

connections

LECTIONARY-BASED BIBLE STUDY

COMMENTARY

January—April 2019

- **Jesus Revealed**
His Identity and Purpose
- **Moving Toward Maturity**
Growing in Faith
- **Celebrate God**
Blessings and Challenges
- **Easter at the Center**
Before and After

COMMENTARY



Next Sunday
Resources



Commentary
by Brian L. Harbour

January-April 2019

We hope you enjoy Brian Harbour's comments. Our goal is to provide you, the *Connections Series Bible Study* subscriber, a variety of perspectives on the Scripture text for any given week. The *Connections Teaching Guide* and the *Connections Study Guide* contain excellent Bible commentary and are designed with adult learners in mind. Brian Harbour's commentary adds even more depth of study to the *Connections Series Bible Study* family of Christian education resources. His pastoral experience, professional and educational preparation, and love for the church and Scriptures make his contribution relevant and warmly personable. This volume represents Brian Harbour's unique reflections, insight, and commentary on the Scripture texts. We are pleased to provide this resource to you.

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About the Author



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Brian and his wife, Jan, are the parents of four adult children. They also have five grandchildren.

As a Gift to the World

January 6, 2019

Matthew 2:1-12

The New Testament contains four stories of Jesus' life. We refer to them as the Gospels. As we study the four Gospels, we immediately notice some differences in the accounts. At first glance, we might think this undermines their credibility. On second thought, we realize that these dissimilarities enhance it. Suppose, for example, that four of us go out to eat on a Saturday evening. As we approach the restaurant, we are shocked by a group of people in front of the restaurant who begin to shove each other. The group spills out into the parking lot where a fight ensues, and finally the police come and take control of the situation. Since we observed the fight, the police decide to find out from us how the fight started. They take each of us to separate cars and ask us to give an account of what happened. What if each of us recites the identical story, word for word, outlining the same chronology of events? Will the fact that all four testimonies are identical, word for word, make the police believe our story? Most likely it will create the opposite effect. They will think that the four of us rehearsed our stories before they arrived and put together a common interpretation of the events. They will not accept our reports as credible testimony but will view them as collusion. Similarly, if the Gospels were identical, word for word, we would reach the same conclusion about them. Instead, we have four different writings telling the story from four different perspectives for four different purposes. This diversity affirms their credibility. Yet, for all their differences, the Gospels coalesce in their goal. They all seek to clarify Jesus' identity and purpose.

During this month, we will study stories from three of the Gospels that provide insight into Jesus' identity and purpose. The first story features the wise men who bring gifts to Jesus but who then discover that Jesus himself is God's gift.

The Context

Matthew 2:1-2

Matthew presents two markers to help us understand the historical context of the event described in our text. To begin with, he locates the story "in the time of King Herod" (2:1). Herod is the first in the line of Herodian rulers over Judea during the last half of the century before Jesus' birth and the first half of the first century after his birth. Herod tries to curry the favor of the citizens of Judea by

rebuilding the temple, but too many factors weigh against him. The Judeans consider him a usurper to the throne of Israel, since he has no connection to David. The hated Romans support him. He introduces into Judea foreign ideas and customs, including idolatry. Plus, he makes decisions arbitrarily and rules with cruelty. Consequently, the people do not like him and long for a more favorable replacement. This generates a paranoia that explains Herod's knee-jerk reaction to the announcement of the "wise men from the East" that a new king has been born in Judea (2:1-2).

Matthew also locates the story in "Bethlehem of Judea" (2:1). Bethlehem, a small village about five miles south of Jerusalem, is not an impressive town. Yet it holds a significant place in Israel's messianic tradition. Matthew identifies this town as "Bethlehem of Judea," not just to distinguish it from another village called Bethlehem, but also to connect Jesus' birthplace with Micah's prophecy. Micah prophesies that the "one who is to rule Israel" and the one "whose origin is from of old, from ancient days," will be born in Bethlehem of Judea (Mic 5:2). Matthew wants us to know that this is no ordinary baby the wise men from the East seek. Instead, he is the One who will fulfill God's promise of a Messiah by bringing salvation to the people of Israel.

Who are these wise men who visit baby Jesus so they can present their gifts and acclaim him as a new king of the Jews? These visitors from the East were not kings, as we often present them, but wise men, members of a caste among the Medes and Persians who studied the stars and their influence on human events. Perhaps calling them astrologers captures the essence of their identity. Notice that Matthew does not tell us that "three" wise men arrive from the East. Tradition has determined that number from the number of gifts. The mention of three gifts could suggest that three wise men gave the gifts (Mt 2:11).

These introductory verses raise one more intriguing question. Why do the wise men connect the star with the birth of the king of the Jews? Some scholars suggest that the prophecy of a star coming out of the land of Judah to mark the birth of a special leader for the Jews was widely spread in the first-century world and not just confined to the Jews (Num 24:17). Perhaps the wise men were familiar with that story and the star therefore caught their attention. Others assume that the star appeared in the sector of the heavens that the wise men linked to Judea. Perhaps a special star suggested some significant event taking place in Judea. Maybe their observation of this star prompted the astrologers to go to Judea to learn more about the special event. When they arrive in Jerusalem, the text records their question: "Where is the child who has been born king of

the Jews?” (2:2). This inquiry immediately grabs the attention not only of the citizens of Jerusalem but also of King Herod himself.

The Response

Matthew 2:3-8

The wise men do not immediately go to Herod for information; instead, they question everyone they meet. Eventually, however, the word gets to Herod. Matthew tells us that King Herod is “frightened” when he hears that the wise men are seeking one who has been born king of the Jews. Matthew adds “and all Jerusalem with him” (2:3), implying that when Herod is unhappy, everyone else is unhappy. Yet, even though he is incensed at this supposed threat to his throne, Herod displays craftiness as he attempts to finesse information from the wise men.

Before calling in the wise men, Herod enlists his spiritual advisors to do some background research on the promise of a Messiah for Israel. Matthew identifies these advisors as “the chief priests and scribes of the people” (2:4). The past and current high priests made up the council of “chief priests.” The “scribes of the people,” originally copiers of the Scriptures, were experts in Jewish law. Herod figures that if Jewish Scripture predicts the birth of a new king, these religious experts should have information about him. He meets with them secretly so he can manipulate to his advantage any information he receives. His advisors relay to him Micah’s prediction that from Bethlehem will “come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel” (2:5-6). Herod knows enough about the Jewish faith to recognize this as a messianic passage predicting a new ruler for Israel. Matthew does not reveal Herod’s response to this information. However, based on what we know about him, his reaction probably transitioned from frightened to incensed.

What can Herod do to squash this threat to his rule? He can send his army to Bethlehem to find the child and destroy him, but that will arouse suspicion. Besides, he does not know which child in Bethlehem poses the threat to him. He decides on a more deceptive approach. Notice that he “secretly” calls for the wise men (2:7). He does not want anyone to know that he is concerned about the visitors’ claim. A secret meeting will enable him to retrieve from them whatever information they have and to determine the level of danger their prediction poses for him.

Herod does not want the wise men to know of his fears, for they might keep important information from him. Instead, he indicates to them that he too wants

to honor this newborn king (2:8). Unfortunately, he does not know where to find him. He thus instructs the wise men to go to Bethlehem to find the child and then to report back to him.

The Visit

Matthew 2:9-12

At this point, Matthew gives no indication that the wise men sense Herod is a threat. They take his advice at face value and go to Bethlehem to find the child, fully expecting to report back to him on what they have found. As they move toward Bethlehem, the star reappears (2:9). It begins to move and leads them to Jesus (2:10). Notice that in Matthew's account, he does not speak of Jesus in a manger, surrounded by the animals normally found in a stable. Instead, the wise men go to "the house" where they find Jesus and his mother Mary (2:11). Does this mean Mary and Joseph settled in Bethlehem temporarily? Does this mean the visit of the Magi did not come until weeks or even months after Jesus' birth? Matthew's account raises these possibilities.

More important is the response of the wise men to the Christ child. When they come into the presence of Jesus and his mother, they bow down and worship Jesus. They recognize the significance of this child born to Mary. They then present gifts to Jesus: "gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (2:11). Frankincense and myrrh are two kinds of perfume. Gold is often associated with royalty in Scripture (Esth 4:11). Most of the Old Testament references to incense associate it with the service of God (Ex 30:34). The early church father Origen said that the wise men bring "gold, as to a king; myrrh, as to one who is mortal; and incense, as to God."

In a dream, God reveals to the wise men Herod's true intentions. Consequently, instead of going back to Jerusalem to inform him of the location of this newborn king, they return to their country by another road (2:12). Little do they know that they will become the centerpiece of Christmas dramas for centuries to come, not as wise men but as kings! How ironic history often turns out to be.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from this familiar story of the wise men's visit to Jesus? The story of Jesus' birth reminds us that God keeps God's promises. Throughout the Old Testament, God promises to someday send a special agent to redeem Israel and to establish God's kingdom. Micah is one of the prophets who

pointed to a future Messiah. Matthew informs us that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies by his birth in Bethlehem. This fulfillment of prophecy not only tells us something about Jesus. It also tells us something about God. God keeps promises.

The wise men's recognition of Jesus as king points toward the Gentiles' eventual embrace of Jesus as Savior. This reminds us that even though Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews, his kingdom will be worldwide. Jesus' ministry will be largely confined to Israel, but by revealing the Messiah's birth to the Gentile wise men, God makes it clear from the beginning that Jesus came for the sake of all people.

The text also highlights the importance of Jesus as God's gift to humanity. Recognizing the full ramifications of the gift God has given us in Jesus Christ should evoke from us the same doxology Paul expresses in his second letter to the Corinthians: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Cor 9:15).

As the Son of God

January 13, 2019

Luke 3:15-22

As the New Testament writers declare the good news associated with Jesus, one of the problems they face is finding the appropriate title to capture the essence of who he is. They draw multiple names from the imagery and vocabulary of their day. They call Jesus a prophet who proclaims a word from God (Jn 7:40). They refer to him as a teacher who teaches us about God (Jn 3:2). They address him as an advocate who stands up on our behalf in the courtroom of God (1 Jn 2:1). They define him as a light (Jn 1:4) and a lamb (Jn 1:29). They declare him to be the chief cornerstone of a new life of hope (1 Pet 2:6). The Gospel of John calls him “the Word” (1:14). The book of Revelation calls him “the Alpha and the Omega” (22:13). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul identifies Jesus as the One who created the world and who holds it together, the image of the invisible God and the head of the church (Col 1:16-18). The first Christians call him Messiah (Jn 1:41), Master (Mt 8:19), and Mediator (1 Tim 2:5). They address him as “Savior” (Lk 2:11) and bow down before him as the Lord (Mt 8:8). One of Jesus’ favorite names for himself is “Son of Man” (Mt 25:31). Our text uses another prominent name for Jesus: Son of God. Peter uses this term to identify Jesus in his testimony at Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16:16); the demons use it when Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac (Mk 5:7); and the centurion uses it at Jesus’ crucifixion (Mt 27:54). God validates this title for Jesus at his baptism, the event described in our lesson text.

John’s Clarification

Luke 3:15-18

To understand the opening statement in our text, “As the people were filled with expectation” (3:15), we need to review the context. John the Baptist generates this expectation when he goes “into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk 3:3). People flock from all directions to hear John preach. His audience includes representatives from the religious leadership (“Pharisees and Sadducees,” Mt 3:7) as well as from the common people (“the crowds,” Lk 3:7). The crowds do not intimidate John, nor do the religious authorities silence him as he proclaims the message God has given him. John realizes that his listeners depend on their physical relationship to Abraham to certify their relationship with God. John

rejects that understanding by reminding them that our fruit and not our roots most clearly reveal our standing with God (Lk 3:8). Based on that understanding, John condemns those who come to hear him preach (Lk 3:9). The fruit of their lives testifies that they do not even have a relationship with God. Therefore, they need to turn and begin walking in a new direction. They need to repent and be baptized.

John's fiery preaching and his call for repentance cause the people to contemplate whether John is in fact God's promised Messiah whose coming will mark the beginning of a new age (3:15). John quickly squelches this misunderstanding (3:16). He is not the Messiah; he prepares the way for the Messiah. He then contrasts himself with the coming Messiah (i.e., Jesus) through two images, one from religious life and the other from domestic life.

The image taken from religious life centers on the practice of baptism. John declares, "I baptize you with water," but one coming after me "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:16). The baptism of the one who is to come, John says, will empower a person by the Spirit of God and will purify a person as if by fire. John's baptism is symbolic. The Messiah's baptism will be transformative.

John draws the other image from domestic life (3:16). When the master of the house returns home from a trip, servants meet their master's every need, including the removal of the master's sandals. According to ancient rabbinic tradition, however, this responsibility to remove the master's sandals distinguishes a disciple from a servant. A disciple performs every duty except untying the master's sandals. Only a servant does that. John places himself on a social level lower than even the servant with his disclaimer, "I am not even worthy to do for the One who is to come after me what a disciple refuses to do and what a servant is required to do" (3:16, my paraphrase). With these two images, John clarifies that he is not the Messiah but is rather the one who prepares the way for the Messiah.

In preparing the way for the Messiah, John preaches both judgment and redemption. John illustrates the judgment side of his message with an image from the common practice of harvest (3:17). With the winnowing fork, the farmer tosses both the grain and the chaff into the air. The breeze blows the chaff away and the grain falls to the threshing room floor. In the same way, the coming Messiah will bring about a division among the people. The unrighteous will be blown away like the chaff. Only the righteous will receive God's blessings. Luke balances that judgment side of John's message with the more positive

affirmation that John “proclaimed the good news to the people” (3:18). The bad news is that we cannot stand before a holy God, for we are all sinners. The good news is that what we cannot do for ourselves, the Messiah will do for us. He will die on the cross for the sins of the world.

Herod’s Retaliation

Luke 3:19-20

At this point in his narrative, Luke inserts the story of John’s imprisonment (3:19-20). Both Matthew (14:1-12) and Mark (6:14-29) describe the arrest and ultimate death of John the Baptist in more detail. Notice also that they both place this story after Jesus’ ministry has been under way for some time. So why does Luke insert the story here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, even before referring to Jesus’ baptism? We see hints of an ongoing competition and comparison between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus in the New Testament. For example, after watching Jesus pray, his disciples ask him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples” (Lk 11:1). We also see the comparison between John and Jesus in Paul’s dialogue with Apollos (Acts 19:1-7). Apparently, Apollos belongs to a group of John followers, baptized in John’s name. In this narrative in the book of Acts, Luke clarifies that John’s baptism is inferior to baptism in Jesus’ name. Perhaps at the time Luke wrote his Gospel, the comparison between Jesus and John continued among those who claimed to be followers of Jesus. Luke, therefore, wants to confirm Jesus’ superiority, and he does so by removing John from the scene before announcing Jesus’ baptism. In fact, Luke will not even mention John in the reference to Jesus’ baptism that follows.

In this section, Luke also focuses on Herod as a representative of evil. Luke refers to “all the evil things that Herod had done” (3:19). John’s imprisonment and eventual death (3:20) are just additional evil things that Herod does. On the one hand, we see Herod, perpetrator of evil, representative of the powers of this world. On the other hand, we see Jesus, the Messiah, the manifestation of God in this world. Luke leaves no doubt which side will prevail. Herod represents the power of this world. In contrast, Jesus is the beloved Son of God.

Jesus’ Anointment

Luke 3:21-22

In this final section of our text, Luke tells the story of Jesus’ baptism. Luke tells us that “when all the people were baptized . . . Jesus also had been baptized”

(3:21). He makes no mention of John the Baptist. John's part is only incidental. Instead, Luke focuses on God's part in the baptism, as God uses this occasion to anoint Jesus for the ministry ahead of him.

While describing Jesus' baptism, Luke notes for the first time Jesus' remarkable commitment to prayer. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' ministry begins and ends with prayer. Here at his baptism, Jesus begins his ministry in prayer (3:21), and then when dying on the cross, Jesus ends his ministry with prayer (Lk 23:46). As Jesus prays, Luke tells us, "the heaven was opened" (3:21). Communication between heaven and earth occurs as if nothing separates the two. In this moment of unique communication between heaven and earth, Luke describes two things: a presence and a pronouncement.

Luke tells us that "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (3:22). One scholar references a belief in Mediterranean antiquity about doves as symbols of the beneficence of divine love (E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, vol. 8 [New York: Pantheon, 1953] 40–41). If that is true, then for the Holy Spirit to come upon Jesus in the form of a dove signifies to those in the Mediterranean world that God loves Jesus. God reinforces that meaning of the dove's presence with a divine pronouncement: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). This pronouncement at Jesus' baptism, like the later one at his Transfiguration (Lk 9:35), blends two Old Testament passages: Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Psalm 2 is an enthronement psalm that declares the ultimate victory of God's anointed one. This statement thus identifies Jesus as God's anointed one who will carry out God's plan for the redemption of the world. Isaiah 42:1 is a Servant Song that describes the servant of the Lord as one in whom God delights and as one who will bring "justice to the nations." This statement thus identifies Jesus as the servant of the Lord who will establish God's just kingdom.

Even if the listeners are not familiar with the Scriptures to which the words refer, they cannot miss the meaning of God's words (3:22). The voice is obviously God's voice, and the sentiments are unambiguous. "You are my Son," God declares, expressing a unique relationship with Jesus. You are "the Beloved," God affirms, expressing a special affection for him. You are the one with whom "I am well pleased," God proclaims, expressing an unparalleled confidence in him. God thus anoints Jesus, God's Son, as he begins his ministry of redemption.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from this experience in our text? The preaching of John the Baptist reminds us of the radicalness of the gospel. John shatters the comfort level of the sons of Abraham of his day with the reminder that their physical descent from Abraham will not bring them into a relationship with God, for it is not what we do for God but what God does for us that makes salvation possible. That is a radical idea among the religions of the world that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions, and it is a part of John's message in the wilderness at the beginning of Luke's Gospel.

John's preaching also reminds us of the practicality of the gospel. John does not just call people to register a decision for God. He commands them to let their commitment to God shape the way they live their daily lives. John reminds the people that God not only forgives us of our sins but also calls us to righteousness that we should display in the relationships, attitudes, and behavior of our everyday lives.

