the Christian movement to speak to diverse and changing circumstances may be the single most important reason why Christianity thrived and spread so quickly. The

diversity also provides us in the twenty-first century with a rich plethora of visions with which to consider the life and work of God in the church and in the world of our own time. And there are twenty additional writings in the New Testament to be explored!

Here are five brief reflections on the implications of this diversity. First, this New Testament diversity should foster openness among denominations today. Our contemporary denominations are based, in part, upon different writings in the New Testament. As such, the differences among church groups today are not a mark of the brokenness of Christ (except when we are in conflict with each other) but are rather a sign of the rich diversity that was there from the beginning of Christianity. Because diversity is constitutive of Christianity from its inception, we can celebrate the differences among us, seek to honor them without collapsing them into one church, learn from one another, and work for a unity that preserves our differences. It takes many different churches to bear the full witness of the New Testament writings.

Second, the diversity of perspectives makes it clear that there is no one theology, no one church order, no one absolute ethic, no one set of worship practices. There are many “gospels” in the New Testament. Good news is multiple and many-faceted. The salvific work of Jesus and the bases for judgment differ from writing to writing. In some ways, this may be unsettling. However, the presence of such diversity has an important salutary implication; that is, the very fact of this diversity undercuts claims to have the absolute truth. It relativizes universal claims for any one of these perspectives. It works against arrogance and fosters humility. As such, we are warned against theological idolatry, the point of view that our understanding of truth is final

and all others are wrong. It subverts any claim to be privileged by our beliefs and the consequent right to oppress others in the name of our truth.

---

**T**here is no denying the diversity of the New Testament. The question is: How will we see it and what will we do with it?

---

Third, the diversity in the New Testament therefore makes it clear that selection is unavoidable, that no one person or group can embrace all that the New Testament lifts up as models, the many beliefs, ethics, and community formations. Whether or not we are conscious of it, denominations have all made choices about what each considers most determinative of Christianity. In light of the diversity, we need to be self-consciously aware of what we are embracing and what we are choosing to neglect or even to resist. In this way, we will be better able to see the limited perspective of our own points of view as churches and as individuals. And we will better appreciate the choices others have made based on the same New Testament, albeit from different books or different themes. And we will be more open to learn from each other and to be changed by each other.

Fourth, when we as Christians teach and preach the New Testament, we will

grow most if we seek to preserve the distinct vision of each of its writings. If we do not, the danger is that we (as Lutherans, say) will preach law-gospel sermons not only on Paul but also on Mark and Matthew and John and James and all the other writings. What I want to promote is the idea that we know the worldview of each writing well enough to see each passage in its own literary context. Then we will preach Markan sermons on the Gospel of Mark and Lukan sermons on the Gospel of Luke and Galatian sermons on the Letter to the Galatians and Revelation sermons on the Book of Revelation and so on. Such honoring of diversity will enrich our preaching and will better assure that we will preach more from the New Testament perspectives themselves and less from our own perspectives.

Finally, the diversity in the New Testament gives us a wider range of responses when we seek to appropriate these writings for our church or for our world. Differing circumstances and problems may call for different theologies and ethics. What may be life-giving in one situation may be de-

structive in another situation—the devil quoting scripture, if you will. What may be liberating for one group may serve to oppress another group. This does not mean that we will pick and choose for our convenience or for our advantage. Rather, the diversity of the New Testament offers many challenging perspectives that enable us to offer good news when needed and mandates to action when called for.

There is no denying the diversity of the New Testament. The question is: How will we see it and what will we do with it? To face it squarely, to honor it, to struggle with it, to learn from it, and to see our own diversity mirrored in it will only serve to benefit the church and the world of our time.

For further reflections on diversity, see David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), and *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

# “Hastening the Day” When the Earth Will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3 (Advent 2, Year B)

Barbara R. Rossing

*Professor of New Testament*

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

Vice President Al Gore compares the terrifying prospect of global warming's effects on the world to “taking a nature hike through the book of Revelation.” Gore's nature hike could also include 2 Peter 3—the epistle text assigned for the Second Sunday of Advent this year in the lectionary. For Christians seeking biblical counsel on the environment, 2 Peter 3 poses particular problems because it consigns the earth to burning up by fire.

We are well on our way to that burning. Three scientific reports from the Nobel prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in 2007 read more like Revelation's plague sequences than like typical scientific reports—with predictions of higher sea levels, more acidic oceans, fiercer storms, deadlier forest fires, more heat-related deaths, longer dry seasons, declining water supplies, catastrophic floods, and increasing infectious diseases around the world. In an ironic coincidence, one of those reports was released Good Friday—fitting, perhaps, since the report narrates the future passion and suffering, even death, of hundreds of mil-

lions of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, even if temperatures rise only as much as 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit or 2 degrees Centigrade.

The suffering was underscored for me at a 2007 conference in Trømsø, Norway, above the Arctic Circle, launching a United Nations report on “Global Outlook for Ice and Snow.” Ice is melting everywhere—whether glaciers, sea ice, ice sheets, or permafrost. The effects of this melting on communities worldwide will be catastrophic. In India and Peru, millions of people who depend upon meltwater from glaciers in the Himalayas or Andes will lose their sole source of drinking water. In Alaska, loss of protective sea ice is forcing numerous native villages, such as the historic Lutheran village of Shishmaref, to relocate inland. News reports that whole islands in Bangladesh have already disappeared due to sea level rise bear eerie resemblance to Rev 16:20, with its description that “every island fled away.”

A few fundamentalist Christians may welcome the prospect of calamitous global warming events as if they were signs of the

end-times and Jesus' return. But for most Christians, the urgent question is whether and how the Bible might provide guidance for addressing our new situation of living at the "end."

It is becoming clear that we do face the prospect of some kind of an "end" in the coming years. At the present rate of fossil fuel consumption, atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide will double, from 280 parts per million before the industrial revolution to more than 500 parts per million—by the middle of this century. Moreover, scientists now think the IPCC forecasts of sea level rise are too low, because they do not take into consideration new data regarding the faster-than-expected melting of both the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets nor mounting evidence of irreversible feedback loops or "tipping points," such as the "ice-albedo effect," by which melting Arctic sea ice itself accelerates further warming because ice is white and reflects heat back to the sun, whereas sea water is dark in color and absorbs more heat.

America's premier climatologist, James Hansen of NASA's Goddard Space Institute, believes there is still time to avert dangerous sea level rise, but he warns that we have less than ten years to drastically reduce carbon emissions or it will be too late to save the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets. He argues for a 90 percent reduction in emissions by the year 2050, with the goal of stabilizing atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations at a level of 350 parts per million.<sup>1</sup> Even the more conservative IPCC says that global carbon emissions must peak and begin declining within the next seven years, by the year 2015, if the world wants to have any chance of limiting the expected temperature rise to 2 degrees Centigrade (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).<sup>2</sup> Our best scientists, religious leaders, and world political leaders underscore the

urgency of acting now, or we risk losing the ten-year window and will be unable to avert irreversible, catastrophic climate change and suffering.

How can we draw on the Bible publicly to address this crisis, underscoring especially the urgency of that ten-year window?

Many early Christian apocalyptic texts address the sense of an "end," so it might seem logical to turn to these texts to speak to our current situation. We must carefully distinguish among various strands of early Christian apocalyptic, however. The New Testament presents a range of perspectives on the end of the world, not all of which are helpful for this moment.

This essay contrasts two apocalyptic texts, Revelation and the epistle of 2 Peter, in terms of how they might help us address today's crisis of global warming. I argue that 2 Peter's claim that the world is destined to be burned up with fire must be viewed as highly problematic—and that the Advent lectionary gives an occasion to speak out about the dangers of such perspectives. By contrast, Revelation's end-of-empire perspective may be more helpful ecologically, especially for underscoring a sense of urgency of the present moment.

---

1. James Hansen, "Why We Can't Wait," *The Nation* (May 7, 2007); see also "Warming Expert Sees 10-year Window," MSNBC News Service (Sept. 14, 2006). Hansen was speaking at a Climate Change Conference in Sacramento, California, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14834318/>. For the argument that we must halt carbon dioxide emissions at 350 parts per million, see Bill McKibben, "Earth at 350," *The Nation* (May 12, 2008).

2. See Table SPM.5, *Working Group III Contribution of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Fourth Assessment Report: Mitigation of Climate Change, Summary for Policymakers*, p. 12. <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg3/ar4-wg3-spm.pdf>.

## The sense of an end: Revelation versus 2 Peter

A strong sense of an impending "end" pervades much of the apocalyptic discourse of the New Testament. Early Christians definitely believed they were living at the end of the age, the end of the world. But the question is: the end of *what* world? What was it that early Christian texts view as coming to an end? With the exception of 2 Peter, the "end" that these texts envision is not primarily the destruction of the earth or the created world. Rather, in proclaiming the dawning of a new age in Christ, they envision an end to the Roman imperial world of oppression, sin, and injustice—an end to the *oikoumenē*.<sup>3</sup>

Here I draw a distinction between several different Greek words for "world." Revelation unveils not the end of the physical created world (the Greek words *kosmos*, *ktisis*, or *gē*) but the end of the imperial world, the *oikoumenē*. In my view this distinction can help us navigate the sense of an end today as well.

In Revelation, the earth (*gē*), the world (*kosmos*), and the entire creation (*ktisis*) belong to God. Despite all its imagery of destruction, Revelation continues the biblical tradition of affirming the fundamental goodness of creation as declared by God in Genesis 1. Commands to "worship the one who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and springs of water" (14:7) make clear that it is God who created heaven, earth, springs of water, and the sea. The use of creation-oriented terminology (the Greek root *ktiz-*) in Revelation is overwhelmingly positive—Rev 3:14, 5:14, and especially the emphatic declaration of 10:6 (see also 4:11) that God "created the heaven and what is in it and the earth and what is in it, and the sea." God does not consign the creation to destruction in Revelation.<sup>4</sup> A key text is Rev 11:18, in which Revelation

proclaims not "the time has come to destroy the earth" but "the time has come . . . to destroy the *destroyers* of the earth"—that is, the Roman empire.

This is quite different from the perspective of 2 Peter 3, a chapter that I have come to view as the most ecologically

---

3. Although *oikoumenē* is often translated "inhabited world" (see definitions 1, 3, and 4 in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich (BDAG), 3d ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and in H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed with revised supplement (Oxford, 1996), I have argued that *oikoumenē* is more accurately translated "empire" in the New Testament (see, by way of comparison, BDAG definition 2). See Barbara Rossing, "(Re)Claiming *Oikoumenē*? Empire, Ecumenism and the Discipleship of Equals," in *Walk In the Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Shelly Matthews, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 74–87.

4. Rev 21:1, "The first heaven and the first earth had passed away," and 20:11, "Earth and sky fled away," can be read in a number of ways, but certainly not as evidence that God must destroy the first earth before the dawning of the new heavens and the new earth. I have suggested that the "first earth" that passes away is the earth that is captive to Roman imperial power, whereas the new earth of 21:1 is envisioned as the earth free from Roman domination (see Rossing, "Alas for the Earth: and Resistance in Revelation 12," in *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, vol. 5, *The Earth Bible*, ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], 189). For the argument that Revelation's anti-imperial critique can be a positive resource for ecological reflection see Rossing, "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision for Earth's Future," in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Dieter Hessel (Cambridge: Harvard Center for World

problematic chapter in the entire New Testament. Second Peter makes repeated references to God's plan for a fiery end to the planet, declaring that "The present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire" (3:7) and that when the day of the Lord comes the "heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire" (3:12). This epistle draws an analogy between end-times fire and the Genesis flood: just as the world (*kosmos*) that existed at the time of Noah and the flood was deluged by water and destroyed, so too the present heavens and earth (*gē*) are destined for fire and destruction (3:6–7).<sup>5</sup>

Most problematic ecologically is that 2 Peter actually calls on believers to participate in "hastening" (*spseudontas*) the day when the creation will be set ablaze:

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? (2 Pet 3:11–12)

This call to readers to hasten the day functions rhetorically to bring the future burning into the present, giving an active role to readers.

Throughout Christian history, 2 Peter's scenario of end-times burning has spawned a potent legacy that continues today. A whole trajectory that developed from this text, beginning in the second century, continues to influence Christian understandings of the end.<sup>6</sup> When parents in a Seattle suburb succeed in blocking the showing of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* in their kids' public school on the grounds that "The Bible says that in the end times everything will burn up," they are referencing 2 Peter 3.<sup>7</sup> Televangelist Jerry Falwell likewise appealed to the fiery imagery of 2 Peter 3 to debunk global warming in a

February 25, 2007, sermon: "The earth will go up in dissolution from severe heat. The environmentalists will be really shook up then, because God is going to blow it all away, and bring down new heavens and new earth."<sup>8</sup> Although Falwell himself did not equate global warming with the end-times fire of 2 Peter, other Christians do. A blog calling itself "The Great Global Warming Debate," discussing whether or not global warming is human-caused or not, contains this post:

Religions, 1999), 205–24, and "For the Healing of the World: Reading Revelation Ecologically," in *From Every Tribe, Tongue, People, and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 165–82.

5. The King James and Revised Standard Versions include an additional reference to fire at the end of verse 10 that has been modified in the New Revised Standard Version on the basis of manuscript evidence—reflecting the text-critical question of whether the earth and the works that are in it "shall be burned up" (*katakaēsetai*, KJV, RSV) or "shall be disclosed" (*heurethēsetai*, NRSV).

