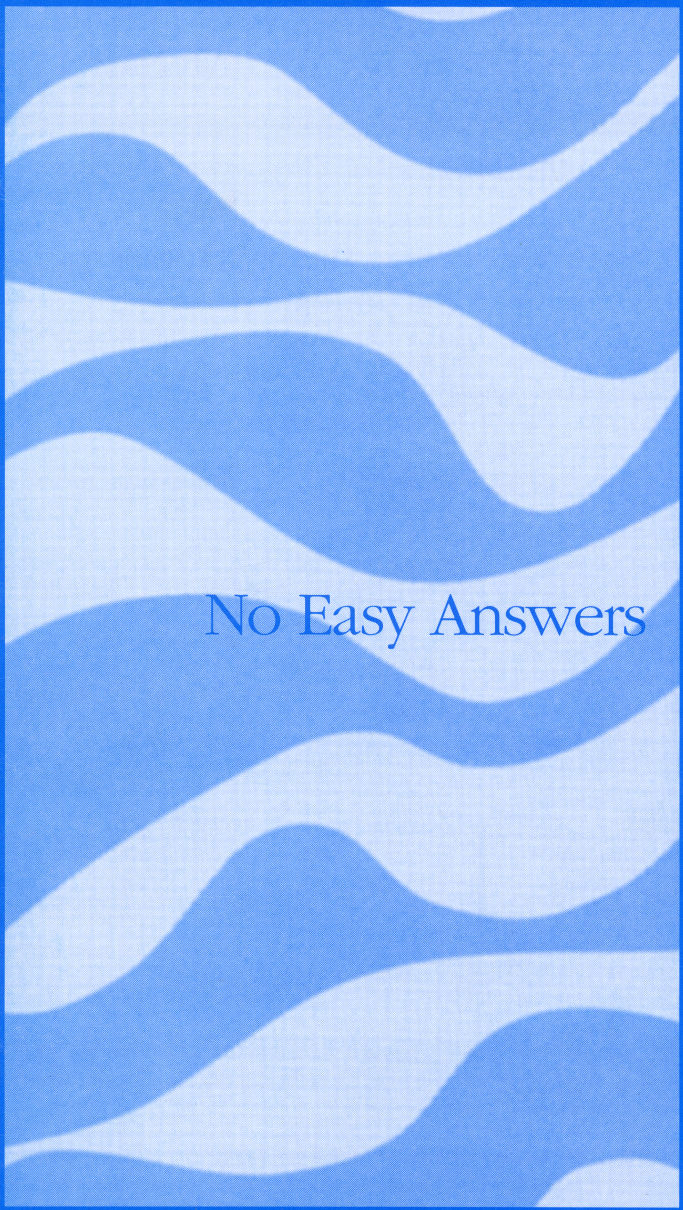
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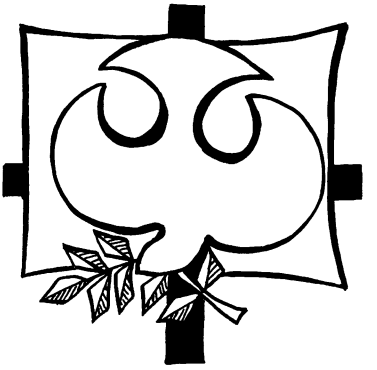
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No Easy Answers

It's only natural to seek easy answers, but in the challenges of living together as nations, religions, congregations, local communities, and families we recognize that what we face embodies all the complexities of life. As professors, pastors, and parents we need to resist the temptation to seek the quick fix or the glib response. And just think of the challenges our children face—how to spend one's life, with whom, and for what purpose. Our congregations, I hope, are places where life can be faced in all its complexity, safely, and with the expectation that our questions and anxieties will be taken seriously.

Ralph W. Klein discusses the challenge of interpreting difficult biblical texts. The book of Job provides no easy answers for the problem of suffering but invites us into the struggle to achieve meaning, comfort, and hope in our suffering. It is the gospel that gives the Scriptures their authority, and authority in the Bible often has to do with power for forgiveness and mission. The Bible is the Word of God, but it is also words written by finite humans with their own limits, presuppositions, and even biases. For the last several centuries many Christians have read the Bible "critically," but at the same time they read it devotionally and with the expectation that they will find here clear expressions of the gospel. Current challenges to biblical exegesis include the subjectivity of the interpreter (gender, race, class), the social location of the biblical writers and the diversity of their perspectives (examples from Chronicles, Hosea, and Daniel, and the problem of the Bible's patriarchy), and passages that seem out of touch with our world today (divorce, sexuality, rape). To give easy answers to hard passages is an insult to those whom we would serve.

Munib Younan reports on the status and activities of Christians in Palestine. Small in number (42,000 Christians in Palestine and 120,000 in Israel) and decreasing, Christians play a role in peacemaking and reconciliation well beyond their size. Israel's occupation of Palestine since 1967 and acts of violence on both sides have seriously crippled hopes for the future. Christians played a significant role in the recent "cartoon crisis" and have pressured the Palestinian Authority not to make Islam the official religion of Palestine and that Sharia not become the main source of legislation. Schools sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land teach peace, coexistence, and democratic principles. Reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis must be built on three principles: Genuine reconciliation can grow only

in a culture of truthfulness; reconciliation is built on justice, and the fruit of justice is peace; for true reconciliation to occur all sides must be willing to forgive. Bishop Younan gave this address in January, 2007, at LSTC. The subsequent clash between Hamas and Fatah and the deterioration of the situation in the Gaza strip make the situation even more perilous now.

Robert O. Smith investigates Luther's attitude toward the Turks of his time and Islam. In Luther's day European Christians thought of Muslims as military foes. But already in 1518 Luther held that Catholic hostility to the Turks was often in resistance to the judgment of God which the Turks exercised. Luther was convinced that the fight against the Turks must begin with repentance. Luther also held to the just war theory and believed therefore that the state had the right to protect against the Turks if they destroyed the worship of God, the peace of the country, law, and justice. The Turks fit into his eschatological scenario: "When the Turk begins to fail a little the Last Day will surely come." Luther became increasingly convinced that Pope and Turk were two sides of the same coin. The joint threat from Turk and pope was addressed in one of Luther's hymns: "Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word/And curb the Turks' and papists' sword." Luther was concerned to educate fellow Christians lest they be seduced by the beauty of Muslim religious practices and convert to Islam. Luther characterized both Islam and Roman Catholicism as religions of works-righteousness. The doctrinal nature of Luther's critical approach to Islam is consistent with his approach to internal Christian adversaries.

Bruce B. Rittenhouse seeks "the truth" about the thirty-three killings at Virginia Tech in April 2007. We must struggle to perceive a meaning that is not just a mirror of our insecurities but reflects the reality of human beings' relationships to God and to one another. It is a denial of the reality that human beings are equally created and sustained by God to suggest that immigrants or Korean Americans or persons who suffer depression are distinctively prone to evil acts. While the killer is responsible for his acts, the rest of us are responsible for forming the context of his acts, a context that contains risk factors for violence. We are each guilty of contributing to our culture's sins toward the socially marginalized through ignorance, fear, and inaction. We are sinners who can live only if we are forgiven.

Pamela Cooper-White provides an extensive review of a recent book by Leonard Hummel on suffering. The book investigates seven Lutherans whose lives had been significantly touched by suffering. Hummel is interested in the particularities of Lutherans' beliefs as they are lived in real life, but he discovered that Lutherans' beliefs and practices around consolation for suffering are

less tied to concepts of doctrinal purity and congruence with a received textual tradition than one might expect. The consolation of God is clothed not in theology per se but in Word and Sacrament, the promise of God repeated by human lips, and the practices of the faithful community. Hummel offers a method for a tradition-centered pastoral research that engages the details of believers' lives with both the comforts and the critical edges of religious tradition.

There are no easy answers, but life is more than a series of mazes and meaningless busyness. Jesus spoke of "the one thing needful," and the fact that we are justified for Christ's sake through faith is at once a focus and an invitation to live without fear and to dare to seek the peace of our communities. If seminary is a place where all your answers are questioned, it is ideally also the place where the center is sought and the gospel reigns supreme. Easy answers are no answers at all; no answers are an evasion of evangelical responsibility.

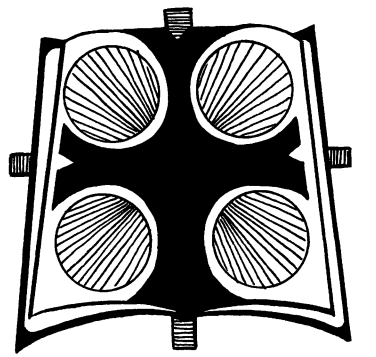
Ralph W. Klein, Editor

No Easy Answers

Ralph W. Klein
Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of Old Testament
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There is a certain ambiguity in the theme of this Leadership Conference. "No Easy Answers" points to the fact that certain biblical passages are hard to understand and hard to apply, and sometimes it is even hard to admit that this is finally what God would want to say. But on the other hand "No Easy Answers" reminds us that at times we would want it no other way.

I think, for example, of the book of Job, which, the more I read it and the older I get, impresses me more and more with the profundity of its response to the problem of suffering. In recent years I have been handing out in my classes a list of a dozen responses to the problem of suffering proposed in the divine speeches and more than twenty responses to the problem of suffering in the rest of the book, some of which are contradictory and some clearly wrong,[1] but which in their manifold interactions and ever-changing rela-



tionship to one another allow the reader to put together again and again an almost infinite series of theological responses to suffering. Some have compared Job to a tangram, a Chinese puzzle whose seven pieces can be fitted together in a variety of ways, none of which is exclusively right or wrong.

Many readers are disappointed with Job the first time through, especially with the divine speeches, and complain about their seeming irrelevance or their resort to power and obscurity, when the reader, like Job himself, wants absolute clarity. But how disappointed indeed we would be if Job gave an "easy answer" to the problem of suffering, and how useless that would be when we or those we minister to experience the puzzling nature of much of human suffering. God's unnerving questions to Job even when it comes to Leviathan finally assume that God controls, but cannot exterminate, Leviathan. God too is vulnerable. No Easy Answers in Job, therefore, also invites us into the struggle to achieve meaning, comfort, and hope in our lives and in our time. Without such struggle we would become as pompous and soporific as Job's "friends."

"No Easy Answers" starts with the presupposition that, at least at its core, the Bible is as clear as a bell. That clarity starts for those of the Lutheran persuasion, and for much of Catholic Christendom as well, with the affirmation that the Bible is first of all about God's promise to all of humanity, about God's gracious acceptance, of God's invitation to a relationship that evokes both faith and obedience, or, in the shorthand of the Reformation, that we are justified by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. As Carl Braaten noted, "The Bible is not a dark and obscure book that only a few professors understand. This does not mean that all the passages are clear, only that all that is necessary for Christian faith and life is clearly revealed in Scripture."[2]

The basis of scriptural authority

The affirmation of the gospel, which our predecessors referred to as the material principle, is finally what gives the Scriptures their authority. Others call it a canon within the canon,[3] and Philip Melanchthon in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession urged us to *add* the gospel to the text if we did not find it there.[4] This gospel-centered authority of Scripture provides a historical and theological rationale for why there is no official list of the canon in the Lutheran confessional writings. Luther's negative attitude toward books like Esther, James, and Revelation is well known, even though many of Luther's followers, also today, see far more value and authority in James and the Apocalypse than the Reformer did. The canon itself, finally,

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1. The friends are wrong, Elihu is wrong, Job is ignorant of the real reason for his suffering, Satan is wrong, etc. Both of the documents referred to are available on my Web site, *http://prophetess.lstc.edu*. Select Writings under the first drop-down menu and then look under Job.

2. Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 11.

3. For Luther himself John's Gospel, Paul's epistles, particularly Romans, and 1 Peter were the "true kernel and marrow of all the books." *Luther's Works* 35:361–62.

4. Edward H. Schroeder, "The Augsburg Aha! The Gospel Is a Promise, an Honest-to-God Promise. A Second Look at the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4" (to be published in *Currents* in 2008). In Apology IV, 257, Melanchthon writes: "For the law works wrath: it only accuses. . . . Therefore it is necessary to add the Gospel promise, that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven and that by faith in Christ we obtain the forgiveness of sins."

is not nearly so important as what many of the canonical books contain.

Lutheran Orthodoxy at times attempted to bolster and support this central message by backing it up with a series of propositions about Scripture itself, its purity, perfection, verbal inspiration, and inerrancy, almost as if the authority of the gospel rested on the demonstrable authority and perfection of Scripture itself. In the church struggle of which I and many others in this room were a part, known as Seminex in shorthand, we insisted that it is the gospel that gives the Scriptures their authority, and then we added quietly, "and not vice versa."

Even the word "authority" is capable of multiple understandings. On the fundamentalist side, one thinks of the bumper sticker that says "God said it; I read it; that settles it." But a word search on "authority" in Matthew's Gospel turns up the following significant evangelical insights: "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has **authority** on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home" (Matt 9:6), or

> And Jesus came and said to them, "All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18–20)

Luther as interpreter

Students of Luther have often observed and even complained that Luther was no systematic theologian. Luther scholar and professor at Princeton Scott Hendrix has observed that "Luther's exegesis reads more like a sermon than a commentary because the legitimate meaning of a text included for Luther its application to the present." Luther chose "the meaning of the text which best fit the significance of the words, the historical circumstances, and *his own theological perspective*" (emphasis added).[5] "[Luther] did not expect his interpretation to exhaust the possibilities of Scripture for all time but to speak the crucial, liberating word for his 'today.'"[6]

Biblical exegesis was for Luther a matter of life and death. Mickey Mattox remarked about Luther's views on exegesis: "Christian exegesis presumes as its point of departure the believer who is caught up in this battle, engaged in a struggle between faith and doubt, truth and error, God and the devil."[7] As Luther described the task of exegesis in 1539, he used those three famous words as the necessary milieu of the exegete: *oratio, meditation, and tentatio*—prayer, deep reflection, and the experience of the trials of life. As Luther worked out his hermeneutics, however, he often did it on the fly.[8] Hendrix remarks that Luther and his colleagues decided ad hoc how to apply Scripture as they faced two distinct tasks—to define and defend the gospel *and* to construct an evangelical Christianity once they were separated from the Roman Catholic Church.[9]

As I read various Lutheran essays in preparation for this address, I was often

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5. Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," *Int* 37 (1983): 234.

6. Hendrix, "Luther," 238.

7. Mickey L. Mattox, "Martin Luther," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 97.

8. Scott H. Hendrix, "The Interpretation of the Bible according to Luther and the Confessions," in *Hearing the Word*, ed. David C. Ratke (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2006), 13–31.

9. Hendrix, "The Interpretation of the Bible," 28.

struck by how clear the essays were about the central, gospel-based authority of Scripture and how ambiguous they were when talking about the Bible's authority on other matters, such as ethics and church orders. When it came to constructing an evangelical view of ordained ministry, Luther himself wrote in 1539: "It is, however, true that the Holy Spirit has excepted women, children, and incompetent people from this function [of ordained ministry]." He cites 1 Cor 14:34 where Paul writes, "The women should keep silence in the churches." Luther then adds:

> In summary, it [the pastor] must be a competent and chosen man. Children, women, and other persons are not qualified for this office. . . . Even *nature* and God's *creation* make this distinction, implying that women (much less children or fools) cannot and shall not occupy positions of sovereignty, as *experience* also suggests and as *Moses* says in Gen 3:16: "You shall be subject to man."[10]

Luther was willing to accept a literal meaning of 1 Cor 14:34 as a divine description for how the office of ministry is to be filled even when that meaning has no relationship to the gospel. Second, Luther identifies the exclusion of women from the office of ministry with natural law and the ordinance of creation as he read it out of Gen 3:16.[11] Clearly, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA came to a different interpretation of the significance of the biblical texts cited by Luther. This was in part because of a different exegesis of this passage and the profound certainty that Paul's words in Gal 3:28 make such distinctions "in Christ" a thing of the past. But I suspect it was also because of a different understanding of how the "normative authority" of the Bible functions among us on questions like this.

What is the Word of God, and how does it work?

The Constitution of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod holds that all matters of faith and life are decided by the Word of God and all other matters, the so-called adiaphora, are decided by majority vote. Doctrine is decided by the Bible, but whether you have a red or green carpet—or no carpet at all—is decided by Roberts Rules of Order. But in the 1960s and 1970s that clear distinction led to a considerable church squabble in the LCMS.

What does one do if there is no agreement on what the Word of God means in our time? Well, then we vote, and some win and some lose.

The constitution of the ELCA is far more sophisticated on this issue and acknowledges that the term Word of God has at least three meanings.

1. Jesus Christ is the *Word of God incarnate* (2.02 a.)

2. The *proclamation of God's message* to us as both Law and Gospel *is the Word of God*, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed. . . . (2.02 b.)

3. The *canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God*. . . . Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world (2.02 c.: causative authority). "The Bible has a unique capacity to mediate God's word of law and gospel, which can bring about life and salvation for individuals and communities."[12]

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10. See *LW* 41:154–55.

11. Hendrix, "The Interpretation of the Gospel," 27.

12. Terence E. Fretheim, "The Authority of the Bible and Churchly Debates regarding Sexuality," *Word & World* 26 (2006): 365.

Things get a bit murkier in 2.03: "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the *inspired Word of God* and the *authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life*. The Formula of Concord, too, identifies the Scriptures as the "only rule and guiding principle according to which all doctrines and teachers are to be evaluated (*Epitome*, 1). Terence Fretheim recently concurred: "The Bible is the fundamental source for shaping and maintaining Christian identity."[13]

I have no desire to contest this constitutional provision, but I would note two gaping ambiguities. First, while the Scriptures are *a* source of determining our life together, they are hardly our only source, since in so many ways we are shaped by the way brothers and sisters in the faith have previously understood the Christian life. That is, we are shaped also by tradition. Tradition has surely played a major role in such central topics as infant baptism, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and ordination to the pastoral office, to name only three.[14] And, second, how one interprets the authoritative source and norm makes all the difference in the world.

Our liturgical customs send out uncertain and potentially misleading affirmations about this "Word of God." When we say at the end of the first or second readings, "The Word of the Lord," we are stating at best an incomplete truth. For these words just read, however much guided by the Spirit, are also written or spoken by finite men and women, children of their times, with their own limits, presuppositions, and even biases, and they addressed their own times. Many of these words are spoken *to* God, not by God, and the Old Testament prophets often distinguish quite clearly their own words from divine oracles.

Tradition probably will retain this rubric even in the era of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, together with "Holy Wisdom Holy Word," but in fact much of the Bible could be described as (very helpful) words *about* God rather than "the Word of God."

The constant liturgical repetition that these words are the Word of the Lord explains some of the fundamentalist-sounding opinions about the Bible that Kenneth Inskeep has documented among Lutheran lay people. The liturgical sentence "The Word of the Lord" makes the Bible sound like a series of verbatim divine oracles. ELCA clergy have answered Inskeep's inquiries with far more discrimination about the nature of Scripture, perhaps offering proof that good theological education makes a difference. I know it doesn't sound right, nor would it play in Peoria, if we were to say the following after the first and second lessons: "The Word of the Lord that has just come to us in an earthen vessel."

What is the significance of this dual characterization of readings from Scripture as both human and divine?

Interpreting the Bible

Christians over the last two millennia have employed a wide range of methods to interpret the Scriptures.[15] Until the time of the Reformation, a fourfold method of interpretation was widely practiced: literal, allegor-

13. Fretheim, "The Authority of the Bible," 365.

14. As Mattox notes, "Even as [Luther] appealed to Scripture alone as a court of last resort, he gladly received much that he found valuable in Catholic tradition and practice, even when it could not be established by the Bible alone, so long as it did not flatly contradict the clear teaching of Scripture as he understood it" ("Martin Luther," 107).

15. See Robert Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

ical, tropological (ethical), and anagogical (eschatological). Although the allegorical method rightly held that the spiritual meaning was of the essence, its procedures allowed the interpreter flights of fancy that virtually removed the text itself as a control on exegetical imagination, and no one would recommend its reinstitution today. Yet, it has to be admitted, for over half of church history the faithful were nurtured and preserved by just such allegorical exegesis.

The literal or historical sense has prevailed since the Reformation. I would prefer to call this the contextual sense to distinguish it from the rigid literalism characteristic of Fundamentalism. That is, we take the text of Genesis 1 as a literal description of the way creation and science were understood in ancient times and thus recognize that our context and our science are much different. Mark Allen Powell has written: "Readers [of the Bible] search for relevant meaning in their world that would be analogous to the meaning that the author hoped to convey to the text's original audience."[16] When the psalmist states, "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5), I do not take this as a proof text for guilt inherited from Adam and Eve, let alone as an imposition of sin on sexual intercourse and the human reproductive process, as it was taken in the Middle Ages; I take it as a poetic confession of the psalmist that from the very beginning of his conscious existence he has been rebellious against God.[17]

For the last several centuries, many Christians, including the exegetical faculty of LSTC and probably the vast majority of the people in this room, have read the Bible "critically."[18] That is, our reading of Scripture resembles in many ways our reading of any other human document—we seek evidence for its time and place of composition, we seek to recognize how writers' points of view and cultural presuppositions have shaped their account, and we recognize the potential gap between what Scripture might have meant back then and there and what it might mean for the world, the church, and ourselves today.[19] This method of interpretation is known generically as the Historical Critical Method.[20] Yet, as we read the Scriptures "critically" we also read them devotionally and with the expectation that we will find there clear and authoritative

16. Mark Allen Powell, "The Social-Cultural Context of Biblical Interpretation Today," in *Hearing the Word*, ed. D. Ratke, 60.

17. Similarly, people with modern understandings of the origin of humans can recognize that the chief errors being combated by the confessors in their discussion of original sin were Pelagianism (that is, that we can achieve our own salvation) and Manichaeism (this is, that God's creation is not good); see Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article I, Original Sin. That relevant meaning can be affirmed by those who read Genesis 1–3 or Psalm 51 from a historical critical viewpoint.

18. After citing familiar Luther quotations, such as "If my opponents have urged Scripture against Christ, we urge Christ against Scripture," and You urge the slave, that is, Scripture—and only in parts . . . I urge the Lord who is King of Scripture," Brian Gerrish remarks: "Such utterances as these show that Luther was emancipated—at least in principle—from the medieval understanding of the Bible's content: for him Scripture is authoritative *insofar as it bears witness to Christ*. For this reason, Brunner is correct in saying that 'Luther was the first to represent a biblical faith which could be combined with biblical criticism.'" B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 65. Still, as Mattox concludes, "it seems clear today that as an exegete Luther was more medieval and catholic than modern and critical" ("Martin Luther," 108).

19. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *IDB*

20. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

expressions of the gospel. That is, we read as critical believers.[21]

Historical criticism has always had its critics on the right, but the last two decades have seen increasing nervousness about historical criticism from within the scholarly critical guild because historical criticism has too narrowly focused on history as the genre of Scripture, magnified the gap between then and now, and overestimated the objectivity of the modern interpreter and the advantages of dispassionate exegesis.[22] Some of the new exegetical methods are in my judgment merely extensions of historical criticism's reach (social science criticism, rhetorical criticism, and even narrative criticism to a degree). Other approaches such as feminist and womanist criticisms and post-colonial criticism note the importance of understanding who the interpreter is in terms of age, class, gender, and racial and ethnic identity. But feminists, womanists, and even post-colonial scholars use many aspects of historical criticism in their approaches. In my judgment the new critical tools and the insights of feminists, womanists, non-Western exegetes, and post-colonial scholars have greatly expanded our understanding of the meaning and significance of the biblical text. But even those who polemicize against historical criticism remain "critical" scholars.

Reading the Bible critically conforms to the sea change in the attitude that took place among many American Christians in the twentieth century. Grant Wacker called this "The Demise of Biblical Civilization.[23] People came to realize that there was not a seamless connection between the biblical world and the world of their experience—the age of the earth, the nonhistorical character of the story of Adam and Eve, and the time-bound character of cultural and moral suppositions in the Old and New Testaments.[24]

Some current challenges to biblical exegesis

1. The role of the subjectivity of the interpreter. One of the goals of historical criticism was to seek "objective" knowledge about these ancient texts, unencumbered by the restraints of church doctrine, the magisterium of the church, or even the biases of the interpreter. But our generation has emphasized that interpreters bring with them unique experiences, known and unknown presuppositions, and differences due to their social location: gender, age, race, class, economic level, political position, religious affiliation, education, and ethnicity. In a sense the reader's point of view has claimed a role parallel to or competitive with the *author's* point of view,

21. Patrick R. Keifert, citing Martin Buss, has criticized the divide between "critical description and capricious faith" and seeks to overcome this divide by following several current philosophers of rhetoric. See his "The Bible and Theological Education: A Report and Reflections on a Journey," in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 166. While recognizing the importance of his critique, I do not believe that the solutions he offers are the only ones possible or that my reading as a critical believer is capricious.

22. No one has expressed this critique more passionately than Walter Brueggemann. See his discussion in *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), *passim*.