In addition, the anointing of Jesus at his baptism reminds us of the source of Jesus' ministry. The presence of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of God's approval at Jesus' baptism acknowledge that Jesus is not just another human being; he is in fact God's anointed one who will carry out God's plan for the redemption of the world (Ps 2) and the servant of the Lord who will establish God's just kingdom (Isa 42).

As the Bearer of God's Presence

January 20, 2019

John 2:1-11

Among the four Gospels, only John records a conversation between Jesus and one of his disciples that acknowledges an important aspect of his mission on earth. Jesus has just reassured his disciples that he has prepared a place for them and that he will eventually return and take them to that place. Then Jesus pronounces one of the most memorable descriptions of himself in the Gospels: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). At that point, Philip says, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (Jn 14:8). Jesus responds, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). In this statement, Jesus reminds us that he did not come to earth only to die on the cross for our sins. He also came to reveal God to us.

We can recall other New Testament passages that affirm Jesus' revelation of God. For example, in his Colossian letter, Paul describes Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), and the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being” (Heb 1:3). I like the more practical expression of this truth in a verse that is not as familiar. During his last week in Jerusalem before his death, Jesus announces to a group of would-be disciples, “When he [that is, a person] looks at me, he sees the One who sent me” (Jn 12:45, NIRV). When we look at Jesus, we see God, for Jesus is the bearer of God's presence. John highlights this truth with a story about a first-century wedding.

The Setting

John 2:1-2

John tells us that Jesus attends a wedding in the tiny village of Cana (2:1). At first glance, the story of this wedding reflects the commonness of the event. Weddings happen regularly, so this is not an unusual event. Nor is this an important wedding. This is not a royal couple coming together. We do not even know the names of the ones getting married. Further, this wedding takes place in Cana, a town whose location remains a mystery even today. A common town, a common couple, and a common event—that is our first impression of what happens in our text.

We do not know whose wedding this is, but Jesus and his family seem to have some connection to them, since his mother attends the wedding as well as Jesus and his disciples (2:2). We can assume that the wedding unfolds according to the accepted custom of the day. The first formal step of courtship was betrothal. The bridegroom gave the bride a piece of paper that legally tied the two together, but for a period after that, the bride remained in her father's house. Then, on the wedding night, the bride would proceed from her father's house to that of her husband in the wedding procession. As the procession made its way down the street, many of those standing along the way joined in the parade. When the procession arrived at the new home, the father of the bride presented his daughter to her husband. Someone uttered a solemn prayer. The couple ceremonially washed their hands, and then the party began. Sometimes these wedding festivals lasted for a whole week as the people ate, drank, laughed, and celebrated.

The Problem

John 2:3-5

But in the wedding described in our text, something happens that casts a dark shadow over this otherwise joyous, gala occasion. The bridegroom and his family run out of wine (2:3a).

Since wine plays an essential role in the wedding feast, a shortage of wine will be a source of extreme embarrassment to the family of the groom. Something must be done.

Surprisingly, Mary, Jesus' mother, steps in to solve the dilemma (2:3b). This raises two questions. First, why does Mary feel responsible for the supply of wine at this wedding? Some scholars conclude that she has an official position at the wedding, suggesting that she is related to either the bride or groom. Whatever her connection to the family, Mary steps in to solve the problem. Her response raises a second question. Why does she ask Jesus to do something about the problem? Does she turn to him simply because he is her son and she expects him to assist her? Or does she turn to Jesus because she remembers the unique prophecies made about her son, prophecies she has turned over in her mind through the thirty years since Jesus' extraordinary birth?

John ignores these questions and instead focuses on Jesus' response to his mother: "Woman," Jesus responds, "what concern is that to you and to me?" (2:4). We should not consider Jesus' response as either a discourteous retort or a blatant refusal to assist his mother. Jesus simply reminds his mother that the

inauguration of his ministry will change the nature of his relationship with her. He will no longer be just her son; he is the Lord. Jesus also suggests to his mother that they are responding to this problem with two different motives. She wants to supply the social needs of the guests and to avoid social disgrace for the host, but Jesus wants to glorify God and further the cause of the kingdom.

Mary apparently understands the meaning of Jesus' response, for his reply neither rebuffs her nor offends her. In fact, she still assumes Jesus will act on her request. Consequently, she turns to the servants standing nearby and instructs them to do whatever Jesus tells them to do (2:5). Jesus does step in to help, probably because he recognizes he can act in a way that will satisfy both of their motives.

The Solution

John 2:6-10

At this point, the narrative turns from dialogue to action. Jesus points to six stone jars and orders the servants to fill them with water (2:6-7). These are not just six random jars. Instead, John explains, they are used "for the Jewish rites of purification" (2:6). Mark reflects on the purpose of this water when he explains in Mark 7:3, "For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders." With his reference to these jars used to hold water for ritual purification, John adds another level of meaning to the story. Jesus not only provides better wine for the wedding; more important, he also provides spiritual purification that goes beyond that provided through the water's ritual use.

Jesus then instructs the servants to dip the liquid out of one of the jars and take it to the master of the banquet (2:8). Between the time the servants fill the jars with water and the moment the master of the banquet tastes the liquid, it morphs from water into wine. As we will see from the statement that follows, this is not just wine, but rather wine of an extraordinary quality. The master of the banquet announces that the host has done something highly unusual. Most families, he says, bring out the best wine first and then the wine of lesser quality after the guests are so inebriated that they are unable to discern the lesser quality. The bridegroom's family reverses the process and saves the best wine until last (2:9-10).

Notice also the amount of wine Jesus produces for the wedding guests. John identifies six jars, each of which holds about twenty gallons (2:6). The host of the wedding party needs a little more wine to finish the party. Instead, Jesus

provides one hundred and twenty gallons of wine, more wine than a host will need for ten parties. Jesus not only provides for their needs of the moment; he also provides such a lavish abundance of wine that it will meet their needs for the future. The spiritual truth that hovers just under the surface in this provision of material abundance echoes through the words of an old song: “Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.”

The Meaning

John 2:11

Why does John include this story of a wedding in Cana of Galilee as the opening story in his narrative of Jesus’ ministry? Three key words help us understand John’s motive. First, note that John tells us that this is the first of Jesus’ “signs” (2:11). John constructs the first section of his Gospel around seven miracles that he calls “signs.” A sign is something that points beyond itself. These seven miracles John includes in his Gospel are not just magic tricks performed by Jesus to create wonder in the crowds of people who flock to him, nor are they random acts of power enacted by Jesus to impress the crowds. Rather, these seven miracles focus attention on the one who performs them, giving clear evidence that he is indeed the Son of God (Jn 20:31).

Next, John tells us that this first sign, the transformation of water to wine, reveals Jesus’ “glory” (2:11). By “glory,” John means the reflection of God that emanates from Jesus’ life. John affirms God’s glory in Jesus early in his Gospel when he writes, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). These signs affirm that Jesus bears God’s presence and signals God’s presence among us. John includes this story in his Gospel so that everyone who reads it will realize that God has made God’s presence known in our world in the person of Jesus.

John concludes the story in our text by revealing that, because of this first miracle Jesus performs at the wedding in Cana, “his disciples believed in him” (2:11). What prompts their faith is not just that Jesus turns the water into wine and saves the bridegroom’s family from embarrassment. Instead, the disciples recognize that God is up to something new in the life and ministry of Jesus. Already at this point they recognize that what God accomplishes through Jesus will change everything. A new spiritual reality has appeared in Jesus, prompting them to put their faith in him.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from this first sign Jesus performs in Cana of Galilee? This story reflects on Jesus himself, revealing his generous and gracious spirit. To begin with, he saves the family from embarrassment by providing the wine. Then, by the abundance of wine that he produces, Jesus reveals the overflowing abundance of his love. Not surprisingly, this Jesus of abundant provisions will later announce his purpose for coming in terms of abundance: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10).

This story also provides insight into Jesus’ relationship with his mother. Jesus’ response to his mother’s request for help does not question his respect for his mother. It rather puts his respect for his mother in the right perspective. Although Jesus loves and respects his mother, she will determine neither the agenda nor the timing of his ministry. Only God can do that.

In addition, this story in our text reveals something about the kingdom of God. John’s story about Jesus, and particularly the seven signs he will discuss in the first half of his Gospel, reminds us that the kingdom of God is already at work among us. God has already begun to move us toward the new age God has in store for us. The eternal has already invaded the temporary, material world in which we live. The disciples recognize this deeper truth and put their faith in Jesus. Will we?

As the Fulfillment of Scripture

January 27, 2019

Luke 4:14-24

When Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection, he gives them an assignment. They are to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). But what is their message to be? Luke tells us in his summation of the disciples’ activity after being released by the religious leaders who sought to silence them. Instead of obeying the command of the Sanhedrin and remaining silent, Luke says that “every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah” (Acts 5:42). The church’s assignment is to convince the world that Jesus is the Messiah.

How will they convince their Jewish listeners that Jesus is the Messiah? As we study the Gospels and evaluate the preaching of the first Christian preachers and examine the epistles of the New Testament, we find two major themes used to confirm Jesus’ messiahship. To begin with, these first Christians conclude that Jesus is the Messiah because of his resurrection. In addition, they affirm that Jesus is the Messiah because he fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah. Both themes appear in the first Christian sermon at Pentecost. Peter affirms Jesus’ resurrection in his declaration, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses” (Acts 2:32). He also identifies three Old Testament Scriptures that find their fulfillment in Jesus (see Acts 2:25-28; 2:31; 2:34-35). Based on Jesus’ resurrection and on his fulfillment of the messianic prophecies in Scripture, Peter concludes, “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). In this lesson, we will explore the second of the themes that affirm Jesus as the Messiah: his fulfillment of the Scripture pertaining to the Messiah.

The Spirit’s Anointment of Jesus

Luke 4:14-19

In the opening verses of our text, Luke provides four insights into these early days of Jesus’ ministry. First, he announces that Jesus is “filled with the power of the Spirit” (4:14). Luke acknowledges more clearly than the other Gospel writers the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ ministry. He has already mentioned the Holy Spirit in relationship to Jesus and his ministry nine times prior to this announcement. In the opening verse of our text, Luke affirms that Jesus is “filled with the power of the Spirit” (4:14). We will continue to see this emphasis on the

Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry throughout the remainder of the Gospel of Luke.

Luke then focuses our attention on Galilee (4:14). Palestine in Jesus' day consisted of three provinces: Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Galilee was the name given to the northern part of Palestine, a territory earlier settled by the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dan. In Jesus' time, Herod Antipas ruled over the Roman province of Galilee. Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, was in Galilee. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus carried out the largest part of his ministry in Galilee. In our text, Luke tells us that Jesus "returned to Galilee."

Luke also notes the favorable response to Jesus from the common people of his day. He says that the report of Jesus' ministry spreads throughout the province of Galilee and that he is "praised by everyone" (4:14-15). As Jesus carries out his ministry, he will continue to evoke favor from the people. Sometimes, they praise his teaching. For example, Matthew concludes his account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount by acknowledging that "the crowds were astounded at his teaching" because "he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Mt 7:28-29). On other occasions, Jesus awes the crowds by his acts of power. John tells us in his Gospel, "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world'" (Jn 6:14). Jesus' popularity among the people eventually convinces the religious leaders that they must kill Jesus before he overthrows the religious system they have established in Palestine (Jn 11:47-48, 53).

Finally, Luke reveals Jesus' use of the synagogue to clarify the purpose of his ministry (4:15). In first-century Palestine, the synagogue provided a center of worship for Jews throughout the country. Some scholars believe that every town had at least one synagogue. Here the Jewish people came to worship and to hear Scripture read. Here they learned about the promised Messiah. The synagogue provided Jesus an appropriate setting for educating the people about his purpose and clarifying his identity. Consequently, when Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth, Luke tells us, "He began to teach in their synagogues." Luke adds the phrase "as was his custom" (4:15-16).

Jesus goes to the synagogue as a worshiper. However, because his reputation has preceded him, the leader of the service asks Jesus to read the Scripture and comment on it. The synagogue has no regular teaching professionals. Instead, the president of the local synagogue invites any distinguished person who is present to speak. The one who reads the Scripture will follow with a word of

exhortation. The leader of the synagogue asks Jesus to read the Scripture and to add his comments to the reading.

Jesus takes the scroll of the prophet Isaiah (4:17). Is this passage the appointed Scripture for the day, or does Jesus specifically ask for the scroll of Isaiah? Either conclusion is possible from Luke's narrative, although Luke's comment that "Jesus found the place where it was written" may suggest that he selects the passage. Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2a, with an additional phrase that may come from Isaiah 58:6. The passage predicts a future time when, through his specially anointed one, God will fulfill God's promise to the people.

Jesus then connects this Scripture with himself and uses the passage to outline the shape of his ministry (4:18-19). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus says, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The idea of a Jubilee year, mandated in Leviticus 25, provides the backdrop for the portion of Isaiah's prophecy Jesus quotes. Leviticus calls for a celebration every fiftieth year that will feature specific types of release, like allowing debts to be canceled and allowing any indentured Israelite to be set free. In other words, salvation is more than just an event or an experience. Salvation is the restoration of right relationships in all areas of life. To the poor, salvation means the good news of their spiritual wealth. To those in bondage, salvation means the offer of freedom. To those in darkness, salvation means light. To those burdened by life, salvation means the burden is lifted. "The year of the Lord's favor" predicted in Isaiah's prophecy includes all these dimensions.

The Scripture's Prediction Concerning Jesus

Luke 4:20-21

After he reads this passage from Isaiah, Jesus rolls up the scroll and sits down, prepared to comment on the passage he just read. The worshipers in Nazareth heard this passage from Isaiah many times. Yet this time, something stimulates a new level of expectancy within them as they await Jesus' comment on the passage. Luke tells us, "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him" (4:20).

We do not know exactly what they expect Jesus to say in response to the reading of Isaiah's prophecy. But we can be certain that his comment startles them, for he claims that this salvation, promised through the prophet Isaiah, will be fulfilled in him and that it will not just happen in the future but will begin to happen in the present. "Today," Jesus proclaims, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). Every Sabbath, the faithful of Nazareth have gathered in

the synagogue to pray for the appearance of God's Messiah predicted by the prophets of old. On this Sabbath, Jesus declares, "I am that one."

The People's Perplexity about Jesus

Luke 4:22-24

Luke describes two responses to Jesus' claim. Initially, Jesus' listeners respond with enthusiastic support. Luke tells us, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (4:22). This initial response morphs into skepticism (4:23-24) and eventually into radical opposition (4:29-30). Their question, "Is not this Joseph's son?" probably means, "Who does this son of a carpenter think he is to make such claims?" In Mark's parallel account, he underscores the skepticism of this retort from the people with the comment, "And they took offense at him" (Mk 6:3). Why this mixed response to Jesus? One commentator suggests that the favorable response comes in reaction to Jesus' announcement that God's salvation is now available, and the unfavorable response comes in reaction to Jesus' claim that he will be instrumental in making this salvation available.

Jesus recognizes the people's skepticism and responds with two common proverbs. First, he mentions the proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" (4:23). Perhaps they are complaining because Jesus, a citizen of Nazareth, has performed acts of healing elsewhere but not among them. In other words, unless Jesus puts them in a privileged position by sharing God's blessings with them first and foremost, they will not accept what he has to say. Jesus then mentions a second proverb: "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (4:24). Jesus asserts that even if he does perform miracles in Nazareth, the people will still not respond to him because they misunderstand the scope of his ministry. To illustrate its scope, Jesus recalls two well-known incidents from Scripture—one from the ministry of Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-16) and the other from the ministry of Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-14). In the first incident, Elijah receives aid from a non-Israelite woman (Lk 4:25-26). In the second incident, Elisha heals a non-Israelite man (Lk 4:27). These two examples enforce a truth about God's kingdom that the citizens of Nazareth have missed: God's plan of redemption includes all humankind, both the sons and daughters of Abraham *and* all the sons and daughters of Adam.

When this implication sinks in with the crowd, curiosity and amazement dissolve into hatred, and hatred explodes into a fury that transforms the worshipers into a mob of vigilantes. At this point, Jesus shows them the miracle

they demanded earlier, for Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way” (4:30).

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from Jesus’ encounter with the people of Nazareth? On a spiritual note, he affirms the importance of the Holy Spirit as we carry out our ministry for God. In this case, as in so many others, Jesus serves as an example. Luke begins chapter 4 of his Gospel by announcing that Jesus returns from the Jordan after his baptism “full of the Holy Spirit” (Lk 4:1). Luke also affirms that when Jesus begins his ministry, he is “filled with the power of the Spirit” (4:14). What is true of Jesus is also true of us as his followers. After the resurrection, Jesus reminds his disciples that they will become his witnesses only “when the Holy Spirit has come upon” them (Acts 1:8). We can carry out our mission today only as we yield to the Spirit of God at work within us.

On a practical note, Jesus demonstrates by his example the importance of gathering with other believers to study God’s word and to fellowship with God’s people. As it was for Jesus, regular attendance at the house of God should be our custom.

On a Christological note, Jesus illustrates the nature and the scope of his ministry. He reminds us that his mission, and thus the church’s mission, is not just about salvation in the spiritual sense but also about the transformation of community. He reminds us further that this gift of salvation is available to all people of all nations who believe in him.

Toward a Maturing Love

February 3, 2019

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

In her book *The Finishing School*, author Gail Godwin identifies two kinds of people. She writes, “One kind, you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves.” These people are “congealed” selves. About the other kind of people, she writes, “They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young.” These people she calls “fluid” selves. About the latter group, the author concludes, “In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive.” ([New York: Viking Penguin, 1984] 4).

We can use these same distinctions to describe Christians. Some Christians become congealed in their Christian lives and never develop any further. Other Christians demonstrate the fluidity that keeps them engaged in life and enables them to continually develop. Paul articulates the theme song of “fluid” Christians in his Philippian letter when he writes, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12). In a similar vein, he urges the Ephesian Christians to press forward “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

During this month, we will consider several dimensions in which “fluid” Christians need to progress if they are to become mature Christians who experience “the measure of the full stature of Christ.” We begin by focusing on the distinguishing mark of a Christian, which Jesus tells us is love (Jn 13:35).

Immature Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

If it is true, as the famous song of a few decades back put it, that “love is a many-splendored thing,” then we can conclude that Christians reflect different dimensions of love. Some demonstrate a mature love, while others reflect an immature love. Paul affirms this distinction in his famous soliloquy on love in 1 Corinthians 13.

