Preaching the Story Behind the Image: The Homiletical Fruit of a Narrative Approach to Metaphor

The Resurrection of Christ: Its Importance in the History of the Church

The Gospel Pattern of Death and Resurrection in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment

The Hero!? 
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Editor’s Note

Perhaps you have already noticed. If you have gotten to this page, you would have been hard-pressed to miss it. With this first issue in volume 34 of the Concordia Journal—itself a significant part of the larger, storied history of Concordia Seminary’s theological publications—we have “changed our look.” The redesigned cover and format are emblematic of our ongoing efforts to provide the best theological resources to you, pastors and leaders in church and world.

In support of those efforts we are pleased to welcome a new member of Concordia Seminary’s professional staff, who has already had a significant hand in the publication you now hold in yours. Travis Scholl has accepted the call to serve the Seminary as our Managing Editor of Theological Publications. In that role, he will serve as editor of Concordia Journal. A life-long Missouri Synod Lutheran, he comes to us after finishing his work as a divinity student at Yale University Divinity School. His concentration in religion and literature will be of great service to this journal, the Seminary that publishes it, and the church it serves.

As it happens, and without conscious effort on our part, “religion and literature” emerges as a sort of serendipitous theme for this issue. Justin Rossow provides a deep and engaging analysis of the role metaphor plays within story, especially those religious narratives that give shape to our sense of reality and identity. The implications for the practices of preaching are clear and profound. David Maxwell’s historical study of the role the resurrection of Christ has (or has not) played in the church’s understandings of atonement involves an analogous study into the crucial role narrative plays in the ways we articulate theology. The article was originally presented at the Seminary’s 17th Annual Theological Symposium, “Recapturing a Full-Bodied Theology of the Resurrection: Christ’s and Ours.” Francis Rossow’s study of the motifs of death and resurrection—their Gospel patterns—in the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky’s great work Crime and Punishment works more explicitly within a “religion and literature” vein. After all, it would be difficult to say anything about religion and literature without at some point saying something about Dostoevsky. Finally, Eric Andrae tracks more Gospel patterns at work in the only slightly lesser known work of world literature, Pär Lagerkvist’s Barabbas. Both of the latter essays can be read as excellent “case studies” of the ways narrative functions within religion, theology, and even spiritual formation, and the power of artistic narrative as a vehicle to convey the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection.

You should also note that this issue of Concordia Journal is a double issue, combining what is normally the January and April issues. That is to say, you will not be receiving another issue in April. We are also pleased to tell you that the next issue will be a very timely theme issue on ecclesiology to be released in July 2008. For that reason, the Homiletical Helps in this issue cover the lectionary through the end.
of July. Consequently the book review section in this issue is relatively short. But bibliophiles need not go wanting: additional reviews beyond those covered in these pages can be found at our online theological resource, www.ConcordiaTheology.org.

As we launch into a new year, with a newly designed journal, the faculty of Concordia Seminary remains deeply committed to providing vital and relevant theological resources to church and world. And in that task, we seek your input. If you have not done so already, please fill out the online survey at www.ConcordiaTheology.org. Your feedback from the survey is a valuable help to us as we continue refining and improving the *Concordia Journal*—and the whole network of resources of which it is a part—as an integral part of our mission to serve church and world with theological leadership centered in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

William W. Schumacher
Dean of Theological Research and Publication
Part 1: A Narrative Theory of Metaphor

1.1 Introduction

A few years back, I heard a soloist from a local performance of Mozart’s *Requiem* interviewed on the radio. She was talking about the *Agnus Dei*, and she commented that every time she sings a requiem, she feels badly for that poor little lamb. Obviously, she misunderstood the metaphor “Lamb of God”—but it is only obvious she misunderstood the metaphor if you know the *Agnus Dei* is about the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, that a lamb taking away sins is a lamb in a sacrificial system, and that Jesus’ death on the cross can be understood in terms of substitutionary sacrifice for the removal of sin. The metaphor “Lamb of God” for Jesus only works (if it does) because of a broader implied narrative that entails what can be expected from a lamb in this kind of sacrificial setting.

The metaphor, “I am Jesus’ little lamb,” uses the same vocabulary word, but has an entirely different meaning. This time, the lamb has a pastoral setting, not a sacrificial one, and I am not a lamb in the same way Jesus is. Now the metaphor implies a shepherd, a protector, perhaps even a green pasture and still waters. Guilt, blood, and sacrifice are no longer in view. We have changed the implied narrative, the “story behind the image,” and have therefore changed the meaning and implications of the metaphor.

We can only make sense out of metaphors like “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” or “I am Jesus’ little lamb” because we fill in the blanks left by the author or speaker. The soloist I heard on the radio was filling in blanks—she saw a poor little lamb who was forced to carry guilt that was not its own—and her way of filling in the blanks led her to an understanding of the metaphor that made her want to rescue the lamb, not be rescued by it.

We *must* fill in blanks in order to make sense of metaphor.1 Our filling in of these metaphorical blanks is guided and constrained by a schema of implied narra-

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1 The Reverend Justin Rossow is Assistant Pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in Affton, Missouri. He is also a graduate student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.
tive relationships. In other words, we understand “Lamb of God” and “Jesus’ little lamb” differently because we recognize the fact that these two metaphors come out of different narrative contexts, that there are different “stories” behind these images. To interpret the textual image is to fill in the narrative blanks left by the metaphor: who is doing what to whom with what result? Is the lamb being sacrificed in accordance with the promise of God to remove sin from guilty offenders, or is the lamb being protected and guided and cared for by a loving shepherd? Changing the implied narrative changes the metaphor.

That, in a nutshell, is my thesis, but it is not my intent in the confines of this article to build the entire theoretical foundation necessary to make such a claim. Rather, I simply want to show that this thesis is useful when preparing for the preaching task; that a concern for the implied narrative context, for the story behind the image, helps at both the exegetical and homiletical ends of the preaching process.

In what follows, you are free to disagree with me exegetically or homiletically on any point; you might not even like the end result. I am not putting forward an “example sermon” so much as trying to give a behind-the-scenes look at the kinds of questions raised by a particular approach to preaching. Hopefully, this different way of thinking about how preachers unpack texts and how hearers unpack sermons will provide for thought as you consider your text and congregation. As they say, Sunday comes with amazing regularity. Perhaps the current approach will add one more tool to your homiletical bag.

1.2 A Narrative Approach to Metaphor

Before we can see a metaphorical homiletic at work, we need to sketch briefly the basic contours of a narrative approach to metaphor. For the sake of argument, we are presupposing the thesis that a schema of implied narrative relationships guides and constrains the process of filling in metaphorical blanks. That is to say, the same kind of structure which propels character and plot toward a narrative’s ultimate dénouement, though it remains hidden beneath the surface level of the text, also functions to shape our understanding of metaphor.

Unlike narrative, however, this structure remains undeveloped in metaphor. Metaphor gives us a snapshot that presupposes a cinematic feature; narrative gives us the whole movie. In order to consider the movie behind the snapshot, the implied narrative behind the metaphor, we need to utilize a tool developed to describe the hidden structure that undergirds narrative itself.

A. J. Greimas, a French structuralist, developed just such a narrative tool, already put to good use by exegetes and homiletition alike. Though Greimas does important work with what he calls the “deep structure” of the text, his most helpful contribution to the current discussion comes from his analysis of a level between the deep structure and the surface of the text, a level which has most affinity to what we have called the implied narrative of metaphor.
On the basis of work done by Vladamir Propp on Russian fairy tales and a theory of theater analysis proposed by Étienne Souriau, Greimas developed a model of important players, actions, and relationships that, in theory, could be used to describe any narrative. For Greimas, all narrative boils down to this: there is some Sender who intends to convey some benefit or Object to someone, the Receiver. The movement of the Object from the Sender to the Receiver is facilitated by the Subject, often the hero or protagonist. Things get interesting when the Subject’s job description of getting and delivering the Object is hindered by an Opponent. The narrative is finally resolved when the Subject overcomes the Opponent with the aid of a Helper and manages to deliver the Object to the Receiver. The whole thing together comprises the “actantial model” (figure 1).

![Figure 1. Greimas’ Actantial Model](image)

Greimas called the important players in his model “actants” as opposed to “actors” because key narrative roles will not always be filled by people (sometimes attributes or inanimate objects do the job). Also, one character in a narrative may occupy more than one location on the actantial model, just as one actantial position may be occupied by more than one actant at the same time.

Important for our current discussion is the fact that the limited number of actantial positions and relationships described by Greimas are necessary for understanding any narrative, even if one or more of the actants are assumed (i.e., not present in the text itself). God might be sending the Holy Grail to humanity, or lovers could be seeking to send marital bliss to themselves. The Helper could be magical armor, super-human strength, or Jimminy Cricket; the Opponent could be a big bad wolf, the dark side of the Force, or a lack of money. The particular manifestations of these actants and their relationships will change from narrative to narrative, but the basic dynamics of this structure will continue to guide and constrain how specific narratives take shape.

For our purposes, to say that filling in metaphorical blanks requires some kind of implied narrative is to say that these actantial positions and relationships are presupposed in metaphor interpretation even when they are not expressly present in the text. To call Jesus the “Lamb of God” is to presuppose an actantial model in which God sends forgiveness to sinners, facilitated by the sacrificial lamb who overcomes the sin of
the world (and perhaps even the wrath of God) with the help of things like the lamb’s unblemished perfection or the promise of God.

Regardless of how we fill in the blanks, the blanks are active and inform the metaphor. Some might not have thought of the wrath of God as an opponent in the Lamb of God metaphor, but we will understand some kind of Opponent, even if we never take a step back to ask what must be overcome in the sacrificial system in order for forgiveness to be given to sinners.

Just as the Lamb of God metaphor includes an underlying narrative structure expressible by an actantial model, “I am Jesus’ little lamb” also presupposes a whole network of narrative relationships. In fact, the difference in meaning and implication between these two very different lamb metaphors is precisely the difference in their implied narrative structures; structures which can be expressed by using Greimas’ actantial model (see figures 2a and 2b).

![Figure 2a. The Lamb of God](image)

![Figure 2b. I am Jesus’ little lamb](image)

Though we might dispute whether or not the shepherd’s staff and courage, for example, are suggested by the second metaphor, we will understand those kinds of things to be informing our understanding of the metaphor, even if we cannot put our finger on which particular things are intended. More important is the fact that the kinds of things that come into question for the “Little Lamb” metaphor
are decidedly different from the kinds of actors, relationships, and outcomes presupposed by the “Lamb of God” metaphor. In fact, the lamb in each metaphor finds itself in a different actantial position: in the sacrificial system, the lamb functions as the Subject, while in the pastoral setting the lamb is the Receiver of the shepherd’s good intentions and action.

It seems natural to say that I am not a lamb in the same way Jesus is. Slowing down to consider the network of narrative implications behind metaphor helps express why this is the case. If I am the lamb, the lamb is the Receiver of the Shepherd’s loving care. If Jesus is the lamb, I am still the Receiver, the guilty sinner in this case, but the Lamb is the Subject who facilitates my forgiveness. I am not a lamb in the same way Jesus is because these two metaphors are shaped by different implied narratives.

A schema of implied narrative relationships guides and constrains the process of filling in metaphorical blanks. This concern for the implied narrative context, for the story behind the image, helps at both the exegetical and homiletical ends of the preaching process. I found this to be the case as I prepared to preach on Easter Sunday, 2006, using the assigned text, Mark 16:1-8. A narrative approach to metaphor raised questions that forced me to consider aspects of the text I had previously missed. It also led me to change my sermon manuscript in light of how the hearers would encounter the sermon. That double-aha!-moment, looking at the text on the one hand and the shape of the sermon on the other, is the heart of why I find this homiletical approach useful.

Part 2: The Theory in Practice

2.1 The Context of the Hearers and the Service

Preachers exegete both text and congregation. As I prepared my Easter sermon, I had particular people in mind. At Salem Lutheran Church in Affton, Missouri, we expected over 1,000 people, mostly middle class Anglos, to join us for our celebration of the resurrection. The majority would have enough Christian background to know the basic story of Jesus rising from the dead, though I also expected a good number of friends, family, non-Christians, and very infrequent attenders (you know, the “Christmas and Easter” types).

Liturgically, we had tracked with Mark throughout Lent and had in fact preached a Good Friday Tenebrae service based on seven scenes from Mark’s passion account, so the broader congregation could relate to references from Mark that had been recently used in other sermons at Salem. This being the Feast of the Resurrection, I also expected there to be a lot of special music, extra singing, and a long distribution; in other words, I cannot preach twenty-five minutes and expect to get people in and out for the four services we had that morning.
2.2 Initial Work with the Text

In that particular context, I began my work with the text. Reading the Gospel assigned for the day, Mark 16:1-8, I was immediately struck by the last part of the last verse, (loose translation from the Greek): “And they [the women] said nothing to nobody because they were scared out of their gourds.” Whether you take these to be the last words of the Gospel of Mark or not, they are the last words of the Gospel lesson for Easter Sunday, and they stick out like a sore thumb.

This last verse does not seem to fit with what we expect from our general knowledge of the Easter story. I imagined the hearers might be struck by the apparent incongruity between the failure of the women and the celebration of the resurrection. How does this ending make sense in light of where we have been together as a congregation as we encountered the Gospel of Mark? This problem for the hearers was the starting point for the rest of my work with the text.

Briefly, working with the Greek and with the help of a commentary, I came to see the failure of the women to carry the Gospel message as just one in a long line of obstacles that needed to be overcome in this pericope. The death of Jesus is an obvious one, and the question from the cross hangs in the air: has God abandoned this Jesus? The young man in white proclaims that Jesus has not been abandoned, that His death has been overcome, but there are other obstacles as well. Mark goes out of his way to remind us how large the stone was, and, whether the passive verb there is to be taken as indicating the intervention of God or not, it should be noted that one of the miracles that first Day of Resurrection is the removal of this impossibly large stone. Also, Mark tells us the sun is already up as the women make their way to the tomb. Especially since darkness played a significant role in our celebration of Good Friday, this Easter sunrise takes on at least the overtones of a Gospel reversal.

Starting with the question of how the failure of the women fits into Mark’s Gospel, I came to see their fear and fleeing as but one of several obstacles that were overcome by God on that first Easter morning. Fear and fleeing connect the women to Jesus’ other disciples who earlier fled in fear. The young man clothed in white stands in opposition to the young man who fled naked in the garden at Jesus’ arrest. Although we do not see it yet, the failure of the disciples signified by the naked young man’s flight has been reversed by the proclamation of the young man robed in white. Even the failure of the women to carry the message will be overcome by God: the Gospel will get out. On a Sunday where I expected a significant representation of infrequent church attenders, picking up on the promise that God overcomes all obstacles, even lapses in discipleship, seemed like a good way to bring Law and Gospel to bear in the lives of the hearers.
2.3 A Narrative Theory of Metaphor Applied

“God overcomes all obstacles.” That was the fruit of my exegetical work. It seemed to fit the text, the day, and the hearers. I thought it was a nice phrase, suitable for a refrain in the sermon, and a memorable way to encapsulate the Gospel. I had the seeds of an Easter sermon.

It was at this point in the text-to-sermon process that a narrative theory of metaphor became both necessary and fruitful. If I had been working with Paul who calls us “heirs,” “slaves,” “adopted sons,” “citizens of heaven,” etc., I would have brought this kind of analysis to bear earlier in the process. Since Mark 16:1-8 does not hinge on a metaphor, it was not immediately obvious that metaphor theory had a place in the preparation of this Easter sermon. Once we raise the metaphor question, however, it does not take long to recognize that the way of talking about the text that says, “God overcomes all obstacles” is itself metaphorical—God is not walking down the street clearing roadblocks in any literal sense. The metaphor in this sermon is at the level of understanding and proclaiming the text rather than in the text itself. With that in mind, I sought to get at the story behind the “obstacle” image to see how it fit with the text and how it would relate to the hearers.

The first thing I realized was that this way of talking in terms of obstacles focuses on one and only one relationship in the actantial model, the relationship between Subject and Opponent. My work with the text up to that point had left me with a very incomplete actantial model indeed (see figure 3).

![Figure 3. God overcomes all obstacles](image_url)

Figure 3. God overcomes all obstacles

It is natural for a metaphor to leave some blanks. In fact, it is inherent in metaphor both to reveal and to conceal, but there seemed to be important things in the text that were not accounted for by the way I was focusing on the Subject/Opponent relationship at the expense of the rest of the model. In theory, there should be elements of the text that help flesh out the metaphor “God overcomes all obstacles.” If not, then this metaphor does not describe enough of the important aspects of this text to be used as a lens through which to view the pericope.
The theory that a structure of narrative relationships informs our interpretation of metaphor led me to go back and ask questions of the text. If God is overcoming obstacles like the darkness of Good Friday, the death of Jesus, or the failure of the disciples, what means are being employed? Who or what are the Helpers? For what purpose are these obstacles being overcome? What benefit is being procured for whom? What is the Object? Who are the Receivers? The actantial model drove me back to the text.

The end result of God overcoming all the obstacles in this reading is not seen in the Gospel of Mark, but it is implied. The young man in white speaks the promise of Jesus who goes ahead of the failed disciples (including Peter and these women) to Galilee: “There you will see Him, just as He said.” The end result of God’s action in Mark is this reunion: failed disciples are brought back into the presence of the vindicated and risen Jesus. The failed disciples, then, are the Receivers, while the presence of Jesus is the benefit or Object they receive.

The means God uses to accomplish this are also important. Certainly His almighty power is implied in the reversal of darkness, the removal of the stone, and the raising of Jesus from the dead. But the express means in the text are words and promises, the promise of Jesus passed on by the proclamation of the young man. A sermon could be preached focusing on this quadrant of the actantial model, how God uses means to accomplish His awesome work, how the promises of Jesus are precisely what we have to hold on to when we are looking for God to step into our story to save. A sermon could focus on that dynamic, but even a sermon which focuses on God’s power to overcome the obstacles in this text and in the lives of the hearers will implicitly deal with the Helper-Subject relationship.

The observation that my way of thinking and talking about the text was suppressing important aspects of Mark’s account forced me to go back and explore how the narrative elements in the text fit with the implied narrative context of God “overcoming obstacles.” I was able to flesh out more fully the actantial model on the basis of the text (figure 4).
Figure 4. Further Analysis of the Text

Now that I had a more complete understanding of the text, I still had to consider how the hearers would unpack the language of the sermon. I had to ask how they would fill in the blanks left by my preaching. If the catch phrase, “God overcomes all obstacles,” hid certain important aspects of the text from me, what else could I expect when my hearers encountered the same metaphor in my sermon? Part of the problem was that the refrain, “God overcomes all obstacles,” does not naturally imply the rest of the model very strongly.7

Overcoming obstacles is usually done for the benefit of the one doing the overcoming. I wanted to come up with a way of talking about God’s active defeat of His enemies that implied more strongly the fact that this victory was accomplished for the sake of someone else. In theory, a way of talking that implies the other blanks of the actantial model more strongly should allow the preacher to bring up other significant aspects of the text more naturally.

How could I speak of God overcoming obstacles (in the text and in the lives of the hearers) in a way that naturally brought up the fact that the result of God’s action (in the text and the lives of the hearers) was the presence of Jesus for failed disciples? I tried to imagine the kind of story that would entail overcoming obstacles for the benefit of someone else.

That is when I began to work with “mission” language. In our conventional way of understanding, when someone is “on a mission” there is a task that needs to be accomplished by someone (a spy, a soldier) for the benefit of someone else (a government, the whole world). Being “on a mission” entails both overcoming obstacles and passing on a benefit to someone besides the Subject. Instead of the tag line, “God overcomes all obstacles,” I changed the language of the sermon to reflect more fully the work I had done with the text in a way that would be unpacked more readily by the hearers. The new refrain became “God is on a mission—and nothing can stop him!”

That is not the best homiletical gem I have ever heard; with some time and effort, you could probably come up with something better. The point here is simply that being aware of the narrative dynamics that lie behind metaphor—not only metaphor in the text itself but in my understanding and proclamation of the text—caused me to slow down the text-to-sermon process. I had to consider dynamics in my interpretation of the text and in my intended hearers’ interpretation of the sermon that helped me better understand the text and shape my sermon with my hearers in mind.

2.4 The Final Product

In our Easter worship folder, the following sermon was titled “Our God is on a mission—and nothing can stop Him!” It is the result of the work with Mark 16:1-8 described above. Further analysis of the imagery in this sermon could be
done in terms of the actantial model, but for our purposes here, I simply want to share the homiletical fruit of a narrative approach to metaphor. No matter what its failings, I hope the following demonstrates that asking questions about the story behind the image leads to productive approaches to text and sermon. Whether you finally employ the actantial model or not, asking these kinds of questions may prove useful in your own text-to-sermon process.

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I love Easter! I even love our Easter sunrise service, the one we had at 6:30 AM this morning! I love it because you start in the darkness and in the shadows, and, by the time the message of Easter is proclaimed, the sun is shining through the stained glass and throwing joyful colors across the pews. It makes you want to say, “Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!).”

I love our Easter sunrise service, but if I’m honest, Easter is about the only sunrise I get excited about. If you are a morning person, more power to you, but I am not. The problem with the sun coming up is that it makes it so hard to sleep. And if you have ever had trouble sleeping, if you’ve ever been up half the night with sick kids, or if you’ve ever stared at the ceiling through the wee hours of the morning thinking about your job, or if worry or anxiety have ever robbed you of those precious hours of recuperation, then you know the sunrise can be just as unwelcome as the alarm clock: it simply means you have to get back up and face your daily grind again.

The women heading to the tomb that first Easter morning had probably not slept well the night before. Most likely, they had been crying much of the night, or concerned about what was going to happen next, or staring at the ceiling through the wee hours of the morning trying not to think of the kind words and warm smile of a Teacher and Friend whom they dearly loved and sorely missed. The sunrise was more of an alarm clock than a promise of hope, for they were waiting to go about the necessary business that faced them that first day of a long week, the anointing of Jesus’ dead body.

That’s how the women must have experienced the sunrise that first Easter morning: a harsh wake-up call to face the hard facts of life and death. But when Mark, our Gospel writer, includes the risen sun as a detail of that lonely walk to the tomb, I think he’s already imagining stained glass rainbows dancing in the sanctuary. You see, Mark took us through the blackest of Fridays. Mark showed us how the sun refused to shine, how darkness covered the entire land at the death of this Jesus. Ever since Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” we have been waiting, waiting to see what happens next, waiting to see if God will respond, waiting to see if this Jesus has indeed been abandoned.

The black darkness of Good Friday stood in the way of the final victory of God for His people. But now—now the sun is up, the darkness has been chased away. In that Easter sunrise, we already get the first hint that our God is on a mis-
The message of the sunrise is reinforced by the stone in front of the tomb. The women see the stone as an impossible obstacle. The stone was large—very large, Mark tells us—so large that these frail and mournful hands couldn't possibly hope to budge it. But God is on the move. God now enters the story. God does the impossible. When the women look up, the impossible tombstone has been removed. Our God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him!

Still, the women don't know what's going on. The body they came to anoint is missing. The death they came to mourn has been undone. They thought they had seen the end of God's mission. They had watched with their own eyes as Jesus died on the cross. And if anything stands in the way of God's will and God's mission, it is death.

The death of Jesus should have been the end. But our God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him! Even death proves too small an obstacle. “You are looking for Jesus who was crucified,” says the young man in white. “He is not here! He has risen!” God has not forsaken this Jesus. Death is the final enemy, but even death will be defeated. Our God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him. Even death is not the end: Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

But the story isn't over—not yet. “Go, tell,” says the young man in white. “Go and tell.” And then, Mark writes, “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.” The women fled in fear and confusion! And even though they had just been told to carry the message of the resurrection, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

These faithful women, their eyes swollen and red from crying, have mistaken the sunrise for a return to the daily grind. These faithful women, their hearts heavy and tired, have missed the miracle of an impossible tombstone rolled away. These faithful women have come to the tomb and heard the Gospel. But these faithful women have failed in their mission.

And in their failure, these faithful women have become just like the rest of Jesus’ disciples. The disciples—the closest friends of Jesus—the disciples fled in fear when they saw Jesus arrested. Peter—bold and brash Peter—Peter watched for a while from a distance, but he fled in despair after denying Jesus three times. By the time Jesus dies, only the women are left to see where his body is laid. And now even the women, these faithful women, have failed in their mission. It kind of makes you wonder, if even the most faithful of Jesus’ followers can fail, what does that say for you and me?

Sometimes it’s hard, too hard, even on an Easter Sunday, if your eyes are red from crying through the night or you’ve lost sleep worrying about the future—sometimes it’s hard to see the sunrise as anything but an alarm clock forcing you to get out of bed and face problems that are too big for you to handle.

Sometimes it’s hard, too hard, even on an Easter Sunday, to see that heavy
burden, that tombstone, as anything but impossibility.

Sometimes it’s hard, too hard, when faced with fears and pressures of living in this time and place even to dare to hope that the resurrection is more than a fairytale.

And so we deny. And so we betray. And so we, too, run away in confusion and fear. We, like all of Jesus’ disciples, know what it is like to fail in our mission.

That’s why it is so important that Mark gives us this insight into the fear and failure of these faithful women. Oh, the message will get out, eventually. The message will get out, or we wouldn’t have this Gospel in front of us this morning. The message will get out, but for now, for now Mark wants to drive home the point that Easter doesn’t depend on these women. Easter doesn’t depend on the disciples. Easter doesn’t depend on you or on me or on what kind of week or month or year we are going through. The Good News of Easter is that God is on a mission.

The darkness of sin can’t stop Him. The impossible tombstone can’t stop Him. Even the failure of the disciples cannot stop the mission of God.

So God sends His messenger with Good News and the words of this messenger point us beyond the failure of the disciples to victory. The young man in white says, “Go tell His disciple, those disciples who fled in fear; tell them! Go tell Peter, Peter who denied even knowing Jesus at all tell him! Go tell those people on Gravois Avenue in Affton, Missouri, tell them: Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!).”

In the face of the fears and worries that keep you up at night, the message rings clear: Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

In the face of the loss and loneliness that makes your heart break, this is your comfort: Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

In spite of the times you have run away in fear, the times you have doubted or denied, the times you have said nothing to anyone, in spite of your ultimate failure as a disciple, the word and promise of God come to you again today: Christ is Risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!).

He is going ahead of you. You will see Him, just as He told you. That’s the Good News of Easter: You will see Him, just as He told you. That’s what God’s mission is all about: You will see Him, just as He told you. God’s mission is to bring failed disciples back into the presence of Jesus. God’s mission is to restore your relationship with the one you have at one time denied or betrayed. Our God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him—not fear, not failure, not sorrow, not death.

So now, every time you see the morning sun, and you have to roll over and hit the alarm clock and head back to the challenges of everyday life, now that same sunrise splashes a stain-glassed promise across your heart: Your God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him.

Now when you pass the cemeteries on Gravois, or when you stand at the
graveside of someone you love, that tombstone that seems so heavy, so impossible, stands as a silent witness of the impossible tombstone that was rolled away. Your God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him.

Now, when fear or doubt causes you to run away, when you fail as a disciple of Jesus Christ, you have a promise to hold onto, you have a hope that is stronger than doubt. Not sin, not failure, not sorrow, not death, nothing, nothing, nothing can stop our God when He is on His mission.

His mission, the mission that sent Jesus to the cross, the mission that raised Jesus from the dead, our God’s mission will one day roll back your impossible tomb stone and raise you to life. For that mission, God’s mission, is this: to bring failed disciples back into the eternal presence of Jesus. God is on a mission, and nothing can stop Him.

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Endnotes

1 This is preeminently true of metaphor, but not uniquely true. All interpretation of any text or utterance involves the filling in of lexical blanks. See Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, Jane P. Tomkins, ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 50-69.

2 If you are looking for an implied narrative context for “nutshell” here, I would suggest the acorn which holds the promise and potential of the mighty oak tree as opposed to one of those half walnut shells under which some street urchin hides a ball and then, by confusing the issue with other empty shells, makes you lose track of what is important and by this sleight of hand relieves you of your money.


4 In the actual Easter service, when the lector finished with Mark 16:8 and proclaimed, “This is the Gospel of the Lord!” the congregational response was strikingly subdued.


6 There is non-literal language in this pericope, like the women being “seized” by fear and trembling, but it is not central to the dynamics of this text.

7 Without going into too much more theory, I think this is probably because we most naturally understand the “overcoming obstacles” metaphor in terms of the broader conceptual metaphor, “Life is a Journey.” In our cultural understanding of life as a journey, travelers are not making the trip for anyone’s benefit except their own. That translates into the implicit understanding that God overcomes obstacles so He can get where He wants to go, which is certainly true, but does not say much for where we fit into the story. For a treatment of the Life is a Journey conceptual metaphor, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Reprint, 2003).

8 The opening section, for example, plays with interpreting a sunrise through the lens of different actantial models. In the first, the sunrise is a Helper, in the second, an Opponent. This interpretive power of metaphor has other important implications for preaching that we cannot explore here.
“If Christ has not been raised,” St. Paul tells us, “your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Co 15:17). Yet the central importance of Christ’s resurrection is not always evident in our preaching and in our theological reflection. I would guess that most of you have heard, if not preached, Easter sermons which declare that the glorious comfort of the resurrection is that it proves that God the Father accepted the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. While this may be true, it seems to suggest that Christ’s resurrection does not actually save us. It merely tells us something about the cross.

If this is our understanding of the significance of Christ’s resurrection, then it is difficult to see how that resurrection plays the central role in our faith and hope that St. Paul claims it does. After all, as long as God accepted Christ’s sacrifice, what difference does it make whether He “proves” it? In any case, would not apostolic preaching about the saving power of the cross count as proof? If this is all we have to say about the significance of the resurrection, then I would suggest that we have lost something in comparison to the resurrection-focused theology of St. Paul.

The easy answer to this problem is to assert that we in the Lutheran church, and perhaps in the Western church as a whole, are too focused on the cross. And what we really need is a dose of the resurrection from the Eastern church. The problem with this answer is that the same St. Paul also said in 1 Corinthians, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Co 2:2). So it will hardly do to address the problem by having a little less cross and a little more resurrection.

A somewhat more sophisticated version of this answer is to blame it on Anselm. Authors as diverse as Gustaf Aulén and Clark Pinnock have suggested that Anselm is responsible for a theory of atonement that operates in a juridical framework that prevents it from focusing on Christ’s victory or His resurrection. Both Aulén and Pinnock would have us abandon Anselm and return to the view of the
New Testament and the early church which describes the atonement, they claim, not primarily as a propitiatory sacrifice but as Christ’s victory over sin, death, and Satan.  