23. Grant Wacker, "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford, 1982).

24. See Erik M. Heen, "The Interpretation of the Bible among Lutherans in the Twentieth Century," in *Hearing the Word*, ed. D. Ratke, 44–45.

and of course that author had a specific social location as well. The book edited by David Rhoads, *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*,[25] seeks to make explicit that every interpretation is a cultural interpretation. It offers ten examples of colleagues interpreting the Book of Revelation *self-consciously* out of their own cultural location. It surely does make a difference if one reads any text as a woman, as a black woman, as an Asian, as a male U. S. citizen, as a person from a formerly colonized country, and so forth. As Hendrix has observed, even Luther "joined the interpretation of Scripture to the experience and theological orientation of the interpreter."[26]

There are of course restraints to this, and we do not want to succumb to a notion that the Bible can mean just anything because I say that is what it means to me. The restraints of the text itself, philology and logic, and arguments that are publicly presented and publicly accountable still apply. As Fretheim recently reminded us, "Because the texts are what they are, we can eliminate certain interpretations with a reasonable level of probability and we can accept others with a similar probability."[27]

Rhoads points out that we who interpret the Bible, whether in a seminary or in a parish, are often unaware of how much our understanding of Christianity is culturally conditioned. Lutherans, for example, proclaim a gospel that announces forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake through faith as *the* gospel for all people. As one of my own teachers used to say, however, "The Gospel is God's good news for our bad situations," and the bad situations we bring to the table may be sins and feelings of guilt, but they also may be doubt, discouragement, loneliness, a fatal illness, experiences of oppression, and countless other maladies. Many people in suppressed cultures may be primarily *victims* of the sins of oppressing powers. God's good news for *their* bad situations, therefore, must mean liberation from the effects of the sins of the oppressing power. This does not mean, of course, that these oppressed people are not themselves sinners and in no need of forgiveness in their personal lives and family relationships. But it does surely mean that a message of forgiveness does not exhaust the dimensions of the gospel that must be proclaimed.

Another of Rhoads's books, *The Challenge of Diversity*, provides illustrations of the diverse definitions of the gospel in the New Testament documents themselves.[28] And Carol Miles has recently shown that the canon within the canon can be a terribly limiting approach. She writes: "The diversity of Scripture . . . honors and addresses the complexity of the people of God." "Preachers must be willing to take up texts representing the full range of . . . theological voices comprising the biblical canon."[29]

2. The social location of the biblical writers and the diversity of their perspectives. There is also in our age an increased recognition of the social location of the biblical

25. *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

26. As quoted by Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "The Word Made Words: A Lutheran Perspective on the Authority and Use of the Scriptures," *Word & World* 26 (2006): 406.

27. Fretheim, "The Authority of the Bible," 373.

28. David Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

29. Carol Antablin Miles, "A Canon within the Canon? No: Proclaim the Whole Counsel of God," *Word & World* 26 (2006): 439.

writers. For more than two decades I have been working on a two-volume commentary on the books of Chronicles. The author of those books, called the Chronicler, was a Levite, or at least a person very positively disposed toward the Levites. He lived at a time when the Persian Empire totally dominated the ancient Near East, stretching from Libya to India, and his own little country of Yehud, about the size geographically of the city of Chicago, was no match militarily or economically for the Persians. He—and his support group—made a choice therefore that entailed collaboration with the Persian powers *provided that* these Persian authorities would grant the Jews freedom to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Despite the small geographic size and small population of the province known as Yehud, he saw his little country as potentially "all Israel," and invited that wider Israel to find meaning and freedom in the worship life of that temple. So unwilling was he to see his community as only an insignificant remnant that he began his book with nine chapters of genealogies, in which the families and clans of each of the twelve tribes were traced back to a common ancestor among the sons of Jacob, whom, by the way, he always calls *Israel*.

One would surely not want to generalize the theological position of the Chronicler as the only good one for all time, but, given the contours of his social location, that may have been the only realistic alternative for freedom possible at his time.

Two centuries later the author of Daniel made another significant choice that no doubt betrays his own social location. Faced with Syrian oppression, he could imagine three choices for his fellow Jews. The first and most repugnant choice was to become collaborators with the oppressors or even converts to their religion. A second choice, which he also rejected, was to join the Maccabean guerrilla fighters, who were intent on liberating the Jews and their temple from the Syrian oppressor by pitched battles and terrorist activities. The third option the author of Daniel favored: to assure God's people that sovereignty had already been transferred by God from the Syrians to the archangel Michael and to the people of the saints of the most high, that is, to the Jews. This was banking everything on the surety of God's promise and considering the arrogant Syrians as so many burnt-out cases. In this case, the Maccabees were the winners, at least according to worldly standards, but their victory was a violent one, and they eventually became parade examples of the generalization that "all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

How to be faithful is never an easy choice. There never have been Easy Answers.

If I had lived in the second century B.C.E., I am sure I would not have denied my Jewishness by collaborating with the enemy or converting to the Syrian religion —or at least I hope that would have been my decision. But would I have joined the Maccabees in acts of freedom fighting, or would I have banked on God to topple the oppressors by demanding that God fulfill God's promises? How to be faithful is never an easy choice. There never have been Easy Answers.

Certain aspects of the social location of the biblical writers present enormous

Something of who we are as interpreters will inevitably be part of any meaning we claim to see in a text.

challenges to us today. The patriarchy of the biblical world is pervasive, and many of the biblical writers devalued or silenced the voices and the roles of women. There were exceptions, of course, and a number of liberated women can be identified in the biblical record: Eve, Ruth and Naomi, Huldah, Deborah, Judith, Hagar, the anonymous woman who anointed the feet of Jesus, the early apostle Junia (Rom 16:7), and the women at the tomb. But these wonderful exceptions do not change the fact that patriarchy was presupposed and practiced by many/most of the biblical writers. The marriage metaphor for the divine-human relationship in both testaments has become increasingly problematic, perhaps for its intrinsic hierarchical structures in the New Testament and for the violence toward women in many Old Testament examples. Why is it that the wayward spouse is always the woman, and, even if we were to overlook that for the moment, does that legitimize the violent fate or degrading treatment of these "wayward women" at the hand of God? We need to identify such violent behavior as wrong and preach in this case *against* the text, or at least against these aspects of these texts.

The danger is that we might throw out the baby with the bath water. Some have tried to rescue these metaphors by saying that in an honor-and-shame culture, the male audience of the prophets was being thoroughly shamed by saying "You men are that harlotrous woman." That is at best a partial solution to the problem. But I think it would be a significant mistake to throw out the prophets who use metaphors that have become perceived as violent toward women, or always were violent toward women.

I have sometimes referred to Hosea as "My (least) favorite prophet." The parenthesis expresses my discomfort with some of his metaphors that resemble the abusive husband glossing things over with flowers or a box of candy (Hos 2:14–15). But Hosea, despite all his rough edges, expresses eloquently for me what is at the heart of God's good news for my bad situation. As God reviews her long history with God's people, beginning already with the Exodus, the behavior of Israel has been that of an irascible teenager, rejecting every benefaction bestowed by God and doing everything in teenage immaturity to evoke divine anger. That is the picture of human activity we see in many episodes of church history and that I see staring back at me from the bathroom mirror on all too many mornings. Even God, especially God, has the right to say enough is enough, your wickedness is complete, damnation is the only alternative. But Hosea's God suffers: "How can I give you up Ephraim, How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Sodom and Gomorrah?" Answer: Because I am God and not a human being. I am not hung up on your—my?—doctrine of retribution. I am the Holy One in your midst, and I will not destroy.

We have these treasures in earthen vessels, Paul says in 2 Cor 4:7. We need to retain the treasure as we discard the flawed flower pots.

3. Passages that seem out of touch with our world today. A number of passages seem insensitive to or at least undifferentiated toward such modern issues as divorce and remarriage, war, and disagreement about the meaning, relevance, applicability and implications of passages about sexuality and homosexuality, or the relationship of Christianity to other world religions.[30]

One of the women in my congregation is married to David, a very thoughtful Jewish man. He shows up for social events of the parish and attends services at the high festivals, but he remains Jewish. Last Christmas Eve David and I were talking after the service, and he told me he had recently resolved to read through the entire New Testament. He had only made it up to Luke, but he was bothered already by passages in the Gospels where Jesus states that anyone who divorces a spouse and marries another commits adultery by that second marriage. Both David and his wife had been previously married. "Am I really committing adultery?" he asked.

I suspect that many of us wrestle with these divorce texts with particular difficulty when they come around in the Lectionary. There is no question, I suppose, that divorce always represents failure and sin, but we all could certainly cite cases where divorce is the lesser of two evils. And most of us can think of cases where we do not view remarriage as adultery.

While there are helpful passages in Scripture about marriage and sexuality, the gap between then and now and changes in marital practices make some of the biblical comments beside the point, not helpful, or even harmful. Then one married routinely at fourteen or fifteen, and married the person whom one's parents had chosen, and there were no reliable forms of birth control. The challenges of our ancestors in antiquity and ours today in regard to our sexuality are quite different.

Is the disagreement in the ELCA about homosexuality really about a different attitude toward the *authority* of Scripture? Fretheim points out that historical critics like Richard Hays and Robert Gagnon, on the conservative side, and Robin Scroggs and Marti Nissinen, on the side advocating change in the church's attitude toward homosexuality, have come to diametrically opposite understandings about the significance for our time of the few biblical passages dealing with homosexuality. Personal convictions about the matter by the interpreters on both sides largely explain the different interpretations of the texts. Something of who we are as interpreters will inevitably be part of any meaning we claim to see in a text. Such differences do not imply a different definition of Scripture's authority.

Part of a "No Easy Answers" approach means that at times we must accept the possibility that a position taken by a biblical writer is wrong or unhelpful. We need to make sure in these cases that we have heard and read the text clearly, and not just because it conflicts with our twenty-first–century notions or our own theological or political positions, which also stand under need for judgment and critique.

There are such passages that offer little help and no little harm. A case in point is the Bible's recommendation for distinguishing between a woman who has falsely claimed to be raped and a woman whose accusation of rape is to be believed. Our own society does not do particularly well here, either, since truth is often sought in the contentious arguments of prosecution

30. We could also mention the anti-Judaistic passages in the New Testament that were born out of the controversies between early Christians and the Judaism of their day.

and defense attorneys that often replicate the violence of the rape itself. But the biblical recommendation is both naive and biased in favor of the male. The engaged woman who is caught having sex with a man who is not her fiance is not to be believed when she alleges it was not consensual because she did not cry for help in the town (Deut 22:24), while her country cousin who claims similar violation is to be believed because no one in the open country would have heard her cry (Deut 22:25–27). Obviously a knife at the throat could have prevented the city woman from crying out. I cite this example because I believe most of you would agree with my judgment against this passage. It unfairly tosses out a city dweller's cry for justice and makes one wonder whether this policy was formulated by an assembly consisting exclusively of males. Anyone who would use this passage as a guide for addressing the issue of rape in church or society today would render untold harm on women. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, "[The responsibility of biblical scholars] must include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts in their historical as well as in their contemporary sociopolitical contexts.[31]

Once the possibility of such critique is conceded, as in this passage on rape, one cannot oppose it in principle when it is raised in other cases. Such passages might include the divine mandate to exterminate the Canaanites, Ezra's forced divorce of more than one hundred men who had married foreign women, the violence modeled by God in regard to wayward women, and passages in Scripture which suggest that women be silenced.

In my discussions around the ELCA of passages dealing with homosexuality, I have pointed out that they are very few, that in every case there are extenuating circumstances, such as homosexual rape in Genesis 19, or that Paul and we do not share a number of presuppositions, and these create a disconnect between what he wrote in Romans 1 and the ethical choices that confront us today. But responsible exegetes will always try to dialogue with the text to make sure they have not missed something, and they will dialogue with other interpreters and invite open criticism of their own views. My views as interpreter may need to be challenged by the scriptural text. That is the risk of every kind of dialogue.

In reading the Bible I may see things that others do not see, and they will surely see things that I do not see. That goes also for what we see as the center of Scripture. Lutherans will no doubt continue to find that center in a gracious God, whose love contradicts divine wrath, and without whose help none of us could ever believe or please God. But that center can be enriched by readers who find other aspects of God that merit or evoke human faith and life, or who resist or even resent our universalizing this evangelical insight. My colleague Richard Perry, for example, has suggested that the canon within the canon for the African-American community is "the Exodus to Jesus paradigm."[32] A similar point was recently made by Lewis V. Baldwin and Stephen L. Murphy: "In the stories of liberation of the Hebrew scriptures and in the actions and teachings of Jesus, African-American Christians assert the special concern God has always had for the oppressed in this world."[33]

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31. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107 (1988): 15.

32. Richard J. Perry Jr., "What Sort of Claim Does the Bible Have Today?" in *Hearing the Word*, ed. D. Ratke, 74.

33. In *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, ed. J. S. Holcomb, 297. James H. Cone

Exegesis, it is said, is among the most ecumenical of all the theological disciplines. In large part most members of the Society of Biblical Literature or the Catholic Biblical Association read the Bible with a commonly accepted bevy of methods. Ecumenical conversation means a willingness to bear witness to what we have seen from our particular locations and to hear what exegetes from other Christian or Jewish bodies have discovered in these same books. That means a willingness to have our views modified or expanded and even to have them identified as misleading or wrong.

Conclusion

I don't remember many speeches or sermons more than a week later, and the world will little note or long remember what I have said here. But one speech I do remember from my Missouri Synod college days in 1958. The late Elmer Witt, long-time creative campus pastor and later director of Holden Village, was speaking. It was six years after the publication of the complete RSV, and Concordia Publishing House, after much hand wringing, had finally decided to include the RSV in its catalog, but with a proviso. On the page where these Bibles were listed, there was a small box, much like the warning box on the side of a cigarette pack, that read: "These Bibles must be read with extreme care." That's exactly right, Elmer Witt observed. These Bibles talk about selling all that you have and giving it to the poor, about God breaking down dividing walls of partition, about seeking justice and only justice in the world, about God laughing in derision at the security offered by the military industrial complex, and about a coming time when swords and spears would be transformed into iPods and laptop computers. (I've updated his speech a bit.) These Bibles, Elmer warned, can get you into trouble with yourself and with your God. These Bibles too can astonish you with the audacity of their promises. When Abram and Sarai struggled with issues of infertility, God took them outside and changed the simple promise of a child into a promise of descendants as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:1–6). When Abram asked how he could know if God would ever come through with his promise of space and place, God invoked a curse on Godself to make the promise credible: "May I be cut to pieces," she said, "if I do not fulfill my promise to you" (Gen 15:7–21).

If we understand the full dimension of challenges facing Christians today, we should not want to give easy answers. Complex questions call for the full resource of the Christian gospel and the variety of scriptural viewpoints, the best of human knowledge, and the wisdom of the tradition, articulated with pastoral compassion and not a little humility. Easy answers are an insult to those whom we would serve and do not reflect the diversities of the scriptural witness. Answers sufficient for the challenge come through prayer and hard work, through risk, and through constant dialogue with the text and the Christian community. Answers sufficient for the challenge facing Christians today presuppose the authority of the Scriptures and locate the basis for such authority in their central, clear, and saving message. Answers sufficient for the challenge will not hide the limits of Scripture, let alone the limits of its interpreters.

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emphasized the Jesus side of this hermeneutic: "In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his: their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor man is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human." *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 36.

The Future of Palestinian Christianity and Prospects for Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation

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I am an Arab Palestinian Evangelical Lutheran Christian. When people ask us Palestinian Christians when we converted to Christianity, we have to remind them that we've been here since the first Pentecost when we are mentioned in Acts 2:11.

Our Lutheran Church began here in the mid-1800s as mission, primarily health and education, to the local people. We have six churches and their ministries: Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, and one in Amman, Jordan. We operate four schools and four additional educational programs that are committed to holistic education and academic excellence. Yes, we are a small church, but not the smallest in the Holy Land. We do not consider ourselves a minority but an integral part of Palestinian society.

I am a refugee. I grew up in the Old City of Jerusalem, and both at home and in church I was taught to respect Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other traditions. I believed in my youth that the world would only become better and better. Now, every time I see what is happening in our present world, I am shocked and saddened to see that the world seems to believe more in the love of power than in the power of love. Our world has come to worship weapons, walls, and war in the name of peace and security. We have come to use the holy writings of religion to justify injustice and to undergird oppression and supremacy. The new wave of anti-Semitism, the growth of Islamophobia, and the proliferation of many kinds of xenophobia stigmatize and demonize people through racism, fear, and ignorance. This movement fuels hatred, anger, and fear against the other and keeps it alive by giving it the face of the enemy.

The Palestinian Christian Churches have denounced such intolerance and extremism and believe it is our calling as ministers of reconciliation to raise up a new generation of the faithful who will urgently seek to see God in other religions and cultures and who will urge all to seek common values of respect for all human life, justice, forgiveness, and healing. It is time that religion became part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We Christians must challenge one another with a firm theology of creation and redemption, knowing that God's son, Jesus Christ, on the cross, saved *all* the world and intended that we all live together in justice and peace as sisters and brothers.

Recent statistics on Palestinian Christians

A new study about Palestinian Christians was presented at a conference in Jerusalem in December, 2006. According to the study, there are approximately 162,000 Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land, 120,000 living in Israel (within the Green Line), 40,000 living in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and 2,000 living in the Gaza Strip. More than 80 percent live in the urban areas, 20 percent in rural areas. Estimates say Christians were around 15 percent of the population of historic Palestine before 1948 and that it fell to about 5 percent in the West Bank and 1 percent in the Gaza Strip by 1967. Today, Christians are less than 2 percent in the West Bank and less than .25 percent in the Gaza Strip.

The study asked about the reasons why Christians are leaving. Some have been saying that it is because of systematic Muslim persecution. But the study concluded: "One factor remains the most detrimental to the continued existence of the indigenous population. This factor is the political situation manifested in the occupation and the loss of hope in a just peace." The fact is that we do not have a problem with systematic persecution by Muslims or the Palestinian Authority. The underlying problem of Palestinian Christian emigration is the unbearable situation under ongoing military occupation.

However, we are very worried about the future of Palestinian Christianity. If present trends continue, there will be no living, local Christian community here in fifteen to twenty years. The heads of churches last year issued a statement with specific steps to help keep the Palestinians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land:

1. Support community-based education through Christian schools and educational institutions.

2. Stop the emigration of Christians through job creation.

3. Provide low-cost housing; housing is a social right, not a luxury.

4. Strengthen Christian social institutions that provide services to all in Palestinian society regardless of religion, gender, or political affiliation.

We are thankful for the support we receive from the churches in the West, but we hope that they will do more. We believe that keeping Christians in the Holy Land is crucial for preserving its historic, religious, and cultural heritage as well for building bridges among the three religions. This will happen only if we work together and if the underlying conditions improve.

The future of Palestinian Christianity is not in occupation, violence, war, or extremism. It is in a just peace, for we believe that Christ has come to give us life, and life abundantly. More and more Muslim leaders from the Gulf to Tunisia are agreeing that the Arab world is not complete without the Christian presence. King Abdullah II of Jordan told a group of 170 Muftis and Muslim scholars in July 2005 in Amman that Arab Christians are the "glue" that holds Arab society together and that we guarantee the presence of civil, democratic society here.

Situation update

The situation is getting more and more unbearable. Land confiscation continues and illegal settlements expand while Palestinian homes continue to be demolished and building permits denied. The separation wall cuts its path through the middle of Palestinian towns, separating neighborhoods, families, farmers and their land. The Qassam rockets continue to fall on Israeli towns near Gaza despite several attempted cease-fires.

Day-to-day existence is a huge struggle

for many. Since the democratically elected Hamas government took office after the January 2006 elections, the boycott on international aid—even humanitarian aid—has devastated an already depressed economy. According to UN statistics, 45 percent of Palestinians are unemployed and 65 percent are under the poverty line. Because of the boycott, public schools were closed for two months before the teachers finally agreed to go back without pay. Health-care services have been cut back drastically and some hospitals are running for emergency services only.

From mid-June of 2006 until January 2007, 500 Palestinians were killed, many of them civilians, women and children, mostly in Gaza. Incursions and arrests are a daily reality, with the number of prisoners now at almost 11,000.

We as churches are afraid that Gaza is near the breaking point. There has been a total siege on Gaza since mid-June, where they are trying to survive without income or supplies because all entry points have been almost entirely blocked to import and export. The deliberate destruction of Gaza's only power plant has left most of the population with little electricity, which means that the water and sewage systems, which are powered to some degree with electric pumps, are also near collapse. Although some of the power facility and other infrastructure are being repaired, the Gaza Strip is virtually decimated.

In the swirl of this downward spiral, it is disappointing and frustrating that this friction exploded into violent, destructive infighting as people became more and more hopeless and impoverished. I always strongly denounce violence of any kind, but I have been even stronger with Palestinian infighting, as this path to civil war is a disaster and hurts everyone. It distracts attention from and worsens the military occupation, which is our main problem. The heads of local churches here released a statement denouncing this violence, advocating unity and offering to help mediate between factions if desired.

All in all, the past six months has been a disaster for the Palestinians and indeed for the whole Middle East. The war in Lebanon, in one UN expert's words, "wiped out fifteen years of development in one month." The war has left the Israelis and the rest of the Middle East in a cloud of uncertainty. The inconclusive end to the war has created havoc in Israeli politics as different factions vie for power.

Israelis continue to live with persistent fear of Iran's nuclear capability, instability in Lebanon, and the possible strengthening of ties between Hamas and Hezbollah. We are afraid of certain voices from Israel who are trying to promote once again the policy of transfer. Benny Elon, a member of the Knesset and leader of an Israeli political party, has recently put forward his "voluntary transfer" plan that would give $100,000 to each family who agrees to emigrate to another country (for a total cost of over $100 billion).

Politically, in some ways we have gone back almost twenty years, as both Israelis and Palestinians are struggling with the recognition of the other. Many here look at what happened when President Arafat agreed to recognize Israel in 1988. It led to Oslo, but then the hopes of Oslo died when it was misinterpreted to bring about severely increased movement restrictions, new closures, and the doubling of settlement building without any international monitoring of the developments.

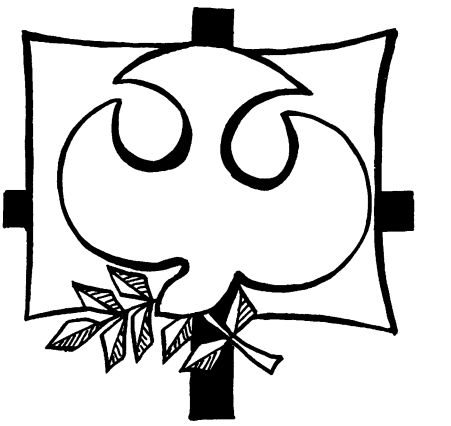
The "disengagement" from Gaza gives us a foretaste of what further unilateral moves might look like. We as churches have warned of any unilateral withdrawals because we believe that dialogue and nego-

tiations are the only way to end the occupation and achieve peace, justice, and security. With unilateral moves, there is usually a winner and a loser. With negotiations, it is possible for both sides to know they have gained something. In Gaza, they simply redeployed its forces to the outer perimeters of the fence, but all of the control was and still is in the hands of Israel. How can an area or state be viable if it has no control over borders, imports, exports, airspace, or water rights? This is also what people are asking about a future Palestinian state. If it follows the path of the wall in the West Bank and takes in the big settlement blocs, it is hard to see how it could be a viable, contiguous state.

We continue to affirm that we want Israel to have security and Palestinians to have justice and freedom. The security of Israel is dependent on freedom and justice for Palestinians, and freedom and justice for Palestinians is dependent on security for the Israelis. This is a symbiotic relationship that is the only formula that will bring a lasting peace.

There are some promising developments. The meeting between Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Abbas was a fruitful one. They discussed important issues, such as movement within Palestine, easing the checkpoints, a release of prisoners, and the return of Palestine's tax money that is rightfully theirs, which Israel has withheld. However, the next day Israel announced plans for yet another settlement in the Jordan Valley. This strengthens those who do not believe in negotiations, who say that nice promises mean nothing in the face of Israel's relentless settlement enterprise.

The Voice of Jewish, Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders' statement "From Crisis to Hope" in December of 2006 is a promising initiative. I urge the



United States administration to listen to its findings. There are various other voices stating our belief that the core problem of the Middle East conflict is the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. It is urgent that we prioritize pushing for a solution. Initiatives such as the Arab Initiative of 2002, the secret Syrian/Israeli talks, and the Road Map are all being reenergized. But if they only give lip service to "peace" and there are no visible signs of justice, I am afraid this will continue to fuel the extremism that has the potential to devour our region. Moderate leaders simply must work for facts on the ground of justice here and or there will be no possibility of a lasting peace.

The goals must be stated clearly, as in the International Crisis Group's recent proposal that articulates a comprehensive plan:

The goal must be unambiguously stated as

- security and full recognition of the state of Israel within internationally recognized boundaries;
- an end to the occupation for the Palestinian people;
- an independent, sovereign state based on the 1967 borders (truce alliance), with East Jerusalem as its capital;
- a just resolution of the refugee issue;
- recovery of lost land by Syria;

- a fully sovereign state and secure Lebanese state.

This conflict is at the heart of the turmoil in the Middle East because the Arab and Muslim world sees this as the test of the Western world's relationship with it. It has created a great divide between the East and the West, the occupied and the occupier. We continue to believe that the road to peace in this region is first through Jerusalem and then through Baghdad and the rest. The Arab world sees the superpowers upholding freedom and justice only for some and not for them. The West encouraged us to hold democratic elections and then refused to recognize the results of that election. The West claims to support freedom, and yet they support the building of the Separation Barrier, mostly on Palestinian land. We still want the U.S. to be an honest broker for justice and peace in this conflict. Bringing peace to the region will depend not on how powerful the West is or how mighty its military. It will depend on whether the powerful and the international community can implement justice with one standard for all nations of the world. It seems to me that the Middle East needs first justice and then democracy.

Here is what I think we need to do:

1. Revive the Document of Principles of Mutual Recognition between Israel and the PLO from 1993. Both Israel and Palestine should be asked to recognize each other based on the 67 Green Line, renounce violence, including targeted assassinations and the excessive use of force, and honor past agreements on both sides, including the freezing of settlements and the dismantling of many.

2. Include a role for religious leadership to advise negotiators on religious issues. Although this is not at its core a religious war, we in this land do find our identities in religion. We must promote tolerance, respect, and religious freedom for all, ensure equal access to all religions, and understand the religious sensitivities of this land.

3. Hold an international conference and negotiations to deal with the core problems of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: two states based on 67 borders, a just solution to the refugee problem and the settlements, shared resources like water, and a shared Jerusalem.