6. *Apoc Pet 5* expands on the fiery imagery of 2 Peter 3, as does 2 *Clem* 16.3. See discussion of the origins and development of the cosmic conflagration tradition by Carsten Peter Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter: Cosmic Conflagration in 2 Peter 3 and the *Octavius* of Mucius Felix," *JSNT* 26 (1986): 79–96.

7. Robert McClure and Lisa Stiffler, "Federal Way schools restrict Gore film: 'Inconvenient Truth' called too controversial," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (Jan. 11, 2007), [http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/299253\\_inconvenient11.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/299253_inconvenient11.html).

8. Jerry Falwell, "The Myth of Global Warming" (sermon, Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA, February 25, 2007). See also Bob Allen, "Falwell Says Global Warming Tool of Satan," March 1, 2007, *EthicsDaily.com*, [http://ethicsdaily.com/article\\_detail.cfm?AID=8596](http://ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=8596).



God planned for global warming even before He created this planet. . . . Please consider with me God's words recorded in the third chapter of Second Peter in verses 10 and 12. Verse 10: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burnt up.

I have pondered the challenges posed by ecologically minded Christians asking "What do you do with 2 Peter 3?" Especially since many churches' lectionaries assign this text to be read during the season of Advent, we cannot simply ignore 2 Peter 3 with its apocalyptic imagery of a divinely ignited burning planet. But we must also insist that 2 Peter not become the lens through which the rest of the New Testament eschatology is read.

For preachers and others who grapple with this text I offer these suggestions. First, we should not attempt to harmonize the New Testament's various apocalyptic cosmologies. The idea of a fiery eschatological conflagration that consumes the entire planet at the end of the world is found only in 2 Peter, an epistle written by a pseudonymous author, perhaps as late as 130 C.E.<sup>9</sup> While other biblical texts use the image of fire—whether a refiner's fire or the fire of purification—no other New Testament text speaks of a total world-destroying fire. And certainly no other text exhorts believers to hasten the day of burning.<sup>10</sup>

The most likely source of 2 Peter's cosmic conflagration imagery is the Greco-Roman philosophical notion of *ekpyrosis*, or world-destroying fire, a much-discussed topic in ancient pagan philosophical debates dating back to Plato's *Timaeus*. The author of 2 Peter may have transposed the Jewish notion of the burning of the *evildoers* into the more Stoic Greek notion of the burning of the *whole created order* as part of his effort to persuade a Gentile audience

---

**W**e must insist  
that 2 Peter  
not become the lens  
through which the rest  
of the New Testament  
eschatology is read.

---

that God is indeed involved in history.<sup>11</sup> The second-century theologian Justin Martyr, for example, makes reference to the well-known Stoic version of conflagration

---

9. Raymond Brown dates 2 Peter to 130 C.E., on the basis of its distance from the apostolic generation and its reference to an established collection of Paul's letters in 2 Pet 3:15–16 (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, Anchor Bible Reference Library [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 767). Other scholars date 2 Peter somewhat earlier; see, for example, John Elliott, "Peter, Second Epistle of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5:282–87, and Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "2 Peter," in *Post-colonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (T & T Clark, 2007).

10. 1 Enoch 10–11 envisions the fallen Watchers being consumed by fire, but it is the destruction of the *wicked* by fire, not the destruction of the world. This is the case also for other Jewish biblical texts often cited as antecedents for the cosmic conflagration imagery of 2 Peter 3.

11. For the thesis that 2 Peter is arguing with Greco-Roman converts who are steeped in the Greek idea of *ekpyrosis*, either through Epicureanism or, simply, Stoicism, see Tord Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter*, ConB NT 9 (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1977) 67 n. 7, and Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter."

in delineating his own Christian version of end-times fire.<sup>12</sup>

Later in the second century, however, when the idea of an end-times cosmic conflagration became a favorite notion of the Valentinians and other Gnostics who

---

## Cosmic conflagration traditions are not shared by Revelation or any New Testament texts other than 2 Peter.

---

thought of the created world as evil, Irenaeus and Origen distanced themselves from this tradition.<sup>13</sup> The important point to note is that already in the second century Christians realized that there are different trajectories of apocalyptic speculation and that the trajectory of a world-destroying fire of 2 Peter risked being used in a Gnostic, world-denying way. Cosmic conflagration traditions are not shared by Revelation or any New Testament texts other than 2 Peter.

Second, even within the polemic of 2 Peter it should be noted that cosmic speculation about the burning of creation is secondary to the main point of the letter. Falwell and other fundamentalists may fixate on the chronology of end-times burning, but that is not at all the purpose of 2 Peter. Rather, the letter uses such end-times threats as a tool to exhort individual sinners to repentance. The epistle's references to the coming burning of creation address a situation where "scoffers" have apparently latched onto the continuity of God's care

for creation to mean that they can do whatever they want, because there is never going to be a judgment day.<sup>14</sup> It is in response to these scoffers that 2 Peter unleashes threats of burning—in order to warn scoffers that there will be a "day of judgment and destruction of the godless" (3:7) in the future, just as God sent a destructive flood in the past. God's patience in delaying the day of the Lord should be used not as justification for complacency but rather as evidence for God's graciousness. With God, "one day is as a thousand years" (3:8).

There still is the problem of the exhortation to "hasten" the day of the Lord and the burning of the planet. In my view, this verse should not be read uncritically in Advent lectionaries as the "word of the Lord." To be sure, the notion of hastening the day of the Lord does not counsel a cavalier "bring it on" attitude toward the fiery destruction, even if our acceleration of global warming today could be seen to take it that way. Hastening the day of the Lord has rather the sense of "active waiting," as Latin American liberation scholar Raul Humberto Lugo Rodriguez has suggested; it is part of the letter's overall strategy of "resistance."<sup>15</sup> Other scholars

---

12. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 1.20, 1.60; *Second Apology* 7: "We say there will be the conflagration, but not as the Stoics, according to their doctrine of all things being changed into one another."

13. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.7.1; Origen, *Contra Celsus* 4.11.79.

14. 2 Peter 3:3. Jerome Neyrey situates the polemic of Second Peter in the context of ancient debates between philosophical schools in the Greco-Roman world, noting that the attack upon those who deny divine judgment closely resembles the apology against Epicurean polemics against providence. See Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980): 407–31.

emphasize that "hastening" is the corollary to the assertion in verse 9 that God defers the *parousia* (the coming of Christ) out of a desire for Christians to repent—in which case the sense would be that believers' repentance and good works could hasten the Lord's return.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in order for this to become a liberating text, those who repent would have to be provided with something analogous to the ark that saved Noah and his family from drowning in the flood. But neither Noah nor the ark is mentioned in this chapter of 2 Peter—only a total end-times burning of the earth, the heavens, and all the elements.

All the fiery rhetoric of 2 Peter leads up to the final promise of the new heavens and new earth: "In accordance with this promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Pet 3:13). This "new heavens and new earth" reference has led some scholars to argue that 2 Peter shares with Revelation a common notion of the positive transformation or renewal of the planet rather than its total annihilation.<sup>17</sup> In their view, the analogy of the end-times fire to the Genesis flood means that 2 Peter does not have in mind the total obliteration of the creation but only its purification, since the Noachic flood did not completely destroy all plants or sea creatures. But 2 Peter does not develop the new heavens and the earth in any positive way, except as a reward for the righteous after the wicked have been destroyed. As Ernst Käsemann points out in his scathing critique of the theology of 2 Peter, "This eschatology only presents us with a straightforward doctrine of retribution."<sup>18</sup>

Aside from the reference to "new heavens and a new earth," chapter 3 of 2 Peter has little in common with Revelation, despite apparent similarities. Even the exhortations to repentance function quite

differently. While 2 Peter shares with Revelation and with most other apocalyptic texts the element of exhortation, 2 Peter focuses much more on individualistic moralism than on the anti-imperial exhortation of Revelation. If we use the distinction that Schüssler Fiorenza has developed, that apocalyptic language can function in two ways—either to control the behavior of individuals or to provide an alternative vision and encouragement of new community structures in the face of oppression—the epistle of 2 Peter definitely falls into the category of moralist use of apocalyptic threats to control individual behavior.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Revelation targets its primary

15. So Raul Humberto Lugo Rodriguez, "Wait for the Day of God's Coming and Do What you Can to Hasten It . . ." (2 Pet 3:12): The Non-Pauline Letters as Resistance Literature," in *Subversive Scriptures: Revolutionary Readings of the Christian Bible in Latin America*, ed. and trans. Leif Vaage (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 202.

16. So J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (New York: Harper, 1969), 367; Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 50 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983): 325.

17. Gale Z. Heide suggests that 2 Peter might share 2 Clement's notion of a purging fire of judgment rather than an all-consuming one, since 2 Clem 16:3 says that only *some* of the heavens (*tines tōn ouranōn*) will melt at the day of judgment ("What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/1 [1997]: 51 n. 42).

18. Ernst Käsemann, "An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 181.

19. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Phenomena of Early Christian Apocalyptic: Some Reflections on Method," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International*

threats of judgment against the system and structures of empire, especially the economic system (Revelation 18). Revelation's New Jerusalem vision (chaps. 21–22) encourages people toward citizenship in God's counter-imperial *polis* (city). Revelation exhorts God's people to "come out" of empire (18:4) so that they can enter into God's wondrous city of blessing and promise.

To summarize: Within the spectrum of early Christian apocalyptic literature, Revelation and 2 Peter represent two very different eschatological perspectives on the "end." Whereas 2 Peter envisions an end to the earth and the whole created world, Revelation envisions an imminent end to the Roman imperial world.

### **End of empire, not the end of the created world**

This crucial distinction between the end of empire (*oikoumenē*) and the end of the created world (*kosmos* and *gē*) is one that I believe can serve us in these next years. Public theologians and religious leaders will need to articulate this distinction much more forcefully in order to equip people of faith to address the crises of "empire" today, manifested in global climate change as well as attendant crises such as "peak oil" (the projected decline of world oil production as supplies become depleted), deforestation, water shortages, and the environmental justice crises being experienced by vulnerable communities throughout the world. What must come to an end today may well be our unsustainable, carbon-addicted way of life that could be defined as the most dangerous manifestation of "empire" today—but not the earth itself. The task of churches will be to lift up New Testament end-of-empire discourses in order to help people envision life beyond this empire, articulating the Bible's joyful and compelling visions for abundant life in

local communities as countervisions to imperial violence and exploitation.

From a biblical perspective, end of empire does not have to mean the end of the physical, created world. Indeed, Revelation perhaps more than any other New Testament text helps readers envision concretely this distinction between empire and the created world, with its picture of the millennium in chapter 20, after the destruction of Babylon/Rome in chapters 17–18. Revelation introduces the millennium as a symbolic thousand-year period of time after Satan has been tied up—that is, after the fall of the empire. Such an image is not meant to furnish a literal chronology of linear time. The entire book presents us with "vision time," as Steve Friesen describes—the journeylike experience in which John moves between "different phases of historical time and records them in a disorienting fashion."<sup>20</sup> The millennium of Revelation represents what Friesen calls "vindication time" for the victims of Roman imperial rule, a concrete period of time after the fall of the Roman Empire. Pablo Richard's interpretation of the millennium of Revelation 20 as "not a chronology but a logic" can be helpful.<sup>21</sup> The important point is that Revelation teaches a logic that invites readers to embrace life on

---

*Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, 1979*, ed. David Hellholm (Tubingen: Mohr, 1989), 313.

20. Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158. Other Jewish apocalypses such as 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra similarly depict a time between the destruction of the Roman empire and the final judgment of humanity, although "their handling of the theme is much different" (Friesen, 160).

21. Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 157.

earth beyond empire—after the satanic power of empire has been dethroned.

Other New Testament texts share the conviction of Revelation that the old imperial order was passing away and the realm of God was already dawning on earth in Jesus Christ. Apocalyptic New Testament language of the "end" seems often deliberately chosen to counter Rome's imperial and eschatological claims to eternal hegemony, and to underscore the urgent advent of God's new age.

### **The urgency of the present moment: Time for repentance and public testimony**

Time is of the essence in Revelation. But, interestingly, the book's perspective is not simply of time hurtling toward an inevitable end. Rather, Revelation puts great emphasis on the present moment as a moment for decision, repentance, and testimony. Shifts from past tense to present and future, along with calls for repentance and use of deliberative rhetoric, all serve to draw the audience into what Harry Meier calls "an abiding sense of the imminent," extending the urgency of the present moment.<sup>22</sup> Analyzing what he calls Revelation's "games with time," Meier argues that Revelation makes ingenious use of delay in order to open up the present moment as a time for decision on the part of readers: "Like advertising with its urgent appeal to buy 'while quantities last'" the Apocalypse "uses the threat of an imminent end to break open an urgent reconfiguration of the present." Revelation offers a kind of never-ending "not yet" that insists on present action.<sup>23</sup>

The end of the empire is inevitable and axiomatic in Revelation, but the destruction seems to be deliberately "delayed" so that the audience can come out of empire, so that it can repent, and so that it can have

the opportunity to give public testimony and witness.

