



JOHN P. WEBSTER LIBRARY

A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings DECEMBER 2005

December 4, 2005

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

December 11, 2005

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126 *or* Luke 1:47-55
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 18, 2005

2 Sam. 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:47-55
or Ps. 89:1-4, 19-26
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

December 25, 2005

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

In looking at the November readings, we asked whether, in the final analysis, we will experience God's power as mercy or as judgment—as love or as anger. Will we ultimately dwell in light, or in darkness? The Advent and Christmas season decisively answers that God's power comes upon us as mercy and love, as Psalm 85 and 126 affirm. We hear the Good News in the December readings, and it is meant for us. We have been given the knowledge we need for salvation: "the Lord does not come to a people who are unprepared. What is required of them? Repentance, forgiveness of sin, and baptism."¹ The Advent and Christmas season is therefore not only the celebration of the coming of Immanuel, God with us, but the celebration of the fact that this Good News is reported not only once, but over and over again: "while individual prophets do not live forever, the word God has spoken to them and through them has the power to outlive them, to survive and speak a word on another day, overtaking and ambushing generation after generation."²

That sense of ambush is important and often lost to us in a society whose members have often lived with the details of the Christmas story from before their earliest clear memories. The call of John the Baptist, and the Gospel of Mark itself which records it, was meant to provide the shock of a sudden awakening: "Time to stop dreaming and face the most important day of your life."³ Waking up can be a very hard thing. Maybe we have lost hope, because things have been so bad for so long. Or maybe we have not realized that we needed hope, because nothing unbearable has happened—just a small succession of minor troubles. The 2 Peter 3 addresses the cynicism that can grow when hope is not immediately and obviously fulfilled: "these verses refute the accusation that the promise of the parousia is false because it did not occur during the first Christian generation."⁴ The Gospel of Luke makes the same point, when we let it:

“Acceptability, prosperity, and comfort have never been the essence of God’s blessing. The story is so familiar that we let its familiarity mask its scandal.”⁵

This familiarity also obscures the fact that the Christmas story is not first and foremost about the baby Jesus: “the story *of* Jesus is not ultimately a story *about* Jesus; it is, in fact, the story of God.”⁶ God alone is the source of ultimate celebration. Paul captures this feeling when he ends his letter to the Romans with a doxology: “the letter is from one point of view about worship, and designed to evoke worship.”⁷ In the same way, 1 Thessalonians 5 encourages believers to rejoice in all things, and Mary’s “Magnificat” in Luke shows that this joy has been part of the Christian faith before Jesus was even born: “It’s the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter.”⁸

Such intense feelings of joy, however precious a gift they are for believers, are not what define a life of faith. Rather, the Christian life is a way of sustaining the celebration of God’s glory once the initial thrill is over; it is a way of learning to speak the language of faith, after our first riotous shouting is finished. How does Christian practice encourage a life of faith, as opposed to disconnected moments of faith? 1 Thessalonians 5 presents three ways: “The first is through careful Christian teaching and leadership... The second is through the mutual influence of the whole community... Third, there are the equivalent of the little rules of grammar, the rhymes and memory-aids which nudge the mind in the right direction.”⁹

One might complain that this process of formation is a little dull. Where is a reflection of God’s glory to be found in such slow and steady progress? Titus 2 explains: “If the future is shaped by saving grace, then the present must anticipate that... You are a human being, so don’t diminish your humanness by drunkenness or other kinds of behaviour that make you more like an irrational animal... The Christian who understands what God’s grace is all about—the powerful love which will turn the world the right way up, and has begun to do so in Jesus—will not be able to stand by and watch injustice at work... someone who is devout in a mature way is someone who... regards it as natural and normal to be in God’s presence, to pray.”¹⁰ What is necessary is to see our Christian lives as part of the story of God and whole world, just as the Christmas story is part of the story of God and the whole world, not merely the story of Jesus’ birth. As the Gospel of John presents the coming of Jesus, it is “the way in which the long story which began in Genesis reached the climax the creator had always intended.”¹¹ In this message, the author of John is echoing the prophet in Isaiah 9: “It is striking that the means by which God

brings about universal and broad-reaching knowledge of God's righteousness remains specified and particular."¹² When we are joined with Christ, we too can take part in living out this story as the creator intended, in our own particular circumstances.

This particularity can sound strange to our contemporary Western minds. Raised on the scientific method and ideals of liberty and equality, we expect that solutions to problems will be universal and replicable. This expectation is one reason we have trouble accepting the factuality of the Gospel accounts of the miraculous conception of Jesus. But in Luke in particular, politics features more prominently in the message of Jesus' birth than biology: "The Savior of all people was born under the reign of Caesar Augustus, whose peace paled before that announced by the angels."¹³ Do we really accept Jesus as king, as ruler of world, any more than we accept Mary as a virgin mother?¹⁴ Do we not reject as equally unnatural the idea that all the problems of the world have one particular solution, which is always rediscovered but never repeated?

The language of the prologue of the Gospel of John equates Jesus with the Wisdom of God. We want to second-guess that wisdom; we have our own expectations, as first-century Jews had their expectations for what a Messiah would do. But Jesus and God do not live up to our idea of wisdom—they define wisdom for us. They do not answer our own hopes—they define hope for us: "Hope does not depend on human feelings of hopefulness, but on the one in whom that hope is invested."¹⁵ God seems to deliberately make that hope hard to accept, so that we see clearly the limitations of our own earthly hopes; Isaiah 9 refers to an ancient crown prince and also to Jesus: "God's will for justice, righteousness, and peace is made flesh in the weakest of human creatures, a little baby."¹⁶ Hope, like grace, comes in the form of a promise, an anticipation of future fulfillment.

Part of that present anticipation is to fully trust in the Good News. Whatever our own shortcomings, God has promised to redeem us and work good through us. This message predates the New Testament. David received it in 2 Samuel 7: "The oracle...locates God's grace toward Israel in an unconditional and everlasting promise to the line of David. This was a new theological understanding in Israel and stood in tension with the conditional 'if' of the Mosaic covenant at Mt. Sinai...this notion advances a theme of unconditional divine grace that makes this text centrally important to later Protestant understandings of justification by grace rather than works."¹⁷ Paradoxically, it is through this grace that the people of God will finally be able to fulfill that "conditional 'if'," living up to "Israel's obligation to be a people dedicated to God,

living lives and maintaining households of positive benefit to neighbor and community.”¹⁸ For this reason, Psalm 96 can boldly praise the God who comes in judgment, because God’s mercy frees us to live in ways that will not shame us under God’s judgment. God’s love for us gives us the confidence to live in ways that do not deserve God’s anger. In this season of Advent and Christmas, truly listen to the Good News: we will live in light, not darkness. Rejoice!

¹ Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 533.

² Christopher R. Seitz, “The Book of Isaiah 40-66: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 6 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2001), 338.

³ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 1.

⁴ Duane F. Watson, “The Second Letter of Peter: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 12 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1998), 356.

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 52-53.

⁶ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 524.

⁷ N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 10 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2002), 768.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 14.

⁹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2002), 132.

¹⁰ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 156-158.

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-10* (London: SPCK, c2002), 3.

¹² Seitz, 516.

¹³ Culpepper, 63.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2001), 12.

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, “The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 11 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2000), 871.

¹⁶ Gene M. Tucker, “The Book of Isaiah 1-39: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 6 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2001), 124.

¹⁷ 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), 1255.

¹⁸ Dunn, 872.