The role of Palestinian churches in peacemaking

In the midst of all this, what is the role of the Palestinian church in achieving a just peace? As a Palestinian bishop, I ask myself: "How do we serve the gospel faithfully and advance the kingdom of God in such a situation? What shall we do?" Some will say that it is too political to be involved in this struggle for peacemaking. Some ask, "Why don't you churches just focus on the gospel and leave politics alone?"

For me, peacemaking is not simply political, it is biblical. It is the very essence of the ministry of reconciliation Jesus came to bring us. And it is in the midst of overwhelming injustice that we as Palestinian Christians are called to be ministers of reconciliation, brokers of justice, defenders of human rights, instruments of peace, and prophets to speak truth to power. Indeed, I believe that all religious leaders—especially Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ones—are called to a prophetic task because we are at a dangerous junction where people are trying to turn political battles into religious wars. We cannot let that happen, because everyone loses.

Living as neighbors—Palestinian Christians and Muslims. We have lived with the Muslims peacefully for many years. In my family, I remember Abu Adnan and Im

Adnan, who lived in Bab El Silseleh in the "souq" of the Old City. Every day we were in and out of each other's homes. On Christmas, they used to come and celebrate with us. One year their children asked, "Why don't we put up a Christmas tree like the Younans?" So that year Abu Adnan and Im Adnan decided to have a Christmas tree in their house, and we decorated it together. During Ramadan, the fasting month, my parents taught me and my brothers and sisters not to eat any food in front of our friends—not out of fear or because of a law, but out of respect for our neighbors and their religious traditions. In the evenings during Ramadan we visited them to eat the delicious Katayef pancakes. And when my mother cooked the traditional St. Barbara soup on January 3 she always asked me to take the first pot to them.

This kind of sharing and living taught me to deal with people not on the basis of religion but on the basis of humanity and neighborliness. And this education prepared me to be able to dialogue with others throughout my life, to understand the other as the other wants to be understood.

We are an integral part of life here. As we walk together, we walk as Palestinians, not separated from one another. We are all Palestinian and we live together, side by side, sharing the same language, culture, land, destiny, and future Palestinian state. This solid foundation of mutual respect and tolerance enables us Palestinian Christians to be bridge builders between the lands of the East and the West.

Cartoon crisis. One example of this mutual respect was how we Palestinian Christians and Muslims worked together during last year's crisis dealing with the cartoons of Mohammed. When we saw the cartoons we immediately denounced them and worked with Islamic leadership to defuse the tensions and anger of the Muslim community in Palestine, knowing that our 1,400 years of common history had laid a good groundwork and trust from which to calm the communities. In the face of a particular threat by a splinter group in Gaza who threatened the church, the Muslim community contacted the political leadership in Gaza on our behalf. We were positively surprised by the immediate action of Hamas, who made it known that anyone who harmed Palestinian Christians or the church would be punished by Hamas. The surprising part is that the very next morning members of the group came to the church bringing flowers to the churches in Gaza!

Because of our closeness, Christians have a special role as interpreters in the midst of these crises. We explained to the Muslim community that Europe is no longer a religious society as they imagine it to be. We explained that Europe is more secular, that there has been a divorce between church and state. There are many in Europe who say they have no religion. In Palestine we cannot understand this. How is it possible to have no religion?

We also told the European world that the Muslim community is diverse and varied. Muslims, like Jews and Christians, have many faces. However, Muslims join together in a common identity when their fundamental symbols and values are attacked. In the Middle East, even people who claim to be secular are in fact religious in their identities.

We explained that freedom of speech is to be respected but that such respect includes respecting other religious communities and their sensitivities. It is not unlike marriage, in which you have the freedom to tell your spouse whatever you want, but you are also bound by a sensitivity to your partner. We said that we did not believe freedom of speech gives permis-

sion to demonize, damage, or desecrate holy symbols, writings, or places.

After the cartoon incident, I called for a code of conduct, which Muslim and Christian leaders in the Middle East, and hopefully the whole world, will sign, in which we agree that no holy writings, places, or symbols are desecrated.

The tree of civilization wilts, and hearts close, when malice takes hold.

Constitution. Another example of Christian engagement is our work with the Palestinian Constitution. As Christians, we realized that there were several serious flaws in the proposed Constitution. It specified that Islam was to be the official religion of Palestine and that Sharia (Islamic law) was to be the main source of legislation. In response to this, Palestinian Christians together with secular Muslims wrote to the President of the Palestinian Authority to express our discontent. We told him that this is the Holy Land—a land for all religions. Therefore, all religions must have equal rights and equal responsibilities. If one religion is "official," that makes the others "unofficial," and that is not acceptable.

We also told him that neither the Bible nor the Koran can be the source for legislation in a democracy because using the holy books in this way promotes theocracy. If we want a democratic state (and we do), we must follow the principles of modern democracy such as equal rights for men and women and equal rights and responsibilities for all religions and beliefs.

This illustrates that we can deal in a democratic way with tough issues with the Palestinian Authority, and this is a part of peace building in a civil society. We didn't say these things because we are scared, oppressed, or persecuted. We said them because we are citizens with equal rights and equal responsibilities in Palestinian society, and it is incumbent upon us to help shape our society so that it reflects the values we hold dear.

Fighting extremism—The Amman Message. We have been strong supporters of King Abdullah's *Amman Message*, which seeks to raise the moderate voices of Islam and promote a better understanding among religions. The initiative, which began in the fall of 2006, speaks boldly against extremism: No human whose heart is filled with light could be an extremist. We decry the campaign that portrays Islam as a religion that encourages violence and institutionalizes terrorism. Throughout history, extremism has caused the destruction of great civilizations. The tree of civilization wilts, and hearts close, when malice takes hold. It is an evil alien to Islamic values of moderation and tolerance. Today, we call on the international community to work seriously on implementing international law and ensuring respect for UN conventions and resolutions, ensuring that there are no double standards, that injustice is uprooted, and that people's rights are reinstated. Achieving this will contribute to uprooting the causes of violence, exaggeration, and extremism.

The Archbishop of Spain, after the Madrid bombings, said, "We must learn from the Palestinian Christians how to live with the Muslims." I believe he is right, because we Palestinian Christians can be

the voice of Islam to the West and the voice of the West to Islam.

LWF officials met with His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi, personal envoy and special advisor to King Abdullah for Religious Affairs. Prince Ghazi encouraged Muslim-Christian dialogue and said that the Muslim community should emphasize seven principles among Muslims: no terrorism, no offensive jihad, good citizenship, the possibility of democracy, respect for religions, human rights, and women's rights.

We welcome this opportunity for dialogue and look forward to deepening our relationship. In December 2006, Christians and Muslims wrote a joint statement denouncing the Palestinian violence, asking for a unity government and calling for Palestinians to lay down their arms.

Education. Our schools are focused on teaching peace, coexistence, and democratic principles. Muslim and Christian students together, boys and girls, side by side, learn how to live and learn with one another. We strive to provide quality, wholistic education that inspires our children to develop their spirits and selves to be all that they can be. Through music, art, sports, drama, and other programs, we seek to prepare our children to build their hearts, homes, and new nation with the values of a modern, civil society with human rights for all. We are teaching our children—Israelis and Palestinians—how to live together without walls, fences, or barriers, without occupation or violence. We are teaching our children how to turn our anger into love and our fear into healing.

The educational aims of our schools are to (1) mold Palestinian Christian identify in a secularized, multireligious, multicultural society; (2) teach coexistence with the other religions around us—Islam and Judaism; (3) teach democracy and practice it in our schools; (4) enhance peace education; (5) promote the role of women; (6) educate the students in the basics of human rights, including children's rights, education, and secure homes and families; and (7) give quality education including music, arts, environmental education, and vocational training.

Our thirteen local heads of churches recently worked with the Ministry of Education of the Palestinian Authority to develop the first Palestinian Christian ecumenical curriculum for both private and public schools. We have 12,000 Palestinian Christian students in the whole West Bank and Gaza, and we are educating over 2,000. That means we have a great influence over one-sixth of the future Palestinian Christian leaders of tomorrow, and we take this responsibility very seriously.

Relations with Jews. Many people do not realize our shared history with the Jewish people as well. For many years, we lived together side by side in peace. My father taught us that we must respect the Jews because they have been oppressed like us. The current conflict is political; it is about land, not religion. Looking at history, we see that Arab people have not persecuted Jews as those in the West have done.

We find it essential to understand the Jews and Judaism in our country. We have to dialogue more with them. We need to understand the Jewish religion and also the history and fears of the Jews that go deep. I have learned much about these fears that are based in their brutal suffering of the Holocaust and earlier in the pogroms of Europe and Russia.

To understand the fears of the other is essential for building trust and understanding the other. After all, our goal is to live together with peace and justice in our shared

land. At a Shabbat meal that my wife and I attended, an eighteen-year-old girl was surprised to meet a Palestinian Christian. Although we are neighbors, just five minutes apart, there is a psychological wall that separates us. She politely asked if I accepted a Jewish state. I really appreciated this daring young woman, and I told her: "Most Palestinians believe in a two-state solution. This means I have to identify what kind of a state I want. I do not want a state with any religion as law, but a modern, democratic, civil society. I want it to be secular and respect all three religions of the Holy Land. And I would respect your decision about whatever kind of state you want for yourselves. If you want it to be a Jewish state so that you can freely observe your Jewish traditions, that is fine. But, I will then ask you, what will be the future of the 20 percent who are not Jewish in a Jewish state?"

Hans Küng said "No peace among nations without peace among religions. And no peace among religions without dialogue." And I say, this dialogue ought to be a dialogue of life, and a dialogue that seeks the common values for justice, peace, reconciliation, love, forgiveness, mutual respect, human dignity, and living together.

> The great world religions have both similarities and fundamental differences. One of the most important similarities is actually a conviction that it is part of the innermost essence of religion to be a source of peace and reconciliation. And herein lies the great challenge. Respect for plurality and diversity is put to the test in a special way in worldviews and beliefs that hold—each independently and in its own tradition—that they know the Truth itself. The credibility of religious convictions is put to the test in their desire for peace.[1]

In the early 1990s, several of us religious leaders from many streams and traditions of Judaism and Christianity began the Jonah Group, a Jewish/Christian dialogue group, to explore our faiths together and deepen mutual understanding. We have looked at what our teachings tell us about violence, self-defense, occupation, land, justice, peace, the role of media, and how we live together. We have shared a Seder together and learned about one another's feasts. This has deepened our understanding of one another and is building bridges among us. In our Arabic-speaking congregation at Redeemer Church in Jerusalem, we have a program where Jewish and Christian families have gatherings and events together to deepen the grassroots understanding of faith and life. Slowly but surely, relationships are growing.

The Council on Religious Leadership in the Holy Land. The Alexandria Declaration was one attempt to work together among Christians, Muslims, and Jews here. The thirteen local heads of churches, the Chief Rabbinate, and the Chief Judge of the Islamic Court have been working on an offshoot of that process we are calling the Council on Religious Leadership in the Holy Land. The goals of this council are to (1) speak out jointly on any desecration of holy places, scriptures, or symbols of any religion; (2) combat ignorance and stereotypes of religions and increase awareness of religions as they want themselves to be known; (3) seek to explore possible solutions to the main core problems between Israelis and Palestinians; (4) work jointly on social, ethical issues; and (5) serve as a reference group for negotiators about religious issues.

Though we are still forming, we have made several concrete attempts to intervene and mediate in some circumstances.

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1. "Vulnerability and Security:" A Study from the Commission on International Affairs in Norway, 2002.

At a meeting right after the capture of Gilad Shalit in Gaza, we agreed to try to actively negotiate to get the soldier released. We had worked and developed a proposal that the Palestinian Authority said they agreed to. The only condition was that the Israeli government would promise to open the files of the prisoners in the future with international guarantees from France and Egypt. The agreement was that the Chief Judge and I would go to Gaza and receive the captured soldier and hand him to the Chief Rabbi.

Even if this did not happen, we will not stop these efforts, because sometimes I think how many lives might have been spared if we religious leaders had been heard. This initiative is but one example of how religious leaders are trying to make a concrete difference on the ground.

One of the most difficult things to discuss is the root cause of our problems. Palestinian Christians and Muslims maintain that the root cause is the illegal occupation. Israeli Jews say it is violence and terrorism. We agreed to dialogue about whether our religions accept occupation or violence. If we can come to some common ground, it may enable us to make our religions a driving force for justice, peace, and reconciliation instead of division. I believe this council is an essential step in the history of our land. We need to support it and encourage it.

The status of Jerusalem. We believe that Jerusalem as a holy city must be shared by three faiths: Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and two peoples: Israelis and Palestinians. It must be a capital for both Israel and the future state of Palestine. This common bond is a profound part of our shared identity as we have a concrete vision of a shared future, living side by side and rejecting any exclusivist claims of one religion over another. Each must have its own identity and access to our holy places and symbols. This is possible only if it is truly shared the way our common God of Life would have us share.

> This dialogue ought to be a dialogue of life that seeks the common values for justice, peace, reconciliation, love, forgiveness, mutual respect, human dignity, and living together.

The heads of churches issued a recent statement on the status of Jerusalem, concluding that these elements must be present for a lasting peace in Jerusalem. The components of this special status must include the following elements:

1. "The human right of freedom of worship and of conscience for all, both as individuals and as religious communities."[2]

2. Equality of all her inhabitants before the law, in coordination with the international resolutions.

3. Free access to Jerusalem for all, citizens, residents, or pilgrims, at all times.

2. Cf. Memorandum 1994, a statement by the patriarchs and heads of Christian Churches in Jerusalem.

whether in peace or in war. Therefore Jerusalem should be an open city.

4. The "rights of property ownership, custody and worship which the different Churches have acquired throughout history should continue to be retained by the same communities. These rights which are already protected in the Status Quo of the Holy Places according to historical 'firmans' and other documents, should continue to be recognized and respected."[3]

5. The various Christian holy places in the city, wherever they are, must remain united in geography, whatever the solution envisaged.

Working toward justice, peace, and reconciliation

Is reconciliation possible between Palestinians and Israelis? Only with dedicated work, God's help, and according to these principles:

First, genuine reconciliation can grow only in a culture of truthfulness.

Second, reconciliation is built on justice, and the fruit of justice is peace.

Third, for true reconciliation to occur, we must be willing to forgive.

1. Genuine reconciliation can grow only in a culture of truthfulness. People today have been wounded and paralyzed by fear, oppression, racism, violence, terrorism, occupation, and hatred. Healing must begin with truth telling and with breaking the silence that hides the suffering of those who are vulnerable and violated. Only such a start will allow the possibility of healing with justice and forgiveness. Only when the light of truth exposes the lies that have been used to inflict suffering on innocent people can the seeds of reconciliation take root.

How many wars and conflicts have been launched in the last years for the sake of ideology or narrow partisan politics, masquerading as security concerns, or using eschatological scenarios and holy writings to justify killing or occupation? And none of them is built on the truth. As a Christian, I believe that truth is the nature of God. The truth liberates and does not burden. Politicians and governments need to free themselves and liberate their peoples by telling them the truth. The conflicts in the Middle East show us how sick ideologies, lies, and propaganda machinery can demonize and create hatred, violence, and destructive extremism. Truth telling must be the basis for healing our broken societies and conflicts.

This of course begs the question: Whose truth? In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, each of the two peoples has its own history, and none among us will relinquish our collective memories easily, as they are such a part of who we are. However, we must not allow ourselves to be so rooted in our own stories of pain and suffering that we cannot or will not understand the suffering of others. We each must learn to acknowledge the validity of the other's truth. It is far easier to show respect for the history of others when they are showing respect for yours. It is in acknowledging the reality of another's history, even when you view the past through a different lens, that the basis for a kind of solidarity embodying a fundamental respect for differences can be laid.

This in turn requires people to face the flaws in their past and to acknowledge the reality of the grief of the other, to begin to realize that the old Manichean division between "us" and "them," "good" and "evil," is fundamentally flawed. It requires us to reinterpret our own past and create new memories. We should never allow our

3. Cf. Memorandum 1994.

history of pain to become our future of hopelessness and injustice.

The late John Paul II gave the world a beautiful example of this when he confessed the sins of some members of the church in the persecution of the Jewish people. Nations, politicians, governments, and faith leaders need to learn from him and act with his courage. We need to confess the sins of hate and injustice that divide us. We need to confess the injustice that has been done to the Palestinian people, and we need to confess the fear that has been imposed on the Israeli people. The time has come for hearing one another's truths because it is essential for healing and reconciliation.

2. Reconciliation is built on justice, and the fruit of justice is peace. Often, when the church speaks boldly and truthfully for peace with justice, it is criticized for being one-sided and imbalanced. But how can justice be imbalanced? When the church is prophetic, it is balanced in its call for both justice and healing. It cares for humanity and justice. It listens to the fears and feels the wounds of both sides but does not lose sight of peace with justice and healing. However, if the church and people of conscience remain silent, I am afraid that extremists from either side will be able to hold justice and peace hostage in the Middle East.

We believe that reconciliation is possible, but only when people come to see that the security of Israel is dependent on freedom and justice for Palestinians and, simultaneously, that freedom and justice for Palestinians is dependent on the security of Israel. This is the key for any just peace and reconciliation in this land. This formula is the one that seeks true peace and healing for both peoples and at the same time allows both peoples to live in their own viable states according to international standards of justice, equality, and equitable sharing of resources.

We should never allow our history of pain to become our future of hopelessness and injustice.

For this reason, I continue to urge the Israelis to see that justice is essential for the survival of both peoples. As former Israeli Speaker of the Knesset Avraham Burg said, "Israel cannot survive without justice." And I would add, "Neither can the Palestinians survive without justice." And so I hope that the Palestinians can continue to develop more strategies of nonviolence and the rule of law in order to achieve our national rights in our own democratic, viable state, in our own modern, civil society. The psalmist sings, "Justice and peace will kiss each other" (Ps 85:10b). And the late Pope John Paul II reminds us, "No peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness."

3. For true reconciliation to occur, we must be willing to forgive. Can Palestinians forgive Israelis? Can Israelis forgive Palestinians? Forgiveness heals and rebuilds troubled relationships from the foundations. But forgiveness is not opposed to justice, nor does it give up one's own legitimate rights. Forgiveness is a process not of forgetting but of learning how to live with the past while redefining that past and creating new memories. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We must develop and maintain

the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

I always make a point to urge Israelis to see God in the Palestinians and urge Palestinians to see God in the Israelis. I urge both to accept each other's humanity with all of its pain and suffering. If we do so in the spirit of forgiveness, we can recognize each other's human, civil, religious, national, and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land be the Promised Land of milk and honey for Palestinians and Israelis.

Conclusion

There are many who will tell you that the chances for reconciliation in the Middle East are slim. And, as you hear me say, the political realities are indeed not that hopeful. But I also tell you that those who say reconciliation is not possible are wrong. As I hope you have seen, it is happening every day, in many ways, in our schools and churches, and with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders of faith and courage. It is my fervent prayer that my children and grandchildren will live one day side by side with their Israeli neighbors in just peace and reconciliation.

I confess that sometimes, late at night, I ask the Lord whether this will ever happen in my lifetime. It is time that we stopped looking to world leaders and politicians to solve our problems, because it looks doubtful that they can get past their own narrow national interests. It is time the church locally and globally takes up its call together with people of good conscience and courage from Judaism and Islam.

A Midrash tells of a rabbi who asked his students how one can be certain the night is over and the dawn has come. One student suggested, "When one can tell the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree." Another said, "When my eyes can distinguish a sheep from a dog." The rabbi replied, "No. When you can look into the eyes of another and recognize your sister or brother. Then truly the night is over, and a new day has dawned."

Today, my sisters and brothers, let us together stand and say that we are fed up with bloodshed, hatred, occupation, and stigmatization. We have spent too much time at war and wasted too many young lives in hate. Let us work together, with God's help, to create that new dawn.

Luther, the Turks, and Islam

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Personally, the teachings of Muhammad don't move me, but the doctrines of the Turks we must engage. One must consider dogma. —Martin Luther

It has been said that "war against the Turks formed the colorful background of the Reformation."[1] However, most studies of Martin Luther relegate his extensive writings and comments regarding the Turks and Islam to background matters, implying that these were peripheral concerns for the most central figure of the early continental Reformations. But ought this concern be so peripheral?

Wars and rumors of wars with Ottoman forces shaped the political arenas of Luther's time. His response to this topic is novel. Perhaps more important, however, is that Luther moved beyond constructions of the Turk as a mere military threat to a consideration of Islam itself, the religious banner under which the Ottoman armies marched. In his engagement with Islam, Luther's primary concern with right doctrine proves consistent with other facets of his public career, almost to the point that it outweighs political shrewdness.

Struggles between Turkish Muslims and European Christians in the late medieval period were often assumed to bear cosmic significance. "To a large degree," Gregory Miller observes, "the Turkish threat was so terrifying because many Germans understood the conflict between the Hapsburg and Ottoman Empires to be a struggle not between two political powers but between the forces of Christendom and that of its archenemy, Islam."[2] This same fear is present among many today who (consciously or unconsciously) subscribe to a view of the tensions present between the Western and Islamic worlds as a "clash of civilizations."[3] As historian Bernard Lewis has asserted of the relationship, "With two world religions, sustained by the same convictions, driven by the same ambitions, living side by side in the same region, it was inevitable that, sooner or later, they would clash."[4]

By the time of Luther's rise to prominence, European Christians were accustomed to thinking of Muslims as military foes. For centuries, crusades had taken

1. George W. Forell, "Luther and the War against the Turks," *Church History* 14:4 (December 1945), 256.

2. Gregory J. Miller, "Luther on the Turks and Islam," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy L. Wengert (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 185.

3. A foundational articulation of this perspective is to be found in Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (Summer 1993), 22–49.

4. Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2000 Years* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 32.

Christian armies to the Levant. In 1492, the fall of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain brought the *Reconquista* to completion. Constantinople, however, had fallen to the Ottomans in 1453, allowing the Turkish forces to move into the Balkans and Hungary, consolidating their power up to the Danube River. Suleiman II took the reigns of the Ottoman army after the death of Selim I, leading some to hope that he would rest on the laurels of his predecessor. In 1521, Suleiman captured Belgrade, and in 1526 King Louis II of Hungary was killed as his army was overthrown in the Battle of Mohacs on the Danube. By 1529, the Ottoman army stood at the gates of Vienna. Again in 1532, the Ottoman threat would be turned back by European forces. It wasn't until 1683 and the last assault on Vienna that the Turkish threat abated. Nevertheless, the Ottoman forces were "feared as a dangerous enemy—a fear that long survived the danger."[5]

God's chastening rod

Given their place in the center of European consciousness, it is unsurprising to find references to the "Turks" in writings from almost all of the major Reformers. Among them, however, only Luther substantively engaged the matter, producing theological perspectives both on the possibility of Christian war against the Turk and on the religion of the Turk, Islam. By contrast, for instance, John Calvin "discussed the Turkish threat occasionally, but said very little about Islam itself."[6] Perhaps the contemporary who most evenly matched Luther's interest in the Turks and Islam was the humanist, Desiderius Erasmus.

The list of Luther's major writings on Islam is long:[7] *On War Against the Turk* (1529), intended to help Christians fight against the threat with good conscience (*LW* 46:157–205); *Heerpredigt wider den Türken* (*Military Sermon Against the Turks*, 1529), with an exposition of Daniel 7, Luther attempted to explain the Turkish threat in all its seriousness (*WA* 30/2:160–97); *Vorwort zu dem Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum* (Preface to *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*, 1530), a preface to a small book written around 1481 to detail the religion and customs of the Turks; such information was in great demand given the Ottoman threat to Vienna (*WA* 30/2:205–8)[8]; *Admonition to Prayer against the Turks* (1541), in which Luther's concern for Christian penitence and prayer to counteract foreign military threat finds fullest expression (*LW* 43:215–41); *Verlegung des Alcoran Bruder Richardi, Prediger Ordens* (*Refutation of the Alcoran of Brother Richard, Preaching Order*, 1542), Luther's German translation of a popular medieval polemical tract against Islam (*WA* 53:272–396); and the *Vorrede zu Theodor Biblianders Koranausgabe* (*Preface to Theodor Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an*, 1543,

5. Lewis, *The Middle East*, 128.

6. Rollin Armour Sr., *Islam, Christianity, and the West: A Troubled History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 115.

7. Explanation of abbreviations for Luther citations:

LW, *Luther's Works* [American Edition], 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986).

WA, *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65+ vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–).

WA, Br, *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe · Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1930–1985).

WA TR, *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe · Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1912–1921).

8. The book, though anonymous in Luther's edition, was probably written by Georg von Muelbach, a Dominican priest in Rome who in his earlier years had been captured by Turks led by Murad II (1421–1451).

WA 53:569–72). In addition to these major works, Luther's occasional writings and, later, Table Talk, are filled with asides and references to the Turks. Like all Europeans of his era aware of greater political realities, the Turk permeated all levels of Luther's existence.

From the beginning of his writings on the Turks and Islam, Luther's comments had political consequences. The first mention of the Turks in Luther's public writings comes in 1518 with his "Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses." There, in reference to the fifth thesis,[9] Luther articulates a theological perspective on the Turkish threat that he will hold until his final writings on the subject. In a section discussing "punishment" that is "God's correction and scourging," Luther asserts that, as with the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6–10), only repentance can still God's chastising rod. But "the 'big wheels' in the church" who would preach a crusade against the Turks "want to fight, not against iniquities, but against the lash of iniquity and thus they would oppose God who says that through that lash he himself punishes us for our iniquities because we do not punish ourselves for them."[10]

Luther's statement of explanation created yet more contention. Indeed, it was singled out for condemnation in *Exsurge Domine*, the papal bull of excommunication directed at Luther by Pope Leo X on 15 June 1520. Among the "destructive, pernicious, scandalous, and seductive" errors enumerated in the bull is an essentialized version of Luther's position: "To go to war against the Turks is to resist God who punishes our iniquities through them."[11] But even before *Exsurge Domine*, Luther tied his struggles with Rome to the war against the Turk. Prior to the beginning of the Leipzig Debate with Johannes Eck in June 1519, Luther wrote to his friend Wencenlaus Linck, "I think I can demonstrate that today Rome is worse than the Turk."[12]

Political threat, theological response

Underlying the political consequences of Luther's teaching was his uncompromising concern for right doctrine. However, among some interpreters determined to view Luther as a political rather than religious leader, doctrine fades into the background.[13] The Turkish threat was the context of such questions.