Repentance, or coming out of empire, is the first action that Revelation calls for. The writer of Revelation believes that people can still make the changes necessary to "come out" of empire (18:4). It is not too late for repentance. To be sure, the book's positive calls for repentance (the imperative of *metanoēson*, "repent") are concentrated in the seven opening letters (for example, Rev 2:5, 16; 3:3, 19), whereas later references to repentance are phrased negatively ("they did not repent from . . .," 9:20–21; 16:9, 11). Yet Schüssler Fiorenza has made a persuasive case that even these negative references to repentance in chapter 9 serve as part of the book's rhetorical appeal to the audience to repent.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in a departure from the book's extensive use of the Exodus story, hearts are never hardened in Revelation. Rather, chapter 11 lifts up a concrete model of successful repentance, with the "rest" of the people who heed the testimony of the two witnesses and "give glory to God" (11:13).

Revelation's plague sequences themselves contribute to the book's call for repentance. The trumpet and bowl plagues (Revelation 8–9, 16) project out into the future the logical consequences of the trajectory that Rome is on, so that people can see in advance where the dangerous imperial path is taking them. The terrible calamities of ecological disaster that are described as befalling the earth, rivers, and oceans are not intended as *predictions* of future events that God has preordained

22. Harry Meier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 147.

23. Meier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 130–31.

24. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 72.

---

**W**e, too, need  
to alter the  
course of our life be-  
fore it is too late.

---

must happen to the world. The plagues serve rather as warnings, as wake-up calls—like Ebenezer Scrooge’s visionary journeys in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, where Scrooge is shown horrifying future scenarios not because they must happen but so that he can alter the course of his life.<sup>25</sup>

We, too, need to alter the course of our life before it is too late.

Even nature itself participates in the warning of the plagues, crying out about the consequences of imperial oppressors’ own deadly actions. When waters and springs turn to blood in the third bowl plague, the angel (“messenger”) of the waters interprets this through the logic of natural consequences, as a boomerang-like effect: “You are just, O Holy One . . . for you have judged these things. Because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is axiomatic” (*axios estin*, Rev 16:6). Today, what is axiomatic is that if we continue on our perilous path we will inflict our own demise.

Testimony or witness (*martyria*) is the second action to which Revelation calls the community, following the model of the testimony of Jesus the Lamb. “Testimony is not just any word, but a public word,” Richard notes, drawing on his experience of resistance in Latin America. “In Revelation, testimony always has a power to

change history, both in heaven and on earth.”<sup>26</sup> Revelation places the Christian community in role of the two witnesses of chapter 11, “calling for a witness of active, nonviolent resistance to Rome’s claim of lordship over human history,” as Brian Blount argues in *Can I Get A Witness?*<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the analogy today would be the call for a massive witness of active nonviolent resistance to the claim of carbon-consuming’s lordship over human history.

“Can I get a witness?” The question that Blount hears at the heart of Revelation is a question we must ask today. We are called to give witness or testimony to the Bible’s counter-imperial message of repentance and hope, and also witness to the stories of people most affected by climate change—people in the island nations of Kirabati or Tuvalu who have done nothing to cause this crisis but who will lose their homes because of our carbon emissions; people in Chicago and other U.S. urban areas where asthma deaths will rise, aggravated by higher and higher summer temperatures; people in the Himalayas who risk being killed from the phenomenon of “Glacial Lake Outburst Floods” because of glaciers melting that have never melted before; people in Africa who will become climate refugees because of severe drought and water shortage. We are called to witness to Revelation’s vision for justice and the healing of the world and to its urgent wake-up call.

---

25. Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 85, 91.

26. Richard, *Apocalypse: A People’s Commentary*, 33.

27. Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 40.

David Rhoads has authored a very important ecojustice article, with insights from the early church, from which I want to quote in conclusion.

Most early Christians believed that the end of the world as they knew it was imminent and that soon Christ would return for final judgment and salvation. We too are facing a possible end of the world as we humans know it because of drastic changes that may take place in the earth's environment.

So, how did the early Christians act in the face of their expectation of the possible end of the world? What can we learn from them? Here are several characteristic behaviors of some early Christians that were shaped by their expectation of the end of the world.

- There was a deep sense of mission. The early Christians had a tremendous urgency to spread the message from village to village, from city to city—to call people and cities and nations to repentance and change of behavior.

- Like Jesus, the early Christians were truth-tellers. They made penetrating analyses of the destructive dynamics of their culture

- Like Jesus, they did prophetic acts. In a sense, their lives were prophetic symbols, for every act is a prophetic act when done out of a vision of the future. So healing the sick, feeding the hungry, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, were all prophetic symbols of a new age impinging on the present.

- They created alternative communities, quite different from the culture around them. They had a vision of the future and sought to live it now in the present. In so far as they lived that vision in the present, the kingdom had come!

- In all of this, they were willing to act unilaterally, as far as they were able, to create a new world without waiting for the leaders of the nation or the rest of the populace to lead the way or even to agree with them.<sup>28</sup>

Today, as in the first century, the church is called to model the behaviors that Rhoads identifies. We are called to offer a compelling, joy-filled, counter-imperial community, grounded in Jesus' vision of abundant life. The season of Advent can be an occasion for truth-telling, repentance, and prophetic public testimony about the urgency

of changing our unsustainable way of life—for the sake of the healing of the world.

It is not yet too late for us to "come out" of this empire of fossil-fuel addiction. But scientists tell us today, and I believe them, that we probably have less than ten years to do so.

---

28. David M. Rhoads, "Who Will Speak for the Sparrow? Eco-Justice Criticism of the New Testament," in *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, ed. Sharon Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 83–85.

---

*Ralph Klein is one of the finest preachers on the faculty of The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Through his leadership as editor of Currents in Theology and Mission for thirty years Ralph has brought together excellence in scholarship and excellence in proclamation for the church.*

*A longer version of this article was published in The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 25–38. I am grateful to Peter Perry for bibliographic and editorial assistance with 2 Peter 3 and to the Louisville Institute, the Lilly Theological Scholars Grant, and to Thrivent for grant support for research. I am grateful to The Church of Norway, to Olav Fykse Tveit, Freddy Knutsen, and Hans Jürgen Schorre, and to the ELCA Alaska Synod.*

# Obscure Text, Illuminating Conversation: Reading *The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ* (Qays al-Ghassānī)

Mark N. Swanson

*Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

## Dedication

My offering to this Festschrift in honor of Ralph Klein may be perceived by some readers as a bit obscure. It’s a story about a nearly forgotten ninth-century martyr, preserved in the Arabic language in a few leaves of a tenth-century manuscript belonging to the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai. It is not a text on which one will preach or from which one will learn the fundamentals of Lutheran theology. One of my tasks, then, is to make an argument for how it fits into a volume dedicated to “Scholarship in the Service of the Church.”

Let me hasten to assure Ralph, at least, that I am sharing a text that has been of some significance to my research and teaching. I first became acquainted with it more than twenty years ago, after Prof. Sidney Griffith of the Catholic University in America had published an edition and English translation in the Belgian journal *Le Muséon*.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, when I was studying in Rome, I found a microfilm of the oldest manuscript witness (*Sinai Arabic 542*) at the Vatican Library; after studying the text, I prepared a new edition and

translation.<sup>2</sup> Since my return from graduate work to full-time teaching in 1992 I have taught this text every year, whether in Arabic (in courses on “The Arabic Christian Heritage” in Cairo and elsewhere) or in English translation (in St. Paul and Chicago). In Cairo, many of my Arabic-speaking Protestant Christian students found texts like *The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ* to be a revelation: Not only did Arabic-language Christian texts *exist* already in the ninth Christian century, but the students were able to read them!<sup>3</sup> In Cairo, one could

---

1. Sidney H. Griffith, “The Arabic Account of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ an-Naḡrānī al-Ghassānī,” *Le Muséon* 98 (1985): 331–74.

2. I eventually published some minor corrections to Griffith’s edition in my study, “The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānī), in *Syrian Christians under Islam: The First Thousand Years*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 107–29, here 107–8. My full English translation appears here for the first time.

3. Arabic is a conservative language, anchored by the vocabulary and grammar of the Qur’ān, understood by Muslims to be the very word of God in clear Arabic speech. One



make the argument that such texts served the local church simply by demonstrating that the Arabic language—usually associated with the Islamic tradition—had served as a language of *Christian* reflection and edification for more than a millennium. For a Christian to speak Arabic (rather than, say, Greek or Coptic) was not to be implicated in a kind of linguistic Fall; rather, it was to be part of a rich heritage of which a text such as *The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīh* is one tiny part. Read in English translation among North American students, however, such a text is shorn of its identity-affirming role.

Can it still function “in the service of the church”? Let the reader be the judge.

### Introduction to the text

A common misconception about the Arab conquests, which began in earnest a very few years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in A.D. 632 and which quickly saw the Eastern Byzantine provinces and the whole of the Sasanid Persian empire incorporated into a new Arab-ruled polity, is that conversion to Islam was regularly coerced. In fact, processes of conversion to Islam among the Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians who found themselves in the new Islamic world order were generally peaceful and, at first, slow to make a demographic impact. However, economic and sociopolitical reasons for non-Muslims to convert to Islam accumulated during the first century and a half of Islamic rule, and by the ninth century, encouraged by the religious policies of the Abbasid rulers who had come to power in 750, a wave of conversions to Islam was underway.<sup>4</sup>

It is not by accident that there arose at about the same time an Arabic-language Christian literature, intended in large part to encourage Christians who had adopted the *language* of the Arabs to keep the *faith*

of their Christian ancestors. Several literary genres are represented in this early Arabic Christian literature: translations of Scripture and other church books; apologetic texts that, even when ostensibly addressed to Muslims, probably served primarily as encouragement and emergency catechesis for Christians; and Arabic-language contributions to a library of apocalyptic texts (that explained current difficulties as the birth pangs of the End) and stories of saints and martyrs (that provided examples of sanctity, courage, and perseverance in the face of trials and tribulations) that had already been taking shape in Christian communities under Islamic rule in languages such as Greek, Syriac, and Coptic.<sup>5</sup>

One particular set of texts, written and preserved in a variety of languages, concerns the neo-martyrs—that is, Christians who were put to death by Muslim authorities for the crimes of apostasy or invective preaching against Islam.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that many of these neo-martyrs brought their martyrdom upon themselves. Peter of Capitolias was a priest who, determined to attain the crown of martyrdom, carried his invective against Islam all the way to

---

consequence of this is that educated Arabic speakers are often able to read simple medieval texts without a great deal of difficulty.

4. A seminal study is Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

5. An accessible, well-written, and reasonably priced introduction to all this material is Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

6. On these martyrdoms, see Griffith, *Church*, 147–55, or Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), chap. 9, “Martyrologies.”

the caliph himself, who, in exasperation, granted him his desire. Rawḥ al-Qurashī was an Arab Muslim convert to Christianity who, immediately after his baptism, returned to his home and family in the garb of a monk, and was promptly imprisoned and eventually beheaded. The Christians who told their stories saw these people as heroes of the faith rather than as suicides, and included their feast days in their liturgical calendars.

The story that I present below provides something of a contrast to the stories of voluntary martyrs. Here is my translation of the Arabic text.<sup>7</sup>

The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ, Superior of Mount Sinai (Qays al-Ghassānī)

1 In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God.  
 2 This is the martyrdom of our father, Saint ‘Abd al-Masīḥ, the superior of Mount Sinai, who was martyred at al-Ramlah.  
 3 There was a man of the Christians of Najrān<sup>8</sup> called Qays ibn Rabī<sup>9</sup> ibn Yazīd al-Ghassānī, from the elite of the Christian Arabs. He was exemplary in worship, and understood his prerogatives and obligations. Once when he was twenty years old he went out, intending to pray in Jerusalem, with some Muslims of the folk of Najrān who were resolved on going raiding. While he was in their company they continually beguiled him and sought his stumbling, with the result that he went raiding with them.  
 4 He was the most skillful of people in shooting an arrow, the best of creatures in striking with a sword or in stabbing with a lance. Ignorance, youth, and evil company so carried him away that he entered with the raiders into Byzantine territory. He participated in the *jihād* with them: he fought, killed, plundered, burned, and trampled every taboo as they did. And he

prayed with them.<sup>10</sup> He surpassed them in the severity of his rage and in the hardness of his heart against the Byzantines. He continued in this way for thirteen years, given to raiding every year.

5 When these years had passed, he went out to one of the cities of Syria to pass the winter there. He entered Baalbek at midday, and upon his horse went directly to the church. As he entered, he saw a priest sitting at the door of the church, reading from the Gospel. He sat at his side in order to listen to him, and said to him, “What are you reading, O priest?” The priest responded and said, “I am reading in the Gospel.” And he said to him, “Translate for me what you are reading.” And he translated for him, saying, “Whoever loves mother or brother or anything more than me, is not worthy of me.”<sup>11</sup>

6 As soon as he had read this [Qays] began to weep, remembering what he had been, and what he had become. When his weeping grew in intensity the priest said to him, “Young man, what is your trouble?” al-

7. Translation of the Arabic text in *Sinai Arabic* 542 (10th c.), ff. 65<sup>r</sup>-67<sup>r</sup>. The title is added, as are paragraph numbers and words appearing within square brackets.

8. A renowned center of Christianity in South Arabia (now the Yemen). With the Islamization of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century the Christians of Najrān were dispersed; some settled in Syria and made common cause with the Christian Arab Ghassānids, hence the *nisbah* (an adjectival name referring to a person’s tribe, home or profession) “al-Ghassānī” (= “the Ghassanid”). The point being stressed here is that the man is an Arab, not an Arabized Syrian.

9. The manuscript here gives “Rabī’ ibn Qays,” but the text later makes clear that the man’s first name is Qays. See paragraphs 11 and 16.