I will be taking a different approach because I believe that the distinction between Anselm’s substitutionary atonement theory and the early church’s *Christus Victor* motif is a blunt instrument that not only obscures the diversity found in the early church, but also leaves the impression that no one believed the cross was a sacrifice to the Father in our place until Anselm invented the idea in the eleventh century. Instead of focusing on atonement “theories,” I would suggest we need to look at the overarching narratives used to explain the significance of both the cross and the resurrection. There are in fact any number of narratives, all of them Scriptural, into which the cross and the resurrection fit. A second question we need to ponder is whether we are allowed to have only one overarching narrative.

In the first part of this essay, I will try to articulate the overarching narrative that dominates our own theological reflection in the Missouri Synod and which I believe we share with other churches as well, both Catholic and Protestant. Then I will undertake a similar examination of a select period in the early church and in the Reformation.

In order to identify our own narrative, I will start with a key passage from the synodical explanation of Luther’s Small Catechism. Question 139 gives us a summary form of this narrative:

139. How does this work of redemption benefit you?  
Christ was my substitute. He took my place under God’s judgment against sin. By paying the penalty of my guilt, Christ atoned, or made satisfaction, for my sins (vicarious atonement).

In this narrative, our problem is that we stand under the wrath of God because of our sin. But Christ Jesus took our place and suffered God’s wrath on our behalf when He died on the cross. This vicarious atonement won for us the forgiveness of sins, which restores us to a right relationship with God. Notice that in this narrative, the resurrection of Christ is not mentioned. The entire redeeming work is ascribed to Christ’s death on the cross.

How then does the synodical exposition handle Christ’s resurrection? We find the answer in question 145:

145. Why is Christ’s resurrection so important and comforting?  
Christ’s resurrection proves that  
A. Christ is the Son of God;
B. His doctrine is the truth;
C. God the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice for the reconciliation of the world;
D. All believers in Christ will rise to eternal life.4

Here we see the explanation I alluded to earlier that the resurrection proves the Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice. This explanation is one of four elements, but all four elements of the explanation are introduced by the verb “prove.” This fits a narrative in which the redemption occurs exclusively on the cross. By default, the resurrection finds its primary significance in what it says about the cross.

Francis Pieper, in the second volume of his *Christian Dogmatics* has a two page discussion of Christ’s resurrection as part of his discussion of Christ’s state of exaltation. In this discussion, the soteriological significance that he attaches to the resurrection is based solely on Romans 4:25: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” On this basis, Pieper states that the Father, by raising Christ from the dead, “declared that the sins of the whole world are fully expiated, or atoned for, and that all mankind is now regarded as righteous before His divine tribunal.”5 This statement is perhaps stronger than the explanation given in the synodical exposition of the catechism in that Pieper describes Christ’s resurrection as an absolution rather than merely a proof, but Pieper’s description, too, operates wholly within the vicarious satisfaction narrative in which the work of redemption is accomplished on the cross, while that work is proven or, more strongly, proclaimed by the resurrection.

Pieper’s discussion of Christ’s atoning work in his section on the three offices of Christ (prophet, priest, and king), demonstrates even more strikingly how the narrative of the vicarious atonement controls what he has to say about the resurrection. The table of contents for the section on Christ’s priestly, or sacerdotal, office goes as follows:

The Sacerdotal Office of Christ

The Sacerdotal Office of Christ in the State of Humiliation 334
The Vicarious Satisfaction 344
Objective and Subjective Reconciliation 347
Objections Raised Against the Vicarious Satisfaction 351
Some Modern Theories of the Atonement Examined 361
The Active Obedience of Christ 372
The Sacrifice of Christ and the Sacrifices of the OT 378
To Whom and for Whom Christ Rendered Satisfaction 379
The Intercession of Christ 382
The Sacerdotal Office of Christ in the State of Exaltation 382
Just by looking at the table of contents, it is not clear where a discussion of Christ’s resurrection would go. Pieper mentions it first on page 343 under the heading “The Sacerdotal Office of Christ in the State of Humiliation.” There he grants that Christ’s resurrection abolishes death according to 1 Corinthians 15, but he goes on to insist on the next page that “Scripture constantly reminds us that our deliverance from the guilt of sin through the one sacrifice of Christ must be kept in the foreground.” Aside from this reference, Pieper makes mention of the resurrection under the heading “Objective and Subjective Reconciliation.” There he uses the resurrection to establish objective reconciliation on the grounds that the resurrection, as he said earlier, is the absolution of the whole world. There is also a brief mention under the heading “The Sacerdotal Office in the State of Exaltation.”

What is particularly striking about these references to the resurrection, is that the bulk of what he has to say occurs in the section on Christ’s sacerdotal office in the state of humiliation. This despite the fact that earlier Pieper clearly classifies the resurrection itself as part of Christ’s state of exaltation. How do we account for this odd placement of the resurrection? The most straightforward explanation is that the resurrection is a relatively minor part of the vicarious satisfaction narrative. Since that narrative concentrates on Christ’s death in our place, the discussion of the cross naturally fits under Christ’s priestly office in the state of humiliation. The resurrection, then, has no place of its own but serves as an appendix to the crucifixion.

So far we have examined some influential pieces of the dogmatic tradition of the Missouri Synod. How does this dogma translate into preaching? In order to answer this, I examined the last fifteen years of Concordia Pulpit Resources, a journal that provides sermons and sermon studies on pericopes for the year. From the fifteen Easter sermons represented in these volumes, it is clear that the subordination of the resurrection to the cross is not as thorough-going as it is in the texts we have examined so far. Over half of the sermons identify the main soteriological significance of Christ’s resurrection as the defeat of death. However, four of the sermons embodied the tradition we have been examining by saying that the resurrection proves that God accepted Christ’s sacrifice. Two of these sermons cited only this explanation as the significance of the resurrection.

I am not surprised that there is more diversity in preaching than in a dogmatics text. That is because the preacher is assigned a particular text. No matter what one’s dogmatic commitments regarding the vicarious atonement, how could one preach on 1 Corinthians 15, for example, without saying that Christ’s resurrection defeats death? So in this respect, the pericopal system is a helpful counterbalance to the kind of theological narrowing that I am describing.

However, the fact that two of these sermons depend exclusively on the explanation that God accepted Christ’s sacrifice suggests that a narrative of vicarious satisfaction in which the resurrection functions as an appendix is operating in
our circles. The most recent example of this that I have seen is in the introduction to our new hymnal, the recently-published *Lutheran Service Book*. In the first paragraph of the introduction, the hymnal narrates the deeds of Christ from the cross to the resurrection, ascension, and second coming. It describes the cross and resurrection in the following way: “Through His perfect life and death, He accomplished forgiveness and salvation for all before the Father in heaven. By His empty tomb and ascension into heaven, He declared His victory over sin and death to all the world.” So the cross accomplished salvation, and the resurrection announced this accomplishment.

What should we make of all this? Should we fall on our knees and confess our captivity to Anselm? Well, no. I should make clear at this point that I do not think that the vicarious satisfaction narrative is wrong. In fact, it has strong Scriptural support because it views the cross as a fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In particular, I would suggest that it views Christ’s death as the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement narrative in Leviticus 16.

We can find support for this interpretation of the cross in Romans 3, a text central to Lutheran theology and cited in article IV of the Augsburg Confession. In Romans 3, Paul makes the point that the entire world is guilty of sin. He then states,

> But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement (ι`λαστήριον), through faith in his blood (Ro 3:21-25a).

From this passage we see first of all that the righteousness from God is witnessed to by the Old Testament, that is, the Law and the Prophets. But which Old Testament passages does Paul have in mind? That becomes clear when Paul states that Christ is a sacrifice of atonement (ι`λαστήριον), thus evoking the Day of Atonement narrative in Leviticus 16. There the Lord prescribes to Moses the way that Aaron should make atonement for the sins of the people once a year. Briefly, Aaron is to enter the sanctuary with a goat and sprinkle its blood on the atonement cover. In this way, he will make atonement for the sins of the people. The atonement cover is the lid of the Ark of the Covenant which is in the Holy of Holies. The Hebrew word for the atonement cover is קָטָן, which in the Septuagint is translated ι`λαστήριον. By identifying Christ with this term, Paul is suggesting that Christ is the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. This identification is made even more explicitly in Hebrews 9, which refers to the yearly Day of Atonement and
then states that Christ “entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood” (Heb 9:7).

When we boil down the Day of Atonement narrative, it goes like this: God is angry with sin. The blood of the sacrifice is presented to God, and this blood makes atonement for sin. This, I suggest, is the dominant narrative that Lutherans use to describe the way in which Christ’s crucifixion saves.

None of this can be ascribed to Anselm. Anselm’s innovation is to make claims about the necessities of God’s justice and the dynamics of how precisely his offended honor had to be satisfied. But the narrative itself, that God is angry because of sin and Christ’s sacrifice satisfies that anger, comes not from Anselm but from the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. Note, however, that the sacrificial animal in Leviticus 16 does not come back to life. There is nothing in the Day of Atonement narrative that corresponds to Christ’s resurrection. Therefore, it is not surprising that those who employ the Day of Atonement story as the primary interpretive framework for describing salvation end up making Christ’s resurrection into an appendix to His death. It may say something important about the death, but it really has no vital role in the story itself.

How then does Paul, who describes Christ as the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement, still manage to say that if Christ is not raised, our faith is in vain? The answer is that there are other narratives used by the New Testament itself to interpret Christ’s death and resurrection. One prominent narrative, which was dominant in the early church, is Passover.

**Christ’s Resurrection in the Early Church**

The Gospel of John presents Jesus’ death as a fulfillment of Passover by specifying that His death occurred at the same time as the slaying of the Passover lambs. John also notes that the fact that the soldiers did not break Jesus’ legs fulfills Exodus 12:46, which states that the bones of the Passover lamb should not be broken (Jn 19:36). Paul makes this connection even more explicit in 1 Corinthians: “Christ our Passover (πάσχα) is sacrificed” (1 Co 5:7).

The early church picks up on this identification and understands Christ’s death and resurrection as a fulfillment of the Passover narrative. This connection is made explicit by authors such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Aphraat, Tertullian, Lactantius, Augustine, and many others. The connection may be seen from the very word they used for Easter: *pascha*, the Greek word for Passover. Some Christians in Asia Minor went so far as to insist that Christ’s resurrection must always be celebrated on the fourteenth of Nisan, no matter what day of the week it fell on, so that the resurrection is celebrated on the same day as the Jewish Passover. These Christians, called Quartodecimans from the Latin word for fourteenth, were not followed by the majority of the church. However, their view
expressed a conviction that the church at large shared that Passover is the overarch-
ing interpretive narrative for Christ’s death and resurrection.

Melito of Sardis’s *Homily on Pascha*, probably written between A.D. 160 and 
170,\(^{10}\) is a good example of this commitment. Melito himself was a 
Quartodeciman. In his liturgical tradition, people would gather on the fourteenth of 
Nisan, the day of Passover, and hold a vigil, probably until midnight. At that time, 
they would begin the celebration of the resurrection. Like the Jewish Passover, the 
Quartodeciman celebration was a single event. There was no separate Good Friday 
service.\(^{11}\)

Melito delivered his *Homily on Passover* in the course of this celebration. In it, 
he indicates that the Passover story in Exodus 12 was read just prior to the homily. 
He then goes on to describe the Exodus story in his own words, explaining that 
this story is a model for the reality that is found in Christ. Just as an artist makes a 
small model out of clay or wax before making the full-scale work of art, so the 
Passover is a model whose fulfillment is found in Christ.

For Melito, the view that Christ fulfills the Passover means not simply that 
the Passover is a prediction of Christ, but more importantly that the Passover actu-
ally is the same story, though on a smaller scale. As such, the Passover serves as the 
narrative that lets us interpret the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection. The 
structure of Melito’s homily reflects this understanding. First he tells the Passover 
story from Exodus. Then he retells the story on a cosmic scale, starting with Adam 
and Eve and ending with Christ. All humanity is captive to sin and the devil, who is 
Pharaoh. Christ is the sacrificed Passover lamb whose blood conquers death. By 
His resurrection, He leads His people out of Egypt, that is, out of sin and death.

So what happens when you use the Passover as your overarching interpretive 
narrative? First, I should note that it does *not* mean that you emphasize the resur-
rection at the expense of the cross. If anything, Melito talks more about the cross 
than the resurrection. In fact, Melito claims that the word *pascha* comes from the 
Greek word *paschein*, to suffer. His etymology is incorrect. It really comes from the 
Hebrew word *pesach*, meaning Passover. However, Melito’s claim does illustrate that 
Christ’s suffering on the cross plays a central role in Melito’s understanding of the 
Passover.

However, when the cross is placed in the Passover narrative, it plays a differ-
ent role than it does in the Day of Atonement narrative. In the Passover story, the 
lamb is not sacrificed to make atonement. At least, there is no explicit mention 
made of this in the text of Exodus. The blood of the lamb saves because it causes 
the Angel of Death to pass over the house. Applied to Christ, this means that the 
cross conquers death. Melito notes that in the story in Exodus, the blood of the 
Passover lamb deters the angel of death, but it only does so because of the Spirit of 
the Lord.\(^{12}\) This comment sets Melito up for his assertion later in the sermon 
that the cross saves us by destroying suffering. He states, “He took to himself the
sufferings of the sufferer by means of a body capable of suffering, and he destroyed the sufferings of the flesh. By a Spirit incapable of death he killed off death, the homicide.” Here, Melito is using the word Spirit to refer to what we would call Christ’s divine nature. Thus, for Melito, the cross saves because Christ takes suffering and death upon Himself through the instrumentality of His human nature and brings it into contact with His divine nature, which destroys it. Although Melito does say that Christ grants remission of sins, he never ties forgiveness of sins to the cross. Instead the blood of Christ, like the blood of the Passover lamb in Exodus, saves because it protects the people from death.

Christ’s resurrection likewise finds its meaning in the Passover narrative. Melito actually lays more emphasis on the cross than on the resurrection in his homily. However, when he does speak of the resurrection, it is clear that the resurrection saves in its own right. It does not merely tell us something about the cross. Melito states, for example, “[Christ] rose from the dead and raised humanity from the grave below.” In Melito’s view, then, both the cross and the resurrection conquer death. The cross does so by destroying it by bringing it into contact with Christ’s divine nature. The resurrection does so by leading us out of Egypt, that is, raising us up from the grave.

From Melito, we see that the difference between the Day of Atonement and Passover narratives is not one of emphasis, as if one emphasized the cross and the other emphasized the resurrection. The real difference lies in the role of both the cross and the resurrection in each narrative. In the Day of Atonement narrative, the cross saves by propitiating God’s wrath, and there is no clear role for the resurrection. In the Passover narrative, the cross saves by conquering death, and the resurrection saves by conquering death as well.

We can see the same thing in another patristic author: Athanasius. Athanasius is not a Quartodeciman, yet, like Melito, he consistently interprets Christ’s death and resurrection along the lines of the Passover narrative. This is particularly prominent in his festal letters. He writes a festal letter every year to tell the priests in his diocese when to celebrate Easter. By looking at these letters, one gains a pretty good sense of what Athanasius saw as the saving significance of Christ’s death and resurrection.

In Epistle 4, Athanasius interprets Christ’s death as the sacrifice of the true Passover lamb. He notes that in the Passover ceremony, which is a shadow of the truth found in Christ, the blood of a lamb on the doorposts “implored aid against the destroyer.” In the Lord’s Supper, he says, we have the “lintels of our hearts sealed with the blood of the New Testament” and this gives us the power to “tread on serpents and scorpions.” Just as the blood of the Passover lamb averted the angel of death, so also the blood of Christ conquers the power of death and Satan.

The notion that Christ’s sacrifice abolishes death is found in a number of places throughout the festal letters. For example, he states in Epistle 6, “The Lord
too was sacrificed, that by His blood He might abolish death.”\textsuperscript{18} Epistle 13 says the same thing: “Our Savior did not redeem us by inactivity, but by suffering for us He abolished death.”\textsuperscript{19}

As we saw in Melito, the cross does not save because it propitiates God’s wrath for sin but because it abolishes death. When we hear that Christ’s sacrifice abolishes death, it is very easy for us to fill in the blanks with the Day of Atonement narrative. We assume that it abolishes death because it forgives sin. I think it is important to note that Athanasius and Melito do not fill in the blanks this way. Christ’s sacrifice saves from death because it fulfills the Passover narrative. There is not much explanation in Exodus, or in Athanasius or Melito for that matter, of \textit{why} the lamb’s blood averts the angel of death. That is just how the story goes.

This does not mean, however, that Athanasius never uses the Day of Atonement narrative. In at least one place in his festal letters he describes Christ’s sacrifice not as a fulfillment of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, but as a fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. Drawing on the discussion of the Day of Atonement in Hebrews 9, he states, “Of old time, the blood of he-goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkled upon those who were unclean, were fit only to purify the flesh (Heb 9:13); but now, through the grace of God the Word, every man is thoroughly cleansed.”\textsuperscript{20} Here he sounds very Lutheran because the focus is on Christ’s death for the forgiveness of sins, and he is employing the interpretive framework for Christ’s death that we are most comfortable with. This is not, however, the main way that Athanasius describes the cross. The Passover narrative dominates his thinking.

In fact, there are places where Athanasius’s focus on salvation as victory over death seems to control his exegesis. For example, in one letter Athanasius refers to Romans 5, in which Paul says that by Adam’s disobedience, sin and death entered the world, but by Christ’s righteousness and His obedience, the many will be justified. Here is what Athanasius says on this score:

For as by one man, as saith Paul (and it is the truth), sin passed upon all men, so by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall all rise (cf. Ro 5:12). “For,” he says, “this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Co 15:53). Now this came to pass in the time of the Passion, in which our Lord died for us, for “our Passover, Christ, is sacrificed” (1 Co 5:7).\textsuperscript{21}

We would normally understand Christ’s act of obedience and righteousness to be His willingness to go to death on the cross, as Philippians 2 states. However, Athanasius understands Christ’s act of righteousness to be the resurrection. This is why he elides Romans 5 with 1 Corinthians 15. By referring to 1 Corinthians 5:7 at the end of his statement, Athanasius indicates that he is thinking of Christ’s death.
and resurrection as a fulfillment of the Passover narrative. Thus, it is no surprise to see him interpret Christ’s act of righteousness as victory over death. After all, in the Passover narrative, victory over death is the effect of both the cross and the resurrection. In any case, Athanasius’s handling of Romans 5 indicates that his soteriological focus is more on the defeat of death than on the forgiveness of sins.

Athanasius’s treatment of the resurrection is very much along these lines. He states, for example, that the Israelites “toiled earnestly to pass from Egypt to Jerusalem, but now we depart from death to life.” Elsewhere he says of Christ’s work, “Having abolished death, He has brought us from affliction and sighing to the rest and gladness of this feast….” These passages indicate that the deliverance from Egypt in the Passover story corresponds to the resurrection of Christ.

Christ’s resurrection, then, saves because it delivers us from our captivity, a captivity to sin, death, and the devil, who is the true Pharaoh.

We have seen from Melito and Athanasius how the Passover narrative shapes one’s interpretation of Christ’s death and resurrection. Both the cross and the resurrection save us, and they do so by conquering death. Unlike the Day of Atonement, there is little or no mention of a propitiatory sacrifice in this narrative.

Luther

Aulén’s thesis is that Luther returns to the Christus Victor atonement motif of the early church. I think it would be more precise to say that Luther uses any number of different narratives to describe the cross and resurrection. For the purposes of this paper, I will highlight one that he employs in an Easter sermon based on Mark 16:1-8. The reason I am focusing on this narrative is that it strikes me as significantly different than the other two.

Before I come to the narrative itself, I would like to highlight a passage from this sermon which addresses the theme of this symposium. Luther states,

And as it is not sufficient to know and believe that Christ has died, so it will not suffice to know and believe that he rose with a transfigured body and is now in a state of joy and blessedness, no longer subject to mortality, for all this would profit me nothing or very little. But when I come to understand the fact that all the works God does in Christ are done for me, nay, they are bestowed upon and given to me, the effect of his resurrection being that I also will arise and live with him; that will cause me to rejoice.

Earlier, we met the idea that the resurrection itself does not save us but only says something about the cross. Here Luther says that not only does the resurrection give us life, but preaching that does not ascribe saving significance to the resurrection is pointless. Luther does not have the zero-sum mentality that says if the cross saves us, then nothing else can. Indeed he suggests that all the events in Christ’s life save us because every work that Christ does is “bestowed upon and given to me.”
How, then, does Luther say the resurrection saves us? He refers, among other passages, to Genesis 3:15, where God says to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” For lack of a better term, I will refer to this as the stomping narrative.

According to this pattern, the cross is not primarily described as a victory. In fact, it is a defeat, penultimate to be sure, but it is the point at which Satan seems to win. Thus, Luther can say in this sermon,

Let us see how [my sins] treat [Christ]. They hurl him to the ground and kill him. O God; where is now my Christ and Savior? But then God appears, delivers Christ and makes him alive; and not only does he make him alive, but he translates him into heaven and lets him rule over all. What has now become of sin? There it lies under his feet.25

This way of describing the cross and resurrection is particularly helpful if the preacher, as Luther does here, describes sin as an enemy power outside of us that seeks to destroy us. “[I]f I look at my sins,” Luther says, “they will destroy me.” Therefore, Luther wants to get his hearers to look away from their experience of sin and failure and look to Christ, whose resurrection is the ultimate victory over sin. Luther states, “Our feelings must not be considered, but we must constantly insist that death, sin and hell have been conquered, although I feel that I am still under the power of death, sin and hell.”

The genius of the stomping narrative, it seems to me, is that it has a place for the experience of defeat. It allows Luther to correlate our own undeniable experience with sin and death to Christ’s apparent defeat on the cross. The fact that we feel the attack of sin and death does not mean that we are separated from Christ; these things are just part of the story. But in the stomping narrative, the resurrection ultimately crushes these powers that seem so threatening to us.

This narrative pattern appears in at least a couple of places in our hymnody. For example, stanza 8 of Luther’s hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice,” gives us Christ’s description of what He will accomplish for our salvation. Christ says,

Though he will shed my precious blood,
Of life me thus bereaving,
All this I suffer for your good;
Be steadfast and believing,
Life will from death the vict’ry win;
My innocence shall bear your sin;
And you are blest forever.26
The basic pattern of this stanza follows the pattern of the stomping narrative: though he will kill me, life will have the victory. The Day of Atonement narrative would identify the cross as the victory, and the Passover narrative would allow this as well. Luther, however, identifies the resurrection as the victory that happens despite the cross.

The second last line does not quite fit the stomping narrative. “My innocence shall bear your sin” would seem to draw on the Day of Atonement narrative. But as I said earlier, Luther is very flexible and not exclusively committed to any particular narrative. His Easter hymn, “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands,” for example, proceeds explicitly along the lines of the Passover narrative.

One other example of the stomping narrative would be C.F.W. Walther’s hymn, “He’s Risen! He’s Risen!” Stanza 2 reads,

The foe was triumphant when on Calvary
The Lord of creation was nailed to the tree.
In Satan’s domain his hosts shouted and jeered,
For Jesus was slain whom the evil ones feared.

This rather startling stanza proclaims that the cross was Satan’s victory. I always thought that was a strange and problematic thing to say, but it does in fact fit the stomping narrative. It is a victory for Satan, though a penultimate one. And the reader, or in this case singer, understands that the true victory lies with Christ’s resurrection. Stanza 3 says, “But short was their triumph, the Savior arose/And death, hell, and Satan, he vanquished his foes.”

In the last two lines of stanza 4, however, Walther, or at least his translator, does revert to the Day of Atonement narrative:

For all our transgressions his blood does atone;
Redeemed and forgiven, we now are his own.

These lines locate our redemption in Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross. Although they actually bear no relation to the original German of this stanza, they do loosely reflect the sixth stanza of the hymn (omitted in our English translation) in which Walther speaks of Christ paying for human guilt with his suffering. This move seems confusing after the particularly stark way in which stanza 2 declares the cross to be Satan’s victory, but it does show that Walther, like Luther, is comfortable with more than one narrative.

**Lutheran Confessions**

How do the Lutheran Confessions handle these themes? The catechisms employ the Passover narrative by their emphasis on Christ as Lord. The Large Catechism states concerning the second article of the Creed, “Let this be the sum-
mary of this article, that the little word ‘Lord’ simply means the same as Redeemer, that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there.” The description of redemption as bringing us from the devil to God is the hallmark of the Passover narrative. When the catechisms address the question of how Christ accomplished this, they turn to the Day of Atonement narrative. The Large Catechism states, “The remaining parts of this article simply serve to clarify and express how and by what means this redemption was accomplished.... Moreover, he suffered, died, and was buried so that he might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owed, not with silver and gold but with his own precious blood” (emphasis added). The explanation of the second article in the Small Catechism combines these themes in summary form:

I believe that Jesus Christ...is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.30

Again, He is Lord because He frees me from the devil (the Passover narrative). How does He do it? With His holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death (Day of Atonement narrative). Based on these passages, I would say that the catechisms employ the Passover narrative as the primary framework for interpreting the cross and the resurrection. However, the catechisms do not remain exclusively with that narrative. When they explore more deeply the question of how Christ accomplished salvation, they turn to the Passover narrative. This is the narrative, after all, that deals with ultimate issues. Our real problem is with God, not Satan, and the Day of Atonement narrative makes this clearer than the other two do.

The Augsburg Confession and the Apology handle these themes somewhat differently. Article III of the Augsburg Confession employs the Day of Atonement narrative when it describes Christ’s death as a “sacrifice...to conciliate God’s wrath.” When it comes to the resurrection, however, Article III states,

Moreover, the same Christ “descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, is sitting at the right hand of God” in order to rule and reign forever over all creatures, so that through the Holy Spirit he may make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, also distribute to them life various gifts and benefits, and shield and protect them against the devil and sin.32

Here the emphasis on the resurrection, and the state of exaltation in general, has less to do with what Christ’s resurrection itself accomplished and more to do with what He is accomplishing at the present time on our behalf. The resurrection is important because if He were dead, He would not be able to do these things.
A similar emphasis may be seen in Apology Article IV. The two titles of Christ repeated throughout the article are propitiator and mediator. Propitiator draws on the Day of Atonement narrative because it describes Christ’s sacrifice as that which propitiates God’s wrath. Mediator, on the other hand, seems to be linked to the resurrection. Christ’s role as mediator is made possible by the resurrection since it is something that He carries out, not once in history, but at the present time and on into the future. Apology IV defines the way in which people are justified as “Christ is the mediator in perpetuity.”

Elsewhere in Melanchthon’s writings, he interprets Romans 4:25, “He was raised again for our justification,” to mean that the resurrection saves us because our mediator is alive and, therefore, active on our behalf. This seems to be a variation on the Day of Atonement, focusing not on Christ as sacrifice but on Christ as high priest. The fact that Christ is continually before the Father holding up His own merits on our behalf secures our justification. In this sense, the Augsburg Confession and the Apology exhibit the same features we saw in Pieper. A commitment to the Day of Atonement narrative prevents statements that give Christ’s resurrection itself saving significance. However, Melanchthon has found a different way of including the resurrection in that narrative by turning to the figure of the high priest rather than merely the logic of sacrifice.

Conclusion

We have looked at various Old Testament narratives that have been used as the frameworks for understanding Christ’s death and resurrection. The Day of Atonement narrative sees the cross as satisfying God’s wrath over sin. The problem with the Day of Atonement narrative is that it has no obvious place for the resurrection. The Passover narrative understands the cross as a victory over death because the blood drives the Angel of Death away. The resurrection is also seen as a victory over death because through it God leads His people out of bondage to Egypt and crosses them over to the Promised Land. The Passover narrative has the advantage of embracing both the cross and resurrection, though it does portray Satan as our main enemy rather than seeing our ultimate problem as God’s wrath due to sin. In the stomping narrative the cross is seen as a temporary victory for Satan, but the resurrection reverses this victory, crushing the serpent’s head. This narrative works well for dealing with the experience of defeat in the Christian life. These narratives cause difficulty only when one is committed to one narrative at the exclusion of the others. Luther, as we have seen, says that every event in Christ’s life saves us because He does it for us and bestows it on us.

It is understandable that Lutherans gravitate towards the Day of Atonement narrative because it is associated with such key texts as Romans 3. Furthermore, it is deeper than the other narratives in the sense that it addresses our problem with God, not merely our problem with Satan. Therefore, I think it would be a mistake
to insist that we need to abandon this approach as if it were invented by Anselm in the eleventh century. Instead, I think the way forward is to admit to ourselves that we can have—and in fact do have—multiple narratives which describe the role of the cross and resurrection in various ways. What we need to abandon is not the Day of Atonement narrative but the zero-sum mindset that assumes that if the cross saves us, then nothing else that Christ does can.

**Endnotes**


7. Ibid., 348.


11. Stewart-Sykes reconstructs Melito’s liturgical tradition. See 18-23.


13. Ibid., 66.

14. Ibid., 103.

15. Ibid., 71.

16. Athanasius links Christ to the Passover in *Epistle* 1.3, 1.7-9, 2.7, 3.1, 3.5-6, 4.1-3, 5.4-5, 6 (passim), 11.14, 14.1-3, 19.1, 19.8, 20.1, 42, 43.


28. For the original German text of the hymn, see Martin Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther: Lebensbild* (St. Louis: Luthersische Concordia-Verlag, 1890), 243-246.

29. LC 2 (Kolb-Wengert, 434).

30. SC 2 (Kolb-Wengert, 355).
31 Kolb-Wengert, 38.
32 Ibid.
33 Ap. 4.357, octavo ed
The Gospel Pattern of Death and Resurrection in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*

Francis C. Rossow

(*Crime and Punishment* (in my opinion one of the greatest novels ever written) can be—indeed, should be—approached in many different ways: as a thrilling adventure story, as a psychological study of the criminal mind, as a philosophical work, and as a religious/theological novel. In this article I am approaching it primarily as a religious/theological novel. But that dimension, we need to bear in mind, is only a part of the novel’s greatness and richness. The whole (the novel) is greater than any of its features that we may single out for admiration—or even the sum of those features.

Despite the complexity of the novel’s message and art, its plot is a simple one. A student named Raskolnikov plans and carries out the murder of a female pawnbroker. Hounded by Porfiry, a shrewd detective equipped only with knowledge of the criminal mind but lacking tangible evidence, Raskolnikov is equally harassed by an unexpected compulsion to confess his crime. Moreover, he is blackmailed by a depraved sensualist, Svidrigailov, who has learned of Raskolnikov’s crime through eavesdropping. But what actually impels Raskolnikov to confess his crime is his innocent association with Sonia, a devout Christian girl driven to prostitution by the poverty and irresponsibility of her family. Even though the threat of blackmail disappears with the suicide of Svidrigailov, Raskolnikov is nudged into confession of his crime through the gentle urging of Sonia and through her reading of the biblical account of Lazarus’s resurrection. Faithful in her devotion to Raskolnikov, Sonia follows him to his imprisonment in Siberia, where her persistent love and Christian witness gradually bring Raskolnikov to his regeneration through Christ.

