

# HOMILETICAL HELPS

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### **Easter 4 • John 10:11–18 • May 3, 2009**

The Good Shepherd. It's such a well-known image. It seems to be relevant in every age—from the earliest times in the catacombs where Christ was so often depicted as a youthful Apollonian shepherd, to the modern Sunday school pictures of the gentle Jesus cradling a lamb, the Good Shepherd continues to be the most common and beloved image of the Savior. And this is true even apart from knowledge or experience with sheep, the pasture or the pastoral life. Perhaps, this is because when Jesus uses the image, he transforms it into something new and remarkable. If the essential characteristic of the Good Shepherd is that he “lays down his life for the sheep,” then we have entered into something unique and profound. No longer does the reader dwell on pastoral images. When Christ says that the sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and know him by his voice, one could find analogies in the world of shepherds and sheep, but that is not its immediate or lasting import. Rather our affections are drawn to the kind of intimacy found between the likes of mother and child. My one-year-old might be happily sitting on my knee, when suddenly he hears the voice of his mother and, naturally, all is lost! He is nothing but squirm and scramble, in order to follow the voice that continues to shower him with incomparable love.

But the metaphor of the shepherd also occurs within the larger context of John and the Old Testament scriptures. In the history of Israel, the shepherd image has a long tradition of being applied to the king. Israel's greatest of kings, David, of course began as a shepherd and his call and anointing explicitly extend his former vocation into his new one: “He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people” (Ps 78:70–71; cf. 2 Sam 7:8; 24:17). On the other hand, when the kings of Israel acted as shepherds who treated their sheep like prey, the Lord declared that “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep” (Ez 34:15).

So it is that in the gospel of John, Christ as king is also a significant unfolding theme. Already in chapter one, Nathanael exclaims to Jesus, “You are the king of Israel.” In chapter six, after having fed the 5000, the people try to make Jesus their king. In his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus is hailed “King of Israel” by the crowds, and at the passion Jesus' kingship is the central object of Pilate's deliberations. So it is that we see the king and shepherd of Israel “lay down his life for the sheep.” In this death, the shepherd is, in fact, “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

The bleeding of one image into another transforms the image of Christ so that all previous expectations of the messianic shepherd and king are made new. “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them” (10:6). Perhaps this is the case, because the promise of the Good Shepherd is only understandable and believable from the Resurrected One. We contemplate these words after Easter, for the Good Shepherd is he that lays down his life, *so that* he may take it up again (10:17). Without the resurrection, all this talk of the shepherd is frankly just plain silly. It is from the far side of Easter that we truly begin to experience the loving voice of the shepherd among us, even as he says to Peter, “feed my lambs . . . take care of my sheep.”

Erik Herrmann

### Easter 5 • John 15:1–8 • May 10, 2009

The Great Fifty Days of Easter continue as the Church explores how it stays alive. Christ’s resurrection certainly makes us alive. To remain alive in Christ is to stay connected to him through his Word and the Sacraments.

The idea of the vineyard and the vine is not new; it was already evident in Isaiah 5:1–7 (the Song of the Vineyard), where in the “house of Israel” the “loved one” planted vines looking “for a crop of good grapes,” but finding that it “yielded only bad fruit” (Is 5:2). Depicting God as the planter of “a choice vine of sound and reliable stock,” Jeremiah 2:21 reveals that the vine turns against God and becomes “a corrupt, wild vine.” This concept is explored in other Old Testament references: Ezekiel 19:10–14, 15:1–8, 17:7–8; Hosea 10:1; Psalm 80:8–19; Isaiah 27:2–6.

Twice Jesus identifies himself as the “vine” or “true vine” (Jn 15:1, 5). He also identifies his Father as the “gardener” (v.1), the one who “cuts off” (*airō*) “every branch in me [Christ] that bears no fruit.”

While “cut off” and “prune” are similar actions, there are nuances to take into account. To cut off (*airō*) has the sense of lifting up and carrying away, as reflected in John 1:29 where Jesus is identified as “the Lamb of God, who *takes away* the sin of the world!” John 11:48 uses the same word in the sense that what is taken away is destroyed.

The use of “prunes” in verse 2 is the only use in the New Testament of the form *kathairō*, related to others, such as *katharizō*, *katharismos*, *katharos*, *katharotēs*, using the stem (*kathar-*) that indicates the elimination of ritual impurities (Jn 2:6, 3:25, 13:10–11). Thus when God, the gardener, prunes the branches, he is cleansing or purifying the branches of his vine, his disciples.

This cleansing, purifying, occurs through the Word that Jesus speaks, God's Word (v. 3). This Word is powerful, "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

The fruit that the gardener expects from the branches is demonstrated in Galatians 5:22–23: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." This is fruit that flows from a heart that trusts Jesus, that clings to his death for life, that believes his word. The branch that remains connected to the vine is a healthy branch, capable of bearing much fruit. Examples of bad fruit can be found in Galatians 5:19–21, which ultimately is no fruit at all, at least not in God's vineyard.

Often translated as "remain," the word "*menō*" also has the sense of "abide, stay, live or dwell, endure, continue." Within this chapter of John 15, the word is used eleven times. It would seem from the commands to remain or abide that the branch has this responsibility. But looking at John 15:4, 5 and 16, puts it all in perspective; "Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.... apart from me you can do nothing.... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last." So it is about Christ and his work in us.

The fact that the "you"s of verses 7–8 are all plural implies that branches do not exist in isolation—going against much of the rugged individualism rampant in our society. The ultimate goal of bearing fruit is the glory of the Father. Our discipleship—our bearing fruit—is to give glory to God the Father. Our bearing much fruit will reveal ourselves as his disciples, reminiscent of John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Henry Gerike

## Easter 6 • John 15:9–17 • May 17, 2009

### Preliminary considerations:

In his recent book, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), Philip Jenkins writes:

In the late ninth century, an elderly Egyptian monk shocked his Muslim listeners when he explicitly denied that Christianity could be supported purely on the grounds of reason, and agreed that ideas like the Trinity and the crucified God flatly contradicted reason. Instead, he said, "I find the proof of the truth of Christianity in its contradictions and inconsistencies which are rejected by intelligence and

repelled by the mind because of their difference and contrast. Analysis cannot help it, though the intelligence and perception enquire and search into it” (76).

This seems reminiscent of the famous statement attributed to Tertullian but is not found in his writings, *Credo, quia absurdum est* (I believe, because it is absurd). I mention this ninth century quote above because I think it applies very aptly to this text and may help us avoid misconstruing its meaning.

God has been called the *mysterium tremendum* and “the totally other” to emphasize his absolute transcendence in relation to the created order (See Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1958]). When we attempt to bring God into our finite world and make him completely comprehensible, we do both God and ourselves a great disservice by attempting to remake him into the image of a human being or something that fits neatly into the order of the finite world, thereby diminishing God and sacrificing our sense of awe and reverence. As the Egyptian monk asserted in the quote above, if we are to be intellectually honest, we must remember that God is a great, incomprehensible mystery, beyond all human reason. This applies not only to the doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, Predestination, and other divine activities and attributes—It also applies to God’s ἀγάπη love.

Not only is God transcendent, he is also immanent. Even though Christ entered into our world to express God’s love for us in more human terms, his love is still a mystery, although a little more comprehensible. We often try to understand God’s love in terms of the various kinds of love that we experience in this world, such as the love of a parent, love for a spouse and children, love for our profession or occupation, or love for a favored means of relaxation or leisure. We tend to think that these human experiences of purely human types of love enable us to fathom God’s great love for us. In a limited way they can help us understand the love God expressed in the redeeming work of his Son since that was a love expressed in a human context with human beings as its object. Athanasius once said about the mystery of the Trinity: “[Man can] perceive only the hem of the garment of the triune God; the cherubim cover the rest with their wings.” We can do no better in our attempts to understand his love. As long as God’s love remains a mystery to us, we must stand in deep awe and respect for his love, and be motivated to keep his commandments as he says in verse 12. God’s command is twofold: love God in return with all your heart, mind, and soul; and love one another.

### **Textual considerations:**

In our text, the love of God originates in the Father since he is the source of the Trinity itself and of all things visible and invisible within the created order. The first love mentioned is the Father’s love for his Son. Next he mentions the love of

the Father for the Son. Then Jesus says, “Abide in my love” and “keep my commandments,” which is explained in verse 12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” In experiencing the love of Christ we are commanded to keep his commandments and love others in the same selfless, ἀγάπη manner in which he has loved us. Christ has patterned this obedience and love for us in his keeping of the will of his Father and loving us as his Father loved him. Jesus’ love for us challenges us to rise above purely human love both in our relation to God and with one another.