After the fall of Belgrade in 1521, polemical exposés on the Turks and Islam began to flood German lands.[14] The pamphlets were so ubiquitous that the genre acquired the generic name of *Türkenbüchlein*. Although Luther was deeply suspicious of papal aims and authority vis-à-vis the question of war against the Turk,[15] his

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9. "The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons" (*LW* 31:89).

10. "Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses" (1518), *LW* 31:90–2 / *WA* 1:535.

11. *Bulla Exsurge Domine*, 15 June 1520: "Proeliari adversus Turcas est repugnare Deo visitanti iniquitates nostras."

12. *WA Br* 1:270, cited in James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer: The Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 135.

13. See, for instance, Kenneth M. Setton, "Lutheranism and the Turkish Peril," *Balkan Studies* 3 (1962): 133–68.

14. For a cross section and contextual analysis of this genre in its Evangelical and Roman Catholic expressions, see John W. Bohnstedt, "The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by the German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 58:9 (December 1968).

15. Luther intimated in 1520 that the main purpose for the pope's support for a war against the Turks was fund raising: "When

Luther was convinced that the fight against the Turks "must be begun with repentance . . . or we shall fight in vain."

own 1529 writings, *On War Against the Turk* and *Military Sermon Against the Turks*, may be understood as contributions to this genre. Luther here remains consistent in his theological conception of the Turks as a manifestation of God's chastising rod.

Such conclusions were not unique. As C. A. Patrides observed of a different but related context, "the [English] Renaissance detected scourges of God everywhere," with "the most consistent invocation of the traditional theory" being "made in connection to the Ottoman empire."[16] Indeed, this approach seems to be a basic theme of the *Türkenbüchlein*.

Though common in the period, any call to repentance and reform issuing from Luther's pen was a political threat. Under the authority of Charles V, Archduke Ferdinand called the Second Diet of Speyer in 1529. All enemies, foreign and domestic, were to be dealt with post haste:

> With Vienna under siege, the Diet was to discuss both the Turkish threat and the religious controversy together. Ferdinand declared that the fact that the Turks were advancing up the Danube had much to do with God's anger over the existence of heretics within the empire. Both the Turks and Luther were to be dealt with summarily.[17]

By the middle of April, Luther, emboldened yet again by support from Landgrave Philip of Hesse and Elector John of Saxony, had responded to Ferdinand's charge with a book, *Concerning War Against the Turks*. The principal argument of the book was that although the Turks should be resisted with overwhelming military defense, such a 'crusade' could by no means be considered a 'holy' war.

These 1529 writings clarified for all that Luther's earlier statements vis-à-vis the Turks were calls to neither pacifism nor irresponsible protection of citizens and subjects. Luther certainly did not display the apathy toward the Turks of which his opponents had accused him.[18] Still, Luther reiterates his earlier position:

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they pretend that they are about to fight the Turks, they send out emissaries to raise money." However, "everybody knows that not a cent of the annates, or of the indulgence money, or of all the rest, is spent to fight the Turk. It all goes into their bottomless bag. They lie and deceive. They make laws and they make agreements with us, but they do not intend to keep a single letter of them" ("To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate," *LW* 44:144). And again in 1521, answering the articles of *Exsurge Domine*, he wrote that "God does not demand crusades, indulgences, and war. He wants us to live good lives. But the pope and his followers run from goodness faster than from anything else, yet he wants to devour the Turk" ("Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," *LW* 32:90).

16. C. A. Patrides, "'The Bloody and Cruell Turke': The Background of a Renaissance Commonplace," *Studies in the Renaissance* 10 (1963): 130.

17. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 220.

18. Luther reported in a letter to Amsdorf that the October 1529 Ottoman siege of Vienna had made him physically ill (*WA Br* 5:163, cited in Miller, "Luther on the Turks and Islam," 193).

19. *LW* 46:166.

. . . to show us clearly that he is not with us in our war against the Turks. God has never put much courage or spirit into the minds of our princes to be able to deal seriously with the Turkish war even once. . . . Why does this happen? Because my article, which Pope Leo condemned, remains uncondemned [by God]. And because the papists reject it, arbitrarily and without Scripture, the Turk must take its side and prove its validity with fist and deeds.[19]

Luther's budding doctrine of the "two kingdoms" finds clear application in this discussion: priests and bishops are to stay in the church, preaching and praying; wars are to be fought by soldiers. To confuse these orders is to invite God's wrath. Indeed, Luther states, "if I were a soldier and saw a priest's banner in the field, or a banner of the cross, even though it was a crucifix, I should run as though the devil were chasing me . . . even if they won a victory."[20]

If, as Luther believed, "the Turk is the rod of the wrath of the Lord our God," the obvious plan of attack would be to "take the rod out of God's hand, so that the Turk may be found only, in his own strength, all by himself." If, he continues, "the Turk's god, the devil, is not beaten first, there is reason to fear that the Turk will not be so easy to beat. . . . Christian weapons and power must do it." Thus, Luther was convinced that the fight against the Turks "must be begun with repentance, and we must reform our lives, or we shall fight in vain." The calling of the church is to "drive men to repentance by showing our great and numberless sins and our ingratitude, by which we have earned God's wrath and disfavor, so that he justly gives us into the hands of the devil and the Turk."[21] As Luther proclaimed in the *Heerpredigt*, "Christians will be punished here on earth because of their sins and the innocent will be made martyrs."[22]

This two-kingdoms approach to the question of war against the Turk was developed within a context of profound existential import. Nevertheless, doctrine, rather than political maneuvering, was the central thread of Luther's approach. One doctrinal component consisted of "just war" concerns. The matter was addressed in the "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors":

> Since the authorities are to honor good and punish evil works . . . it is their duty to make defense against those who would destroy the worship of God, the peaceful order of the country, law, and justice. On this account we are to defend ourselves against the Turks. . . . For this reason a government may wage war, so that justice and honor may be established in the land and the coming generation may not lead a life without virtue.[23]

As Luther had stated unequivocally in 1526, "At the very outset I want to say that whoever starts a war is in the wrong."[24] Furthermore, commenting on Matthew 5:9, Luther concluded that "anyone who claims to be a Christian and a child of God, not only does not start war or unrest; but he also gives help and counsel on the side of peace wherever he can, even though there may have been a just and adequate cause for going to war."[25]

Although perspectives critical of the pope and emperor were certainly not welcome, Luther's articulation of a doctrine of two kingdoms is not indicative of political opportunism. Even sympathetic historiography tends to obscure this point:

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20. *LW* 46:168.
21. *LW* 46:170, 171.
22. *WA* 30/2:170, "Army Sermon Against the Turks" (in Armour, *Islam, Christianity, and the West*, 119).
23. "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony" (1528), *LW* 40:306.
24. *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526), *LW* 46:118.
25. *LW* 21:40.

Afraid of losing the much-needed support of the German princes for the struggle against the Turkish threat from the south, Emperor Charles V agreed to a truce between Protestant and Catholic territories in Nuremberg in 1532. . . . Thus the Lutheran movement was, for the first time, officially tolerated and could enjoy a place in the political sun of the Holy Roman Empire.[26]

While the Lutheran princes negotiated a measure of toleration with the peace treaty signed on 3 August 1532, Luther was unequivocal in his advice against such practical measures: "If we wish to nail everything down neatly and securely through our own efforts and do not also trust God to act powerfully in it, then clearly nothing good will come of it."[27] Furthermore, against the pragmatic considerations of political leverage, Luther recommended in May 1538 that the Protestant princes go unconditionally to the aid of Charles V and his fight against the Turkish threat, "for necessity has no law. Where there is need, there is an end to what law, alliance, or treaty says. The need supercedes everything."[28]

A final item from the Table Talk serves to illustrate the political hay that could be made from the matter of the Turkish threat and Luther's unwillingness capitalize on its possibilities. A member of an imperial mission to the Turks reported to Luther that Suleiman had shown much interest in Luther and his movement and that he had asked the ambassador Luther's age. When they told him that Luther was forty-eight years old, he responded, "I wish he were even younger, he would know in me a gracious protector [*einen gnedigen herrn*]." But, hearing that report, Luther made the sign of the cross and said, "May God protect me from such a gracious protector!"[29]

Eschatology, the Turk, and the pope

Luther approached political questions regarding the Turks from an unrelentingly theological perspective, a perspective eschatologically inclined: "In place of the crusade Luther saw a spiritual eschatological battle. However, military action was still necessary because Christians were not only citizens of heaven, but also citizens of an earthly kingdom."[30] It is now widely accepted that Luther's eschatological perspective produced a conservative public theology.[31] Thus, George Forell understood Luther's eschatology as the "limiting principle" of his social ethic: "Faith was the 'motive' and the 'quietive' of his social ethics. It was the driving force behind all his attempts to reorganize society and at the same time the reason why all such attempts were in the background of his theological thinking."[32] However conservative, Luther's eschatology did not mitigate his commitment to doctrine as the *cantus firmus* of his engagement with the world.

While it is true that Luther's apocalyptic anticipations became more pronounced in his later years, they are present throughout his career.[33] References to the "Last Day" abound in the Table Talk. In 1532, he

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26. Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester. Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 69–70.

27. *WA Br* 6:326, cited in Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 256.

28. *WA Br* 10:20, cited in Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer*, 279.

29. "*Behut mich Gott fur diesem gnedigen herrn!*" *WA TR* 2:508 (2537b).

30. Miller, "Luther on the Turks and Islam," 197.

31. See, for instance, J. M. Porter, "Luther and Political Millenarianism: The Case of the Peasants' War," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42:3 (1981): 389–406.

32. George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (New York: American Press, 1954), 162.

33. Heiko Oberman, "Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the 'Old'

was reported to have said, "I have one more year to preach, but I am afraid I won't live that long. I hope I shall see the Last Day."[34] And again, at a later date: "'I hope,' said Dr. Martin, 'since the Gospel is despised, that the Last Day is not far off, not more than one hundred years.'"[35] In the winter of 1542–43, Luther was suffering a great deal of pain and expecting the hastening of the end:

> I'm fed up with the world, and it is fed up with me. I'm quite content with that. The world thinks that if it is only rid of me everything will be fine, and it will accomplish this. After all, it's as I've often said: I'm like a ripe stool and the world's like a gigantic anus, and so we're about to let go of each other. I thank thee, dear God, that thou dost allow me to stay in thy little flock that suffers persecution for the sake of thy Word.[36]

The Turk was an important feature of Luther's 'end-times' scheme. As Luther wrote in 1530 to dedicate his translation of the apocalyptic book of Daniel:

> The world runs and hastens so diligently to its end that it often occurs to me forcibly that the last day will break before we can completely turn the Holy Scripture into German. For it is certain from the Holy Scriptures that we have no more temporal things to expect. All is done and fulfilled: the Roman Empire is at an end: the Turk has reached his highest point: the pomp of the papacy is falling away and the world is cracking on all sides almost as if it would break and fall apart entirely.[37]

The signs of the times in which he believed himself to be living were related directly to the Ottomans:

> When the Turk begins to fail a little the Last Day will surely come [*der jungste Tag gewißlich kommen*]. For this is the way it must be according to Scripture. . . . There is commotion enough in the political life at present. Lawyers never had more to do than just now.[38]

Although he soon expected the end of the "world," Luther was not a modern dispensationalist looking for a scientific system of biblical interpretation. When read into the Bible, such schemes are allegorical. Thus, while he follows interpreters who "have generally divided the world into seven ages or seven days, during which the week of this finite life is brought to a close," Luther tells his students that "these divisions are arbitrary" and therefore "should not be accepted as articles of faith."[39] In his preface to the Book of Revelation—first written in 1530 and included, revised, in the *Deutsche Bibel* Luther oversaw in 1546—Luther states that "the first woe, the fifth [evil] angel, is the great heretic Arius and his companions, who have plagued Christendom so terribly everywhere." The second woe is "the sixth [evil] angel, the shameful Mohammed with his companions, the Saracens, who inflicted great plagues on Christendom, with his doctrines and with the sword." The latter join with "the holy papacy," whose ultimate crime is the founding of "a counterfeit church of external holiness." Finally, when "these two last woes combine and make a final concerted attack upon Christendom . . . all hell is loose."[40]

One major character of the last age in which Luther believed himself to be living

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Luther." *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19:3 (1988): 435–50.

34. *WA TR* 2:31–32 (1291), cited in Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 168.

35. *WA TR* 6:306–7 (6985).

36. *LW* 54:448 (5537).

37. "Luther to John Frederic, Duke of Saxony," cited in Armour, *Islam, Christianity, and the West*, 114.

38. *WA TR* 6:306, 32 (6984).

39. *WA* 42:649 / *LW* 3:141–2, commenting on Gen 17:10–11.

40. "Preface to the Revelation of St. John" (1546/1530), *LW* 35:404–5. Medieval writers often referred to Arab Muslims as "Saracens," a traditional term of uncertain etymology.

is the Antichrist. Luther's identification of the pope as the Antichrist is common knowledge, though this statement of 1521 directly to the pope illustrates well the point: "All the pope accomplishes with his crusading indulgences and his promises of heaven is to lead Christians with their lives into death and with their souls into hell. This is, of course, the proper work of the Antichrist."[41] Luther, however, became increasingly convinced that Pope and Turk were two sides of the same coin. Thus, he could write ten years later in *On War Against the Turk*, "just as the pope is the Antichrist, so the Turk is the very devil incarnate. The prayer of Christendom against both is that they shall go down to hell, even though it may take the Last Day to send them there; and I hope that day will not be far off."[42]

In 1537, Luther bolstered his two kingdoms–based condemnation of crusading with an interesting eschatological observation. Since the pope was himself the Antichrist, it wasn't feasible to think that through his efforts Christendom would be saved:

> For as I have said in this last age, we cannot even hope that this Anti-Christ devil be overthrown and Christianity be saved through the Roman emperor or some other great secular power, as it happened in Christendom in times past. On the contrary, the Anti-Christ must himself have the highest power on earth and in addition he must have all kingdoms of the world duty-bound to him.[43]

One interesting aspect of Luther's discussion of the Antichrist in relation to the Ottoman threat is his conflation of the pope and the Turk on functional if not ontological and historical levels. In his 1535 lectures on Genesis, Luther was playing with the category, skirting up to the edge of conflating pope and Turk but in the end staying with the pope alone as Antichrist. "The Antichrist, that is the pope and Turk," he says, "elevate themselves . . . above God in the category of relation, who is the God proclaimed by the Word and manifested by the worship." But soon after, Luther backs away from this functional conflation:

> Yet it is more in accordance with the truth to say that the Turk is the beast, because he is outside the church and openly persecutes Christ. The Antichrist, however, sits in the temple of God. Therefore, strictly speaking and by logical definition, he who sits in the church is the Antichrist.[44]

The nuance of these distinctions would fall away in later statements. Already in 1529, Luther had proclaimed, "The Turk fills heaven with Christians by murdering their bodies, but the pope does what he can to fill hell with Christians through his blasphemous teachings."[45] At one point in the Table Talk, Luther speculates regarding the origin of these two threats, asserting that "Pope and Turk started out at the same time under emperor Phokas, about nine hundred years ago."[46] His speculation went even further: "The person of the Anti-Christ is the pope, his flesh is the Turk. The one has infested the Church spiritually, the other bodily. However, both come from the same lord, even the devil."[47]

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41. "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles" (1521), *LW* 32:90.

42. *On War Against the Turk* (1529), *LW* 46:181.

43. *WA* 47:19, cited in Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 176–7.

44. *LW* 3:121, 122.

45. *War Sermon Against the Turk* (1529), *WA* 30:2, 195, cited in Forell, *Faith Active in Love*, 174.

46. *WA TR* 3:173 (3104b).

47. *WA TR* 3:158 (3055a): "Corpus Antichristi est simul papa et Turca, quia corpus constituitur corpore et anima. Spiritus Antichristi est papa, caro eius Turca, qui corporaliter infestat ecclesiam, ille spiritualiter. Sunt tamen ambo exuno domino, Diabolo, cum papa sit mendax et homicida Turca."

The joint threat from Turk and pope is addressed by Luther in the church's collective song. His hymn *Erhalt uns Herr bey deinem Wort* (Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Thy Word) was produced in 1541–42 and collected in Klug's Wittenberg hymnal of 1543. As Francis I of France joined forces with the Sultan against the Empire and threats against the Lutherans were again growing, the first verse of the hymn, originally designated a children's song, takes on special immediacy: "Lord, keep us steadfast in thy Word / And curb the Turks' and papists' sword [murdering] / Who Jesus Christ, your only Son / would tumble from your throne."[48]

Whatever his concerns regarding the Antichrist, Luther was confident that God was sovereign in worldly affairs and that the chastening rod could yet be removed from the Ottoman hand. It is this conviction that animates Luther's later writing:

> Heavenly Father, we have indeed deserved your punishment. But execute the punishment yourself according to your grace and not your wrath. It is better to be in your punishing hands [*in deiner hende staupe uns geben*] than in the hands of men or enemies. . . . But you know, Almighty God, Father, that we have not sinned against devil, pope, and Turk and they have no right against us or power over us to punish us. But you can use them as your harsh rod [*grimmegen Ruten*] against us, who have sinned against you and deserved all this misfortune.[49]

Islam: A matter "still outside our knowledge"?

Considering the Ottoman threat and engaging the religion under whose banner it marched required different sensibilities. The Turks could be constructed and encountered in purely military or political terms. A nuanced understanding of Islam was not required to muster the dehumanizing impulse required for combat. Indeed, such nuance was a threat to the monolithic and homogenizing interests of war making. And if one did choose to consider Islam, choices had to be made. Should the belief system be engaged on its own terms, or should one draw from the centuries of Christian polemic against this latecomer claimant to the mantle of monotheism? Should inquiry be independent, or should thinking about Islam always be undertaken in the interests of the state? These questions underlie Luther's approach to the Turks and their faith.

Luther's willingness to engage Islam in a manner more on its own terms than most approaches during his time may be interpreted as a measure of toleration. This particular form of toleration, however, did not extend as far as those articulated by some others. In 1531, for instance, Sebastian Franck advised Johannes Campanus to "Regard as your brothers also all Turks and Heathen" if their fear of God is manifested in learnedness and interiority drawn from God and if they are fair in their dealings.[50] Kate Zebiri, in her study of the history of

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And then again in 3055b: Spiritus Antichristi est papa, caro Antichristi est Turca, quia hic ecclesiam spiritualiter, ille corporaliter devastate."

48. *WA* 35:467–8 / *LW* 53:304–5. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) version of the verse is modified: "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word / Curb those who by deceit or sword / Would wrest the kingdom from your Son / And bring to nought all he has done" (trans. Catherine Winkworth).

49. *Admonition to Prayer Against the Turks* (1541), *WA* 51:608 / *LW* 43:232.

50. "Halte für Deine Brüder auch alle Türken und Heiden, wo sie auch seien, wenn sie Gott furchten und—gelehrt und inwendig von Gott gezogen—Gerechtigkeit wirken, obgleich sie niemals von der Taufe, ja niemals von Christus selber irgendeine Historie oder einen Buchstaben gehört haben, sondern seine Kraft allein durch das innerliche Wort in sich

Muslim-Christian relations, notes that "In some cases religious motives led Christians to dissent from prevailing attitudes of intolerance or to oppose military aggression, while in others, religious or apocalyptic ideas engendered a deep pessimism or animosity toward Islam."[51] She follows R. W. Southern contrasting St. Francis of Assisi as a representative of the former while Luther represents the latter. However, constructions of the Turk were in Luther's time exceedingly harsh, i.e.,

> Fancying themselves to be the true heirs of antique civilization, [*Quattrocento* style] writers cast the Turks in the rôle of barbarians, the counterpart of the old foes of Greece and Rome. As *barbari*, the Turks were regarded as cruel, of savage habits, and the enemies of culture.[52]

Given his context and the content of his responses, Luther's support for more responsible apprehension of Islam—even when ensconced in the vale of polemical refutation—can be charitably approached.

Although Luther's engagement with Islam was polemical, it was not morally triumphalistic. That is, while Luther was sure Christians had a better understanding of God's truth and right doctrine, he was equally sure that non-Christians were fully capable of living lives more religiously responsible than most Christians with whom he was acquainted. While, with other writers of *Türkenbüchlein*, Luther did not hesitate to catalog the atrocities alleged to have been committed by the Turks, he refrained from *ad hominem* attacks against Muhammad, the founding prophet of Islam. This is somewhat surprising, given the history of Christian polemical literature against Islam, literature of which Luther was certainly aware. His approach, however, is consistent with the approach expressed early in his career directly to Pope Leo X:

> Believe me when I say that I have never thought ill of you personally, that I am the kind of person who would wish you all good things eternally, and that I have no quarrel with any man concerning his morals but only concerning the word of truth. In all other matters I will yield to any man whatsoever; but I have neither the power nor the will to deny the Word of God.[53]

Although Luther's engagement with Islam was polemical, it was not morally triumphalistic.

Instead of personal attacks, Luther's focus was on doctrine: "Personally, the teachings of Muhammad don't move me, but the doctrines of the Turks we must engage. One must consider dogma."[54]

The sword of right doctrine defends against all enemies, Roman or Turk. This

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vernommen und dasselbe fruchtbar gemacht haben." Sebastian Franck, "Brief an Johannes Campanus," in *Der linke Flügel der Reformation. Glaubenszeugnisse der Taufer, Spiritualisten, Schwarmer und Antitrinitarier*, ed. Heinhold Fast (Bremen: Carl Schunemann, 1962), 228.

51. Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 27.

52. Robert H. Schwoebel, "Coexistence, Conversion, and the Crusade against the Turks," *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965): 164.

53. *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520). *LW* 31:335.

54. "Personalia, quae dicunt de Mahomet, me non movent, aber die lehre der Turken mussen wir angreiffen. Dogma muss man ansehen." *WA TR* 5:221 (5536).

view finds antecedents in some medieval approaches to Islam. Southern, for instance, sums up the teachings of Wycliffe on matters similar to those treated by Luther: "the main struggle in the world was between Evangelical Christianity on the one hand and the spirit of Islam on the other, and the latter was found in prelates at home as much as in Moslems abroad." For Wycliffe, Islam was "a heresy . . . at the level of morals and practice; and at this level the Western Church was more culpable even than Islam."[55] Erasmus also was critical of Christendom in his discussions of Islam: "The most efficacious way of overcoming the Turks would be if they beheld that which the church taught and exemplified shining forth in our own lives."[56] There was, therefore, a broad context for Luther's statement in 1529:

> There are entirely too many Turks, Jews, heathen, and non-Christians among us with open false doctrine and with offensive, shameful lives. Let the Turk believe and live as he will, just as one lets the papacy and other false Christians live. The emperor's sword has nothing to do with the faith; it belongs to physical, worldly things.[57]

Because for him geopolitics were in God's hands and not in the machinations of political and military power, Luther could not know if Vienna's ability to withstand the sieges of 1529 and 1532 were indicative of future events or if the Ottoman victory would someday be total and complete. Given this temporal uncertainty, Luther was convinced that the best resources should be available for the education of Europeans in the religion of their enemies and future conquerors, not for some modern notion of appreciating the exotic but for the edification of Christian souls as they faced, potentially, life under Ottoman rule. In response to the clear and present danger of invasion by the Ottoman Empire, Luther was concerned to educate his Christian brothers and sisters, lest they be seduced by the beauty of Muslim religious practices and convert to Islam.

Luther's support for publishing worthwhile material on Islam, however controversial, stemmed from his desire to have the best sources of information widely disseminated. One of these sources, the *Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum*, originally written around 1481, is judged helpful by Luther because, in sharp contrast to most *Türkenbüchlein* available at the time, it seeks to relate "details so as not only to recount the evils of the Turks but also to exhibit alongside them the best things."[58] Indeed, he goes on to say, the tract "bears the clear signs of a forthright and sincere heart that writes nothing from hatred, but sets forth every thing out of love of the truth."[59] If, according to Luther, one's purpose is to refute the teachings of another, an honest appraisal of even their best characteristics is warranted:

> Those who only censure and condemn the base and absurd characteristics of the enemy but remain silent about matters that are honest and worthy of praise do more harm than good to their cause. What is easier than to condemn things that are manifestly base and dishonest . . . ? But

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55. R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 81. The connection to Luther is made on pp. 106–7.

56. Cited in Armour, *Islam, Christianity, and the West*, 118 n. 9, corrected.

57. *On War Against the Turk* (1529), *LW* 46:186.

58. Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam: *Preface to the* Libellus de ritu et moribus Turcorum (1530), and *Preface to Bibliander's Edition of the Qur'an* (1543)," *Word & World* 16:2 (1996), 258. Translations of the two prefaces discussed in this section are taken from this publication.