Thesis: The Gospel Pattern of Death and Resurrection

Many readers have interpreted the novel as a tribute to the power of love or to the value of suffering—Christian themes to be sure, but not exclusively Christian themes. Perhaps the best way to get at the specifically Christian/Gospel character of *Crime and Punishment* is to see in it the Gospel pattern of death and resurrection.

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Raskolnikov, the protagonist, proceeds from spiritual death to spiritual life through the intervention of Sonia, a Christ figure.

**Raskolnikov’s Evil**

Raskolnikov’s spiritual death is most obvious in his planned, even rehearsed, and eventually accomplished murder of an old pawnbroker and the gratuitous murder of her half-sister when she blunders onto the scene of the crime. Murder is foul enough, but some of the factors prompting Raskolnikov’s crime make his deed even more despicable. In the course of the novel Dostoevsky presents a variety of motives for Raskolnikov’s crime: the desire for money to alleviate the poverty of his mother and sister; an unconscious protest against the squalid environment he lives in; incipient insanity; the thrill or daring of it, a sort of morbid curiosity; Satan; and a superman concept. Although the humanitarian and environmental factors prompting Raskolnikov’s crime may reduce the heinousness of his foul deed, the main motive—at least the one to which Dostoevsky devotes the most space—the superman concept, increases the magnitude of his crime.

As a university student Raskolnikov had written an article advancing a superman concept. That article advocated the theory that society is divided into two classes—ordinary people and extraordinary people. The latter have the right to break the moral law on occasion to advance some great cause designed (in their opinion) to benefit humanity. Not only will these extraordinary people not stop at murder (if necessary) to further their cause, but they will not even consider what they do to be a crime—although ordinary people will so view it according to their conventional moral standards. Raskolnikov regarded Napoleon, Lycurgus, and Mahomet as examples of the extraordinary class. To implement his theory, to prove that he himself was a member of the extraordinary class, a sort of modern Napoleon, was a major factor in Raskolnikov’s axe murder.

The heinousness of Raskolnikov’s crime is skillfully foreshadowed through a dream he has. In the dream a man cruelly beats to death with a crowbar an old mare, unable to pull a wagon overloaded with drunken revelers, under the rubric that the mare is his property and that he can do with it as he pleases. Intensifying the depravity of the owner’s mind and deed is the phenomenon of a woman laughing and cracking nuts for the duration of the ordeal. One bystander is so shocked at what he sees that he calls out to the owner, “Are you a Christian, you devil?” Horrified at his “nightmare,” but relieved to discover that it was only a dream, Raskolnikov promptly connects the dream to his contemplated crime: “Good God!…can it be, can it be, that I shall really take an axe, that I shall strike
her on the head, split her skull open...that I shall tread in the sticky warm blood....Good God, can it be?” (53). This dream episode is a microcosm of the murder that informs the main plot of *Crime and Punishment*.

As the dream foreshadows the egregious evil of Raskolnikov’s crime, so his confession to Sonia mirrors it. So horrible is the deed even in his own eyes that, like the murderer in the movie *Presumed Innocent*, Raskolnikov at first can confess it only in the third person. “He...did not mean to kill that Lizaveta...” he says, “he...killed her accidentally” (353). Unable to give the dastardly deed the words it deserves, Raskolnikov twice insists that Sonia guess at what he did rather than himself admitting it (353). For that matter, even when he was contemplating his crime, Raskolnikov was unable to give his evil deed the necessary evil words, referring to it, not as a murder or a crime, but rather as “that” (2), “this” (47), “it” (47), “the whole plan” (3), “this business” (3), “dream” (3), “project” (3), and “experiment” (53). So evil even in his own view is the deed Raskolnikov plots that he cannot call a spade a spade.

The evidence for Raskolnikov’s spiritual corruption does not rest exclusively, however, on the murder of two old ladies and the circumstances related to that crime. There are more subtle indications. For example, early in the novel Raskolnikov tries to protect a drunken girl from a would-be rapist stalking her and even pays a policeman to intervene; then suddenly he “repents” of his contemplated good deed and dismisses the officer with the cynical thought, “Let him take as much from the other fellow to allow him to have the girl...And why did I want to interfere?...Let them devour each other alive—what is it to me?” (45). In the opening pages of the novel Raskolnikov emerges as an irritable hypochondriac, isolated from others, ducking his landlady, and crossing the street to avoid his friend Razumihin. The very name “Raskolnikov” means “alienated,” “detached”; Raskolnikov is “like a tortoise in its shell” (25). His separation from both humankind and God is best symbolized by Raskolnikov’s tossing into a river a coin given him “in Christ’s name” moments before by a kind woman, an action accompanied by Dostoevsky’s gratuitous explanation, “It seemed to him, he had cut himself off from everyone and from everything at that moment” (102). Obviously, something is rotten in the state of Raskolnikov’s spirituality.

Raskolnikov’s character and conduct are more than inhuman—they are diabolic. And for Dostoevsky “diabolic” is more literal than hyperbolic. Evil is not merely of human provenance; it is ultimately of satanic origin. Demonic possession is a reality in Dostoevsky’s portrait of evil.4 “A strange idea [the crime] was pecking at [Raskolnikov’s] brain like a chicken in the egg” (57). Having overheard someone say that the pawnbroker would be alone at precisely the time of his scheduled appointment with her, Raskolnikov “felt suddenly in his whole being that he had no more freedom of thought, no will, and that everything was suddenly and irrevocably decided” (56). As he approaches the pawnbroker’s lodging, weaponless, he spies
an axe under a porter’s bench and seizes it with the remark, “When reason fails, the devil helps!” (65). There seems to be additional diabolic intervention (diabolus ex machina, to coin a term) when a wagon screens Raskolnikov’s entrance into the lodging, when there is an empty flat for him to hide in after the crime as strangers approach him on the stairway, and when the porter is not home as Raskolnikov returns the axe. Sonia’s later diagnosis removes any doubt of a satanic role in Raskolnikov’s evil when she cries out to Raskolnikov, “You turned away from God and God...has given you over to the devil!” (360). One thinks of St. John’s comment about Judas during the meal in the upper chamber right at the start of our Lord’s Passion: “And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, “That thou doest, do quickly’” (Jn 13:27 KJV).

Separated from both God and man, Raskolnikov experiences occasional foretastes of that permanent separation called hell toward which he is headed. “A gloomy sensation of agonizing, everlasting solitude and remoteness, took conscious form in his soul...the most agonizing of all the sensations he had known in his life” (92-93, my emphasis). “A special form of misery had begun to oppress him of late....There was a feeling of permanence, of eternity about it; it brought a foretaste of hopeless years of this cold leaden misery, a foretaste of an eternity ‘on a square yard of space’” (367, my emphasis). For Raskolnikov, “to feel like hell” is neither metaphor nor cliché.

Dramatic Hedging

To prevent the reader from despising Raskolnikov and dissociating from him, Dostoevsky, to be sure, gives his protagonist some redeeming qualities, a literary practice called dramatic hedging. Raskolnikov, even like Shylock and similar villains of literature, is not altogether bad. Anonymously, he leaves money for the poverty-stricken Marmeladov family when he first meets them. He is consistently generous, giving money to a street-singer, to a prostitute (no services rendered!), to fetch a doctor for the dying Marmeladov run over by a carriage, and to Marmeladov’s destitute family after his death. He even asks Polenka, Marmeladov’s daughter, to pray for him as he leaves the bereaved family.

Dostoevsky’s Concept of the Double

But for Dostoevsky to attribute a few good qualities to Raskolnikov’s character is more than the exercise of a literary convention. For him the duality in Raskolnikov, the mixture of good and evil in his make-up, is a theological truth, the Christian doctrine of the old man and the new man in human personality. “It’s as though he were alternating between two characters” (187). As Sonia puts it in a moment of dismay, “How could you give away your last farthing and yet rob and murder?” (355).
This brings us to Dostoevsky’s curious concept of “the double,” a concept prominent in many of his novels. He dramatizes the Christian doctrine of the duality of human nature by suggesting that among the acquaintances of such principal characters as Raskolnikov (of this novel), Ivan Karamazov (of *The Brothers Karamazov*), and Golyadkin (of *The Double*) there are people who constitute the embodiment, the personification, the logical outcome (unless corrected or inhibited) of their respective old man and new man. Razumihin, Raskolnikov’s good friend, is Raskolnikov’s “good double.” (There by the grace of God can go Raskolnikov.) And Svidrigailov is Raskolnikov’s “evil double.” (There except for the grace of God goes Raskolnikov.) Thus Raskolnikov is strangely attracted to Razumihin, mystified as to why he is drawn to him, especially when feeling the urge to confess his crime. “Could I have expected to set it all straight and to find a way out by means of Razumihin alone?” (47). Frequently, Razumihin and Raskolnikov call each other “brother” (though unrelated), and even Raskolnikov’s mother and sister regard Razumihin as “a relation” and “a son and a brother” (197, 272).

More to the point in our present focus on Raskolnikov’s spiritual death and corruption is Dostoevsky’s portrait of the protagonist’s “evil double,” Svidrigailov, one of the “creepiest” evil characters in all literature. It is an understatement when this evil man—a wife abuser, a pedophile, visited by ghosts, incapable of dreaming anything but nightmares, and from whom children flee in terror—is told, “You should go to a doctor” (250). Svidrigailov himself is aware of the strange affinity between himself and Raskolnikov. “Didn’t I say that there was something in common among us, eh?” he asks Raskolnikov (248). “I keep fancying there is something about you like me,” he insists (254). “Wasn’t I right in saying that we were *birds of a feather*?” (251, my emphasis). Raskolnikov, too, is uncomfortably aware of the horrifying affinity. He puzzles over the fact that “that man had some hidden power over him” (398). This “double-relationship” between protagonist and villain is further evidenced by numerous parallels between the two men: both are cynics; both have nightmares; both feign sleep to avoid contact with unwanted visitors; both berate themselves for their occasional and inexplicable good deeds; both are afraid of water; both are in need of “fresh air”; and both have committed murder. “I don’t know why I’m afraid of that man,” Raskolnikov muses (255). Readers of Dostoevsky can clarify the mystery for Raskolnikov. “Because he’s your double—your evil double—the portrait of the frightful thing you will become unless, by God’s mercy, you mend your ways!”

**Enter Sonia—and the Scriptures**

Plagued by conscience, driven by suffering, harassed by Porfiry (the detective whose “psyching out” of the protagonist qualifies him as the “Columbo” of the nineteenth century), and horrified by his future, Raskolnikov seeks the help of Sonia, a prostitute (but not by her choice). She has been driven to her fate in order
to combat the poverty of her family, that of the alcoholic Marmeladov. Raskolnikov became acquainted with her when Marmeladov was run over and killed by a carriage. Raskolnikov is perceptive enough to note the difference in their respective evil: his is by choice; hers is by circumstance. His suffering is self-imposed; hers is other-imposed.

It is clear that Dostoevsky intends Sonia as a Christ figure—of sorts. Like Christ she is innocent (relatively), yet she “becomes sin” (2 Co 5:21) for the sake of her family. “Where is the daughter,” Marmeladov cries in his famous drunken speech, “who gave herself for her cross, consumptive step-mother and for the little children of another? Where is the daughter who had pity upon the filthy drunkard, her earthly father, undismayed by his beastliness?” (20). “Sonia Marmeladov, the eternal victim so long as the world lasts” (39, my emphasis). At the end of the novel Raskolnikov recognizes that she “was with him for ever and would follow him to the ends of the earth” (453, my emphasis); (see Mt 28:20). At one point he even bows down to her, dropping to the ground and kissing her foot with the explanation, “I did not bow down to you, I bowed down to all the suffering of humanity” (279).

It is to this Christ figure, Sonia, to whom Raskolnikov repairs for help. Actually, his first major visit to Sonia is ostensibly to help her, to make her realize that if she continues in her present life of prostitution, she will end up dead. But he learns that despite her misery and bleak future, she trusts unswervingly in God. “He does everything,” she quietly whispers to Raskolnikov (281). As they converse, he spies a Russian New Testament in her room. He is startled to learn that Lizaveta, the pawnbroker’s half sister whom he had also murdered, had given it to Sonia and that the two had been good friends. Impulsively, he asks her to read him the account of Lazarus’s resurrection, the biblical miracle that Porfiry had earlier mentioned to him in the course of interrogating Raskolnikov about the crime. Sonia obliges Raskolnikov—but reluctantly. She is no careless hawker of precious Christian truths. She is not one to cast pearls to swine or holy things to dogs. Raskolnikov “understood only too well how painful it was for her to betray and unveil all that was her own. He understood that these feelings really were her secret treasure” (283; Dostoevsky’s emphasis). After the reading, Raskolnikov, on the verge of confession, only hints at his crime by promising that if he comes back, he will tell her who killed Lizaveta.

He keeps his promise, returns to Sonia’s lodging, and confesses—clumsily, reluctantly, and without remorse. She urges him to confess to the authorities and embrace his punishment, promising to share his imprisonment in Siberia. She instructs him also to go to the crossroads and kiss the ground as a symbol of his crime against all people and of his having defiled the earth (361, 452). As he leaves her lodging, Raskolnikov asks for a cross. Sonia offers one, again a gift from Lizaveta. Almost he takes it, then shrinks back from it and decides to wait until he is ready for it. Nor does Sonia force the cross on him.
The confession to the public authorities does not come easily for Raskolnikov. Even when he goes to the police station to make a clean breast of it, he learns that Svidrigailov, the only person (besides Sonia) who knew of Raskolnikov’s guilt and who had threatened to blackmail him, had killed himself. Technically, Raskolnikov is now safe from the law. Stunned, he leaves the police station—only to be driven back by the pleading eyes of Sonia as she waits outside. Much to the officer’s surprise, Raskolnikov returns and confesses to the murder—precisely at the time when, humanly speaking, he had no need to confess.

The Artistry and the Theology of the Encounter with Sonia

There are numerous remarkable features deserving of comment in Raskolnikov’s visits to Sonia. First, there is the irony of a murderer and a harlot reading the Scriptures together. One is reminded of our Lord’s comment about publicans and harlots going into the kingdom of God before scribes and Pharisees (Mt 21:31). Then there is a sort of poetic injustice in the fact that it is Lizaveta’s Bible and Lizaveta’s cross that are instrumental in initiating Raskolnikov’s transformation. He gave her death—physical; in return, she gives him life—spiritual. Unlike the widow Paul speaks of in 1 Timothy 5:6, who “is dead while she liveth,” Lizaveta, in a sense, “liveth while she’s dead”! Then there is the emergence of a foil relationship between Raskolnikov and Sonia, a sharp contrast between the two made vivid against the background of a number of similarities between them. Both had committed crime: murder by one, prostitution by the other. Both, in a sense, had killed a life: Raskolnikov in the past and Sonia in the future (her own) if she persists in prostitution. “You have laid hands on yourself,” Raskolnikov tells her, “you have destroyed a life...your own” (286). But there the similarities end. Raskolnikov’s crime is selfish; Sonia’s crime is sacrificial. Raskolnikov denies God (279), but Sonia trusts Him unreservedly. There is the lesson to be learned from Sonia’s missionary technique: to avoid in our Christian witness not merely constipation of the spirit but also the opposite malady of diarrhea of the mouth. There is Dostoevsky’s skillful use of a device to unify his plot: using the very miracle account of Lazarus’s resurrection that Porfiry had casually introduced earlier (227) as a catalyst for a major shift in the direction of the plot.

But that miracle account is more than a device to tighten the structure of Dostoevsky’s lengthy novel. The account of Lazarus’s resurrection, as we have seen, initiates the change in Raskolnikov’s character from bad to good. But here is where the genius of Dostoevsky is especially evident. He chooses a Gospel account which not merely effects the change in Raskolnikov but also, simultaneously, symbolizes the nature of that change: from death to life. Even as Lazarus was physically resurrected, so Raskolnikov is spiritually resurrected. To put it simply, the account of Christ resurrecting Lazarus from the grave not only begins the change in Raskolnikov, it dramatizes that change. It suggests the death and resurrection
Gospel pattern that informs this novel. After Raskolnikov had confessed his crime to Sonia, we are told, “A feeling long unfamiliar to him flooded his heart and softened it at once. He did not struggle against it” (354). Just before his confession at the police station, Raskolnikov gives a coin to a beggar woman, who responds, “God bless you” (402). Note how this incident parallels, yet contrasts, an earlier incident when Raskolnikov, mistaken for a beggar, receives a coin from a woman, given “in Christ’s name,” and then throws the money into the river. Even as the earlier action symbolizes his rejection of God and man, so the later action signifies his growing acceptance of God and man. The transformation is evidently underway. But, unlike Lazarus’s resurrection, the transformation is not instantaneous. Spiritual resurrection, realistically, comes harder and takes more time.

The Role of the “Epilogue”

That is why Dostoevsky attached the “Epilogue” to his novel. Some (notably Ernest Simmons) have criticized this addition as anticlimactic, as a dull footnote to an otherwise exciting presentation. Some argue that the novel should have ended with Raskolnikov’s electrifying confession at the police station. That opinion is not without merit. But, really, Dostoevsky needed the “Epilogue” for the completion of his theme, Raskolnikov’s spiritual regeneration. Even in Siberia Raskolnikov resists the change that has begun. Late in the “Epilogue” we are told that he recognized only “his criminality, only...the fact that he had been unsuccessful and had confessed it” (467). But Sonia patiently and unobtrusively persists, loyally bestowing on him her love and understanding. Then one day it happens. Raskolnikov embraces her and weeps, and Sonia recognizes that the moment she had longed for had come. In Dostoevsky’s words, their “pale faces were bright with the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection into a new life” (471). The novel ends with the words, “But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life” (472).

Form Reinforces Content

Even the structure of the novel—not just the content—reflects this death and resurrection pattern. Raskolnikov’s visit to Sonia in which she reads to him the biblical account of Lazarus’s resurrection occurs near the midpoint of the novel, thus dividing the novel into two easily recognizable parts. In the first part Raskolnikov visits Alyona, the pawnbroker; in the second part Raskolnikov visits Sonia, the prostitute. Murder is the high point in the first part; confession is the high point in the second part. There is a rehearsal for each of these actions in each part, a “dry run,” so to speak, preceding the contemplated activity. Above all, death in the first part is paralleled by life in the second part. Form reinforces content—another aspect of Dostoevsky’s genius.
Two Other Possible Gospel Patterns

Early in this essay I specified two other ways to get at the role of the Gospel in *Crime and Punishment*, the way of love and the way of suffering. Because these two routes need not be exclusively Christian routes, I chose not to pursue them. But inadvertently, in my depiction of Sonia’s relationship with Raskolnikov, I have, in fact, dealt with the power of love as a Gospel pattern after all. Her reading of the biblical account of Lazarus’s resurrection and her comments on that account were the Gospel in words. Her patience, loyalty, and unobtrusive love for Raskolnikov were the Gospel in actions. The verbal was reinforced by the visual. The two cannot really be separated in Christian witness. It is a truism that words—even Gospel words—without accompanying deeds are relatively ineffective.

I do feel, though, that the other route to the Gospel, the way of suffering, deserves more than a passing reference in view of the prominence of the theme of suffering in the novel. The Bible says, “We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Ac 14:22). *Crime and Punishment* is a dramatic demonstration of that truth. Whether suffering is self-imposed (as in the case of Raskolnikov) or other-imposed (as was true of Sonia, her parents, and her siblings), God can use those sufferings to steer the victims into the kingdom of God. Two notable examples of this (besides Raskolnikov and Sonia, whose sufferings I have dealt with briefly) are Marmeladov and his wife, Katerina Ivanovna. Marmeladov’s famous drunken speech in the tavern early in the novel (20) has even been referred to as “The Gospel according to Marmeladov.” In it he pictures God’s mercy on Judgment Day to suffering sinners such as Sonia and himself. Katerina Ivanovna is a consumptive, most of her life exposed to abuse and abject poverty. Coughing blood, ridiculed by guests at the funeral dinner she gave for her husband, eventually maddened by society’s rejection of her, Katerina dies in her misery. In another stroke of genius, Dostoevsky has Raskolnikov discover on her pillow a “certificate of merit” (once given her for her skillful dancing before the governor), symbolizing her status also in the sight of God. Literally pleasing, this symbol, however, is theologically disturbing. Does Dostoevsky portray suffering as redemptive because it drives us to Christ, who redeems? If so, his presentation accords with the Scriptures. Or does Dostoevsky portray suffering as redemptive per se? Katerina’s words shortly before her death seem to suggest the latter: “I have no sin. God must forgive me without that. He knows how I have suffered” (373). If so, Dostoevsky’s view dilutes the truth of salvation by God’s grace alone, apart from human merit. Equally troublesome is the ingredient of masochism in Dostoevsky’s concept of suffering. Marmeladov, especially, embraces suffering for its supposed benefits. “Know, sir, that such blows are not a pain to me, but even an enjoyment” (21). Later he calls his sufferings “a consolation” (23). Yet the central episode of the novel, Sonia reading the biblical account of Christ’s resurrection of Lazarus, and
Raskolnikov’s subsequent transformation clearly put suffering back into a more orthodox perspective.

For Further Reading


Endnotes


2 The multiplicity of motives leading Raskolnikov to murder is considered by some critics to be a flaw in the novel. They feel that neither Raskolnikov nor Dostoevsky could make up his mind about the motivation. This may well be the case, but I disagree that the variety of motives is a weak-
ness in the novel. Realistically, a criminal does not always know his own mind. Further, Dostoevsky’s depiction of numerous motives is a tribute to the mystery of evil, another whole that is often greater than the sum of its parts.

3 See especially pages 225-231. Although usually associated with Nietzsche, the superman concept has been credited by Nietzsche himself to Dostoevsky, who, in turn, derived some of the theory from Hegel.

4 This is especially clear from the very title of one of his novels, *The Possessed* (sometimes also translated *The Devils*).

5 Notably, besides *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Double*. 
“The climactic event of history, the Gospel-event, has hit our world with such impact that it has spilled beyond the bounds specifically chosen by God, divine revelation, to contain and convey it.” Ample evidence to support this hypothesis is found in nature, mythology, pagan religions, art, music, film, and bellettristic literature. It is this last category which will receive attention in this article, specifically *Barabbas* by the “titan of Swedish literature,” Pär Lagerkvist (1891-1974). Lagerkvist won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1951, the year *Barabbas* was first published. It is the purpose of this essay to demonstrate that Barabbas, “a novel about good and evil, faith and doubt,” is a grand and powerful example of the impact of the Gospel-event: it tackles head-on the central issues of incarnation, vicariousness, eschatology, and death and resurrection, while also posing questions on the meaning of life and the existence of God. Although the questioning nature of the book is one of its literary strengths, it may, however, actually soften what could have been an even more powerful blow of and for the Gospel message, as opposed to solely a grand example of its impact.

In this essay, I will first give some background information on the author, which will prove helpful in explaining his writing development, specifically the work under consideration. Then I will follow a very brief summary of the contents of the novel. Thirdly, I will give my observations and insights on the presence of a Gospel pattern in *Barabbas*. Finally, I will evaluate some analyses by literary critics in light of this pattern as part of a closing summary.

**Background**

*Barabbas* lends terrific support to the aforementioned hypothesis, especially in light of its author and his background. Lagerkvist was from Sweden, a nation which became increasingly secularized during his lifetime there. Lagerkvist himself came to rebel against the religious conservatism of his childhood. His Lutheran parents “were pietistic believers in the Old Testament, accepting the stern and at
times frightening judgments of God while practicing, without inquiry or anxiety, their simple religious devotions. A shy and dutiful boy, Lagerkvist was inevitably a participant in an uncomplicated, unquestioning religious way of life.” However, with the influences of local theaters, Darwinian teachings at school, and “new thought” opposed to the state church, Lagerkvist eventually did question and distance himself from his religious upbringing. This gap became wider after a few weeks in Paris in 1913, during which he was exposed to and enchanted by modern art and its experimentation and abstraction. “By the mid-twenties...his removal from fundamentalism, state religion, and popular Christianity had been set.”

Despite this removal, his writings actually became increasingly packed with patterns of the overflowing Gospel event. This confirms that Lagerkvist was a “deep religious searcher.” “The conflict between the traditional Christian and the modern scientific-determinist views became a departure point for his writing...” Even as a boy, Lagerkvist wrote that “religion should be seen as an expression of man’s striving for something higher and of man’s belief in the good and the beautiful.” Lagerkvist’s pursuit of that ideal provides the continuity in his writings. Importantly and interestingly, Lagerkvist described himself as “a believer without faith, a religious atheist.”

The Novel

Everyone knows how they hung there on the crosses, and who they were that stood gathered around him: Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene, Veronica, Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross, and Joseph of Arimathea, who shrouded him. But a little further down the slope, rather to one side, a man was standing with his eyes riveted on the dying man in the middle, watching his death-throes from the first moment to the last. His name was Barabbas. This book is about him.

Thus, simply, eloquently, begins the novel.

The reader follows Barabbas from the foot of that cross to the poetic justice of his death on the same. In between these events we are led on an eventful journey as Barabbas struggles to come to grips with his place in the universe.

Shortly after his release and following some time of indulgence in wine and women with friends, he comes into contact with the early Christian community and continues to do so throughout the work: a deformed girl, even Peter and Lazarus. Despite trying to convince himself that their doings have “nothing whatever to do with him,” he is nonetheless continually drawn to them and intrigued by them, though, once it is discovered who he is, he is met by shouts of “Get thee hence, thou reprobate!” (29).

After witnessing the stoning death of the deformed girl, Barabbas rejoin...
forever, or so it seems to his old friends. Suddenly, thankfully to these so-called friends, he disappears. He turns up as a slave in the mines and, eventually, as a servant in the Roman governor’s house. While in the mines he is chained to another: Sahak, a believer in Jesus as Lord and God. They form an incredibly tight, yet strangely unique, bond. Both end up crucified for their confession, their actions, in the name of Jesus.

**Gospel Pattern in Barabbas**

*Barabbas* is packed with startling Gospel truths, Gospel implications, and Gospel questions. It is “a thoughtful and beautiful work, permeated with respect for religious values and biblical poetry.” As such, the book confirms “that Lagerkvist has dealt more persistently than most twentieth-century authors with the eternal questions....” The most obvious proof of a Gospel pattern in the work is the theme of vicariousness. This is established often and powerfully. Barabbas, “he who was acquitted in the Master’s stead...” (147), did not want to come up to Golgotha (2), and yet he found himself there, staring at the man “hanging there in his stead...the man who had been crucified in Barabbas’s place” (6, 12).

There can be no doubt about this Biblical truth: Christ “died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (1 Co 5:15). He died for you, in your place. But He really, in reality, in history, uniquely, died for Barabbas, in his place.

[Jesus] had got his own way all the same: to be crucified instead of Barabbas. [The followers of Jesus] spoke of his having died for them. That might be. But he really had died for Barabbas, no one could deny it! In actual fact, he was closer to him than they were, closer than anyone else, was bound up with him in quite another way. Although they didn’t want to have anything to do with him. He was chosen, one might say, chosen to escape suffering, to be let off. He was the real chosen one, acquitted instead of the son of God himself—at his command, because he wished it (45).

“At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, ‘Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Christ?’ ‘Barabbas,’ they answered. ‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?’ Pilate asked. They...shouted..., ‘Crucify him!’ Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified” (Mt 27:17-26, *passim*).

But did Barabbas “live for...him who died for” him? Did he even live? Or did he simply exist? Was he among the walking dead? “Death! He always had that inside him, he had had that inside him as long as he had lived” (137). Did he expe-
rience the life given to him by Jesus’ death, or did he feel it a burden, undeserved; did Jesus’ substitutionary death, conversely, kill Barabbas? It seems, we shall see, that the novel often points to it as a burden, yet, paradoxically, one with resurrection hope.

This story is perhaps not so unique as it first seems, after all. Christ died in Barabbas’s place. You are Barabbas. The reader is Barabbas. This is your story, our story, humanity’s story; and Barabbas’s emotional and psychological journey and his struggles are ours. Thus Barabbas has taken our place in the novel; he is our vicar.

As Barabbas comes into contact with the early Christian community, specifically Peter, he is confronted with incarnational thought. With human reason, he rebels: “How can they talk like that!... The son of God! The son of God crucified! Don’t you see that’s impossible!” and “Didn’t [they] know what a Messiah was?...He would have come down from the cross and slain the lot of them” (27ff).

Barabbas, though, continues to be haunted by the dying man on the cross, God made flesh. Barabbas is a man between heaven and hell, between faith and unbelief, between the sacred and the profane. He lives hell, before he is moved to action—to confession even. The girl with the hare-lip dies a martyr’s death. To this Barabbas is witness, but not a cold, unmoved witness. After the first stone is thrown “Barabbas, stepping right up to [the perpetrator],” lifted his mantle slightly and stuck a knife into him with a deft movement that bespoke long practice. It happened so quickly that no one noticed anything” (70). Barabbas then carries the outcast girl miles into the countryside to bury her beside her still-born child. Thus she, who confronted him with the strange maxim, “Love one another” (40), has taught him to love. “No, he didn’t like that crucified man. He hated him” who had let this fragile girl be killed, but Barabbas loves her (75). He is on the way. He had done something for her, something selfless for her. But in killing for her and fleeing, “It was as if the earth had swallowed him up” (71).

It will. It did. Hell. Death: slavery in the mines. There “he resembled a dead man rather than a living one...” (86). “Escape from the hell to which they were condemned” was something unknown (107). But it was in this very hell, when it would seem likely that God was the farthest away (deus absconditus), that Barabbas meets the beginnings of escape, of—dare we say—resurrection. He is bound, literally and figuratively, to fellow slave Sahak. Barabbas reluctantly reveals that he had witnessed the Master’s death and resurrection. Sahak is overjoyed. He is a Christian, with the words “Christos Iesus” engraved illegally on the back of his slave disk, marking him as property of God. Barabbas “asked Sahak in a curiously faltering voice if he would not engrave the same inscription on his disk too” (94).

Sahak is befriended by an overseer eager to learn about Jesus. As a result, the supervisor sees to it that Sahak can get out of the mines for a job working the earth. Sahak will not go without Barabbas. Barabbas is “bound up with him” as Barabbas will forever be with Christ (45). Through Sahak, through Christ, Barabbas
is thus at least partially resurrected:20 Physically he is “returned to life, as it were; they live on the earth like other beings and not down in perpetual darkness” (106).