In verses 13 and 14, Jesus calls us friends, φίλοι from the verb φιλεῖν, the fraternal love between or among human beings. However, this love is usually between equals and motivated by self-advantage or a gain of some sort (the Vulgate translates ἀγαπεῖν and φιλεῖν with words derived from *diligere* and *amare*, but these two words do not have the rich meaning and contrast of the Greek terms). This fraternal relationship is possible because of his assumption of a human nature.

Since God is both a transcendent and an immanent being, the love of God as transcendent will always remain a mystery, while the love of God as immanent will be vaguely, but not completely, understandable to us.

In the introductory overview for some of these verses in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament IV b, p. 172 (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), the editor lists these captions: “God reveals himself in our charity, as we love one another as God has loved us.” “When we love one another, we love God and, in effect, keep all that he has commanded, since love encompasses all other commandments.” “It is the love of God that motivates us to love one another as God’s love is intertwined with our own” (172). A sermon outline could be developed out of the three captions, or I would suggest the following outline as another organizational structure for a sermon:

## **Outline:**

### **The Mystery of God’s Love**

- I. God the Father is the source or cause of all true, genuine, God-pleasing love, beginning with the love that exists among the members of the Trinity itself. This love is a profound mystery.
  - A. The Father is not only the source of the other two Persons of the Godhead, the created order, man’s salvation, but also of Christ’s love for us.
  - B. God is the source and model of all unselfish, God-pleasing love. When by God’s grace we reflect that love back to God or to others in our world, it is a mystery to non-Christians.
- II. Since the love of the Son for mankind originates in the pure ἀγάπη love of the Father and is expressed within the realm of human existence, it is a semi-mystery.

- A. Christ's love is more comprehensible because he shared a human nature with us and we witness his love as it is expressed in a more human way.
  - B. His love became demonstrable and tangible in his acts of mercy and regard for human beings, and especially in his redemptive, self-sacrificing work on the cross.
- III. The ἀγάπη love of Christians is a reflection of the Father's love for his Son and their love for the world, to the degree that we can imitate the love of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. Since our inter-human expressions of love fall short of the love of the Father and of his Son, it is less a mystery than the love of God, but still a mystery to our world.
- A. Since our human natures remain sinful, which they do this side of the saintly bliss of heaven, our love for others will never be a true, perfect reflection of God's ἀγάπη love.
  - B. However, we can rise above the purely selfish love of this world when our love for others is anchored in and patterned after the ἀγάπη of God as modeled by Christ in our world.

### **Concluding thoughts:**

Unfortunately we are often influenced by the popular conceptions of love that are fashioned by the Hollywood model, described in romance novels, magazines, and the entertainment industry generally. To try to use that model to understand the ἀγάπη love of God is a real tragedy and sacrifices the true, profound mystery of God's love for us. When the sense of divine mystery is lost, we also lose the sense of awe and reverence necessary to truly appreciate God's love for us and His efforts to transform our lives through the redeeming work of Christ.

Quentin F. Wesselschmidt

## **Ascension • Luke 24:44–53 • May 21, 2009**

### **A Journey for the Ages**

This homiletical help provides reflections on central themes for the Ascension in light of the liturgical context and hymnography for the feast. The Gospel reading for the Ascension of Our Lord is the Lukan account of Jesus' final teaching and his return to his Father. It is the end of Jesus' earthly journey, culminating with his entry into his Father's eternal presence, but the beginning of the pilgrimage of the Church on earth. The post-apostolic church father Irenaeus' great

theme of recapitulation is accented in Luke's own distinct way: the Church will, like her Lord, make the same pilgrimage of suffering and death that he has made from Jerusalem and the temple through every earthly Galilee to the heavenly Jerusalem. The church's task is to proclaim to the world that all the spiritual tribes of Israel, Jew and Gentile, have been planted in Jesus in their final resting place (LSB 494, st. 4). It is a journey for the ages.

What do I mean when I say that the ascension is a journey for the ages? As Hebrews 9:24–26 proclaims, “For Christ has entered . . . into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. . . . he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” The enthronement of Christ Jesus at the right hand of his Father restores the relationship which had suffered the great divorce—between God and his human creatures. Humanity now stands in the presence of the heavenly Father, as at the beginning in the first garden of paradise, in Jesus, the Son of Man forever. Eternity, which had been broken by the fall, is now one again. There are no longer any ages (periods of time, rules or reigns, peoples or nations) divided from the will of God in the ascended One. The age of all ages (see Galatians 1:5; Philippians 4:20; Revelation 1:6, 5:13, 7:12; translated most often in the West as “forever and ever”) has come. In Christ's ascension, the final age of God's reign has begun. In Christ the Church enters the ages (the plural signifies its totality and completeness) of all ages and begins its journey to the consummation of this final age.

Embedded in the Gospel reading is the essential shape of Jesus' journey and the pilgrimage of all Christians in him: the teaching of the Word; the journey through the Word's death and resurrection by the Spirit; the final blessing of God before his presence in the ages of ages. Celebration of the ascension feast should accent this journey from the baptismal font through the Supper of the Lord's body and blood to the final blessing at the eschaton of Christ. In this final appearance of Jesus to his disciples he opens their minds to see that the shape of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, is the shape of the entire Scriptures and of the Church's life. The liturgical context should call to remembrance this journey in concrete ways (remembrance of baptism at the beginning of the service, celebration of the Lord's Supper) and the preaching ought to immerse the assembly in the story of their journey from death to life. For instance, the ascension feast provides another opportunity to affirm and pray for those who have recently been baptized, catechized, and confirmed: adults, youth, children, and infants.

The journey that Jesus makes is a journey from God to God as the promised Messiah, anointed and empowered by the Spirit to be the meeting place between God and humanity. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, he comes from God to his people in the temple, revealing his Father. Through his exodus from death to life, his recapitulation as the true Son of God of Israel's exodus from slavery to freedom, he offers salvation in the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with the heav-

only Father. This is the Word of God that has been fulfilled, revealed, and proclaimed in his person and his pilgrimage. It is also the life and pilgrimage of Christians which we make in worship week in and week out: in the hearing of the Word, in baptism, and in the Lord's Supper.

The journey that begins with God seeks to return his creatures to him. The ultimate destination in this journey is to stand before the throne of the heavenly Father with our earthly brother, Jesus. On this day the church triumphantly acclaims that Christ has laid the first fruits of humanity in his own body at the throne of his heavenly Father. The preaching should lead the hearer to rejoice that in Christ she already has a seat in the Father's assembly hall. Thus, the Ascension hymns rejoice in the triumphant elevation of our humanity into the Father's presence, as this hymn sings:

He has raised our human nature  
On the clouds to God's right hand;  
There we sit in heav'nly places,  
There with Him in glory stand.  
Jesus reigns, adored by angels;  
Man with God is on the throne.  
By our mighty Lord's ascension  
We by faith behold our own (LSB 494 st. 5).

Yet, each person must by faith behold their own humanity as baptized into the humanity (and divinity) of Christ. Thus, Christ gives the promise to his disciples to clothe the church with the power from on high (the anointing of the Holy Spirit) once he has ascended. In the power of the Spirit the church is able to bear witness to the journey that it is making to the heavenly Father in Jesus, following his lead. In its witness it invites all people to join the journey and personally make the final pilgrimage with Christ and ascend on high on the last day. The impetus for the church's call and invitation to all people is reflected in this Ascension hymn's prayer:

To our lives of wanton wand'ring  
Send Your Spirit, promised guide;  
Through our lives of fear and failure  
With Your pow'r and love abide;  
Welcome us, as You were welcomed,  
to an endless Eastertide (LSB 491, st. 3).

It is a journey for all the ages for which this poem by John Donne so eloquently offers its praise:

Salute the last and everlasting day,  
Joy at the uprising of this Sun, and Son,  
Ye whose just tears, or tribulation  
Have purely washed, or burnt your drossy clay;  
Behold the Highest, parting hence away,  
Lightens the dark clouds, which he treads upon,  
Nor doth he by ascending, show alone,  
But first he, and he first enters the way.  
O strong Ram, which has battered heaven for me,  
Mild Lamb, which with thy blood, hast marked the path;  
Bright Torch, which shin'st, that I the way may see,  
Oh, with thy own blood quench thy own just wrath,  
And if thy Holy Spirit, my Muse did raise,  
Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise.