10. That is, he participated in ritual prayer as a Muslim.

11. Cf. Matthew 10:37 and Luke 14:26.

Ghassānī said to him, “Do not reprove me for my weeping. I was once among the adherents of this Gospel, but today I am among its enemies. Listen to my story, until I have made it known to you.”

7 When he had made his account known to the priest, the priest said to him, “What prevents you, if you are remorseful, from returning and repenting?” al-Ghassānī said to him, “The matter is exceedingly great. I know things about myself that the mountains and the two earths [?] cannot bear.” The priest said to him, “Have you not heard the Gospel say, ‘That which humans cannot endure is easy for God?’<sup>12</sup> It also says that ‘God rejoices more in the return of one sinner than in a hundred righteous’.<sup>13</sup> Yes, my beloved brother, know that God is swifter to us than we are to Him! You have read the Gospel, as you mentioned to me. Remember the thief,<sup>14</sup> and the Prodigal Son!”<sup>15</sup>

8 The young man arose and prayed in the church, unsheathed his weapon, threw it before the altar, and pledged to God that he would not return to any aspect of his former life. The priest performed for him the *usmūn*<sup>16</sup> for the forgiveness of sins. Then he went out, sold his horse and his weapon, and distributed the proceeds to the poor. The priest celebrated the mass and communed him. Then [Qays] exchanged the peace with him and went out, heading for Jerusalem.

9 When he arrived, he put on the black garb [of a monk] and went in to the patriarch, *Anbā* John,<sup>17</sup> and made his story known to him. The patriarch consoled him and strengthened him, took joy in him and prayed over him, and sent him to the *laura* of Sabas,<sup>18</sup> to the superior of the monastery, that he might make him a monk. He went there and became a monk, and [the superior] put him in the care of a spiritual master. He remained there for five years.

10 After that he went out and performed a

circuit of the monasteries in the vicinity of Jerusalem. And after that he went out to Mount Sinai,<sup>19</sup> and resided there also for a number of years, in strict devotion and in the service of the monks and solicitude for them, so that he came to go regularly to Aylah<sup>20</sup> because of the *kharāj* tax on the estate of Qasr al-Tūr,<sup>21</sup> as well as the *kharāj* tax on the Christians of Pharan and Raitho.<sup>22</sup> Because of what the monks saw of his solicitude, they appointed him steward<sup>23</sup> over them. He continued in this for five years.

11 After that he conceived a desire to make his affair known.<sup>24</sup> Thus he went out to al-

12. Cf. Luke 18:27.

13. Luke 15:7.

14. Luke 23:39-43.

15. *al-ibn al-shātir*, not “the clever son” (as in contemporary Arabic) but “the son who withdrew from his family” (Luke 15:11–32).

16. From Greek *hagiosmon*?

17. Probably John VI, patriarch from 839 to 843.

18. For the famous Palestinian monastery of Mar Saba, see Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), and Joseph Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995).

19. For the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai, see, for example, George H. Forsyth and Kurt Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973).

20. The ancient Red Sea port city, today ‘Aqabah, Jordan. The name “Aylah” is preserved by the nearby Israeli town of Eilat. Apparently in the mid-ninth century there was a tax office in Aylah.

21. That is, the agricultural land in the vicinity of Mount Sinai (*al-Tūr*, “the Mount”).

22. Other Christian centers in the Sinai peninsula.

23. *uqnūm* = Greek *oikonomos*.

24. That is, he wanted to make a public profession of his reconversion to Christianity.

Ramlah,<sup>25</sup> and with him two virtuous monks who had given themselves to him to accompany and serve him. He wrote a letter as follows: “I am Qays ibn Rabī ibn Yazīd al-Ghassānī al-Najrānī. My story is thus-and-such. I have become a Christian and a monk, out of my own longing and my desire for Christianity. I am lodging in the church. If you want me, seek me there.”

12 He threw the letter into the communal mosque in al-Ramlah. Then he went with the two monks and sat in the lower church, St. Kyriakos.

13 When [the Muslims] had read the letter in the mosque they raised a din, and a group of them went out until they reached the lower church. They made the rounds of the church, inside and out, from top to bottom, while he was seated [there] with the two monks. They did not see him because God blinded them to him. He got up and walked in front of them so that they would see him, but [still] they did not see him! They went to the upper church to seek him, and then returned to the lower. They were unable to seize him—despite the fact that they were jostling him—because God had blinded them to him. The two monks said to him, “Our father, God has not desired to make your affair known to them. If He had known that you were to undergo [martyrdom]<sup>26</sup> today, He would have made you known to them. Therefore, if God did not desire that, do not resist the command of God!”

14 He remained in al-Ramlah for three days, then departed for Edessa,<sup>27</sup> then returned to Mount Sinai.

15 They found that the superior of the monastery had died, and the monks sought to make him superior over the Mount. (His [new] name upon becoming a monk was ‘Abd al-Masīh.<sup>28</sup>) And he dwelt as superior over Mount Sinai for seven years.

16 It happened that the official in charge of the *kharāj* tax treated the Mount unjustly.

(The *kharāj* in those days used to go to Palestine.<sup>29</sup>) Therefore [‘Abd al-Masīh] went out with a group of monks, bound for al-Ramlah. When they reached a place called Ghadyān, they discovered companies of pilgrims coming from their pilgrimage.<sup>30</sup> As a company was passing them by, a man who was part of it saw [‘Abd al-Masīh] and recognized him, for behold, he was one of his companions from the years that he had participated in raiding! He clung to him and said, “Are you not Qays al-Ghassānī?” He said to him, “I do not know what you are saying.”

17 But the man shouted and raised a clamor, and the members of his company gathered at his shouting. He said to the people, “This monk was with me for years in the raids, and used to lead us in prayer. He is a man of the Arabs, and was my companion. He once received a wound at the top of his shoulder. Search him, and if you do not find

25. A city built early in the eighth century to serve as the provincial capital of Palestine, located near (and replacing) the ancient city of Ludd=Lod=Lydda/Diospolis, famous in the Christian period for its shrine of St. George.

26. The word used in the text, *tasbur* “have patience,” appears to reflect the Greek *hypomenō*, frequently used in the context of martyrdom.

27. Now Urfa in Turkey, Edessa was a major center of Syriac-language Mesopotamian Christianity. While at the time of this story Edessa was best known for its Jacobite (anti-Chalcedonian miaphysite) community, there was also a Melkite (Chalcedonian) community there.

28. ‘Abd al-Masīh is Arabic for “servant of Christ,” Christodoulos in Greek.

29. Once Ahmad ibn Tulūn had come to power in Egypt (868-883), the *kharāj* tax of Sinai would undoubtedly have gone there rather than to Palestine.

30. That is, *Muslim* pilgrims returning from Mecca.

it as I have said, then I am a liar!"

18 They stripped him of his cloak and robe, and found the scar as he had said to them. So they bound him with the cords of the beasts, and joined him to his companion monks, who were three in number. They undid his bonds and at night pleaded with him to flee, saying to him, "We will remain with them, to do with us what they will, and offer ourselves in your stead." He answered them saying, "It is more fitting that I be *your* ransom, by myself."

19 When they drew near to al-Ramlah, that accursed one mounted his beast and went ahead of them into al-Ramlah. He gathered a crowd, went in to the governor, and informed him of what had happened in the case of the monk. [The governor] directed a cavalry unit to accompany him, until they encountered [the monk] en route, escorted him into al-Ramlah, and brought him in to the governor.

20 The governor said to him, "Be ashamed of yourself! For you are a man of high birth and dignity!" 'Abd al-Masīḥ replied, "Shame from Christ my God is more compelling than shame from you! Do what you like."

21 And [the governor] sought [people] to bear witness against him, and a group of people bore witness to what they did not know. Then he imprisoned him for three days. After that he brought him out and offered him Islam, but ['Abd al-Masīḥ] did not accept it from him, and [his] response offended [the governor's] hearing. At that he went into a rage, and ordered that he be beheaded.<sup>31</sup> And indeed they carried it out. Then [the governor] ordered that [his body] be concealed from the Christians and burned. So they carried it until they reached a well at Bālighah, which had been laid waste. They threw his body into it, cast upon it great quantities of wood, and kindled a fire in it so that the wood was consumed.

They set a guard over it so that the Christians would not steal [his remains].

22 When nine months had passed, monks from Mount Sinai came out and talked with groups of the people of al-Ramlah concerning him. [The people of al-Ramlah] were extremely anxious about this, fearing both the sultan and the depth of the well (because it was about thirty fathoms deep). But ten strong young men decided to run the risk [of recovering the body]. They prepared rope and a large basket, went to the lower church, and spent the night there until the people were sleeping. Then they took candles and fire and departed, and with them the monks. They tied one monk with the basket at the end of the rope, and lowered him [into the well], fire and candles in his hand. When he reached the bottom he lit the candles and searched, to the depth of his knee, the ashes from the wood that they had cast upon him. The first thing that appeared of ['Abd al-Masīḥ] was his skull, which shone like snow. Then he brought out the rest of his body: the fire had not burned it, and had not caused it any damage at all. [The monk] rejoiced exceedingly at that, and great was his wonder. He took one of his arms and hid it, and likewise took some of his bones, then put the rest into the basket and called to them to pull it up.

23 When they had pulled it up, all those who were above snatched at [his remains] and fled to the lower church. Three of them remained behind, and brought up the monk. When they had brought him up, they went to St. Kyriakos and found [their companions] wrangling over [the remains]. The monk who had been below continually resisted them until he was able to take his

31. On apostasy as a capital offense in Islam, see Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmans en pays d'Islam* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1958), 163–68.

head, and they left him the arm that he had taken in the well. Then they buried [‘Abd al-Masīh] in the *diakonikon*, except for the forearm and thigh, which they held back in order to bring [the martyr] out to the people that they might receive a blessing through him. And the monks departed for the Mount with his head, and there they celebrated his feast.

24 His martyrdom was on the ninth day of March. Therefore let us sing praise to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, to the age of ages. Amen.

### Brief commentary

In my experience, there are a number of issues that students regularly raise when they read this text, and about which they are happy to have a conversation.

First, there is the conversion scene (#5–8), in which we note the courage of the priest (who undertakes to do pastoral care with a terrifying stranger) and the beauty of his preaching: his eloquent statement “God is swifter to us than we are to God” (#7) is one of the most beautiful sentences I have found in texts of this sort. Furthermore—and perhaps most surprisingly for anyone who knows the history of conflict in the early Church over what to do with Christians who had lapsed under persecution and later desired to return to the community—we note the ease with which the penitent Qays is accepted back into the Christian fold. As my Arabic-speaking students sometimes put it, “The gate of repentance is open!”

Second, there is the strange episode in the middle of the story (#11–13), when Qays, now the monk ‘Abd al-Masīh, “conceived a desire to make his affair known”—that is, to join the glorious ranks of the voluntary martyrs. However, his attempt was foiled when God blinded the eyes of the crowd that turned out to seize the monk

who was doing his best to make himself conspicuous! We are reminded of the mysterious ways of God and perhaps offered a gentle critique of the voluntary martyrdoms that were often celebrated in churches under Islamic rule. This story, by way of contrast, suggests that taking one’s martyrdom into one’s own hands is an act of human hubris—and that God has hilarious ways of deflating our pride.

Third, Arabic-speaking students seldom missed the similarity of ‘Abd al-Masīh’s denial “I do not know what you are saying” (#16) to that of Christ’s disciple Peter (Matthew 26:70, οὐκ οἶδα τί λέγεις). How are these words to be understood? As a betrayal in a moment of weakness? Further reflection may see a clue to understanding the monk’s words in the *names* that are used. The monk’s erstwhile companion had asked, “Are you not Qays al-Ghassānī?” For the one who had died to his former life and been reborn as the monk ‘Abd al-Masīh (#15), a simple Yes in response to the question was not a possibility. If this observation is correct, however, it emphasizes again the hubris of the monk’s earlier attempt to take his martyrdom into his own hands: by writing “I am Qays ibn Rabī‘ ibn Yazīd al-Ghassānī al-Najrānī” (#11) he was making an elaborate claim to an identity to which he had supposedly died.

Fourth, when ‘Abd al-Masīh came to see martyrdom as *God’s* will for him, he accepted it with steadfastness (#20–21)—and refused to choose martyrdom for anyone else, despite the willingness of his loyal friends (#18).

Fifth, there is the final comedy of the human wrangling over the relics (#22–23). In my experience of teaching this text, it has been important not to allow this passage to enable a session of Protestant self-congratulation over against churches that value relics but rather to take it as an oppor-

tunity to examine the history of the cult of the saints—and to think about the various ways in which all Christians seek down-to-earth assurance of the presence and power of God.

All of these observations offer entry points into wider church historical conversations: about apostasy and repentance, voluntary martyrdom, monastic vocation, the “law of apostasy” in Islam, and the cult of the saints. More than that, they can lead to conversation about deep theological matters: the grace of God, human pride, death to self and the world, courage in the face of adversity, and the earthly places/means where assurance of God’s presence is (and is not) to be sought.

Yet another aspect of this text deserves discussion in a world and in communities that Christians share with Muslims. A clear aim of this ninth-century martyrdom text is to persuade Christians to remain in the Christian fold and to welcome those who had departed but who desired to return. Although the text is not as blatantly polemical as some Arabic Christian texts from around the same period, the reader may have noticed that it does not portray its Muslim characters at all sympathetically. The background of the text is a Christian-

Muslim *confrontation* rather than a fruitful Christian-Muslim encounter or a competition in goodness.<sup>32</sup> While the text is helpful for understanding the survival strategies of a community under threat, it gives little positive guidance for members of communities who wish to reach out to those beyond their boundaries in the hope of creative and mutually instructive dialogue. Of course, throughout the history of the church and down to the present day, strategies of identity preservation and communal edification have been in tension with those of *apologia* and outreach. Here, too, is an important area for conversation—opened up by a little story about events of 1,150 years ago.