But this partial resurrection is not just physical; it is also spiritual. Sahak and Barabbas are questioned by the Roman governor about their allegiance to the state’s opposition to Jesus. The governor wants the name on the disk to be crossed out. Sahak without hesitation professes his willingness to die for his Owner/Lord/God/Master, rather than profanely worship Caesar. Barabbas, though, protests that he does not believe in Sahak’s God: “‘I have no god’” (119). The governor then asks, “‘Why then do you bear this ‘Christos Iesus’ carved on your disk?’” (119). The protagonist’s stunning response directly reveals, for the first time really, a spiritual resurrection: “‘Because I want to believe’” (119). If I were Barabbas’s pastor, I would tell him, “If you want to believe, then you do.” Weak, struggling faith is faith nonetheless; it clings to the man who died in your stead.

However, Barabbas, now with God’s name crossed out, goes with the governor to serve him in Rome. Sahak, who it certainly could be argued is a Christ-figure, is crucified. Barabbas weeps. He has moved away from the continuous refrain of indifference—“He didn’t care for anybody. He never had” (41). But now, instead of being indifferent, he hates: “He could not have been quite so indifferent to [the world] as he thought, all the same. For he hated it” (129).21 Indifference in spiritual matters is the devil’s great joy; it is certain damnation, sure unbelief. But Barabbas is not indifferent; he hates. He hates, paradoxically, his “freedom.” “He was not bound together with anyone. Not with anyone at all in the whole world” (132). And he feels alone, dead; he is back in hell. He descends into the catacombs, hoping to find a secret meeting of Christians. He hungers for the body of Christ! But there he finds only darkness and is surrounded by death. Finally, stumbling out through the narrow way to seeming light, he finds complete darkness over Rome. “He walked there in the darkness, as though buried in it, walked there with the scar in his lonely old face, the scar from the blow his father had dealt him.22 And among the grey hairs on his wrinkled chest hung his slave’s disk with God’s crossed-out name. Yes, he was alone in heaven and on earth” (136). Separation: hell and death. Is his name crossed out in the Book of Life?

Then he happens upon the great fire of Rome. “It’s the Christians!” The crucified man had returned to save mankind, to destroy this world, as he had promised. To annihilate it, let it go up in flames, as he had promised! Now he was really showing his might. And he, Barabbas, was to help him! Barabbas the reprobate, his reprobate brother from Golgotha, would not fail. Not now. Not this time. Not now!” (138). He hates the world. He, tragically, does something for his God. He helps spread the fire: “The whole world, the whole world was ablaze! Behold, his kingdom is here! Behold, his kingdom is here!” (140). But it is not the Christians. Barabbas is alone; it is fire; it is not the kingdom; it is hell.
In jail “Barabbas the acquitted” is shunned by the community of Christians falsely imprisoned. “Barabbas sat there again alone” (147). He knows nothing of the meaning of life. Conversely, Peter’s face “radiated a great peace” (148).

The moving close of the book deserves to be quoted in full length:

And so they were led out to be crucified. They were chained together in pairs, and, as they were not an even number, Barabbas came last in the procession, not chained to anyone. It just turned out like that. In this way, too, it happened that he hung furthest out in the rows of crosses. A large crowd had collected, and it was a long time before it was all over. But the crucified spoke consoling and hopefully to each other the whole time. To Barabbas nobody spoke. When dusk fell the spectators had already gone home, tired of standing there any longer. And besides, by that time the crucified were all dead. Only Barabbas was left hanging there alone, still alive. When he felt death approaching, that of which he had always been so afraid, he said out into the darkness, as though, he were speaking to it: ‘To thee I deliver up my soul.’ And then he gave up the ghost (148-149).

This closing section raises some vital points. Barabbas is not chained to anyone. Lagerkvist uses this to show that Barabbas is alone, destitute; nobody speaks to him. For a Christian, freedom, paradoxically, is found in being a slave to one’s owner, the Lord Jesus. Sahak made this clear. We are united to Jesus in Holy Baptism (Ro 6). And we are thus chained to the community of believers, the Baptized.

Furthermore, to whom does Barabbas speak and give up the ghost? The darkness? Nothing? Jesus? God? All of these? Lagerkvist does not answer this question, but he suggests; the reader must draw the conclusion; the climax happens in the reader’s imagination. It is much like Mark’s Gospel, in which the author does not believe for anyone; only 1:1 is explicit in whom this Jesus is. In regard to Barabbas’s words, it must be said that Someone has to hear words and that can only be God. As said earlier, the reader is to identify with Barabbas. Here, with these final words and his (martyr’s) death, Barabbas, in turn identifies with Jesus (for us): same words, same death. This is great dramatic irony and poetic justice.

**Final Analysis and Summary**

André Gide in his famous prefatory letter to Lucien Maury, the author of the preface, writes concerning Barabbas’s last words, “It is the measure of Lagerkvist’s success that he has managed so admirably to maintain his balance on a tightrope which stretches across the dark abyss that lies between the world of reality and the world of faith. The closing sentence of the book remains (no doubt deliberately) ambiguous.... That ‘as though’ leaves me wondering whether, without
realizing it, he was, in fact, addressing Christ, whether the Galilean did not ‘get him’ at the end” (x).

Graham Bates has said:

The work combines the utmost physical realism with an intensity of spiritual conflict not often equaled in the retelling of Biblical tales. Pär Lagerkvist has taken a man barely mentioned in the New Testament and has built him into a character as real, as evil, and as good as he must have been to the men who knew him those centuries ago. This is no outline sketch in black and white but a deeply conceived and richly colored portrait of a man driven beyond the powers of his endurance by a force he could never actually believe in.26

Bates gives a wonderful summary, but I would have to side with Gide in that the question of Barabbas’s belief remains just that: a question.

In this “complex moral theme,” as Harvey Breit calls it, “with its sense of spiritual torment, its deep stirrings of faith, its sure response to the movements of the human mind, is expressed the riddle of Man and his destiny, the contrasted aspects of his fundamental drama, and the cry of humanity in its death throes, bequeathing its spirit to the night.”28 Or perhaps even bequeathing it to God?

I cannot agree with critics such as Weathers, Maury, Bates, and others who insist that it is clear that Barabbas finally meets only death and “commit[s] his soul into [its] darkness and the void.”29 I agree with Gide in at least seeing the possibility of eternal life for Barabbas. This is the impact of the Gospel event at its strongest in this novel.30 Lagerkvist has not totally abandoned his Lutheran roots. Even Weathers admits: though “not really a Christian himself, Lagerkvist is remarkably true somehow to the Christian gospel, a gospel stripped to the living bone; and he is remarkably true somehow to the Pauline concept of the new man, rotting mankind blasted into new dimensions of life and glory. He is, as Margit Abenius has expressed it, ‘negatively and strongly bound to the Christian faith.’”31 This negativity can be seen in Lagerkvist’s portrait of the community of early Christians, which reproaches our hero Barabbas. This is in marked contrast to the image of Sahak, who prays alone and whose very individual confession leads to his death. Even Barabbas, though struggling immensely in the protagonist’s role, is portrayed as a loner. This is all to say that, for Lagerkvist, religious experience is highly personal and individual. Nonetheless, his restless main character paradoxically and continually yearns for community: with Sahak,32 with the early Christians, and even, in a sense, with the crucified and resurrected Lord Himself.33

Cui bono? So what? What difference does a Nordic novel from over half a century ago make to us today? The strength of the novel lies in Lagerkvist’s exceptional ability to dramatize ideas, concepts, and feelings, rather than just talk about or describe them.34 As such, Christian readers can, in a sense, experience the sacred
from the perspective of the secular man, and thus empathize with internal questions and longings that perhaps believers had heretofore not discovered; this cannot help but be of great value in evangelism. Moreover, this different and unexpected point of view (that of Lagerkvist, of Barabbas!) is edifying and refreshing for the faithful who hear the timeless Gospel proclaimed again and again.

To conclude: Richard B. Vowles writes, “Ours is the...soul of Barabbas...examining the mystery of life.” Lagerkvist would seem to agree: “You are Barabbas,” he may say to the reader. But Vowles also writes that Lagerkvist himself goes along a “path through a dark moral universe.” So the reader may say to Lagerkvist, “A believer without faith: you are Barabbas.” Who is right? Anyone? No one? Both?

Endnotes

1 The Gospel-event: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, containing the realities of incarnation, vicariousness, eschatology, and death and resurrection. It is especially these four themes which often appear in literature and thus deserve our attention.


6 He is “Swedish fiction’s great questioner, disturbing and irreplaceable...” (Victor Svanberg, as quoted on the inside front cover of Lagerkvist, Barabbas [Stockholm], this writer’s translation).


8 Ibid., 8.


10 Frances Carol Locher, ed., Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980), 328.

11 Weathers, Pär Lagerkvist: A Critical Essay, 9. Cf. the following key quotation from Lagerkvist’s countryman and contemporary, Nathan Söderblom, archbishop of Uppsala (1914-1931) and 1930 Nobel laureate (Peace): “Men were reckoning with this, that humanity should be seeking after the innermost meaning of things, seeking after God. But men were not reckoning that God on his part might be seeking after them. Then something happened which could never have been the creation of any man’s thought. We pass from a world of fantasy, built up by men out of their notions and their dreams, to the real world which God has built. It is shown to us in the religion of the cross” (Nathan Söderblom, The Death and Resurrection of Christ [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968], 32).

12 Locher, Contemporary Authors, 328.

13 Pär Lagerkvist, Barabbas, with a preface by Lucien Maury and a letter by André Gide (New York: Bantam Books, 1951), 1. Unless otherwise noted, from hereon all quotations are from Barabbas, the English translation.

14 Foreshadows Lagerkvist: “Now he was standing up here on the gallows-hill looking at the man on the middle cross, unable to tear his eyes away. Actually he had not wanted to come up here at all, for everything was unclean, full of contagion; if a man set foot in this potent and accursed place part of him would surely remain, and he could be forced back there, never to leave it again” (2).
15 Gabriel Jönsson, as quoted on the inside front cover of Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* [Stockholm], this writer’s translation.
16 Weathers, 5.
17 Also, unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.
18 This is actually good Christocentric theology. It is Christ’s action, Christ’s choosing, Christ’s wish. He acts upon Barabbas. He acts upon humanity.
19 The man who threw the first stone. He is identified as a “true believer” (70).
21 Cf. the words of Jesus: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul” (Mt 16:26a) and “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25). James asks, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (Jas 4:4).
22 His mother, a Moabitess raped by his robbing father, died while giving birth to him. “Nobody knew whom the child belonged to, and she couldn’t have said herself; only that she had cursed it in her womb and borne it in hatred of heaven and earth and the Creator of heaven and earth” (82). Thus was Barabbas conceived in hatred and born in hatred. Furthermore, Moab was Lot’s son by his daughter (Ge 19:30-38). The Moabites were enemies of Israel (2 Ki 1:1, 24:2; 2 Ch 20:1-30). However, Ruth, the mother of Obed and an ancestress of Jesus, was from Moab (Ru 1:4).
23 He died a slow death, unlike Jesus (Mk 15:44).
24 Cf. Luke 23:46: “And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, ‘Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’ And having said thus, he gave up the ghost” (Authorized King James Version).
25 The Frenchman won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947.
26 Locher, *Contemporary Authors*, 329.
27 Ibid., 329.
29 Weathers, 36; cf. 35.
30 An event that would not have taken place, at least not in the same exact way of that cross, had Barabbas not been released.
31 Weathers, 45.
32 Sahak, too, rejoices in finding community with Barabbas (92-94).
33 Cf. Augustine’s famous prayer: “You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You” (Augustine, *Confessions* Book I, I [1], translated with Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick [Oxford University Press, 1991], 3).
35 Vowles, in the introduction to Lagerkvist, *The Eternal Smile and Other Stories*, xix.
36 Ibid., xiv.
It is often observed that Hebrew grammar is much simpler—less refined—than that of Greek. While that may seem true in terms of morphology and syntax, the lack of sophisticated grammar usually means that the task of translation is more difficult—with nuances dependent more on intuition and the need to read subtle signals than on formulaic constructions.

A major example is the Hebrew verb system itself. On the one hand, it seems simple: two tenses, perfect and imperfect. Actually these are not tenses as much as aspects, with translational values that go far beyond simple “past” and “future,” or even “complete” or “incomplete.” The so-called waw consecutive often seems (and is too often presented) as some sort of “conversive” form that “changes” imperfect to “past” and a perfect to “future.” In fact, the so-called “imperfect waw consecutive” reflects a distinctive Masoretic marking (patach + dagesh forte) of a third tense or aspect: the so-called preterite used primarily in narrative. The comparable use of a marked perfect (“perfect waw consecutive,” though not via a distinctive pointing of the waw) is apparently an adaptation of that phenomenon to note the use of the perfect as more of a “wild card” or “chameleon” tense, adapted to its grammatical context.

Our focus here is not the discussion of the verb system, both simple and complex though it be. Fundamental Biblical Hebrew makes an attempt at a simplified presentation in introducing the waw consecutive in chapter 8. For a more detailed discussion, see Waltke and O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax, chapters 29-33, and Joüon and Muraoka, A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew, section 117-118.

What is offered here—in the tradition of the Grammarian’s Corner to focus on a specific grammatical “case study”—is an example of a syntactical marker that uses one feature of the verb system, one that employs this odd use of the “perfect waw consecutive” as a contextual wildcard. To be sure, the most common example of a perfect waw consecutive is usually simply translated as a future. In fact, this is not because the syntax of the form is necessarily future, but because the context is future.

This future sense is also the context of the waw consecutive use of הָיָה ( hayah ) as the tense marker within the sentence structure that begins עַדְתָּ הָיָה (Impf waw consecutive, “and it happened…”; cf. KJV, “and it came to pass…”), or conversely for the future, הָיָהּ (Pf waw consecutive, “and it will happen…”). But, if the context changes, so will the force of the perfect waw consecutive. Consider the following two examples:

Deuteronomy 5:1, Imperative followed by perfect waw consecutive

יָשָׁם שִׁירָא לְהַשָׁמֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר הָיָהּ לַעֲשָׁהוֹ

[...] לְעַלָּם אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׁמֶשׁ לֶעֶשָׁהוֹ
“Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments [which I am speaking in your hearing today], and then learn them, and then watch to do them.”

Here the imperative (שמע) is followed by two perfect waw consecutives (הלIPHER共和הלIPHER共和) which thus take on the force of the imperative which began this sequence. However, since the perfect verb form is, in fact, sequential (what Waltke and O’Connor term a “consequent [logical and/or chronological] situation to a situation represented by a volitional form,” section 32.2.2), the perfect waw consecutive is translated not only as an imperative but also as a subsequent imperative (e.g., with the adverb “then”). Thus, Israel should first hear the statutes and judgments, then they should learn them, and then they should actually take care to do them.

Exodus 3:13: **Participle** followed by perfect waw consecutive

הנה אנכי נא אליבנים ישראל אמורתיה להו …

[And Moses said to God,] “Look, I am coming (**about to** go, **going to** go) to the sons of Israel, and then I am going to say to them...”

Here the perfect waw consecutive (אמרה) follows the participle (נב) and is therefore translated with the same grammatical force as the participle. In this idiom the participle following היננ is likely the so-called “imminent future,” which indicates an imminent action or something that is “about to” or “going to” happen. The point is that the perfect waw consecutive is thus also translated with that same “imminent future.”

To conclude, the so-called “perfect waw consecutive” is really a “wild card” that adapts to whatever verbal aspect begins and thus controls the sequence in which the waw consecutive follows. The force of the following verb can often be translated with the adverb then to indicate this action as sequential.

Andrew H. Bartelt
HOMILETICAL HELPS
The Last Sunday after Epiphany • The Transfiguration of Our Lord
2 Peter 1:16-21 • February 3, 2008

Introduction: This Sunday provides one key point of structure within the church year, both in how it looks back over the season of Epiphany and how it also looks forward through the season of Lent to Easter. The Sundays in Epiphany are “framed” between the Baptism of our Lord and His transfiguration. The Synoptic accounts of Jesus’ Baptism and of His transfiguration each relate that the voice from heaven acknowledged Jesus to be God’s Son. This witness from heaven frames the season of Epiphany: in His ministry we see that Jesus is the true Son of God incarnate in the flesh, and this is just as the voice of God the Father also testifies both at the Baptism and at the transfiguration.

But the Sunday of the Transfiguration also anticipates the glory of Jesus’ resurrection. The transfiguration and the resurrection then together “frame” the season of Lent from the outside (just as the Sunday of the Temptation and the Sunday of the Passion frame this season from within). Finally, the transfiguration, in depicting Jesus “appearing in glory” on the mountain, also points ahead to the Parousia when He will appear again in glory—and so the Last Sunday after Epiphany also anticipates the Last Sunday of the church year.

It is especially this final point regarding the relationship of the transfiguration to the Parousia that most directly relates to the message of 2 Peter. 2 Peter 1:16-21 is read on this day because of the direct reference in 2:17-18 to the transfiguration as witnessed by Peter. But the purpose of this epistle was in part to attack false teachers who denied that Jesus would come again in glory (2 Peter 3). The reference to the events on the holy mountain in today’s text is used as one witness to establish the reality of Jesus’ “power and appearance.” Though the focus here is upon what happened in His first advent, yet as Jesus appeared here, so He will appear on the Last Day.

Details: Verse 16: In the epistle’s opening the readers are exhorted to godly living as would reflect their calling (1:3-11). In verses 16-21 the author provides a basis for this exhortation: the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in power has been made known to the recipients of this epistle in the apostolic preaching that has come to them.

How has this message come? The author distinguishes both how the message has come and how it has not come. It has not come by following “cleverly devised myths” (ESV). Rather than this being a reference to a proto-Gnostic or some other kind of heretical story that the author is writing against, this could very well be how the false teachers have tried to characterize the apostolic preaching—as a sophisticated story made up by men. If so, this characterization is here denied. The apos-
tolic message is not man-made. It is instead based upon eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ majesty. In the following verses the events of the transfiguration will be singled out as one notable example of Jesus’ power (δύναμις) and appearance (παρουσία), but Jesus’ entire ministry of teaching and miracle-working could be seen as evidence of how He came.

Verses 17-18: The events of the transfiguration are here briefly described as this event is used as the one example par excellence of the manifestation of Jesus’ divine glory at His first coming. Note how the transfiguration is described as Jesus receiving honor and glory from the Father, that this is what was happening on the mountain. Note also the mention here of the voice from out of heaven—“This is My beloved Son in whom I delighted/am well pleased.” As also described in the Synoptic accounts, the transfiguration was occasion for God both to honor and to testify to His Son. The three apostolic witnesses have testified to the Father’s witness, a testimony now preserved for us in the three Synoptic accounts and referenced here in 2 Peter.

Contra the false teachers, the transfiguration is here described as something that actually happened and that was seen by eyewitnesses: this event is not merely legend or saga or some made up tale to make a spiritual point about Jesus’ identity. It actually occurred and is evidence both of Jesus’ power at His first coming and of the power that will be seen on the Last Day when He comes again. It is upon such eyewitness testimony that the hearers have been called to faith and are exhorted to faithful living. (Note: Even if someone were to dismiss 2 Peter because of its status as antilegomena, there are still the three Synoptic accounts of this event to rely upon.)

Verse 19a: “We have as very reliable the prophetic word.” Questions arise when reading and interpreting this verse. First, what is the referent of τον προφητικὸν λόγον (“the prophetic word”) in verse 19? This is apparently the same as πᾶσα προφητεία γραφῆς (“every prophecy of scripture”) in verse 20. Is this a reference to the entire Old Testament? Is it a reference only to the prophetic portions of that corpus? Could it refer also to any prophetic word given in the apostolic age? Most agree that the author is not referring to the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as such. Yet his understanding of “scripture” could theoretically embrace some or all of Paul’s epistles, for these are also grouped along with the “other scriptures” in 3:16. At the least it is the books of the Old Testament that are referenced here as they continue to witness to Jesus’ coming.

Second, what is the function of the comparative adjective βεβαιότερον (“more sure” in ESV) in verse 19? Is this making a comparison between the eyewitness testimony described in verses 17-18 and arguing that the OT prophecy is somehow more reliable and certain than that? Or does this adjective function in an elative sense and thus simply describe the prophetic word as being “very reliable”? Either way, two witnesses are given to Jesus’ coming in power: the eyewitness testimony of those
who saw and heard—here, in particular, the transfiguration—and the prophetic word of the Scriptures.

Verses 19b-21: The hearers are admonished to pay special attention to the witness of the prophetic word. Why? The origin of prophecy is not with men. It comes from God through the work of His Spirit. One should note that in this verse—a verse which is used as a proof text for the doctrine of inspiration—the author has in mind specifically the prophecy found in the Old Testament. (It is by analogy that one would see these verses as speaking to the New Testament, for these books are not referenced here—though note again the author’s view of the Pauline epistles.) Thus here it is the testimony of the Old Testament that is considered a very strong witness in support of the apostolic message regarding the coming of Jesus. The false teachers are at odds not only with the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, but also with very reliable, prophetic words of Scripture.

Considerations for preaching:

I. The Gospel appointed for today, Matthew 17:1-9, provides the fullest account of the transfiguration and the preacher would be wise to reference this in the sermon as providing the “full story” of the transfiguration. The preacher could well decide to focus on the Gospel text and use the epistle to illustrate what this event means for the lives of believers: we can rely on the witnesses that Jesus is the Son of God who came and will come again in power.

II. If preaching on the epistle, one should focus on the witness of both the transfiguration and Old Testament prophecy to Jesus’ powerful appearing. (Do not let the sermon devolve into an exercise of merely discussing the doctrine of verbal inspiration by focusing only upon verses 19-21). Those who deny that Jesus will come again are refuted by the prophecy of the Old Testament and by the apostolic witness to Jesus: these testify that He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead—just as we confess in the creeds.

III. What is important about the transfiguration as used in 2 Peter 1:16-21?

A. At the transfiguration the Father gave glory and honor to Jesus and testified that Jesus is His Son. The Father’s actions and words still witness to Jesus today. Looking ahead into Lent, we can anticipate how Jesus will show Himself the Father’s true Son by being faithful in His calling to give His life as a ransom for many. Yet the Father’s honoring of His Son on the mountain also anticipates Jesus’ vindication on Easter.

B. The transfiguration is also analogous to the Second Coming, and this seems to be the main point made in today’s text. In both events Jesus comes and appears in glory. The events on the holy
mountain provide a foretaste of what is yet to come on the Last Day when we too will see the Son of Man coming in His glory.

C. The false teachers described in 2 Peter lived as if there were no final judgment to come (see 2 Peter 2); the true believers are to live as if their Savior will come again. The transfiguration serves as one vivid and visual reminder that He who goes to the cross is also the glorious Son of God who will judge the world on the Last Day. The church is called to live faithfully today in light of this hope.

David I. Lewis

Lent 1 • Romans 5:12-19 • February 10, 2008

With Lent’s traditional emphasis on repentance and self-denial, the season runs the risk of turning one inward. That is to say, the danger lies in seeing Christ and His cross from the perspective of our personal piety and penance rather than the other way around. This reading from Romans sets our Lenten meditations aright. Universal in its scope and Christocentric in its orientation, this text requires us to understand our own life, history, and future against the vast landscape of redemptive history—a panorama stretching from the beginning of the world to the new creation. It is said that there are some books that you read, and there are some books that read you. Romans is surely the latter.

In this case, Paul reads to us our history through the lens of two men: Adam and Christ. Both stand as the head and representative of the human race. Both perform deeds that have far-reaching, indeed universal, consequences. The contrast of the two figures encompasses the entirety of our situation. They are the beginning and end of human history.

Previously, Paul argued for the universal sinfulness of all people, Jew and Gentile alike, so that the free gift of God’s righteousness might be clearly known through the Gospel of Christ. The experience of the Law’s condemnation is the basis for this argument, whether that be the Law as given through Moses or that which is written on the heart: all are without excuse, there is no one who does good, all fall short of the glory of God. Now, he revisits this theme, tracing the story beyond universal experience to the cosmic catastrophe that began with the first man.

Adam’s trespass was the entrance of sin into the world and the beginning of the dominion of death. All people thereafter have been beneath its sway: the inescapable reality of life is that it ends. Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, but in the history of the sons of Adam, one kingdom appears invincible: “death reigned.”
Death reigned, that is, until “the one who was to come.” While Adam’s deed brings judgment, condemnation, and death, Christ brings grace, justification, and life. However, this does not mean we are talking about two essentially equal archetypes. Paul takes great care to affirm that the first Adam is hardly to be compared to the Second Adam—“the free gift, is not like the trespass.” Christ is not Adam redivivus. He is the promised “one who was to come,” the eschatological Son of God, and what Christ has accomplished is exceedingly more powerful, with a far more miraculous effect. Adam’s sin ushered in the dominion of death, but Christ’s free gift of righteousness restores man’s created dominion, who now “reigns in life” through Him. Grace not only counters Adam’s trespass, but the trespasses of all people, resulting in justification.

The “obedience” of Christ through which many are made righteous (v. 19) should probably not be limited to the post-Reformation doctrine of Christ’s active obedience, i.e., Christ’s substitutionary fulfillment of the Law. Paul is stressing the impact of the single act: the “one trespass” that resulted in the condemnation of all people versus the “one act of righteousness” (ἐνὸς δικαιώματος) that leads to justification and life for all people (v. 18). Christ’s obedience is to His Father and finds complete expression as He yields Himself up to death (Php 2:8; cf. FC Ep, III). While this act of obedience remains extra nos—outside of us—it nevertheless incorporates and comprehends us all. “One died for all. Therefore all have died” (2 Co 5:14). The sinner has died with Christ. And as Paul will go on to say later, “For the one who has died is freed from sin” (Ro 6:7). Sin—all sin—has been crucified with Him. Of course, the death of the old Adam through the death of the New is only Gospel when death does not have the last word. Freedom from sin can only benefit the living. Therefore, the culmination of the story must be the resurrection: Christ’s and ours.

In these verses, we are given a wide-angle perspective on salvation, but not so that we are left merely as spectators. Paul’s sweeping view is necessarily mapped out in our personal lives in which we come to see Christ and ourselves rightly. When John Donne, the English poet, was deathly ill, stretched out on his bed as a “flatt Map,” attended by cosmographer-like physicians, it was precisely in the landscape and “geography” of Romans 5 that he found hope:

We think that Paradise and Calvarie,  
Christ’s cross and Adams tree, stood in one place;  
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;  
As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face,  
May the last Adams blood my soul embrace.  

Erik Herrmann
In the verses preceding our text, St. Paul beautifully proclaims the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. This is a gift of God that comes through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Since justification is purely God’s action, there is no room for boasting on the part of the believer. However, even though our works gain nothing before God, we should still do them. In the verse immediately prior to our text, Paul clarifies that the Law is not overthrown. Rather we continue to uphold it. Still, Paul reminds us that we cannot get away from the fact that the Law brings wrath (4:15). It shows us our sin. Even as we strive to uphold it, it will always accuse and condemn us.

Two Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham and David, are referenced in this text to support the Scriptural doctrine of justification. Paul makes it clear that this is not his doctrine, but that of Holy Scripture. It is the faith of the patriarchs of old, not a Pauline invention. Neither of these two patriarchs possessed their own strength for salvation, nor did they boast in anything but God’s grace. The examples of Abraham and David illustrate exactly what St. Paul says in the latter part of the text, namely that the promise to Abraham and his offspring “depends on faith” so that it “may rest on grace.”

Paul’s example of Abraham is an almost direct quote from Genesis 15:6 in the Septuagint. Paul, like the Septuagint, uses the word λογίζομαι (to reckon or account) when referencing Abraham. His faith was reckoned or counted to him as righteousness. Earlier Paul addressed this “righteousness,” namely that it is from God apart from the works of the Law, to which the Law and the prophets testify (Ro 3:21). God’s gift of righteousness is clearly proclaimed in the Law and the prophets, hence the example of father Abraham.

That brings us to Paul’s second example, King David, who penned Psalm 32. Paul quotes the first two verses. Once again we encounter the word λογίζομαι, this time with an emphatic negative. “Blessed is the man of whom the Lord shall never count (his) sin.” Paul’s exegesis places this right alongside the example of Abraham. A man’s sin is not counted against him. Rather he is credited with righteousness. King David of old, like father Abraham, knew and believed this great truth!

There is a potential connection with Nicodemus in our Gospel reading from John 3:1-17! Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Jesus points him away from the works of the flesh to the work of God through the Son of Man who will be lifted up. Those who believe in Him will receive eternal life. How does this faith come? It is given when one is born again (literally “from above”) by water and the Spirit. Nicodemus and the Pharisees remind us how easy it is to “not understand” these truths of God. Many great teachers of the Law, children of Abraham and David by blood, misunderstood the promise given through their patriarchs. Let it not be so for us! The mighty power of the Gospel defends us from all doubt and confusion con-
cerning our justification. The Law has its place, but the promise rests on the Gospel of God’s grace. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through Him (Jn 3:17). In other words, Jesus is not a new Moses. He is our Savior.

The Gospel “for you,” comes through very clearly in the fact that God’s promise to Abraham is also guaranteed to Abraham’s offspring. The true children of Abraham are those who believe in Christ (Gal 3:7). True children of Abraham are those who have been born from above, by God’s gracious work in Christ. God is the one who “gives life to the dead” and “calls things into being that do not exist.” He can make children of Abraham out of mere stones (Mt 3:9). God can make children of Abraham out of those who were born dead in their trespasses and sins. That is what God has done for you and me, heirs of the promise to Abraham.

The NIV text (4:1) reads: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, ‘discovered’ in this matter?” A sermon on this text could build on the concept of the Gospel as “An Awesome Discovery!” We even hear Dr. Luther’s experience with the Gospel put this way, namely as a “discovery.” Discoveries often happen in the midst of a journey. Luther’s journey was one of turmoil as he wrestled with the Law, the burden of his sin and a desire to know a God who loves His people. What an awesome “discovery” it must have been for him when St. Paul revealed that even for God’s people of old, salvation is ours by grace through faith, not by the works of the Law.

The preacher could structure his sermon around several individuals (Abraham, David, Nicodemus, or even Paul) and their journeys toward the discovery of the Gospel, perhaps using the example of Luther as an introduction, then concluding with the journey of the hearers. The life of a Christian is a Lenten journey. We journey each day with our Lord’s cross in view and the hope of resurrection to come. This approach gives opportunity to proclaim the Law in the sense that St. Paul teaches it here, namely, that it brings wrath. That is extremely evident in the example of Luther and even in David’s case after being convicted of his sin with Bathsheba. How awesome the discovery of the Gospel was for them! Throughout our journey, when we get puffed up with self-righteousness, or like Luther, fall into the pit of despair because of our sin, what an awesome discovery it is for us when we receive Jesus and His forgiveness through Word and Sacrament.