Kent Burreson

### **Easter 7 • May 24, 2009 • John 17:11b–19**

The vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of this text are rather simple. In fact, a pastor whose Greek has become rusty would be well advised to return his attention to the original languages with this week's Gospel lesson. The impact and rhetoric of the text are another matter. Embedded in the narrative of our Lord's Passion, this text is part of the High Priestly Prayer. Part of the challenge for the preacher is the problem of how to preach a sermon based on someone's prayer. The application of a prayer may depend on *who* is doing the praying!

It is common for us to read parts of Jesus' prayer to the Father as implicit or indirect commands to the disciples. In other words, Jesus prays to the Father and expresses his deep desires and wishes, and prays in such a way that the disciples can overhear and thus be motivated to strive for the Lord's desired ends. For example, in verse 11 our Lord asks his Father to keep his disciples in the Father's name, "that they may be one, even as we are one," and this petition can easily be converted to a sermon exhortation to the congregation: "Remain in God's holy name, and strive for the kind of unity that reflects the unity of God himself!" Or, toward the end of the pericope in verse 17, Jesus pleads with God the Father to "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth;" and we might translate that prayer as an encouragement to our people to continue and increase their personal and corporate devotion to the Word of God, since that word is the key to their sanctification.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with exhortations and encouragements as such. But the problem is that this present text, the prayer of Jesus to his Father on

our behalf—and remember that we are explicitly included in his prayer in the verse immediately following this pericope!—does not cast any of these things as a command directed at Jesus’ disciples. These are our Lord’s prayers *for* us. He asks the Father to do these things for us, and give these things to us. We can be confident that these are precisely the things the Father *does* and *wants* to do, just as we can be confident that the Father will do what the Son asks of him. That confidence means we can read Jesus’ prayer as future indicatives rather than as disguised imperatives. The Father will do these things for us, because the Son has asked and prayed, with his words and works and blood on our behalf. And that way of reading the prayer is very different from reading these as indirect imperatives calling for action by us as his disciples. The difference is tantamount to the difference between reading this text as gospel and reading it as law. The slogan for one reading of Jesus’ prayer might be “Yes we can—and must!” while a gospel reading of the prayer would acclaim, “Yes he *does!*”

Consider what it means to read the prayer of Jesus as gospel indicative rather than as sanctified imperative. Jesus prays that we disciples be “kept” in God’s name, kept from the evil one, filled with joy in despite experiencing the world’s hatred. As an exhortation—“Keep yourselves close to God, and be joyful even when you suffer!”—this seems like uncertain comfort in the face of danger and suffering. But if we remember that our Savior, just before giving himself for us, asks his dear Father to do these things for us, then we have no reason to doubt that the Father’s answer to the Son will be a resounding and unambiguous “Yes!” And since the Father’s “Yes!” is a response to our perfect Savior’s prayer, and not to our dubious performance, Jesus’ prayer for us comforts us and reassures us.

The Father’s answers to the Son’s prayers for us (in this text and throughout the High Priestly Prayer of John 17) are a summary of the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is not mentioned by name in this text, but his work for us and among us is anticipated in Jesus’ prayers. He is the one who places God’s name on us in our baptism. He keeps us in that name, sanctifies us by the Word of God, which is truth itself. He protects us from the evil one. He fills us with joy in spite of all suffering or hardship, a joy which the world cannot give or understand. The Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth in the one true faith, applying to us the work and worth of Jesus our Savior. Jesus consecrates himself, and the Spirit sets us apart for holy service to God in Christ.

So this week’s “gospel prayers” are a perfect preparation for Pentecost. The outpouring of the Spirit, to be celebrated next week, does not come unexpectedly out of the blue, but comes as the Father’s gracious answer to Jesus’ pleading for us. As the Father answers Jesus’ prayer with a huge, divine “Yes!” the Spirit can, will, and *does* keep us in the Father’s name, guards us from evil, fills us with joy, brings us Jesus’ word of truth, holds us together in holy unity, and consecrates us. This is the prayer that brings down Pentecost for us and for the world, the prayer the Father

answers without fail, and the prayer that keeps us safe and makes us one—not by our efforts and accomplishments, but because the Father says “Yes!” to the Son for us.

William W. Schumacher

## **Pentecost • John 15:26–27; 16:4–15 • May 31, 2009**

This is Pentecost, a day of celebration; a day to remember and hold fast to our identity as the people of God, and the purpose he intends for our lives in this world, and the new world to come. We are here to give him glory!

Our Gospel Lesson is a Pentecost sermon preached by our Lord on Maundy Thursday evening (Jn 13–17). Here he gives us a wonderful promise: He will send his Holy Spirit —“the Spirit of truth.” (Jn 15:26) He also tells us what the Holy Spirit will do upon his arrival. He will completely reverse the result of the trial of the next day. He will convict the world of sin, direct us to the righteousness of Christ, and assure us of Satan’s defeat (Jn 16:8–10). The Holy Spirit will personally confirm the Easter victory won by our Savior on the cross and the open tomb. This promise to the disciples was fulfilled on Pentecost, and it has been fulfilled for us as the Holy Spirit works in our lives through the means of grace.

In his book, *Make Disciples, Baptizing*, Dr. Robert Kolb reminds us that Baptism played a central role in the life of the early church, and it should play a central role in our ministry today. As we address a culture that has a deep longing to connect with God, a Pentecost sermon—with a focus on God’s grace in Baptism—allows the preacher to address this “longing”

A focus on Baptism is also important due to the general lack of knowledge and understanding about Baptism. For some people, Baptism is seen as an act of obedience or as a membership rite for new members. For others, Baptism is a way for the congregation to join the new parents in celebrating the birth of a child. Still others view Baptism as a reception of God’s free gift of forgiveness, but fail to realize the impact of Baptism on the person’s life as it relates to family, to the body of Christ, and the mission of Christ.

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit brought about significant change to the lives of the disciples and some 3,000 listeners. Even though we are living in a culture of change, the greatest change that we have experienced was that brought about by the same Holy Spirit at our Baptism. Paraphrasing the words of Hebrews 11:40, God was fulfilling his plan of providing “something better” for his people.

In coming into our lives in Baptism, the Holy Spirit has given witness to the truth of God. Personally, he has taught us that our sins are forgiven in and through Jesus Christ, that we are connected with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as

the fellowship of believers (we are the family of God!). Having received this witness, we are then empowered to be witnesses to others (Jn 15:27). It is the preacher's task to assure his hearers of these great truths. On what basis can he assure them? The assurance is based on God's word and promise.

The story of God's saving activity in the Christian life begins with Baptism. As this story develops, and as the Christian lives out the meaning of Baptism, lives are impacted for eternity.

The Sacrament has a profound impact on the life of the baptized and upon the life of the family. In the liturgy of Baptism, parents and sponsors *make a commitment before God* to bring the child up in love of the Lord.

The impact goes beyond the family, for in Baptism God is bringing the child into the family of faith—into his church, where together with our fellow Christians we serve our Lord—who gave his all for us. As members of the Lord's Church we have been sent. We are sent to be witnesses, witnesses to God's grace and truth in Jesus Christ. We are sent to tell people that in Jesus Christ their sins are forgiven and that he has conquered our enemies of sin, death, and hell. We are the living people of God whom God is sending today (led and empowered by his Spirit) to bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ as he seeks to save people from hell and send them to heaven.

On Pentecost, we remember who the Holy Spirit is and what he is doing. Remembering our Baptism enables us to know who we are and what we are to be doing.

Robert Hoehner

### Holy Trinity • John 3:1–17 • June 7, 2009

This text is perhaps too familiar to the typical hearer. Phrases like “born again,” “the Son of Man will be lifted up,” “God so loved the world . . .” may well wash right over the congregation and not sink in to challenge them in the way that Jesus challenges Nicodemus. A few comments on key phrases may help refocus hearers on the text itself.

#### “Born again/from above” (3:3, 7)

The Greek *anōthen* can have either meaning (hence the Concordia Seminary motto: *phōs anōthen* = “Light from Above”). By his response, Nicodemus misunderstands this to mean “again.” But Jesus points him to a different meaning: birth “by water and the Spirit.” Already at 1:12–13, the Evangelist describes those who “received” Jesus as not having been “born of the flesh” but “born from God.” The point is not that there is a “second” birth, but that there is a difference between a

birth brought about by humans and a birth brought about by God through his Spirit. The former accomplishes nothing, but the latter brings one into the Kingdom of God. “Born again” in American Christianity typically means “really Christian” as opposed to a more Johannine sense of “Christian.” For the sake of clarity it may be necessary to point this out.

