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A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings JANUARY 2006

January 1, 2006

Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 148
Luke 2:22-40
 or Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 8
Galatians 4:4-7
 or Philippians 2:5-13
Luke 2:15-21

January 8, 2006

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

January 15, 2006

I Sam 3:1-10 (11-20)
Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18
I Cor. 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

January 22, 2006

Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:5-12
I Cor. 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

January 29, 2006

Deut. 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

In looking at the December readings, we explored how God's mercy frees us to live in ways that will not shame us under God's judgment, and God's love for us gives us the confidence to live in ways that do not deserve God's anger. In the January readings, we get deeper into the question of how individuals respond properly to God's love and mercy in the circumstances of their own individual lives. We are all called by God, but the commissions we receive when we respond to God's call vary greatly.

We see the inescapable individuality of our responses reflected in the various characters of Luke 2: "Luke wants to draw readers of every age and stage of life into his picture. No matter who or where you are, the story of Jesus...can become your story. In becoming your story, it will become your vocation. Everybody has their own role in God's plan."¹ (Psalms 148, 8, and 29, with their litanies of all the different parts of creation and the part they play in praising the name of God, reflects the way God's story draws in everyone and everything). In Isaiah 61-62, we learn of God's plan for Israel as a unique people in a specific place and time. This plan affirms God's ideal for God's people, as is also expressed in Numbers 6: "The ideal is where God pays particular attention to persons, where blessing and security drive out the power of death, and where the achievement of wholeness and peace is possible."² In a real sense, wholeness and peace is only possible where people receive their own individual blessings and security through God's personal attention to them. (Psalms 139 and 62 capture the way that God knows

each of us through and through). This theological reality reaches its fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as Paul explains in Galatians 4: “God gave, not the law, but his own spirit, the spirit of his son, to turn his people into his true children in their innermost beings as well as in legal status.”³

We are invited to see Jesus’ story in its entirety, then, as our own. When Jesus is baptized by John in Mark 1:4-11, we are meant to understand the significance of our own baptisms: “Learn to hear these words addressed to yourself. Let them change you, mould you, make you somebody new, the person God wants you to be.”⁴ This reminder is reinforced by the story in Acts 19, which underscores the fact that “John’s baptism, like John’s ministry as a whole, was concerned with preparation for the one who came after him, the one whose presence would signal the new age of the Spirit.”⁵ This wholesale message of grace can seem somewhat indiscriminate on the part of God; we can see God being pleased with Jesus, the incarnation of truth and grace, but our own imperfections seem to call out for judgment, not blessing. God would be well within God’s rights to tell us to come back later, after we had improved. But as the great hymn in Philippians 2 declares: “This is a God who is known most clearly when he abandons his rights for the sake of the world.”⁶ Put in a slightly different way, as seen through the lens of the creation story in Genesis 1, we see that “God and God’s creation are bound together in a distinctive and delicate way.”⁷

Or, in the reverse, it is our very createdness that binds us to God in a distinctive and delicate way. This relationship is at the heart of 1 Corinthians 6: “This whole passage is about learning to use the human body in the right way, for the right purpose.”⁸ There is no dualism between spirit and body in Scripture, or indeed between heaven and earth. The words of Jesus in the story of Nathaniel in John 1 Jesus’ words can be paraphrased: “Don’t think that all you will see is one or two remarkable acts of insight...If you follow me, you’ll be watching what it looks like when heaven and earth are open to each

other.”⁹ This pervasive experience of discernment is rather more unsettling than the more compartmentalized process we typically imagine. The call of Samuel reflects the impossibility of hearing God’s words without living in the actual ongoing presence of God: “First Samuel 3 serves less to call Samuel as a prophet than to inaugurate him as a prophet, mediating the word of the Lord... We sometimes celebrate so-called mountaintop religious experiences as ends in themselves, without considering what the God we encounter in religious experience demands of us.”¹⁰

Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 warns us as well against domesticating religious experience: “There will never be a time when Christians can settle down and treat the world as though it’s going to last forever...it won’t matter that you followed or didn’t follow some social order or pattern in the way that your family and friends all assumed you would. What will matter is that you were faithful to the Lord in whatever strange circumstances you found yourself.”¹¹ The calling of the first disciples in Mark 1:14-20 is the archetype of this kind of radical, even disreputable, faithfulness: “Jesus was now calling them to trust the good news that their God was doing something new...they had to cut loose from other ties and trust him and his message.”¹² We often have trouble imagining ourselves being so quick to obedience—for good reason—but we can find encouragement in the example of Jonah, the reluctant prophet: “The persistence of God wears down resistance.”¹³

In other words, obedience is not as much about us as about God, as Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 8: “what matters is not *your* knowledge about this or that, or even about God and the gods; what matters is *God’s* knowledge of you, and the way you will be aware of that is by the love you find for this true God deep in your own heart and mind.”¹⁴ As portrayed in the inauguration of Jesus’ ministry in Mark 1:21-28, the basis of true authority is not knowledge of religious tradition, but rather openness to God’s Word coming through Jesus’ words. We are meant to learn from Jesus’ example, as we are indeed members of his Body: “When the church learns again to speak and act with the same

authority, we will find both the saving power of God unleashed once more and a similar heightened opposition from the forces of darkness.”¹⁵ These forces are not necessarily supernatural, since human nature and the rest of the natural world can be dark enough without outside assistance. Because of our weaknesses in a difficult world, we must be careful not to become overconfident in invoking religious authority. This wariness is reflected in the restrictions on prophets laid out in Deuteronomy 18: “The importance of prophecy could not be denied, but its haphazard and random appearance meant that it had to be treated with great care.”¹⁶ Although we receive our individual blessings and security from the personal attention of God, these things always find their fulfillment in the community of God’s people, as Psalm 111 affirms. The norms of our communities cannot replace our unique responses to the calls of God, but our communities help us to discern whether we are both hearing and responding correctly.

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 27.

² Thomas B. Dozeman, “The Book of Numbers: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1998), 66.

³ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2002), 46.

⁴ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 6.

⁵ William Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1988), 146.

⁶ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters; Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2002), 104.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1982), 22.

⁸ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 71.

⁹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-10* (London: SPCK, 2002), 18.

¹⁰ Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1998), 992-994.

¹¹ Wright, *1 Corinthians*, 91-93.

¹² Wright, *Mark*, 10.

¹³ Phyllis Trible, “The Book of Jonah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 7 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1996), 515.

¹⁴ Wright, *1 Corinthians*, 100.

¹⁵ Wright, *Mark*, 12.

¹⁶ Ronald E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1998), 429.