He begins by describing a kind of love that succumbs to other desires in the human heart. Human beings crave to impress others by their articulate speech, their insights concerning the future, their courageous faith, or their unparalleled generosity. Yet Paul says that a Christian can do all those things and still “not

have love.” The word “have” literally means “to have more finely.” In other words, allowing ourselves to be driven by these other ambitions demonstrates that we do not really have a mature kind of love. Nothing—not creative imagination, the accumulation of information, correct doctrine, or even sacrificial giving—takes the place of the mature love to which God calls us.

Mature Love

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

But what does this mature kind of love look like? In the central section of this chapter, Paul describes in detail the characteristics of a mature love. To begin with, he asserts that mature love is “patient” (13:4). “Patient” reflects the passive dimension of mature love. To be patient means to refuse to give in to the natural reactions of indignation, smoldering resentment, and even active retaliation. No matter how our opponents attack us, mature love refuses to react. Why? Because mature Christian love receives its motivation not from what others do to us but by what Jesus has done for us. Mature Christian love is a Christ-initiated response to life. If we continue to love others, no matter what they do to us or how they respond to us, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

Paul adds that mature love is “kind” (13:4). The Phillips Bible translation has Paul say that love “looks for a way of being constructive.” In Ephesians 4:32, Paul identifies the qualities of constructive kindness as being “tenderhearted” and willingly “forgiving one another.” “Tenderhearted” reflects an attitude; “forgiving one another” reflects an action. The two go together. Kindness begins with an attitude toward others, a willingness to put ourselves in their place so we can understand them and their action toward us. Then, this attitude of compassion demonstrates itself in the act of forgiveness. If we are willing to recognize the condition of those who oppose us and ultimately to forgive them, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

Paul adds to his description of love by identifying some things that mature love does not reflect. To begin with, mature love does not reflect envy (13:4). What is envy? Envy is our feeling that others have received more than they deserve from life while, at the same time, thinking that we have been short-changed by life. Mature love does not see others as rivals for the blessings of life but instead rejoices in their blessings. If we celebrate the praise that comes to others, even if it surpasses the praise that comes to us, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

Mature love does not reflect an elevated self-evaluation (13:4). Paul uses two words to describe this exaggerated opinion of our own importance. One word is “boastful,” which describes those who sound off about their own accomplishments. The other word is “arrogant,” which describes those who think they are better than everyone else because of those accomplishments. Boasting reflects an inordinate desire to call attention to oneself in contrast to love that focuses on others. Arrogance causes us to build ourselves up, but love motivates us to build others up. If we focus our attention on building up others instead of building up ourselves, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

In addition, mature love does not respond to others with rudeness (13:5). The Greek word translated “rude” means to act in a disgraceful way. We see examples of this kind of behavior in the Corinthian church, for example, when some of the members who are materially prosperous shame others who have nothing when partaking in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:22). Mature love will not allow us to act in ways that disgrace or shame other members of the family of God.

Mature love “does not insist on its own way” (13:5). The New International Version translates the Greek word as “self-seeking.” Self-seekers are enamored with self-gain, self-justification, and self-worth. On the other hand, mature love turns our focus onto others. Mature love prompts us to ask, “What can I do for you?” If, in our relationships with others, we care more about what they want than about what we want, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

According to Paul’s description, mature love “is not irritable or resentful” (13:5). These two words are cousins. “Irritable” reflects an instantaneous negative reaction to something that happens to us or to someone who does something to us. “Resentful” reflects a lingering rage concerning these provocations. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” seems to be hardwired into the human psyche. Love short-circuits that desire for revenge by wiping clean the record book of wrongs done against us. If we avoid both the knee-jerk reaction to hurts and the lingering resentment toward the one who invoked the hurt, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

Paul adds in verse 6 that mature love “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth” (13:6). “Truth” refers to the kind of behavior that reflects the gospel. “Wrongdoing” refers to the kind of behavior that reflects the ways of the world. Mature love does not celebrate those who follow the pattern of the world. Instead, mature love rejoices with every word or action that demonstrates

the truth and power of the gospel. If we join with others who demonstrate the truths of the gospel in their lives, then we demonstrate a mature kind of love.

Paul concludes his description of mature love in verse 7 with a series of positive actions. First, he claims that love “bears all things.” The Greek word suggests someone who fends off every force and refuses to allow external forces to deter it from its responsibilities. Further, love “believes all things.” Love refuses to yield to rumors and innuendos. Instead, love always believes the best about the other person. Love “hopes all things.” This is not hope toward God but hope toward others. Love always believes that, because of God’s grace, God’s best will eventually come to that other person. And finally, love “endures all things.” The Greek word means to hold up under the load. Love never gives up on others, no matter what it must endure. David E. Garland summarizes this final list with the conclusion, “Love never loses faith and never loses hope” (*1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2003] 620). Paul illustrates these characteristics of mature love in his own life. In a much more perfect way, Jesus demonstrates these characteristics in his life.

The Superiority of Mature Love

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

In the concluding portion of this familiar chapter on love, Paul affirms the superiority of mature love. He first contrasts it with prophecies, tongues, and knowledge (13:8-10). Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will someday cease “when the complete comes.” What time reference does Paul have in mind? He is probably thinking of the end of the age and simply affirms that these gifts, as important as they are, will eventually cease because they will no longer be necessary. In contrast, love will be relevant in both this age and the age to come. Paul then contrasts the unfailing quality of love with two other qualities that he includes in the trifacta of Christian virtues: faith and hope (13:13). At the end of the age, faith will be replaced with vision. At that time, hope will be replaced by reality. Only love will remain.

In between these two contrasts, Paul presents two metaphors to remind his readers how they can experience this mature kind of love. The first metaphor pictures a child moving from childhood to adulthood (13:11). When children move into adulthood, they put away childish things. Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that some of the things they valued in the “immature” stage of their Christian lives need to be set aside, and now that they have moved into spiritual

maturity, they need to give love its proper place of priority. The second metaphor pictures a person looking into a mirror who sees a reflection of someone but who eventually sees that person face to face (13:12). Here Paul reminds the Corinthians that as they move toward maturity, they will see things more clearly. At that point, their priorities will be changed to match their new vision, and love will surface as their top priority.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from Paul's remarkable paean to Christian love? Paul's central thought is the demanding quality of love. Love is not something soft and gushy. Love is hard work. Love is the graduate school of Christian living. The kind of mature love Paul describes in this passage counters every natural tendency of the human heart in our relationships with others.

Paul further defines love as an action and not just a feeling. Love is something we do. Jesus reminds Peter of this truth in his dramatic dialogue with him in John 21:15-17. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" To each query Peter gives a positive response: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And in each instance, Jesus responds, "Prove it by feeding my sheep" (author's paraphrase). Words mean nothing unless they prompt action. Love is something we do.

Further, Paul reminds us that love is a proactive action and not a reactive one. In other words, love's expression is not determined by what others think or do or by who they are. We love others not because of who they are but because of who we are. We affirm that we are Jesus' disciples only by our love (Jn 13:35).

Toward a Maturing Belief

February 10, 2019

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Many images used in the New Testament to describe the Christian life suggest growth and development. Christians are to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom 12:2). Christians are to build “on the foundation” that comes to us through the grace of God (1 Cor 3:12). Christians are to “press on toward the goal” (Phil 3:14). Christians are to be “built up in him” (Col 2:7). Christians are to “pursue righteousness” (1 Tim 6:11). Christians are to “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). All of these passages support the same conclusion: becoming a Christian is only the first step in a process of growth and development in our Christian lives. Conversion must lead to a transformation that we refer to as spiritual growth. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:15, we are to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

Our lessons for this month focus on four dimensions of that growth. In last week’s lesson, we used Paul’s unparalleled description in 1 Corinthians 13 to outline the mature kind of love every Christian should demonstrate. In this lesson, we focus on a maturing faith.

The Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

As our text opens, Paul focuses on “the good news that I proclaimed to you” (15:1). The word translated “good news” refers to the gospel, so Paul affirms here that the gospel stands at the center of his message to the Corinthian Christians. Paul follows in the footsteps of Jesus at this point. Mark announces the beginning of Jesus’ ministry with this statement: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God” (Mk 1:14). The first disciples continue this focus on the gospel. Philip proclaims the gospel (Acts 8:12). Peter and John preach the gospel (Acts 8:25). The book of Acts also reveals Paul and Barnabas’s focus on the gospel (Acts 14:7). This emphasis on the gospel continues in Paul’s epistles. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul reminds his readers, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel” (see also Rom 1:16, Gal 1:11, Eph 3:7, Col 1:23, and 2 Tim 1:11). So Paul opens our text with this simple reminder to the Corinthian Christians: “When I came to you, I came preaching the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ.”

The preaching of the good news becomes effective in hearers' lives when they receive it (15:1). The Greek word translated "received" means more than accepting something. It means taking it into ourselves and making it our intimate companion. It means embracing it. The Corinthians received the gospel and then they incorporated it into their lives.

Paul takes this thought a step further by commending the Corinthians for their continued commitment to the gospel. After receiving the gospel and embracing it, they remain faithful to it in their daily lives. They "stand" in the gospel (15:1). Paul expresses a similar thought in Colossians 2:6 when he admonishes the Christians at Colossae, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him." The Corinthian Christians receive the gospel from Paul. They then embrace it as their companion. Finally, they allow the gospel to shape their daily lives.

In verse 2, Paul shifts from an explanation of what the Corinthians are to do with the gospel to a reminder of what the gospel does to them. The gospel is something "through which also you are being saved" (15:2). The word "saved" means to deliver, to heal, or to make whole, and suggests that those who are saved now reside in a place of security and joy. The New Testament presents two dimensions of this saving process available through the gospel. Through the gospel, we are saved *from* sin and death. The angel who announces Mary's impending pregnancy tells Joseph, "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Through the gospel, we are also saved *for* life. John 3:16 declares, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Paul reminds his readers of the importance of holding "firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you" (15:2). What will happen if the Corinthian Christians do not stand firm? Paul suggests that they will "believe in vain." We might translate Paul's words as saying they will believe "for nothing." Paul's statement suggests that a person can fail to enjoy the full benefits of grace. At the beginning of his Roman epistle, Paul proclaims that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16). If we fail to stand firm in our faith, we will miss the full manifestation of that power in our lives.

The Substance of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

At this point, Paul reaffirms the basic elements of the gospel. Before identifying these elements, Paul declares that these truths concerning Jesus are “of first importance” (15:3). This phrase signifies not just their priority in terms of time but also their preeminence in terms of importance. These truths, Paul declares, are foundational. He himself does not determine that these are foundational elements. Instead, he forwards to the Corinthian Christians what he received from God and from the earlier tradition of the church (15:3).

Notice that Paul precedes each of these elements with “that.” Some scholars suggest that the repeated use of “that” in this passage is equivalent to using quotation marks, which suggests that Paul is reciting a formula already well established in the church by the time he writes 1 Corinthians, which is usually dated around AD 55. This formula develops around four facts: Jesus died (15:3), Jesus was buried (15:4), Jesus rose from the grave (15:4), and Jesus appeared to his disciples (15:5-8).

The first two events, Jesus’ death and burial, reinforce the miraculous nature of the third event, Jesus’ resurrection. They confirm that Jesus’ resurrection was no parlor trick in which Jesus faked his death and then reappeared to simulate a resurrection. When Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus put Jesus’ body into that cave and rolled the stone in front of it, Jesus was as dead as any person whose passing we have ever grieved. Jesus died, and he was buried.

The third item in Paul’s list, his declaration that Jesus came forth from the grave, is his central thought, for it provides the key to our understanding of who Jesus is. The resurrection affirms that Jesus is who he claims to be: God’s Son, the world’s Savior, the name that is above every name, and the one in whom we can put our trust. On Good Friday, the disciples feared that they had misplaced their trust. They assumed Jesus lied to them and that he was not who he claimed to be. However, when they stood in the presence of the Risen Christ after his resurrection, they knew that whatever Jesus said, he would do. Whatever Jesus claims, that claim is true.

The final fact, Jesus’ appearance to the disciples, affirms the evidential basis for Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus’ physical appearance to the disciples assures us that his resurrection was not a work of fiction created in the fertile but fearful minds of Jesus’ followers. Jesus appeared alive, not just to one person but to many and not just on one occasion but on several.

These four events form the substance of the gospel. All the affirmations about Jesus in the New Testament—his preexistence with the Father, his virgin birth, his sinless life, and his vicarious death—mean nothing if the darkness of his

death is not eclipsed by the light of his resurrection. The theme of every New Testament sermon, the assumption of every New Testament book, and the motivation for every act of evangelism in the New Testament is the glorious good news that Jesus Christ is not dead but alive. These historic events, culminating in Jesus' resurrection, are the heart of the New Testament faith.

Embracing the Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:9-11

Paul now returns to the subject of our relationship with the gospel. In the opening section, he alludes to the response of the Corinthians to the gospel, urging them to stand firm so they will not “believe in vain” (15:2). In this final section, Paul refers to his own response to the gospel, assuring his readers that his faith “has not been in vain” (15:10).

Paul juxtaposes his unfitness to receive the blessings of the gospel with his extraordinary effort in claiming the full benefits of that gospel. He refers to himself as “the least of the apostles” (15:9). This is not feigned humility on his part. Paul never forgets his original opposition to the gospel and the lives he permanently damaged during his persecution of the church. Only God's amazing grace rescued him from that life of destructiveness and transferred him to the road that leads to life. “But by the grace of God I am what I am,” he declares (15:10). Yet, as he does in other places, he combines human effort with God's grace in the process of discipleship (compare Eph 2:8-10 and Phil 2:12-13). Paul affirms, “I worked harder than any of them,” but then quickly balances that claim with a caveat: “though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (15:10). David E. Garland captures this dynamic by asserting, “Grace does not so much require response as it enkindles response” (*1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2003] 694).

Paul closes the passage with a declaration of unity between him and the other apostles (15:11). For the other apostles and for him, these factors cited above (15:3-8) provide the foundation for the gospel: Jesus died, he was buried, he arose from the grave, and then he appeared to the disciples. If Christians will accept these facts and allow them to transform their lives, then, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:15, they will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

Conclusion

What lessons do we learn from Paul's declaration about the essential elements of the gospel? To begin with, he roots the gospel in history. Christianity is not a philosophical system developed by intellectuals. Instead, Christianity grows out of some basic historical facts concerning Jesus. Jesus lived on this earth. He proclaimed the good news of God's love. He died on the cross for the sins of the world. On the third day, God raised him from the dead. Jesus then appeared to the disciples as the risen Lord. These historical facts provide both the foundation for and the essential elements of the gospel.

Paul reminds us of the importance of our response to these historic facts. We must not only know these things about Jesus; we must also affirm them. We must not only hear the gospel; we must also embrace it. Only then will we experience the full benefits of the gospel.

Finally, Paul affirms the transforming power of the gospel. He presents himself as an example of this transforming power. He alludes to his life before his confrontation with the resurrected Christ on the Damascus road. Even though he considered himself at that time to be a leader among the Pharisees, he acknowledges in this passage that he was unfit to be called an apostle. Yet the gospel changed all of that. He describes this dramatic change initiated by the gospel in Galatians 2:20: "And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Toward a Maturing Expectation

February 17, 2019

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

One of the most appealing things about the gospel is its offer of hope. Romans 5:2 talks about “our hope of sharing the glory of God.” Colossians 1:5 refers to “the hope laid up for you in heaven.” In Titus 1:2, Paul mentions “the hope of eternal life.” Peter assures his readers of “a living hope” that comes to those who embrace the gospel (1 Pet 1:3). The gospel generates an expectation concerning the future that instills hope within us.

This New Testament hope includes many dimensions. According to Romans 8:38-39, our hope in Christ assures us that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God. According to 1 Corinthians 10:13, our hope in Christ assures us that we will never be confronted by a temptation too great for us to resist. According to Philippians 4:13, our hope in Christ assures us that God will provide the strength necessary to fulfill every task God sets before us. According to Philippians 4:19, our hope in Christ assures us that “God will fully satisfy every need . . . according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” The list goes on and on.

The New Testament also connects this hope with our expectation of life after death. Our hope in Christ assures us that God will resurrect us from the grave and provide for us a life that never ends. This hope grows out of the promise Jesus articulated in John 6:40: “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” Paul focuses on this hope of life after death in our text for this week’s lesson.

The Basis for Our Expectation

1 Corinthians 15:12

Paul lays the foundation for this hope in our future resurrection with his opening statement in verse 12. Our expectation of life after death grows out of Jesus’ victorious resurrection in which he defeated death. “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead,” Paul questions, “how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (15:12). Why do we believe in life after death? We believe in life after death because of the resurrection of Jesus. Because he overcame death to live again, we know we will also experience life after death. Jesus affirms this connection in his comforting words to the disciples on the final

night of his life. “Because I live,” Jesus assures the disciples, “you also will live” (Jn 14:19).

But why do we believe in Jesus’ resurrection? Our belief in the resurrection of Jesus is based on what Acts 1:3 calls “many convincing proofs.” The empty tomb provides the first proof. When the disciples went to the place where Jesus was buried, they discovered that the tomb was empty, a fact that even the authorities did not deny (Mt 28:13-15). The empty tomb stands as positive testimony to Jesus’ resurrection.

A second proof is the dramatic transformation of the disciples. After Calvary, the disciples were disconsolate. John 20:19 paints a picture of fear, despair, and shattered dreams. A short time later these same discouraged disciples glowed with confidence and stood fearless in the face of persecution as they preached with such power that the evidence convinced thousands to believe in Jesus (Acts 3). Courage replaced fear. Boldness replaced timidity. Power replaced weakness. Why this amazing change in the disciples? Something happened that third day to change the disciples, but what? Nothing but the appearance of the risen Christ to these disciples can explain the new start, the amazing vigor, the continued life and growth, and the intensive theological development of the church. The transformation of the disciples stands as another testimony to the reality of the resurrection.

The worship of the early believers on the first day of the week, the day they called the Lord’s day, also supports our belief in Jesus’ resurrection. From the beginning of recorded Hebrew history, the Jews worshiped on the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath. The Jews of Jesus’ day remained devoted to the Sabbath. Yet thousands of Jews who became Christians abandoned their holy day and embraced the first day of the week as their day of worship (1 Cor 16:2). What caused them to change one of the most ancient traditions of their faith? Only one fact can explain the change, the fact that echoes from the graveyard of Jerusalem: Jesus arose from the grave on the first day of the week. Christians worship on the first day of the week to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection.