### **“Water and the Spirit” (3:4)**

Here is a classic Johannine conundrum: Jesus says something that likely has no meaning to his listeners, but tremendous significance for those who are reading the Evangelist’s text. In chapter 6, when Jesus says: “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood,” the audience in the gospel can hardly make sense of it. The lack of a Lord’s Supper narrative and the fact that this occurs in a context far removed from Jesus’ passion would not give any of the characters in the story any clue as to Jesus’ meaning. Nevertheless, for the recipients of John’s gospel, the passage cannot fail to evoke the Lord’s Supper. So also here in chapter 3. Various explanations have been given in order to avoid a sacramental understanding of “water and the spirit,” but here is one case, in spite of its frequent abuse by modern Lutheran preachers, where “water” actually does reference Baptism. The point of “by water and the spirit,” of course, is not to make baptism the exclusive means by which the Spirit creates “children of God,” but that for the readers/hearers of John’s gospel, it served as a reminder to them that they themselves had already been born from above through the waters of baptism. The preacher should allow it to function in the same way for his hearers.

### **Structure of the Pericope**

What does Jesus’ answer have to do with Nicodemus’ statement (3:2)? Nothing, and everything. Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as “from God” because of the signs, but Jesus shifts the focus from what he has been doing in the signs to what the Spirit does (3:3–8) and then to what Jesus speaks (3:11) and came to accomplish (3:14, 16). The invoking of the Bronze Serpent account in Numbers 21 shows that only through God’s chosen means are his people saved. Only by Jesus does birth “from above” happen, for he alone came “from above.” Furthermore, the flow of the discourse moves from the work of God in the individual (“unless one” . . . “the one who believes” 3:1–15) to his work for all of creation (“loved the world” 3:16–17). Unfortunately, the lection ends at 3:17; the pericope should have been allowed to continue to 3:21, where the consequences of both belief and unbelief are made clear. Indeed, reading 3:16–17 without 18–20 may leave the impression that Jesus is a universalist; God loves the world, but it is not clear without vv. 18–20 that those in the world are condemned apart from faith in Christ. Furthermore, without v. 21 the hearers may also get the false impression that faith does not result in new life, as if, for example, Jesus commanded his church only to

“baptize” but not also to “teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Mt 28:19–20). The preacher is encouraged to incorporate 3:18–21 into the Gospel reading and the sermon. Such will be assumed in the notes below.

### **Suggested sermon focus**

Is that all? Most all of us have had an experience where we have seen or met in person a sports hero, Hollywood star, or political figure, but have been left unimpressed. The person was not as large, beautiful, or friendly as we had thought he or she would be. With Jesus it seems to be the opposite. Our culture has taken him down a few notches: His miracles are explained away, some claim that his teachings are not really that unique or profound, there are many other religious teachers in the world who might be followed to reach “heaven.” Nicodemus approaches Jesus assuming the latter. He gives what he apparently thinks is a generous and profound interpretation of Jesus’ work. But it was not enough. Jesus did not merely have God with him – he was the Son of God come to down earth. And he would be lifted up, so that anyone who would look to him – and only to him — would be saved.

But this saving act of God—lifting up the Son of Man on the cross and giving new life from above by water and the Spirit so that we may have “eternal life” does not mean that all we do is wait around to be “taken into heaven,” not caring what we do or do not do. We have been born from above to “do the truth.” Our deeds (*ta erga*) show that we are in the light, indeed, they have been done in the light because they are done through the one who is above – they are literally “done in God” (3:21). Life in Christ is not some kind of Gnostic existence where we merely attain some kind of knowledge, but a life lived “from above” is often fundamentally different from the lives of those who have not been born from above—they do “wicked things.” Preachers may be tempted to use this as an opportunity to blast away at whatever current societal problem is in the news, but the goal of Jesus in this text is to move his born-from-above people to confident living in him, by his power, focusing on him as the one lifted up, in whom we “do the truth.”

Jeffrey Kloha

## **Proper 6 • Mark 4:26–34 • June 14, 2009**

Mark 4 begins and ends with references to Jesus as a teacher (4:1, 4:38). Yet it is clear from the central theme of his teaching (the kingdom of God) and from his authority over wind and sea that Jesus is much more than a teacher. In his words and works, the end-time reign of God is being “planted” in the world. A new age has begun and soon will come “fully”—the full grain in the ear and the tall and sprawling mustard bush of these Mark 4 parables.

## The kingdom of God

This coming kingdom is not a New Testament innovation. It is the fulfillment (1:14) of God's promise to restore David's kingdom forever (Mk 11:10). It is the promised goal for which the hearts of all pious Israelites had long been longing (e.g., Joseph of Arimathea, Mark 15:43). That this reign of God is present and established by the person and work of Jesus is accented by the kingly portrayal of Jesus in Mark's passion narratives (15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26, 32).

Jesus' own preaching is summarized: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (1:14). Although the kingdom is "at hand" and the reference to "those outside" in 4:11 perhaps suggests that the disciples are (already) inside the kingdom, elsewhere Jesus can say that the disciples *will* see the kingdom come in power (9:1), that he *will* drink of the fruit of the vine anew in the kingdom of God. At the heart of our two parables lies this tension between the present dawning of God's reign in Jesus and the continued longing for its fullness, still to come.

The rhetorical goal of the parables, then, is to encourage weary or doubting Christians. As surely as Christ has come, as surely as he has died and risen again, as surely as his Gospel word is being planted in the world, so certain is the eternal, joyous, secure, righteous kingdom of God which is coming. Though it may take many "days and nights," though Christ's work in his church may now seem "small," be sure that the harvest will come and that we will be given a place to "nest" in God's presence forever.

## The automatic seed (verses 26–29)

This parable portrays a farmer who broadcasted his seed (βάλλη—subjunctive aorist) and then keeps on sleeping and arising (καθεύδῃ καὶ ἐγείρηται—subjunctive present) while the seed goes about sprouting and growing. This miracle in the earth simply happens, as a matter of course, automatically (αὐτομάτῃ), so that the seed's "fruit" is produced (καρποφορεῖ). The farmer "knows not how" all this happens (v. 27), yet he is confident that a seed, when planted, will grow. Seeds just do that.

So it is with the full fruit of God's coming reign. The work of Jesus and, especially in Mark 4, the words of Jesus (Mk 4:14) are being sown. There is no question that the harvest will soon follow. Verse 29 borrows imagery of eschatological harvest from Joel 3:12–14. This parable also contains significant linguistic and theological ties with Isaiah 5:1–7; 11:1; and 27:2–6.

The context of Mark 4 pushes towards an identification of the "seed" with the word of the Gospel. To this, passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:6–9 and 1 Peter 1:23 could be added. Another interpretive possibility is to identify the seed (σπόρος) with the dying and rising of Christ (note ἐγείρω in v.27 and cf. John 12:24).

Ultimately, the saving work of Christ and the saving word which proclaims and bestows it go together. The planting of the Gospel word of the kingdom, so full of Christ and his saving death and resurrection, will not be in vain.

### **The mustard seed (verses 30–32)**

As in the previous parable, the mustard seed contains the promise of its end: the full plant. In addition, this parable warns against despising the seed for its smallness. The cross may be foolishness, the means of grace unimpressive—but they are bringing about the end-time restoration of God’s reign among his redeemed people!

Old Testament allusions are strong here. God’s end-time reign as an enormous tree is emphasized in Ezekiel 17:23 and 31:6. Jesus’ language also echoes the description of Nebuchadnezzar’s kingship in Daniel 4:12, 21. Just as significant, perhaps, is the king’s vision and its interpretation in Daniel 2:31–45. The great, layered statue represents a succession of powerful kingdoms, but in the end a mere stone (small as a mustard seed?) strikes the statue, breaks it to pieces, and then grows into a great mountain which fills the whole world. This stone is the kingdom of “the God of heaven” which shall “break in pieces” all other kingdoms and which shall “stand forever” (Dn 2:44).

### **Suggested sermon outline**

- I. When God will be king forever!
  - A. The joy and beauty of the kingdom Christ has prepared for us
  - B. The “seeds” from which this kingdom are growing
    1. Jesus’ saving life, death, and resurrection
    2. Jesus’ continuing work through his Word
- II. Challenges
  - A. The church’s failures (as if we must make the seed grow)
    1. Startling statistics regarding church decline
    2. We mill about in the garden, lurking over the seeds, wringing our hands about what we can do to make them grow
  - B. Competing kingdoms (as if Christ’s kingdom is too small to really matter)
    1. The greatness of nations, national interests, national events—the life of the church is marginalized
    2. The glamour of a modern godless culture—reality television and supermarket tabloids garner much more attention than the church
    3. The success of other religions and false Christianities—compare the annual budget of the Mormons with the LCMS!