Joel P. Fritsche
That’s Core, That’s Basic

Sometimes it’s good just to go back to the basics, just to hear once again the core of what we believe, just to listen to what brings peace, hope and joy to our hearts. Romans 5 does just that. The Apostle Paul is assuring us of the basic, core hope we have when he says, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.1).

This sermon is not about what God wants us to do this week. It is not about our understanding some deep and mysterious doctrine. It is not even about how we feel today. No, this sermon is just about being justified. It is all about what God has done and how His deep and mysterious way of doing things shows how He feels about us.

Yet having said that, we begin by talking about ourselves. We begin by realizing once again that we are weak, ungodly, and sinners. We begin by admitting that God needs to save us because we cannot justify ourselves before Him.

Of course, weak, sinful, and ungodly is not how we want to see ourselves. If anything, we want to see ourselves as just the opposite. It starts young.

I read about a school system in Nevada, although I could not verify where it was, that wants to change the grading system so that no one can fail. Instead of A’s or B’s you are described as “extending.” If you are more of a C student, then you are “developing.” And those who should get an F are “emerging.” In this school system, you can only succeed. You are only described in positive terms. That is how we want to see ourselves—as adults too.

The St. Louis Post Dispatch (Sunday Section A+E, July 29, 2007) printed a John Losos review of a book titled Americanism, written by David Galernter. The book tries to make the case that America is blessed because we have talked about God so much in our country. Presidents and others make mention of God in their speeches and because of our inherent virtue, we have put God on a pedestal. Here is a line from the review: “That proves how worthy we are; we deserve all the wonderful things God has consequently bestowed upon us.”

That is how we want to see ourselves. But that is not how God sees us. Not inherent virtue, but inherent sin. Not strong and emerging, but weak and sinful.

When I tried to Google the Nevada school system’s grading policy to verify that story I read, one of the first links that showed on the screen was to the September 13, 2006 Las Vegas Sun. It read: “Cheating on standardized tests in Nevada schools nearly doubled last year as students relied on phone cameras, text messages and those old standbys—wandering eyes and passed notes.” God’s way of looking at us is much more accurate.

When it comes to adults, I think of the controversy about posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms in this country. I know the reason is to have us fol-
low God’s ways in our judicial system, but could you imagine sitting in God’s courtroom and He is the judge? That is scary! The Ten Commandments are printed in huge block letters on the wall behind Him. He reads the second commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” No use of four letter words. No carelessly saying “Oh God” in the middle of a sentence. No justification for calling someone a nasty name because you were angry. Just the commandment staring you in the face, saying, “Did you keep me all the time?” and God asking “How do you plead?”

Not inherent virtue, but sin. Guilty as charged.

Should I pick another commandment, say, “You shall not steal”? No greed. No anxiety over money. No cheating on taxes or some other financial form. No buying so much stuff that you cannot be generous in giving to those in need. No cheating your family or church or friends out of time because you are too busy working to make more money. Just the Commandment staring you in the face saying, “Did you keep me all the time?” and God asking, “How do you plead?”

Not good, just guilty. Just weak, ungodly and sinful.

No, we do not want to be in God’s courtroom with the Ten Commandments on the wall behind Him. His justice would declare us to be unloving, unlovable, helpless, completely unable to do anything of eternal consequence, sinful, and deserving of God’s punishment. That’s core, that’s basic.

What is true and accurate is the confession of sin we make in our worship services: I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you and justly deserve your temporal and eternal punishment.

That is how God sees us if we were stand before Him all by ourselves in His courtroom with Him as judge.

But we are not in His courtroom. We are in His house, His church. We are in the one place where we remember that the greatest injustice of all time has saved us from God’s punishment. Here in the church we do not just stare at God’s Law and wilt under our guilt. No, we also see Jesus’ cross and rejoice in our justification. That’s core, that’s basic.

Remember that dark Thursday night. Jesus has gone to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It is quiet and His disciples fall asleep. Then a small group of soldiers and religious leaders surround Jesus. One of His disciples, Judas, steps out and betrays Jesus—with a kiss of all things. Peter wakes up and tries to stop the arrest, but Jesus wants no violence here, no rescue. He is going to trial and nothing will stop Him from being accused.

The court is hastily convened. People come forward to make charges, but their testimonies do not agree. Jesus is innocent. Here is the one person who is inherently good. He is strong, godly, and sinless. No charge can stick against Him except for one that is trumped up. So an injustice is perpetuated, and Jesus is sentenced to die.
Yet justice is served when Jesus is nailed to that cross—God’s justice. Our sin could not go unpunished. Our weakness could not be ignored. Our breaking of the Ten Commandments could not be simply excused. No, someone had to die. Someone had to take the eternal punishment, and that someone was Jesus. Our sin and His death combine on a cross and God’s justice is satisfied. We are justified, not because of anything we have done, not because of any inherent virtue within us, not because we are somehow deserving. No, we are justified in God’s sight when in faith we hold onto Jesus as our one hope, our peace with God, our only reason for rejoicing when we stand before God on Judgment Day.

I remember seeing a plaque in a Christian bookstore. It had a picture of Jesus hanging on a cross. A question is written above Him: How much does God love us? Beneath Him the answer is: He stretched out His arms as wide as they could go and died. The apostle Paul says it this way: “God showed His love for us in this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” Remember at the beginning of this sermon I said it was not about how we feel, but how God feels about us. God loves us, and Jesus on the cross is the deepest expression of His love. That’s core, that’s basic to what we believe.

Remember when I said this sermon is not about what we do? When it comes to being justified, saved, at peace with God, we can do nothing. I read about a man named Bill who donated one hundred pints of blood. It was in the Reader’s Digest some years back. No doubt that was a good thing Bill had done, and many people owe their lives to his kindness. But this is what Bill said, “When that final whistle blows and St. Peter asks, “What did you do?” I’ll just say, “Well, I gave 100 pints of blood.” Bill says with a laugh, “That ought to get me in.” A writer by the name of Joe McKeever made this comment about Bill. “Bill was probably joking. But if he was serious... [i]f Bill is counting on the giving of 100 pints of blood to get him to heaven, he is trusting in the wrong blood.” Our faith is in Jesus, because His blood shed on the cross justifies us. That’s core, that’s basic to what we believe.

Remember when I said that this sermon is not about our understanding some deep and mysterious doctrine? Well, I sure do not understand how He could do this, but I am glad Jesus did something no one else would do. Oh, you might hear of a soldier falling on a grenade to save his buddies or a parent dashing into a burning building to save a child or perhaps a stranger risking her life to save a toddler who is running out into a busy street. But Jesus dies for the ungodly no matter how evil that person may be. Jesus dies for the weak and helpless. For the unloving and unlovable. For the sinful and those who can do nothing of eternal consequence. For you and me. Imagine that! That’s core, that’s basic to what we believe.

But you know something? When you go back to the core, the basics—that we are weak, ungodly, and sinners, yet justified because God’s love is shown in Jesus, who, at just the right time, died for us—it makes a difference in how we feel. We rejoice. It makes a difference in what we do. We endure when we suffer, even
more, we become people of character and hope. We love and live for Jesus. And it makes a huge difference in what we know. It is deep and mysterious, yet our faith holds on to one core, basic truth: God’s love was shown when Jesus stretched out arms as wide as they could go and died for us. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Yes, it is good to go back to the basics. Amen.

Glenn A. Nielsen

Lent 4 • Ephesians 5:8-14 • March 2, 2008

All of the Lenten epistle readings in series A are from Romans with the exception of this one from Ephesians. The pericopes from Romans have provided a number of opportunities to ponder justification in a number of ways. We know that all men are condemned to death through the sin of Adam, but that Christ’s one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men (Lent 1). The sinner is justified by God’s grace through faith, not by works of the Law. This was true even for Abraham, David, and all of God’s people of old (Lent 2). While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly to bring us to peace with God. Now we are able to rejoice even in our sufferings (Lent 3).

The epistle reading for Lent 4 turns our attention toward living the Christian life. It certainly builds off of what we have rejoiced in during the last few Sundays: Christ’s righteousness and the justification and life He has accomplished for all men. It also builds off of the foundation that St. Paul laid earlier in Ephesians, namely 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (ESV). Now we can freely do the works that we are created in Christ Jesus to do.

Even though most of the text is exhortation to good works, notice that Paul’s appeal is not compulsion by the Law. It is a Gospel appeal: “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord” (5:8). Also, Paul does not merely indicate that one is lost in darkness before conversion, even though that is certainly true. That person is darkness itself. One’s very essence and being is sin. The Gospel enlightens darkness. It turns darkness into light. In the office of Evening Prayer we sing, “Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome.” He is the life and light of every man (Jn 1:4). To be light “in the Lord” implies a relationship, a connection to Christ and His forgiveness. It is His light that produces light in the lives of God’s children. Therefore, even the works we do are not done by us, but by Him.

For Christians, the temptation is always to revert back to darkness. We live in the midst of those who cut themselves off from the light, who continually live in
darkness. Darkness cannot produce fruit. Those who cut themselves off from Christ cannot produce good works. Even the works they do, what the world would call “good,” are sin. Association with darkness is clearly harmful, even detrimental to the Christian. How often do we take part in the unfruitful deeds of darkness? How often do we find ourselves doing shameful things when we cut ourselves off from the light, Jesus Christ, and from our fellow believers? In his first epistle, John says, “But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). Our fellowship with the Lord Jesus, and our fellowship with one another, is clearly important in our walk as children of the light.

Walking together as children of light is a critical witness to the light, Jesus Christ, in this world of darkness. In chapter 4 Paul rejoiced in the unity we have as believers in the body of Christ. Together we are strong, not easily tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, not easily pulled back into the darkness. First and foremost, in Christian love, our duty is to expose the deeds of darkness done by our own brothers and sisters in the faith. We confront one another in our sin, always with the goal of winning our brother over and proclaiming Christ’s forgiveness. Secondly, walking as children of light, we expose the deeds of darkness in the world. As the light of Christ shines upon the ungodly, we see the true nature of their deeds—death. It is our prayer that as the light of Christ shines on them; their eyes may be opened to this as well.

Ironically, in the Lenten season we are headed toward darkness, the darkness of Good Friday. The preacher could work this in as a Gospel handle. This darkness is good. We do not turn away from this darkness. Without the darkness of Good Friday, there is no resurrection light and life. There is no salvation or good works that follow. Jesus Christ, the light of the world, became darkness. He became sin so that we might walk in the light of new life. As Christians, we expose this deed done by our Lord in darkness to the world.

Paul concludes with what is most likely a stanza from an early Christian hymn. It proclaims the truth of what has taken place for the believer—a resurrection or an awakening by the light of the Gospel. This is our prayer each and every day, as each day we awake anew with the light of Christ shining on us. Each day we awake in the grace of our Baptism. Each day is a resurrection from death, a rescue from the deeds of darkness, a deliverance from the clutches of the evil one. This is also our prayer for unbelievers, that the light of Christ would awaken them, expose their deeds of darkness, and make them fellow children of light. Just as it is the light that produces fruit in our lives, so it is the light of Christ, the Gospel, that enlightens the unbeliever and calls him to faith and a life of good works. To walk as children of light is to walk in the power of the Word made flesh, the lamp for our feet and the light for our path, who shines upon us with His grace.
A sermon on this text, appropriate for Lent, could build on the theme (taken from verse 14): “A Lenten Wakeup Call.” There is ample material in the text to proclaim the dangers of drifting back to the darkness of sin and death as well as the blessing of the light of Christ. Rather than the darkness of sin, our Lord calls us to the darkness of Good Friday, through which we then receive the light of His forgiveness won on the cross. Through Baptism we are children of the light, bearing the fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth, exposing the deeds of darkness in our own lives, in the lives of fellow believers, and in the lives of the lost.

Joel P. Fritsche

Lent 5 • Romans 8:1-11 • March 9, 2008

Romans 8:1-11 is a rich and theologically important text. Here Paul expresses in remarkable fashion both the distinction and the proper relationship between the Spirit’s work to bring salvation to believers (subjective justification) and the same Spirit’s presence in believers to empower them for Christian living (sanctification). Moreover, because the Spirit is the “eschatological down payment” that God has granted to all Christians in these last days, this reading also proclaims that those who are justified and (hence) seeking to live for God also possess the certain promise of final, bodily resurrection and eternal life on the Last Day.

The structure of Paul’s argument in these verses is relatively clear. The main statement occurs in verse 1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The “therefore” links chapter 8, at the least, with the end of chapter 7. Because God has delivered believers and will finally give deliverance even from the combat between “the flesh” and the regenerate “mind” (7:25), already now believers have the gift of acquittal before God’s bar of justice. God already pronounces believers in Christ, “not guilty”!

The remainder of the lesson explains and grounds why verse 1 is true, and that grounded explanation is centered in the work of the Spirit. Verse 2 says, “For the Spirit of life’s ‘law’ freed you in Christ Jesus from sin and death’s ‘law.’” It is hard to imagine that Paul would say that a law had freed believers. Paul uses the verb “to free” (ἐλευθερώνω) five times in his letters. The three other uses in Romans are all passive tense forms, with God or Christ implied as the one who frees Christians/the creation (Ro 6:18, 22; 8:21). In Galatians 5:1, “Christ” is the explicit subject of the verb. Here in verse 2, then, if the Spirit is the real agent of our freedom, it is likely that Paul uses the term νόμος with the meaning of “principle” or “truth” (see also Ro 3:27). The principle of the Spirit of life is the Gospel message, which immediately Paul explicates and explains in verses 3-4. The “principle” of sin and death is the demand for obedience which no human is able to perform suffi-
ciently. Verse 2, then, proclaims the Spirit’s use of the Gospel, through which He has freed believers from the demands of sin and death, here personified.

Paul offers the content, the good news of the “law of the Spirit of life” in verses 3-4. In reference to the Law’s inability, weakened as it was through the sinful flesh of fallen humans, God acted decisively. In the flesh, that is, in the flesh of Jesus, God condemned sin by sending the Son who bore the likeness of sinful flesh. God’s purpose in so doing was to acquit believers, namely, to vicariously, in Christ, satisfy in believers the Law’s requirements.

Thus far, the text has focused on subjective justification, the Spirit’s act in bringing the good news of God’s work in Christ into the lives of believers. But when he describes the believers in whom the Law’s requirement has been vicariously fulfilled, Paul shows the Spirit-created connection between justification and sanctification. Paul refers to believers as those “who walk, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (v. 4). Here the apostle shows that the same Spirit who set believers free from condemnation through the Gospel also directs their minds to walk (that is, to live with a regular and ready responsiveness) in the Holy Spirit. That is to say, justification leads to, energizes, and enables sanctification. (For a similarly focused argument that explicitly evokes the promise and power of baptismal union with Christ, see Ro 6:1-11). This sanctification-work of the Spirit is described in verses 5 through 10. The Christian’s mind, though surely tempted and sometimes torn by the struggle between flesh and Spirit (see Gal 5:16-17), will be directed again and again toward the things that the Spirit desires: faith in Christ, joyful service to the neighbor, warfare against sin. Paul starkly describes what happens when the mind of an unbelieving human being is not empowered by Spirit: that way of thinking and living is death (verse 6), hatred of God, and the unwillingness to submit to God’s will (v. 7). Indeed, those whose minds are not empowered by the Spirit are not even able to please God at all (v. 8).

The Christian, however, can believe this promise joyfully: the same Spirit who brings us to faith through the Gospel is also living in us to direct and strengthen our daily lives. Even though our life in this age is still mortal and our bodies are still “dead” in the sense of being subject to death, the Spirit in us is life on account of righteousness (v. 10). That is to say, because we have been justified, the Spirit’s life is at work in us. And all of this Spirit-filled promise leads to a goal: resurrection on the Last Day (v. 11).

A basic sermon outline is below:

Introduction:

Remember when you have seen a child learning to ride a bicycle? His dad or mom runs alongside, holding on to the seat to keep the child from crashing. The goal, of course, is that sooner or later, the child will not need the parent to hold on—he will be able to ride by himself, under his own power.
That familiar picture is never, never the goal in the Christian life! From beginning to end, from new birth to resurrection on the Last Day, we are Christians only because of the Holy Spirit’s power. We can learn to rely at all times on the Spirit’s support. Listen to God’s promises about the Holy Spirit’s work in your life, from beginning to end.

By the Spirit’s Power, From Beginning to End! (Ro 8:1-11)

I. The Spirit sets us free in the first place—through the Gospel!
   A. Unless the Spirit brings the Good News to us, we remain under condemnation.
   B. But the Spirit has set us free, by leading us to believe in what God has done in Christ to condemn sin and fulfill the Law’s demands for us.
   C. That means your baptismal certificate is your emancipation proclamation! You are free from accusation, free from fear, free to belong to God!

II. The Spirit is present each day, empowering us to walk in ways that are pleasing to God.
   A. New desires have begun in you—when you were baptized.
   B. The Spirit who brings the Gospel to forgive you each day also uses the Gospel to lead you into choices that are pleasing to God.

III. The Spirit leads us into God’s glorious future, on the day of Christ.
   A. The struggle with temptation—between “flesh and Spirit” (Gal 5:16-17)—will be over!
   B. Because God gave us His Spirit who frees us and empowers us, God will raise us from the dead!

Conclusion: Do not ever try to go it on your own. Rely on the Spirit and His message of Christ.

Jeffrey A. Gibbs

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion • Philippians 2:5-11 • March 16, 2008

The Introit for the Day in the Altar Book, LSB reminds the worshippers that the One who is the subject of the day’s worship is “the King of Glory.” “The King of Glory” is identified as “the Lord of hosts”—who is in charge of human and angelic armies, the sun, the moon, and the stars. “The King of Glory” is referred to as “the Lord” (יְהֹוָה)—the Covenant God (Ex 3:14, 15), God from eternity.

Philippians 2:5-11 can serve well as the text for the sermon when the emphasis is on either the Palm Sunday event or the Sunday of the Passion.
Verses 6 and 7 have been the object of much discussion. Various interpretations and translations have been proposed especially for the words of verse 7. KJV has “thought it not robbery to be equal with God” (cf. also NKJV). The ESV and the NIV have “made himself nothing.” The NRSV has “emptied himself.” The NLT has “he gave up his divine privileges.” The Greek word ἐκενωσεν does have the meaning of “to empty.” The question becomes, “Of what did Christ Jesus ‘empty Himself?’” The witness of the New Testament indicates that He did not empty Himself of His divinity. The Lutheran Confessions interpret the passage by stating that the Son of God “did not reveal his majesty at all times but only when it pleased him, until he completely laid aside the form of a servant [Php 2:7] (but not his human nature) after the resurrection.”(FC, Ep, VIII, 16). (Cf. also FC SD, VIII, 25, 26: “…Of course, he also possessed the majesty from his conception in the womb of his mother, but, as the Apostle testifies [Php 2:7], he emptied himself of that majesty, and as Dr. Luther explains, [fn 265] he kept it secret in his state of humiliation and did not use it all the time but when he wanted to”).

In the text itself Christ Jesus is identified with God. He took the form of a servant and was truly human. He was both true God and true man. The God-man Christ Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. As the God-man Christ Jesus He died on the cross. Saint Paul said, “He humbled himself becoming obedient until death, indeed death on a cross.” Christ Jesus said of Himself, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

God the Father exalted Christ Jesus and gave Him a name that is above every name at, and to, which the totality of the creation is to bow. Every tongue is to confess, “Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.”

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord!’ except in the Holy Spirit” (ESV).

**Suggested Outline**

**The King of Glory**

I. The God-man Christ Jesus had a mission
   A. He entered Jerusalem to suffer and to die on a cross
   B. As true God He conquered sin, death, and hell
   C. As true man He was the substitute for all mankind

II. The Father exalted Him
   A. Resurrection
   B. Session

III. Believers
   A. Those in whom the Holy Spirit has worked faith through:
      1. Word
      2. Sacraments
   B. Are the beneficiaries of Christ’s suffering, death, and exaltation
C. Are called to confess before God and mankind that
1. “Jesus Christ is Lord!”
2. The “King of Glory!”
3. To the glory of God!

Arthur F. Graudin

The Resurrection of Our Lord • Colossians 3:1-4 • March 23, 2008

This well-known reading from Colossians presents two (at least!) opportunities for mis-interpretation in our present context. The first might be called an over-spiritualizing of the reading. The second would be a moralizing of the text. I will offer brief comments on the text itself, and then speak to each of these two possible mis-readings.

The little word “therefore” (οὖν) with which the reading begins is of some importance. At the end of chapter 2, Paul has expressed his dismay that the Colossian Christians have been willing to submit to “pious requirements” regarding foods and festivals, as though these things possessed anything more than the “appearance of wisdom” (2:23). Such attempts contain a double error. First, they falsely exalt worthless regulations to the status of “true spirituality.” Second, by claiming authoritative status such regulations place the believers once again under the reign of the elemental things of the universe, and not under the reign of Christ. So to live is to live in the wrong direction, and to flirt with trusting in something or someone other than the Son of God.

But the Colossians have been taught to look to Christ for their reality and their hope. They are baptized, that is to say, their old way of life has died (2:11-12). So as the reading gets under way, Paul offers what is formally a conditional clause—but really they know that it is true: “If you died with Christ (and indeed you have), then keep on seeking the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God” (v. 1). In a sense, the reading could stop here, with the main clause presented: “Keep on seeking the things that are above.” Verse 2 repeats and explicates, namely, that the things above are not the things merely on the earth. Verse 3 explains why (γὰρ) the believers should seek the things above. In so explaining Paul fleshes out the significance of Baptism: “you died with Christ,” and your (real) life now remains hidden (the force of the perfect, “has been hidden”) with Christ, in God. Verse 4 offers the end-time contrast with the present hiddenness of the Christian life, namely, the great eschatological promise of the time when believers will no longer have to seek the things above and nothing will remain hidden. The realities now hidden will be seen openly, when Christ returns in glory to share his glory with all Christians.
So, the center of the text is the invitation/exhortation, “Keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God.” Now we return to the possible mis-readings of this pericope. In our present context, where “spiritual things” and “heaven” are conceived of in virtually platonic fashion, one might be tempted to use this text to despise “mundane” matters. In this misunderstanding, “the things above where Christ is sitting” would be otherworldly, non-physical things. Nothing could be farther from Paul’s intention! Christ has accomplished all that He has done for the believers precisely through “mundane” things, namely, the blood of His cross (Col 1:20). The believer’s death with Christ and new life with Him has been inaugurated through the circumcision made without hands, but using the earthly element of water (Col 2:11-12). The “things above” that the believers are to seek are precisely those promises and perspectives that have come true on the earth, and that now are sealed and certain because Christ who accomplished them is sitting in divine power and splendor. The promises and priorities are “with Christ,” but they are all about life here on the earth, lived through faith in Christ and in love for one’s neighbor. The “things above” are the Good News that empowers and directs life lived here on earth.

The other error in reading this text might be to turn it into pure exhortation, so that “keep on seeking the things that are above” is tantamount to “try hard to be good.” But that would be to hurry on too quickly to the undeniably hortatory material that follows in verse 5 and following. The believers in Colossae are being tempted to give their allegiance to the “elemental things” (2:20). Therefore, in the first place the invitation to “seek the things that are above” is precisely that: a gracious invitation to believe again in what Christ, who is sitting and reigning over all things, has already accomplished. The reason why Paul (and every pastor!) must regularly invite Christians to keep seeking God’s promises in Christ is because the world works ceaselessly to distract us from the promises of life that remain hidden—for now. So, to “seek the things above” is equivalent to our Lord’s invitation, “Seek first the reign and His righteousness” (Mt 6:33), that is, look for and believe in what God has done to establish His gracious reign in Christ.

At the same time, as believers seek the Gospel truths that are found in Christ, they will also inevitably find God’s will for their lives and callings. This is why the current text can be immediately followed by verse 5: “Therefore, put to death...” Colossians 3:1-4, then, is holistic, rooted in the Gospel and flowing out into all of life. Seek your orientation from Christ, and look for his coming!

Looking Up Enables You to Live! (Col 3:1-4)

I. Paul needs to say to the believers, “Keep on seeking the things that are above.”
   A. Once you become a Christian, then the battle is joined.
B. All around us, and within us, are lies and forces that are trying to bury us.

II. The truth that we need is “above,” because it is truth that Christ promises!
   A. Christ is sitting at God’s right hand—this means He has conquered, and He is ruling!
      1. He conquered by dying...and by rising to forever-life.
      2. He is worthy of worship and honor, with the Father and the Spirit.
   B. Christ can and will deliver the truth that will enable us to live as believers.

III. And one day, the truth will come crashing down, to change everything!
   A. One day, the battle and the fight will be over.
   B. Christ will be revealed, and all who trust Him will be revealed with Him in glory.

Jeffrey A. Gibbs

Easter 2 • 1 Peter 1:3-9 • March 30, 2008

Good Hopes that Die; The Better Hope that Lives

Hope is good. In a book by John Ortberg (If You Want to Walk on the Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 159), he cites medical research that studied men after they had had their first heart attack. It was based on the degree of hopefulness or pessimism. Twenty-one of the twenty-five most pessimistic men died within eight years. Only six of the most optimistic died in the same time period. Hope was a better predictor of death than such medical risk factors as high blood pressure and cholesterol level.

Mr. Ortberg adds a humorous twist to make the point that hope is good: “Better to eat Twinkies in hope than to eat broccoli in despair” (159).

What is hope? Hope is when you are struggling and you believe something better will happen. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen, something you have not seen or have happen yet. Hope is when you are holding out for a future that is rosier than what you are going through now.

When my sister was first diagnosed with cancer in the liver, we hoped she would beat the odds and get better.3 We hoped that the medicine would work and destroy the cancer cells. We hoped that exercise and diet would make a difference. She was given just a few months to live, and when the one year mark passed we held out hope against hope that she would have more time with us. Hope is good when you are looking for a return to health.
When we hear of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, we hope that peace will come to this battered world. We watch world leaders meet and hope that something good will happen for a change. We learn of a major terrorist arrested and we hope that the violence will be slowed down. Hope is good when you want bloodshed to stop.

When we turn on the news and our eyes are met with a bridge collapsing, we hope that people are not hurt or dead. We hope that rescue workers are successful in their searches. We hope that the bridges we travel over are sound and will not fall down. Hope is good when you are concerned about keeping people safe and out of danger.

Yes, hope is good, but deep inside we know that hopes die all too soon when the future is uncertain or what we hope for will only be temporary. My sister died of cancer just a few months after that one year mark on the calendar. Our good hopes were dashed when no more medicine could be given, when no more food could be eaten.

A lull in the war against terrorism is shattered by another bomb exploding, another plot uncovered, another day of soldiers killed. Our good hopes disappear when evil wins out over peace, when death takes innocent lives.

Deep inside we know the next disaster is soon to happen. A hurricane, tornado, plane crash, flood, tsunami, building collapse, earthquake—something will be the next breaking news story. Our good hopes for safety die just a bit more each day with each new catastrophe.

Now do not get me wrong here. Hope is good and we are not to give up hoping for health, safety, peace, and a better future. Those are good hopes. But they are also dying hopes because they are uncertain or will not last.

It is not hard to make a list of words that begin with the letter “D” that are words describing how these good hopes are dying hopes. Discouragement, despair, disease, disaster, devil, disappointment, disobedience, depression, distance from God, detractors, and death. The last one is literally the killer of hope—death.

I am not sure why, but so many cemeteries seem to be on a low hill, exposed to the harshest weather conditions. In the heat of summer, with the grass turned brown, or the dead of winter, with an icy wind blowing down your neck, you stand amidst a sea of eroding gravestones, and deep inside you know hopes for health and safety and something good died when the caskets were lowered into the ground. Yes, good hopes die.

And yet, even when these good hopes die, we know there is a better hope that still lives. Against all dying hopes, we have one hope that lives deep inside of us. You can hear it in the apostle Peter’s words. “Praise be to the God and Father.” “Greatly rejoice.” “An inexpressible and glorious joy.” “Praise and honor.” “New birth.” “An inheritance that can never spoil, fade or perish.” These first verses of Peter’s letter shout hope—living hope—as he encourages his readers with the rea-
son for the better hope that lives. God has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

What is this better hope? Hope is when you are struggling and you believe something better will happen because Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you. He lives and guards the salvation that has been given to you. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen, something we have not seen or had happen yet. No, we have not seen heaven yet. We have not experienced life after death. We have not had the last day resurrection from the dead that will empty all the cemeteries in the world. But that inheritance is kept in heaven for us. Hope is when you are holding out for a future that is rosier than what you are going through now. Even when good hopes die, we have deep within us a better hope, the hope of the resurrected Lord Jesus who lives for us, who lives within us, who lives to give us life, peace, and safety with Him that will never fade or die or disappear.

My parents are buried in a small cemetery, exposed to the harsh weather conditions. When I visit their graves in the summer, the heat has turned the grass into a crinkly carpet of brown blades. A stifling breezeless afternoon brings sweat to my forehead as I walk to their graves. Death surrounds me. But then I look down and see someone has placed flowers on their graves. The color and beauty of the flowers remind me that hope lives even in a cemetery.

You see, the flowers take me back to Easter and all the flowers that fill a church on that joyous day of celebration. They take me back to the first Easter morning when Jesus’ tomb is empty. I see Mary Magdalene, whose hopes were dashed by Jesus’ death on the cross, now holding on tightly to her risen Lord. Her hopes are alive again. Deep inside she knows that even though death may kill some good hopes, she has her arms around the better hope, the eternal hope, and the hope for salvation that cannot be taken from her no matter what “D” word may invade her life.

And this same hope lives within us as we bury a sister, a mother, a spouse, a child, or a close friend. In the service at the graveside, we read this paragraph:

We now commit the body of (you fill in the name) to its resting place; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subdue all things to Himself (Pastoral Care Companion [CPH, 2007], 134).

In preparing for this sermon I came across a helpful item of how Easter brings a living hope. It is just a short saying: “Easter is the New Year’s Day of the soul” (A. B. Simpson in “Inspiring Quotations,” Christianity Today, Vol. 41, no. 4).

New Year’s Day: a day of hope for a brand new year. A day pictured as a new baby full of life and promise walking in while the old man of the last year walks away.
Easter is the New Year’s Day of our souls. The old and dying give way to the new and living. The resurrection of Jesus Christ brings new birth deep within us: it brings a faith that lives in the promise of something better kept in heaven for us. Because Jesus lives, our hope lives.

My mother died in 1993, but I still remember what a green thumb she had. She loved African violets and a plant called Christmas Cactus. If a leaf broke off, she would replant it and it would grow. She always had hope that she could grow another plant. I bought a African violet this week to remind me that a small cemetery in Wisconsin is not a place where hopes die, but deep inside is a living hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And you know what? The living hope makes even the dying hopes good. We hope for health because we believe that God’s healing touch reaches into our lives today to give temporary reprieve from the disease and despair that invade our bodies. We hope for peace because we believe God works times of quiet and protection as a little bit of relief from the destruction and death of this violent world. We hope for safety because we believe God sends His guardian angels to defend us from so many times of disaster.