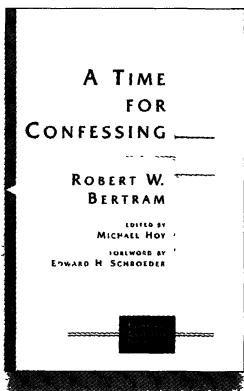
## Conclusion

*The Martyrdom of ‘Abd al-Masīh* offers a variety of opportunities for conversation about things that matter. Texts from ill-known corners of the Christian tradition—or the lesser-known parts of Scripture—can do that. Few people know that better than Ralph Klein.

---

32. For this phrase, cf. *Sūrat al-Mā’idah* (5) 48.

# RECENT BOOKS FROM **EERDMANS**



## **A TIME FOR CONFESSING**

*LUTHERAN QUARTERLY BOOKS*

**Robert W. Bertram**

Edited by **Michael Hoy**

Foreword by **Edward H. Schroeder**

"At long last we receive the cream of Robert Bertram's critical thinking on what it means to be a confessing church and a confessing Christian in times of challenge and crisis. Bertram articulates a 'theology of the cross' that draws its inspiration from Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and he models what it means to be a confessing theologian for a confessing church."

— **Carl E. Braaten**

ISBN 978-0-8028-2461-5

240 pages • paperback • \$30.00



## **NATURALISM**

*INTERVENTIONS* series

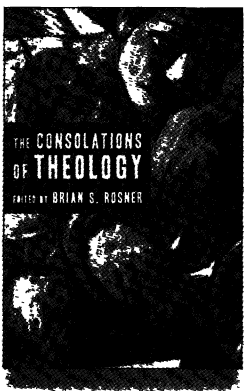
**Stewart Goetz** and **Charles Taliaferro**

"A brilliant book! These veteran philosophers represent naturalism fairly, both allowing its spokespersons to speak for themselves and accurately interpreting their views. Yet the authors' criticisms of naturalism and their defense of theism are trenchant and insightful. Superbly done!"

— **Paul Copan**

ISBN 978-0-8028-0768-7

140 pages • paperback • \$16.00



## **THE CONSOLATIONS OF THEOLOGY**

Edited by **Brian S. Rosner**

"Imaginatively conceived and thoughtfully executed, this book will surely attract a wide and grateful readership. Collectively the essays demonstrate that theology at its best, whether ancient or modern, speaks to the human condition because it is born of personal struggle deep within the soul."

— **John W. de Gruchy**

ISBN 978-0-8028-6040-8

170 pages • paperback • \$16.00

At your bookstore,  
or call 800-253-7521  
[www.eerdmans.com](http://www.eerdmans.com)



**WM. B. EERDMANS  
PUBLISHING CO.**  
2140 Oak Industrial Drive NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49505



# Preaching Helps

First Sunday of Advent—Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Series B

## A Christmas Feast

I read this series of Preaching Helps for Advent and Christmas on the Fourth of July, while a cable channel ran a marathon of second-rate Christmas specials. The only connection I could make between July 4 and December 25 is that I felt as stuffed on good preaching on the Fourth as I feel after a Christmas feast. The annual residency of the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Program ended the day before, and we had spent three weeks feasting on God's word. I was privileged to preach at the opening Eucharist. It is humbling and remarkable to be extremely pleased with and proud of a sermon, and to say without embarrassment that the preaching only got better after that.

Tom Long pointed out some of the windows of grace that God regularly opens, which we often fail to notice. Frank Thomas asked us why we keep waiting for people to applaud when God is already clapping. H. Beecher Hicks powerfully proclaimed the good news for all people in and through a careful analysis of African American preaching. Dave Rhoads enthralled us with embodied recitations of the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Paul's letter to Philemon, and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Those were just some of the faculty preachers. Doctor of Ministry students—seasoned preachers with gifts for the pulpit—preached in both chapel and classroom. I heard an Episcopal priest push God's love for all people to the point that the proclamation of grace made us squirm uncomfortably with wonder. A United Church of Canada pastor preached a powerful word of truth and hope to her denomination. A priest from New Zealand spoke the gospel into the lives of middle-school and high-school boys who come to her cathedral for an annual school mass. And a Lutheran pastor opened the Bible in such an inviting way that we all would have signed up for the Book of Faith initiative.

I noticed a couple of differences in our doctor of ministry students this year. First, many wanted to be referred to as *students*. This is a noticeable difference. For years, the preferred nomenclature was *participant*, because professors needed to recognize that D.Min. students bring wisdom and experience to the learning process. But this year, people were clear that they wanted to learn and to have a relationship with teachers. The other difference I noticed is that, rather

than showing their stuff, students wanted to hear excellent preaching, to receive the gospel, to be fed. Many came to us very hungry. Many went home with a renewed commitment to find ways to hear good preaching. The differences I noticed in students this year are, I think, an indication of how tough things are in the trenches.

So, as I sit here on the Fourth of July, stuffed on the gospel and excellent preaching, I wonder: How will I make certain that I am not starving for good news come Christmas? How will I guarantee that I receive the gospel at Christmas? Personally, I am blessed with daily chapel. But I recall long stretches as a parish pastor when the only person I heard preach was me. Colleagues suggest making preaching and receiving the gospel a priority at cluster meetings, attending midweek worship services in a neighboring congregation, campus ministry, or hospital setting, and regularly exchanging sermon videos with a trusted but a distant colleague. How will you feast on the gospel this Christmas?

When it comes to feasting on God's Word, this series of *Preaching Helps*, authored by **Clark Olson Smith** (and all *Preaching Helps* for that matter), is either a wonderful appetizer or dessert. These pages are not a Christmas feast. They taste so much better, they are so much more satisfying, when as preachers we are well fed on the gospel, even full, rather than hungry.

Olson-Smith did not provide much of a biography. He simply said that he is pastor of St. Stephen Lutheran Church in South Plainfield, New Jersey. A graduate of LSTC, he is in his first call. In class, he pushed himself and his peers to both preach and provide an experience of the gospel. He wanted sermons to do what they say. When I led a first call theological event in Region 7, I had an opportunity to once again be his preaching professor and talk through a sermon he was preparing. I was impressed anew by the seriousness with which he takes his context and the perspectives that are part of his generation. Biography or no, you will come to know him in these pages.

As you prepare for Advent and Christmas, I pray that you will find ways to eat well when it comes to the daily bread of the gospel. If you are intrigued at the thought of eating a Christmas feast in June and July by coming to Chicago to learn about and hear good preaching, let me know, or visit the ACTS Doctor of Ministry in Preaching Web page at [www.actsdminpreaching.org](http://www.actsdminpreaching.org). It's wrong for me to sit here satisfied and say nothing, when preachers are hungry and I know where they can go to feast!

Blessed Advent and Christmas!

*Craig A. Satterlee, Editor of Preaching Helps*  
<http://craigasatterlee.com>

## First Sunday of Advent November 30, 2008

Isaiah 64:1–9

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

We read this week some of the most heart-rending scripture. Isaiah cries out, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” And the psalmist weeps, “You have fed your people with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.” I call it heartrending because it tears open the truth of our world and our lives.

“Our world, our tears.” I recognize these voices also as my own—the desperate urgency and the hot, hopeless tears. Even in times not so extreme, personally or corporately, these scriptures recall those extremely dark times of the past, even as they unmask today’s hidden, chronic heartaches. Paul will speak of it in 1 Corinthians, our waiting “for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” At the reading of Isaiah 64 and Psalm 80 that moment of revelation will come. God will truly tear open the heavens and come down. We will see again our raw, bleeding need for Jesus.

This is what I mean by “heartrending”—the revelation of our need and also Christ’s presence in it. Mark speaks too of this need, and of its filling. Jesus promises to come indeed, so that the rending and tearing will be like the joyful breaking open of fig tree blossoms. The rending will be a mending.

Isaiah is not naive about that need for mending. Our wounds are not only those of victims. They are also self-inflicted. The mess we are in has many of our own fingerprints on it. “We sinned,” Isaiah confesses. “We transgressed.” And it’s no light thing, as if these sins might simply be dismissed.

“Like the wind, our sins sweep us away,” the NIV translates. Our *sins* dismiss *us*, Isaiah is saying. The consequences are mortal.

David L. Petersen suggests that this passage—and indeed all of Isa 63:7–64:12—is liturgical in nature. “An elaborate communal lament,” he calls it.<sup>1</sup> The cry “tear open (*qara*) the heavens” recalls Isa 36:22 and 37:1. As Assyria threatened war, King Hezekiah and his administration “tore (*qara*)” their clothes. To call this a “sign of mourning” would, I think, understate its depth. For this scene, plus the encouragement to read Isa 64:1–9 as a liturgical text, brings to mind a picture of tremendous communal grief mixed with bitter hope. Imagine a whole assembly rending their clothes as a sign of their rending, confessing hearts, calling on God to join them by rending the heavens and coming down.

In our own assemblies, preachers invite us to do the same. The bad news is the mortal danger we are in and our complicity in its advent. The good news is the advent of our God. God already responded to our heart-rending confessions not only by tearing open the heavens and coming down but also by letting God’s own self be torn open for our sake on the cross. This rending was a mending, and it will be again. Again and again, God in Christ chooses to suffer the mortal consequences with and for us, *so that* hope, joy, peace, and love might finally be ours, together with God and one another.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul names this “togetherness” as “the fellowship (*koinonia*) of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” This is the same *koinonia* or “sharing,” Paul notes in 10:16, that we have in Christ’s blood and body in Holy Communion. The whole letter speaks volumes about how challenging is

1. David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 76.

the “togetherness,” “fellowship,” and “sharing” in Christ. Still, there is hope and power in this fellowship and the *koinonia* eating we do. For Paul, our *koinonia* eating breaks our communion, our partnership, with worldly demons.<sup>2</sup> The rending of such relationships and community begins the mending of the fellowship of God’s Son.

In *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers writes insightfully about Mark’s political imagination of God’s rending and mending.<sup>3</sup> Myers refers to Mark 13:24–37 as Jesus’ “second sermon on revolutionary patience.” In naming the four night watches, Jesus foreshadows crucial moments in the passion: evening—the Last Supper and time after the crucifixion; midnight and “cock crow”—the general and specific times of Peter’s denial; and dawn—when Jesus was handed over to the Romans. But for Myers the most important foreshadowing Mark does here is in Jesus’ call to “Wake up!” “Watch!” and “Stay awake!” These evoke the disciples’ failure to do just that in Gethsemane. Present-day disciples, Myers concludes, are

exhorted to embrace the world as Gethsemane: to stay awake in the darkness of history, to refuse to compromise the politics of the cross. The revolution of means as well as ends, the nonviolent struggle against the historical lockstep of domination, will prevail because the strong man is not the true “Lord of the house.” So can we join the struggle to bind him and liberate his domain.<sup>4</sup>

Advent is a time for honesty about the strength of the “strong men” that tear us and our world apart. We and our communities and nations have been cut to the bone by war, broken open by addiction, torn in two by greed. On the first Sunday in Advent, preachers wake us up to hope by proclaiming Christ, who comes in peace and love as one torn open and yet alive, mending us for joy even we rend our hearts before God.  
CKOS

## Second Sunday of Advent December 7, 2008

Isaiah 40:1–11

Psalms 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Peter 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Where is the wilderness? In which wilderness are we preachers preparing a way?

The wilderness talk of Isaiah and Mark recalls the first mark of a New Monasticism: “Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.”<sup>5</sup> For now, let me encourage us to read “abandoned places of Empire” as more than a simple euphemism for “inner city.”

Myers, writing on this opening of Mark, sees the author subverting from the outset both Rome and Jerusalem. This *evangelion* is about Jesus Christ, not the Emperor or his armies. It is not more imperial propaganda, but news of a victory (and a powerful victor) worth celebrating, worth reorienting one’s life around, worth following on a new way. Moreover, for Myers, the wilderness locale of the messenger introduces a tension, a polarity with the temple. The wilderness is to the temple as “periphery” is to the “center.” For this *evangelion* begins and ends as a “wilderness revival,” not a temple liturgy.<sup>6</sup>

2. See 1 Corinthians 8. Breaking communion with demons is also the start of challenging and reorienting communion with Christ.

3. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 343–48.

4. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 348.

5. For a full listing of “The Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism,” see <http://www.newmonasticism.org/12marks/12marks.php>; see also Claiborne, Shane. *Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

6. Myers, 124–26.

I have been sent to the wilderness in the suburbs. The wilderness in the suburbs looks different than the wilderness in urban places—or the wilderness in rural places. From those other wildernesses, these suburban ones may look instead like the gleaming heart of the Empire. I have to confess, there are days they seem that way to me, too.

I am one of those young pastors who is comfortable claiming the role of a prophet. I cherish the memory of a Mexican lay woman. When our group of U.S. Lutherans visited her Roman Catholic parish, she graciously welcomed us and then sent us as missionaries “into the heart of the Empire.” So I am a child of the suburbs with a chip on his shoulder.