59. Henrich and Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations," 258–59.

to refute good and honest things that are hidden from sight, that is to further the cause, that is to lift up and remove the scandal.[60]

It is with boldness, therefore, that Luther observes from reading the book he is printing that "the religion of the Turks or Muhammad is far more splendid in ceremonies—and, I might say, in customs—than ours, even including that of the religious or all the clerics." It is no surprise that some eagerly convert to Islam since even members of Christian religious orders are "are mere shadows when compared to them, and our people clearly profane when compared to theirs. Not even true Christians, not Christ himself, not the apostles or prophets ever exhibited so great a display."[61]

While admiration of Ottoman bureaucracy or military efficiency could be tolerated among European intellectuals, such outright praise of the Turks *in religious terms* was tantamount to treason. Luther would go further. Just as he would later conjoin the Turk and the pope under the rubric of Antichrist, Luther in this preface characterizes both Islam and Roman Catholicism as religions of works-righteousness:

> For the gospel teaches that the Christian religion is something other and more sublime than showy ceremonies, tonsures, hoods, pale countenances, fasts, feasts, canonical hours, and that entire show of the Roman church throughout the world. Indeed, in all these things the Turks are far superior. . . . May they finally then grasp this truth, namely, that the Christian religion is by far something other than good customs or good works.[62]

Luther charges that it is these similarities in basic concern that have led to the suppression of accurate information regarding Islam. Once again, doctrine comes to the fore. If one would deny the basic articles of Christian faith, Luther asks, "what benefit is it to them if they have the religion of the angels, even if they are twice as religious as the Turks?"[63] Luther closes his preface with a willingness to further engage the sources and teachings of Islam: "Perhaps I will say more, if ever I get my hands on that Muhammad and his Qur'an." Luther would have a hand in ensuring that the latter of these came into his possession.

While it is true that "Sixteenth-century scholars and clergy who fought for the dispersal of a translation of the Koran were motivated by the desire to refute rather than promote its ideas,"[64] Luther stood among those humanists and Christian theologians who recognized the need for a workable copy of the Muslim holy book if they were to learn for themselves what Muslims believed. Under the patronage of Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, Robert of Ketton had completed a Latin translation of the Qur'an in 1143. This translation, however, was quite rough and included many interpolations and explanations of Ketton's own.

Scholars in the Reformation era found the Ketton translation wanting. Nevertheless, it was this edition, with editing from Theodor Bibliander, that was printed in Basel by Johannes Oporinus in 1543. Bibliander, though familiar with Arabic, had not mastered it to the point of being able to produce a completely new translation. A Zwinglian and nonpredestinarian, Bibliander was motivated by eschatological missiological urgency: his "highest desire was to banish war and dissension from the world. Because of his goal, the brevity of time, and his belief that souls could be saved, it was imperative to convert the

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60. Henrich and Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations," 259.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

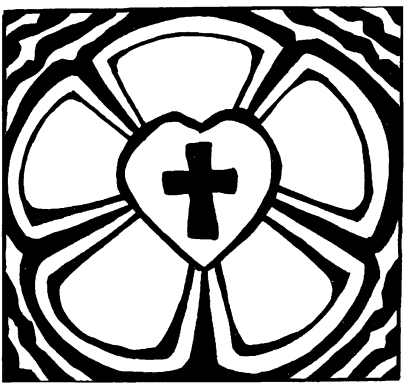
63. Ibid., 262.

64. Harry Clark, "The Publication of the Koran in Latin: A Reformation Dilemma," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15:1 (1984), 3.

Moslems through missionary work."[65] Access to the Qur'an and its errors was central to this missionary task.

The project of printing a Latin edition of the Qur'an faced many difficulties and doubts. Basel's city council, coming off a recent university controversy in which Oporinus had been involved, was divided on whether or not the book should be allowed within its walls. As Oporinus wrote, "the magistry is afraid that if so pestiferous a book is published, the sky will fall." The tension was not eased until an influential outsider, Luther, wrote a letter in support of the project. Luther's letter is unequivocal in his derision of the teachings of the Qur'an and his insistence on a widely disseminated translation intelligible to Europeans so "pastors have a true witness to the people for preaching the abomination of Mohammad through which they should become the more inimical to him and strengthened in our Christian belief."[66] The magistrates of Basel responded to Luther's demands with indignant acceptance. Luther's response to their publication approval included mention that he had prepared a preface for the volume. Additionally, the text was preceded by a "Warning to the Reader" penned by Melanchthon, in which he detailed the doctrinal errors in the text. Three printings of the volume were produced by Oporinus in 1543, and by 1550 it was a regular item in his catalog. The Arabic Qur'an was not printed until 150 years later; it is significant that "it is again a Lutheran theologian, Abraham Hinckelmann," who achieved this landmark.[67]

In relation to the progressive nature of Luther's support for publishing the Qur'an in Latin, his *Vorrede zu Theodor Biblianders Koranausgabe* is a short piece that makes little headway in Christian understandings of the Qur'an or Islam. His basic concern is to demonstrate the inadequacy of Islam through an articulation of basic Christian doctrinal principles. In response to all challenges to the gospel—"idolatrous Jews, Muhammadans, and papists"—Luther urges Christians to "sound forth the voice of the gospel and bear witness that the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, whom the apostles show us, is truly the Son of God and Savior, and let us denounce the



errors of all those who wage war against the gospel." Luther's rationale for supporting the publication of the Qur'an rests squarely in his hope that the religion's inner workings will be exposed: "Once the book of Muhammad has been made public and thoroughly examined in all its parts, all pious persons will more easily comprehend the

65. Clark, "Publication of the Koran," 6.

66. Cited in Clark, "Publication of the Koran," 9, 11.

67. Johannes Wallmann, "Luther on Jews and Islam," in *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics through the Centuries*, ed. Benjamin Uffenheimer and Henning Graf Reventlow, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 59 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988): 155.

insanity and wiles of the devil and will be more easily able to refute them."[68] The purpose of this refutation is not for spiritual triumphalism alone but so that these victories "might be able to bring some to safety, or certainly to fortify our people with more sturdy arguments."[69]

In this 1542 preface, Luther's understanding of the Turks as God's chastening rod remains constant. "Because only a few call upon God rightly in prayer, the church, therefore, is being punished for its ignorance and neglect." The specificities of the Christian faith, therefore, ought to be emphasized to counteract error: "since this punishment is in sight, may it warn us . . . to invoke the eternal and true God, the creator of all things, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified for our sake and raised from the dead." Precisely because Muhammad "scorns this sacrifice and propitiation," Muhammad "acknowledges . . . that he is devising a new belief that dissents from the prophets and apostles" and is therefore "a new thing."[70] These improper doctrines must be added to those seeking refutation by all true (read: Lutheran evangelical) Christians.

> We must fight on all fronts against the ranks of the devil. In this age of ours how may varied enemies have we already seen? Papist defenders of idolatry, the Jews, the multifarious monstrosities of the Anabaptists, Servetus, and others. Let us now prepare ourselves against Muhammad.[71]

But, as magisterial encounters with spiritualists and *Schwärmer* had proven, an enemy that is not or cannot be known cannot be adequately fought. As Luther writes, "what can we say about matters that are still outside our knowledge?"[72]

Conclusion

Even with the myopic approach to Islam present in the *Vorrede* of 1542, the totality of Luther's engagement with the Turks and Islam presents an approach far more involved than that of any other thinker of the Reformation era. Placing this collection of writings in their historical context demonstrates that, indeed, the Ottoman threat provided the colorful backdrop of the Reformation. And although with Islam Luther was writing concerning an existentially pressing military and spiritual threat, the bulk of his contributions to the discourse did not consist of irresponsible *ad hominem* attacks. The doctrinal nature of Luther's critical approach to Islam is consistent with his approach to the internal adversaries and foes who, while still Christian, interpreted their faith wrongly and to ill effect. While it may be an unfair or unwelcome appellation, this consistency contributes to Luther's conflation of the Turk and the pope under the rubric Antichrist. Far from being a peripheral concern, therefore, our understanding of Luther should be fundamentally informed by his intellectual and doctrinal engagement with the Turk and Islam.

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68. Henrich and Boyce, "Martin Luther—Translations," 263.
69. Ibid., 266.
70. Ibid., 265–6.
71. Ibid., 266.
72. Ibid.

What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth about the Virginia Tech Killings?

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At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." (Luke 13:1–3 NRSV)

The basic facts of the Virginia Tech killings are now well known: On Monday morning, April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech senior named Cho Seung-Hui shot and killed thirty-two students and faculty on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, before killing himself. Two of the victims were killed in the West Ambler Johnston dormitory, and the remaining thirty were killed two hours later in Norris Hall, a classroom building across campus.

For me, this last fact has particular significance. As an undergraduate, I took a half dozen engineering classes in Norris Hall. Virginia Tech is real for me as a community and a place that contributed to my identity and to an enduring circle of friendships. It is not what it was for most Americans watching the news these past weeks, an abstract concept waiting to be filled by the media narratives.

Indeed, the murders have unique and personal meanings for the victims' family members and friends. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, what the truth is for particular individuals depends upon the relevant relationships and the legitimate claims these relationships impose on the one who speaks.[1] I claim no particular insight for those who have suffered this loss. They have a claim on those of us who did not suffer in their shoes that we respect their individuality and do not presume to speak for them or impose our own explanations on their suffering.

What is the truth for those of us in the United States who did not know the victims? Bonhoeffer contends that "In order to say how something is real—i.e., to speak truthfully—one's gaze and thought must be oriented toward how the real is in God, and through God, and toward God."[2] To accept this is to accept through faith that God is the ultimate reality. It is to accept Jesus' words to Pilate, as John records them, that Jesus reveals that ultimate reality: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Every-

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940–1945*, ed. Mark S. Brocker, trans. Lisa E. Dahill (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 602.

2. Ibid., 603.

one who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37 NRSV). From this vantage, the truth of the Virginia Tech killings is more than the observable facts, and we must struggle to perceive a meaning that is not just a mirror of our insecurities but reflects the reality of human beings' relationships to God and to one another. This is my purpose in this reflection.

The orgy of media coverage following the killings has had little to do with telling the truth and much to do with the American people's willingness to pay for a story that reassures them of their own safety and innocence in the affair. So the media has looked for ways to tell a story in which the killer was uniquely evil and Virginia Tech was uniquely vulnerable. Some stories emphasized that the killer was a Korean-American immigrant. Some emphasized that he was teased, bullied, and isolated—an isolation that may have been rooted in autism or a speech impediment that led to antisocial behavior and depression. Others focused on the killer's family: the long hours worked by the parents, their failure to involve themselves in the community, their sense of economic disadvantage relative to their neighbors, and the killer's lack of achievement in comparison with his Ivy League sister. Still other stories identified unique weaknesses in Virginia's gun laws, unique failures of the Virginia Tech administrators to foresee this crime, or unique failures of the police who responded to the initial shootings at West Ambler Johnston to perceive the nature of the threat to the campus community.

Through these narratives of exception, the media were lying, and their audiences were paying them to lie—in the sense that Bonhoeffer defines lying: "the negation, denial, and deliberate and willful destruction of reality as it is created by God and exists in God."[3] It is a denial of the reality that human beings are equally created and sustained by God to suggest that immigrants or Korean Americans or persons who suffer depression are distinctively prone to evil acts and that excluding these groups from full participation in society will contribute to public safety. This is a self-imposed blindness like that which Jesus attributes to the Pharisees in John's Gospel: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (John 9:41 NRSV).

Those who accept the lies that only particular groups are predisposed to the kind of violence that took place at Virginia Tech are seeking to secure their lives apart from God in a world in which the only true security against our mortality is that which comes from God's grace and transcends our mortal lives. It is a denial of reality to ignore the truth that every U.S. resident participates in social sins that form the context for the killer's actions, and to suggest that the guilt for this crime can be apportioned without remainder among the killer, his family, the Virginia Tech administrators, the Blacksburg police, and the Virginia legislators. Those who choose to consume these lies are seeking what Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace—that is, self-absolution without remorse and without a desire to change.[4] Instead of the reality disclosed by God in which all are sinners and need to repent and seek God's mercy, they choose a lie that contrasts their own absolute innocence with their designated scapegoats' absolute guilt.

To the extent that Americans accept

3. Ibid., 607.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4. *Discipleship*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 43.

these lies to reassure themselves, they commit a second wave of violence—an assault upon the identities of immigrants, Korean Americans, the mentally ill, the communities of Virginia Tech and Blacksburg, and the state of Virginia.

As a Virginia Tech graduate, I belong to one of the groups that the current media narratives scapegoat as distinctively prone to and distinctively contributing to violence. This is the same kind of media narrative that is repeated across the United States every day on a smaller scale to offer audiences a false sense of security and innocence in relation to local acts of violence, particularly those involving marginalized groups and neighborhoods. For me, it is easier to recognize the function of the media narratives in the particular case of the Virginia Tech killings because in this case the narratives have assigned me to the group of scapegoats rather than the group that is falsely reassured.

Despite his many real grievances, the killer bears responsibility for his lack of moral discrimination in confusing his tormentors and his victims and for his failure to recognize the disproportion between his hurts and the measure of his revenge. He bears responsibility for taking judgment and punishment into his own hands and for his acts of murder. There is no final answer to why he chose to murder; the origin of this act lies in the mystery of individual freedom, and that is why he is responsible.

At the same time, while the killer is responsible for his acts, the rest of us who collectively make up U.S. society are responsible for forming the context of his acts, a context that contains risk factors for violence. We contribute to a culture in which success is so important and failure so shameful that many families decide to conceal and deny their children's problems rather than seek help for them. We contribute to a culture in which children's and teenagers' social recognition is constructed in competitive hierarchies that demand a loser for every winner, an outsider for every insider; in which male identity, power, and worth are defined through the violent fantasies that boys and men consume in popular television shows, movies, and video games; in which we cultivate fear of one another through our isolation and the stories we consume—and then in our fear demand access to weapons that are far more likely to kill family members and friends than to protect us.[5]



The truth for us, then, is not a simple tale of innocent victims and an innocent society faced with inhuman evil. The truth is that the cultural context that contributed to the risk of violence at Virginia Tech is present everywhere in U.S. society, and we all share in its sins. "If you continue in my word," Jesus says, "you are truly my dis-

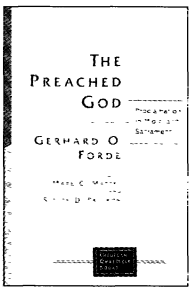
5. A 1998 study found that guns in the home are 22 times more likely to be used in an unintentional shooting, a criminal assault, or a suicide attempt than in self-defense. Arthur L. Kellermann et al., "Injuries and Deaths Due to Firearms in the Home," *Journal of Trauma* 45, no. 2 (August 1998): 263.

We are each guilty of contributing to our culture's sins toward the socially marginalized.

ciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31–32 NRSV). The word of the gospel frees us from the fear of death and guilt, enabling us to recognize and accept the truth of our common sins, our mutual vulnerability to one another, and our dependence upon grace. The truth is that for every person in our culture who is bullied, humiliated, and ostracized, and ultimately acts out revenge fantasies, there are many thousands of people who are bullied, humiliated, and ostracized, who are exposed repeatedly to violent revenge fantasies in television shows, movies, and video games, who nevertheless retain sufficient moral perception and compassion toward strangers not to act out these violent fantasies.

The truth is that each of us is alive today only through the moral discernment and mercy of those whom our society bullies, humiliates, and marginalizes. Even if we are mostly innocent of conscious malice that would single us out as particular targets for retaliation, we are each guilty of contributing to our culture's sins toward the socially marginalized through ignorance, fear, and inaction. We are what the victims of the Virginia Tech shootings were. We are sinners who can live only if we are forgiven.

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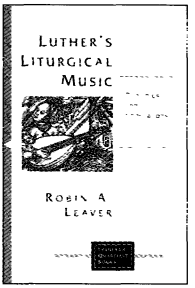
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A Book Worth Discussing: Leonard Hummel, *Clothed in Nothingness*

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Clothed in Nothingness: Consolation for Suffering. By Leonard M. Hummel. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. 201 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Leonard Hummel's book *Clothed in Nothingness: Consolation for Suffering* is arguably the first monograph specifically on Lutheran pastoral theology since Martin Marty's *Health and Medicine in the Lutheran Tradition*, published by the Park Ridge Center for Health, Faith and Ethics in its denominational series published in the 1980s.[1] In this approach, Hummel joins pastoral theologians from other traditions, Nancy Gorsuch[2] (Reformed) and Pamela Couture[3] (Wesleyan), in contributing a volume from a distinct denominational perspective. Although Hummel is careful to bring critical questions to this enterprise, he walks a fine line between investigating the distinctiveness of his given tradition, and apologetic. How well does he succeed in navigating this? What is the role of apologetic in pastoral theology?

Hummel grounds his theology of consolation both in the Lutheran theological tradition, particularly in what he identifies within that tradition as a "predilection for what is finite, fragile, and human," and in contemporary pastoral theology more generally, with its emphasis on the human situation and human suffering as its starting point for all theological reflection. The title "clothed in nothingness" is drawn from Luther himself:

> Therefore our life is simply contained in the bare Word: for we have Christ, we have eternal life, eternal righteousness, help and consolation. But where is it? We neither possess it in coffers nor hold it in our hands, but have it only in the bare Word. Thus has God clothed his object in nothingness. (xii)[4]

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1. Martin Marty, *Health and Medicine in the Lutheran Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). See also Carter Lindberg, "The Lutheran Tradition," in *Care and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions*, ed. R. L. Numbers and D. W. Amundsen (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 174. Herbert Anderson's many publications, such as *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, written with Kenneth Anderson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1983), draw from the Lutheran tradition as a Lutheran pastoral theologian but do not address the question of a systematic Lutheran pastoral theology per se. A symposium took place at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, "Luther, Prayer and Pastoral Care," that included Jane Strohl, "Luther and the Word of Consolation," and Herbert Stroup, "Pastoral Theology: Reformation or Regression?" *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* (Winter 1987), 23–53. For historical overviews of Luther's approach to pastoral consolation see also Strohl, "Luther's 'Fourteen Consolations.'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 3 (1989): 181, and Galen Tinder, "Luther's

He further differentiates between tradition as it claims to be "true," articulated in the form of doctrine, and lived religious tradition as it is "real"—that is, practiced by Lutherans seeking consolation for actual suffering. He uses both of these sources, doctrine and lived tradition, to understand the contributions of the Lutheran theological tradition to an understanding and practice of consolation for suffering.

Hummel explicitly states that he is not undertaking here to propose a grand theological project, for example a pastoral theology of justification or a theology of the cross, nor is he proposing a prescriptive pastoral theology based on Luther and the Lutheran Confessions per se. His aims seem more modest, and therefore also more postmodern, rooted in the particularity of the everyday lives of his research subjects: "an effort to understand the experience of suffering and consolation in the lived religion of a few members of the Lutheran tradition," bringing "the lens of tradition to their experiences to determine what that lens clarifies and what it obscures" (p. 17).

In his review of how consolation came to be viewed and to function historically in the Lutheran tradition, as a "gift from God that fortifies sufferers" (p. 21), Hummel argues with those who would seem to understand consolation as a private, world-avoiding matter between God and believers. He attempts to show how Lutheran tradition affirms the mediation of consolation by human carers, the "priesthood of all believers," and embodied in human means —the ministries of word and sacrament: preaching and pastoral care, and working for the common good with a "confident and helpful worldliness" (p. 44).

At the center of the book is a qualitative research study of seven Lutherans whose lives have been significantly touched by suffering or, using Kenneth Pargament's language,[5] by a "significant negative event" (p. 49). Hummel takes an ethnographic research approach, characterized by conversation and collaboration with his research subjects, whom he calls his "co-researchers." This method, increasingly adopted in social scientific and now also pastoral psychological research, aims at a nuanced and rich understanding of the particularities of research participants' experiences, a "thick description," to quote anthropologist Clifford Geertz,[6] rather than a sweepingly generalizable or universal theory. As such,

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Theology of Christian Suffering and Its Implications for Pastoral Care," *Dialog* 25/2 (1986): 109. Hummel provides a more exhaustive overview of *Seelsorge* and consolation in the history of Lutheranism in his Chapter 2, pp. 21–48.

2. Nancy Gorsuch, "Revelation and Pastoral Theology: Cooperation, Collision, and Communication," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 9 (1999): 35–48; Deborah van Dusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

3. Pamela Couture, "Feminist, Wesleyan, Practical Theology and the Practice of Pastoral Care," in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. Denise Ackermann and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), and "Revelation in Pastoral Theology: A Wesleyan Perspective," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 9 (1999): 21–34.

4. *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 32:123, 25–29, trans. Jane Strohl in "Luther's Eschatology: The Last Times and the Last Things," unpublished Ph.D. diss. (University of Chicago, 1989), 120. Hummel has changed Strohl's translation of *Trost* from "comfort" to "consolation."

5. Kenneth Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford, 1997), cited in Hummel, 49, 177.

6. My own association, not Hummel's. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

Hummel claims results that are "not meant to be conclusive, but suggestive—the first step in an ongoing practical theological study in the relationship between tradition and lived religion not only among Lutherans, but also among members of other religious traditions" (p. 50). Following Don Browning's method, set forth in *A Fundamental Practical Theology*,[7] this research is intended to be "value active" rather than value neutral, seeking "to challenge and to be challenged by the subjects of his study" (p. 50). Qualitative research of this kind is guided not by a hypothesis, as in quantitative research, but by an open-ended research question. Hummel's overarching question is: What is "the relationship between the co-researchers' lived religious experience and the normative teachings of their tradition"? (p. 53)

It should be noted that Hummel does not employ a pure qualitative approach. His method departs from entirely open-ended forms of postmodern, constructivist research in several ways. He uses semi-structured interviews, in which he maintains some control over the flow of the research dialogue. He also administers traditional quantitative instruments to amplify his interpretation of the interview data (p. 53)—although he does so as a means of triangulation, seeking corroboration from additional sources—and he does share these ratings with his participants and invites their interpretations of those results.

The greatest departure from purely qualitative research is Hummel's decision not to return to his subjects with his findings for their continued engagement and critique of his interpretations, a process commonly called "checking back." His reasoning, following German sociologist Regina Sommer and other European researchers,[8] was that to have done so was to move from the role of researcher to "quasi-therapist" (p. 68). However, this begs the question whether all interpretation must be therapeutic, or, indeed, whether therapeutic interpretation itself is somehow too dangerous to share with the client. Contemporary schools of psychoanalysis, like contemporary qualitative researchers, stress the importance of intersubjectivity and shared exploration rather than interpretation.[9] In this way, Hummel might be challenged to include his "co-researchers" more deeply in subsequent stages of the research beyond the interview phase, inviting their feedback on his summaries of the interview data and his conclusions.

Hummel further keeps one foot in the modernist camp, even as he takes seriously postmodern critiques and questions, by taking up a dialogue throughout the book with Kathryn Tanner's book *Theories of Culture*.[10] He contends, contra Tanner, that even in a postmodern age there still is validity to the concept of a religious—in this case, Lutheran—tradition and that the Harnackian metaphor of the "red thread"[11] still can be fruitfully applied to the writings of Luther and the Book of Concord as they continue to inform contemporary Lutheran thought, identity, and behavior. Here the

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7. Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

8. Regina Sommer, *Lebensgeschichte und gelebte Religion von Frauen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), and other researchers cited in Hummel, 178–79.

9. For a discussion of this distinction, see Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

10. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

11. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* trans. T. B. Saunders (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 298.

question of an apologetic approach raises the further problem, To what degree can an exponent and practitioner of a given religious tradition fairly critique that tradition? Hummel's work perhaps offers an answer that straddles the modern/postmodern divide: While there may be bias (and where is there not?), who would be better attuned than a researcher from within the tradition, especially if using at least quasi-qualitative research where some intersubjectivity is assumed, to the nuances and details of interview partners' expressed beliefs and experiences? Taking Tanner's critiques seriously, he poses the questions: "What does analyzing lived religion through the lens of that religion's tradition reveal? What does it obscure?" (p. 73)

Hummel is interested in the particularities of Lutherans' beliefs as they are lived in real life. "No one's beliefs and practices are carbon copies of any tradition" (p. 79). And yet, as his interviews demonstrate, those formed in the Lutheran tradition (*Bildung*) since birth (p. 132) do seem to differ somewhat in their worldview from the one participant who married into the church in adulthood and who retained both Christian Science and Baptist beliefs.

Boundaries of the tradition are therefore more fluid than the most orthodox respondents, as self-identified, tended to think. Hummel finds in his data evidence of "permeable boundaries and other threads" as sources of consolation for suffering (p. 80) besides the red thread of sixteenth-century Lutheran doctrine. Examples include his interviewee Charles's use of the idea of *Gelassenheit*, a state of mystical surrender to the will of God, appropriated into Lutheran Pietism but with roots in the Anabaptist tradition; Ruth's reliance on traditional African American approaches to suffering, especially a belief in God's active involvement and control over the affairs of this world and consolation in the belief that "God is in charge" (p. 86); and Oscar's sense that his upbringing as a Lutheran actually endowed him with some positive rewards—leaning toward a "victory theology" in which the faithful may be rewarded by outward signs of God's favor. At the same time, the feeling of being trapped in sin, the subjective experience of *Anfechtung* that so plagued Luther, and the deep unease generated by the fear of the "hidden side of God" and God's "alien work," while clearly consonant with Lutheran theological categories, warred against the experience of consolation for Robert, Allison, and Ruth: "God is frightening" (p. 91). Julia's comments, in contrast, were an example of "a kind of theology of the cross in claiming that she believed that God could bring light to her darkness, bring some creation out of her experience of chaos" (p. 94). However, she distinguished clearly between her suffering and the will of God, stating, "Christ's suffering in life and on the cross is related to a gift of grace from God. It has nothing to do, in my mind, with the suffering that would happen to a human being because of our relationships or illness or whatever" (p. 95).

In summary, Hummel's research leads him to the following assertion:

> The theology of the cross and suffering in the Lutheran tradition is complex, nuanced, and varied. It teaches—or more accurately warns—that God works in an alien manner by sending suffering. It also teaches—or proclaims—that God cares for those who suffer and dissuades them from dwelling on God's alien work. The reports of these seven Lutherans reveal similarly complex, nuanced, and varied understandings of the relationship between God and human sufferings. Neither those who make correlations between their negative events and the will of God, nor those who deny the possibility of such correlations, express beliefs outside the norm of their tradition. Furthermore, most of them expressed their beliefs with a sense of personal urgency and

earnestness, focusing on them for significant portions of their interviews. In their lived religion, the will of God, their suffering, and all suffering, was a lived reality. (p. 97)

Hummel further stresses the importance of *practices* to mediate the negative effects of belief in a theology that holds the tension between God's salvation and God's condemnation (p. 98): reading comforting passages in the Bible, hymns received as gifts from the tradition, and, for one respondent, the *context* of a new, welcoming congregation, including the sacraments and the experience of the priesthood of all believers. A "priest-psychiatrist" also played an important role for one respondent, holding implications for the importance of the integration of psychology and spirituality in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy.