Yes, hope is good, but even when good hopes die, we have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Amen.

Glenn A. Nielsen

Easter 3 • 1 Peter 1:17-25 • April 6, 2008

Textual Considerations: The words "judges each one according to each one’s deeds" (1:17) (ESV) are a reminder of the final judgment described by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46. Good deeds do not earn salvation but are the evidence of faith.

The words ευ φοβω (1:17) have been translated “with fear” (ESV), “in fear” (KJV), “in reverent fear” (NIV, NRSV, NLT). A footnote in CSSB (p. 1907) states, “reverent fear. Not terror, but wholesome reverence and respect for God, which is the basis for all godly living (cf. Pr 1:7; 8:13; 16:6).” In An Explanation of the Small Catechism (c. 1991), the word “fear” is explained. “We fear God above all things when we revere Him alone as the highest being, honor Him with our lives, and avoid what displeases Him” (58).

The Greek word παροικίας (1:17) has been understood in a literal or metaphorical sense. Some interpreters think that 1 Peter was written to believers who had been scattered and were in a form of exile. In verse one of this letter the apostle Peter does address “those who are elect exiles of the dispersion.” Others understand that the word was used metaphorically as a reference to believers who
were awaiting the return of the Lord. In today’s liturgical setting the metaphorical use is appropriate. Believers are in Christ’s church militant and are anticipating Christ’s return to transport them to His church triumphant.

It should be noted that not all believers will die before the return of Christ. As St. Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 and 17, “For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alone, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep...Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (ESV).

Verses 18 and 19 point to the consequences of original sin and the price Jesus Christ paid to redeem mankind.

Verse 20 points to the eternal existence of Christ and His coming in the flesh. As true God, He conquered sin, death, and the devil. As true man, the price He paid was deposited in mankind’s account as payment for mankind’s sin.

Verse 21 indicates that Christ, whom God raised from the dead and glorified, made it possible for people to become believers and to have “faith and hope.”

The apostle Peter calls believers to display “brotherly love” since they have been “born again...through the living and abiding word of God.”

Verses 24 and 25 are a shortened quotation from Isaiah 40:6-8. Human beings are compared to grass that withers and flowers that fall, “but the word of the Lord remains forever.” The end of verse 25 points out that “the word” referred to in the quotation is the Gospel that has been announced to Peter’s hearers and readers.

Suggested Outline:

(The antiphon of the Introit for the Day calls for fellow believers to dwell in unity: “Behold, how good and pleasing it is when brothers dwell in unity.”)

Believers/Brothers in Christ:

Have been redeemed by the precious Blood of Christ.

Have been “born again...through the living and abiding word of God.”

Are called “to love one another earnestly from a pure heart.”

Arthur F. Graudin

Easter 4 • 1 Peter 2:19-25 • April 13, 2008

Introduction: In the three year lectionary the Fourth Sunday of Easter is also designated “Good Shepherd Sunday” with readings from John 10 as the Gospel text dispersed over the three years. Today’s Epistle is read on this Sunday perhaps
especially because of verse 25 which does relate to this theme—“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (ESV). Note, however, the purpose of the Epistle text is not so much to describe Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but rather it is a call for slaves to endure hardships because of the example of righteous suffering set by Jesus.

**Literary context:** The style of 1 Peter is marked by an ongoing cycle of exhortation given to the believers followed by descriptions of the Gospel reality in which these exhortations are based. The full context of today’s Epistle would embrace exhortations found in 2:11-20 followed by the Gospel basis for these in 2:21-25. The believers are exhorted as aliens here to abstain from the passions of the flesh (2:11) and to live honorably among the Gentiles (2:12). There seems to be a particular interest in avoiding wrongdoing/criminal activity so that any charge laid against a Christian would be unwarranted (2:12). In light of this a general exhortation is given to all believers in 2:13 that they be subject (ὑποτάσσω) to every human institution because of the Lord. A more specific example of this then begins in 2:18 where house slaves (οἰκέτης, in the same semantic field as δοῦλος, but referring more specifically to “domestic help”) are told to be subject to their masters. The text continues this exhortation, but 2:18 is not included in the pericope. Perhaps this is done in an effort to make this text appear more universal in scope. Nevertheless, today’s text is part of an exhortation to house slaves to submit to suffering and unfair treatment at the hands of their masters based on the example of Jesus’ own suffering. It is by analogy that this text would then apply to unjust suffering experienced by other believers in our relationship to human authority in any other situation as well. But such an extension could be said to follow given the more general exhortation to all believers in 2:13.

**Details:** Again, vv. 13 and 18 should be kept in mind as part of the context for today’s text.

Verses 19-20: A distinction is made here between suffering unjustly and suffering because one has actually sinned: It is χάρις ("a gracious thing" in ESV) when one suffers unjustly, but there is no "credit" (κλέος in ESV and various translations) when one has brought such suffering upon himself because of bad conduct. Is the unjust suffering described here more specifically speaking about suffering because one is a Christian or is it more generally addressing any unfair treatment a house slave might endure? The more general sense could be meant here: House slaves perhaps had to experience unfair treatment regularly as part of their lot, but they are here called to endure it for the sake of their new status and identity as disciples of Jesus.

Verses 21-23: “For to this you were called.” The call of every Christian includes a call to be willing to suffer, especially for the sake of the Gospel (see Mk 8:31ff.). And so the basis for the exhortation to submit to human authority (and here house slaves to their masters) and with this even to suffer unjustly is provided in the example of Jesus: Jesus also suffered unjustly. He did not sin, yet He was
punished as one who had sinned. *And why did He do this?* He suffered on behalf of the believers. And in this He left them an example.

Verse 24: The Gospel reality underlying this exhortation is now made more explicit: Jesus Himself took up our sins in His body upon the tree. Note the allusion to Isaiah 53:9. He did this so that by dying to sin we would live for righteousness. As in Romans 6:1ff. participation in Christ’s death and resurrection is emphasized here as one result of the call to faith. Note the allusion to Isaiah 53:5 in the relative clause at the end of this verse—“by his wounds you have been healed” (ESV). The Gospel reality that Jesus suffered and died for us to give us new life becomes the basis for the exhortation to submit to human authority—even slaves to their human masters—and to endure unjust suffering.

Verse 25: This sentence now marks the conclusion of this exhortation to the house slaves (exhortations to wives and husbands follow in 1 Pe 3ff.) and shows once again the Gospel reality experienced by the believers. Their former status is described: “For you were straying like sheep” (ESV). Note the allusion to Isaiah 53:6. But their present status follows: “But [you] have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (ESV). Once lost and wandering sheep, the believers are now under the leadership, protection, and guidance of the Shepherd and Overseer. The purpose of the call to submit to human authority and to endure unjust suffering is so that no accusation of wrongdoing can be justly made against a disciple of Jesus. This provides a witness to the world. Such a witness is in keeping with being guided by this one Shepherd who likewise suffered death to bring new life to His once-wandering sheep.

**Considerations for preaching:**

I. Although verse 18 is not included in the pericope, the preacher should not shy away from the context that slaves are being addressed here. That slaves are exhorted on the basis of Jesus’ own example indicates a number of things:

A. There were probably a large percentage of house slaves among the believers addressed by this Epistle. The nature of the Gospel was such that it brought hope to those who had little standing politically or socially in the first century Greco-Roman world. The new life in Christ Jesus was such that it elevated their duties to that of both vocation and witness to Jesus. Any unjust suffering these believers may have had to endure at the hands of their masters became an opportunity to follow the example of Jesus and to provide a faithful witness.

B. Where we take it for granted that the institution of slavery should be done away with—and then may choose to fault the apostles for not calling for its abolition—the New Testament offers a more radical answer to the problem: A slave who became a Christian then had as
his primary identity that of “disciple of Jesus.” This identity in the end is in no way is affected by the presence or abolition of the institution of slavery at any given moment in human history, and, in fact, it finally transcends this earthly life where we are really aliens and sojourners anyway.

C. The present day American preoccupation with seeking one’s rights, freedoms, etc. could be seen as the polar opposite of the attitude called for in today’s text. Because slaves are being addressed here, today’s text could sound very “politically incorrect” to many American ears. This shows how alien these teachings are in our own cultural context. Here one might expect exhortations such as “seek freedom,” and “exert your own will,” “seek blessings” over and against “be subject to.” To the degree that Christians are affected by the culture there is then the need for repentance and a return to the standard of discipleship established in the NT. When a Christian falls into the contemporary American habit of being over-preoccupied with his own rights and privileges—almost as if this earthly life is all there is—he provides a faithless witness to our Lord who gave up His rights to die in the place of sinners.

II. To preach this text faithfully, the preacher will exhort as does the text. But it is by analogy that the exhortations here apply more universally to other believers who are not slaves. We are all called to show excellent conduct (2:11) and to be subject to human authority (2:12)—and thus we may all have to endure unjust suffering at the hands of human authority.

III. To preach this text faithfully, the preacher will also base all exhortation in the example set by Jesus and thus also in the Gospel reality experienced by believers. Jesus willingly suffered, thereby giving us an example to follow of faithful endurance. But Jesus’ suffering was not pointless: In His suffering Jesus Himself carried our sins in His body thus to save us from the power of sin. We as sheep went astray and He (to continue the allusion of Isaiah 53) bore on Himself the punishment of us all. We have now returned to Jesus, who is the Shepherd and Overseer of our lives and to whom our lives now give witness.

David I. Lewis

Easter 5 • 1 Peter 2:2-10 • April 20, 2008

Easter is the start of something new: the resurrection of Jesus is the dawn of the new creation. As Carl Michaelson puts it, Jesus is the “hinge of history.” In
Him the story of the world has made a decisive turn; indeed, He is the fulcrum upon which history turns. The First Epistle of Peter puts it in this way: *Christ is the cornerstone.* He is the foundation upon which is built the spiritual house of God’s people. The laying of the cornerstone is decisive—there is no taking it back. One is either built upon it or stumbles over it. “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” But to those who do not believe, Christ is “the stone that the builders rejected...a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.”

This decisive moment in salvation history is reflected in the transition experienced among God’s people. There is a *before* and an *after.* “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Central to this text is Peter’s description of this new status as God’s people. At first it seems ironic that the description of God’s people as “newborn babes” whose birth is “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3) is steeped in the language and images of the Old Testament: a priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, a temple. But this only reinforces that what preceded Christ was only there *because* of Christ, foreshadowing Him and the salvation He would bring. Thus, the prophets were said to have the “Spirit of Christ in them” as they prophesied about the grace that is now ours. Previously, to be a temple and a priesthood, a chosen race, and a holy nation could only approximate the true meaning of these terms, which have now been fully realized by the coming of this grace. In a way that surpasses the former experience of God’s people, these images describe our relationship to God as well as to the world. The sermon could then develop these along the following lines:

If we are born into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ, then we truly are elect exiles (1:1), for we have been chosen and set apart from a world overshadowed by the doom of death. No particular race created by God has a privileged status. In reality, there are only two races that have any theological import: that which is born of Adam and consequently born into sin and death, and that which is newborn in Christ and his resurrection. Yet we are also related to the world as a priesthood and a temple. That is to say, as “priests” and a “spiritual house” we are mediators, directed toward the world for the sake of God’s love. As a priesthood, God’s people live for the sake of the world in prayer and in sacrificial love. As a living temple built upon Christ, we bear the presence of God to the world. This happens precisely when we “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Erik Herrmann
In this Easter season we hear the apostle Peter exhorting the Christians to live righteously, turning from evil and doing good, seeking peace and pursuing it (1 Pe 3:8-12). In doing this he wants us to look at:

**Jesus Christ, the Guide to Right Living**

**I. The followers of Christ are called to serve God and do good.**

A. We are to be eager to do good, with a whole-hearted zeal, even if it entails suffering for it (vv. 13-14). But this is a daunting challenge, and we are often unwilling and fearful. So he continues:

B. Remember that this is the life that honors Christ as Lord and confesses hope built on Him (v. 15). How important—and how comforting—to know the reason for it!

C. A good conscience is a precious blessing and useful for the Christian life, since it recognizes that it is always right to follow Christ, come what may (vv. 16-17).

**II. Christ gives a guide for the Christian life—Himself!**

The section in verses 18-22 is often regarded as a digression from Peter’s main line of thought in chapters 3-4. But in fact it gives that line of thought (the call to righteous living even to the point of suffering) impressive support.

A. The apostle has set forth Jesus as our example (2:22), who sets the pattern (suffering followed by glory, 1:11). In faith we see this as the pattern into which God leads us, as his fellow apostle Paul also says (Ro 8:17), a pattern which ends in victory and full vindication of one’s cause. Jesus suffered to carry out the will of God (v. 18). He was able to announce His victory and vindication as the risen Savior to wicked spirits in hell who have vehemently opposed the divine purpose to save (v. 19), like the souls of Noah’s detractors (v. 20) and demonic powers (v. 22; 5:8-9).

B. Most important of all, Christ gives us the basis for the hope by which we live. He has suffered and died for our sins to reconcile us to God (v. 18). This gracious atonement is bestowed upon us in Baptism. Peter says that Baptism saves us and that it is to be seen not as a removal of dirt but as an erotema (v. 21), which C. E. B. Cranfield feels is best understood to mean that “baptism is a pledge of God’s forgiveness” (Peake’s Commentary, 1029). This is the blessing of a good conscience (v. 21), cleansed by forgiveness for all failures and stirred to loving obedience to such a marvelous Savior, so that it is of service in the Christian’s life (v. 16). Baptism saves
by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because Easter is His victory over the curse of death, won by Him through His atonement and shared with us in our Baptism.

Conclusion: The reason for our hope, which we gladly proclaim (v. 15), is Jesus’ eternal lordship over all things, which has indeed been proclaimed throughout the universe at the commencement of His exaltation, as this passage assures us. “The descent, the resurrection appearances, and the session at the right hand belong together as a unified proclamation of Christ’s victory in the three different but related realms of hell, earth, and heaven” (David Scaer, “He Did Descend into Hell,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 35:99).

Thomas E. Manteufel

Ascension • Ephesians 1:15-23 • May 1, 2008

“There’s A New Lord in Town”

Ascension Day is included as one of the milestone events in the grand narrative of the Gospel as set forth by the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. And yet, it doesn’t seem to receive its due among Lutherans. Is it decreasing in importance? Ascension Day seems to be the forgotten festival, hardly on par with Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter. The lectionary simply lists Ascension Day as a separate festival. The same thing occurs in the Thrivent desk calendar. Ascension Day does not even get a page of its own in the LSB lectionary, and the lessons are not printed! (Even Wednesdays in Advent and Lent get that, as does that non-liturgical holiday, Thanksgiving.) Furthermore, the lectionary makes no provision for its observance on the Sunday following Ascension Day, should churches not celebrate it on its designated day.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we do not know what to do with Ascension Day. It may appear more as a going away day in which Christ leaves us behind. How can we celebrate that? Perhaps it is because the day focuses on the lordship of Christ and Lutherans do not quite know what to do with that. After all, the Evangelicals seem to have laid claim to that title for Christ and with it a stress on the sovereignty of Christ in a way that lays more emphasis upon Christ’s role as a master than as a savior. But there is a Lutheran (and thus Biblical) way of interpreting the ascension and session of Christ (these should be taken together) as a gracious lordship. Within the context of the creed, the ascension of Christ occupies an important place. But the creed does not give us an explicit interpretation of its meaning. In fact, the creedal narrative of Christ’s work can be interpreted through at least three different motifs, all of them interconnected, but with different emphases.
First, in light of the atonement and the propitiation of God’s wrath, we can understand the ascension as Christ returning to heaven where He sits at the right hand of God and serves as our mediator since He is one of us. Hebrews picks up this idea. Second, the meaning of the ascension can be unpacked with the motif of creation in which Christ is the Second Adam who undid the devastation and death wrought by the first Adam. Here it should be noted that it is as a man that Jesus ascends into heaven in order to sit at the right hand of God. In other words, as the first Adam lost dominion over creation, the Second Adam (and we with Him) requires that dominion here in the Ascension. Finally, in light of Christ’s victory over Satan on the cross and in the resurrection, the ascension can be interpreted as Christ taking up His rule over the principalities and powers, making them His footstool. Our Ephesians text picks up this particular theme.

If we enter the Christus Victor story at the point of the incarnation of the Son of God, we would stress that Christ came in order to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:8). During His life on earth, beginning with the temptation narrative and culminating in His death and resurrection, Christ engaged in a duel (Luther calls it the Magnificent Duel) with Satan. Satan in turn devoted all his energies to the goal of preventing Christ from achieving salvation for us. He failed. In His death and resurrection, Jesus triumphed over the power of the devil, along with his allies of sin and death. Christ won a decisive victory for us as demonstrated in His taking the enemy’s capital with the descent into hell. By His ascension, He entered heaven where He kicks Satan out (Rev 12) as our accuser once and for all and makes His enemies His footstool. The reference is to Psalm 110, the most quoted passage of the Old Testament in the New Testament. It speaks about how a conquering ruler would place his feet upon the necks of his defeated enemies.

Now Christ rules over all, not as a despot or tyrant, but as a gracious Lord or Shepherd King. The final sentences of AC III can provide some direction about how to take this and develop it. Christ rules by giving His Holy Spirit, through whom He protects, guards, and defends us against the last gasping efforts of Satan to take us down with him. By His rule, Christ nourishes us and strengthens us with His means of grace now that He has made us His own and we live under Him in His kingdom.

There’s a New Lord in Town

I. Joyous celebration. Concluding scene of the first Star Wars movie. Huge hall. Heroes are honored. Awards and places of honor are given. This might give us a sense of the setting of the ascension, but doesn’t compare to what happens here.

II. Christ Rules: All Things Have Been Placed under His Feet.
   A. The ascension is the climactic event of His victory procession (resurrection, descent into hell, and now ascension). Heaven receives Him, God honors Him.
B. Kicks Satan out (Rev 12). Christ rules over His enemies. In Baptism we have been transferred from tyranny of Satan to lordship of Christ.

III. Living under His Rule is Good News
   A. Christ’s rule is a rule of graciousness. He rules by giving us the Holy Spirit and the gifts of redemption
   B. Christ protects us from the evil one and ultimately will deliver us from Satan.
   C. From the right hand of God, Christ will bring all things to their consummation and reconcile all things to himself.

IV. We used to use the expression, “There’s a new sheriff in town.” This meant that things were going to change. The Ascension tells us, “There’s a new Lord in town.” That’s great news.

Charles P. Arand

Easter 7 • 1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11 • May 4, 2008

“On the Prowl”

Peter portrays an aspect of the Christian life that may sound more than a little scary. “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a lion looking for someone to devour.” This does not portray the Christian life in rosy colors as one of increasing peace and prosperity. Instead it suggests something much darker: Christians are being hunted down by a merciless adversary. Peter’s language here would be echoed centuries later by Luther in the introduction to his Baptismal Booklet where he asks parents if they are fully aware of the ramifications of having their child baptized. In other words, by baptizing the child, they are hanging around that child's neck a life long enemy, namely, the devil. And yet, this is not exactly how we talk today. Perhaps Satan has become something of an embarrassment. If anything, it is easier to talk about aliens and monsters (beginning with Frankenstein), all which have replaced the devil and demons as the embodiments of evil in the consciousness of most Americans. And yet, Satan as the prince of this world is a prominent theme in the writings of the New Testament. But we seem to find it much easier to talk about relationships in general and our relationship to God in particular than to talk about demonic forces.

In many ways this text in Peter follows nicely on the heels of the Ephesians text assigned for Ascension Day. In doing so, it fits well into an overarching narrative or story that we must increasingly emphasize for our hearers today lest the individual pericopes be seen as isolated and disconnected pieces of the Scriptural Gospel. Our text does not explicitly pick up the atonement narrative (Christus
Victim) and instead follows what might be called “battle narrative” (Christus Victor) or what Luther called the Magnificent Duel (Mirabile Duellum) narrative. The text for Ascension Day focused on how Christ ascended into heaven and took His place at the right hand of God in order to rule over all rule and power and authority and dominion. God placed all things under His feet (here it recalls Psalm 110). As Ascension Day has become observed by fewer and fewer people, it might be wise to bring in that ascension theme into the sermon for this Sunday. It provides an important backdrop and transition to our text today.

In other words, Christ came to destroy the works of the devil. During His life on earth, beginning with the temptation narrative and culminating in His death and resurrection, Christ engaged in a duel with Satan. Satan in turn devoted all his energies to the goal of preventing Christ from achieving salvation for us. He failed. In his death and resurrection Jesus triumphed over the power of the devil, along with his allies of sin and death. Christ won a decisive victory for us as demonstrated in His taking the enemy’s capital and getting booted out of heaven as our accuser. By His ascension, He entered heaven where He kicks out Satan (Rev 12) once and for all. Taking His seat at the right hand of God, He uses the necks of His opponents as a footstool.

It is at this point that our text fits into the narrative. Even though he was kicked out of heaven, Satan now engages in rearguard operations against believers. Even though he remains on a short leash here on earth, he devotes all of his energies toward the goal of preventing us from receiving and enjoying the fruits and benefits of Christ’s victory. Who else can Satan take down with him? He prowls around looking for someone to devour. So how does he take others down with him? The notion of prowling implies sneakiness. It rarely involves a frontal attack. A lion stalks his prey. He seeks out the weak in the herd. If necessary, he chases down the prey and attacks from behind. So it is also with us. All may be going well. But Satan looks to blindside us. He sets ambushes for us. Here, Luther’s explanation to the Sixth Petition in the Large Catechism might offer some ideas about how to develop this idea. Remember, the goal of Satan is to destroy our faith and thus deprive us of Christ’s blessings. Reading Luther’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer in the Large Catechism and C.S. Lewis’ Screwtape Letters would prove helpful here.

On the Prowl!

I. Introduction: In the movie, Predator, alien beings come to earth in order to hunt humans. Sound far-fetched? Sure. Yet there is one far more terrible who is on the prowl for us.

II. Significance of the Ascension
   A. Christ’s expels Satan from heaven and makes Satan and his allies His footstool. Yet in retreat Satan’s rearguard action is to lay waste to everything left behind.
B. Transferred from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of Christ in Baptism, we are enlisted in the war against Satan. In that struggle, suffering occurs as a result of Satan’s fury, yet we know that we share in Christ’s victory celebration.

III. Living Under the Reign of Christ
   A. Keep your eyes open. Look all about you. Satan will engage in guerilla actions and ambushes. He wants to catch us unawares so that we fall from faith without being aware of it.
   B. Our weapons: We live under the reign of Him who defeated Satan. His strength in our struggles is given to us through God’s Word and prayer.

IV. In the end, Christ exercises an everlasting dominion and you have been called to an eternal glory.

Charles P. Arand

Day of Pentecost • Acts 2:1-21 • May 11, 2008

Some have referred to the Acts of the Apostles as the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” However, neither title does full justice to the focus Luke wants to give to the risen Christ as the mediator of the Spirit of the Father to the apostolic church and through her to all the nations. Nor do these titles point us to the Lukan interest in the risen Jesus as the agent and aim of the apostolic proclamation to the whole world.

At the very beginning of Acts, Luke gives us a picture of the risen Christ who is taken up to heaven “after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles” (1:2). From the start, the Spirit is not seen as an independent agent who does and speaks things apart from the risen Christ and His words to the apostles. Luke wants us to contemplate the unity of Christ and His Spirit—their joint mission—in the passing on of the saving words of God to the apostles and through them to all peoples.

Luke sees Pentecost as the fulfillment of the Jordan, providing us with a vital link between the mystery of Christ and the mystery of the church. The Spirit with whom the Father anointed Jesus at the Jordan river “to bring glad tidings to the poor...to proclaim liberty to captives...and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19) is now given through the risen Christ to the church, so that “repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all nations” (Lk 24:47). The one anointed with the Spirit of the Father at the Jordan to proclaim glad tidings now becomes the one who baptizes the disciples with the Spirit on Pentecost to preach His name.
The activity of the Holy Spirit in the anointing of Jesus and the baptism or clothing of the church with “the promise of [my] the Father” or “power from on high” (Lk 24:49; Ac 1:4, 8)—two ways of describing the Holy Spirit respectively as gift and action—are completely oriented towards the preaching of the Word that leads to Baptism and faith in Christ. Accordingly, the language of receiving “power” only serves the purpose of identifying the apostles and their associates as “witnesses” to Christ (Ac 1:8). Similarly, from Pentecost onwards, the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is not an experience subsequent to faith in Christ but precisely the initiation of repentant sinners everywhere into the name of Christ through Baptism in water for the forgiveness of sins (Ac 2:38). Note then that the promise and gift of the Spirit serves the proclamation of Christ that leads to Baptism in His name and faith in Him.

The reading for this Day of Pentecost assumes the continuity of the Holy Spirit’s activity through the words of Christ and His apostles. However, the emphasis falls on the beginning of the universal extension of this message in Jerusalem. The universality of the gift of the Spirit of Christ on the last days foretold by the prophet Joel begins to be fulfilled on this Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem (Ac 2:17-21). From that day forward, the Spirit will only come through the word of those who shall speak “of the mighty acts of God” in Christ (2:11) and “shall prophesy” concerning Christ (2:17-18)—there is no other form of speaking or prophesying for Luke—but the Spirit will also come “upon all flesh” (2:17) so that “everyone shall be saved who calls on the name of the Lord” (2:21, cf. 2:39).

The most striking note of universality in the account of the giving of the Holy Spirit upon the Jerusalem disciples lies in their spoken witness to Christ “in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Ac 2:4). This multilingual display of the Spirit through the proclamation of Christ in the “native language” of Jews living abroad (2:8; cf. 2:6: “in his own language,” and 2:11: “in our own tongues”) makes clear the divine intent for the church in mission. The promise and gift of the Spirit of Christ cuts through and breaks down ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers. The universal call to repentance and the forgiveness of sins are for all people without distinction.

We live in a North American society that is increasingly diverse both in terms of ethnicities and languages, and yet it is not uncommon for North Americans to insist on a monolingual identity. Many cry out, “English only!” (Unfounded fears? The reality is that the majority of immigrants and their descendants consistently learn the dominant language of the country where they live and work.) There is a real problem when an absolute claim to monolingualism gets in the way of the church’s mission and service “to all those far off” (cf. Ac 2:39). Some say, “Why don’t these Mexicans learn English?” When Christians in the United States make learning English a condition for bringing Christ to the nations and the nations to the church, we have lost the lasting significance of Pentecost for us today.
So the text for the Day of Pentecost can function as *a call to repentance* for the church. It is also *an invitation* for an English-speaking church to live out her mission gladly in an increasingly diverse United States as the Spirit of Christ continually brings her out from her immediate sphere of service into the speaking of the Gospel in the many tongues of their neighbors. The *Gospel promise* lies in the universality of God’s gift and promise to the nations, one that excludes no one on the basis of culture, ethnicity, or language.

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

**Holy Trinity • Acts 2:14a, 42-48 • May 18, 2008**

On Holy Trinity Sunday, it is tempting to find in Luke’s portrayal of the life of the Jerusalem community, where all brothers and sisters confess the same apostolic teaching and share all things in common, an *analogy* of the three divine persons in communion with one another who share the same divine will, works, and essence. Luke’s description of the community might not flow out of such a general analogy of the Trinity but it does flow out of a Trinitarian *narrative of salvation* that directs us to the mystery of Pentecost.

Peter’s Pentecost sermon interprets the awesome event as the exalted Christ’s outpouring unto others of the promised Holy Spirit whom He first received from His heavenly Father (Ac 2:33). We have here an act of sheer Trinitarian *generosity*. The Holy Spirit whom Jesus received from His Father, He does not keep to Himself. Rather the one anointed by the Father with the Spirit at the Jordan is the one who baptizes with or pours forth the promise of the Holy Spirit to the nations (cf. Lk 24:46-49; Ac 1:4-5, 8). For Luke, therefore, to call the Holy Spirit “promise” and “gift” is precisely to highlight the *gracious outreach* of the Father through His Son to sinners by means of the proclamation of repentance that leads to Baptism in water for the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:38).

From Pentecost onwards, it is the gift of the Spirit given in Baptism that will make of repentant sinners a *community* that gathers around the apostolic teaching of the Word and the breaking of the bread (Ac 2:41-42). There is no other community that the Holy Spirit from the Father *creates and gathers around* the risen Christ through His apostolic *Word* and His *sacraments*. The reality of the church—its very existence and life—appears in Acts as the product of the gracious work of the Holy Trinity, the fruit of the generous outreach of the Father through His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Jerusalem community is *outward-looking* because the apostles “with great power bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Ac 4:33; cf. 2:43). This apostolic “power” is actually a description of the Holy Spirit in action as the one
who moves the church out into the world to proclaim the risen Lord even as the same Holy Spirit gathers the world into the church. (Note: “Spirit” and “power” are parallel terms in Luke; e.g., Lk 1:35; 24:49; and Ac 1:8; 10:38.) The community’s bold witness in word and deed earned them “favor with all the people” so that “every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (2:46-47; cf. 5:12-16).

There are marks that make this Trinitarian creation and gathering of repentant sinners we call church stand out in the world. In addition to their adherence to the teaching passed on to the apostles by the risen Lord and their fellowship around the table of the Lord, these brothers and sisters lived out their faith through a life of prayer and praise to God (Ac 2:42, 47) and by caring for the poor neighbor in their midst (2:44-45). In particular, the church’s commitment to the poor is striking because the brethren “would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (2:45) so that “there was no needy person among them” (4:34).

Nowadays social models or analogies of the Trinity highlight the ethical implications for the church and society of a communitarian vision of divine persons in communion with one another. A problem with this approach is that the Trinity only serves as a model “out there” for us to create a better community “down here.” Luke provides a more faithful way to think of our being church in the world by helping us contemplate the lasting significance of the Trinitarian mystery of Pentecost for our lives together.

The evangelist reminds us that the fullness of community—one’s being and living in relationship to God and the neighbor—is the gracious work of the Trinity “down here.” To be forgiven before God through Baptism into Christ and to be for the poor who need us is not our human project but the generous work of the Holy Spirit in the world. The risen Christ’s continuous and merciful outpouring of the Holy Spirit from God the Father creates and gathers the church from all the nations. Such outpouring also empowers the church to proclaim boldly the Lord’s death and resurrection and work on behalf of the poor in her midst. Through the church’s work of proclamation and mercy, Luke reminds us that the Lord is able to add to her number those who are being saved.

The text for Trinity Sunday provides a call to repentance for failing to be the ideal, faithful, outward-looking Christian community Luke so favorably portrays. It also provides an invitation to the baptized to seek strength in the Word and the breaking of the bread for boldness to proclaim Christ and care for the poor in church and world. The Gospel promise lies in the gracious outreach and sheer generosity of the Trinity who continually creates and gathers the church from the nations even as He leads her into the nations.