I am also one of those young pastors who is uncomfortable claiming the role of a prophet. I am all too aware that there is no wilderness uncolonized and that every imperial bastion produces its own wilds. Like urban places and rural places, the suburbs are truly wild, bewildering, and broken. The gospel-truth is that every gleaming heart of the Empire is just a shaky facade. The heart of the Empire is indeed broken. So I am a child of the suburbs with more than a chink in his armor.

Second Peter’s question cuts right to the quick: “What sort of persons (*potapous*) ought we be?” Or, with an alternate translation of *potapous*, “From what country ought we be?” This emphasis on *place* fits with the question’s answer in v. 13: “In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” In this time of waiting, we ought to be people from the place where righteousness is at home. This, according to the promise of Jesus Christ, is and will be a place rural, urban, *and* suburban. And, being people of righteousness, waiting for the final fire, we also ought to hasten (*spoudasate*, v. 12) to be found at peace (not slinging fire

at each other), regarding the patience (not the fire) of our Lord as salvation. Isaiah agrees. The prophet ultimately is to “comfort my people,” to “speak tenderly.”

The reason that prophets speak comfort is that it’s often not so easy to tell the empire from the wilderness, or vice versa. Besides, the *evangelion* about Jesus has a firmer, if gentler, grip on us and the places we live than any other news, good or otherwise.

I am ultimately relieved not to be the messenger Mark and Isaiah proclaim, else I would certainly be tempted to play with matches this week. Instead, the true messenger, whose sandals I am unfit to untie, came before me and will come after me. This is good news for all preachers, even as it steals our fiery thunder. Our Advent proclamation is the tender comfort of the coming Christ, available through repentance. “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.” It is this news, as Mark notes in 1:5, that will draw people from countryside and city alike, from Empire and wilderness. Christ’s *evangelion*, his cross at the periphery, crosses all the boundary lines we draw and makes all places homes for righteousness.

For in Christ, we all live and die at, are drawn into and sent out from, not the center, but the edge of the Table. CKOS

## Third Sunday of Advent December 14, 2008

Isaiah 60:1–4, 8–11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

John 1:6–8, 19–28

“Who do you think you are?” Maybe this captures the tone and implication of the question the Judeans put to John. Or maybe pure confusion, not indignation, led them on their fact-finding mission. Or maybe it was expectant curiosity—“Could *you* be the One?”

Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh suggest that John’s odd behavior—his baptizing—led people to ask questions about his identity.<sup>7</sup> “Symbolic river-dipping,” they assert, “was a prophetic act in Israel.” It was “out of keeping” with his family, his geography, his demographic cohort. John was walking like a prophet and talking like a prophet. Walking like the Messiah and talking like the Messiah even. So indignant, they demanded. Confused, they questioned. Hopeful, they wondered. “Who *are* you?”

Surprisingly, perhaps, John “confessed and did not deny it.” He neither defended himself nor appealed to his rights or authority. Instead, three times, echoing Peter, John admits truthfully that he is no one special—not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. When pressed, his assertion “I am the voice . . .” rings ironic in my ears. Is John smirking? Playfully mocking their grand, prophetic expectations? Or maybe he quotes Isaiah with a straight face, to draw attention away from his person, his identity, and to focus it instead on his voice, his witness. That witness is “I’m no one special. In fact, I am less than special, less than worthy. But one is coming after me and is indeed already among you.”

Surprisingly, perhaps, no one asked, “Who is *he*?” But the next day, John went ahead and answered that question anyway.

As the Judeans asked John, “Who are you to baptize?” I can hear all sorts of responses, questions, and challenges to the claims this week’s scriptures make about who we are and what we do. Who are we to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners? Who are we to be planted as oaks of righteousness? Who are we to sow in tears but reap in shouts of joy? Paul especially makes some wildly extravagant claims. Who are we to rejoice *always*? To give thanks in *all* circumstances (if not *for* all of them)? Who are we to test *everything*? To be complete and blameless, in spirit and soul *and* body? None of these behaviors and identities is in keeping with our apparent identities. I can just hear it: “Who do you think you are? Who *are* you people?”

All the same, around here, in and beyond the assembly, what we do and say and are doesn’t make us special. As miraculous or prophetic or attention-grabbing as it all is, it’s not about us. Instead, like Paul says, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.” The One who is faithful will do it, not us. We are not the One. We simply witness to that One, who is somehow both coming and among us all at once.

These are hard but liberating words for a small “o” one who is used to gaining much attention for his behavior and lavish praise for his achievements. I am one who likes being others’ “go-to” guy for questions and problems. What it must have cost John to say the words “No, I am not.”

And what he must have gained! I imagine that those words freed him simply to do

7. Bruce Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 43.

and be “out of keeping.” I’ll bet they released him from the paralyzing doubt and demand of “Who am I? And who should I be?” I wonder if it was those words that freed Paul to rejoice and give thanks always, even in circumstances of his own failure and limitation. For “No, I am not the One” surely is the beginning of trust in and the birth of hopeful waiting for the true One.

Preachers, this week we consider who we are not and who we therefore are freed to be. Only then will we be ready to testify to true light in the darkness. CKOS

## Fourth Sunday of Advent December 21, 2008

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

Luke 1:46b–55

Romans 16:25–27

Luke 1:26–38

At the congregation I serve, we are even now considering a building project. So God’s question to David in 2 Samuel strikes a resonant note with us. “Are you the one to build me a house to live in?” Well, are we?

Whether or not the assemblies within which we preach are also considering new buildings, 2 Samuel raises a host of questions about how we relate to the “houses” we live in and where God lives in the midst of them. What is the difference between people who are “settled in their houses” and people whose houses are “made sure forever” and “established” by God? What house *does* God live in?

Before we consider these questions directly, let’s play with the meanings of “house.” We might speak literally about our “houses” and mean no more or less than the buildings we and our families live in. Or we might speak of the body’s “house” of wor-

ship, learning, and prayer, meaning those buildings of sanctuaries and classrooms and offices. There is also the “house” of the nation we live in. All three of these are the meanings at play in 2 Samuel.

With these, I suggest inviting more meanings to the playgroup. Let’s invite anything within which we can be settled or made sure. There are the “houses” of our thought or our imagination, which provide our framework of meaning and our boundaries of what we believe is possible. There are also “houses” of our relationships, which exist at many levels. A friendship or my marriage with my wife or my extended family can all be thought of as “houses” I live in. And then there are the neighborhoods and towns and cities we live in, the institutions we interact with, laws we abide by (and don’t). The list is surely not played out, and you undoubtedly have already added many “houses” I haven’t even imagined. Keep playing while we return to the earlier questions.

First, what is the difference between people who are “settled in their houses” and people whose houses are “made sure forever” and “established” by God? I ask this question because the first verse of 2 Samuel 7 reminded me of the sermon Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson preached at the opening worship of the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.<sup>8</sup> In it, he named differences between a “settled church” and a “sent church.” A settled church, he proclaimed, is one that seeks “some kind of equilibrium or homeostasis to calm our anxieties and compensate for our low expectations of the Holy Spirit’s power, promise, and presence.” A sent church

8. The full text of Bishop Hansen’s sermon is available online in PDF format at <http://archive.elca.org/bishop/messages/MSHCWASermon2007.pdf>.

will be a restless—not an anxious—people, the restlessness born of high expectations that the Holy Spirit is going to show up, and when the Spirit shows up through the proclamation of good news of Jesus Christ, lives are changed, sins are forgiven, the alienated are reconciled, the poor hear good news, unbelievers come to faith, the sick are healed, the dead are raised, and people share in common all that they have, each according to their need.

Change “Holy Spirit” to “Jesus Christ” and we have an announcement of the promise of Advent. More than that, we have a description of what will happen when God strengthens us and makes us sure in this Advent hope. Like God’s word to David, the promise of Advent *unsettles*. It unsettles us and makes us restless while it strengthens and sends us.

This Advent promise is the unsettling answer to the second question. What house *does* God live in? Not a building, but a body—the body of Mary and the body of Christ, and our bodies too. But perhaps we have already settled on what this means. Like a confirmation student regurgitating an answer, we can surely remind ourselves that God lives not within a house of brick and mortar but within the community *inside* the house of brick and mortar. But even this is proof of low expectations, of an anxiety-calming equilibrium. Consider David, who would rather have built a house for the ark of God than leave his house of cedar. Is the community recognizable as the body of Christ when it is *outside* that house of bricks and mortar?

The angel Gabriel proclaimed to Mary the fulfillment of God’s Advent promise to David. How strange that *this* is how God made sure of the house of David! Would not walls of cedar and stone make a house more sure and certain than the tender walls of Mary’s womb? This is indeed perplexing. But what is truly *unsettling* is how recklessly, even promiscuously, God makes a

home within Mary. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Mary asked, as if her womb was one house whose door she was carefully guarding, perhaps as carefully as we guard the door to our budgets and hearts and reputations. The promise of Advent is that God has *already* taken up residence in *all our houses*, despite all of their weakness and without our permission. God has taken up residence already, and so very soon Christ is coming out and taking us with him.

In Advent, God comes to live in our cedar-clad houses of low expectations and high anxiety, so that we ourselves might be rebuilt and reborn. God lives in portable, even invasive, water, word, and meal in order to strengthen us and make us sure, even as we leave our houses behind. For God promises that our unsettled terror will become a holy and hopeful restlessness. So holy and hopeful will that restlessness become that, with Mary, we will break out in song<sup>9</sup> and set out and go with haste into a dangerous and needy world, sure only of Christ’s own presence with us. CKOS

## The Nativity of Our Lord Christmas Eve December 24, 2008

Isaiah 9:2–7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11–14

Luke 2:1–20

My sister is an accountant—a tax accountant, no less. That she chose this career came as a surprise even to those of us who were closest to her. We didn’t count on someone as sociable as she to choose a life with

9. Get it? “Break out.”



numbers. But God's is certainly a world of uncountable surprises and wonder.

The new taxes wrapped up with Augustus' registration are only one of the reasons Melanie came to mind when I read Luke. She also recently gave birth. Her son is the first grandchild in the family, and this is his second Christmas. Dylan is blessed with an accountant-mom who understands the difference between treasuring and tabulating.

Luke's good news of great joy for all people, accountants or not, is the child Jesus. Jesus is the One that no one counted. When all the world was to be registered, Mary and Joseph, along with nameless others, were counted important enough to tax and to draft into imperial service. But they were not counted important enough to have a place in the inn. Surely the child of unimportant but exploitable people, a child who would probably die in infancy, could be of no importance to the growing empire. There was no column of statistics lowly enough for babies like him. So all the world was registered, numbered, counted for—except Jesus.

The Emperor's registration, like nearly all of the accounting we all do, was a survey of *what is*. Left out of his—and our—official numbers is *what is to come*. This Jesus no one counted was the firstborn of God's surprising new world.

The first ones to make this good news known were others uncounted and uncountable. No one counted on the uncountable multitudes of the heavenly host. No one dared count on shepherds.<sup>10</sup> And yet—or, perhaps, and so—these were the only ones that dark night who knew the value of the One child. While the crowded inn was abuzz with threats of new taxes and the specter of war, the insignificant fields were ablaze with heavenly light, overflowing with joyous song. “Unto you, uncounted ones, is born a Savior!”

This is good but hard news for those

counted and those doing the counting. A new world of peace and security was not Augustus' to secure. Nor is it ours. No matter how vital our demographic, how numerous our gifts, how careful our accounting, the uncounted Christ child is the only hope of the world to come. Apart from that One, we can count only on more of the same—more bad news, more darkness, more war, more grief. Indeed, we erased that One from the ledger, only to watch—and deny—as God set the record straight.

But do not be afraid, for this One child is good news of great joy for all people, counted or not. Christ has come to end our rigid and rigged accounting practice, to set us free from slavery to the numbers, from bondage to the known and counted and quantified. Starting with Jesus, only God's mercies count. The spreadsheet of our sin has been erased. And a surprising new world, in which *all* have uncountable value, has begun.

Indeed, we see it begin with Mary, who “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” She did not tabulate the offenses and interruptions of the shepherds or the assaults and arrows of the Empire or the exclusions and insensitivity of the inn. Instead, she treasured God's invaluable gift. She treasured this Child and these Promises. She treasured those uninvited strangers and their stubborn, smelly sheep. She treasured; she did not tabulate.

This is the way of God's new world: treasuring all people and all creation. The Uncounted One treasures us, not only for who we are but also for who we are becoming. Like Mary and the shepherds, even the crowded inn and the Emperor himself, we all are becoming new as Christ's immeasur-

---

10. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 232.

able love is poured out upon us. That love has water to bathe and cherish us; a meal to feed and nurture us. That love has a death to pursue us beyond the end and a life to bear us to a new beginning.

The Uncounted One, born tonight, treasures us all into God's new world of surprises and wonder. In this world, there are no taxes, no draft, no rationing; none under- or overcounted. Instead, there is abundant life and immeasurable grace for all. Tonight and forevermore, there is only the One child, Christ Jesus our Lord, who, although unaccounted for, shepherds us into a whole, new way of living and counting. CKOS

## First Sunday after Christmas December 28, 2008

Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

More than any other gospel, Luke's story of Jesus Christ is also a story of a turning of the ages. Jesus, and John with him, initiate something momentously new. At this momentous turning, there are both a conflict between generations and a promise of peace.