In Paul’s discussion of Jesus’ resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8, he highlights additional proof that affirms the reality of Jesus’ resurrection: the appearances of the risen Christ to his disciples and friends. We know Jesus rose from the grave, Paul asserts, because he appeared alive to the women at the tomb, to Mary Magdalene, to Simon Peter, to James, to the disciples in various groups, and finally to Paul himself on the Damascus Road. Paul’s implication is clear: “If you don’t believe me, check with these people. Most of them are still

around to confirm my account.” In this opening verse of our text, Paul uses the resurrection of Jesus as the foundation for affirming our resurrection. If Jesus has been raised from the dead, then we know we will also be resurrected.

The Absence of Expectation

1 Corinthians 15:13-18

In this central section of our text, Paul reverses his direction, this time arguing from our resurrection back to Jesus’ resurrection. Instead of arguing from a positive perspective as he does in verse 12 (Jesus was raised and so we know we will be raised), he argues from a negative perspective (if there is no resurrection for us, then there was no resurrection for Jesus). Paul explores the adverse ramifications of not expecting a resurrection in the future.

To begin with, the conviction that resurrection from the grave is impossible negates the foundational belief of the Christian faith, which is Jesus’ resurrection (15:13). If resurrection is not possible, then the claim of Jesus’ resurrection cannot be true. But if Christ is not raised, why did the first Christians insist that he had risen from the grave? Maybe the women and other disciples who claimed Jesus arose from the grave were deluded about what happened. Perhaps the women approached the wrong tomb on Sunday morning when they came to anoint the body of Jesus. Maybe when the supposed caretaker of the cemetery told them, “He is not here” (Mt 28:6), pointed his finger to the right tomb, and declared, “Come, see the place where he lay” (Mt 28:6), the women mistook him for an angel and assumed he was announcing Jesus’ resurrection. Or maybe it was all a scheme in which the disciples stole the body of Jesus and then made up the story of his resurrection to provide a power base from which they could found a new religion with themselves at the head. But if some such explanation is necessary because resurrection from the grave can’t happen, then Jesus did not rise from the grave.

If the claim that Jesus arose from the grave is not the truth but just a hoax, the veracity of the gospel and the validity of our faith are undermined (15:14). By “our proclamation,” Paul probably has in mind the gospel message whose salient points he outlines in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. By “your faith,” he has in mind the disciples’ response to the preaching of the gospel, which they embrace and by which they live. The word “vain” carries two different meanings in our text. When used about the proclamation of the gospel, “vain” suggests the idea of empty or ineffective. If the claim of Jesus’ resurrection is false, then the gospel is empty or ineffective. When used about their faith, “vain” carries the idea of

foolish or useless. If the claim of Jesus' resurrection is false, then their faith is both foolish and useless.

Further, if the claim that God raised Jesus from the grave is false, then the gospel misrepresents God (15:15). The first Christians did not present the gospel as a message emerging from human ingenuity. Instead, they claimed that the gospel comes from God. When Jesus began his ministry, Mark tells us that he came to Galilee "proclaiming the good news of God" (Mk 1:14). In the opening words of his epistle to the Romans, Paul reminds his readers that he has been set aside "for the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1). When Peter admonishes his readers for not maintaining the proper moral standards as Christians, he reminds them that they are disobeying "the gospel of God" (1 Pet 4:17). These first Christians claim that the gospel comes from God. However, if the core message of the gospel, which the disciples claim to be from God, is false, they not only invalidate their own preaching. They also misrepresent God.

Finally, if our claim of Jesus' resurrection is false, then the gospel does not provide hope, as the Christians claim (15:16-19). Instead of being redeemed and forgiven by God and reconciled to him, we are still in our sins. Romans 4:25 affirms that Jesus "was raised for our justification," but if Jesus has not been raised, then we have not been justified. In 1 Corinthians 15:20, Paul calls Jesus "the first fruits of those who have died," but if Jesus has not been raised, then the claim that he is the first fruits of our own resurrection is an empty claim. Instead of rejoicing in the life after death that came to be known as heaven, the Christians who have already died have simply perished. If Jesus has not risen from the grave, we have no gospel and we have no basis for a hopeful expectation about the future.

Two Alternatives

1 Corinthians 15:19-20

Paul concludes the passage by setting side by side these two alternatives. On the one hand, we can refuse to believe in the resurrection, either Jesus' resurrection or our own. About those who select this alternative, Paul concludes, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19). On the other hand, we can believe in Jesus' resurrection and consequently our own, affirming Jesus to be "the first fruits of those who have died" (15:20). Paul will elaborate on what that means for us in the remainder of 1 Corinthians 15.

Conclusion

What does this lesson teach us about hope? First, our hope in the resurrection comforts us as we face the death of a loved one. As Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians, we do “not grieve as others do who have no hope” (4:13). Our belief in the resurrection of the dead assures us that we will see our loved one again.

Second, our hope in the resurrection aids us as we face our own death. Paul reflects this courage when he exclaims, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil 1:21). Our belief in the resurrection of the dead affirms that death is not the period at the end of the sentence of life but only a comma that indicates the transition of our lives to a higher level of significance.

Finally, our hope in the resurrection empowers us as we live out our Christian lives on the earth. When asked about what kept him going in the face of his opposition, Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, purportedly answered, “Every day I expect to be murdered or robbed or enslaved; but I’m not afraid of these things because of the promise of Heaven.” How encouraging is the promise Jesus gives to Martha: “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (Jn 11:25).

Toward a Maturing Spirit

February 24, 2019

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

The idea of resurrection from the grave does not appear for the first time in the New Testament. Instead, the Old Testament also suggests the idea of resurrection. When Isaiah describes Judah's song of victory on the day God delivers her from oppression, he includes the promise of resurrection. "Your dead shall live," he announces. "Their corpses shall rise" (Isa 26:19). The psalmist expresses confidence that God will "not give me up to Sheol" (Ps 16:10). Even in the depths of his despair, Job expresses hope in a resurrection when he declares, "after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26). Perhaps the clearest confirmation of life after death in the Old Testament comes from Daniel: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2). As the New Testament period opens, the concept of life after this life already holds an important place in the theology of the Pharisees, one of the leading religious groups of the day. In contrast, the Sadducees do not believe in a resurrection from the grave, a distinction Paul uses to distract his critics when he appears before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Acts 23:6-8.

The resurrection of the dead also holds a central place in the new faith that develops around Jesus. Jesus predicts his own resurrection (Mt 16:21) and then makes good on his prediction (1 Cor 15:20). Likewise, he assures the disciples that they too will be raised from the grave (Jn 6:40). In the text for this lesson, Paul further explores the idea of the resurrection of believers.

A Physical Body versus a Spiritual Body

1 Corinthians 15:35-38

Paul deals with two questions concerning the resurrection of believers: the "what" question and the "how" question. The first question asks, "What happens at the end of our physical lives?" Paul affirms that our life continues even when our physical life ends in the experience of death. After death comes a resurrection. In the two previous lessons, Paul applies that truth to both Jesus and the Corinthian believers. As Jesus' death ends in a resurrection, so will it be for believers. Death is not the end of life; it is only a transition.

The second question asks, “How are the dead raised?” (15:35). Paul responds to that question in the text for this lesson by describing the kind of body in which we will be raised. Apparently, when the Corinthians hear of a resurrection, they think of it in terms of the reconstruction of the human body after death. Paul wants to disabuse them of such a limited understanding. Perhaps that is why he responds with the pejorative, “Fool!” (15:36). He wants them to recognize that the resurrection body is so much more than the physical body in which we now exist. He offers two analogies to make his point.

The first analogy comes from the plant world. When a farmer plants a seed, its “burial” makes it appear that the seed dies (15:36). The death of the seed, in turn, leads to the life of the plant. Further, the farmer understands that the seed will produce a plant that differs from the seed itself (15:37). Yet continuity ties the seed and the plant together. The farmer does not plant a kernel of corn and produce wheat. In this analogy from nature, Paul pictures a process that has continuity but not identity. Paul then applies this analogy to the idea of resurrection (15:38). When a person dies, God will bring that person forth from the grave. This new body will not be just the restoration of the physical body that was buried; it will also be the emergence of a new, transformed body. Yet there will be continuity between the new spiritual body that God brings forth from the grave and the physical body that dies.

The second analogy comes from the physical world, which includes various kinds of bodies (15:39-41). Although this passage is not in our lesson text, Paul’s analogy in these verses provides further understanding of his view of the resurrected body, so I will touch on it briefly. Paul describes the variety of bodies in the physical world in which we live—human bodies, animal bodies, and even heavenly bodies (15:39-40). Human bodies differ from the bodies of animals. Bodies of animals differ from the heavenly bodies. But they are all bodies. To each, God gives the appropriate body. Paul concludes that just as God gives appropriate bodies for everything in this physical world around us, he will also give appropriate bodies for everyone in the spiritual world beyond death.

The Nature of this Spiritual Body

1 Corinthians 15:42-44

Paul now describes the new spiritual body that will come with resurrection (15:42). In a series of antitheses, Paul applies his earlier point concerning seeds and the plants that come from them to the new resurrection body God will give us. As the wheat stalk is different from the kernel of wheat that we plant, even so

the resurrection body will be different from the physical body planted in the grave. The resurrection body will be a transformed body. In what ways will our bodies be transformed? Notice Paul's four antitheses.

"What is sown is perishable," Paul writes, but "what is raised is imperishable" (15:42). To be "perishable" means to be subject to decay. We are in the process of dying every day and our death and burial are the end of the dying process. However, our resurrection bodies will be removed from this realm of decay. They will never be subject to death or dissolution. They will be imperishable.

Paul adds, "It is sown in dishonor" but "it is raised in glory" (15:43). New Testament writers use the word translated "dishonor" to describe something common or ordinary. Paul contrasts the ordinariness of our physical bodies with the "glory" of our resurrected body. This word "glory" suggests an appearance that commands respect. The transformation of the physical body into the resurrection body will move us from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Perhaps John has this in mind when he writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him" (1 Jn 3:2).

Further, Paul tells us, "it is sown in weakness" but "it is raised in power" (15:43). Our physical bodies are limited in so many ways. Ultimately, at the point of death, our strength vanishes completely, and our physical bodies fall prey to nature's elements. In contrast, our resurrection body will be free from all the limitations and handicaps we now know. We will be able to measure up to the highest potential of God's plan and purpose for our lives.

In the fourth antithesis, Paul concludes his claims in the previous antitheses with a simple declaration: "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (15:44). In both this life and in the next, we have a body. Paul modifies the word "body" with two adjectives: "natural" and "spiritual." Just as God has given us a natural body adequate to live in this world, even so God will give us a spiritual body adequate to exist in the next life. Our resurrection body will be adequate to function in the new realm of existence in which we will live through all eternity. This spiritual body will be imperishable, glorious, and powerful.

How does Paul know these things about our future resurrection body? Where does this description of our future resurrection body come from? It comes from the descriptions of the resurrection body of Jesus, a body so transformed that the disciples on the Emmaus road do not realize this is Jesus, and yet a body eventually recognizable through his words and deeds (Lk 24:13-32). Jesus' resurrection body is an incorruptible body that ascends to be with the Father

(Acts 1:9), a powerful body that can pass through a closed door and suddenly appear to the disciples (Jn 20:19), and an adequate body that is now at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf (1 Pet 3:22). Jesus' resurrection is both the proof of and the prototype for our resurrection.

The Uniqueness of this Spiritual Body

1 Corinthians 15:45-50

In the closing section of our text, Paul further clarifies the distinction between the physical body and the spiritual body by comparing Adam, the first to have a physical body, with Jesus, the harbinger of our new spiritual bodies. Adam is the prototype of all who have physical bodies. God created Adam's physical body out of the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7) and then breathed life into his physical body. Paul implies that God does the same for us. We all share with Adam this physical body.

Paul sets beside this description of Adam as "the first man" the picture of Jesus as "the last Adam" (15:45). When Jesus' physical body died and was placed in the tomb, God raised him from the grave and restored him to life. However, God did not just restore him to his physical life. Instead, Jesus' resurrected body is a spiritual body that transcends what he was before. Paul implies that God will do the same for us. Through faith in Christ, we will also receive this spiritual body.

Notice the distinction between Adam and Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:45. Paul declares that Adam "became a living being." However, Paul presents Jesus as "a life-giving spirit." In the resurrection, Jesus not only assumes his spiritual body. He also becomes the giver of spiritual life to all who follow him. This leads to Paul's distinction between Adam and Jesus in the final verses of our text (15:46-49). Because we are human beings like Adam, we too have a physical body that ultimately will deteriorate into death. But, because of our faith in Jesus, the last Adam, we have a spiritual body that will never deteriorate but will be ours for all eternity. Only because we have received this spiritual body from Jesus can we inherit the kingdom of God (15:50).

Conclusion

Every generation of Christians asks the "how" question raised by the Corinthians and addressed by Paul: "How are the dead raised?" What can we learn from Paul's discussion in our text? Paul reminds us, first, that our resurrection body will be different from our physical body. The New Testament gives few details

about what that resurrection body will be like, but it clearly affirms that it will be different from the physical body we have now. We can even affirm that it will be better than the physical body we have now.

Paul also reminds us that our resurrection body will be like our current physical body in some recognizable way. We can perhaps gain some insight into this question by observing the interaction of the first disciples with the resurrection body of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection body is different from his physical body. For example, he can move through closed doors and he can travel along the Emmaus Road without the disciples recognizing him. Yet the disciples do recognize him, perhaps not so much in how he looks but in what he says and does. Our resurrection body, like his, will be marked by both continuity and distinction.

Finally, Paul implies that just as our physical body has been appropriate for life in this world, our resurrection body will be appropriate for our existence in the life beyond. This assurance provides comfort for us as we contemplate what our future holds. Both in this life and in the life to come, we can be confident that "my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).

Celebrate God's Presence

March 3, 2019

Exodus 34:27-35

One of history's most fascinating Christians began his life in the lap of luxury, enjoying the wealth of his father who was a successful cloth merchant in Assisi, Italy. He began life as Francesco, but we know him as Francis of Assisi. Around 1202, his father outfitted him for a military expedition. On the journey to the battlefield, something happened to change his life. He met a leper along the road. Initially repulsed by the sores and disfigurement of this leper, Francis galloped by to get away from him. However, as he passed the leper, he recognized Christ in him, remembering Jesus' admonition that "as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Consequently, Francis stopped, gave the leper money, kissed his face, set him on his horse, and led the leper to his destination. Thus began the spiritual pilgrimage of a man who cared for the sick and the needy and whose influence radiated throughout the ancient world. Francis's life displayed his closeness to Christ. According to one legend, in an annual gathering of the Franciscans, as his followers were called, Francis and the other friars retreated to a nearby mountain to pray. Suddenly, the people from Assisi rushed up the mountain with fire-fighting equipment because they said the mountain was aglow. They thought a forest fire would endanger the praying men. Instead, the glow came from Francis in prayer with his fellow friars. The story in our text describes a similar illuminating experience in Moses' life.

Moses' Encounter with God

Exodus 34:27-28

The opening statement in our text, "The LORD said to Moses" (34:27), requires some background. After God delivered the Hebrews from their captivity in Egypt, Moses led them toward Canaan, the land God promised to the Hebrews through Abraham. Their journey toward Canaan led them to Mount Sinai, where they stopped. Moses ascended the mountain to meet with God. At that point, the Bible tells us, "the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai" (Ex 24:16). Moses remained on the mountain for forty days and forty nights (Ex 24:18). At the end of Moses' extended stay on the mountain, God gave Moses the tablets of stone

on which God had engraved the Ten Commandments and sent Moses back down to the people (Ex 31:18).

In the meantime, the Hebrew people waiting at the foot of the mountain became impatient, fearing that something had happened to Moses, so they persuaded Moses' brother Aaron to build a golden calf for them to worship, to provide a tangible god they could see and approach (Ex 32:1-6). When Moses returned and discovered that the people had given themselves to this apostasy, he smashed the tablets (Ex 32:19), and God sent a plague on the people (Ex 32:35). But God was not finished with them. He still wanted to fulfill his covenant promise to Abraham, so he invited Moses to ascend the mountain once more. Moses cut two new tablets of stone, per God's instructions, and he once more ascended Mount Sinai (Ex 34:4). Our text tells us that during this second trip to the top of the mountain, "The LORD said to Moses..." (34:27).

In this conversation with Moses on their second encounter on the mountain, God addresses the covenant. God reveals two things about this covenant (34:27). First, God reveals God's commitment to the covenant. Even after the people apparently give up on God, God still does not give up on them. God once again expresses a desire to make a covenant with Moses and with Israel. In addition, God reminds Moses of the demands of the covenant, telling Moses that God will reestablish the covenant with Israel "in accordance with these words"—that is, with the words of the law that will be engraved once more on the stone tablets Moses brings to this meeting with God.

As in his first encounter with God on Mount Sinai, Moses remains on the mountain for "for forty days and forty nights" (34:28). Biblical writers often use the phrase "forty days and forty nights" to identify any time of intense spiritual reflection or activity. For example, 1 Kings 19:8 reveals that Elijah spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness after Jezebel threatened to kill him, preparing for the spiritual challenge ahead. Matthew 4:2 discloses that Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, fasting and praying, preparing for his three years of ministry and ultimately his destiny on the cross. Similarly, Moses spends forty days and forty nights in the presence of God, absorbing the glory of the Lord that settled on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:16).

However, Moses is not idle during these forty days and forty nights, nor does he focus on his own physical needs. Instead, he focuses on the revelation God gives him (34:28). Although our text only mentions "the ten commandments," we can assume that God reveals much more to Moses, because when he descends from the mountain to meet with the Hebrew people, he delivers a full

body of instructions including Sabbath regulations, details relating to the construction of the tabernacle, and the proper protocol for worship in the tabernacle. In addition, Moses will carry something else with him as he descends from the mountain, something of which he is not aware: the radiant reflection of God in his face.