Hummel further investigates responses to consolation, including valuing creation, strength to face difficulties, learning from one's mistakes, and recognizing the sacred in the secular. He also identifies systemic social factors that influence the experience of consolation and tribulation—loss of church community after a divorce, failures of the health-care system, economic stresses of single motherhood, the impact of a social position of powerlessness on women's depression (p. 117, citing Susan Dunlap[12]), and the effects of a "punishing economic system" (p. 118) on both women and men.

In recapitulating his research, Hummel states that the false dichotomy between beliefs and practices is now "undone" by his findings (p. 123). His research might be summarized that Lutherans' beliefs and practices around consolation for suffering are less tied to concepts of doctrinal purity and congruence with a received textual tradition—although lifelong Lutherans tend to be able to describe their experiences in reference to those religious norms and beliefs—than what those who call themselves Lutherans actually do. Whatever the "Lutheran tradition" is, then, it is more complicated than a series of doctrinal assertions. As Hummel cites religious historian David D. Hall's "contention that multiple narratives inform religious lives,"[13] lived religion is "'messier' than any received tradition" (p. 131). Hummel returns to the modern/postmodern fence, contending (helpfully, I believe) that

> I have confounded post-structuralist sensibilities by indicating that there is something like a metanarrative of tradition informing the beliefs and practices of most co-researchers. At the same time, I believe that I have also confounded post-liberal sensibilities by bringing to attention a medley of incongruent traditions, voices, and experiences at work in their lives. To say it differently, my study reveals that there may be something like a red line of tradition to be found in living religion, but that red line is invariably broken or twisted or braided with other threads. (p. 131)

Hummel concludes this consideration of the role of tradition by engaging in dialogue with concepts of consolation in two other traditions, Wesleyan and Reformed, respectively, through the works of Couture and Gorsuch cited above. He finds parallels in feminist writers' critical appropriations of their traditions with the Lutheran theology of the cross, especially as elaborated by feminist Lutheran theologian Mary Solberg,[14] Sharon Thornton,[15] and the Lutheran Pietist August Hermann Francke,[16] in addressing the invisibility of

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12. Susan Dunlap, *Counseling Depressed Women* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

13. David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

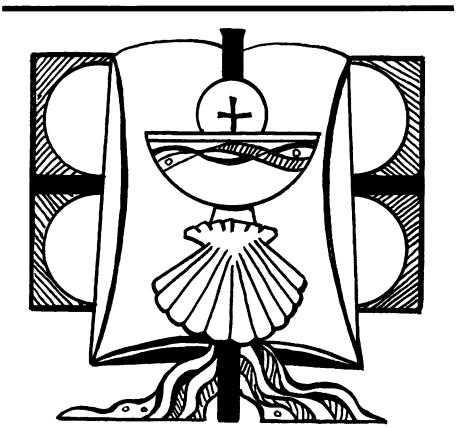
14. Mary Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

15. Sharon Thornton, *Broken Yet Beloved: A Pastoral Theology of the Cross* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2002).

disenfranchised persons in poverty. From these sources, he argues that to advocate for justice and empowerment is another mode of consolation by addressing the root societal causes of oppression and suffering. He contends, on the other hand, with Gorsuch's Reformed radical separation of divine and human agency, asserting with Luther that "the infinite may be born 'in, with, and under' the most finite forms of consoling ministries" and that "the Lutheran perspective on consolation is that pastoral care is itself the revelation of God" (p. 141).

In his conclusion, Hummel reaffirms Luther's words that the consolation of God is "clothed in nothingness" (p. 141)—the "bare word"—not in theology per se but in Word and Sacrament (citing Jane Strohl[17]), the promise of God repeated by human lips over the ages, and by the practices of the faithful community that, although ephemeral as time, communicate hope and encouragement.

To return to the question of the role of apologetic in pastoral theology, Hummel navigates this inquiry into a specific tradition's sources of consolation with care and balance. If this book were seen only as an examination of the effect of the Lutheran tradition on the consolation for suffering of Lutheran believers, Hummel's aims might be rightly criticized as unduly insular and of little account to Christians (or others) outside the Lutheran fold. To the extent that Hummel seems at times to lean toward the side of defending Lutheran modes of consolation, this may be a danger. But those instances are few. Perhaps an enduring value of this book is precisely in Hummel's attempt to propose a method by which a tradition's theological norms and categories—its "meta-linguistic stipulation of what *kind* of talking, whatever contents, can properly be proclamation and word of the church" (p. 27, quoting Gritsch and



Jenson[18])—may be honestly and critically examined both in light of the lived experience of believers and in comparison with other traditions. He offers pastoral theologians within and outside his own Lutheran tradition a challenge and a stimulus: to further engage in the important question raised by Tanner's work: To what extent does each of our traditions really function as a tradition at all, except as a fictive source of culture and unity for its believers? By holding Tanner's critical question consistently before him, Hummel offers us a method for a tradition-centered pastoral research that engages the details of believers' lives with both the comforts and the critical edges of this perhaps fictive but nevertheless functioning category of "religious tradition."

16. Citing Marcia Bunge, "The Child in German Pietism," in *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 252.

17. Jane Strohl, "Evangelism and the Congregation," presentation to the New England Synod Assembly, ELCA, Sturbridge, MA, June 2, 1994.

18. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 42–43.

Preaching Helps

First Sunday in Advent—Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Series A

Pause at the Manger

If I am not preaching somewhere Christmas Eve, I will be tempted to stay home. Yes, I will miss the carols and the candlelight, and receiving Christ incarnate in the Sacrament. But, after visiting Lutheran congregations the last few Christmases, I am weary of sermons that are more about the shepherds than about the Christ. Preachers seem to latch on to the fact that the shepherds "made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed" (Luke 2:17–18). Hurrying past the manger as they hurry through the story, they arrive at the shepherds and exhort the congregation to do the same.

So if the congregation plays the shepherds in this Christmas pageant, the preacher must have typecasted him- or herself in the role of head angel. Let's review the script. Nowhere does the angel tell the shepherds to do anything! "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger'" (Luke 2:9–12).

No exhortation to do anything. Just the good news. **Joy L. McDonald Coltvet**, author of these reflections, asks, "Who's coming to worship tonight?" Joy remembers the stranger, the one for whom family is a burden, the one coming alone during this season when family is so emphasized, coming alone for the first time since a loved one died this year. She reminds us that, at some level, all who come ask "Will God come and save us from our materialism? from my grief? from our brokenness? from my loneliness? from our stress? from my addiction? from our burdens? Will God be present tonight?" That's the question I bring to worship on Christmas Eve—Will God come and save us? Will God be present tonight? If you, preacher, answer that question in such a way that your hearers pause at the manger long enough to do what the shepherds did on their own without being told (dare to believe, want to look more closely, be so amazed that the words just flow out of their mouths), your sermon will be a gift to all who gather.

Joy currently serves LSTC as Director of Vocation and Recruitment and Co-Director of the Office of Vocation, Admissions and Financial Aid. She graduated

from Luther College and is an alumna of LSTC. During seminary, she trained at Bethany, an African American Lutheran congregation on Chicago's south side. She interned at rural St. John's in Pearl City and St. Paul's in Kent, Illinois. She volunteered at Holden Village. Ordained in 2001, she served as associate pastor at Galilee Lutheran in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, and as campus pastor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. During five years in Wisconsin, she planned and led worship for synod assemblies and leadership events and was the local worship coordinator for the ELCA's Global Mission Event in Milwaukee. She has written for *The Word in Season, Sundays and Seasons 2007*, and the Women of the ELCA online magazine, *Café: Stirring the Spirit Within.* She is married to Ben and they live in Chicago.

During the time Joy wrote these reflections, she participated in two synod assemblies and talked with colleagues in both the Greater Milwaukee Synod and the Metro Chicago Synod about these seasons. She listened to Pastor Pat Keen, who serves in New Orleans, and heard about work there since the hurricanes of 2005. These past months, Joy has been reading books by Martha Beck, whose stories have been running through her head during this whole process. Joy was also part of an immersion trip to Mexico as part of LSTC's Youth in Mission program. The group visited the Lutheran Center in Mexico City and communities within and around Cuernavaca, and heard from people who struggle to make ends meet and who work for justice with marginalized people.

Joy describes this period of the church year as "a story-filled season." She writes that in these seasons, "each Gospel writer's voice pops in from time to time. Their stories are intermingled and combined. Their stories are pressed up against, flow from and change the meanings of texts in the Hebrew scriptures. Suddenly, according to Matthew, the awaited ruler, transformer, messiah Isaiah described is . . . Jesus! And Matthew goes to great lengths to show us this truth.

"Then, there are the myriad ways that these holiday readings interplay with our life stories. They evoke the smells, sights, and sounds of childhood Christmas. They remind us of the year when a loved one died as we entered the new year. They bring to mind again the year that we watched a woman's belly grow and a new child emerge, timed perfectly with the season. They point us toward our own unfulfilled hopes and dreams of the ways God is coming into the world —Word made flesh. We wonder what sightings of Christ's presence we might see this year and if we will be able to say with Simeon at the end of our days, "I have seen God's coming, life is complete. . . ."

It's less about telling people what to do and more about helping them to see, hear, touch, taste, and experience Jesus. Blessed Christmas preaching!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor of Preaching Helps

First Sunday in Advent
December 2, 2007

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

First Reading—*A graceful last day*
In trying to look for links between the readings for the First Sunday in Advent, I am interested in the way each casts light on images of house, household, walls, community, family, and the activities of ordinary life. We wake from sleep, eat and drink, and create relationships. It seems that Isaiah's vision of fulfillment being centered within the house of God is significant. Teaching goes out from here. Disputes are settled here. This is the place where weapons are transformed into tools for pruning/gardening. Similarly, in Psalm 122, security is found within a city where you can plant your feet, where people are bound together, where justice and peace meet in one place and way of living.

Both of these images of a place of safety remind me of the *pu'uhonua*, literally "place of refuge" or "sanctuary," on the Big Island of Hawaii. This lush grove of palm trees is on the ocean and surrounded on all sides by a thick wall. In a historical time when numerous actions could be against the *kapu* (code of living) and result in a death sentence, anyone who could make it to *pu'uhonua* was safe. The place cleansed you and restored you to the community. The bones of the chiefs hallowed this place and made it powerful enough to cleanse. No blood could be shed on this sacred ground. It provided a second chance for defeated warriors, enemies, women who ate the wrong foods, those who insulted the chief, anyone vulnerable.

What places are like this in our current day—places that have the power to change our broken and defeated status, places of forgiveness, of refuge? Where is it so tangible that you can feel refuge in your bones?

This earthy groundedness in the visions of Isaiah and the psalmist who describe the goodness of city, work, and community make the last part of the Romans text a bit baffling. We are just a few days past celebrating the harvest, Thanksgiving, the season of provisioning. So what does it mean in this moment to hear the words at the end of this reading from Romans, "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires"?

This present moment may well be the time to wake from sleep, but other images in the reading seem problematic. Why is it necessary to create sharp division and contrast between dark and light, flesh and spirit, desire and honor? Are our desires for home, family, peace, and security wrong? Is the writer of Romans implying that we're all given to a kind of excess that leads us to drunkenness, wastefulness, quarreling, and jealousy?

While the reading from Matthew 24 certainly rings a bell as an advent text, it also seems to not "fit" with this part of Isaiah's vision. Is it supposed to be reassuring to not know about the day and hour of Christ's coming, or is this a dire and fearful warning? Because of history with this text from Matthew and pop-culture wisdom about those "left behind," some in our congregations cannot hear these words without feeling high anxiety. On the one hand, a sense of urgency can be a very helpful motivating force, especially if we are the type of people that work best with a little pressure. On the other hand, it is hard to feel the good news of God's grace in our bodies if anxiety is surging through them.

The opportunity at the beginning of the church year to look toward the end of life, at

least to consider our own death, can be a gift. When we have the experience of facing the end, it can clarify life. We might ask, "If you knew you had a year left to live, how would you?" And then, "Why not live that way now? What are we waiting for?" This can be a way to clarify God's calling and our vocation—or that way of living that brings a sense of joy and meaning to our lives. This way of considering these readings may help us avoid the kind of looking to "the end" that is a kind of escapist longing for heaven; the danger of looking so far ahead that we miss the coming of Christ today.

An interesting challenge of this day is making sense of these diverse visions of what the days of the Lord's coming reign will look like. Each reading points to the future. One vision shows a household, a stronghold. Another shows the opposite—a time of great uncertainty, a situation of conquest or terror in which one is taken and one is left. However, whatever the future may hold, Jesus is coming. There is something to do in the meantime, while we wait. We are invited to go to the house of God, where God might teach us to walk the path. We are told, "Let peace be within you." Now is the moment to wake from sleep and be ready with anticipation for the unexpected arrival.

Pastoral Reflection

The preacher has a number of options at the beginning of this Advent season. One example is Susan Wendorf's suggestion that instead of complaining about the culture, which is already celebrating Christmas in December, we should celebrate Advent in November.[1] That way, we could do more justice to both seasons than we often do, especially since we don't gather in worship for all of the twelve days of Christmas.

Ever since I read Wendorf's suggestion, I've seen more clearly the link between the readings of the last weeks of the church year and the first weeks of Advent, all looking toward the "already and not yet" reality of the risen Christ's reign. If this kind of approach makes sense in your context, begin preaching Advent themes of preparation and singing Advent songs in November as the readings turn to questions about resurrection and the return of Christ.

In a way, this approach illumines a reality of life that is very present during this season, articulated poetically by T. S. Eliot,

> What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from. . . .
>
> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[2]

On this weekend, throughout the world, do we see evidence of the Lord's coming? In places of terror and suffering, where is the reign of God creeping in and transforming the hearts and minds of people? Where are people beating swords into plowshares? Where are God's people refusing to learn war anymore? Whether God is entering our world and our lives in gentle or dramatic ways, we're called to be ready.

Richard Jensen writes, "The call to 'be ready' is a call to put our lives in the hands of the One Who Knows: our gracious God. Our first day with God, our baptismal day, was a day full of grace. Our last day will be gracious as well."[3] JLMC

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1. Susan Wendorf, "Let's Move Advent!" *Lutheran Partners* (Nov./Dec. 1991).
2. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), 43.
3. Richard A. Jensen, *Preaching Matthew's Gospel* (Lima: C.S.S. Publishing, 1998), 214.

Second Sunday in Advent December 9, 2007

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

First Reading—*Signaling hope*
In Isaiah, we see signs of hope. First we learn about someone who is coming who will have a spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might. This one will be a righteous judge restoring equity for the meek and removing wicked exploitation. In this restored earth a wolf and lamb are together; a leopard and kid are together; a calf, a lion, and fatling are together; and a little child leads this motley crew of "natural" enemies. Everyone is eating grass and straw—there's no more killing to eat. There is no fear of death by snakebite or poison. No hurt exists, no destruction. All destructive power relationships are ended. No one is preying on another. All the fighting people, tribes, and factions come together. The psalmist continues this restorative image in a song that the king's son will be the one under whose rule righteousness will flourish and peace will abound.

In Romans, these signals are articulated again—all this is written for the people's instruction, encouragement, and hope. The writer of Romans points to Christ specifically as the one who fulfills the vision of Isaiah. Jesus is the root, or the shoot/offshoot,[4] of Jesse, David's father. Jesus' resurrection fulfills the hope not only of those people of God already waiting for righteous leaders but also of Gentiles, "outsider" nations who also need hope.

In Matthew's description of John the Baptist, we have a contrasting vision of who is coming soon. Not only is John himself a fiery preacher, but he preaches that wrath is coming. The one who is coming, according to John the Baptist, is coming with an axe of judgment. John's baptism is with water, but the baptism that is coming is one of the Holy Spirit and fire. This expected one is cleansing the threshing floor and dividing the wheat from the chaff.

So, who is coming this Advent? Which Jesus? Is it Jesus the shoot from the stump, signal of hope and transformation into peace, or is it Jesus the one bearing the axe, the winnowing fork, the bringer of fire? The answer is Yes—both. At the same time, the answer is Neither. Jesus surprises people by what he does *not* do—Jesus does not conquer the earth with military force, become king, bring absolute order. Jesus also surprises people by what he does do—Jesus does bring diverse people together into one community, lead by going to the cross to suffer and die, send people out to transform the world through preaching.

Jesus did say things that separated people. Some people followed; others went away sadly. People very different from one another were brought together. If we need evidence of these major differences, we could consider all the fighting among the earliest churches. Sworn enemies, like Peter and Paul, had to come into a room together and work out an arrangement for how to go forward together. This is probably a good image of work we might do as a church in this Advent season. But it's not just about our work. It's about the work God is doing among us.

It is not just that Jesus came once upon a time and these things happened. Jesus comes among us today, once again, and these things happen. We get to witness them—to see, talk about, and share these things. Again this week we have three verses that appear to fit together somewhat and then a bizarrely different Gospel message. Maybe this is an opportunity to not

force everything to fit together but just allow the tensions. This is a season when incongruous things are happening because of the layers and layers of life coming together at once. Proclaim the layers.

Pastoral Reflection

There was a storm that went through Hyde Park in Chicago this past year, and it left remarkable damage. It was not a tornado but a series of bursts so intense that many of the mighty cottonwoods that follow the underground streams through this neighborhood were uprooted. Many lost major limbs, and some lost all of their limbs. The pattern was very much like the reading from Matthew last week. One was taken; one was left. After all was over and the pruning crews had finished removing broken branches, the trees outside our window had nothing left but trunks. We were reassured that foliage would grow again, but it was hard to believe. Could anything grow from those bare, dead-looking trunks? Nevertheless, as summer passed, the foliage did return. It was amazing to watch the bare trunks sprout tiny branches and leaves and become covered in green once more.

How much more amazing to see a shoot sprout from the stump of the tree. Life springs from death; hope is born in spite of the bleakness of our current situation.

This is a season where many people are looking for signs. Jewelry stores invite lovers to show a sign of their love with a diamond—and certain members of this society begin to wonder, Will I receive that gift? In spite of films like *Blood Diamond*, raising awareness and exploring the injustice and human pain that can surround the diamond industry, these and other expensive gifts still hold incredible power over people as a sign of things we all long for from others—love, desire, commitment, high regard.

Children of many ages wonder what a parent or parents will give them this year. Will it be my heart's desire? Will it show that parents have been listening? Do they know me? In *Expecting Adam*, Martha Beck tells the story of her pregnancy and early life with her son born with Down syndrome. She describes the gift of Adam. One Christmas, her young daughters Katie and Lizzy struggled to get over their disappointment when their gifts were not quite what they hoped for. Then, they all watched Adam's pure joy at receiving a package of batteries. Martha describes how she tried to correct her son. "Oh, honey, that's not the real present. The real present is—" But Adam didn't hear her as he began running around the house babbling with excitement about all the things he could do with this fabulous, fabulous gift. Beck sums it up: "Something about Adam always manages to see straight past the outward ordinariness of a thing to any magic it may hold inside."[5] She describes how much life with Adam has taught her about rejoicing in the gift. What does this mean in light of Isaiah's vision of a child leading us?

Another story like this comes from a child at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, our urban partner congregation, whom I watched as he received an "inappropriate" gift, a gift that I was afraid might have embarrassed him because it was for a much younger child. His incredibly generous response to my question "Is it okay? Would you like to choose another gift?" was "No, this is good. I'll give it to my nephew. He will really like it."

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4. Leander E. Keck, *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (SanFrancisco: Harper Collins, 1989), 2136.

5. Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam. A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999), 190.

People wonder this week if Christmas this year will be just the same, filled with the same happiness or disappointments as last year, or if there will be something different, some unexpected sign of love and joy and presence and peace. What will be the sign that Jesus has come among us? In proclaiming the good news, encourage people to come and see. The meal is a time when Jesus comes . . . but don't close your eyes as you go out into this week. We have heard Isaiah announce that "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." Because we have prayed with the psalmist this week, "may God's glory fill the whole earth," we are reminded that the presence of God is both hidden and revealed far beyond this meal. . . . Watch for it. JLMC

Third Sunday in Advent
December 16, 2007

Isaiah 35:1–10
Psalm 146:5–10 or Luke 1:47–55
James 5:7–10
Matthew 11:2–11

First Reading—*Why we can't wait*
To people in mortal fear, whose mouths are dry and whose stomachs are clenched, Isaiah articulates a vision of the new climate that's coming. Instead of dry land there will be blossoms. Instead of fear, manifest in weak hands and feeble knees, there will be new strength, joy, and singing. All will be walking together along the Holy Way. No traveler, not even fools, will go astray. All kinds of incredible things happen, not only restoring humans to health and abilities that they had lost (or never had) but restoring the dryness of earth to a swamp.

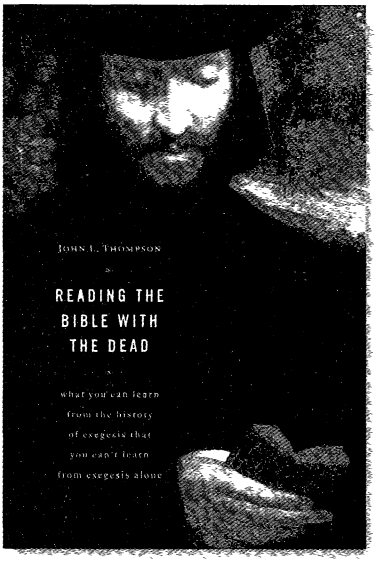
Don't we all long for this? Can't you almost taste it—a day when sorrow and sighing shall flee away? With my eight-year-old twin niece and nephew, I whisper with excitement and longing, "I can't wait!"

Both Psalm 146 and Luke 1 take us even further along the road, proclaiming that the LORD sets prisoners free, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over strangers, upholds orphan and widow, but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin. The righting of all unjust systems, the restoration of prisoners or proud folks to their communities, the healing of physical and spiritual disabilities are all within the scope of God's transforming power and plan. And Mary sings in response to her pregnancy that God has done great things not only for her personally but for generation to generation. We might join in singing with Mary, "It's happening! We can't wait."

Then James joins in with a word for the wise. Be patient, especially with each other, while you wait—the coming of the LORD is near. It's hard to wait. We've been singing for years now. *Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king. Alleluia, alleluia, we're going to see the king.* And still we wait. Grumbling begins. We begin to doubt and fear. James encourages us with an agricultural metaphor: Like farmers, beloved, wait for the precious crop from the earth. We're trying to wait, but we can't wait to feast together on the gifts of the earth, shared at God's table.

Then, in Matthew, we ask Jesus with John who is in prison, "Are you the one?" Jesus says, "Yes. Be assured"—and points to the things that are happening. Then he speaks to the crowds about all the good that John has done and yet also describes his limits: "the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Could it be that Jesus says this so that the crowd doesn't feel intimidated, so that they see the kingdom of heaven as accessible? John's imprisonment casts a foreboding shadow over this text. John is the messenger who goes ahead of Jesus,

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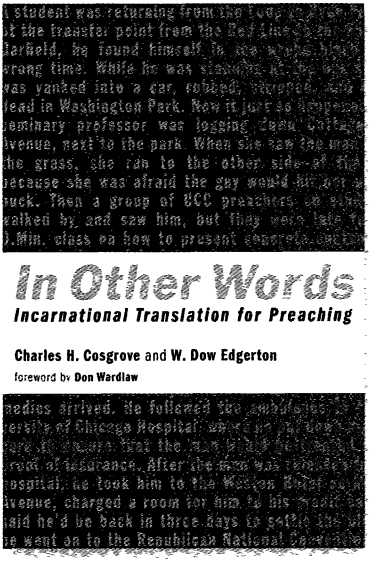
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preparing the way. Jesus takes on the preaching role and words of John and will follow John to death, but on the way Jesus gives hope that the promises of God are coming to pass. Again, it's happening in very tangible ways: Those who are blind see, those who are lame walk, people with leprosy are cleansed, people who are deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them, and blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Jesus. And even though we might feel afraid about going where John, then Jesus, are going, we begin to see why we can't wait.

Pastoral Reflection

"We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive."[6]

Today's texts are both joyful and tension-filled. Of course, we want all of these visions to come to be—freedom, strength, health, nourishment, ability, access for all—or do we? In the U.S.A., we incarcerate a higher percentage of our population than any other of the world's wealthiest nations. In many states, we incarcerate more black men than we send to college. So, what does it mean for us that we have a God that sets prisoners free?

We actually have the resources to end world hunger. It's not that we don't have enough food, we have unjust distribution of the abundance that God provides. We have the power to be God's people together and end starvation, the most dire poverty, the basic lack of health care—we simply lack the will to do it. So, what does it mean for us that we have a God who gives food to the hungry, who watches over strangers, orphans, and widows? What does it mean for us that God brings the way of the wicked to ruin? Could *we* be the wicked? Maybe.

John's question for Jesus might be a good question for the body of Christ on this day. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" This seems very similar to Mahatma Gandhi's challenge, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."[7] We are not alone in this work of transforming our communities and world to reflect God's holy way. Jesus has already been in this work for a long, long time. Jesus goes before us.

Among worshippers this day are also those who are hungry, scattered, blind, deaf, poor, foolish, impatient, suffering, empty, and oppressed. You might consider offering a midweek Advent healing service this week or include the order for healing within Holy Communion (see *ELW*, p. 27).