In our own time, we know something about ages turning, about generational conflict, and about a hope and promise of peace. In *The Multigenerational Congregation*, Gil Rendle argues that "congregations are doing ministry in the context of a 'major generational watershed.'"<sup>11</sup> Many congregations, he claims, find themselves divided between the different, and usually competing, values of the GI and baby boomer generations.<sup>12</sup> While genuinely appreciating each other, we "do not communicate

well with each other," and confusion and conflict about the very fundamentals of ministry and life together often rule us.<sup>13</sup>

Luke—thanks be to God—addresses us and our conflicted generations. Indeed, this week's Gospel names the promise of Christ's healing peace in our midst.

Before we consider it, let us first let the rest of Luke read us. In Luke 12:49–53, Jesus warns that the fire he brings will spark generational conflict and division. Families, he says, will be divided "father against son" and "daughter against mother." Even in-laws of different generations will be divided against each other. But to see more clearly the dynamics of turning and conflict and promise, we must look elsewhere.

Luke 5 offers an interpretive key. Questioned about why he and his disciples do not fast as John's do, Jesus tells a familiar parable of old and new, wine and wineskins. It's a parable of practices and traditions and of the generations that hold them. Notably, the parable makes no blanket rejections or affirmations. Although Jesus seems to identify himself and his disciples with the new wine, his last words add a twist: "no one after drinking the old wine desires the new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'"

Such themes are also evident in Luke's opening scene. Even as Gabriel announces the turning and names the promise, conflict begins. John, Gabriel promises, will "turn the hearts of parents to their children." But, resigned to being the end of the line, aged Zechariah does not believe, and the generational conflict starts. With the father's enforced silence, one generation loses its voice to make way for the next. Sight of the new-

11. Gil Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (The Alban Institute, 2002), 55.

12. Rendle, 41–43.

13. Rendle, 78.

born turns the father's heart, and Zechariah finds his voice again when he breaks with the tradition of previous generations by naming the child John. Notably, as we have seen, Luke's is not a rejection of an old generation or a condemnation of a new one. As tradition is broken and generational expectations are subverted, the covenant is preserved.

Preserving the covenant is central also to Luke 2:22–40. Luke is emphatic here about the law, using *nomos* five times in these verses—more than in the whole rest of the Gospel! Both Anna's and Simeon's credentials within the covenant are emphasized as well. But these references to the law are not meant as a proof or litmus test of what is to come. We do not see here a rigid blueprint of the turning Jesus initiates. This is no simple *returning*. Instead, the complexity, the irony, the messiness of Christ's turning of the ages is revealed in the scene's setting. It unfolds in the Temple, of all places, the destruction of which this celebrated child will one day foretell. So Luke means something else by emphasizing the law.

Indeed, by affirming the law here, Luke shows that the momentarily new thing the child Jesus initiates is also something momentarily old. Anna herself announces this, "speaking about the child to all who were *waiting for, anticipating (prosdechomenois)* the redemption of Jerusalem." Simeon too was *waiting for, anticipating (prosdechomenos)* the "consolation of Israel." Like Anna, Simeon's song names how old is the hope this newborn fulfills. In this moment in the Temple, old and new celebrate each other: the new giving peace to the old, the old giving a way to the new. Each has a role to play in Christ's turning of the ages.

This is good news for us, locked in intergenerational conflict as we may be. The child Jesus most assuredly brings peace in the midst of competing values, even as he

transforms the "old" covenant into a "new" gospel. In our own time, such transformation is never easy. There is rising and falling for many; there are wounds on all sides. And yet, Christ is present with us, healing the divide and holding us together. Indeed, Jesus promises that the very turning of the ages is his own. Not a tragic sign of decline or a triumphant march of progress, the turning of the ages is *the work of the gospel*, a gift to old and new alike, a project in which every generation has a voice and place. When we anoint winners and punish losers, when we assign blame, when we squelch conversation in order to avoid conflict, we reject Christ. Nevertheless, Christ is faithful, holding old and new together, even as Christ turns one into the other into the other.

And so, in our multigenerational stewardship of the gospel, we are free to consider together: What new wineskins ought we fashion to hold and give flexible shape to the gospel-promise of new wine? Which are the old practices and deep traditions of the gospel that we ought to remember and pass on in this new age? As we sing together God's canticle of the turning, there will be the pain of loss, the confusion of language, the conflict of values, and the frustration of limits. And there the newborn Christ will be also, both fulfilling and promising anew the redemption and consolation of all of creation.

CKOS

## Second Sunday after Christmas January 4, 2009

Jeremiah 31:7–14  
Psalm 147:12–20  
Ephesians 1:3–14  
John 1:[1–9] 10–18

A few years ago, at a continuing education event called “Preaching John,” Dr. Robert Kysar shared a handful of preachers’ guidelines for approaching the Gospel. The most memorable was this: Let John’s imagination inspire your own. Searching for language to describe what this intimate relationship with Christ and Christ’s community was like, John stretched and pushed words beyond themselves. Preachers, Kysar encouraged, ought to feel free to play, too—guided by John’s own images, to reach for holy poetry that will help the present-day assembly imagine and believe themselves into this Christ.<sup>14</sup>

On the Sunday when each appointed reading celebrates God’s creative, effective, and redeeming Word, what better time than now to do just that? To warm up our holy imaginations, I offer a question John got me wondering about, and then I suggest a response. But do not let yourself be limited. Instead, as you prepare to preach, be mindful of the questions and images that capture your imagination. Start there, and give the Spirit time and space to lead you.

Reading John 1, I wondered: What sort of Word is this that became flesh? What does its incarnation suggest the Word was to begin with? Malina and Rohrbaugh suggest a preliminary approach to this Word. First, they offer a nonliterate view of *logos*—that is, “word” as a statement, an utterance, the whole thing a person says. In this case, the Word is “God’s total utterance that has

resulted in everything created, visible and invisible.” Thus, John 1 is “a first-century updated retelling of the ‘Law’ (Torah) given by Moses.” It is already a *reimagining* of creation, the exodus, and Sinai.<sup>15</sup>

Let’s push this reimagining further. What sort of Word is this that became flesh? How might we update and retell the story of God’s fleshy Word from creation until today?

Many years after my adolescent reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, I returned to J. R. R. Tolkien, reading *The Silmarillion*. Published posthumously, *The Silmarillion* is Tolkien’s backstory, a collection of loosely connected short stories telling the ancient history of Middle Earth from the beginning of time.

The first story is called “The Music of the Ainur,”<sup>16</sup> and it begins:

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad.

This is Tolkien’s richly evocative reimagining of The Beginning.<sup>17</sup> As the story continues, God (Eru/Ilúvatar) declares “a mighty theme, unfolding to [the angelic Ainur]

14. Robert Kysar, lecture notes, “Preaching John,” Lutheran Outdoor Ministries 2005 Mid-Winter Theological Academy, Florida, January 25–27, 2005.

15. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 35–36.

16. J. R. R. Tolkien, “The Music of the Ainur,” in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 15–22.

17. The Christian resonances in this story are intentional, not incidental. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis were dear friends, drawn together by their common faith as much as their common craft.

things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed.” But when the Ainur, assembled as a unimaginable choir, sing this mighty theme, there is a rebellion. Impatient and vain, Melkor (Satan) begins singing his own song, creating stormy dischord in God’s Song. So, smiling, God raises up a second theme, beautifully reconciling the discord. But again and much more violently, Melkor sings his rebellion. Now stern, God calls forth a third theme.

And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time . . . utterly at variance. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow. . . . The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony.

Finally, with one last piercing chord, God silences the Song and reveals its purpose. In the Void, the Ainur discover something new, a “new World”—the Earth, living and growing and “unfold[ing] its history.” The rebellious song could not undo God’s creative, effective, and now redeeming Song.

So what sort of Word is this that became flesh? A Song sort of Word, Tolkien suggested. A song is indeed word-become-flesh. Without flesh, without a body to sing it, a song cannot live and enliven, draw us in and bind us together. In *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*, Lorraine Brugh and Gordon Lathrop claim that song is a “primary way in which the assembly enters into the sounding of God’s word.”<sup>18</sup> In song, the Word of God dwells deeply within us, perhaps more deeply than in any other way.

A Word yearning to be sung and lived, a loving Word liberating us for the sake of harmony and healing—this is the Word that became flesh. Christ Jesus our Lord became flesh and died to bring a bright, new song of gladness into every dim and sorrowing silence. Christ died to gather every scattered

and discordant life into God’s one, holy Song.

Almost parenthetically, Tolkien wrote, “And it is said by the Eldar that in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than any substance else that is in this Earth.” No wonder God chose water to accompany God’s creative, effective, and redeeming Word/Song as the sacrament of our adoption. CKOS

## The Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 2009

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

“Yeah, we’re gonna burn, burn, burn.  
And we’re gonna shine, shine, shine.  
Even if it wears us out,  
Or takes us out past these county lines.  
We’re sick of moving oh, so slow,  
And being told where to go.  
Making up our minds to burn and shine.”  
—The Elms, “Burn and Shine”<sup>19</sup>

Does this describe those magi? Having seen the star rising and burning and shining, did they make up their minds to burn and shine, too?

18. Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly, Volume One* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 56.

19. “Burn and Shine,” words and music by Owen Thomas, © 2002 Birdwing Music, ASCAP. Appears on the EMI album TRUTH SOUL ROCK & ROLL. Full lyrics available at <http://www.theelms.net/lyrics/burnandshine.htm>.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come!” declares the prophet. If these words were fulfilled not only at the exiles’ return, and not only at the birth of Christ, but also in our midst this Epiphany, I wonder: What light are we waiting for?

God’s people addressed by the prophet were waiting for the light that would set their children free and bring them home. This light would draw kings and nations, gather the scattered exiles, and spark a time of abundance and wealth. God’s people singing Psalm 72 were anticipating a king who would endure like the sun. This king’s devotion to God and God’s justice would be revealed in his special concern for the poor and needy. God’s people at Jesus’ birth were waiting for the Messiah, who would shepherd God’s people Israel. But what of those Gentile magi? What about us? What light are we waiting for?

Like all of God’s people, the singer of the song “Burn and Shine” is waiting for that thing, the Light, that will make all the difference. For him, light will give a depth of purpose, a meaningful direction. “Don’t you ever wish for something true? / Something to pour your heart and soul into?” the song continues. Again, I wonder, does this describe those magi?

When I was younger, my friends and I used to call this kind of light “the glowing path.” “The glowing path” was the direction or option that was right, that fit, that was truly God’s call to us. It wasn’t something to make but rather something to find, something for which to wait until it would be revealed. We would look for the glowing path whenever we were discerning and deciding—in everything from college majors and future careers to much less momentous choices like what to order off the entrée menu or which plans to make for the weekend. We put a lot of time and energy and angst into waiting for the glowing path to be

revealed . . . and lamenting that *no* path was glowing.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come!” Isaiah’s question sounds less like “What light are you waiting for?” and more like “What light *are* you waiting for?!” There’s an urgent challenge: Look around! Your light is *here*, so burn and shine already! “See and be radiant!” What are you *waiting* for?!

For God’s people addressed by the prophet, this light was surely not bright and neon. It was nothing like a blazing sign, erected by the exiles’ captors, announcing the exiles’ imminent return and apologizing for the misunderstanding. Instead, the light was a promise: at best, a thousand tiny points of light whispering change into the thick darkness. So the prophet called the people to *be the radiant light*, to make it known to kings and nations that God would bring their children home.

The same was true of the psalmist. Sung or prayed at a coronation, the light of this king could only be a promise, a hope, a communal trust named. It called God to act: to give the king God’s own justice. It called the king to act: to judge with righteousness. *And* it called the people, the poor and needy themselves, to act: to demand justice, to call out to the king for the righteousness of God.

Similarly, there was no glowing path for the magi—just a small point of light in a dark, dark sky. The light of that star was nothing like a beacon; it was neither steady, nor stable, nor reliable like the North Star. Instead, this star moved; it wandered even. Following it was surely a nightly challenge, and in fact they got it wrong or they gave up or they thought a shortcut was in order. Whatever the case, the magi skipped the exit for Bethlehem and took instead the road to Jerusalem, the logical place to find a king. But the star wandered to them. It found them, *way* past their county lines, and guided them to Jesus.

The good news of Epiphany is that Christ's light has found us. Although we are lost in Jerusalem, hemmed in by injustice, hidden in the gloom of grief, the Star of Jesus has come to us. "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" There is no glowing path; only a Star, and the path is made by walking.

Amid all the foggy uncertainty and confusion, God has revealed a single living, moving point of light: the mystery of God's will. "You have already heard," Paul says in Eph 3:2, "of the economy (*oikonomian*) of God's grace that was given to me for you." This economy of grace is "the news of the boundless riches of Christ," "the economy (*oikonomia*) of the mystery hidden for ages." In other words, the very logic of the universe, once hidden, is now made known. Revealed, it is Christ and his abundant grace and love for all. This is no static, one-time payment, Paul assures, but a richly flowing economy of grace. It's a moving, living light, a wandering one, and it has come to us, of all people. Liquid Light embraces us from the Font. A body of Light swallows us at the Table. Weekly. Daily. Light.