Moses' Reflection of God

Exodus 34:29-32

Moses returns to the people (34:29). This time, even though he has been absent from them for forty days and forty nights as in his earlier ascent of the mountain (Ex 24:18), the people do not waver in their faith or yield to their anxieties. Instead, they wait expectantly for Moses' report. He holds in his hands "the two tablets of the covenant," which he shares with the people, along with the other information that follows in Exodus 35:1-19. What captures the attention of the people, however, is not what they hear when they listen to Moses but what they see when they look at Moses. The Bible tells us "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God" (34:29).

How do Aaron and the other Israelites respond to this glorious transformation of Moses? The Bible tells us that "they were afraid to come near him" (34:30). In the Bible, fear is a common human emotion in response to God. At times, the word "fear" connotes terror in the presence of God. Adam and Eve display this manifestation of fear after they disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit. When God asks Adam and Eve why they are hiding from him, Adam responds, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen 3:10). At other times, the word "fear" connotes respect or reverence in the presence of God. The writer of Proverbs seems to have this understanding of fear in mind when he declares, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Prov 9:10). The fear expressed by Aaron and the Israelites in our text leans more toward terror than respect. When the people juxtapose their recent disobedience of God in worshiping the golden calf with the awesome demonstration of God's power and glory, terror strikes their hearts. They do not know what God is going to do, but they realize they have no power to stop it. Not surprisingly, "they were afraid to come near [Moses]."

Moses immediately draws them out of their terror by reporting to them what God communicated to him on the mountain (34:31-32). He assures them that God does not want to destroy them but rather wants to renew the covenant with

them. Moses reports that God's words on the mountain were not invectives against them but instructions for them. Reluctantly, the people approach Moses. This provides him the opportunity to communicate God's expectations for them as God's covenant people. Did Moses only announce to them what we know as the Ten Commandments? More likely, Moses expanded on all the instructions God gave him. The people had survived the wrath of God. Now it was time for them to move forward as God's people.

Moses' Reticence Before the People

Exodus 34:33-35

Our text ends with an intriguing discussion about the veil and Moses' shining face. After this initial report to the people when his shining face dazzles them, Moses covers his face with a veil. However, he only uses the veil when he speaks with the people. Whenever he goes before the Lord to speak to him, he takes the veil off. Then, when he comes back to the people to report on his conversation with God, he puts the veil back on (34:33-35).

Why does he do that? Our text implies that he does this to protect the people and to lessen their fear because, when the Israelites view his face, they see that "the skin of his face was shining" (34:35). In this explanation, Moses wears the veil when he appears before the people because of his concern for them.

Paul gives a different interpretation of Moses' actions in one of his Corinthian letters. Paul admits that Moses wore the veil originally to protect the people from "the glory of his face" (2 Cor 3:7). But then, Paul suggests, the glory begins to fade from Moses' face. Consequently, he wore the veil "to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside" (2 Cor 3:13).

In both explanations, we find this common thread: when Moses spends time in the presence of God, he absorbs the glory of God that settled on Mount Sinai, and this absorption of God's glory is reflected in his face.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from this experience in Moses' life? To begin with, we can learn a lesson from Moses' lack of awareness that his face shone from the glory of God. Surely, at this point, no one is closer to God than Moses. Yet he does not seem to recognize this. Moses demonstrates that sometimes the most devoted and godly men and women are unaware of the effects their closeness with God has on them. They know they dwell in God's presence, but they are not aware of the mark the relationship leaves on them.

Moses' experience also suggests that other people will know when we are in close fellowship with God. Our faces might not literally "shine" like Moses' face. Nevertheless our actions, our words, and our relationships will demonstrate the depth of our relationship with God. Peter and John demonstrate this truth when the Sanhedrin brings them in and tries to intimidate them into giving up their faith. When the members of the Sanhedrin notice their boldness, Luke tells us they "recognized them as companions of Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Moses also demonstrates the way the reflection of God's presence in our lives certifies our leadership. Aaron and the Israelites listen to Moses because they can see the reflection of God's presence in Moses' life. Peter demonstrates this truth in his Pentecost sermon. After his sermon, three thousand people respond to his message and proclaim their faith in Jesus (Acts 2). Why do they listen to him? Even more important, why do they believe him? Peter does not hold any certification as a teacher or as a leader among the Jews. His only certification is the evident presence of God in his life.

Celebrate God's Guidance

March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Kenneth Taylor titled his autobiography *My Life: A Guided Tour*. This was more than a book title. It was the description of his life. After serving at Moody Press for sixteen years, he gave up his job security to work full time translating *The Living Bible*. He told his oldest son, "I'm not sure where I am going, but I know it will be a guided tour" ([Wheaton IL: Tyndale House, 1991] ix).

What Ken Taylor claimed about his life can also describe the life of the Hebrew people whom God delivered from Egyptian bondage under the leadership of Moses. From the moment they crossed the sea and escaped from the Egyptians, God guided every step of their journey. Nehemiah later elaborates on this idea of God's guidance when he writes, "You in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go" (Neh 9:19). In our text for this lesson, as Moses prepares the people for what is ahead, he reminds them once more of God's guidance.

Bringing the Offering

Deuteronomy 26:1-3

Even a casual perusal of the Old Testament confirms the central place held by sacrifices and offerings in the ancient world. The conflict between Cain and Abel revolves around the giving of an offering to the Lord. Cain brings an offering from the produce of the land, and Abel brings an offering from the firstborn of the flock (Gen 4:3-5). When Noah's feet touch dry land after disembarking from the ark, he builds an altar on which he offers burnt sacrifices to God (Gen 8:20). The narrative in Genesis 12–50 notes repeated sacrifices to God made by the patriarchs.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that as the Hebrew people prepare to enter and take possession of the promised land, Moses instructs them to bring an offering (26:1). Notice that the people are to give God the first fruit of the ground (26:2). Moses' statement reminds the Hebrews that they are not to give out of what they have left over after meeting their own needs. Instead, they are to give God their first and their best. In other words, they are to make their offering to God out of the first fruits of the harvest.

Moses also instructs them to bring their offerings “to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name” (26:2). Religious sanctuaries abound in the land of Canaan. Consequently, God’s marching orders to the people include the command not only to avoid these pagan places of worship but also to destroy them (Deut 12:2-3). God knows that involvement in these other worship centers will inevitably influence Israel to follow the patterns of worship practiced there. Therefore, God clearly warns the people, “You shall not worship the LORD your God in such ways” (Deut 12:4).

In the opening verses of our text, Moses reiterates that the purpose of these offerings is to acknowledge what God has done for the Hebrew people (26:3). Their offerings acknowledge that God has fulfilled the promise to Abraham. God has demonstrated faithfulness and displayed graciousness to God’s people. Therefore, the people bring God the offering of the first and the best of their harvest and place it in a basket in the place God sets aside for worship. The basket of produce sitting by the altar will be a witness to God’s faithfulness to them.

Retelling the Story

Deuteronomy 26:4-9

Another important part of Israel’s response to God is to retell the story of God’s providential care. On many occasions, the Hebrew leader will recount this narrative. For example, the book of Deuteronomy itself contains three major speeches in which Moses reminds the people of God’s guidance and provision. In this text, however, Moses describes an occasion in which the people themselves will retell the story. Apparently, this will occur in a worship setting. The priest will take the basket containing the first fruits from the land, and will set it down before the altar of God (26:4). At that point, the people will retell the story of God’s guidance as a part of a religious credo or confession of faith.

Who do the people have in mind when they mention “a wandering Aramean” who was their ancestor (26:5)? Some connect this reference to Abraham, the father of their faith. However, the context suggests that this confession of faith has Jacob in mind. If Jacob is intended in this worship credo, why does it refer to him as an “Aramean”? The Bible identifies Rebekah, Isaac’s wife and Jacob’s mother, as an Aramean (Gen 25:20), and Jacob marries Rachel, whose father is identified as an Aramean (Gen 28:5). Thus, Jacob connects with the Arameans through marriage. Perhaps that family connection is the basis for calling Jacob an Aramean. Or maybe the term simply places the patriarchal origins in the area

from which the Arameans come. The word translated “wandering” can denote either a person who moves around or a person who is in danger of perishing. This reference best fits Jacob, for he flees from his brother who wants to kill him. This worship credo begins by focusing on Jacob.

The second part of the narrative focuses on Joseph’s successful rise to power in Egypt and his invitation to his father Jacob to bring his people to Egypt to live there as resident aliens (26:5). We read about this part of the story in Genesis 46–49. Sold as a slave by his brothers, Joseph ends up in Egypt, where a series of events bring about his reunion with his brothers and his father. When Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams, Pharaoh rewards Joseph by appointing him as second in command in Egypt (Gen 41:45). When his brothers come to Egypt to seek relief from the drought in their land, Joseph gives them supplies and eventually reveals his identity, inviting his family to settle in Egypt. Thus, as the worship credo in our text puts it, Jacob “went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien” (26:5). Jacob’s family is small at that point. Exodus 1:5 suggests that Jacob’s entourage includes only seventy people when they arrive in Egypt. But, according to Exodus 1:7, Jacob’s people “multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”

Here, the story changes from one of success and comfort to one of oppression and conflict (26:6). We read about this part of the story in Exodus 1:8-22. The rise of a new Egyptian pharaoh “who did not know Joseph” (Ex 1:8) marks the transition. No longer do the Hebrews enjoy their privileged position as resident aliens. Now, they suffer oppression as slaves. Notice the heaviness of the words in our text that describe the Hebrews’ condition during this time: “affliction,” “toil,” and “oppression” (26:7). This is a miserable, depressing time for the Hebrew people. The Bible says of the Egyptians, “They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them” (Ex 1:14).

The story transitions again as the people cry out to God for help and God sends Moses as their deliverer (26:7-8). Even though Moses plays a central role in this deliverance, the religious credo focuses on God’s intervention, not on the human servant who implements it. It is not Moses but “the LORD” who “brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” and “with signs and wonders” (26:8). The Bible employs several chapters to tell the story of God’s mighty deliverance of the Hebrews (Ex 4–15).

The final segment of the story focuses on the present moment our text describes. God brought us to “this place,” the worship credo declares, and to “this land” (26:9). Notice that this confession of faith makes no reference to the

events at Mount Sinai. Perhaps this credo focuses on what God has done for the Hebrew people up to this point as they gather at the threshold of the promised land, while the law given at Mount Sinai describes how their lives will be governed after the people enter the promised land. If this is the case, then the credo may omit the giving of the law because it becomes applicable after the people enter the land. Nevertheless, the credo affirms that God has brought the people to their promised land, “a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Celebrating the Guidance

Deuteronomy 26:10-11

Now that they stand at the threshold of the promised land, Moses exhorts the people to revel in the story of God’s guidance. The phrase “before the LORD” suggests that they are to do this as a part of worship. Moses suggests three specific ways in which the people can do that. First, they revel in God’s guidance by giving their offering to God (26:10). By presenting an offering to God, in this instance the first fruits of their produce, they give tangible expression to their gratitude.

They also revel in God’s guidance by worshiping God (26:10). The word translated “bow down before” in our text means to worship. This verb usually describes a context in which inferiors prostrate themselves before superiors, as David does before King Saul (1 Sam 24:8), or where human beings prostrate themselves before a deity (2 Kings 19:37). The latter is the action described in our text. Remembering God’s guidance causes the worshipers to prostrate themselves before God.

Finally, they revel in God’s guidance by celebrating (26:11). This verse reflects a joyous note in the worship of God that we see in other places (Deut 12:7, 12, 18). In another verse, the Bible instructs God’s people to “Rejoice before the LORD your God . . . at the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name” (Deut 16:11). As the Hebrew people stand at the threshold of their promised land, they have much to celebrate. Moses encourages them to reflect that celebrative mood in their worship.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from the experience described in our text? First, the story in our text tells us something about God. God’s promises had not come to fulfillment up to this time, not because of any unfaithfulness on God’s part, but because of unfaithfulness on the people’s part. When the people trust God and

move in obedience to God, that is, when they move from unfaithfulness to faith, God fulfills the promise to them. Years later, Joshua will say, “Not one of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (Josh 21:45).

The story in our text also tells us something about suffering. The years of Egyptian bondage are a terrible time in Hebrew history. Yet God uses that time to mold the people into what God wants them to be. In 1 Kings 8:51, the biblical writer refers to this time in Egypt as “the iron-smelter.” Suffering and trial are often God’s tools for shaping the lives of God’s people, though at the time they may not understand it.

Finally, the story in our text tells us something about worship. We sometimes allow worship to become a dull ritual in which we just go through the motions but experience no sense of God’s greatness and express no sense of our gratitude. Our text describes a different kind of worship—one that draws from us our offering, our submission, and our celebration. I love the way the psalmist describes this kind of worship: “But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, ‘Great is the LORD!’” (Ps 40:16).

Celebrate God's Promises

March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

On March 11, 1942, American General Douglas MacArthur left the Philippine island of Corregidor as he fled from the invading Japanese army. He and the troops who escaped with him traveled through stormy seas patrolled by the Japanese and reached Mindanao two days later. At a news conference, he issued a promise to the citizens of the Philippines: "I shall return." On October 20, 1944, that same General MacArthur waded ashore on the Philippine island of Leyte and announced, "People of the Philippines, I have returned!" This was one of the great promises in American military history that was made and fulfilled.

The story in our text from Genesis also relates to promises, in this instance promises God makes to Abraham. Abraham lives in "Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen 11:28), a place located just northwest of the Persian Gulf in today's Iraq, when God presents him with both a challenge and some promises. God challenges Abraham to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1). Along with this challenge, God issues some promises (Gen 12:2). Among these promises, God tells Abraham that he will be the head of an expansive nation and that God will give this nation a land. Our text for this lesson focuses on these two promises.

The Promise of an Heir

Genesis 15:1-6

Our text opens with the transition phrase, "After these things" (15:1). "These things" include Abraham's conflict with Lot (Gen 13), his rescue of Lot from an alliance of kings who seized Lot and his belongings (Gen 14:14-16), and the strange encounter with Melchizedek (Gen 14:17-21). Add to these things the passing of time without an heir being born through whom God's promises can be fulfilled. Consequently, in Genesis 15, Abraham's mood seems to be a combination of perplexity and despair.

God offers a word of encouragement. "Do not be afraid," God tells him (15:1). Then God assures Abraham that he need not be afraid because of who God is and because of what God will do. God tells Abraham, "I am your shield," an image suggesting God's protection. God further assures Abraham by reminding him of what God will do. God will fulfill the promises to Abraham of

a great nation and a special land, assuring Abraham that his “reward shall be very great.”

The fact that God has not yet given Abraham an heir prompts him to complain that the heir of his house is going to be “Eliezer of Damascus” (15:2-3). According to the customs of the day, if Abraham produces no heirs, Eliezer, Abraham’s chief steward, stands to inherit Abraham’s wealth and possessions when Abraham dies. God quickly dismisses this suggestion, assuring Abraham that his heir will not be a servant but a son (15:4). God uses a different image in repeating the promise of multiple descendants. God previously informed Abraham that his descendants would be as incalculable as the grains of sand on the earth (Gen 13:16). Now, God assures Abraham that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars (15:5). God tries to sweep away Abraham’s concerns with the assurance that the covenant promise is still in effect and that it will be fulfilled.

Yet notice that God gives Abraham no tangible evidence to support this promise. Abraham is still childless, and he still does not possess the land. All God offers as assurance at this point is God’s word. How will Abraham respond? The biblical writer captures Abraham’s response in one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. The Bible says this about Abraham: “And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6).

Why is this verse so important? To begin with, it reveals the depth of Abraham’s faith. In response to God’s promise, the Bible says he “believed.” Abraham’s belief does not come from a persuasive presentation by God or from a newly discovered moral strength within himself. Rather, Abraham’s belief is rooted in his understanding of who God is. With no further proof that God will fulfill God’s promises to him, Abraham nevertheless trusts what God says.

This verse is also important because it provides an important text for the New Testament understanding of salvation by faith. On three occasions, the New Testament writers quote this verse to support the idea of salvation by faith (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23). The concept of righteousness reckoned to us through faith in God’s promise for the future is the heart of the gospel message. Paul articulates this connection in Romans 4:23-24: “Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” We can understand why the New Testament writers love this verse. Abraham, the father of Israel, gives indisputable evidence to the validity of the “salvation by faith” principle at the heart of the gospel.

The Promise of the Land

Genesis 15:7-8

God has assured Abraham that God will fulfill the promise of an heir produced through Sarah and him. God now assures Abraham concerning the promise of land (15:7). The idea that God set aside a special land for the chosen people stands at the heart of the Old Testament story. God's initial call to Abraham includes the promise of land (Gen 12:7). When Isaac blesses Jacob before he flees from the wrath of his brother Esau, Isaac prays that God might give to Jacob "the blessing of Abraham" which includes the right to "take possession of the land where you now live as an alien—land that God gave to Abraham" (Gen 28:4). God confirms this promise in the encounter with Jacob at Bethel when God says, "The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you" (Gen 35:12). Jacob transfers the promise of this land to his descendants in his final blessing on Joseph's two sons (Gen 48:4). When God calls Moses to deliver the people from their Egyptian bondage, God reminds Moses of this same promise: "I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Ex 6:8).

This raises two questions: the "where" question and the "why" question. Exactly where is the promised land? In Genesis 15:18, God defines this land as the territory "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." In the covenant renewal with Abraham in Genesis 17, God describes this promised land as "all the land of Canaan" (Gen 17:8). These descriptions are not precise. To the "why" question, though, we can suggest a more definitive answer. In Moses' second speech in the book of Deuteronomy, he reminds the Israelites, "It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Deut 9:5).

In God's appearance to Abraham in our text, God repeats the earlier promise to give Abraham many descendants and to give those descendants the promised land. Still, Abraham's uncertainty remains. He articulates his doubt in a question: "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" (15:8). God answers Abraham's question by confirming the covenant with him.

Making the Covenant

Genesis 15:9-12, 17-18

God instructs Abraham to bring three specific animals that are to be used in the sacrifice: a heifer, a goat, and a ram. In addition, God instructs him to bring two birds: a dove and a young pigeon (15:9). Our text does not include an order from God to cut the animals and lay them out the way Abraham does. We do not know if God's order implied this procedure or if Abraham simply adopted the procedure commonly followed in his day. In either case, Abraham cuts the three animals in half and lays them side by side with some space between them. He also places the birds, left uncut, on the ground (15:10), and he defends these carcasses from birds of prey that try to snatch them away (15:11).