4. The largest threat of all: the reign of me! Every day I am turning from the light of God's reign to the darkness of life as my own king!

### III. Responses

- A. The parable of the automatic seed (as reply to II.a.)
- B. The parable of the mustard seed (as reply to II.b.)

Thomas Egger

## Proper 7 • Mark 4: 35–41 • June 21, 2009

### Preface: Sometimes a boat is just a boat

Although Mark's account of the stilling of the storm did not occur in any historic lectionary, Matthew's version of the story was the traditional Gospel reading for the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. So the story has been preached routinely in the history of the church, but not as we might expect. A brief investigation of sermons on the text shows that preachers commonly used it to discuss not the person of Christ but the church and its trials.

Tertullian was likely first to equate the boat that carried Jesus and his disciples with the church. In *On Baptism* 12, he ridiculed the suggestion that the disciples had undergone a sort of baptism when the waves washed over them during the storm. Then he added, "That little ship presented a type of the Church, because on the sea, which means this present world, it is being tossed about by the waves, which means persecutions and temptations, while our Lord in his long-suffering is as it were asleep, until at the last times he is awakened by the prayers of the saints to calm the world and restore tranquility to his own" (translation by Ernest Evans, SPCK, 1964). Tertullian's idea that the boat is the church and the storm the troubles it faces would cast a long shadow on the history of interpretation.

Even Martin Luther and C. F. W. Walther succumbed to this seemingly irresistible bit of allegory in sermons for Epiphany 4. Luther, after briefly retelling the story from the text, describes the troubles the church faced historically, using the example of the Arian controversy, and then the troubles faced by the church in his day. "So, too," he says, "we receive tremendous blows from the Enthusiasts and Anabaptists" (WA 49:334). Walther goes even farther than Luther in his spiritual interpretation of the boat, basing his theme and entire outline on it. The theme—Christ's Ship on the Sea of Galilee, a Picture of the Church in Our Time—is divided into three parts: a picture of the danger the church is in; a picture of its members; a picture of the protection under which it stands (*Amerikanisch-Lutherische Evangelien Postille*, Concordia Publishing House, p. 79.).

Normally I prefer to mine sermons from the past for good examples of preaching, but these present an important cautionary lesson not to leap over the point of the text to an application derived from it—even if that application is supported by traditional interpretations. (By the way, both Luther and Walther composed excellent sermons on the church. I just wish they had used a different text.) The problem with using the boat as a type of the church is that the boat is not the point of the story, nor is the storm. The boat is a prop and the storm part of the supporting cast for the main actor, Jesus. The point of the text is that Jesus has power over the storm; and to realize who Jesus is. So even though preaching on the text may come around to the dangers we face as individual believers or as the church, preachers should arrive at that point *through* Jesus as portrayed in the text and not apart from or despite the point of Mark's, or Matthew's, or Luke's account. See, for example, the interpretation of Joel Marcus in number four below.

The truth about Jesus delivered by this narrative is discussed here under three headings: Jesus is Lord of creation; Jesus is a Lord to be feared; Jesus is the Lord who saves.

### **Jesus is Lord of creation**

Jesus commands the storm to stop with his words. Through this story Mark shows what the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed states with the phrase “by whom all things were made.” In the chapters prior to this text, Jesus had already demonstrated his power over the demonic. Now he demonstrates his power over creation, over the destructive forces of the natural world. In doing so, he uses the same word to rebuke the storm that he had used against the demon in 1:25. This word is stronger than the traditional translation *be still* suggests. *Shut up* would be a good colloquial alternative. The result of this utterance is the storm obeys immediately. Utter stillness, rather than a gradual dying down of the wind and waves, shows that the power of the Creator is present.

Jesus demonstrates a power beyond the reach of any mere mortal. Whatever illusions of control human beings might have, such illusions dissipate rapidly in the face of violent storms—typhoons, hurricanes, and tornados. The fact that no human being can command the sea is something of a commonplace in historical writing. Antiochus Epiphanes, the villain of the story of the Maccabees, is described as one who “in his superhuman presumption, thought he could command the waves of the sea.” (2 Mc 9:8) A more pious ruler, King Canute of England, supposedly had his throne set up by the seashore as the tide was coming in for the very purpose of demonstrating his powerlessness over the sea. Seated on his seaside throne, he ordered the tide not to invade his territory or to wet his garments. When the sea failed to obey his command, he said, “Let all earth's inhabitants know that the power of kings is vain and frivolous, nor is any king worthy of the name except Him by whose command heaven, earth, and sea obey eternal

laws.” Canute then placed his crown on the head of an image of Christ on the cross (Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia anglorum*, VI.17).

The stilling of the storm proclaims Jesus’ tremendous power. The story signals that it will not be an equal fight when Jesus faces even a “legion” of demons in the following chapter of Mark’s Gospel. The story also reveals the need for faith. The disciples had asked Jesus, “Don’t you care if we drown?” He responded with a question of his own, “Don’t you have faith yet?” Precisely what sort of faith the disciples should have had is unfolded as Mark’s Gospel goes on to answer their question, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

### **Jesus is a Lord to be feared**

Jesus provoked fear in his disciples by displaying his power over the storm. Mark writes that the disciples “feared a great fear,” and this wording is stronger than that of the parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke. Fear seems to be used in the normal sense and in the sense of awe. For the disciples to fear Jesus would be justified, since they had just accused him of not caring if they drowned and he had responded by questioning their faith. The disciples would have been right to fear Jesus’ judgment of them, just as we today ought to “fear and love God,” i.e. fear his judgment upon us as sinners and love him for his gracious acceptance of us in Christ.

Jesus’ calming of the storm also evoked the fear that is awe in the presence of divine power. Jesus displayed power over the chaotic sea ascribed in the Old Testament to God alone (Is 51:10, Jb 26:10–12, Ps 104:6–9).

### **Jesus is the Lord who saves**

Joel Marcus (*Mark 1–8*, The Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1999) observes that Mark’s audience would most likely have seen parallels between Jesus and Jonah. Both slept through a storm and once awakened were able to save the crew—Jesus by stilling the storm, Jonah by sacrificing himself to the waves. Jesus would, of course, also ultimately sacrifice himself for the salvation of all people. On this point, Marcus says, “[T]here is perhaps a hint of [Jesus’] resurrection in the use of the verb *egeirousin* for the disciples’ rousing of him” (p. 337).

Marcus further suggests that by analogy the hearers of this text can place themselves in the story. According to his interpretation, the fact that Jesus and his disciples were moving to the gentile shore parallels the situation of Mark’s readers in their outreach to gentiles. Thus he believes the “other boats” of v. 36 gave Mark’s audience the opportunity to read themselves into the text and to see Jesus as coming powerfully to aid them against opposition.

Whether or not you accept Marcus’ interpretation, the saving power Jesus displays in this text certainly has application beyond that particular storm.

Paul Robinson

### **Rendezvous with Jesus**

The healing of the woman and the healing of the daughter are part of a series of four miracles in Mark 4 and 5 which demonstrate Jesus as Lord over creation, over Satan, over sickness, and over death.

#### **The Gathering (21)**

The story begins with Jesus in the boat again, and when he arrives, a gathering of people are there. His reputation was such that many wanted to hear and see him in much the same way as we gravitate toward the rich and famous today.

#### **Jairus Comes, A Crowd Follows (22–24)**

Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, comes, honors, and makes a request of Jesus. He comes with the assurance that Jesus will heal his sick child. “Lord, you can heal her by your hands and she will live.” Notice how our Lord deals with him. Jesus cannot go fast enough for the pleading Jairus. How do you hurry God? A great crowd tags along. Who wouldn’t? They are curious; they desire to see what will happen. Is he all that they say he is? Where is he going? Can he do this? Is he really the one? They heard what Christ had done, now they follow him, but not from deep faith, to see it for themselves.

#### **Woman’s Confession of Faith (25–29)**

Here is “Mark’s sandwich story” (the story within the story). This woman’s twelve year situation tugs at our heart: “discharge”, “suffered”, “spent all”, “no better”, “grew worse,” denote her hopeless and helpless predicament. What is this woman to do but try anything and everything! Being an unclean outcast of society, she hears of the “miracle worker.” He is coming and she plots—perhaps, day and night—saying over and over again, “If only I can touch him I will be healed (made whole).” With nothing left but her faith, the unclean one moves toward Jesus. She touches him.