"Jesus is the reason for the season." We'll see this slogan in numerous places this Advent. Consider how it is both true and false. The earliest Christians celebrated the resurrection of Christ, not his birth. Jesus' nativity was not celebrated until the fourth century and was created as a counter-festival to pagan celebrations going on at the same time. Throughout history, Advent has been preparation for Epiphany or for the second coming of Christ. Often today it's a major marketing time and time for holiday parties and children's programs. There was and is tension around the question of whether Advent is a season of preparation for God's judgment and God's coming reign or a festive time of singing happy birthday to Jesus. This tension still remains because this is and always has been a season influenced by both surrounding cultural norms and countercultural themes.

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6. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (Signet Classics, [1963] 2000). The full text of King's letter is at www.*thekingcenter.org/prog/non/letter.html*.

7. www.*quotationspage.com/quote/27184.html*.

In congregations that continue to use the Advent wreath with three purple or blue candles and one pink candle, this third Sunday of Advent we light three including the pink one. Pink is the liturgical color for joy, and reading these texts, you can see why. Joy, that gift of hope and delight that is deeper than happiness, keeps bubbling up in the visions of this week. Here are a few words of wisdom from the small book *On Joy*[8] by H. Jackson Brown Jr.:

"Great joy, especially after a sudden change of circumstances, is apt to be silent, and dwells rather in the heart than on the tongue." —Henry Fielding

"'On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined' is my motto, whether there's any dance to dance or any joy to unconfine." —Mark Twain

"Occasionally in life there are those moments of unutterable fulfillment which cannot be completely explained by those symbols called words. Their meanings can only be articulated by the inaudible language of the heart." —The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. JLMC

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 23, 2007

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

First Reading—*God saves*
In this encounter between King Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah, we get a glimpse of Ahaz interpreting God's word very rigidly, in a way that becomes annoying even to God. Ahaz apparently follows the command not to put God to the test absolutely. Even when invited by God to cut himself a little slack and allow God to assuage his fear and build his confidence by asking for a sign, he will not do it. So God, or at least God's prophet Isaiah, gets a bit ticked off. In what can be heard as a humorous encounter, Isaiah tells Ahaz that, frankly, he's wearisome and if he won't ask for a sign, God's going to give him one anyway. The sign is a young pregnant woman who will have a child named "Immanuel." Before this child grows to the age of maturity, the enemies that Ahaz fears with a paralyzing fear will be powerless. In other words, God asks, "What are you so worried about, Ahaz? Don't you know that I, the Lord, am with you? Don't you know that I am taking care of my people?" Like Ahaz, the psalmist cries out to God, "Save us!" And equally often, God promises, "I am the Lord your God. I am with you."

It's interesting that Romans 1 is the text paired with Matthew 1, because the writers seem to have a very different sense of what makes Jesus both human and divine. In Romans, we read that Jesus was "descended from David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead." This is the earlier witness, and it seems to affirm Jesus as born of two human parents, Mary and Joseph, but divine or "Son of God" because of being raised from the dead. Although this is not dominant theology today, it is in dramatic contrast to the story we hear in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew is clear that Joseph's role is not that of biological parent. Matthew emphasizes that Mary conceives from the Holy Spirit, a "new creative act that makes Jesus uniquely related to God."[9] Joseph,

8. H. Jackson Brown Jr., *On Joy* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1994).

9. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 175.

according to Matthew, is father of Jesus through the actions of adoption, through claiming and naming his son.

Joseph and his powerful, life-saving dreams "book-end" Christmas this year. It is interesting that although angels appear directly to people in Luke's account, they appear to Joseph in dreams. Joseph follows the angel's instructions not to be afraid but to stay with Mary. Because of Joseph's faithfulness and commitment, God's saving work begins. Because Joseph remains with Mary, she is saved from disgrace. The promise that this son, Jesus, or "God saves," who would save people from their sins, must have been awe-inspiring for Joseph as he woke from sleep.

Pastoral Reflections

In the second chapter of her book *The Joy Diet*[10] Martha Beck invites readers to ask themselves a series of questions to be better able to speak the truth:

- What am I feeling?
- What hurts?
- What is the painful story I'm telling?
- Can I be sure my painful story is true?
- Is my painful story working?
- Can I think of another story that might work better?

The whole point of this exercise, it seems to me, is to be able to recognize that we have choices about the way we tell our stories. Because we can never tell every detail, we get to choose the parts of the truth that we will highlight, the parts that we will carry with us, the parts that will become truth for all time verses a temporary reality.

This is a storytelling season. Here, in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, we hear the stories that we hear each year, that we tell over and over again. We listen again to hear God's voice proclaiming love to us for all time, whether our present reality seems full of pain or full of joy.

In the face of Jesus' crucifixion and then the many sufferings of the early church, it would have been easy for early Christians to tell this painful story: God has abandoned us. We are foolish to give our lives to this work; our gospel is good news to no one, least of all to us. But instead, they recognized and proclaimed another story. In Matthew, they told the story of a child who was born among us as the fulfillment of God's promises through time. They told the story of a young woman pregnant through the Holy Spirit and the story of her fiance, whose roots connected their family to King David and whose dreams saved their lives.

This is a season that our ancestors in faith created because they knew we need it. We need a time to tell the story of God's coming among us, past and present and future. Who has taught us better to go through the process of truth-telling that Beck describes than the witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion, who chose to transform their initial painful story of God's abandonment and the loss of Jesus into a story of God's unfailing promise, Jesus' passionate commitment to God, and God's raising Jesus from the dead? They have shown us the way in this season to transform our stories and proclaim them, offering hope, peace, and joy.

A theme throughout today's readings is that of vocation. Paul describes himself as servant, apostle, and recipient of grace. God is the one who saves. Joseph is called to be faithful husband to Mary and father to Jesus. Our vocations are those tasks, roles, and duties we are called to do because there is need in the world and it gives us joy to do them. Martin Luther had a very high view of the vocation of parenthood. He somehow noticed that although we do not always

10. Martha Beck, *The Joy Diet: 10 Practices for a Happier Life* (New York: Crown, 2003), 45.

value those tasks which are most mundane, those often are the tasks that are most vital for our shared life together.

To what is God calling you and your congregation in this season?

Another theme on this day is adoption. Joseph adopted Jesus. He claimed him as family and named him Jesus. God declared Jesus the Son of God. In baptism, God adopts us as precious children. God claims each of us as family and names us sisters and brothers, family of God. A powerful song to sing on this day that articulates these themes of longing for truth, longing for family, longing to belong is "Christ, Be Our Light" (*ELW* #715):

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.
Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
signs of your kingdom come.

Beck offers a final tip on the journey to the joy of speaking the truth: "Offer compassion to your inner lying scumbag."[11] When we are not able to tell our stories with hope, peace, and joy during this season, we can remember that God offers grace and compassion to humanity not by separating from us in our times of need but by becoming one of us. God saves us by being right here, in whatever is going on this time. God is with us. JLMC

The Nativity of Our Lord (Proper 1) December 24, 2007

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

First Reading

In the reading from Isaiah this night, we're given a vision of light, multiplication and increased joy at the harvest—like dividing plunder. I can't help but chuckle a little that this text is our Christmas Eve reading. My early pietistic training as well as the writer of Titus say instead, "Not that! We are supposed to renounce worldly passions. We wouldn't rejoice in dividing plunder." But in an era when pirate movies are very popular and pirates seem, well, *friendly* for the most part, we can actually imagine coming upon a buried treasure and maybe spreading it out among all the people.

On this night, I can imagine a joyful picture of children's eyes, wide at the foot of the Christmas tree. Almost everyone, rich or poor, has either experienced or imagined this scene. It is also significant that Isaiah's vision isn't that of hoarding the plunder but of dividing it, the joy of coming upon a pile of goodies so abundant that it brings joy to share it, to spread it around. The biblical writers are so honest in naming our hearts' desires—Can we be that honest in our preaching of this text?

Isaiah continues by describing the leader who is to come, using poetic words that have been put to music so often that music comes

11. Martha Beck, *The Joy Diet: 10 Practices for a Happier Life* (New York: Crown, 2003), 45.

to mind as we hear them. Whether it is G. F. Handel's *Messiah* in English choral splendor or *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*[12] that comes to mind, hearing the names—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—brings music to the ears of your congregation.

That makes it especially appropriate that Psalm 96 also begins with singing. "Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy" (v. 12b). In planning services, some will opt to skip the psalm on Christmas Eve, but it is interesting that in the readings appointed for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, it is an option to hear Psalms 96, 97, and 98 in order (if you do services Christmas Eve, Dawn, and Day). What other time of year do we hear the psalms consecutively like this? So, instead of skipping them entirely, if you do not usually intone the psalm on this celebratory night, you might choose a song that proclaims the psalm text. Possibilities include "Sing unto the Lord" (R295), "Sing Out, Earth and Skies" (R289), and "The Trees of the Field" (R188).[13]

The preacher gets to choose how many verses are read tonight from the Gospel of Luke. I suggest including verses 15–20 because they tell us that when messengers come proclaiming the news of Jesus' coming to us, we can respond as the shepherds did: "Let's go see it!" When we see it, we can make it known, glorify and praise God for all we've heard and seen.

Pastoral Reflections

Who's coming to worship tonight? In many congregations, the seats are not filled with those who have been journeying through Advent together. This is often a very different crowd—filled with strangers, people you haven't seen for a long time (but are supposed to remember), people who come only on this night every year. Families take up whole pews as relatives come together; children can barely contain themselves. People's stress may be at a peak level. Others are coming alone—during this season when family is so emphasized. Some are coming alone for the first time since a loved one died this year. People are here tonight with a wide variety of "ghosts" of Christmas past, present, and future.

That is why this night is important, although its texts are the same every year, although we can have all kinds of cynicism around why others are here or why we are here. I think it's safe to say that each person comes with a heightened sense of expectation on this night of singing and candlelight. Will God come and save us—from our materialism? from my grief? from our brokenness? from my loneliness? from our stress? from my addiction? from our burdens? Will God be present tonight? God's saving work is both personal and collective. God comes for people uniquely and for the whole community of creation.

The emotions of those hearing the good news in the Gospel of Luke make a great transition from initially being terrified, then amazed, then filled with gratitude and praise of God. How might these same emotions also be present for those gathered tonight? For the shepherds, it's also a journey from terror and amazement to action. What kind of action might the preacher call for in those gathered to worship tonight? After you tell them about the child tonight, what words do you hope they will go and "make known" to others?

The preacher has the opportunity using all the most familiar language and perhaps

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12. Dianne Reeves, Patti Austin, Stevie Wonder, and George Duke, *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*, Audio CD (World Entertainment, 1992).

13. *Renewing Worship Songbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

using some new language to do evangelism on this night—not only with the strangers but with the members. Tonight is the night to remind people why they've made a commitment to be people of the Way or why they might. Even more important, this is a night to describe what God has done and is doing among us. JLMC

The Nativity of Our Lord (Proper 3) December 25, 2007

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

First Reading—*Remember and reveal*
Themes running through this day, beginning in Isaiah, are the ways God is remembering us and revealing God's presence to us and the ways that we can do the same. Remember. Reveal. What is God known for according to Isaiah? God has done marvelous things. God brings victory. God is revealing vindication, remembering love and faithfulness, redeeming people thought to be lost. Because of the wonder of who God is, according to the psalmist, all of creation is part of singing praises.

And then there is the messenger of God. This is the one who announces peace, brings good news, announces salvation and says "Your God reigns." To the ends of the earth all shall see the salvation of our God. In fact, they sing for joy because *in plain sight* they see the return of the Lord. Remember. Reveal. Psalm 98 continues in this same vein. The psalmist sings out that others should join in the song including all the earth—instruments, floods, hills, everything.

In the same way that so many traditional tales begin, Hebrews 1 starts with the stock story phrase, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways." But suddenly, just as we are hunkering down for a tall tale, we are catapulted instead to the present and future. Today, in the last days, God has spoken to us by a Son. One of the ways God's Son is described is as the "exact imprint of God's very being" or the "express image of his person" or "exact representation of his being." Jesus is like the mirror image or the thumbprint of God. According to Harold Attridge, "Divine Wisdom is also described as the reflection and image of God,"[14] so perhaps Hebrews is linking these or perhaps working to take this relationship between the Son and Creator even a step farther. According to the writer of Hebrews, as we look upon and experience Jesus, we are experiencing God's nature, God's presence. Yes, the God who sustains or "bears along" all things by his powerful word. This is a great prelude to John 1.

Like Matthew, it is a priority for the writer of Hebrews to cite sources, drawing on the biblical tradition. The writer quotes a number of psalms. We are reminded that in the beginning, you [God] formed the earth, the heavens are the work of your [God's] hands, they will perish but you [God] remain; they will all wear out like clothing . . . but you [God] are the same and everlasting.

These same themes are carried through in John 1. We look back to the very beginning, the intimate connection of the Word and God. We hear about John, witness to the light. We hear about the people's rejection of the true light, but we also hear that "to all who received him and believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." We hear about a new way of being born of

14. Harold W. Attridge, *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), p. 2252.

God, the adoption that comes to us through baptism. Finally, we hear the words we can say by heart with the proclaimer of the gospel, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth."

Even if it is not the usual practice in your congregation to memorize and perform the scripture, this can be a powerful way to share this Gospel. Because it is such a "wordy" and abstract portion of scripture, your taking the time to learn it by heart will have an impact on your hearers. This can be a powerful demonstration of the Word proclaimed on the feast that celebrates that God and Word are one.

Pastoral Reflection

In efforts to resist the materialism of this season and have a simpler, more meaningful celebration, perhaps we can go too far. "Things" are not unimportant in our faith or during this season. We do not have an anti-material God. But if it's difficult to distinguish between the things that give life and the things that give stress, in our efforts to simplify, we may end up throwing out the baby with the bath water.

We celebrate a God incarnate in Jesus through these twelve days of Christmas, a God who has not withdrawn from the world and all its trappings but who came and immersed himself in the world. Jesus was born like other babies throughout the world, in the muck of blood, mucus, and dirt. Jesus went down to the Jordan and got into the muddy, life-giving waters. Jesus broke bread with all kinds of people, enjoyed the best of wines, and, when looking deeply into the eyes of others, loved them. Jesus faced misunderstanding, loneliness, rejection, grief, torture, and death. This is a season when we marvel that God comes to be present with humanity in all of these ways.

If Jesus could be so fully human, how might we be more fully human during this season? This can be a season of becoming very self-centered or very family-focused, in the narrowest sense of family. Another way to celebrate and practice the incarnation of God-with-us is to immerse ourselves in stories of those who followed the way of Jesus. You might watch the films *Romero* (1989), *Gandhi* (1982), *Malcolm X* (1992) or the *Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) for stories of people who immersed themselves fully in the suffering of people around them, who had experiences in which they saw God in the flesh in the ordinary lives of neighbors and strangers, who gave their lives because they dwelt with the people.

As Oscar Romero became Archbishop in El Salvador in the 1980s, he confessed in his first sermon that he came to them as a person with a lot of "book learning" and that, while many things can be learned from books, he would now be learning from the people.[15] As he learned from them, God became flesh, and Romero recognized where God was present in the people and stood with them. This faithful stance did not mean always being "poised." When his friend and fellow priest Fr. Rutilio Grande was murdered, he wept. He became angry, lost his temper, shouted. He cried out when he witnessed the torture of another young priest. Amid all the suffering, there were moments when he laughed and sang with the humblest of people. Romero, a priest who had once been mocked and dismissed as a bookworm and sickly fellow who "wouldn't last long" as bishop, is now remembered as a saint throughout Latin America and the world. It's true, his life didn't last long, but the impact of his life was profound because he became so fully immersed in the lives of "the least."

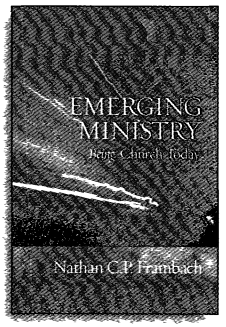
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15. *Romero*, dir. John Duigan (Lion's Gate, 1989).

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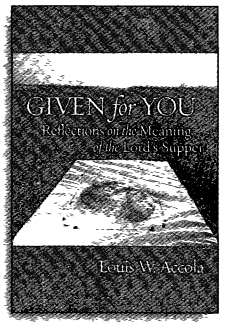
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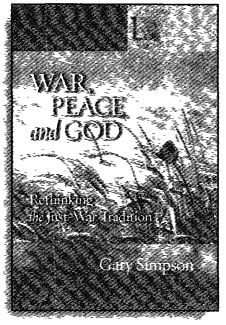
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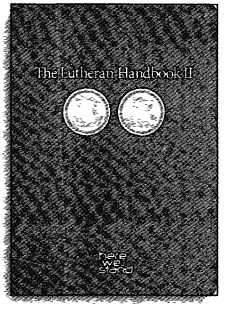
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"The Risk of Birth, Christmas, 1973"
by Madeleine L'Engle

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour and truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.[16]

First Sunday after Christmas
December 30, 2007

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

First Reading—*God goes before us*
Joseph's dreaming borders Christmas this year. Joseph dreamed at the fourth week of Advent that he should not fear to take Mary as his wife. Now he dreams again that the family must flee to Egypt. Later in this same story, Joseph dreams a safe return not to Judea where Archelaus, son of Herod, is still ruling but to Nazareth in the district of Galilee. Joseph's dreams save his family, but the horrific violence that surrounds them, the death of little children, wailing and loud lamentation, foreshadow Jesus' crucifixion. Death is already a part of the story even while Jesus is an infant.

In Advent, through the stories of Luke and Matthew, we see the presence of angelic messengers, but in this word from Isaiah 63 we are reminded that fundamentally it is God's presence that has saving power. Is this so that we don't misplace our sense of gratitude? So that we recognize not only the messenger but the provider? On this day of celebrating incarnation, Isaiah reminds us that God is directly involved.

Recently, our family gathered at the death of a family member. In death, what seems most important is not that we say the right words or do exactly the right things but that we are present. Isaiah is recounting to us that God is present. God's presence has saving power in times of trouble.

Psalm 148 is almost a relisting of the seven days of creation of the first chapter of Genesis, with few exceptions. First the sun, moon, and stars, then heavens and waters, are called on to praise the Lord. Next, sea monsters and deeps, then fire, hail, snow, frost, stormy wind; all kinds of weather are fulfilling God's command. The psalmist then calls on mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars to praise the Lord. Wild animals and domestic animals, insects and birds join in the song. Rulers of people and all kinds of people, men and women alike, old and

16. Madeleine L'Engle, *Glimpses of Grace: Daily Thoughts and Reflections* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 330.

young together are invited to join in praise.

What is different from Genesis? Perhaps only that there are kings, princes, and rulers—a hierarchical human order that is not present in the original vision. Despite this difference, all of creation in its variety and wholeness, even in its brokenness, is commanded to praise the Lord. All are connected and called to work together in praise of their Creator.

The Greek word *archegos* in Hebrews 2:10 appears four times in the New Testament—in Acts 3:15 and 5:31, Heb 2:10 and 12:2. It is translated in various ways as pioneer, forerunner, captain, prince, author, leader. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson uses the phrase "salvation pioneer."[17] Interestingly, it is not usually translated the same across all four instances. In the NRSV, the word "pioneer" appears only in Hebrews. The theme is that Jesus goes before people, not through avoiding suffering but in going through it. Although the word appears only once again in Hebrews, the theme of "the wandering people of God being led by Jesus the forerunner to the heavenly sanctuary and place of rest recurs in 4:11, 14 and 6:20."[18] Herbert Chilstrom writes about this passage:

> Certainly [Jesus] was not the pioneer in the sense of being the first to die. But he is the pioneer in a more important sense: he is the first to find his way through the seemingly impenetrable mountain range to the land beyond. And once he found the way he opened it for all.[19]

The writer emphasizes that Jesus, the exalted one, is not ashamed to call descendents of Abraham "brothers and sisters" and uses quotes from Ps 22:22 and Isa 8:17–18 to reinforce this theme. Because Jesus himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. The writer of Hebrews assures those who are suffering that Jesus can say convincingly, "I've been there."

Pastoral Reflection

For a number of years, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service has sent out materials at this time of year comparing the themes of this text—the flight to Egypt, the holy family's own refugee journey and the hospitality they received (or didn't)—as a way to learn about the struggles of today's immigrants and refugees. Hopefully asking people questions like, "Is there room at the inn?" and reminding them that "Jesus was a refugee" humanizes the people who can otherwise be ignored as nameless faces.

But, what if we take this a step further than whether or not we, the "innkeepers," "Herods," or "Egyptians" of our day, are willing to be welcoming? Who are we in the story? Are we the magi—seeking, finding, but inadvertently bringing harm to so many? Are we like the king—fearful of losing power and position and relentless in our desire to keep them? Are we like Joseph—dreaming, trying to be obedient, running from place to place? Are we like Rachel, weeping in grief? Are we like Mary, following along? Are we Jesus—the one who was saved . . . to save?

The story of the Slaughter of the Innocents is only one example of evil in the world that Jesus comes to address. Just three years ago, we watched and experienced the horrible devastation of the tsunami in southeast Asia. Just a little while later, hurricanes battered the southern shores of the U.S.A., and levees broke in New Orleans. In the Spike Lee film *When the*

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17. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2006).

18. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 685.

19. Herbert W. Chilstrom, *Hebrews: A New and Better Way* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 19.

Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts,[20] a mother shares the story of her dreams surrounding those horrific days. In her dream, her daughter came to her and said, "Mommy, I'm falling. I'm falling." And all this mother could see was water all around her. Her daughter was drowned.

In the film *Zapatista*[21] indigenous mothers from southern Mexico tell their story of displacement and oppression, weeping and crying out in grief: "I have no more sons—one was killed and two were taken to jail. That is what happened to my sons."

"We don't even know where they threw our dead."

"Who will carry the wood [for my children] if I am dead?"

Preachers may want to watch *Zapatista* or *When the Levees Broke* or other films such as *Hotel Rwanda* or *School of Assassins*,[22] and consider showing one as the adult education option today, in order to engage more fully with the reality of this reading as experienced in the world today.

Perhaps what makes the Herod story so horrific is that it shows the exact opposite of the strong biblical value of hospitality. When magi come across his door, Herod acts welcoming but is really treacherous.

A very different story is told in the Christmas oratorio *L'Enfance du Christ* by Hector Berlioz. It is the story of the flight to Egypt but with hospitality from the shepherds on the way and with a surprising welcome in Egypt. In the third part, The Arrival at Sais, the holy family is welcomed by an Ishmaelite. This Ishmaelite father sings, "Come in, come in. You will find hospitality here. You're a carpenter? I'm a carpenter too! What a coincidence. What a pretty baby Jesus is! Come in, eat, drink and rest. Sleep well. Don't have any bad dreams." After this incredible display of welcome, with the assumption that the family will stay as long as they are in Egypt, the chorus sings: *Ce fut ainsi que par un infidèle Fut sauvé le Sauveur* (And thus it was that our Savior was rescued by an infidel).[23]

What a contrast to Herod, who brought bad dreams to everyone. This hospitable Ishmaelite welcomes the family with lavish hospitality and invites them to sleep well while they are in the care of his family. What a surprising and beautiful contrast story to inspire us to such gracious hospitality. JLMC

The Name of Jesus
January 1, 2008

Numbers 6:22–27
Psalm 8
Galatians 4:4–7 or Philippians 2:5–11
Luke 2:15–21

First Reading—*Named God's children*
A theme that runs throughout these readings, appropriately for the day, is that of being named and chosen. In Numbers, we are reminded that the children of God put God's name on them and God blesses them. The psalmist wonders, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor." We are reminded by the psalmist that, because of this special status, there is much for

20. *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, dir. Spike Lee (HBO Home Video, 2006).

21. *Zapatista*, dir. Benjamin Eichert and Rick Rowley (Big Noise Films, 1999).

22. *Hotel Rwanda*, dir. Terry George (MGM, 2005); *School of Assassins*, dir. Robert Richter (documentary about the School of the Americas, 1994; available at *www.soaw.org/article.php?id=29*).

23. *http://home.comcast.net/~litvr/berlioz.pdf*.

us to care for in all of creation—and, lest we forget, that God's name is majestic in all the earth.

The letter to the Galatians explores the relationship of our adoption as God's children. Because we are God's children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying Abba, Father. God's Spirit allows us to recognize God and be recognized. We are not slave but child, and if child then also heir. With inheritance comes both freedom and responsibility.

The observance of the naming and circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day has roots in the sixth century.[24] Like any Jewish boy, Jesus bears the mark of the covenant that began with Abraham and becomes new through the shedding of his blood on the cross. When we are named children of God at baptism, we are marked by the cross of Christ and baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Use of these cruciform themes around naming might cause the preacher to choose the second reading from Philippians 2 instead of Galatians, since it takes us through Jesus' journey as human being, to the humility of the cross and God's raising him and giving him "the name that is above every name" (Phil 2:9).

We look to Luke for the fullest account of the circumcision and naming of Jesus, just one verse long. According to Matthew, Jesus is the name given to Joseph when the angel assures him that Mary's child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. According to Luke, that name is given to Mary by the angel before the baby is conceived. Regardless of whether the name was shared initially with Mary or Joseph or both, the name is significant. It means "God saves" and, according to Luke, it comes with this additional promise, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32–33).

Pastoral Reflection

But I tol' Jesus it would be all right
If He changed mah name[25]

While traveling in Mexico, our immersion group met with a community and faith leader, Nacho Torres. As he introduced himself, he pointed out that this was his "slave name." One of the young women of our group, an African American from Chicago, asked what he meant by that. He explained that the name was Spanish—the group that had conquered and enslaved his own indigenous people and forced their culture on them, a conquest that goes on even today. He has another name, in his native language, that he uses among his people in religious ceremonies and within family. This is his true name. During our time together we reflected about cultural enslavement in one's own land and also the atrocity of taking people from their land to another, having not only name, identity, and culture imposed but taking people even from their land.