Having prepared for the ceremony as God instructed him to do, Abraham now falls into a deep sleep (15:12). In a dream, God reveals to Abraham that his descendants will go through some dark days. For 400 years they will languish in captivity in a foreign land (15:13). Yet God promises to punish the nation that inflicts this oppression on Abraham's descendants and assures Abraham that this time of captivity will not destroy his descendants. Instead, they will come out of this time of captivity stronger and wealthier than they were when they went into it (15:14). In an aside, God informs Abraham that he himself will not have to go through this time of captivity. Instead, he will live peacefully to the end of his days when he will "be buried in a good old age" (15:15).

When Abraham wakes up, darkness has descended around him. At that point, "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch" pass between the animal pieces (15:17). Since covenants in this time were usually confirmed when both parties of the covenant walked between the sacrificed animals, perhaps the two elements mentioned in our text represent the two parties making the covenant: God and Abraham. The "flaming torch" probably represents God, since God's presence is often represented by fire (as in the fire in Moses' burning bush in Ex 3:2 and the pillar of fire that guides the Hebrews as they escape from Egypt in Ex 13:21). This may mean the "smoking fire pot" represents Abraham. Another possibility is that both the flaming torch and smoking fire pot represent God, in which case God passes through the animals but doesn't require Abraham to do so. This would demonstrate God's strong commitment to the covenant. Either way, God confirms the promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation that will spring from his descendants (15:18).

Conclusion

What lessons can we draw from this week's text? Our text presents Abraham as an example of faith. Even though God gives Abraham no tangible evidence that the promises will be fulfilled, and although at times Abraham becomes discouraged, he nevertheless continues to embrace God's call. As he continues to live by faith, Abraham becomes a central part of God's unfolding plan of righteousness. As Genesis 15:6 puts it, "he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Our text also demonstrates the patience of God. This is the third time God comes to Abraham to remind him of his part in God's unfolding plan of redemption. On two earlier occasions, God informed Abraham of his important role. On two earlier occasions, God assured Abraham that this promise would pass down through him to his offspring. Yet God does not condemn Abraham for his continuing doubt. Instead, God continues to patiently bring him along, demonstrating the mercy that characterizes God's relationship with humanity.

Finally, our text reminds us that the God of the Bible is a covenant-making God. God does not remain aloof from humanity but rather repeatedly connects with us in covenant agreements in which we play a part in the unfolding plan of redemption. God makes a covenant through Abraham and later will make covenants through Moses and David. Finally, God will make a new covenant through Jesus Christ. God does not leave us to make our own way but instead draws us into God's plans and allows us to be active participants.

Celebrate God's Ways

March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-9

The book that bears the name of Isaiah represents the Old Testament prophetic tradition at its best. The New Testament writers underscore the prominence of the Isaiah scroll by quoting more often from it than from any other prophetic writing. If we want to understand the ways of the prophets, we need only focus on the book of Isaiah.

However, as we study the book of Isaiah, we realize that it does not reflect Isaiah's ways as much as it highlights the ways of God. On the one hand, we clearly see God's judgment against the covenant people because they have turned from God. This judgment message dominates the first thirty-nine chapters of the book, which most interpreters believe come from Isaiah of Jerusalem, who was active in the second half of the eighth century BC. On the other hand, we recognize God's mercy that leads God to invite the people to return to God and once more experience the blessings of the covenant. This theme dominates the final twenty-seven chapters of the book, which most interpreters believe come from prophets continuing Isaiah's tradition during and after the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC.

We see both aspects of God juxtaposed in our text for this lesson. For the Israelites who have been exiled to Babylon because of God's judgment, a historical cataclysm now provides the opportunity to experience God's mercy. The leader of the Persian nation that defeated Babylon in 539 BC offers the exiles the opportunity to go home. This is not an easy decision for the exiles. To leave the comfort of their homes and the structure of their lives they had established in this foreign land involves risk and uncertainty. Yet God reminds the exiles that their place in God's unfolding plan for the redemption of humanity is the issue, not their comfort.

Our text reflects on God's ways as God offers Israel an invitation that is both a promise and an appeal.

The Invitation

Isaiah 55:1-3a

God's word to the exiles starts with an invitation to enjoy water, wine, and milk (55:1). Perhaps for the prophet these three elements represent the basic physical

necessities of life that God will provide in abundance when the exiles return to their own land. More likely, the prophet uses these elements to symbolize the spiritual sustenance that will be available to the returning exiles. The prophet contrasts this spiritual nourishment with the physical nourishment available to the Israelites in their Babylonian exile at two points.

To begin with, this spiritual sustenance from God is free, in contrast to the cost of the material sustenance available to them in their land of exile (55:1). Water was a precious commodity in the ancient world, often sold on the streets to those who had sufficient resources to purchase it. In contrast, God's spiritual provision is free and abundant. All who thirst may drink of this spiritual resource even if they have no money.

In addition, this spiritual sustenance from God brings fulfillment in contrast to the material sustenance they purchase in Babylon that "does not satisfy" (55:2). When the prophet compares the satisfaction of their creature comforts in Babylon with the satisfaction of their relationship with the covenant God, he concludes that God alone can satisfy the deepest needs of their lives. If the exiles remain in Babylon, they will continue to spend their wages for something that does not satisfy. On the other hand, if they return to their homeland and renew their covenant with God, they will discover an abundant supply of spiritual commodities that bring genuine satisfaction.

So the exiles must decide. Staying in Babylon has some appeal for them. They will not have to pull up roots. They will not have to make a long journey. They will not have to adjust to living in their old homeland. Yet remaining in Babylon means they will miss out on "what is good" (55:2), and they will be excluded from the "everlasting covenant" God made with the people of Israel (55:3).

Note the irony of God's covenant with Israel. God invites them into an eternal covenant based on God's unconditional love that confronts them with requirements they must fulfill to remain in that covenant. Unconditional and yet conditional—such are the dimensions of God's inscrutable relationship with Israel. God wants the exiles to return home and rebuild the nation so they can enjoy the fullness of God's blessings. Yet getting in on this benefit and participating in God's "everlasting covenant" requires a deliberate, personal decision on the part of the exiles.

The Promise

Isaiah 55:3b-5

The prophet connects this “everlasting covenant” not with Abraham, with whom God initiated the covenant with Israel, but with David (55:3b). God’s covenant with Israel begins with Abraham when God promises to make his name great and to use him to bring blessings to the nations of the world (Gen 12:1-3). God renews this covenant with Israel at different points in their history (see Deut 29 and Josh 24 as examples). Eventually, God makes a covenant with David. This is not a new covenant but a confirmation of the earlier Abrahamic covenant. About David, God promises, “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:13). The prophet has this promise to David in mind when he mentions God’s “steadfast, sure love for David” (55:3). The Old Testament connects God’s promise of an eternal throne for David with an individual to whom the prophet Jeremiah refers as “a righteous Branch” who will “spring up for David” and who “shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (33:15).

When he identifies someone whom God made “a witness to the peoples” (55:4), does the prophet in our text have in mind this “righteous Branch” who will come as the world’s Messiah to complete God’s plan of redemption, or does he have in mind David himself? If the former, the prophet points to the future Messiah who will reveal God’s redemptive plan. The return of the exiles to their land will provide the way for the eventual arrival of this Messiah who will bring to fruition God’s covenant promises to Israel. If the latter, the prophet points back to David who witnessed to God’s redemptive plan by his leadership over Israel. The return of the exiles to their land will echo David’s earlier witness concerning the power and purpose of Israel’s covenant God. In either case, Israel’s positive response to God’s invitation to return to their land will facilitate Israel’s further participation in God’s work of redemption.

However, the prophet reveals that Israel’s participation in God’s unfolding plan of redemption is not the most important result of their positive response to God’s invitation (55:5). At stake is God’s plan for the redemption of all humanity, a plan God embedded in the original covenant with Abraham when God promised to bless through Israel all the nations of the world (Gen 12:3). The prophet reminds the exiles that this is still God’s plan. The universal note of God’s redemptive plan constantly stretches Israel’s understanding and challenges Israel’s biases. Consequently, God repeatedly reminds Israel of this universal dimension of God’s plan. The prophet supplies another such reminder in verse 5. God cares not just for Israel, but also for all of creation, and not just for the

chosen nation, but for all the nations. Israel's faithfulness to God's covenant will bring blessings both to Israel and to other nations.

The Appeal

Isaiah 55:6-9

This opportunity for Israel to be a part of God's plan to bless all the nations of the world prompts the prophet's appeal in the final part of our text. We can understand the prophet's appeal in Isaiah 55:6 in two ways. On the one hand, it can be a warning for the exiles who see the opportunity to return to their homeland as an open-ended invitation. They might say to the prophet, "We are thankful for the opportunity, but we are not yet ready to make the decision. Later, at a more convenient time, we might consider God's invitation." To such presumption, the prophet offers this warning: they might not have a next time. This might be the last time God draws near, the last time God provides an opportunity for them to return home and renew the covenant. Consequently, the prophet shrouds his appeal with this note of urgency: "Seek th LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near" (55:6). The prophet warns the exiles not to presume upon God's graciousness.

On the other hand, the prophet's appeal can be an encouragement to the exiles who fear they have already missed their chance, assuming their previous sins against God have disqualified them from the covenant. They might say to the prophet, "It is too late for us to come back to God. We have so blatantly and continually sinned against God that we cannot turn back to him now." To such resignation, the prophet offers this word of encouragement: it is never too late to turn back to God. Despite their past sins, God invites the exiles to return to God and to reconnect with God's redemptive plan for the world. Consequently, the prophet offers yet another opportunity for them to "seek the LORD" and to "call upon him" (55:6). The prophet urges the exiles not to give in to their despair.

To both groups—those who presume upon God and those who misunderstand God—the prophet identifies the pathway to renewal: turning from and turning to. The first step is to turn from "their way" and "their thoughts" (55:7). The prophet mentions their thoughts because these thoughts provide the seedbed out of which actions come. He mentions their actions ("their way") because their actions reflect what is in their hearts. The second step is to "return to the LORD" (55:7). Why does God continually overlook Israel's sin and give them another chance to repent? Why does God remove the people from their land by exiling them to Babylon and then offer them an opportunity to go back home? In the

closing verses of our text, the prophet concludes that God's ways are different from our ways (55:8) and that God's ways are better than our ways (55:9). Sometimes we cannot understand the ways of God. We simply must accept them.

Conclusion

What can we learn from our lesson text concerning the ways of God? The prophet reminds us that God's ways are different from ours. Few of us have the patience for others that God shows to us. Even in our most generous moments, we often follow the proverbial "three strikes and you're out" approach. Yet God comes to us again and again with the offer of forgiveness. The psalmist reminds us that God "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps 103:10). Thank God for that.

The prophet also reminds us that what God provides is greater than what the world offers. He reminds the exiles that God's spiritual gifts are free and that they bring fulfillment to our lives. Yet we so often continue to "spend...money for that which is not bread" and "labor for that which does not satisfy" (Isa 55:2) instead of opening ourselves to the bountiful resources that God offers. Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians of God's bountiful resources when he declares that God "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20).

Finally, the prophet reminds us that God's ways are inscrutable. No matter how perceptive we are, we cannot fully comprehend the ways and actions of God. The prophet affirms this truth about God in the final words of our text: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:9).

Celebrate God's Provision

March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:1-12

Sportswriters call the 2016 Baseball World Series a classic for several reasons. To begin with, the two teams playing in the series, the Chicago Cubs and the Cleveland Indians, had the longest World Series title droughts in professional baseball. Cleveland had not won a World Series since 1948 and Chicago had not won one since 1908. In addition, the Cubs came back from a 3–1 deficit to win the series, only the sixth team to accomplish such a comeback in World Series history. Further, in the deciding seventh game, with each team having won three victories, the game went to extra innings. Then, to add another note of drama, with the game tied at 6–6 after the regulation nine innings, a cloud burst unleashed a rain storm that led to a 17-minute delay before the game could continue and a winner could be decided. Finally, in the tenth inning, the Chicago Cubs won the game that gave them the championship. A few days later, more than five million people packed the streets of Chicago to celebrate with their beloved Cubs baseball team. After waiting for 108 years, the people of Chicago were finally able to celebrate.

That same sense of delayed gratification marks the story in our text. When Moses leads the Hebrew captives out of Egypt, they expectantly look forward to the possession of the promised land (Ex 14). To satisfy their hunger, God sends manna from heaven (Ex 16). To quench their thirst, God brings water out of a rock (Ex 17:1-7). When enemy nations attack them, God quickly defuses the threat (Ex 17:8-16). Apparently, nothing can stop the Hebrews from successfully taking possession of their land. But when they arrive at the Jordan River and prepare to cross over, everything changes (Num 13). As the spies sent to scout the land report the presence of giants and numbers of enemies too great for them to overcome, the people's courage melts, and they refuse to enter the land (Num 13:25–14:12). In response, God announces, "Not one of these—not one of this evil generation—shall see the good land that I swore to give your ancestors" (Deut 1:35). For forty years, the Hebrews wander in the wilderness as that generation dies (Num 14:33). Finally, after Moses dies, God anoints Joshua to finally lead the Hebrew people into the land of promise (Josh 1:1-3). God parts the Jordan River so the people can cross over on dry land (Josh 3). After the people arrive at Gilgal, they build an altar of stones to remember God's

provision (Josh 4). Our text describes the Hebrew people's celebration after forty long years of waiting.

Reputation

Joshua 5:1

The events I described above did not happen in a vacuum. The nations surrounding the land God promised to the Hebrew people and those occupying that land took notice of the massive invasion of Semitic people who arrived from the south. The biblical writer refers to "the Amorites" and "the Canaanites" as representatives of the seven different nations that occupied the land God promised to Israel: the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Deut 7:1). Earlier, the Hebrews encountered two Amorite kings on the east side of the Jordan and defeated them and took possession of their land (Num 21:21-35). The Hebrews were equally successful as they confronted the Amorites on the west side of the Jordan. The land west of the Jordan was known as Canaan, and the people who reside there were called Canaanites. They occupied most of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, the land later known as Palestine. The people organized around major cities, with little effort to form a coalition with the other cities to present a common defense. This aided the Hebrews as they took possession of the land west of the Jordan.

The biblical writer, however, is not interested in providing information about these people who occupy the land. Instead, the writer focuses on their response to the success of the Hebrews under the leadership of their God (5:1). God's miraculous act at the Jordan River that allows the people to cross over on dry land especially impresses them. When the Amorites and Canaanites hear what the Hebrew God has done, the biblical writer tells us that "their hearts melted, and there was no longer any spirit in them" (5:1). Since the Jordan overflows during the time of harvest (Josh 3:15), the Amorites and Canaanites probably think that the swollen river will present an insurmountable defense against the invading Hebrews, at least for a while. The report that the Hebrews easily cross the river because of the intervention of their God paralyzes these nations with awe at the power of God.

To say the people who reside in the promised land no longer have any spirit in them does not suggest that they will simply roll over and play dead as these invading Hebrews try to take possession of their land. The book of Joshua describes a long and drawn-out process, suggesting a gradual and piecemeal

conquest of the land. Joshua 13:1 makes this point: “Now Joshua was old and advanced in years; and the LORD said to him, ‘You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land still remains to be possessed.’” Even at Joshua’s death, much of the land remains in the hands of the original occupants of the land. Yet the biblical writer indicates that at the very beginning of the conquest, the reputation of Israel’s God generates fear and trembling among those who dwell in the land.

Identification

Joshua 5:2-9

Before the Hebrew people possess the land, God instructs them to identify themselves as his people by reinstating a practice they have apparently neglected during the forty years in the wilderness: the circumcision of all males (5:2-3). God institutes the practice of circumcision when he renews his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. After repeating the promises he made earlier, God instructs Abraham to circumcise every male as “a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gen 17:11). The Hebrews continued this practice while they were in Egyptian captivity (Josh 5:5), but for some reason not explained in the text, they discontinued the practice while they wandered in the wilderness (5:4-6). Perhaps they abstained from circumcision during the wilderness years because they believed God’s covenant with them had been temporarily discontinued.

What does circumcision mean for the Hebrew people? Circumcision provides an outward sign of their inward commitment to God. It serves as a mark of identity. By the practice of circumcision, the Hebrews acknowledge that they are part of the covenant people of God. Returning to the practice of circumcision at this point indicates that the Hebrew people have turned from their earlier pattern of disobedience (5:7-8). As God expresses this truth in our text, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt” (5:9). The abstention from the practice of circumcision indicated a failure to adhere to the requirements of the covenant. The resumption of the practice acknowledges the restoration of the covenant between God and Israel.

What is the significance of “Gilgal” (5:9)? A place called Gilgal plays a significant role in the subsequent history of Israel. Ehud, one of the judges of Israel, passes through Gilgal on his way to slay the king of Moab (Judg 3:19). Gilgal provides one of the locations for Samuel’s circuit court (1 Sam 7:16). David passes through Gilgal while returning to Jerusalem to resume the throne after Absalom’s rebellion (2 Sam 19:15, 40). Elijah ascends to heaven from

Gilgal (2 Kings 2:1), and Elisha establishes his headquarters at Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38). Yet we do not know if all these references are connected with the location introduced in our text. More likely, the Hebrews adapted this name, which means “circle” and refers to a circular altar, for several different locations. The Gilgal in our text is significant because the Hebrews establish an altar here and because Joshua will use it as the base for his military operations (Josh 9:6; 10:6; 14:6).

Celebration

Joshua 5:10-12

After the men recover from the circumcision procedure, the people celebrate the Passover (5:10-11). The Passover acknowledges God’s mercy in sparing the Hebrew children when the death angel passed over the city during the final plague before Pharaoh released the Hebrews from their Egyptian captivity (Ex 12). In the first Passover celebration, each family selected and sacrificed a lamb. They took some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts of their house. Then they ate the lamb along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. After that, the angel of the Lord struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, including human beings and animals. Because of the blood on their houses, the angel of the Lord passed over the houses of the Hebrews. At that time, God instructed the Hebrews to celebrate the Passover every year “as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children” (Ex 12:24). Numbers 9 describes a celebration of Passover at Mt. Sinai, but we see no other reference to the Passover during the Hebrews’ forty years of wilderness wandering. Now that they arrive at the promised land, they reinstitute the celebration. The celebration of Passover acknowledges that they are God’s covenant people and affirms again God’s merciful provision for them.