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.
The apostle Paul had long planned to visit the brethren in Rome who had heard the Gospel from other Christian preachers (1:13). When Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans, he had yet to deliver a collection to the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem before making the long-awaited trip to the west (15:25-27). Upon arriving at Rome, he had also hoped to enlist the support of the local church for a missionary trip to Spain (15:24, 28).

Well, Paul did make it to Rome after his Jerusalem trip, though in chains (cf. Ac 21:30-33). As far as we can gather from both the silence and hints of Scripture, as well as church tradition here and there, it does not seem that the apostle made it to Spain. Rome might have been his place of martyrdom (cf. 2 Ti 1:16-17; 4:6-8).

One of the most moving scenes of the movie Peter and Paul is one where the apostle is in chains and being escorted by Roman soldiers into Rome. As Paul approaches the outskirts of the city, great numbers of Christians appear from behind the bushes to greet with joy their spiritual father, their brother, their apostle (cf. Ac 28:14-16). With some difficulty, an exhausted Paul—chains and all—takes courage, smiles, and hugs old and young alike.

The text for today bears evidence that such a deep bond of love between Paul and his Roman brethren developed over time. The apostle gives thanks for them, praises their faith, remembers them in his prayers, asks God to bring him to them for mutual encouragement in the faith, and longs for the opportunity to preach the Gospel to them (1:8-15).

The apostle’s heart beats for the Romans. To them Paul writes one of the most comprehensive and beloved epistles in the Christian world for all time. The last verses of the assigned text set up the tone for the whole epistle and expose the heart of the Gospel that Paul has been called to preach to Jews and Gentiles (1:13-16). Although the wrath of God is indeed revealed against sin (1:18), the apostle Paul is much more eager to preach the power of the Gospel “for the salvation of everyone who believes” (1:16). And what does this Gospel reveal to us? The righteousness of God through faith in Christ (1:17)—the heart of the epistle, indeed of the Gospel!

In the broader context of Romans, Lutherans can proclaim God’s word of Law against us but especially God’s word of Gospel for us. However, may I also suggest that the preacher take the opportunity to take the congregation on a journey into the heart of Paul, into the depth of his love for the church. Paul’s intense love for the church clearly flows out of his love for Christ and the power of His Gospel for which he was appointed an apostle, put in chains, and ultimately died. Lesson: One cannot love the church enough.

Because the church in the world is always suffering the attacks of Satan (tentatio, Anfechtung), and at times giving in to the evil one and the flesh, the church
often becomes a *scandal* to the world and her “less than perfect” life discredits her witness in word and deed before all men. Well aware of their sins, Christians today can also take heart in the Gospel and learn *again and again* to love the church as Paul’s heart beats for the Roman brethren—yea, as Christ Himself loves the church to the point of giving His own life to save sinners like us.

The assigned text gives us a picture of what it means to love the church. We love the church when we give thanks to God for our brothers and sisters near and far, praise their faith in Christ, remember them at all times in our prayers, encourage one another in our faith, and are eager to speak and hear the Gospel of salvation in Christ from one another in season and out of season. Why not? We can even long to visit Christian brothers and sisters near and far whenever possible. This is now easier to do than in Paul’s day due to the shortening of distances through fast travel and communications.

The text functions as an *invitation* to be church, to live out the Gospel with one another, as Paul loved the Romans. For Paul, this self-giving love for the church—in his case, to the point of martyrdom—flows out of God’s own gracious revelation in His Gospel that sinners are forgiven and declared righteous before Him through faith in Christ. *Lesson: God does not love the church because she is beautiful. The church is beautiful because God loves her.* We love and suffer for the church for the same reason.

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

*Proper 4 • Romans 3:21-28 • June 1, 2008*

It is always a challenge to preach on a very familiar text in such a way that people actually hear the message afresh. Familiarity breeds, if not contempt, then complacency and inattention. For Lutherans, these verses from the third chapter of Romans are perilously familiar, and both the preacher and his hearers may be lulled into a mistaken sense that there is nothing new to which to listen in these words. The antidote for such spiritual numbness is the profundity of the Gospel at work in the text itself, for these verses richly reward close attention at every new reading.

One of the remarkable features of this passage is the way in which it keeps the focus on God Himself. Even though we stoutly confess that the justification of sinners is entirely God’s work, it is still easy for us to see ourselves at the center of the story. If asked why God undertook to save the world through the death of His Son, we might naturally answer that God loves us. Though true, that is not quite the answer provided by our present text. Here the apostle does not speak in terms of God’s love, but of His righteousness. Of course, English translations use a collection of words that may tend to obscure somewhat the fact that “just,” “right-
eous,” “righteousness,” and “justify” all reflect the same family of underlying Greek words related to dikaios. The words in this group, though closely related, are used in several different senses by Paul, even within a single verse.

Preaching the Gospel as God displaying His righteousness can help gain a fresh hearing for this familiar text. Actually, God’s righteousness may seem to be a strange concept for people who are convinced that God is simply undifferentiated love and acceptance, which is easily understood as sheer tolerance of sin. That idea is a far cry from God’s righteousness. Justice or righteousness can, according to the specific context, be understood as a quality or attribute of God Himself, an essential aspect of His character. But the powerful phrase “the righteousness of God” is not Gospel for sinners as long as we understand it simply as a description of God’s own nature and attributes. The just, righteous, holy God stands over against the shortcomings of sinful people—and who can stand in God’s presence? Of course, as Martin Luther discovered in his study of Romans, the Gospel meaning of the phrase is not a sheer quality of God’s nature, but a gift of His undeserved kindness and mercy, or as Luther put it, “the righteousness that counts before God.”

Christ’s death is the supreme point at which God’s perfect essential justice (by which He condemns and punishes sin) and God’s perfect saving righteousness (by which He forgives sinners and makes them righteous) intersect and coincide. This is why verse 25 is so crucial in the present passage. There it says that Christ’s sacrifice both displays God’s justice and vindicates His mercy; God gives Christ as a “propitiation by blood… to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (emphasis added). How is God’s past forbearance related to His display of His righteousness in Christ’s death? The idea seems to be that God set up a paradoxical difficulty when He overlooked former sins; how could He do so and still be truly just and righteous Himself? Is there a contradiction between God being just and God saving sinners? The two seem utterly incompatible with each other. Christ’s suffering on the cross is precisely where that contradiction is displayed most vividly. The cross holds before our eyes the paradox of a God who is both holy and merciful, and that is the Good News. In Jesus Christ, God satisfies completely His own divine justice, which sentences all sinners to death, and by faith in Christ God redeems and justifies—buys back and makes righteous—all those who have, indeed, fallen short of His glory, but who nevertheless trust in Jesus. Christ’s death on the cross was the only way for God to show Himself to be both the Just One and the Justifier of the unjust.

It is important to remind people in all this that God was not under some kind of external coercion or necessity to justify sinners through the death of His Son. God did not have to save us. His righteous mercy and saving justice are acts of pure divine freedom, so justification in Christ is an utterly free gift. It is driven by no other motivation than God’s own perfect unwillingness to let His all-too-fallen creatures be destroyed by their own sin.
This astonishing Good News is emphatically and unconditionally summarized in verse 28. The “rightness” of a human creature in God’s sight is entirely based on trust in that free saving death of Christ, rather than on any kind of human activity. Our trust rests in the righteous God who embraces unrighteous human beings and puts us right again. Such a word does not leave us complacent about our own status, but overcome by awe and wonder and gratitude.

William W. Schumacher

**Proper 5 • Romans 4:13-25 • June 8, 2008**

The story of Abraham (or Abram, as he is called in the parts of Genesis to which Paul refers) shows that God’s promises are received by faith. By pointing to the patriarch, Paul underscores that everything depends on what God says, on His word of promise. The part of the Abraham story to which Paul especially refers is God’s promise to make Abram the father of many descendants (Ge 15:1-6). This promise was stamped indelibly in Abram’s mind and senses as God points his eyes up to the countless stars in the night sky. But the promise was more than poetic metaphor, because it flew directly in the face of Abram’s own experience and circumstances. He was childless and he was old—too old to start fathering any children. For Abram to believe this promise was exactly equivalent to believing that God raises the dead and creates the universe out of nothing (v. 17).

Abram did not simply leap blindly to the fond hope that God would give him not one or two children, but whole galaxies of descendants. His faith was not simply the imagination of what God could possibly do. Instead, Abram’s faith was directly anchored to what God said, to His promise. Without that word of promise, all Abram had to go on was his daily experience of old age and the lifelong evidence of his wife’s infertility (v. 19). In fact, God’s promise directly contradicted Abram’s experience and evidence! Nevertheless, that counter-factual promise of God kindled the faith that Paul wants us to emulate.

Such faith and hope in the teeth of the evidence would be a kind of insanity or mere “irrational exuberance” if its object were not the Word of God Himself. He is the one who gives life to the dead. He alone is the one who said “Let there be…” and thus called the universe into existence. His Word is therefore more than simply accurate and factually true; it is powerful and creative. God’s word of promise (to Abram and to us) actually does, performs, creates, and gives what it says. Trusting the power and trustworthiness of what God says and promises is precisely what God counts to our credit as righteousness, that is, such trust is exactly the kind of relationship God wants to restore between us and Him.

Paul’s focus on the Abram story invites the preacher of this text to weave narrative throughout the sermon: Abram’s story, Christ’s story, our story. These are
stories about the dead coming to life at the voice of God, narratives about God speaking new reality into existence ex nihilo. The themes of resurrection and creation echo through the text, and can echo through the sermon, as well. Abraham was “as good as dead” (v. 19), and God’s promise calls him to life like the voice of Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb. Christ’s resurrection is our resurrection, as His death was our death; the promise of the death and resurrection of Christ for us calls us to life. God spoke and created the heavens and the earth, so the starry sky overhead is a sign to Abram (and to us) of the creating power of God’s promise.

As always, it is not enough for us to tell our hearers about the promises of the Gospel. We have to make the promise again. The task is that people actually hear God address them and promise them that Christ was given up to death for their trespasses and raised from the dead for their justification, to put them right with God. The preacher must be audacious enough to stare the contrary evidence and experience of sin, weakness, and death right in the face and speak a real word of promise—a promise that depends on the resurrection of Jesus to be true. Paul connects us with Abram into one story of faith: according to verses 16-17, we who believe in Christ are Abraham’s children and heirs—by the miraculous, creative working of God’s promise, we are the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram. And when God counted Abram’s faith as righteousness, our faith is called righteous, because we trust in Christ whom God raised from the dead (v. 24).

William W. Schumacher

Proper 6 • Romans 5:6-15 • June 15, 2008

This pericope is an interesting selection for a couple of reasons. For one thing, the assigned verses for this Sunday’s Epistle lesson combine two rather different thoughts. Verses 6-11 develop the theme of peace with God through justification, introduced in the beginning of the chapter. Verse 12 starts a new idea, vividly comparing the sin and death that spread to all humanity because of Adam with the free gift of justification that spreads to all by faith in Christ, and that theme continues to the end of chapter 5. A preacher may decide to concentrate a sermon on one part or the other, rather than try to combine two somewhat different sets of metaphors and images. (It is also interesting to note that this reading overlaps with, but does not exactly match, a different selection from Romans 5 appointed for the first Sunday in Lent, in which the verses 12-19 more naturally center around a single theme.)

Both parts of this text (6-11 and 12-15) are so rich in direct, explicit Gospel statements that they are hard to miss. These verses contain some of the most powerful and best-loved expressions of what God has done for us in Christ, and the
language is rich and varied. Paul’s description of our lost condition without Christ is stark and overwhelming: weak, ungodly, sinners, enemies. By marvelous contrast, God’s saving power in Christ displays His perfect timing, demonstrates His love, reconciles us to God, justifies God’s ungodly enemies, and saves us from God’s wrath. All that, says Paul, results from the power of Christ’s death and resurrection. The Law of God was unable to save sinners, not because there was anything wrong with the Law, but because our sin put us under the threat and condemnation of the Law, and that means death. All humanity has followed Adam into sin and the result has been death. Now Christ, the Second Adam, is the source of God’s free gift that undoes sin and its deadly results for all. With this richness of language and theological themes staring us in the face, there is no need (nor, indeed, any excuse) for filling a sermon with theological clichés; let the sermon strive to capture and echo the distinctive ways of expressing the Good News of Christ, and not homogenize the text into a generic platitude.

The Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori explored the mystery of the cross of Jesus Christ by developing what he termed a “theology of the pain of God.” Kitamori sums it up this way: “The gospel is the gospel of the cross. This means that God loves the objects of his wrath and that he, in his love, embraces men alienated from him.” In other words, God’s essential righteousness or justice is moved to wrath against sin, but God chooses to love precisely those His own righteousness condemns. We encountered this tension two weeks earlier in Romans 3, where God showed Himself to be both the Just One and the One who justifies the unrighteous. But in this present text in Romans 5 (especially 6-11), the two sides are laid out in sharp relief: how can the holy God love weak, ungodly sinners? This conflict is precisely what Kitamori calls “the pain of God.” It is not that our sins hurt God or cause Him pain; sin prompts God’s wrath, but does not hurt Him. The pain of God, revealed on the cross of Christ, results from God’s determination to love the sinners His justice kills. The problem only arises if sin is taken seriously. How can the God who is perfectly just and righteous simply overlook the sins by which His creatures have separated themselves from Him? If God ignores sin, is He really just? And if sin must be punished, does that mean that God’s righteousness contradicts—or even trumps—His mercy and His love?

A common, simplistic answer is that God “loves the sinner” but “hates the sin.” Many of us have used that sort of facile distinction, but it really will not suffice, will it? Such an answer trivializes both the depth of sin and the magnitude of what God has done in Christ. As our present text makes clear, the trouble is emphatically not that we are basically decent, lovable people who have made inadvertent mistakes or lapses which need to be cleaned up. God did not rescue us because we were His friends who had drifted off course or run into trouble. While we were His enemies, Christ died for us. God’s love is given precisely to the unlovable ones who deserve wrath and condemnation.
While Paul’s description of himself and his readers as formerly enemies and ungodly, etc., certainly described the biography of that first generation of Christians, many in our congregations may not feel that the words apply equally well to them. Paul, after all, was an adult convert, and had actively engaged in the persecution of Christians and rejection of Christ. Many of the believers in Rome had been pagans—idol worshipers—before coming to faith in Christ. Of them, certainly, it is fair and accurate to say that Christ died for them while they were still “that kind” of sinners. But is the situation really that bad with a lifelong Christian today, someone who was brought to the faith as an infant in Baptism and has lived as a believer ever since? It is important that the preacher not portray the experience of Christians in a way that does not really correspond to all Christians. Without sensationalism or exaggeration, the preacher needs to confront the present reality of sin and enmity toward God that haunts even the hearts of lifelong believers. The saving death of Christ is not something that we only needed for a single past experience of conversion. Rather, Christ’s death once and for all is still the very power that overcomes our pathetic spiritual weakness, the sin that so easily entangles us, and the awful hostility toward God that can and does lurk inside us and sometimes springs forth even against our will (a reality that is explored in much more detail in Romans 7).

William W. Schumacher

Proper 7 • Romans 6:12-23 • June 22, 2008

Introduction to the Sixth-Eighth Sundays after Pentecost

As I began to prepare homiletical helps for Propers 7-9, I realized that the three sequential texts comprise the central portion of a larger section of Romans normally identified as Romans 6:1-8:39. This section transitions from the previous section, Romans 5:12-21, which contrasts Adam’s disobedience and its destructive impact on humanity with Jesus’ obedience and the resulting gift of grace and righteousness. The section immediately preceding Proper 7, Romans 6:1-11, rejects the idea that because of the grace we received through Jesus we are free to sin boldly so that grace might abound. Paul instead describes the connection that Christians have to Jesus through their Baptism. The Christian has been baptized into Jesus’ death, set free from the dominion of sin, and given a new life in Christ. Paul exhorts the readers to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. The Epistle’s focus on the justifying work of Jesus now turns to new life in Jesus and what it means to walk in the newness of this life. The encouragement to walk in the new life that we have received through Jesus, and the difficulties...
involved in doing so, are the focus of Propers 7-9. While each text could be preached as separate sermons, I have chosen to present them as a three-part sermon series. I titled the series, “Portraits of Faith: Images of Our New Life in Christ” in order to place the texts under the umbrella of Romans 6:1-8:39. I also created a PowerPoint template that is available for download at www.ConcordiaTheology.org for use with the suggested three-part series. For those of us who get nervous dealing with texts focused on sanctification, I offer the following quote from Martin Franzmann on this section of Romans:

Until now Paul has concentrated on the new status the Gospel creates for man. This is all God’s doing...There is no activity of man’s here...But the creative force of the Gospel as the power of God for salvation is not exhausted in creating a new status for man...Man only receives from the giving hand of God; but he does receive, and he works with what he has received.

Series Outline:
The three-part series below is my second revision. Originally, I failed to see the three portraits of who we are and who we are becoming as children of God (slave, bride, and soldier). While there are other ways that the texts can be connected, I thought that taking the approach of painting a portrait fit well and avoided the “just do it” approach that can be characteristic of sermons that deal with sanctification. Below is the suggested sermon series outline:

Portraits of Faith: Images of Our New Life in Christ • Romans 6:12-7:25a

I. Heart-Obeying Slave (Romans 6:12-23)
II. Fruit-Bearing Bride (Romans 7:1-13)
III. War-Waging Soldier (Romans 7:14-25a)

Textual Comments:
This text cannot be properly understood outside of its immediate context and the overarching theme of the Gospel’s saving and transforming power found throughout Romans. This text assumes a baptized audience. The Church in Rome was well established and, as Paul states in 1:8, their faith was “proclaimed in all the world”. The themes of being a slave to God, obedience of faith, and the tension between righteousness and unrighteousness that are woven throughout the epistle’s sixteen chapters can only be properly understood in light of the free gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ and the new life our unity with Him brings.

One of the most interesting aspects of this text is the use of παρίστημι. παρίστημι means to place something or someone at the disposal of another. It is
also used in the sacrificial sense of “offering up” a sacrifice to God. These two uses come together in Paul’s concept of the Christian life as a “living sacrifice” in Romans 12:1-2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (ESV)

It is the same “presentation” of our new lives to God that is encouraged in our text. The Christian is no longer under sin, but grace. Sin has lost its dominion. Sin is no longer our master. This new-found freedom in Christ does not, however, give the Christian license to continue in sin. Paul addresses this in verse 15 when he says, “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!” While it might seem absurd to conclude that the forgiven Christian can find comfort and even boldness in sin, because of God’s grace, it is deceptively easy to abuse our God-given freedom by obeying sinful passion. Because of this, Paul encourages us to reject the reign of sin and instead place our lives at the disposal of God, who brought us back from spiritual death through our baptismal union with Jesus’ death and resurrection. As a side note, while preparing this homiletical help, I spent time thinking and praying about what it means to place myself at God’s disposal. How would my daily life be different? How would God use me in my broken state to further His kingdom and accomplish His will? Paul provides a starting place for the exploration of these questions by illustrating the act of presentation or “placing ourselves at the disposal” of God in two ways. The first is as an instrument of righteousness and the second is as a slave of righteousness.

The presentation of our bodily members to sin as an ὄπλον (instrument) for unrighteousness is a vivid one. The reader can imagine the horror of giving back to sin the new life that took the death of Jesus to gain. The very body that was rescued from sin’s dominion is carelessly given back to its deadly rule in order to fulfill the base passions that still lurk in human flesh. By no means! Paul presses us to present ourselves to God instead. God, who brought us from death to life, is the rightful recipient of our bodily members. We are to be instruments of righteousness in the hands of God, not to fulfill our unrighteous desires, but to fulfill His righteous ones. Under grace, our very members become instruments of the Divine. It is interesting to note that in neither case are our members instruments in our own hands. We never reach the level of being the wielder, only the instrument wielded. This thought alone goes against the mainstream thought in society today and serves to correct any hubris that remains.
Paul’s second illustration is that of a slave of righteousness. While this illustration parallels the first, it serves to reveal further facets of the dichotomy. One facet that appears obvious, but requires some thought is that when we place ourselves at the disposal of another, they have effectively become our master, and we their slave. While this might be obvious in the case of servitude to the devil, it is less obvious in the continual series of master-slave relationships we encounter on a daily basis. Paul reminds us that we are slave to anyone we obey, either to sin or to obedience.

Obedience (ὑπακοή) is another facet of the slave illustration that requires thought. “Obedience” is not a frequently used word in congregations today. To many Christians it smacks of legalism, and to many brides it is an archaic vestige of a male-dominated society. Christian obedience is often seen as a punishment and limitation instead of a privilege and liberation. But in the end, Paul explains that it is not a matter of being obedient, it is simply a matter of to whom your obedience is given. Obedience to sin leads to death, but obedience to God leads to righteousness. Another interesting use of ὑπακοή is in the phrase, ὑπηκούσατε δὲ ἐκ καρδίας εἰς ὃν παρεδόθητε τύπον διδαχής (“obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed”). As Christians, we are given over to a new standard of teaching, a teaching to which a heartfelt obedience is given.

Paul concludes this section by admitting that, previously, righteousness was not a concern. Since we were slaves of sin, unrighteousness was our command, but the fruit was rotten, shameful, and ultimately led to death. But we have been set free from sin and God is our new master. Life in His service leads to sanctification and eternal life in Jesus Christ. Death was the wage paid by our previous master, but God gives us the free gift of life—now and forever. God be praised!

Sample Outline:

Heart-Obeying Slave

The call goes forth, and is at once followed by the response of obedience. ….It displays not the slightest interest in the psychological reason for a man’s religious decisions. And why? For the simple reason that the cause behind the immediate following of call by response is Jesus Christ Himself.6

Introduction: Martin Luther in his 1521 letter to Philipp Melanchthon penned the following words, “Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong…” Wow, no wonder the Reformation was so popular. Could it be true that, because of the forgiveness we are given in Jesus Christ, we have a free license to sin boldly? Not exactly, a closer reading of Luther’s letter reveals that his point is not that we are free to sin, but that we are free from sin’s oppressive dominion and that no sin can separate us from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In our text for today, Paul asks and answers
a similar question, “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!...But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed...” In our message for today, we will explore what it means to be a slave who is “obedient from the heart” as we explore our first portrait of faith: the heart-obeying slave.

I. Who do we obey? (12-16)
   A. Our Passion or God’s Purpose
   B. Deadly Sin or Righteous Obedience

II. How do we serve? (17-19)
   A. From Our Heart
   B. To His Standard
   C. By Our Freedom

III. What do we receive? (20-23)
   A. Life not Death
   B. Gift not Wage

Conclusion: As we leave our first portrait of faith—the heart-obeying slave—we remember the greatest servant of all, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, who not only served from His heart of love, but fulfilled the standard that we could never fulfill. It is because of His servant heart that we can rejoice in a freedom that the world can never steal and that sin can never destroy. Paul’s portrait of the Christian as the heart-obeying servant is one of willing service in response to Jesus and empowered by Him. It is an obedience that is willing and not coerced—done according to the heart and not the flesh. An obedience that places each of us at God’s disposal: for His purpose and to His Glory.

Anthony Cook

Proper 8 • Romans 7:1-13 • June 29, 2008

Textual Comments:
In the section of Romans preceding this text (6:12-23), Paul illustrates our relationship with God as both instruments and slaves of righteousness, but in this section, the opening illustration is that of marriage. In the same way that a bride is bound to her husband until death, so too we are under the lordship of the Law until death. In today’s society, where the Biblical understanding of marriage is obfuscated by the convenience of civil law, Paul’s illustration speaks to the modern reader on more than one level. Regardless of this “contemporary static,” Paul’s message is clear: the bride is bound to her husband until their bond is broken by
death, and any connection with another man would result in adultery, but once her husband has died, she is free to be united with another. In Paul’s application to our relationship to Christ, however, the decedent includes not only the groom, but also the bride. It is through our death in Christ that our relationship to the Law is broken. The watery death of Baptism breaks the bonds of lordship that the Law once held. Through the connection we have in Baptism with the death and resurrection of our groom Jesus, we become His resurrection bride. “Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead…”

The concluding portion of verse 4, “...in order that we may bear fruit for God…” provides a transition to the resulting change in purpose that this new relationship brings. This passage is reminiscent of Paul’s words in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” In both cases, the concepts of walking in “good works” and living a life that “bears fruit” for God are both based on the radical change in relationship and identity that comes through the saving work of Jesus Christ. The sequential importance of salvation in Christ preceding the call to “bear fruit” cannot be understated in the same way that the call itself cannot be overlooked.

Paul now turns his focus to what it means to be Christ’s fruit-bearing bride. No longer will our sinful passion go unchecked resulting in the fruit of death, but instead new fruit will be born and this fruit will be born for God. Because we have been released from the confines of the Law, we are now able to serve in a new way—in the newness of the Spirit and not according to the oldness of the letter of the Law. The concept of ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος (in the newness of the Spirit) in comparison to the oldness of the letter of the Law is of interest. The letter/Spirit dichotomy is also found earlier, in Romans 2:19, “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” And again in 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 we read: “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Dunn in his commentary on Romans explains:

But those who have identified with Christ in his death have been liberated from the vicious spiral of sin, works, death to serve in “newness of Spirit.” The reference is probably to the (Holy) Spirit as the mark of the new epoch and distinguishing feature of those who belong to it...the motivation and direction comes immediately from the Spirit within, that is, the obedience from the heart (6:17), the discernment of the renewed mind (12:2).
In the concluding portion of this pericope (7:7-13), Paul wants the reader to know that we are set free from the Law not because the Law was a sinful spouse, from whom we needed rescue, but because we were unable to fulfill our relationship to the Law because of our sin. The Law, like a mirror, reflected back to us the sinful image that made it impossible for our relationship with the Law to be fulfilled. I am reminded of the devil’s promise to Adam and Eve, that if they ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes would be opened and they would know the difference between good and evil. The irony was that once their eyes were opened, the evil that they saw was themselves. It was not God or the tree that was to blame, it was Adam and his bride. Paul reminds us that the Law was meant for life, but that sin used what was good to deceive us and ultimately brought death. This creates an interesting chiasm of “life to death to death to life” in which those who were once alive become spiritually dead through sin, but, through a baptismal union to the death of Christ, receive new life through His resurrection. Chiasms aside, Paul’s point is that the Law is good, but sin is evil and that those who hear and understand his message of liberation from the Law through Jesus should not mistake the Law that is good for the sin that misused what God had given for the good of His people.

Sample Outline:

Fruit-Bearing Bride

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,

for the marriage of the Lamb has come,

and his Bride has made herself ready;

it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

(Rev 19:6-8 ESV)

Introduction: The image of a bride is one of beauty and purity, that is, unless you have cable TV. The image of the bride presented on reality shows like Bridezillas is something other than pure. One of the show’s recent tag lines proclaimed, “They’re madder, they’re badder, they’re back!” Well, in our text for today, we discover that before we became the bride of Christ as described in the Book of
Revelation, we looked more like the bride of Frankenstein popularized on reality TV. In our message for today, we will explore what it means to be a bride who “bears fruit for God” as we explore our second portrait of faith: the fruit-bearing bride.

I. Free from the Law (1-3)
   A. Freed through Death
   B. Freed to Marry Another
II. New in the Spirit (4-6)
   A. To bear fruit for God
   B. To serve in a new way
III. Alive in the Lord (7-13)
   A. Saved from Sin
   B. Saved from Death
   C. Saved by Christ

Conclusion: Because Jesus, our groom, gave His life, we are given new life as His bride. We are freed from our relationship to the Law that, because of our sin, resulted in death, and instead we receive a new life in the Spirit. No longer does the sin within our members bear fruit for death, but through our new life in Christ, it is now possible to bear fruit for God. We have been clothed with fine linen, bright and pure. We have been saved from sin and death. We have been saved by Christ, our groom, and through His grace, we have become his fruit-bearing bride.

Anthony Cook

Proper 9 • Romans 7:14-25 • July 6, 2008

Textual Comments:

Proper 9 presents a sobering reminder of the Christian’s constant struggle to walk in the newness of life. The reader can hear the anguish in Paul’s voice, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (22-24). It is hard to imagine a Christian who at one time or another has not felt the same internal struggle. The disappointment is only magnified as the Christian learns more about God’s will for their life. The more clearly we see God’s will the more clearly we are shown how we have fallen short of fulfilling that will. It is only the Christian who can see the true depth of their sin and depravity; it is only the Christian who can find comfort and strength in the face this revelation.
The whole life of the Christian is framed in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Our new life and identity come from Jesus and the forgiveness that we need when we fail to live up to our calling comes from Him. It is only the misguided and arrogant Christians who assume that after they have received resuscitation through the gift of grace that they can return to the Law to live their lives under their own will and power. Jesus is the one who brings victory to the battle, and through His victorious death and resurrection, we are given the grace we need to fight the battle that is waged in our flesh. Paul gives us the assurance that, even though the battle might be lost, in Christ the war is won. But the victorious outcome does not minimize the need for the daily battle. Paul calls us to war. Paul calls us to fight in the war of the two laws. The law of the mind that understands and delights in God's Law and the law of the flesh that attempts to take us captive again to death and the devil. The battlefield that Paul describes is found within the very fiber of our fallen human flesh. Like a Civil War historian, Paul recounts his battle step-by-step in verses 14-20. This approach allows Paul to narrate his personal struggle from an almost third-person perspective. Speaking from the perspective of the new life he has been given, he sees the all too familiar scenario of the desire to do good crushed by the soldier of sin that still lives within his flesh. Paul's desire to do good is not enough to win the battle and in the end he stands perplexed by his own actions. Like catching a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror and not recognizing his own face, Paul realizes that his inner transformation has yet to manifest itself in his flesh. While some might accuse Paul of gnostic tendencies, most Christians can immediately identify with Paul's point of view.

The fact that Paul is so open about his struggles and the war that rages within is, I believe, a good example for Christians in general. The temptation to hide the struggle that each of us faces in order to appear more sanctified than our brothers is not only a lie, but leads others to believe that the struggle is something that “mature Christians” should not experience. Show me a Christian who no longer struggles against the flesh and I will show you a fresh grave. Death is the only release from the remnant of sin that lives within each of us. This fact points to the final realization that it is not the spiritual resurrection in our Baptism that is our final state; but the final resurrection on the Last Day when the battle is finally over and the fulfillment of the new life that we receive through faith is fully manifest. But until that time comes, we are in a continual process of being and becoming. We live in the now/not-yet reality that one day will give way to the eternal now of our life with Christ. In the meantime, in the midst of our daily struggles, our only response is that of thanks to Jesus Christ who through His death and resurrection provides the assurance that not only will our struggle end, but that through Him, victory is assured. Thanks be to God!
Sample Outline.
War-Waging Soldier

I know that sin and guilt combine
To reign o’er every thought of mine
And torn from good to ill;
I know that, when I try to be
Upright and just and true to Thee,
I am a sinner still.