We were dead in our sins and unclean before God. While our culture does not readily recognize it, nonetheless before God we are unclean. Our misery manifests itself in an outlook of helplessness and hopelessness. At our baptism God moves to change all of that. By the touch of water and word, our lives change, we are freed from bondage and made his children. Simply, this is done without any merit or worthiness in us, but purely out of God’s divine goodness and mercy. God is not finished with us nor is he finished with this unclean woman.

“Immediately” the world changes for this woman just like our world changes through baptism. From unclean to clean, from hopelessness to hope, all by the power of Almighty God.

### **Jesus and the Woman (30–34)**

By faith the woman is healed, and Jesus knows that someone touched him. The power left him. Jesus asks the disciples a seemingly ridiculous question. “Who touched me?” The large crowd presses all around him, how would they know? Jesus realizes who it was. The woman bares her heart to Christ and tells him all the truth. Her emotions display a realization of what had just happened to her and publically she now realizes—Christ healed her! Luther describes her as believing in that power of God in Jesus and that he alone can answer the trust of her heart. Jesus, out of loving concern, calls her “daughter,” and assures her of peace and healing. In this moment Jesus restores her to the community.

### **Test of Faith (35–37)**

Now, back to what may be a more serious test of faith. Up to this point, “where there is life, there is hope.” Jairus, likely impatiently waiting for Jesus to finish with this unclean woman, is brought a message, “She is dead. Why worry Jesus; he can do nothing for you.” In the grip of instant emotion the words of Jesus’ encouragement penetrate Jairus’ heart—“Do not fear, only believe.” Peter, James, and John accompany Jesus to the house in order to witness the work.

### **Christ Declares the Resurrection (38–39)**

Upon arriving, Jesus observes the beginning of a funeral. He declares that the young girl is merely sleeping. Death for the believer is but a sleep. In our culture that denies miracles, places God between myth and magic, and focuses on self, as was also true in Jesus’ time, it is predictable that our Savior’s words would elicit a laughing denial of what he is about to do.

### **Christ Enters the Chamber (40–43)**

Christ enters her bedroom with her father and mother. He takes her hand and tells her, “Arise.” God called her to life! She rose! The onlookers who “heard but did not hear” and “saw but did not see” were astonished. They should have recognized God engaged in compassion and tenderness and in meeting a human need. He charges them to keep silent about what happened and to give the young woman something to eat.

Christ’s rendezvous with these two women is a powerful illustration of how God touches our everyday life. There is a sense of urgency here and a sense of secrecy. It is faith alone that overcomes death and that gives life. Sin remains our greatest problem and death our greatest enemy. Jesus remains our only solution.

“It’s a good thing Jairus didn’t come to Buddha, for he may have been told that he was too attached to his daughter, and he must become unattached to the material world. It’s a good thing he didn’t come to Mohammad, for Mohammad did no miracles. It’s a good thing that he didn’t come to Marx, for he would have told

him that economic oppression was the source of his problem. It's a good thing Jairus didn't come to Freud, who would have suggested he would need psychological analysis after nature took its course. . . . But he came to 'Jesus, who, by healing and rising from the dead, showed compassion and demonstrated His messianic identity'"<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Bacon

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, eds. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Mark* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 73.

## Proper 9 • Mark 6:1–13 • July 5, 2009

Here we are at the first week of July—Fourth of July weekend no less!—and the Gospel of Mark gives us no “summer vacation” from its cruciform sense of faith, discipleship, and the way of Christ. In this text (a continuation of last week's Gospel text from Mark 5), Jesus has returned to his “hometown.” He is returning from his preaching tour of the Gerasenes (5:1), where he had been amazed by the faith of those on the outskirts of the promised land, particularly the abiding faith of one he calls “daughter” (5:34) and one he calls “little girl” (5:41). The terms of endearment are striking in the retrospective of his return home, where his own original family seems to share little affection for the course of life their eldest half-brother has taken.

Of course, perhaps their lack of affection is only in response to his. The “offense” (v. 3) that is taken by the local yokels hearkens back to Mark 3:31–35, where Jesus has essentially disavowed himself of his blood ties. Or at least opened up those ties to a much broader family. “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother,” he had said (3:35). Those of us who are claimed by his Father in Baptism, and who now do his will in the new life he clothes us with, are part of this new family.

I suspect that in any given congregation, there are those who have been around long enough that they feel like they know everything there is to know about their “hometown” parish. And there are those who are still new enough that they feel like the crowded-out woman who only wants to touch the Master's cloak (5:25–34). If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, Jesus of Nazareth has a prophetic word for all of us, new and old alike. Whether or not we honor the Prophet's work among us is a stickier business (v. 4). Verse 6 is a terrifying indictment: Jesus reciprocates their amazement at his power (v. 2) by being “amazed at their unbelief.” That is always the hazard of a homecoming: the one who returns may not be

received for the person they have become. Too many in Nazareth would trade Jesus—the-Prophet’s hands of power for the former hands of Jesus—the-Carpenter. Of course, how he deals with their (and our) unbelief is work left to Jesus—the-Christ.

In the meantime, Jesus leaves for the villages (v. 6). And he sends out the twelve, two by two, bestowing upon them the power and authority that come from his own hand (v. 7). But their discipleship is not without cost. Jesus warns them that they will likely have to “shake off the dust that is on [their] feet” in those places that do not honor the work of prophets (v. 11). The austerity of their mission is a hint that the only power they need comes from God. In discussing the parallel pericope in Matthew, the sainted Martin Franzmann poignantly writes, “The SPIRIT of the mission is the spirit in which Jesus worked—no small-souled care for self...but His confident dependence on God, the Lord of the harvest, who will provide food for His workmen, who give freely what they have freely received” (*Concordia Self-Study Commentary*, NT, p. 25). The same is true for our mission as the people of God—“sisters” and “brothers” of Jesus—in these austere times.

But Mark does not dwell on the rejection; he saves the best news for last: “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (v. 13). The news is so amazing that it reaches the desk of King Herod (vv. 14ff). Perhaps Mark knows what we know. The joy-filled astonishment of sheer faith born of water and Word always outweighs the amazement of unbelief.

On a final liturgical note, it is worth marking the recent renewal of periodic services of anointing in many parishes. In my own experience, I have seen them become meaningful personal rites of healing, occasionally administered after services for all who wish to stay in the quiet of the sanctuary. Given the wondrous closing to this week’s Gospel reading, this eighth Sunday after Pentecost might be a fitting occasion to start or continue the practice.

Travis J. Scholl

## Proper 10 • Mark 6:14–29 • July 12, 2009

### Notes on the pericope

One who wants to preach on the basis of this passage should recognize (as the lectionary does not) that this story, about the death of John the Baptist, is an intercalation, that is, an episode inserted within another episode (in this case, the sending of the Twelve). Intercalations are a prominent feature of Mark’s Gospel. They draw attention to and interpret the surrounding episode and its meaning within the whole story of the Gospel. For example, the Beelzebul episode (Mk 3:22–30) comes between the resolve of Jesus’ family to get him, because he is said to be out

of his mind, and the arrival of his mother and brothers, who call for him. This intercalation invites us to identify the family who thinks Jesus is out of his mind with those who have said, “He has an unclean spirit,” and it leads us to see that genuine members of Christ’s family are those who do the will of God. This intercalation also encourages to recognize that the Gospel as a whole directs us to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, to acknowledge that he came in the power of the Spirit, to listen to his Word, and to look forward to his return, when he will do for all who believe in him what he did in his first coming.

Recognizing the episode concerning Herod and John as an intercalation will make it clear that vv. 14–16 are significant. These verses make the transition from the sending of the Twelve (6:7–13) to the death of John, and they indicate how John’s death relates to the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Herod has heard of Jesus and his disciples, for his name was becoming known (v. 14). Some people were saying that he was John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Others said that he was Elijah. Still others said that he was a prophet like the prophets of old. When Herod heard about Jesus, he was like most of the people. He did not grasp the true identity of Jesus. He thought that Jesus was John, whom he had beheaded but now raised from the dead (v. 16). Then Mark relates why John had been imprisoned and how he was killed. Put very briefly, John was imprisoned and killed because he preached against the sin of Herod and Herodias, and because Herod valued his own reputation more than the life of this righteous and holy man.

This intercalation shows that the suffering and death of John foreshadows the suffering and death of Jesus. Already Jesus has encountered opposition and has provoked unbelief. For instance, the Pharisees and the Herodians already are plotting to kill Jesus (3:6; see also 3:20–35 and 6:1–6 for other explicit indications of unbelief). It is not clear, however, that they will get their way. Jesus has shown remarkable power and authority and, because of this, he has drawn crowds in most places. Only with this intercalation does the story itself show that Jesus’ ministry will end in suffering and death.