The arrival of the Hebrews in the promised land also changes the way in which God provides nourishment for his people. From the time the Hebrews escape from Egypt to the time they arrive in the promised land, God provides nourishment for them by sending manna from heaven. Exodus 16:35 tells us, “The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.” Our text confirms that statement by revealing that “the manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land” (5:12). As they wandered in the wilderness, they had no way to produce their own food, so God provided for them. Now that they have arrived in the promised land, they will produce their own food. This marks the

beginning of a new experience for the Hebrew people. They have left the wilderness, and they have entered the promised land.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from the experience described in our text? This story reminds us, first, of the awesome power of God. When John describes the miracles of Jesus in his Gospel, he refers to them as signs. That is, these miracles served as signs pointing to the power and purpose of Jesus. In the same way, the mighty acts of God in Hebrew history serve as signs that point to the unparalleled power of the covenant God of Israel.

This story also reminds us of the importance of marking ourselves as children of God. For the Hebrews, circumcision became the mark that signaled their connection with the covenant God. How do we mark ourselves as followers of Jesus? What is the sign that identifies us as Christians? Jesus answered that question both with his own life and with his announcement to his disciples on the final night of his life. Jesus said, “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

Finally, this story reminds us of the need for celebration in the Christian life. God instituted the Passover as an annual time of celebration for his people that reminded them of who they are and of who God is. We must also incorporate times of celebration into our lives. Sunday worship is an opportunity for celebration. Easter is a time for celebration. We should also develop our own personal strategies for celebrating the love and mercy and guidance of God. Perhaps Paul had that in mind when he exhorted the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4).

Looking Toward the Cross

April 7, 2019

John 11:55–12:8

In the Gospels, we find different stories of a dinner during which a woman anoints Jesus with expensive perfume. These stories are found in Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, Luke 7:36-50, and John 12:1-8. The stories in Matthew and Mark are very similar. The story in both of these Gospels happens not long before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Both Mark and Matthew seem to describe the same dinner held in Bethany at the home of a man named “Simon the leper” where an unnamed woman anoints Jesus’ head. The story in Luke seems to occur earlier in Jesus’ ministry at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. Luke doesn’t say where Simon the Pharisee’s house is; the last place he has mentioned is Nain (see 7:11). In Luke’s account, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus’ feet. Our lesson focuses on John’s account, which shares some details with the versions in the three Synoptic Gospels, but differs significantly from them as well.

The Speculation about Jesus

John 11:55-57

John declares that “the Passover of the Jews was near” (11:55). This is the third Passover John mentions in his Gospel. He mentions one Passover early in Jesus’ ministry, even before the arrest of John the Baptist. Jesus goes to Jerusalem to celebrate this Passover. While there, according to John, he disrupts the commercial activities in the temple and has his nighttime meeting with Nicodemus (Jn 2:13–3:21). John mentions a second Passover during Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Jesus does not go to Jerusalem for this second Passover but continues his teaching in Galilee (Jn 6:4). Now, in our text for this lesson, John mentions a third Passover, when Jesus will again go to Jerusalem, this time not just to teach but also to embrace God’s plan through which he will bring about the redemption of the world.

In the Hebrew calendar, the first appearance of the new moon marks the beginning of the month of Nisan, in which the Jews celebrate the Passover meal each year. They select the Passover lamb on the tenth day of the month. Then, on the fourteenth day of Nisan, they kill the Passover lamb in preparation for the meal. Whenever possible, devout Jews from near and far journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. To prepare for the celebration, John tells us that they

“purify themselves” (11:55). Several ritual defilements can disqualify a Jew from participating in the Passover celebration. These pilgrims must therefore carry out the proper cleansing rituals to enable them to participate in the Passover meal. In some cases, this can take several days, hence their desire to get to Jerusalem early.

However, the Jewish pilgrims preparing for the Passover celebration in Jerusalem have another issue on their minds. Rumors about the activities of a religious teacher named Jesus and his clash with the religious leaders in Jerusalem have spread throughout the country. These pilgrims who come to Jerusalem for the Passover know of the threats directed at Jesus, and they wonder if the appeal of celebrating Passover in Jerusalem will nevertheless draw Jesus to the city despite the danger (11:56).

John reveals that the plans of the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus and put him to death are not empty rumors. The Pharisees have sought to silence Jesus for months, and now they are prepared to take more drastic steps to accomplish that by arresting and eventually putting him to death (Jn 11:47-53). To implement their plan, they order the people of the city to assist them in determining Jesus’ whereabouts (11:57). They will not have to wait long, nor will they have to initiate a search for him, for Jesus will come to Jerusalem to confront the very ones who want to put him to death.

The Anointing of Jesus

John 12:1-6

Before entering Jerusalem, Jesus stops in Bethany, “the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead” (12:1). The Gospel writers crafted their narratives for their own purposes in their own ways, so it is not necessary to try to harmonize the various accounts of a woman anointing Jesus while he is at a dinner party. We will do well to let John’s account stand on its own. But if we wish to harmonize the accounts, it is possible. The accounts in Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9 have the dinner occur in the home of Simon the Leper. John seems to imply that the dinner happens in the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. On the other hand, he does not explicitly say that the dinner occurs at Lazarus’s house. He says rather that Lazarus is one of those at the table, which could suggest that the dinner is in someone else’s home (12:2). Perhaps Mary and Martha are present, not because it is their home, but rather because they have been enlisted to serve the meal to the men who will recline at the table

(12:2). Either way, as we will see, only John has Mary the sister of Lazarus anoint Jesus' feet.

John identifies Lazarus as the one "whom he [Jesus] had raised from the dead" (12:1). This is not an offhand remark but an identification that provides extra significance to this gathering, for the raising of Lazarus has intensified the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. John affirms this in the passage immediately following our text (Jn 12:9-11). The crowds in Bethany and in Jerusalem have heard the story of Lazarus. Consequently, they not only want to see Jesus. They also want to see Lazarus, because Lazarus provides living proof of the miraculous power of Jesus. Therefore, if the religious leaders are to silence this growing allegiance to Jesus, they will have to remove both Lazarus and Jesus from the scene.

However, Lazarus is not the leading actor in the drama that unfolds at this dinner. He is only one of the participants. John instead focuses the spotlight on Mary, Lazarus's sister (12:3). Mary bursts onto the scene with an expression of spontaneous, lavish exuberance. Like every good storyteller, John does not explain everything. How many are at the dinner? Where does Mary get the expensive perfume? Why does she pour it on Jesus' feet? John answers none of those questions. What we do know is this: Mary takes a pound of very expensive perfume, which Judas values at three hundred denarii, and in a few seconds of extravagant adulation, she pours it all on the feet of Jesus. Five seconds later, nothing remains of that expensive perfume but an aroma lingering in the air.

But there is more to Mary's action (12:3). After pouring the expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, she lets down her hair, John tells us, something no decent woman would do in mixed company in the first-century world. After this, Mary uses her hair to wipe the oil off Jesus' feet. This action creates an embarrassing silence.

Judas breaks the silence with his protest of Mary's extravagance (12:4). He complains, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (12:5). We might at first glance applaud Judas's prudence about finances and his concern for the poor. After all, three hundred denarii equals the pay it takes a common laborer an entire year to earn (Mt 20:2, NASB). John quickly disabuses us of our praise for Judas by revealing his deeper motive. He discloses two facts about Judas (12:6). Judas handles the money for Jesus and the disciples (see also Jn 13:29), and Judas is "a thief." Prior to the betrayal itself, only John identifies these character flaws in Judas that will eventually inspire him to betray Jesus. In an earlier account in John's

Gospel, when many of Jesus' followers turn away from him and Jesus questions the disciples about their loyalty, Jesus says to the disciples, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil" (Jn 6:70). John explains that Jesus makes such an accusation of Judas because Judas will eventually betray him. In the story in our text, John identifies Judas's dishonesty and his love of money, traits that will motivate him to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:14-15).

The Response from Jesus

John 12:7-8

John closes the story with two responses from Jesus. To begin with, he defends Mary's action (12:7). "Leave her alone," he tells Judas. Then he explains her action by connecting it to his coming death. The point at issue is Jesus' symbolic anointing in preparation for his burial. In other words, the point of the story is to remind us that the cross looms over Jesus like a dark shadow. It is not a death that will prevent him from fulfilling his purpose for coming to the earth, but rather a death that will enable him to fulfill his purpose. It is ironic that Jesus even mentions his death at this point during the dinner. Anointing is usually a mark of festivity. Consequently, a remark concerning a burial is not what those reclining around the table expect to hear. Perhaps this indicates the degree to which Jesus' coming passion dominates his thinking at this point. The cross lays heavy on his mind. Therefore, what would have brought celebratory thoughts to his mind on another occasion causes Jesus to think of his death on this occasion. In pouring the oil on Jesus' feet, Mary demonstrates that she has more fully entered the mind of Jesus than anyone else in attendance at the supper, for she alone realizes his death is imminent.

We cannot so easily explain Jesus' other response, in which he remarks, "You always have the poor with you" (12:8). Does this mean Jesus has no concern for the poor? That is not Jesus' point with his statement. We can certify Jesus' concern for the poor in such passages as Mark 10:21 and Mark 12:42. Jesus does not dismiss the poor, but rather acknowledges the presence in every generation of people who cannot help themselves and who need to be helped by Christians. Perhaps we should concentrate on the second phrase instead of the first phrase in this final statement: "But you do not always have me" (12:8). Jesus does not at this unique point focus on the poor but on his coming death. Jesus warns the disciples that his death is imminent. They will only have him for a short while longer. Consequently, like Mary, they should prepare for his coming death.

Conclusion

What does this experience in the life of Jesus teach us about Christian living today? To begin with, Mary's action reminds us of the importance of spontaneous, lavish giving. We do everything in moderation today. Most of us are so afraid we are going to embarrass ourselves by an overly exuberant expression of our faith that we have squelched our passion for God completely. Twentieth-century Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood warned the church against practicing a "mild religion." How long has it been since we gave something, said something, tried to achieve something, or dreamed about something so spontaneous and so lavish that it left people shaking their heads?

Judas's action reminds us that things are not always what they seem to be. On the surface, Judas's protest reflects concern for the poor. He seems to be so pious and compassionate. However, this is not the true story. Judas does not care about the poor but about the purse. He is not concerned about helping the poor. He simply wants to protect his own financial position. Such false concern also exists in the church today.

Jesus' statement at the end of our text reminds us of the reality of priorities. No one can question Jesus' concern for the poor, nor can we legitimately interpret his closing statement as an excuse for not ministering to the needs of the poor. Yet we must often determine our attention and allocate our resources according to priorities. Mary recognizes that truth, and Jesus commends her for her proper perception.

Entering Jerusalem

April 14, 2019

Luke 19:28-40

Several years ago, a fire ignited in one of the oil wells in a field near Houston. Since the Houston fire department was too far away to offer help, the head of operations sent out a general call announcing that the first volunteer fire department to put out the fire would receive a generous bonus. In a nearby town, the volunteer chief sounded the alarm and the local volunteers came running. They jumped on their old fire truck and headed toward the oil field. When the truck approached the oil well that was on fire, it did not slow down but rushed past the workers and headed right into the fire, stopping only when the truck hit the equipment surrounding the oil rig. The four volunteers immediately jumped off the truck, and with their water and sand they soon had the fire under control. The head of operations approached them when the fire was out and said, “You guys are amazing. You came rushing down the hill and headed right into the fire without a moment of hesitation, totally disregarding the danger. What remarkable courage!” He pulled a check out of his pocket and handed it to one of the volunteers. “Here is a check for \$1,500,” he announced. Then he asked, “As a matter of curiosity, what do you guys plan to do with this bonus?” The head of the volunteers responded, “The first thing we’re going to do is get the brakes fixed on our fire engine!” Sometimes displays of courage are circumstantial and not genuine.

We can certainly not say that about Jesus. During the three and a half years of Jesus’ ministry, the opposition of some of the religious leaders expanded into a malignant hatred. They continually conspired to silence Jesus. We see this especially in John’s Gospel where the author repeatedly says that the religious leaders want to silence Jesus by killing him (5:18; 7:1, 19; 8:37). Jesus knows their desire to kill him, and he recognizes that Jerusalem is the center of their power. He knows, in fact, that if he goes to Jerusalem, his enemies will succeed in their plan. Nevertheless, Jesus courageously heads to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

Luke 19:28

Luke uses the “going to Jerusalem” motif as a connecting link for the material in the middle section of his Gospel. The journey begins in Luke 9:51 with the announcement, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face

to go to Jerusalem.” The journey continues in our text for this lesson, which opens with this declaration: “After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem” (19:28). It will not end until Jesus “entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there” (Lk 19:45). Occasionally, to make sure we have not forgotten that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, Luke reminds us of that fact (Lk 9:53; 13:22; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11).

Why the focus on Jerusalem? Since the time of David, when he made Jerusalem his capital and constructed his royal palace there, Jerusalem has served as the political capital of Israel. Since the time of Solomon, when he constructed the temple in Jerusalem and enlarged the city, Jerusalem has served as the religious center of Israel. When the writer of Revelation pictures God’s future redemption of the world through the promised Messiah, he describes “the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev 21:2). Jerusalem is also important because it is the location of Jesus’ death and his resurrection. We should not be surprised, then, that Luke uses this “going to Jerusalem” motif to set the stage for the climactic, final section of his Gospel where the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection unfolds. When the time has come for Jesus to die and be resurrected, he must get to Jerusalem. In our text for this lesson, Luke tells us about Jesus’ preparation to enter the city of Jerusalem, and then he describes the response of the people when he enters the city.

Preparing to Enter the City

Luke 19:29-35a

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus arrives at the Mount of Olives, “near Bethphage and Bethany,” two villages within a couple of miles of Jerusalem (19:29). At this point, Jesus selects two disciples to initiate his plan for entering Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark join Luke in describing this plan to send two disciples on an errand. None of them identify these two disciples, probably because their identification has no bearing on the story. Luke focuses instead on Jesus’ instructions to them. He tells them to go to one of the nearby villages. Only Matthew specifies that this village is Bethphage (Mt 21:1-2). Jesus instructs them to bring from the village “a colt that has never been ridden” (19:30). Again, Matthew gives more details by identifying this animal as a colt of a donkey (Mt 21:2), perhaps to identify Jesus with the messianic prophecy of Zechariah (9:9). The fact that this colt has never been ridden implies that God has reserved it for sacred use by Jesus.

This raises an interesting question: how does Jesus know the colt will be there? Scholars offer two suggestions. Some attribute Jesus' knowledge of the colt to human planning. Jesus has made a prearrangement with a friend in Bethphage that if he ever needs a colt, he can use one belonging to this friend. Others attribute Jesus' knowledge to divine intuition. As Jesus does on other occasions (Mt 17:27; Jn 2:24-25; 4:39), he discerns things that no one else can perceive. His knowledge supersedes human intuition. He is aided by divine perception.

Apparently, the two disciples Jesus enlists for the task have some qualms about their assignment. They are understandably concerned about what the owner of the colt will say when they walk up to the animal, untie it, and start walking away. So Jesus gives further instructions: "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it'" (19:31). With that word of assurance, the two disciples head for Bethphage to carry out their assignment.

No doubt the disciples still quiver with nervousness as they arrive at the village and spot the animal and begin to untie it from its post. Someone does confront them about taking the colt, just as they feared. They quickly repeat what Jesus tells them to say and consequently receive permission to take the animal (19:32-34). They return to Jesus with the colt, their assignment faithfully fulfilled (19:35a).

Entering the City

Luke 19:35b-40

At this point, the disciples throw their cloaks on the colt, place Jesus on the cloaks, and move toward Jerusalem (19:35b). Because this is the time for the Passover celebration, the roads leading into Jerusalem overflow with other pilgrims. As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the crowds of people along the road respond to Jesus and his entourage of disciples in two ways. First, the crowds spread their cloaks on the road (19:36). In 2 Kings 9:13, the people spread their cloaks on the road for Jehu to certify him as their king. The action of the people in our text suggests a similar intention. We might say they roll out the red carpet for Jesus.

They also shout something to Jesus as he enters the city (19:37-38). Luke summarizes their comments in Luke 19:38: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" These words come mostly from Psalm 118, a psalm of praise sung each year at the Passover celebration and one of the six psalms most quoted or referred to in the

New Testament (the others are Pss 2; 22; 69; 89; and 110). “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord” echoes the words of Psalm 118:26. The Jews considered this passage a reference to the promised Messiah. “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven” echoes the words of the angel announcing Jesus’ birth (Lk 2:14). Perhaps Luke suggests here that some people finally recognize the true purpose of Jesus announced by the angels at his birth.

The shouts and actions of the people indicate that they think of Jesus in messianic terms. It is obvious, however, as the story continues, that they misunderstand what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. They miss the clue of the animal Jesus rides into the city. He does not ride into Jerusalem on a high-spirited war steed but on an animal associated with the pursuit of peace. They also miss the clue of the prophecy associated with the Messiah riding on an animal of peace. In riding on the colt of a donkey, Jesus identifies with the prophecy of Zechariah, who speaks of the Messiah in terms of peace, meekness, and salvation (9:9).

Luke concludes his story of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem with a fascinating verbal skirmish between Jesus and a group of Pharisees who hear the crowd attribute to Jesus the exalted expectations that only the Messiah deserves (19:39-40). These Pharisees urge him to stop the crowd from attributing messianic proclamations to him. We do not know their intentions. Are they trying to protect Jesus because they are afraid of what will happen to him if he continues to present himself as the Messiah? Or are they trying to silence him because they regard his claims to be the Messiah as heretical? In either case, Jesus ignores their suggestion. He informs them that his mission cannot be stopped by human restrictions. Ultimately, all of nature will join in the chorus of approval as he fulfills God’s plan for the redemption of humankind.

Conclusion

What can we learn from this description of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem? This passage highlights the importance of timing in God’s unfolding plan. On earlier occasions, Jesus deliberately avoids Jerusalem, but on this occasion, he will not allow anything to prevent him from entering the city. On earlier occasions, he instructs those for whom he performs miracles not to tell others that he is the Messiah, but on this occasion, he reminds the Pharisees that nothing can silence the proclamation that he is the Messiah. Why this change? The answer is God’s timing. Jesus understands that God carries out his plans according to his own timing.

