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A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings
MAY 2006

May 7, 2006

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

May 14, 2006

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:25-31
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

May 21, 2006

Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

May 28, 2006

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Acts 1:1-11
Ephesians 1:15-23
Luke 24:44-53
John 17:6-19
Psalm 1
Psalm 47
or Psalm 93
1 John 5:9-13

In the April readings, we came face to face with the unique role that Jesus plays in our covenant relationship with God, above all else in his passion, death and resurrection. To claim that Jesus plays a unique role in our relationship with God—in other words, that Jesus is uniquely important to our salvation—is simply another way of affirming that we are Christians. Without Jesus, we would not fully understand what it means to be God’s covenant people, nor could we even begin to hope to fully live into that relationship. In the May readings, we dig deeper into what it means to have God fully present in our world and in our lives.

The most simple sense of the fullness of God’s presence is that the entire world is filled by God’s grace, as we see in John 10:11-18: “The ‘other sheep’ are that great company, from every nation under heaven, that God intends to save, and to save through Jesus. The Jewish Messiah is to become the Lord, the shepherd, of the whole world.”¹ Since we are called to love our neighbor as God loves us, we are called to love nothing less than the whole world as well. This love is not simply a sentimental inclination, but an ongoing series of actions, as we see in 1 John 3:16-24: “Love’s genuineness is demonstrated in concrete acts of helpfulness. Obviously, to refuse to perform such acts is to close one’s heart.”² This absolute obligation can seem overwhelming, even burdensome to our modern American autonomous sensibilities. But we must remember that living under the obligation God gives us is not a burden, but rather represents freedom from the many competing obligations our fellow humans would like to see us under. This liberation is the

central message of Acts 4:5-12: “Rulers generally assume that they control the instruments and symbols of authority and power...The stone the builders of the nation rejected as an unworthy foundation for national aspirations has become the cornerstone of hope in the future.”³

To stand with and for the whole world, as God does, is obviously beyond our own limited mortal capabilities. What success we do have therefore points to the glory of God and not to our own merits, as is underscored in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26-40: “If the good news is being preached out there, it is the work of God, not of people...in being obedient to the Spirit, preachers like Philip find themselves in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people.”⁴ Since these kinds of surprises often push us beyond our capabilities, we must accept that at times they also push us beyond our understanding as well. We can only hope to move forward to a greater understanding by acting despite the incompleteness of our knowledge because of our trust in the completeness of God’s love, as 1 John 4:7-21 illustrates: “Those who claim that revelation demonstrate their rebirth and knowledge of God by loving others...failure to love invalidates any claim to know God...Knowledge of God’s love is given in God’s own deed.”⁵ The world—even the part of the world contained in the Church—usually sees this path to knowledge as odd, even impossible. But Christians know that although we now see through a glass dimly, we shall someday see face to face, and that face will be the face of Jesus, as we are assured in the parable of the vine and the gardener in John 15:1-8: “it is a way of speaking of himself as Israel-in-person, and of his followers as members of God’s true people because they belong to him.”⁶

Since we must give up the certainty of our knowledge, we must also give up all exclusive claims, even those claims which are based on Scripture. As the living Word, Jesus the trumps the written Word, as we see in the experience of the early Church in Acts 10:44-48: “The affirmation

of Christ's Lordship is a theological statement gleaned from the experience and faith of the apostles, not something to be proved from the Torah or prophets...Any doubts about the validity of Peter's new insight into the impartiality of the gospel are assuaged by the irruption of the Spirit."⁷ In 1 John 5:1-6, we are further taught that following Jesus, obeying the will of God, and listening for the Spirit of truth are inescapably tied together: "Proof of loving the children of God is loving God and obeying his commandments."⁸ This standard of accountability is not intended to set us up for punishment for our imperfections, but rather to show us the way to overcome them, as we see in John 15:9-17: "The 'command' to love is given by one who has himself done everything that love can do...He has come to make us more human, not less."⁹

Jesus shows us that we must give up our delusions of self-reliance, of the world's self-subsistence. This imperative is addressed in Acts 1:1-11, 15-17, and 21-26: "Since Christ, all previously existing relationships of power are being transformed. It is not simply that the world is expected to end soon but that the world view as it had been, the methods and values for determining worth and significance in the world, has ended. There is now a new reality."¹⁰ For this reason, Matthias is chosen as the new twelfth disciple by "chance," rather than by any competitive process. In the same way, Jesus himself did not save the world by competing with the powers of the world, but through an undeniable moment of transformation, as we see in 1 John 5:9-13: "Not by water only but by blood would mean not by his earthly ministry only...but by his death."¹¹ Of course, death is in itself a part of the world and its powers; in a sense, death is the defining power of the world as it is. True transformation, therefore, cannot stop with death but must involve something completely new, which is why the ascension—not just the resurrection—is so important. In John 17:6-19, Jesus "is entrusting the disciples to the father he has known and loved throughout his own earthly life, the father who, he knows, will care for

them every bit as much as he has done himself.”¹² It is not for nothing that “Ephesians treats the exaltation of Jesus rather than the cross as the focus of God’s saving power.”¹³

The focus of God’s saving power, of course, points the way to the focus of our salvation, our full and complete relationship with the creator God. This focus is outlined in Luke 24: “The answer is here, in a few sentences which will take a lifetime, and in fact all the history of the church, to work out. The church is to be rooted in scripture and active in mission...the only way forward is the one we all find the hardest at every level: repentance and forgiveness.”¹⁴ We must repent of the things we allow to clutter our lives and our world, crowding out the presence of God; we need the power of God’s forgiveness to sweep those things away. We must turn to Scripture for the fullness of the historical witness of God’s covenant people to their God; we must be active in mission so that our witness and our covenant move forward in history, instead of fossilizing into dry bones of past faith. We must have Jesus, who came and will come again, the incarnation of the already/not-yet of God’s promise and our hope.

¹ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-10* (London: SPCK, 2002), 152.

² D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1991), 90.

³ William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1988), 49.

⁴ Willimon, 72.

⁵ Smith, 106-107.

⁶ Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2, Chapters 11-21* (London: SPCK, 2002), 70.

⁷ Willimon, 98-99.

⁸ Smith, 117.

⁹ Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2*, 74.

¹⁰ Willimon, 19.

¹¹ Smith, 123.

¹² Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 2*, 95.

¹³ Pheme Perkins, “The Letter to the Ephesians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 11 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2000), 382.

¹⁴ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 301.