Isabella Baumfree changed her name. After many years as an African-American slave in the U.S., which included severe beating, losing the man she loved, and bearing thirteen children, she walked away from slavery and became a Christian, feminist, and preacher. She changed her name to Sojourner Truth and embodied her new name as she traveled and spoke truth from that time until her death.

In Mayan culture, there are no words for "I" or "me," only "we" and "us." There

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24. *Sundays and Seasons: Year A 2008* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 64.

25. *http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/changed_mah_name htm*

is no word for "enemy," although that has been learned over time. This shows a collective sense of name and identity that we ought to have as Christians, as well, although we don't always live into this reality.

One story of notable exception is that of Grace Lutheran Church in Conroe, Texas. In response to Hurricane Katrina's devastating impact, Grace found another church named Grace in New Orleans and decided to share their resources. They didn't stop there. They contacted every church named Grace in the ELCA (383 in all!), and many of these congregations joined in partnership to raise nearly $100,000 and provide volunteers for recovery efforts. They shared a name, so they could sense how they were all related.

Names are important. Growing up, "Joy" was an unusual name in my community. In Sunday school, other children pointed at me as we sang any number of songs with "joy" in them. "McDonald" was not much better—think Old McDonald, Ronald McDonald . . . you get the picture. However, when I was about to be married, I realized that I wanted to keep my name—or, if marriage is a bond that requires change, as I think it is, that both of us should change to show that mutuality. I was blessed with a partner who saw my point, and we have been the "McDonald Coltvet" family ever since. Sure, it's a mouthful, and sometimes frustrating in a culture that still predominantly expects one last name, but it is meaningful to me that we both changed our names.

When babies are adopted, new parents make decisions about how their children will be named. What about the new name will reflect their new family and cultural identity, and what will reflect the child's own biological roots? My friend named her new daughter, adopted from China, first after her grandmother and second with a Chinese name.

Other friends hosted a Korean international student for one year, and although she came to the U.S. as a Christian she had never been baptized. As the date for her baptism grew close, she asked my husband and me to be her godparents. We were very honored. I was even more touched when Hye Jung Hwang said to me that night that she would be taking a new baptismal name. Hye Jung "Joy" Hwang became my goddaughter at the Easter Vigil in 2005. She has since returned to Korea, but I am so blessed by that gesture of love and friendship. It is not common in our Lutheran practice to take a baptismal name, and we hadn't encouraged her to do so, but Hye Jung Joy knew the blessed power of naming, and I'm so grateful to her for sharing that gift with me. JLMC

The Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 2008

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

First Reading—*Revealing accessibility*
Isaiah 60 instructs hearers to lift up your eyes and look around. As humans, we often close our eyes, not seeing what is around us. But Isaiah invites us to open our eyes and notice that things are changing. There is reason to hope. Out of exile, sons are coming home from far away, daughters come with assistance. Why are the daughters carried? Is it because in this situation of oppression, like so many others, the women are especially targeted? Are they wounded more deeply? Is there less shame for women in leaning on the arm of another?

Another line that especially stands out

in this passage from Isaiah is "precious is their blood." A pastor in Milwaukee tells the story of witnessing a mother on her hands and knees, with a bucket of water and scrub brush, scrubbing the blood of her murdered son off the sidewalk. We grow calloused to the preciousness of blood as we see more war, bloodshed, and violence, both real and film-made. But Isaiah says that to God each person's blood is precious. Like Abel's blood cried out from the ground to God, the blood of martyrs calls out from the ground today. God notices and deeply values the gift of human life.

Then Isaiah creates a picture of the abundance that God's people will enjoy in contrast to the scarcity they have been enduring. They can rise up because light, glory, wealth, and the "abundance of the sea" are all being brought to them. We in the "first world," whose food travels an average of 1,500 miles to our tables,[26] have perhaps lost the awe that many people in our world and many people of Isaiah's day would have experienced at having the abundance of the sea brought to us for us to eat. But we can imagine what a joyful feast this would evoke.

This is just one example of the theme of access that begins in this reading and winds through each reading for this day. Although God's people have been exiles, they now will have access to the abundance, community, and connection they have lacked.

As we sing Psalm 72 as Christians, we cannot help but make the connection to Jesus in the list of attributes of the good king who delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those without another helper—a king who saves lives, crushes the oppressor, redeems life; who sees their blood as precious. The psalmist seems to be calling for God to fill the king with these kinds of values. When we apply it to Jesus in our day, this isn't simply a "spiritualized" theology. It isn't only that Jesus died for our sins long, long ago so that, after being crushed, people can find solace in heaven. In a world that values human life less than the economy, this is a gritty and down-to-earth kind of theology that says God's type of leadership is about a reordering of values in this life. This is a psalm that calls to mind the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that he is "a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." Paul's purpose and calling is to let the outsiders know, until they believe it themselves, that they are part of the body, fellow heirs, and sharers in the promise of God. It's still a mystery how we are all one, but the welcome of God to Gentiles is evidence to Paul of "the wisdom of God in its rich variety." This passage, too, is about access. We have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Matthew's story of the magi's visit, first to Herod and then to Jesus, is also a story of access. Their way to Jesus is difficult and fraught with danger and deception. However, they find the child and his mother Mary. They kneel and give honor; they give gifts. By their long journey and their emotional response at its completion—being overwhelmed with joy—they reveal even to us who Jesus is. This encounter with the child, and with the living God who has been speaking to Joseph in dreams and now speaks to them through a star, changes the way home.

Pastoral Reflection

Last week we already heard the end of the story, so we know that when King Herod is frightened, it's a bad sign. When a leader

26. Cat Lazaroff, "Food Travels Far to Reach Your Table," *www.organicconsumers.org/corp/foodtravel112202.cfm*

has absolute power, and fear is added to the equation, it means danger for everyone. So it is not surprising that the storyteller says Herod was frightened "and all Jerusalem with him."

The magi, by alerting the king to the presence of his possible overthrow, purposefully or inadvertently, cause a chain reaction. The king is so upset that he consults with the Judean religious leaders and scholars. Then he brings in the magi secretly, gets information from them, and tells them an outright lie.

While at the Lutheran Center in Mexico, we heard the story of a U.S.–born pastor who raised his children to question what they saw on television. Even when powerful world leaders spoke, they were trained to think critically. How? Each night as they watched the evening news, they were allowed to throw a foam brick at the TV anytime someone told a lie. Of course, they loved throwing the foam bricks, so they would listen really carefully to try to determine any untruths. "Was that a lie, Daddy? Was it? Was it?"

That's the kind of ear we can bring as we overhear the conversation of Herod and the magi. We know, because we know the whole story, that Herod is up to no good. King Herod says to the magi, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." This is the point at which, if this were a play, a chorus of children would shout out "No! Don't tell him!" If we start sympathizing with Herod, we're missing the whole dramatic point of the story and perhaps revealing our stance as incredibly privileged, powerful, and fearful people.

That could be a way to preach this text, as "Herods" of our own day or as those empowered by the Spirit to discern the lies that come at us from within and without. What lines are we fed as people of faith in the U.S.A. that we ought to reveal as the powerful and fear-filled lies that they are?

Another approach is to preach is from "below." Though it is significant to Matthew that important international visitors recognized, honored, and gifted the Christ child, we do not need a certain wealth or status to do the same. The gifts the magi bring are gifts recognizing the end of the story—spices that would be used at the tomb—but even Jesus' death is not the end. An encounter with the living God changes the way home.

In the last year of using the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, I encountered for the first time a Christmas hymn that I had never sung in worship before. It is the last one in the section, perhaps because it takes us from Christmas into all the rest of life. In "A Stable Lamp is Lighted" (#74), we move from the stable to Passion Sunday and Holy Week. The words by Richard Wilbur are powerful, especially in the fourth stanza:

But now as at the ending,
The low is lifted high;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
in praises of the child
by whose descent among us
the worlds are reconciled.

What worlds need to be reconciled today? Many. This could also be a way to preach this text: how Jesus has power to reconcile murderers and those whose blood cries out from the ground, how Jesus has power to put in right relationship the rich and those who have no helper, how Jesus has power to reconcile God and humanity. In our worship, we sing this reality into being. JLMC

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2008

Isaiah 42:1–9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34–43
Matthew 3:13–17

First Reading—*This is the one!*
Isaiah describes the servant of God in many ways, but first as one who is chosen, who delights the soul, who is upheld by God. In the first verse of this chapter, God says, "I have put my spirit upon him." The word used for spirit here is *ruach*. It has many meanings. Later, in verse 5, there is a poetic line where Isaiah seems to say the same thing twice. "Thus says the Lord God . . . who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord." The first word for "breath" in Hebrew is *neshaman*. *Neshaman* has a variety of meanings: breath, spirit, breath of God, breath of human, every breathing thing, spirit of human. But the word for spirit in both Isa 42:1 and 42:5, *ruach*, has an even broader array of meanings. In addition to those listed, *ruach* includes God's spirit, wind, emotions ranging from courage to anger, breath not only of God and humans but also animals and all living things, the energy of life. It can also mean animation, vivacity, vigor, and prophetic spirit. It is a word packed with meaning—a word that can barely contain or represent what it symbolizes.

So if God has put *ruach* on and within the servant, he cannot be crushed until he has established justice in the earth. This is important because it is easy to be crushed by the oppressor. And, as we look at Isaiah through the lens of the life of Jesus, who we see as the fulfillment of this vision of God's chosen one, we see how he did both fulfill the gentle way of leading described by Isaiah and have the knack for escaping angry mobs before his mission was fulfilled.

Isaiah paints as an answer to prayer not only the servant but also all of God's people. Isaiah turns his gaze from describing the chosen one to look directly into our eyes: I have called you. I have taken you by the hand. I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners. Isaiah ends, "new things I now declare . . . I tell you of them." The question is what we will do with this tall order. Will we be people of promise, eye-openers, people who use our freedom to set others free? We are told these new things to move us to action.

We are told by none other than the voice of the Lord. Repeatedly in Psalm 29 we learn how powerful the voice of the Lord can be. It can break apart majestic trees. It can tame a young, wild ox like a skilled rancher or cowboy. It flashes like fire. It shakes the wilderness. In view of how powerful, even dangerous, the voice of the Lord is, the psalmist prays for strength and blessing of people with peace.

Peter's sermon in Acts 10 clearly names Jesus as "the one." Peter begins with a very inclusive message—that God comes to all people. He then gets more specific about how God has come in Jesus Christ. He tells the story of Jesus' message and how it spread, the work that Jesus did, and how his death and resurrection have changed the world order. Now, we have forgiveness. We have something specific to do. Those of us who have had the opportunity to eat and drink with Jesus are witnesses, so we have a story to tell.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism, the heavens open and Jesus sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove upon him. And a voice says . . . either to John or Jesus, we can't be completely sure who all heard that voice from heaven, "This is my

Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This is the one.

Pastoral Reflections

What does it mean to celebrate baptism, the journey from death to life, the dying and rising with Christ, in a world that has experienced and witnessed both the tsunami that came without warning through India, Indonesia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand in 2004 and the 2005 hurricane season—Katrina, Rita, Wilma—whose devastation U.S. communities are still working to address? Baptism for those who see a river as a source of life, cleanliness, and nourishment is a different sacrament than for those who see the river as full of crocodiles. An international seminary student expressed to me one day her incomprehension of our strong emphasis on baptism as American Lutherans: "I always feel like I'm drowning in baptism here in the U.S."

Here is a paradox of the baptism of Jesus. On the one hand, it is the way that he "fulfills all righteousness" or shows himself to be who he ought to be, a man of integrity, virtue, one in right relationship with God. On the other hand, it is a precursor to his dying and rising. Yes, a voice from heaven announces to John, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." But Jesus isn't given long to bask in the descent of the Spirit of God; after his baptism he is led to the desert to fast for forty days and nights, become famished, then be tempted.

This paradox is what we face as we are baptized as well. On the one hand, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit. We are marked with the cross of Christ forever. We are called, even chosen. God takes us by the hand. But for what? So that we can be given as a covenant to the people. To those who are chosen by Jesus as witnesses, as we hear in Acts, and who eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead, as we do every time we gather for Holy Communion, comes God's command to preach. We are called to tell the story that Jesus is the one ordained by God as judge and that through him, all who believe receive forgiveness in his name. It is important to tell the story on this day that not only pastors are called to preach. This is the kind of speaking we are all urged to do—telling the story of how Jesus was anointed, how he lived as a healer and one who did good, how he was killed and how God raised him and allowed him to appear to witnesses. This is the one!

I was a group leader in a recent immersion trip to Mexico. Many times through the first days there, different youth came to me and expressed how overwhelmed they felt. "I feel like I'm drowning," one student said. In a way, she was experiencing the flood of the world's pain—that's why we call it an "immersion." If we are tempted to close our eyes to the pain and injustice of the world, we are pushed instead to keep them open even as we go under the water. When we feel like we're drowning, when we experience the flood of the world's pain, anguish, and loss, we are reminded that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Baptism is daily dying and being raised to new life. We are raised up, gasping for air, and the breath of God fills us.

This is a month in which some of the people gathered for worship are feeling overwhelmed. In January, the holidays are over and the bills are looming. Some people are dealing with a wide variety of post-holiday emotions; others already feel that they have failed in their new year's resolutions. The message of Jesus' baptism and reminder of our own is needed at just such a time as this. JLMC

Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 20, 2008

Isaiah 49:1–7
Psalm 40:1–11
1 Corinthians 1:1–9
John 1:29–42

First Reading—*Come and see*

In Isaiah 49 there is a repetition of Isaiah's sense that the Lord called him even before he was born. In the womb God named him and formed him to be God's servant. God's calling is so intrinsic to Isaiah's being that people can't really dispute when the Lord says through the prophet, "I'm not only for the 'insiders'" (the tribes of Jacob and the survivors of Israel). The Lord says instead, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." In other words, you are not only for your own but for the whole earth. Although Isaiah feels he is deeply despised, he is also chosen.

According to the psalmist, the Lord's gift is the ability to have open ears, eyes, and lips. What God values is not concealing and withholding all that God has done but being open about it. So, a faithful response to God's faithfulness, salvation, and saving help is to tell the good news. "Here I am" is the response that our loving God wants to hear from those who hold God's law within their hearts.

In 1 Corinthians, the themes of God's faithfulness and God's call continue. A new theme also emerges—the theme of this season after Epiphany where, layer by layer, the identity of Jesus Christ continues to be revealed to us. Who is Sosthenes? He is a brother in Christ to Paul and co-sender of the letter, perhaps the same person named in Acts 18:17 as an official of the Corinthian synagogue.[27] "Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things" (Acts 18:17). Although we don't know with certainty that this is the same man, let's assume for a moment that it is. If so, what does it mean that Paul's greeting is shared with a man who was known in the community as a defector from Judaism, one who had been a chief ruler in the synagogue and who had been publicly humiliated? One thing it might highlight is the word in verse 8, "[Jesus] will strengthen you to the end . . . ," especially since the literal translation of the name Sosthenes is "safe in strength."

In John's Gospel, the importance of looking and seeing cannot be emphasized enough. In nearly every verse of this pericope, these words appear as John the Baptist reveals the identity of Jesus. John the Baptist witnesses to who Jesus is because God revealed it to John in the baptism event. According to John's account, Jesus' baptism is apparently for the benefit of John the Baptist, who then faithfully tells everybody what he witnessed. John is so convincing that his own disciples start following Jesus. When Jesus asks them what they are looking for, they ask Jesus where he is staying, and he replies "Come and see." They go with Jesus and remain with him all day. Proximity is the mark of a follower; in order to follow, you need to be close by. How else could you know where he is going next? As they talk about their experience of this day with Jesus they tell the others, "We have found the Messiah."

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27. Victor Paul Furnish, *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francicso: Harper Collins Publishers: 1989), p. 2141.

Pastoral Reflection

Isaiah has a challenging word for any congregation that might be focusing exclusively on its own survival. It is easy to fall into that pattern when we are scattered, when we are suffering, when we fall into survival mode. In verse 6 God says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel: I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." In other words, you are chosen and precious to God—but not just for your own sake. You are thinking too small if your vision is just to take care of your own. No, God calls the people of God to reflect God's light out into our neighborhood, our communities, and then out beyond even our country borders. God is not content until all people have had the opportunity to experience a new way of seeing.

Making a decision inside ourselves is much different than speaking it. We are much more likely to do something if we tell somebody, especially if that person will help hold us accountable. The psalmist, in gratitude for God's wondrous deeds and thoughts toward humanity, says that he has open eyes, open ears, open lips. He hasn't concealed God's love but has spoken of it. The psalmist is not withholding the story of God's steadfast love and faithfulness but is open, spreading the news to the great congregation. You might challenge your congregation today during the sermon to take a few moments to speak to their neighbor about how they have seen or heard or spoken about God's presence this week. Ask them to take turns so that one is practicing having open ears while the other practices speaking of God's faithfulness. If there are those who can't think of something, invite people to have an openness of all their senses and to be aware of God's wondrous deeds in the coming week.

Jesus invites us, too: "Come and see." There are some things you just can't understand if you haven't been there. I am guessing that this sense of things fueled the race to the moon in the 1960s. Now, we might critique that journey as an incredible amount of money to spend to walk around in the dust, hit a weightless golf ball, and take gorgeous photos of Earth, but how could people really know until they got there what a moonwalk would be like?

Any kind of travel takes us out of our element enough to challenge our way of seeing, not only of the place we are visiting but as we look back at home. I find that travel puts me more in tune with my sense of gratitude. I feel grateful for the people who are cooking for me and cleaning for me. I feel grateful for a bed to sleep in and clean water to drink. I feel grateful for the people whose stories I hear along the way. So many things that I don't stop and note as reasons for gratitude in my daily life do occur to me when I am out of my usual routine. Maybe this is why Jesus invites disciples, then and now, to change our location in order to see differently.

How might you not only talk about this idea but show it in your preaching this week? You might change your location or change something about your preaching style. Depending on the flexibility of your worship space and your congregation, you might set things up differently or actually ask people to move during the service, inviting "Come and see." JLMC

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 27, 2008

Isaiah 9:1–4
Psalm 27:1, 4–9
1 Corinthians 1:10–18
Matthew 5:1–12

First Reading—*Power shift*
Again we read Isaiah 9, which was our first reading on Christmas Eve. But now, in this season after Epiphany, season of revelation, these are the phrases that stand out. "The people who walked in darkness [the hopeful, expectant dark of Advent? the frightening dark of oppression?] have seen a great light." God has multiplied the nation and increased its joy, and along this way of the sea, that's like the joy of seafaring pirates dividing plunder. Why are they joyful? Perhaps because the power has shifted. They are no longer the "have-nots" but those who can distribute plenty among the whole group. The yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor is broken! No wonder gloom has been replaced by glorious light.

The theme of light is carried on in Psalm 27. Because the Lord is the stronghold of life, fear is replaced with confidence. In the first letter to the Corinthians, this confidence comes more specifically from the gospel and the power of the cross of Christ. Paul writes that to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

Our reading from Matthew begins with John's arrest, a pivotal turning point in Jesus' ministry. In response to John's arrest, Jesus withdraws. Then, he moves to Capernaum in Galilee. As John is forced to relinquish it, Jesus carries the preaching movement forward. Jesus starts proclaiming the same words that John has been proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Walking by the beautiful sea of Galilee, Jesus seems to realize that he cannot do this alone, and he asks some people to join him in this work. It's almost as if the arrest of John propels Jesus into this next stage of his ministry and into the sense that he is going to need people to be in this work with him. So he calls the disciples in a very simple way, with an invitation to join in creating a social movement. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." How could they have known what all that might mean? But, they leave work, family, and security to follow Jesus as he goes through Galilee, teaching in synagogues and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom, curing every disease and sickness among the people.

Zebulun and Naphtali are two of the tribes of Israel, which were located in the present-day region of Galilee. Josephus calls this region where Jesus begins his ministry "an earthly paradise." It is significant that at this point Jesus is not going to the wilderness or to a place where he is alone. Instead, he is headed toward a lush, green, beautiful, populated area, an area in which there are fisherman and farmers. It is a crossroads for all kinds of people. One way to look at this move is that Jesus is moving away from the center of imperial power to the grassroots.

Pastoral Reflection
This weekend's texts cast light on possibilities for a congregation in transition. A full range of emotions is explored as Isaiah's people move from anguish to increased joy, as the psalmist describes people putting aside fear and living with confidence, as Paul deals with divisions in the church at Corinth. As Jesus moves to Galilee, Matthew is clear in describing this move not as a "running for cover" but as a fulfillment of

prophecy. Where is your congregation at right now? How can you as the preacher tell the story of congregational life so that they can hear God speaking through change?[28] If you cannot imagine a way (or even if you can), it may be that you, like Jesus, need a time to retreat to the lush, green part of the world in order to get a new vision, sense of calling, power to preach.

When have you sensed that you needed to take up the mantle of the preacher who came before you and step up to the plate? Like Jesus takes up preaching in the vacuum that John's arrest creates, we sometimes are propelled forward into leadership because of another's absence. However, Paul has a different stance because he is dealing with a church in conflict. In contentious times, Paul reminds the Corinthians that ministry is not about the individual leaders ("baptizers" in this case) but about the gospel we are called to preach in the name of Christ.

Every season can be a season for preaching the theme of vocation, but the Epiphany season is an especially compelling time. By vocation I am thinking of something far broader than a person's job or career choice. Martin Luther included family relationships, normal daily tasks, and even menial chores like a father washing diapers—Luther says that this father shouldn't feel ashamed to do this, though his culture says that's beneath him, because God blesses whatever we do in love.[29]

Vocation, ideally, can also include what we most love to do. God calls us to live life at the intersection of the deep need of the world and our own deep joy. God's call comes from both within and outside of us. In Psalm 27:8, we hear an example of inner call: "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, Lord, do I seek." In Matthew's story of Jesus calling disciples, the disciples get to hear it from someone else: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people" (Matt 4:19). It would be a mistake to miss this opportunity to preach God's gracious invitation into the work of the reign of God.

Whom have you invited lately to do ministry with you in your congregation? Whom have you invited to consider a leadership role or to get a taste of something new? Whom have you invited specifically to consider ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament? This is a good assortment of scriptures to bring to people with questions of how God is speaking to their hearts and what they are hearing from those around them about next steps in life. Many folks, young and middle-aged and old, are just waiting to be asked, are waiting for the inner and outer call to coincide. Speak Jesus' call to them.

The work that Jesus calls us to is obviously far broader than the work we do inside the structure and body of the church. The kingdom of heaven is much broader than we typically envision. Jesus' initial work is to travel throughout Galilee, teaching, proclaiming, and healing. This is a wonderful time to lift up the vocation of all the baptized and perhaps draw special attention to those who have committed their lives to work in these areas: travel, teaching, proclaiming, healing. Encourage them in their work and challenge them to see these callings as ministry. JLMC

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28. For additional reading on this theme, see Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Change: Preaching in Times of Congregational Transition* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2005).

29. From Kurt Hendel, "Luther and Vocation," session in LSTC's "Serving Christ in the World" program, June 21, 2007.

A Matter of Perspective

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Here's a provocation.

Al Qaeda is, above all other things malevolent, a youth ministry dedicated to faith formation.

Now that I surely have your attention, may I state as surely that I do not mean to imply that anything is malevolent about youth ministry as such? But I do emphasize this: We who are involved in Christian leadership and leadership formation would do well to pause and consider whether our attitudes and practices about youth ministry are at all comparable—in a much more positive way!—to those who are dedicated to youth formation for fundamentalist Islam.

For that matter, are we churched leaders—whether in congregations, other institutions, or synodical or churchwide management—dedicated to such faith and worldview formation with *all* age levels, including youth? Further, have we the passionate conviction that everything is at stake in such commitment?

The above provocation is not my own only. It is first the observation of a young dedicated scholar and activist who works with the Muslim Student Association in North America. As a responsible man of faith dedicated to religious understanding, respect, and tolerance, he offered his observation as a "bottom line" descriptor of one extremist fundamentalist movement with which he cares not to be associated. He shared his insight with a group of leaders, representing almost all major religious traditions in the United States, who are concerned about a needed connection between pluralistic religious understanding and foreign policy. (But that is entirely another editorial.)

So many implications about our work in theological education and Christian ministry quickly came to my mind. So many "new" agendas inserted themselves, as daily happens, on the "required" list for a seminary curriculum. How can they all fit, as surely they cannot? And how could they all be warranted, as so much should be? I also thought of how similar the Al Qaeda strategy is to Christian fundamentalist youth programs today that ask what side high-school youth are on when it comes to the looming battle with science, morals, cultures, *and* Armageddon (ever and again), as well as likely democratic politics (hard to tell which is worse in some minds). "Respect" and "tolerance" are such wimpy predicates for those who lead such youth programs.

So, where is this seminary president to turn? Maybe it is not so much what "new" is required in a curriculum or position description. Maybe it is above all a matter of perspective. If youth ministry, for example, is but that particular *task* which one hopes to graduate from on toward a senior pastorate (no more sleeping on hard floors!), if it is but only something into which a seminary graduate yearns not to be pegged come first assignment/call, then we do not have the picture right at all, and we have not taught the big picture *whatsoever*.

So what is the "big" picture? I'll go with two scripture quotes for now, my can-

ons within the canon for this thought piece. First, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Second, "Feed my sheep." And a third (sort of!) scripture: "Perfect love casts out all ideology."

A great argument can be made for *love* and *feeding* being at the heart of the theological curriculum and at the heart of all faithful ministry, especially with youth. I also believe they would trump the base (double-entendre intended) rationale under the above-cited "successful" youth ministries. Do we love God's people and creation? Do we passionately believe that everything is at stake in the worldview that comes with loving God's people and creation? Can and do we live from the overriding *joy-full* perspective that faith formation, beginning with our youth, is our only national, personal, and universal security?

We have great ministry to do, in with and through the Holy Spirit. And everything is at stake on it.

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