The lesson also reminds us of the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection in fulfilling God's plan. Beginning in Luke 9:51, we sense Jesus' urgency to reach Jerusalem, for it is there that he will fulfill the purpose for which God sent him to this earth. We should not overlook the importance of Jesus' teachings and his miracles. Yet we must never forget that Jesus' purpose for coming to earth was not just to teach or to heal but to die on the cross for the sins of the world.

In addition, this lesson provides insight into the kind of Messiah Jesus will be as he fulfills God's purpose for his life. Throughout Scripture, the horse is an animal of war, but the donkey is reflected as an animal of peace (Zech 9:9). In our text, Jesus mounts a donkey and rides it into Jerusalem. Jesus does not ride into Jerusalem on a donkey because he can find no other animal. He rides the donkey and identifies with the prophecy of Zechariah to communicate something about the nature of his kingship. God's plan for redeeming the world, Jesus reveals, is not coercion but persuasion. It will be achieved not by power but through suffering.

Leaving the Tomb Behind

April 21, 2019

Luke 24:1-12

They call him “the King of Rock and Roll.” Even though he died in 1977, he is still loved and honored throughout the world. His fans continue to celebrate his birthday each year. The Elvis channel on SiriusXM Radio plays his music twenty-four hours a day. Hundreds of thousands of people visit his grave each year in the Meditation Garden at Graceland Mansion in Memphis, Tennessee. His name is Elvis Presley.

The worshipers who greeted him as he entered the city of Jerusalem called him “the King of Israel” (Jn 12:13), and the writer of Revelation refers to him as “King of kings” (Rev 19:16). Even though he died 2,000 years ago, he is still loved and honored throughout the world. His followers continue to celebrate his birthday each year. Several channels on Sirius Radio play music that celebrates his life and legacy twenty-four hours a day. Hundreds of thousands of people visit his grave each year inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. His name is Jesus.

On a surface level, we can find several parallels between these two “kings.” Yet at least one remarkable difference distinguishes Jesus from every other personality in human history, including the King of Rock and Roll. Jesus’ tomb is empty. The angels moved the stone that sealed his tomb, not so people could go inside and see the body but so that they could go inside and see that the body was not there. In our text for this lesson, Luke describes this event in which Jesus leaves the tomb behind.

The Empty Tomb

Luke 24:1-3

All four Gospels acknowledge Jesus’ death on the cross. Matthew tells us, “Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last” (Mt 27:50), a statement Mark echoes (Mk 15:37). According to Luke, just before Jesus “breathed his last,” he cries out, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46). John relates a custom of that time in which the legs of those hanging on the cross were broken to hasten their death. However, John informs us, “When they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs” (Jn 19:33). Mark even tells us that Pilate sends a centurion to certify that Jesus is dead (Mk 15:44-45). So all four Gospels confirm Jesus’ death.

All four Gospels also describe Jesus' burial. They concur that a man named Joseph of Arimathea receives permission from Pilate to bury Jesus' dead body (Mt 27:57-58; Mk 15:43; Lk 23:50-52; Jn 19:38). All four Gospels concur that Joseph places Jesus' body in a tomb hewn out of rock. Luke says that this is a "tomb where no one had ever been laid" (Lk 23:53). Mark adds that after putting Jesus' body in this tomb, Joseph of Arimathea rolls "a stone against the door of the tomb" (Mk 15:46). So Joseph, with the aid of Nicodemus (according to Jn 19:39), places Jesus' body in the tomb. They block the entrance with a large stone and, according to Matthew, to make sure Jesus' body stays in the tomb, Pilate assigns a group of Roman soldiers to stand guard. The soldiers add to the certainty that Jesus' body will remain in the grave by "sealing the stone" (Mt 27:66).

These affirmations of Jesus' death and these explanations of the process by which Joseph buries Jesus provide the context for our text in this week's lesson. As dawn breaks on Sunday morning, "the first day of the week" (24:1), a group of women approach the tomb where Joseph placed Jesus' body. They know where to go because they followed Joseph as he took Jesus' body to the tomb. Luke tells us, "They saw the tomb and how his body was laid" (Lk 23:55).

They carry spices to anoint the body and to properly mourn the death of their friend. They expect to see a dead body placed in a tomb sealed by a stone, the scene they witnessed on Friday. Mark, ever the practical narrator, tells us that on the way to the tomb, the women anxiously wonder how they can move the stone and get into the tomb to anoint Jesus' body (Mk 16:3).

When they arrive at the tomb, they witness an amazing scene. The stone has been rolled away from the entrance (24:2). Luke never explains what causes this phenomenon, nor does he refer to the Roman soldiers that Matthew mentions in his account. He just tells us that the women enter the tomb, still expecting to find Jesus' body for them to anoint.

Then, another startling development confronts them. Jesus' body is not in the tomb (24:3). Scholars have debated the question that undoubtedly immediately comes to mind: what happened to the body? The first Christians need no other explanation for the empty tomb than the one proclaimed by the New Testament preachers. Paul expresses the essence of this understanding in his sermon in Antioch of Pisidia: "When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead" (Acts 13:29-30). Joseph places Jesus' dead body in the tomb,

but on the third day, God raises Jesus from the grave, leaving behind an empty tomb.

The Heavenly Visitors

Luke 24:4-8

Even though Jesus' body is missing, the women quickly discover they are not alone. "Two men in dazzling clothes" appear in the tomb with them (24:4). Luke refers to them as "men" because they have human features. However, the women recognize them as heavenly figures because of the brilliance of their clothing.

The empty tomb and the appearance of these heavenly messengers evoke two responses from the women. First, Luke tells us that they are "perplexed" about the empty tomb (24:4). The word translated "perplexed" carries the meaning of uncertainty. They cannot wrap their minds around the incongruity between what they saw on Friday and what they see now. In response to the two heavenly messengers in the dazzling clothes, Luke tells us the women are "terrified" (24:5). The word translated "terrified" is the word from which our word "phobia" comes, and it suggests shock or alarm that causes one to tremble. The women's perplexity and terror cause them to fall on their faces before these two heavenly messengers.

The messengers' words evoke a sense of excitement in the women, for they announce that Jesus is not dead but alive. Consequently, the women will not find Jesus in the graveyard among the dead. Instead, they will find him among the living. The heavenly messengers leave no room to speculate that someone has stolen the body or that Jesus has been miraculously revived from near death. Instead, the angels boldly declare that he "has risen" (24:5).

These messengers remind the women of Jesus' earlier prediction of his death and resurrection during his ministry in Galilee (24:6-7). The messengers then quote what Jesus said earlier to the disciples (Lk 9:22, 44; 18:32-33). Apparently, because this was such a radical promise, the words did not sink in at that time. However, the reminder of Jesus' promise at this point sparks the memory of his earlier predictions. Luke says about the women, "Then they remembered his words" (24:8). Like the two disciples on the Emmaus road for whom the truth of Jesus' words finally breaks through (Lk 24:31-32), these women finally grasp the full meaning of Jesus' earlier promise. Luke does not say the women remember being told of Jesus' words but that they remember his words, affirming that they were there when Jesus spoke them. Since these were

intimate words Jesus shared only with his closest group of followers, the women were in the inner circle of Jesus' followers.

The Women's Report

Luke 24:9-12

What the women witnessed at the tomb, they now share with the disciples (24:9). Again, Luke seems to magnify the importance of the women. In Luke's account, they are not ordered to report to the disciples. Instead, on their own initiative, they seek out the other disciples and share with them the marvelous revelation given at the empty tomb. Luke hints at a larger group of followers than just the eleven disciples. He tells us that the women report the resurrection of Jesus "to the eleven and to all the rest" (24:9).

Who are these women? Luke mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James (24:10). Jesus touches each of these women in a significant way. Jesus heals Mary Magdalene, after which she follows him and supports him all the way to what seems to be the bitter end. As a reward for her faithfulness, Jesus gives Mary the privilege of seeing for herself and sharing with the other disciples the good news of the resurrection. Joanna is the wife of Herod's servant Chuza (Lk 8:3). Jesus heals her of some undisclosed physical ailment. She not only becomes a follower of Jesus but also supports him out of her private means. Mary is the mother of James, the son of Alphaeus (Lk 6:15), one of the disciples. According to Mark 15:40-41, she also stands near the cross when Jesus dies. She apparently connects with Jesus through her son. That we do not know the names of all the women at the tomb becomes clear from Luke's summary phrase: "and the other women with them" (24:10).

How do the disciples respond to the women's report that Jesus has risen from the grave? They respond with an understandable degree of skepticism (24:11). Apparently, unlike the women, they do not immediately remember Jesus' promise. Unlike the women, they do not instantly accept the words of the divine messengers. Peter, as he often does, takes the initiative in investigating the women's claims (24:12). He goes to the tomb. Uninterrupted by divine messengers, Peter has time to investigate more closely the evidence left in the tomb. He sees the strips of linen with which the body of Jesus was wrapped, but he finds no body. After Peter's investigation of the empty tomb, Luke tells us that Peter goes home "amazed at what had happened" (24:12). Perhaps at this point, Peter begins to grasp the reality of Jesus' resurrection. He will transition

quickly from “amazement” to commitment, and Jesus will use him as an early leader of the resurrection community we know as the church.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from our text on this Easter Sunday? As we study our text, we note first the wonder of Easter. Confronted by an event their minds cannot comprehend and their experiences cannot explain, these first witnesses to the resurrection explode with astonishment. Something extraordinary happened that day, and the women and the other disciples responded with wonder. As we celebrate Easter this year, we need to recapture again the wonder of Jesus’ resurrection.

We should also embrace the hope generated by that first Easter. As it begins to dawn on the disciples that Jesus defeated death and that he is still with them, the embers of anticipation created by the report of the empty tomb explode into a blaze of hope. Jesus’ resurrection holds the promise of our own future resurrection. The hymn writer says it right: “Because he lives, we can face tomorrow.”

Finally, we must never forget what Jesus’ resurrection tells us about him. This one who faced death and all it could throw at him and won the victory over it is no ordinary person. He is the resurrected Lord who rules over the principalities of darkness. Paul affirms the significance of Jesus’ resurrection when he writes to the Romans that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4).

Coming with the Clouds

April 28, 2019

Revelation 1:1-8

I added a book to my library several years ago because of its promise of strange and unusual stories. For example, the book recounts the experience of Captain J. H. Hedley, an American flying over Germany during World War I. When the Germans attacked the airplane, the pilot, a Canadian named Makepeace, pushed the plane into a sudden dive, causing Hedley to be pulled out of the plane. Makepeace continued his rapid descent for several hundred feet before leveling off. Incredibly, as Makepeace leveled off the plane, Hedley alighted on its tail, drawn to the plane by the suction of air it created. Hedley grabbed on to it and eventually managed to climb back into his seat. The book is full of such intriguing stories, and I am sure I was not the only one to be drawn to it (Richard B. Manchester, *Incredible Facts: The Indispensable Collection of True Life Facts and Oddities* [New York: Galahad Books, 1985] 46, 75).

The book of Revelation has drawn the interest of Christians and non-Christians alike across the centuries for the same reason. Its enigmatic, mysterious character provokes two contrasting responses. The strangeness of the book of Revelation repels some readers. Even Martin Luther, in his preface to his translation of Revelation in 1522, writes, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book.” In contrast, the strangeness of the book of Revelation compels others to become obsessed with it, using it to create an elaborate, detailed schema for the future.

We must avoid both extremes, neither neglecting the book nor twisting it into something it is not. Instead, with a careful and open-minded approach, we can discover both the message Revelation provided for the first-century Christians and the message it presents to us today.

The Revelation to John

Revelation 1:1-3

The opening verse of Revelation provides information concerning its author and purpose (1:1). Throughout the book, the author identifies himself as “John” (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). The traditional view, held by Justin Martyr in AD 166, Irenaeus in AD 185, and Clement of Alexandria in AD 215, identifies the author as John, one of Jesus’ disciples. Others, like Dionysius of Alexandria and Eusebius the

historian in AD 265, identify the author as someone known as John the elder. The book itself leaves either choice as a legitimate option.

The author says that his purpose in writing the book is “to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). John believes a great persecution is about to begin, and he wants to warn his fellow believers of the dangers that will soon face them. He specifies these dangers in his letters to the individual churches in Revelation 2–3 and quantifies these troubles as cosmic struggles in his apocalyptic descriptions in Revelation 4–19.

John does not conjure up these images in his own mind. Instead, an angel of the Lord reveals these things to him (1:1). The angel testifies concerning two things: “the word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2). John seems to speak of God as the source of this revelation and Jesus as the one who communicates it. John’s words here recall the opening chapter of the Gospel of John where the author declares, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1), and then adds, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

John concludes his introduction with a benediction (Rev 1:3). He includes two groups in this benediction: the ones who read aloud the words of this prophecy and the ones who hear and embrace these words. John reminds his readers of the urgency of the hour by announcing that “the time is near.” After grabbing the attention of his readers with these words of introduction, John now focuses their attention on the central figure in his revelation of things to come: Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus’ Person: Who Is He?

Revelation 1:4-5a

John identifies his target group as “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). Since there were more than seven churches in Asia, John probably uses the number “seven,” the complete number, to imply that these messages go to all the churches in Asia, with the seven being representatives of the entire group of churches. He then issues a greeting like the one Paul uses in his epistles, offering his readers “grace” and “peace” (1:4). “Grace” refers to the undeserved favor of God available to us through Jesus Christ. “Peace” describes the sense of well-being that comes from God’s grace at work within us.

John locates the source of this grace and peace in God, the seven spirits, and Jesus Christ. John describes God as “him who is and who was and who is to

come” (1:4). He will repeat this description of God in Revelation 1:8. This description attributes an unchangeableness to God that other biblical writers highlight (Ps 102:27; Mal 3:6; Heb 1:12; Jas 1:17). John’s description also reminds us that God is eternal. As Lamentations 5:19 puts it, “But you, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations.” God is eternally present and thus able to help all people in all ages.

John also refers to “the seven spirits who are before his throne” (1:4). Some scholars see the “seven spirits” as a reference to the Holy Spirit, although this is a strange way to speak of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps John uses the perfect number “seven” in describing the Spirit to imply the Spirit’s perfection or completeness. For other scholars, this mention of “seven spirits” is a reference to the seven angels that represent the seven churches.

John’s primary focus at this point is not on God the Father or on the seven spirits, but on Jesus. John uses three phrases to identify Jesus (1:5). First, he addresses Jesus as “the faithful witness.” In human history, a plethora of religious seers have given witness about the things to come. John says that in Jesus we have a faithful witness who tells us not the way things seem to be but the way things really are. In John 8:26, Jesus affirms, “I declare to the world what I have heard from him [God],” and in John 12:50 he says, “What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.” Jesus faithfully reveals all things concerning God, life, humanity, and eternity. He is the faithful witness.

John also refers to Jesus as “the firstborn of the dead” (1:5). John addresses here the foundational element of our faith: Jesus’ victory over death signaled by the resurrection and the promise of our future resurrection, so carefully detailed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus’ resurrection not only certifies who he is; it also validates what he says. By his resurrection, Paul tells the Romans, Jesus “was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness” (Rom 1:4).

Finally, John identifies Jesus as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). Mightier than any army that ever marched, more powerful than any Caesar who ever reigned, and greater than any parliament that ever sat, Jesus possesses the authority of God that enables him to carry out God’s redemptive assignment for the world. John’s description of Jesus echoes the psalmist’s earlier picture of the Messiah as one whom God will make “the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Ps 89:27). Because of who Jesus is, John assures his first-century listeners that they can count on him.

Jesus' Performance: What Does He Do?

Revelation 1:5b-6

John now turns his attention from Jesus' person, who he is, to consider his performance, what he does. John notes first that Jesus "loves us" (1:5). Paul confirms Jesus' love for us in Romans 5:8, where he writes, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Jesus' undeserved love for us is a recurring theme in the New Testament.

Then, John adds that Jesus "freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5). We find the word translated "freed" in Luke 13:12. For eighteen years, a spirit of infirmity holds a woman in its grip, crippling her body. Jesus tells the woman, "You are set free from your ailment" (Lk 13:12). What Jesus does for the woman physically, he does for all of us spiritually. He sets us free from the sin that holds us in bondage and liberates us to become what God wants us to be.

Finally, John tells us that Jesus "made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father" (1:6). To make us a "kingdom" speaks of the power and authority Jesus gives us. To make us "priests" describes our participation in his kingdom work. Jesus wants to do more than just liberate us from our sins. He wants to lift us to a new level of participation in his redemptive work. This description of what Jesus does for us evokes from the writer of Revelation another of the doxologies that permeate this final book in the Bible: "to him be glory and dominion forever and ever" (1:6).

Jesus' Promise: What Will He Do?

Revelation 1:7-8

John then looks to the future and promises that Jesus will return to the earth to consummate God's kingdom. The image of Jesus "coming with the clouds" (1:7) replicates an image used by the prophet Daniel (Dan 7:13) and echoes the image used by Jesus himself as he reveals to the disciples what will happen at the end of the age (Mt 24:30). The image reflects power, victory, and exaltation.

As John concludes this section of Revelation, he turns his attention back to God with a declaration from God and a description of God (1:8). God's declaration utilizes the Greek alphabet to magnify God's completeness and to affirm God's eternity. "Alpha" is the first letter and "Omega" the final letter in the alphabet. From the beginning to the end, God is God. John then repeats his earlier description of God as the one "who is and who was and who is to come." From the beginning of time to the end of time, God exists. God has no beginning

or ending. God was, is, and will be. Consequently, the only proper response to this majestic, eternal God is praise and worship.

Conclusion

What does this description of Jesus in the opening verses of Revelation do for us today? To begin with, the reminder of who Jesus is should strengthen our faith. If we are going to put our faith in someone, we want to be sure he or she is worthy of our trust. John's description of Jesus as the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth reminds us that he is worthy of our faith.

The reminder of what Jesus has done for us should fortify our courage. We know that we cannot face the challenges of life in our own strength. John's reminder that Jesus loves us, has released us from the bondage of our sins, and has transformed us into kings and priests assures us that we do not have to face the challenges of life on our own.

The reminder of what Jesus will do for us in the future should nurture our hope. We have no way of knowing what our future holds. Yet knowing that our future is in the hands of a majestic, eternal God, we can face the future with hope instead of despair. We know that God holds our future and that we can count on God forever.