And so, the wait is over. "Arise, shine, for your light has come!" In the words of the "Burn and Shine" singer, "Take all your feelings, and put 'em aside, / And get what matters on your mind." The light we celebrate on Epiphany is no "Get over it!" kind of light. It is not a "See, there is nothing to be afraid of" kind of light. It is a light that reorients us, reminds us of what we have forgotten, calls our attention to what we have overlooked. It is a light that sends us past the boundaries of our expectations, across the lines of injustice, beyond the gloom of our grief. Minds made up or not, on Epiphany God raises us up with Christ to burn and shine. CKOS

## The Baptism of Our Lord January 11, 2009

Genesis 1:1–5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1–7

Mark 1:4–11

Much is made of emerging generations and our pursuit of celebrity. Blogs send our voice to the masses. MySpace profiles inform the public about our personalities and preferences, our moods and music and favorite movies. Vote after vote for the next American Idol is a dream that we too might be discovered and elevated. Fad and fashion are our air and water. We all want our fifteen minutes of fame. We all are sure there is more to living than the homogenized lives we see around us. We all want to be called out of the anonymous crowd. *And* we want that crowd to be our audience.

An audience is the one thing Jesus does not have in Mark. Jesus is set apart from the anonymous crowd, but no one knows it. There is a spotlight that no one sees, a voice-over that no one hears—not even John, Jesus' would-be agent and promoter. When the heavens are torn open just as Isaiah promised on the first Sunday in Advent, only Jesus experiences it. Only Jesus gets "a glimpse behind the scenes"; only Jesus sees the "unseen forces actually operative in [his and everyone else's] destinies."<sup>20</sup> From every other human vantage point, the baptism of Jesus from Nazareth (a.k.a. Nowheresville<sup>21</sup>) is like every other anonymous baptism. Baptized, Jesus became a beloved nobody, an unknown superstar, a secret messiah.

20. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 129.

21. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 128.

This flies in the face of conventional wisdom. We emerging generations know in our bones that you're nobody 'til everybody loves you. Yet, whether or not we know it in our bones, this is also a myth, a prison, seducing us into a paralyzed frenzy, a frenzied paralysis. We scramble for attention and wait to be noticed. We scour every possible path and loiter at every crossroads. We pursue celebrity and fear the limelight. We crave what ultimately corners us, the crowd's attention, affirmation, and approval.

But, thanks be to God, Jesus the Baptized tears open this powerful myth. Jesus changes frenzy into urgency<sup>22</sup> and paralysis into purpose.<sup>23</sup> Jesus tells us that we are beloved, but not by the crowd. We've been singled out but remain anonymous. We have an audience, but not of our peers or our parents or the public. Our fame, our failures, and the very justification for our existence are neither our own nor the crowd's but God's alone, given and held in baptism.

I myself began to learn about the lure of and liberation from the crowd in a Bible study on Mark. I was lost in a university larger than my hometown and caught by a need to achieve and to please and to stand above. For a year, a handful of us gathered in a church basement around the Gospel of Mark. Although no one else saw it, the heavens were truly torn open and the Spirit came down. I remember clearly one frigid February night, walking home and reeling from what God had revealed: life and love and freedom. I had no words that night, only stinging tears. Tears for new friends and a God who loved me. Tears for an unmistakably urgent call. Tears for what had been lost to the crowd along the way. Tears because, as I was hearing God's voice, I had begun to discover the one God had made for me.

About a year after that brisk, tearful night, our Mark Bible study group went on

retreat to the place where I had been baptized. We took a moment away from the event we were attending to snap a photograph together. It shows us posed at the spot on the floor of the camp's common room where I had knelt and been baptized. I've lost touch with almost all of the people in that photo. And yet, it is today an image of the heavens torn open, of love poured down, of the unseen forces at work in the universe revealed to be at work in my life as well. The Holy Spirit descended like a smiling Bible study group in raggedy jeans and sweatshirts.

The memory of this moment is God's strength to resist the lure of human attention, affirmation, and approval. From any other human vantage point, it's just a regular old photograph, not even worthy of being posted on my Facebook profile. Still, it is courage from the Holy Spirit. It sends me into and sustains me within all manner of wildernesses.

Baptism helps us neither accumulate nor organize friends. Indeed, because of it, we may lose many. And still, baptism is God's watery gateway to true communion, global and eternal, immediate and intimate. Baptism does not shield us from failure, faults, or the scrutiny of leadership. Indeed, it sends us into these, awakens our awareness of them. And also, in baptism, God holds us in mercy and carries us beyond death. Baptism does not vault us into celebrity, fame, or notoriety—even within the modest local assembly—but, through baptism, God teaches us to step out of the

22. See Mark 1:10. *Euthus* ("just as" or "immediately") is used here, one of twelve times in the first chapter alone and thirty times in the Gospel as a whole. In Mark, there is no time either to pose for the camera or to wait for public affirmation and adulation. There is only the immediate urgency of the kingdom mission.

23. See Mark 1:12. We are likewise sent and driven.



spotlight for the sake for the anonymous and, when in it, to announce like John the coming of one greater than ourselves. Indeed, given a baptismal glimpse behind the scenes, we may find ourselves exiting the stage to join Christ among life's unseen actors.

Because Jesus was baptized, we have become beloved nobodies and unknown superstars. In baptism, we die with Christ to the crowds and live with Christ by the Holy Spirit. Because of Jesus, ragged holes all over heaven send God's love to us and send us in God's love. CKOS

## Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 18, 2009

1 Samuel 3:1–10 [11–20]

Psalms 139:1–6, 13–18

1 Corinthians 6:12–20

John 1:43–51

Where will we put our bodies?<sup>24</sup> Bodies and place are themes at play this week. The Second Sunday of Epiphany invites us to reevaluate where we have been putting our bodies. For the sake of catching God's vision, for the sake of Christ's body, for the sake of everybody we know—where will we put our bodies?

The story of Samuel and Eli asks, Where will we put our bodies in order to catch God's vision? At a time when the word of the Lord was rare (LXX: *timion*)—valuable, precious, costly—Eli's body was in its "usual place" (NIV), in his own place (LXX: *en to topo autou*). Recalling the anonymous oracle in 2:27–36 and its specific charges in v. 29, I wonder if this was a choice place to be—comfortable, quiet, set apart from the busy bustle of the temple. Samuel, on the other

hand, was sleeping in the temple, where God's ark was. Perhaps this was his nightly habit. Or maybe God's unfailing lamp had drawn in a restless Samuel that unusual night. Whatever the case, it is there that Samuel catches a precious vision from God. Eli himself recognized that his was not the place where God was speaking. Although he prepared Samuel, coached and coaxed him to receive God's vision, Eli did not move from his own usual place.

Paul asks, Where will we put our bodies for the sake of Christ's body? "All things are lawful," he quotes, "but not all things bring together (*sympherei*)." Here, Paul's body metaphor is communal. Except for v. 15, Paul wrote of the body only in the singular, while "your" is always plural. It is the benefit and bringing together of "the body of you all" that concerned Paul. "Do you not know that y'all's [one] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?"<sup>25</sup> That singular body is Christ's, the one body in which we all are united together. While we are free to do all things, not all things bring this body together. For example, putting our bodies with the body of a prostitute unites (*kollomenos*), but it does not bring together (*sympherei*). Because Christ bought us all at the costly price (*timon*) of his own body, we are not our own to do whatever is our right or ability or desire. Where we put our individual bodies,

24. Barbara G. Wheeler, lecture notes, 2007 Weber Memorial Lectures at Moravian Theological Seminary, March 2007. During her lecture, Dr. Wheeler encouraged listeners to a "full-bodied witness," asking, "Where will we put our bodies for the sake of the gospel?"

25. I disagree with the *HarperCollins Study Bible*, which notes on v. 19: "Temple of the Holy Spirit, here used metaphorically of the individual believer's body." *HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Wayne Meeks, Jouette M. Bassler, et al. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

we put the whole precious body of Christ. “Therefore,” Paul concludes, “glorify God with y’all’s body.”

The story of Jesus’ call to Phillip and Nathanael asks, Where will we put our bodies for the sake of everybody we know? Malina and Rohrbaugh describe this section of John as “the start of the group that ‘believes into’ Jesus.”<sup>26</sup> For John, believing in Jesus means “breaking with the dominant social order” and becoming embedded in, deeply attaching and remaining loyal to Jesus and his discipleship community.<sup>27</sup> Those who, like Nathanael, don’t fit anywhere else find a home in Jesus.<sup>28</sup> At its very inception, Jesus’ community grew as the people Jesus found went and found others they knew—Andrew to Simon Peter, Phillip to Nathanael. Phillip, in essence, used his body as a bridge for Nathanael to believe into Jesus.

In the end, “Where will we put our bodies?” is a question we may answer because of the good news about where Jesus put his own body. For our sake, Jesus put his body on a cross and, even in our midst, on a Table. It is this news and Meal that sends us bodily—both *in body* as individuals and *as a body* created anew by communion with Christ. As we go, the psalm promises not only that our body is “fearfully and wonderfully made” but, what is more, that wherever we put our body, God is near. CKOS

## Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 25, 2009

Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Psalm 62:5–12

1 Corinthians 7:29–31

Mark 1:14–20

Was it John’s arrest that completed preparations for the way of the Lord? Was it that event, sending shock waves up the Jordan River and into the Sea of Galilee, that readied Simon, Andrew, James, and John to respond to Jesus’ catalyzing call? Did it clarify and lay bare the world as it was, ending their illusion or indecision, so that when Jesus came and said “Follow me” they could *immediately* leave it all behind for the sake of the world to come?

We see such moments in movies. In *Star Wars*, it happens when a restless but skeptical Luke returns to his farm with Obi Wan. Finding his home razed and his aunt and uncle brutally murdered, Luke is finally ready to leave with the old Jedi and join the galactic Rebellion. In *Romero*, it happens when a frantic priest calls the bookish, middle-of-the-road archbishop out of a posh

26. Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary*, 54.

27. Malina and Rohrbaugh, 32, 55.

28. Malina and Rohrbaugh, 60. The authors point to John 15:16, saying Jesus “speaks a truth all socially alienated people immediately understand.” In this regard, it is interesting to note that Jesus immediately recognized Nathanael as socially alienated: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” The *HarperCollins Study Bible* reminds us at v. 47 that Israel/Jacob was indeed deceitful. Therefore, Jesus’ exclamation named truth: Nathanael was a known outsider who did not conform to social norms of behavior.

dinner party with El Salvadoran elites. The news the priest brings of a government massacre of the poor opens Archbishop Romero's eyes to the terror campaign and sets in motion his vocal resistance that will lead to his assassination. In the Gospel of Mark, is the arrest of John the Baptist that moment for those first disciples?

For the assembly, that moment has already come. Epiphany dawned weeks ago. Time is pregnant (*peplerotai*, Mark 1:15) and is even now contracting (*synestalmenos*, 1 Cor 7:29). But the call to repent and follow, the prophetic storytelling in which God's time decisively swallows our own, may not yet have been spoken or heard. Diagnoses have been given. Deaths have occurred. Failures of moral courage have spun out their consequences. The gradual accretion of indignities and dissatisfaction has reached its tipping point. In the aftermath of these moments, the preacher need only follow Christ into the "present distress" (1 Cor 7:26 NIV) to proclaim the good news that will set us "free from all anxieties" (1 Cor 7:32 NRSV). Following needs a call.

I remember the call that followed one of those moments in my own life. On September 11, 2001, I was in college in New York State. While we were all still unaware, a fellow student announced from the back of the lecture hall that the south tower had just collapsed. When I returned home, I found a housemate stunned in front of the television, eating a bowl of cereal, watching live as the north tower came down. For at least an hour, we sat transfixed by the stream of images . . . until the telephone rang. It was my pastor on campus, calling to see if I had any family caught in the World Trade Center. I did not, but he went on to name all those in the church who did, asking me, finally, if I would come help him make more calls. With my book bag and my housemate still sitting on the couch, I left immediately.

That moment and the months that followed taught me how vulnerable we are in those *kairos* moments. When storms strike, there are all manner of people and powers fishing our troubled waters for recruits. Violence and addiction bait us. Security and comfort hem us in. But, thanks be to God, Jesus Christ trolls these waters, too, casting a network of self-giving servants and dropping a lifeline of good news. With a gospel-call, Jesus frees us from anxiety, so we can immediately leave behind what is for sake of what will be.

The gospel-call that frees us is this: A new whole world began with Christ's cross. At the moment of crisis, God did not withdraw from our disastrous and shameful suffering but instead joined it, diving into its heart. In Christ's own body and blood, God suffered with us and for our sake absorbed our condemnation, only to raise us out of those troubled waters, after our dying with Christ, to a life lived in pursuit of God's imminent kingdom.

Preachers, trust that now is the time. Enter into the assembly's present distress with empathy—even, perhaps, with your own story. And then, repeat the gospel-call, simply and clearly: A new life unloosed from anxiety is even now being born. Come help Jesus make more calls. CKOS

---

## **Web sites**

***produced by  
professors at the  
seminaries pub-  
lishing Currents***

Wayne Weissenbuehler (WTS): Rural Ministry  
*<http://ruralministry.com>*

Ralph W. Klein (LSTC): Old Testament Studies  
*<http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/>*

Gary Pence (PLTS): Healing Religion's Harm  
*<http://healingreligion.com>*

---

## **Change of address?**

Please contact us by phone or e-mail (*[currents@lstc.edu](mailto:currents@lstc.edu)*), or send your corrected mailing label or a photocopy, or any change-of-address form, to Currents in Theology and Mission, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615, phone (773) 256-0751, or fax (773) 256-0782 (specify *Currents*).

Whether you write or call, please include the six-digit code at the top left of your address label for our reference. Thank you.

---

Currents in Theology and Mission  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago  
1100 East 55th St.  
Chicago, IL 60615

---

Non Profit Org.  
U. S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit No. 38  
Wheeling, IL 60090

---