I know that often when I strive
To keep a spark of love alive
For Thee, the powers within
Leap up in unsubmissive might
And oft benumb my sense of right
And pull me back to sin.

“I Do Not Come Because My Soul,” verses 2 & 3, by Frank B. St. John,
The Lutheran Hymnal 379 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941)

Introduction: What would happen if those who fought for good were infected by a dark force that tempted them to forsake what they knew to be good in order to follow their evil desires? You would have the plot to Spiderman 3. In Spiderman 3, Peter Parker is infected by an alien force that forces him to wage a war against his internal demons in order to resist the domination of his internal darkness. While this sounds like a fantastic story-line for a movie, it isn’t far from the reality of our lives. For like the fictional character Peter Parker, we too wage a war within ourselves. It is a battle between good and evil—a battle that exposes our weaknesses and tempts us to give in to the sinful darkness that lurks in our lives. In our message for today, we conclude our Portraits of Faith: Images of Our New Life in Christ series by exploring what it means to be a soldier who wages war against sin as we explore our third portrait of faith: the war-waging soldier.

I. Desire (14-21)
   A. The Good I Want
   B. The Ability I Lack

II. Delight (22-23)
   A. In the Law of My Mind
   B. Not in Law of My Members

III. Deliverance (24-25)
   A. From the Body of Death
   B. Through the Son of God

Conclusion: The war that we wage is real. It is war that will rage until we are freed from our body of death and sin, but it is a war that will end and it is a war in which the victory is already won. Jesus is our deliverance, our hero, our Lord. Jesus waged the greatest battle of all, the battle against sin, death, and everlasting damnation. Jesus while appearing to be defeated on the cross, won the war by taking on the sin of the world and triumphing over it through His death and resurrection. So
as we continue to battle, we can be assured that even though temptation wars within us, Jesus has overcome and the victory is won.

Anthony Cook

Proper 10 • Romans 8:12-17 • July 13, 2008

The texts for Propers 10-12 are consecutive readings from the eighth chapter of Romans, closely related thematically, and therefore can naturally be grouped as a three-week sermon series. All three texts deal profoundly and realistically with a common theme: The struggle of faith in a fallen world.

The first part, following this present text, could be entitled “Life by the Spirit of Christ.” All human beings are in a life and death struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. “Flesh” in this context should be explained clearly as referring to the entire sinful nature, not just our physical bodies. Christianity does not teach dualism, as if the material world were inherently evil, and non-material or spiritual reality were superior or godly. Some people, of course, do simply indulge their coarsest physical appetites and lusts. But it is also fairly common that people in our communities live according to some sort of ideals or principles and may even think of themselves (and be thought of by others) as quite “spiritual” in some sense. People like to say, “I am spiritual, but I’m not religious.” But any kind of “spiritual” life which is disconnected from Jesus Christ and His Word of promise falls under Paul’s category of “flesh” in the sense that it arises from our fallen human nature and is at war with what the Spirit of Christ wants to do in us and in the world.

Whether driven by physical appetites and lusts, or deluded by a “fleshly spirituality” directed away from the true God and the Spirit of Christ, the sinful human nature or “flesh” leads ultimately in only one direction: death. Apart from Christ, there is only one possible outcome to the struggles of human life, because that sinful nature is cut off from the Creator from whom alone we can receive adoption, an inheritance of life, and true freedom in relationship with Him.

Paul does contrast life “according to the flesh” with life “by the Spirit,” but he is much more interested in what we have been given by the Spirit in Christ than in describing or condemning the dead-end alternative of the flesh. Preaching that is faithful to this text will emphasize the positive gifts and fruits of a life directed and sustained by God’s Spirit, rather than a vivid denunciation of the flesh. In other words, the sermon will stress the Gospel more than the Law, because the text does that, too.

What does life by the Spirit of Christ look like? It is characterized by crushing and killing the sinful actions that are typical of a Christ-less life (“you put to death the deeds of the body,” v. 13). Life by the Spirit is life as a member of God’s
family, a son (or daughter) (v. 14), with a permanent and legitimate place in God’s household. It is the antithesis of slavery, but rather gives us free and intimate access to God as our Father (v. 15). And the Spirit Himself is active in our life as God’s children, testifying that we are God’s children and that we will inherit a glorious life. All this comes as the Spirit unites us with Christ. We are sons and daughters because we are connected to the Son, we are heirs if and only if we are fellow heirs with Christ, and we call God our Father because He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

None of this beautiful description of life by the Spirit exempts Christians from the struggle inherent in life in the world as we experience it. There is no choice between suffering and not suffering, between dying and not dying. If we live by the flesh, we will die; if we live by the Spirit we are putting the flesh to death so that we may live in Christ. Being adopted as God’s children, united with His Son, and made fellow heirs with Christ all entails that we also suffer with Christ. Being baptized into Christ means being baptized into His death (6:3), so that the Christian’s life in the world will often look like something other than freedom, joy, and glory. But the Spirit of Christ lets us in on the secret, and we look forward confidently to the glory of resurrection life with Christ.

William W. Schumacher

Proper 11 • Romans 8:18-27 • July 20, 2008

The previous text (Ro 8:12-17) presented us with “Life by the Spirit of Christ.” The present text, the second of three consecutive readings from this chapter, encourages us under the theme of “Hope in the Midst of Suffering.”

Paul does not pretend that faith in Christ removes life’s difficulties. In fact, he acknowledges frankly that our experience is full of various kinds of suffering. The experiences of this life do not match the promises of peace, joy, and life which are promised by God in Christ. On the contrary, we daily encounter all kinds of suffering (“futility”...“bondage to decay”...“pains of childbirth”). So the life of faith is a life of deep longing for what is promised, and of endurance in suffering. It is a life of hope that keeps in mind what is promised but what is not yet seen (the memory of the certain future of God’s victory, the future dimension of faith). Living with that hope in a broken world calls out to God in prayer which almost cannot be called prayer, “groanings too deep for words,” by which the Spirit himself prays for us and through us.

Preaching this text will call for careful attention to how we state both the problems faced by our people and the hope and comfort offered in the text. This text does not present the “Law” in our usual terms of guilt and condemnation.
Rather, Paul describes not only the Christians to whom he writes but also all creation—the entire cosmos—as temporarily subjected to bondage, suffering, decay, and “futility” (or emptiness, meaninglessness, v. 20). The connection between human sin and this universal cosmic oppression is only hinted at by indicating that the creation is in some sense waiting for God’s children to be resurrected and glorified (the “redemption of our bodies,” v. 23). The present state of things, both on the personal human scale and in the entire universe, simply does not yet correspond to what God intends and promises.

If the Law is presented in this way (rather than our usual categories of personal sin and guilt), then the Gospel is also expressed in a way that corresponds to and answers that state of human life and cosmic “groaning.” This means that following our text it may not be essential to translate the Gospel promise into a literal statement of the forgiveness of sins, if doing so means we lose sight of the specific promises and comfort in this text. Therefore, because God has acted decisively to save His creatures and redeem His creation, the present state of bondage and futility is also a state of eager longing, of enduring suffering as “the pains of childbirth,” and therefore especially of hope and of patience. What is hoped for remains as yet unseen: we can know it only by faith, which trusts the one who promises our final redemption. And in the meantime the Spirit helps us, weak as we are, to begin to pray. True, our prayers are rough and often inarticulate; not only does creation groan, but we too are frequently reduced to groans by the gap between what is and what will be. Indeed, Paul tells us that the Spirit bypasses our pitiful inability to pray as we should, and actually prays for us. Creation itself groans, we groan inwardly, and the Spirit Himself intercedes for us “with groanings too deep for words” but in a way that accords with God’s saving will (26-27).

Lutherans have a strong theological suspicion of anything that claims to be “too deep for words,” and such vague language may sound like enthusiastic Schwärmeri. But Paul is not describing some sort of spiritual accomplishment of believers who manage to experience a deeper spiritual life than the average Christian. Rather he is reminding us that our spiritual resources in the face of the present age of futility and suffering are not limited to our own abilities or our own knowledge. The inexpressible support and intercession of God’s Spirit helps us precisely in our weakness and ignorance, when we ourselves neither can pray nor know how to pray, and that help surpasses all understanding or explanation.

God’s promise of our final redemption, resurrection, and glorification casts a whole new light over the futile sufferings we experience now. Because God’s salvation awaits us, suffering will have an end and a goal. The Spirit’s work engenders confident hope and bears us up when human strength and understanding fail.

William W. Schumacher
We sketched a connected theme in the previous two lessons, both of which dealt with the struggle of faith in a fallen world. The first focused on “Life by the Spirit of Christ,” and the second celebrated “Hope in the Midst of Suffering.” This third of our consecutive readings turns our eyes and hearts vividly to “God’s Final Victory.”

In spite of the sufferings and struggles we face now, God’s victory is sure. His love for us in Jesus Christ will not abandon us or be overcome by any enemy or difficulty. His determination to save us and reclaim us extends from eternity past (predestination), to his present activity (calling and justifying), to the glorious future. Here it is especially interesting to note the aorist verbs in verse 30. We easily grasp why predestination is placed in the past, because that clearly refers to a past decision of God. But how are we to understand the whole string of active aorist indicative verbs? Have all these things already happened? Have we already been called, justified, and glorified? The use of the aorist in this passage is reminiscent of the use of the “prophetic perfect” in Biblical Hebrew, with the same force: even future actions of God are as sure and certain as though they had already taken place.

What this means is that all God’s promises, including His as yet unfulfilled promise of final glorification, are equally sure and certain. Christian hope (in Paul’s sense of the word) is not a pious wish about what God might do or plucky optimism about how things might turn out. It is faith in the future tense, and like faith in any dimension, this hope trusts confidently because it is anchored in God’s word of promise.

Hope in God’s final victory strengthens us in the face of all current difficulties in a way that simply transcends all our experience. Paul’s rhetorical questions in verses 31-35 pile up the certainties that God’s absolute commitment to us simply cannot be shaken, eroded, or compromised. In each case, the “if” (“If God be for us…”) must be understood as “since,” that is, Paul is drawing conclusions based on certainties rather than speculating about possibilities, and therefore the answers to the questions are, so to speak, beyond question. God is for us, therefore no one can prevail against us. He did give His Son for us, so He will certainly give us everything with Christ. He does justify, so no one can condemn us.

There is perhaps no more powerful and beloved expression of confidence and comfort in the face of all struggles and threats and suffering than the final verses of this chapter (vv. 38-39). Thousands of millions of Christians have clung to these assurances in the face of the most overwhelming experiences of pain, evil, and death. These verses are the climactic, soaring summary of the whole chapter’s description of our struggle of faith in this very fallen world. In God’s powerful providence and gracious will, what triumphs is ultimately not our endurance, our
faithfulness, our insight, or our correctness. The victory is, in the end, God’s victory over everything that would destroy or diminish His creation. And God’s love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord makes His victory our victory.

William W. Schumacher

Endnotes

2 http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=23117
3 I use personal stories in my sermons. You may use this story with proper reference given. Or you may recall a similar situation with someone in your own family or a congregational member.

One of the advantages of a trans-Pacific flight and of time (with LCMS World Mission) in the Far East away from television and other state-side distractions is the leisure of time for additional reading. Add to that the fact that while this reviewer was teaching Wisdom Literature at China Lutheran Seminary in Taiwan, just at the point of Ecclesiastes, the ultimate nightmare of folks dependent on their computer intruded itself, namely a hard-drive crash which removed (among other things) lecture and study notes—vanity, indeed! With added interest and urgency, therefore, this reviewer turned to Limburg’s book for help, even though first glance admittedly did not project it to be significantly helpful.

Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) is a tough book, as its tortured process of acceptance into the canon testifies. In places it articulates conventional, Proverbial wisdom, but turns without warning to very provocative anti-wisdom. It consigns to vanity things that are prized by “normal” people as blessings from God. It is the only book of Scripture that uses a category like “fate/chance” (9:11) or observes that “as it is with the good man, so with the sinner” (9:1). Clearly one purpose of Ecclesiastes seems to be to temper an overly facile bending of Proverbial wisdom to self-driven, manipulable interests. Does, however, Ecclesiastes have its own positive message?

The contribution of this slim volume by Limburg (emeritus, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN) is taking Ecclesiastes at face value, both what seems a pessimistic emphasis on systemic, pervasive, inescapable hebel (vanity, meaninglessness) and the sobered, measured commendations of joy and fearing God. Building on years of teaching experience, Limburg moves with patient pace through the Book of Ecclesiastes, stopping to reflect on pericopes of his choosing, touching most major themes in Ecclesiastes, without necessarily dwelling on each verse or even each chapter (8 and 10 have no comment). In the process, he weaves in personal experiences (family gravestones, confirmation bulletin), quotations from Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and applications to modern issues and concerns. Limburg concludes that while Ecclesiastes is “on the extreme edges of ordinary biblical teachings” (132), he is there with a “hardy realism” (135), calling people to rejoice, remember, and revere, even in the face of that pervasive hebel.

This reviewer is not commending Limburg’s book as a sufficient answer to exegetical or isagogical study, nor is it a comprehensive commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes—for that Brown’s commentary in the INTERPRETATION series is not a bad choice. This brief study is, however, a very readable, helpful, positive introduction to the theology and the relevance of
Ecclesiastes for Christians who share life “under the sun.” As it was for this reviewer, this book would be a fine refresher for pastor or leader, and even as a study text for Bible class or small group. In the process a part of Scripture often left behind as unwieldy, even intimidating can be opened to people who would likely be pleased and relieved at the chance to discuss the kinds of bedrock questions of faith and life that Ecclesiastes raises.

Henry Rowold


Richard Jensen’s starting point is the cultural observation that “today’s churchgoers, steeped in multimedia communications, have been trained to think and learn with their eyes and ears together” (5). With that communications environment in mind, Jensen divides his book into two distinct sections, the first providing a rationale for using visual images in preaching, the second adding practical tips and suggestions.

In the theoretical and theological discussion of Part I, Jensen notes a fundamental Platonic dualism that permeates both Christian iconoclasm and the intellectual development of modern Western thought. This dualism prefers the mind over the body and word over image. Against this, Jensen argues for the goodness of the physical as creation and insists on the circumscribable characteristic of a God who has become incarnate. Images, for Jensen, are actually a means of grace: “In, with, and under (to use words from Martin Luther) the icon, one becomes aware that one is present to God and that God is present and working God’s grace....this finite icon is a means for the presence of the Infinite One” (43).

Jensen’s aim is not to promote the image above the Word but to engender a more holistic approach to preaching. Though he describes image and word as fundamentally different—images are inclusive, open, and polyvalent, while words are exclusive, closed, and precise in their meaning—in the end Jensen wants these two contrasting forms of communication to complement each other. “Images need words for definition. Words need images for depth and mystery” (136). The effective preacher will use both.

After the theoretical groundwork is laid in Part I, Part II provides practical tips ranging from online resource suggestions to strategies for introducing more visual media to a congregation. This wide variety of advice was collected by Jensen from pastors and students who are actively engaged in the practice of preaching with visual images. After Jensen listens to these “experts in the field,” he concludes by suggesting sermon structures that take advantage of both visual and verbal imagery. Here Jensen’s previous work on story finds a place in his current work on image.
Perhaps the greatest contribution of this work is Jensen’s concern for the communication environment in which we preach (and our hearers interpret). As Jensen puts it, “How can we make use of visualization in preaching for people who live in a strongly visual environment?” (6). Envisioning the Word is a first attempt at a serious homiletical answer. The tone of his book suggests that Jensen does not consider this the final word. Still, he raises important theological, cultural, and communication questions that must continue to be addressed if we are to preach the Gospel faithfully and effectively.

The greatest shortcoming of this work is Jensen’s treatment of the relationship between word and image. From a communication theory perspective, the important role context, culture, and interpretive communities play in the meaning-making process for both words and images makes Jensen’s stark dichotomy between the polyvalent image and the univocal word, untenable. Words are not as closed nor images as open as Jensen assumes in his theoretical discussion. In the practical section of the book, Jensen himself abandons this stark dichotomy and instead treats “numerous ways to structure a sermon built around verbal and visual images” (137, emphasis added). Exploring the interpretive dynamics common to both visual and verbal images would add depth to Jensen’s argument and lead to more specific practical suggestions.

Theologically, Jensen treats the relationship between word and image by placing images in the category of sacrament, earthly elements “connected with God’s word of promise” (62). Jensen’s stark dichotomy of words/images, however, blurs the fact that images as earthly elements are not equivalent to the waters of Baptism or the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Instead, in as much as they convey the Gospel, images are part of God’s word of promise; the proclaimed Word is not confined to words alone. Jensen is on the right track when he urges, “We need to utilize all the senses to proclaim Jesus Christ to sensate beings” (81, emphasis added). Rocks, fortresses, lambs, and shepherds (for example) do not correspond to the physical elements in the sacraments. Instead, they are metaphors for the Gospel with a visual or sensate dimension which may be carried over to objects, art, or other visual media used in preaching. The visual becomes a mode of proclaimed Word rather than a kind of sacrament. Only as proclamation does image dare claim to be a means of God’s grace.

The strongest critique of the CD-ROM which accompanies the book should come from Jensen himself. These black and white stylistic renderings lack any of the dynamic power of engagement Jensen calls for when he approvingly cites John Dominic Crossan’s distinction between “metaphors of illustration” and “metaphors of participation” (3).
In the end, if this book accomplishes its author’s primary purpose, it is well worth the read, for Jensen wants to “urge preachers to think in pictures, using complementary words and images to present a holistic sermonic experience” (10). More and more in our current communication context, faithful proclaimers of God’s Word will find ways of using verbal and visual images to do just that.

Justin Rossow
St. Louis, Missouri


James Dunn, Professor Emeritus at the University of Durham, challenges NT scholars with a stark alternative. In the quest for the historical Jesus, either “continue to operate within the literary paradigm...or deliberately alter that default setting and attempt consciously to envisage a world strange to us, a world of rampant illiteracy, a world where information was communicated orally, a world where knowledge in the vast majority of cases came from hearing rather than from reading” (120). Dunn’s thesis is that the traditional literary paradigm stands on flawed principles and an oral/aural paradigm must be pursued. For example, the higher critical literary criterion of “dissimilarity” dooms to failure the efforts of the Jesus Seminar and other old “questers” who seek to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Professor Dunn persuasively argues that faith and history stood together from the very beginning. The Jesus of history had a lasting impact on the attitude, actions, and faith of people. The “only Jesus available to us... is Jesus as he was seen and heard by those who first formulated the traditions we have - the Jesus of faith” (31, Author’s emphasis). Oral/aural tradition explains the similarities and differences in the present literary materials about Jesus better than consideration or speculation on purpose driven editing and modification of written sources.

Happily, for this reviewer and certainly others, Dunn’s methodology leads to the conclusion that the picture of Jesus in the New Testament accurately reflects the impact the historical Jesus made on people. The Achilles’ heel for Dunn’s thesis is the reliability of oral tradition. Here Dunn cites examples from contemporary oral cultures and finds support in the work of Kenneth Bailey and others. While other readers may be more skeptical and want more verifiable data, this reviewer accepts the integrity of oral tradition with enthusiastic caution. My enthusiasm for Dunn’s thesis, in large part, comes from my five year experience among the pre-literate Ipili people in Papua New Guinea. I recall how many questioned the “new technology” that I introduced, i.e., reading and writing. They asked again and again, “When you look at marks on a piece of paper, how can you tell if it is true? When we
listen, we look in each other’s eyes and we know who is telling the truth.” [I understand their dilemma better today when I look at material on the Internet and am uncertain of origin, methodology, and veracity.] I also recall the pre-literates phenomenal memory; the Ipili frequently refreshed my memory by sharing details of past events which, before their reminders, I could only vaguely recall. My caution comes from awareness of human nature, which can edit oral [or written] materials for personal advantage. Dunn himself recognizes that compromise will be necessary in the scholarly battle over oral/aural and literary features in the Jesus tradition. As one example, Dunn does not discuss Luke 1:1-4. In the end, however, Dunn’s thesis merits careful consideration. Dunn’s direct questions demonstrate that it is more logical to think that the Gospels reflect the impact of the historical Jesus than the creative [distorting?] imagination of later editors (cf. 120-121). The Jesus tradition was a “living tradition, lived-in-and-through tradition” (125).

Professor Dunn wants the present work to make available to more readers the key methodological contributions in Jesus Remembered. His larger monograph was published in 2003 as the first volume in his proposed trilogy, Christianity in the Making (27-150 CE). The present book consists of a Preface, Introduction, three chapters, and an Appendix, as well as Scripture and Subject Indexes. Chapter one, “The First Faith: When Did Faith Become a Factor in the Jesus Tradition?” demonstrates, as noted above, that faith and history are combined from the very beginning of the Jesus tradition. Dunn exposes the fallacy of many prior quests in which the veracity of “Sitz im Leben Kirche” could be assumed but the content or authenticity of “Sitz im Leben Jesu” needed proof. Rather, the logical assumption must be that the historical Jesus “can be none other than the Jesus-who-made-the-impact-which-is-the-beginning-of-the Jesus-tradition” (30). Chapter two, “Behind the Gospels: What It Meant to Remember Jesus in the Earliest Days” starts with the premise that only about ten percent of the people in the Roman empire could read and write and the percentage in Roman Palestine may have been as low as three percent. Thus, Dunn posits, the earliest Jesus tradition most probably was transmitted in oral/aural form. Oral/aural transmission is characterized by an event which stimulates community discourse leading to an oral tradition maintained and shared by responsible people with both fixity and flexibility, stability and diversity (46-51).

The third chapter, “The Characteristic Jesus: from Atomistic Exegesis to Consistent Emphasis” examines the impact Jesus made and includes the stunning suggestion that Christian anti-Semitism has motivated separating Jesus from Judaism. The Quest for the Historical Jesus must be the Quest for Jesus the Jew (65). From that starting point, Dunn identifies a rich variety of verifiable characteristics of Jesus as he made an impact in his
Jewish context. The Appendix “Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition” is Dunn’s 2002 presidential address to the annual meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas and was published in an earlier version in NTS 49 (2003), 139-175. It underlines and illustrates the principles espoused in the previous chapters.

In summary, Dunn’s small monograph merits study by the wide readership he envisions. It exposes long standing fallacies and offers thought provoking consideration of the importance of oral tradition. In addition, it gives confidence that the Jesus of history had such a profound impact on the faith and life of his first listeners that we would do well to read their record so that Jesus can have a similar impact on our lives.

Robert Holst
St. Paul, Minnesota


The famous advocate for the social gospel—Walter Rauschenbusch—once offered this analysis of Lutheranism: “Thus far Lutheranism has buried its ten talents in a tablecloth of dogmatic theory and kept its people from that share in the social awakening which is their duty and right” (Christianizing the Social Order [New York: Macmillan, 1912], 125). He is right. Lutherans joyfully embrace “dogmatic theory” as it relates to preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments. But is there a way to remain faithful to our Biblical and confessional convictions while at the same time engaging the social, economic, and political issues of the day? Robert Benne answers in this book with a resounding “yes”!

The first part of Benne’s collection of previous essays and articles is an autobiographical account. He documents his intellectual journey that began with Niebuhrian social-ethics and the liberal Protestantism of the 1960s. In the 1970s, however, Benne began to rediscover his Lutheran roots and decided to abandon the view that the mission of the church is to transform society toward the kingdom of God. This decision resulted in his departure from LSTC and a new beginning at Roanoke College in Roanoke, VA. Benne’s 1988 book, Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life, signaled that he had joined the neo-conservative movement in the ELCA.

In the second part of Reasonable Ethics Benne highlights the distinctly Lutheran themes of Law and Gospel, the two kingdoms, the calling of the Christian, and the role of church in society. He offers a potpourri of articles that address politics, economics, higher education, sexual ethics, culture, and entertainment. Most of these essays and articles were written since 1990.
Benne’s essays are built upon the recognition that God has placed Christians into four orders: marriage and family, work, public life, and church. Benne’s passion, however, is how the church can faithfully engage public life. All too often the church sees itself as a political actor and social transformer, and in doing so it loses integrity and its reason for being.

To rectify this situation, Benne believes that the church must make a commitment to (1) a distinction between salvation offered by God in Christ and all human efforts; (2) a focused doctrine of the church and its mission that follows from the first theme; (3) the two-fold rule of God through Law and Gospel; and (4) a paradoxical view of human nature and history. Benne describes three concentric circles that assist the church to order itself. The core is the central moral vision consisting of the Ten Commandments, the priority of love in all relationships, the value of all human life, and the sanctity of marriage. The next concentric circle is more speculative; statements in this realm represent the church’s attempt at applying its moral view. The last circle consists of the church’s position on specific policy issues. It is important that the church distinguish between the three realms because the danger is to conflate the circles into one or collapse the outside circles into the middle. The church’s ministry is to be involved in public life. This, however, is penultimate; the Gospel is ultimate.

While interacting with the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, Benne discusses the church’s options as it moves out of the center circle and interacts with society. They are as follows: (1) Christ against Culture (e.g., withdrawal from the world); (2) Christ above Culture (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church that seeks to create a synthesis, led by the Church); (3) Christ transforming Culture (e.g., the Reformed tradition that works to convert the culture to the will of God); (4) Christ of culture (e.g., liberalism’s program of absorbing Christ into the culture). Benne, however, offers another alternative: Christ and culture in paradox, built upon the doctrine of the two kingdoms. He writes, “The paradoxical vision leads to a different way of construing the public role of religion than does the Reformed or Catholic. Its themes serve as guardians of the radicality and universality of the Gospel, of a proper understanding of the church’s task, and of the two ways that God reigns. Churches ignore these themes at their great peril” (102).

Whereas Niebuhr’s five options seek to resolve the tension, the Lutheran teaching of the two kingdoms is content to live with unresolved tensions. The church best engages the kingdom of the left by equipping and empowering the Baptized to be faithful in their callings. Preferring this indirect way of making a public impact, Benne calls churches to educate and equip their laity so that they engage the world ethically in their respective vocations. Benne calls this “the ethics of character.”
As the church goes about the task of channeling God’s justice and righteousness into the world, the dangers are three-fold: (1) expect too much and offer the world a false hope; (2) deny the true mission, the proclamation of the Gospel; (3) simplistically apply Biblical texts to complex issues. The Lutheran vision leads to a non-utopian view of history that is not cynical. The church, then, works for relative victories while it prays for the final coming of the kingdom of God. By anticipating Christ’s kingdom coming at the end of time, the church undercuts the morally ambiguous kingdom of this world and its pretentious estimation of itself. The church best confronts injustice in the world by not being of the world.

Lutheran pastors and church leaders have been sitting on the political and social sidelines for far too long, in large part because there seemed no model to faithfully move forward. But now, through his lifelong study and struggle, Robert Benne has provided a way that is Biblical, evangelical, and faithful.

R. Reed Lessing


“Executive Values serves as a road map for incorporating faith and values into everyday organizational life. It demonstrates how doing well and doing good are inextricably linked, and provides a comprehensive strategy for utilizing Christian values to achieve organizational goals” (1). So begins the introduction to a book that argues that one does not have to choose between serving God and pursuing profit, or between family and work. In fact, Kurt Senske argues, operating from a foundation of Christian values gives us a competitive advantage! The book sets out to provide a theoretical framework for Christian leadership by recounting the experiences of successful Christian leaders, examples of the challenges that leaders face, and “practical guidelines for applying Christian values in typical leadership situations” (7).

Chapter one lays a solid foundation—the Golden Rule—which fellow church leader Brad Hewitt considered the primary lesson that he learned at Harvard. That rule is based on Scripture and incorporates love, honesty, respect, and justice into our working world. Senske describes Christian leaders as servant leaders who submit first to God (he shows here the good influence of Robert Greenleaf). Then he describes Christian leaders as people you can trust and as people who hire others with similar values. These people pay attention to public relations and find ways to make everyone in the organization a leader. The two questions a leader must ask at some point are these: “Do I know when it is time to leave my organization? Have I ensured that my organization will be better off in my absence than if I had stayed?” (26).
Chapter three, “Do the Right Thing,” continues the emphasis upon the Golden Rule, inviting the reader to act with integrity, which is always good business. This chapter is especially full of examples of companies that did the right thing and those that did the wrong thing. We can learn from both. The questions Senske offers from his experience in chapter four, “Values-based Strategic Planning,” are useful to all kinds of leaders, from business to university to church. Senske’s familiarity with the writings of people like Jack Welch, Jim Collins, and John Kotter enable him to draw on even wider experience than his own.

Chapter seven concludes with a call to significance rather than survival or success. Drawing on my favorite author, Senske quotes C. S. Lewis: “Aim at Heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither” (150). Then he asks, “Whom am I serving?” The final paragraph of the book gives the answer: Jesus Christ.

What sets this book apart from other books on leadership? I think that it is the combination of its Christian approach, the many examples of leadership in action, the organizing principle of the Golden Rule of Leadership (emphasized throughout the book), and its overview of strategic planning (chapter four). In addition, you do not typically get a chapter like chapter six, “Balancing Family and Professional Life,” in a book on leadership. Many leaders need to read that chapter, particularly in its emphasis upon the model that leaders must set for employees and the family-friendly environment that the author encourages. The idea of offering sabbaticals to employees should be heeded far beyond the typical university application of the idea, and Senske’s own example is a worthy one. There are many other insights common to books on leadership that are highlighted. People enlist in a cause, but they work for a business. Effective companies focus on meeting the needs of both customers and employees. It is important to hire the right people. Understand that people leave managers, not companies.

In spite of these many fine insights, I would have liked to see a wider Christian theology, especially one where the Gospel was preeminent and our creation in the image of God was included. While the Golden Rule serves as a consistent thread in the book, the Golden Rule fits into the category of Law, rather than Gospel. The motivation for leading should, for the Christian, be our response to Him who first loved us. I would have liked to know, after chapter four, where do I go from here? I would have liked some recommendation of books or resources at the end of some chapters (for example, resources that could guide the reader through a strategic planning process). In some places, Senske is almost too personal, drawing on his own experiences, but using those experiences to show applications or examples. Of course, an author should draw on experience, but I wonder how many readers have figured out which senior
manager left his organization after a year (54).

Despite these minor criticisms, I join Tom DeLay and Michael Dukakis in commending a book that, if read and implemented, will lift the level of leadership to a stronger ethical level and provide many practical insights as well.

Joel D. Heck
Austin, Texas

Editor’s note: We found simply too many interesting books to be included in print in this issue. To read those additional reviews, go to www.ConcordiaTheology.org.
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## Index of Homiletical Helps

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