At this point, suffering and death are only suggested, but later Jesus reinforces this reading explicitly. He does this after the transfiguration, when the disciples ask why the scribes teach that Elijah must come first. Jesus explains that Elijah comes to restore all things. Then he adds, “How is it written about the Son of Man that he would suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I say to you, Elijah has come, and they did to him as they pleased, as it has been written of him” (9:12b–13). With this Jesus identifies John as Elijah who was to come, and he links John’s sufferings with his own. Jesus also does this after he asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The answers here correspond to the opinions of chapter 6: some say, “John the Baptist”; others say “Elijah”; still others say, “One of the prophets.” After Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, Mark relates that Jesus began to teach how he had to suffer many things, be rejected, be killed, and after three

days rise again. Moreover, he teaches that anyone who would come after him must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow him. This reinforces reading the intercalation as foreshadowing also the suffering of those who follow Jesus, because they also will encounter opposition (6:11).

We should not, however, read into this the crucifixion without also reading into it the resurrection. In a wrongheaded way, Herod himself did this by identifying Jesus as John the Baptist raised from the dead. John did not rise, but Jesus said that he would (8:31; 9:9; 9:31, 10:34), and he did. He promised the same, moreover, for all who follow him: "... whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (8:35).

### Notes for preaching

The sermon based on this passage taken in this way might aim to encourage hearers to trust in Jesus and believe his Word. As I have been implying, this pericope should be preached as an intercalation. Explaining the concept is not necessary, and using the term is likely to be confusing. It would be necessary, however, to explain this episode in relation to the sending and the return of the apostles (6:7–13, 30–44), and also to other passages in the Gospel, including 8:27–9:13 (confession of Peter, first passion prediction, teaching on discipleship, transfiguration, question about Elijah).

When we read this passage in these contexts, it becomes clear that it says much to us about facing and withstanding opposition, rejection, and persecution. This text, which brings together John, Jesus, and the apostles along with their preaching, applies most directly to those called to the office of the ministry. But it has something to say to all followers of Christ. Disciples today should not be surprised by such reactions, and they should not bend to such pressures. Mark shows us that what happened to John was not an isolated incident but a preview of things to come for Jesus and for his followers. Overt persecution may not be a problem for many congregations in the Missouri Synod, but opposition and rejection of Christ and the Gospel may arise in subtler ways or on an individual basis. The message today could be:

Don't try to save yourself, your reputation, your money, your family, or even your life by denying Christ and the Gospel. If you do, you'll be sorry. But if you lose any or all of these things for Christ and his Gospel, then you will save your life. So take heart, no matter what you may face now or in the future. Just as Christ died but was raised, so also will you.

Given this text, it would be fitting to speak such words and make such a promise as one called, like the apostles, to speak for the Lord.

Joel P. Okamoto

## The Feeding of the 5000

- I. Introduction: This pericope occurs within the critical events of chapter 6 of Mark. The chapter begins with Jesus' rejection in his hometown (vv. 1ff) and continues with the twelve being sent out as "apostles" to carry forth his mission of preaching and healing (vv. 7ff). This is followed by the tragic end of John the Baptist (vv. 14ff) and then the return of the twelve (v. 30)—which causes the death of the Baptist to be part of an *inclusio* in which death for faithfulness is folded within and illuminates mission and witness. Verse 30 is, in fact, included in our pericopal arrangement. Our text is followed by the drama of the second water incident—this time walking on the water (6:45ff [cf. 4:35–41]) and then further healings (6:53ff), once again merely by touching the hem of his garments (cf. 5:28).
- II. Textual Criticism: A variant in v. 31 adds color to the story and is worth considering. It is not recorded in the normal Nestle–Aland text but is visible in the *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*. Instead of the aorist middle imperative ἀναπαύσασθε, a number of manuscripts that give preferred readings in the Gospel of Mark (e.g., **8**, L, 565 [also D]) read the present middle imperative ἀναπαύεσθε. This would make Jesus' command either emphatic (appropriate given their arduous mission), or of some enduring force.
- III. Grammar:
  - A. Note the historical present main verbs at the beginning of vv. 30, 31, again in the middle of v. 37, and at the beginning and in the middle of v. 38. Consider carefully vv. 37–38 in this regard. The tension of the conversation between Jesus and the twelve is palpable here. What little they have is really highlighted in this exchange.
  - B. Verse 32 contains the interesting phrase "in *the* boat" (note the article). Perhaps there was a particular boat that was regularly at Jesus' disposal.
  - C. In v. 34, when it says that Jesus had compassion on the crowds, it uses σπλαγχνίζομαι, which is a strong word denoting gut-wrenching anguish on someone's part.
  - D. The subjunctive in v. 36 has, standing behind it, as it were, a question of deliberation, *viz.*, "What shall we eat?" You might translate this: "...in order that...they might buy for themselves something to eat/what they should eat."

- E. The authority of Jesus may be seen in the asyndeton (lack of connecting words) in v. 38, as he says, “How many loaves of bread do you have? Go and see.” Neither sentence has a δε, or an οὖν or some such connector near its beginning. Note the asyndeton also in v. 37 in the interchange there.
- F. Verse 37 contains a genitive of price (θηναρίων διακοσίων).
- G. In v. 39, ἀνακλίνει denotes reclining for a meal, not simply sitting on the ground. This is appropriate, in view of the noun συμπόσιον, which, in a Greco-Roman context, normally indicates a banquet with conversation, usually enhanced by wine [for a wide-ranging discussion of this and other concepts in this pericope, see Peter J. Scaer, “The Lord’s Supper as Symposium in the Gospel of Mark,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008) 119–133]. The word for “green,” χλωρός, generally denotes fresh and young new growth.
- H. Note the “distributive doubling” (BDF 493) in vv. 39 and 40, with συμπόσια and πρασιάι, respectively. The first could be rendered “by eating/banqueting groups” and the second “group by group, like garden beds” (a πρασιά is a garden plot).
- I. Verse 41 contains several grammatical points worth noting. First, the stringing of nominative participles (predicate position) is typical of Mark, but this feature can be found in classical authors. Second, note that the main verb εὐλόγησεν has the five loaves and two fish as its object. Frequently a sentence beginning with a predicate position participle whose object is also the object of the main verb will make the object expressed do “double duty,” as it were, and not repeat it. Third, note the move to present stem forms later in the sentence, after the breaking of the bread. He “proceeded to give them” (the loaves [also doing double object duty]) to his disciples, in order that they might “keep on placing them before them.” One gets the picture of a repetitive process.
- J. ἐχορτάσθησαν in v. 42 denotes eating to the full. It is often used of cattle being fattened. Along with ἀνακλίνει and συμπόσια in v. 37, what is pictured here is something much more akin to dining than to having a snack.
- K. Verse 43 is a bit difficult syntactically, but it seems to mean something like: “and they took up broken pieces, “fulnesses” of (= the fill of) twelve baskets....” The word κοφίνος denotes a basket that was used, especially in later times, by Jews.

#### IV. The Narrative and Theological Content:

- A. Jesus is described as having deep-seated compassion for the people, because he saw them as sheep without a shepherd (v. 34). By this one must be reminded of Psalm 23, which declares that the Lord/Yahweh is the shepherd of his people, especially with the reference to pastures of “green,” which, as in v. 39, denotes fresh, green growth. But more, Ezekiel 34 comes to mind, especially vv. 11–17, where Yahweh says that he himself will be the shepherd of his sheep, seek them out, and that they will lie down in rich pasture. The eschatological vision of the presence of Yahweh at the end of time with his people, to shepherd them, comes to fruition in this text. Jesus is Yahweh, himself, come to be with his people.
- B. The very image of people dining with Yahweh should also bring to mind Exodus 24:9–11, one of the most amazing passages in the entire Bible. It speaks of Moses and the seventy elders going up the mountain and actually “seeing” the God of Israel (the LXX changed the text here!). 34:11 ends by saying that they beheld God, and “they ate and drank” (presumably, with him). Rikki Watts has argued strongly that Mark is filled with “New Exodus” motifs (see chapter 1, where Jesus experiences first water and then temptation in the wilderness). Dining with the Lord in the wilderness, as it were, would bring further confirmation of this accent of the New Exodus.
- C. Perhaps most important is the fact that several features of this pericope provide a *foretaste* of the powerful reign and rule of God (= Kingdom of God) that will be implemented fully at the end of time, but which also receives an initial instantiation in the person and ministry of our Lord, as the time/καιρός “stands fulfilled” and the Kingdom “stares the people in the face”/ἤγγικεν (Mark 1:15—see the healing of the paralytic in 2:1ff, of the deaf/dumb man in 7:31ff, and of blind Bartimeus in 10:46ff, against the background of Isaiah 35:4–6, which depicts the eschatological reign and rule of God). In other words, this text exhibits proleptic eschatology (cf. Addendum 11–B in *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*).
  1. The people are told to sit down on fresh green grass—in a desert place! The desert has begun to bloom with the restoration of creation in the presence of Yahweh himself (cf. Isaiah 35:7—see also our Lord’s dwelling with the wild beasts during the temptation [1:13] and being unharmed by them [cf. Ezekiel 34:25, 28]). This accent is “confirmed,” as it were, by the phrase

- πρασιάί πρασιάί, which normally denotes garden plots—perhaps reminders of the Garden of Eden.
2. The entire banqueting theme (note ἀνακλίνειν and συμπόσια in v. 37 and ἐχορτάσθησαν in v. 42) is eschatological (in addition to being revelatory of Jesus as Yahweh himself [see b, above]). See especially Isaiah 25:6, which speaks of a feast of rich food hosted by Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, at the end of time (when he will swallow up death forever [v. 8]). (It is interesting to connect the reference to wine in 25:6 to the normal connotations of συμπόσια, though there is no indication of wine in this text.) Here the people feast with their God, just as they will do even more fully at the consummation of the age.
  3. In both cases the end of all things breaks into this fallen world with the very Lord of creation standing within his people's midst.
- D. Finally, it is worth asking whether the feeding of the 5000 should be seen as “eucharistic.” After all, a number of themes are similar, and some of the descriptions of the blessing (εὐλόγησεν) and the breaking (κατέκλασεν) of the loaves of bread (6:41) are very similar. We may see this connection, but only in a very complex way. The feeding of the 5000 is a foretaste of the consummation of the age to come and points to the final feast with Yahweh in the fully implemented Kingdom of God. When the disciples participated in the first holy communion with their Lord (Mk 14:22–25), they also received a foretaste of that final feast (see 14:25), indeed, even more fully than did the followers in Galilee. Both “foretastes” find their fulfillment in the full instantiation of the Age to Come, the Parousia. As a result, both may remind us of each other, but each is a quite distinct event, so a line can never be drawn directly between the two but must always be drawn through, as it were, the Parousia/ consummation of all things at the end of time. Note also that the feeding of the 4000 in chapter 8 of Mark (vv. 1ff), which takes place in Gentile lands (and which entails pieces of bread being placed into σφυρίδας, which are Gentile baskets [cf. kofi,nwn in v. 43 of this text]), reminds us that the consummation will be inclusive, so that the feast of Yahweh “for all peoples” (Is. 25:6) will comprise both Jew and Gentile alike.

James Voelz

### Exegetical Analysis and Homiletical Treatment:

This text is conducive to the development of a sermon which is constructed inductively. This is not only because the text is narrative in form (and thus inherently inductive), but also because it presents a couple of areas of tension for resolution. These tension points are manifested as enigmas regarding Jesus' behavior. Not only does Jesus do what is unexpected but also what seems contrary to expectations. Thus the quest of the sermon is to discover *why* Jesus does what he does in his actions toward the disciples—and ultimately toward us.

The two ambiguities to be resolved relate to Jesus' actions, which appear to put the disciples at peril. In the first case Jesus sends the disciples into conditions which are dangerous. In the second case Jesus appears to bypass attending to their plight. The question which the sermon may answer is *why* he does so.

#### Tension 1: Jesus sends the disciples into a perilous situation.

The first area of tension arises at the beginning of the narrative as Jesus sends the disciples out onto the Sea of Galilee. The text is emphatic that Jesus compels them to make this maritime trip (v. 45 – ἡνάγκασεν). En route to the intended destination of Bethsaida, the small boat encounters a forceful contrary wind (v. 48). The trip should have been a short one—Bethsaida would be across only a relatively small bay travelling to the north-northwest. But the gale, probably from the north or northeast, drives the boat off course and into the middle of the lake (v. 47 – ἐν μέσῳ τῆς θαλάσσης, v. 48 indicates it was a severe headwind). Thus although the disciples had embarked on their journey before sundown, by 3:00 A.M. (“the fourth watch,” v. 48) they are still battling the wind and waves. Verse 48 indicates that they are sorely distressed in their plight (βασανιζομένουσ), no doubt fearing for their lives.

The enigma to be addressed here is that Jesus, who knows the future, sends his disciples into this traumatic context. The fact that he will walk on water and calm the wind signals that he can exercise divine power, which includes the ability to discern the events of the future (see Mark 17:18-21, 27-30). So although he foreknows that the storm will arise and threaten the disciples, he sends them forth onto the lake. The question to be pressed is this: *Why* does Christ deliberately send his followers into such a fearful situation? This is applied to the hearers' lives as the preacher illustrates times in which obedience to God's direction brings hardship.

#### Tension 2: Jesus apparently intends to pass by the disciples in their time of peril.

The second tension develops when Jesus, walking on the water, appears to bypass the disciples in their plight. Verse 48 states: “...he came to them, walking on

the sea. He meant to pass by them (καὶ ἤθελεν παρελθεῖν αὐτούς).” It seems remarkable—even contrary to Jesus’ propensity to deliver and rescue—that this clause appears in the text. Yet it is there. The preacher can address this tension by asking the question: *Why* does Jesus appear to neglect his followers in their time of need? This is applied to the hearers’ lives as the preacher illustrates perilous times in which God seems absent and aloof.

### **Resolution of the Tensions**

Ultimately, of course, these dilemmas will be resolved in the sermon. This will serve not only to provide rhetorical and emotional relief to the hearers, but also to deliver the proclamation of the Gospel to them. H. B. Swete summarizes the resolution in a single statement: “The purpose in each case was to try, and by trial to strengthen faith” (*Commentary on Mark*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977, p. 138). R. Alan Cole writes similarly but more thoroughly: “This episode is a good illustration of the life of discipleship seen as a constant experience of testing and deliverance; for it was not through stubborn self-will, but through direct obedience to the Lord’s command, that the disciples found themselves in this plight. Thus the storm in no way showed that they had deviated from the path of God’s will: God’s path for them lay through that storm, to the other shore of the lake...It was not that the Lord intended to pass them by, for it was because of their need that He had come; but they must be brought to realize the need for themselves.” (*Mark: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961, pp. 115–116).

This opens up the proclamation of the Gospel by demonstrating that Christ’s purpose for such times of testing is to benefit his people. Christ is willing and able to deliver us from that which will destroy us—ultimately from sin, death, and hell. Just as Jesus demonstrated to his disciples his presence with them in time of trial and his power to save them, so also he has demonstrated this supremely in his death and resurrection, which rescue us from the curse of our sin. Accordingly we can trust him in the face of all perils and hardship (see Rom 8:28–39).

### **Focus Statement:**

God brings his children into difficult and fearful situations to strengthen their faith in his presence and power to deliver them from ultimate peril.

### **Goal/Function Statement:**

The hearer, during times of hardship, more fully trusts Christ’s presence and power to save.

### **Suggested Outline and Homiletical Development of the Sermon:**

- I. God sometimes sends his people into fearful situations.
  - A. Jesus sent the disciples into a perilous situation (vv. 45–48a).

- B. God sometimes sends us into difficult contexts.
- C. The question is *why* God would do this.
- II. God sometimes appears to pass us by in the time of peril.
  - A. Jesus appeared intent on passing by the disciples in their time of peril (v. 48b).
  - B. It can appear to us that God isn't paying attention to us in our time of need.
  - C. The question is *why* God would do this.
- III. When God's direction brings us hardship and he appears to neglect us, we often respond with fear and despair.
  - A. The disciples failed to trust Jesus' presence and power to deliver them (vv. 49–50a, 52.).
  - B. When our obedience to God's direction brings hardship, we doubt God's presence and his gracious purpose.
- IV. But God's purpose is to use this experience to benefit us.
  - A. God shows how powerful he is by delivering us from that which would destroy us.
    - 1. Jesus demonstrated to his disciples his presence and power to save (vv. 50b–51).
    - 2. Christ rescued us from the ultimate perils of sin, death, and hell by his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection.
    - 3. Christ delivers us from the need to fear or doubt.
  - B. God uses these experiences of hardship to strengthen our faith.
    - 1. The disciples were awed and amazed at Jesus' power (v. 51b).
    - 2. We are awed at God's grace and power to save us.

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