

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 115 (2009) 548-570 by Raymond F. Collins.

On November 29, the Latin church begins its reading of the Scriptures on Sunday by gracing its Sunday eucharistic liturgy with readings from the Gospel according to Luke. The evangelist Luke is clearly a well-educated Hellenistic writer. Despite being a Hellenist, Luke invites his readers to consider Jesus in the light of the Old Testament. He does so by using the well-known literary device of ring construction; the writer opens and closes a text on the same theme, often using the same words.

The Gospel according to Luke opens its description of Jesus’ public ministry with Jesus going into his home-town synagogue where he looked for and found a couple of passages in the Book of Isaiah (Isa 6:1-2; 58:6) which he then read to the assembly. Jesus’ commentary on these Old Testament Scriptures was simple, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). After his resurrection from the dead, during his final appearance to the disciples, Jesus “said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45).

Among the evangelists, Luke alone draws this kind of attention to Jesus’ helping his disciples to understand the scriptures. Only Luke offers his readers this comprehensive commentary on Jesus’ ministry. As preachers of the Gospel according to Luke during this liturgical year, it would seem inappropriate for us homilists to fail to open the minds of Jesus’ disciples so that they understand the scriptures of the Old Testament.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 6, 2009

LITURGY

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11 contains Paul’s prayer for believers in the Roman colony at Philippi.

Luke 3:1-6 contains Luke’s version of the first preaching of John the Baptist.

Baruch 5:1-9 is the conclusion of the Book of Baruch, one of the Bible’s deuterocanonical texts. The book is one of the very few books of the Bible which was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, not even in fragmentary form.

Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4 is the sixth among the choice of seven Old Testament readings that can be read during the Easter Vigil. Two passages from the book (Bar 1:15-22; 4:5-12, 27-29,) serve as weekday readings during the twenty-sixth week in Year I, but the Book of Baruch is used in the church’s Sunday liturgy only on the Second Sunday of Advent in Year C, today.

The historical Baruch was the prophet Jeremiah’s friend and scribe. He worked for Jeremiah around the turn of the sixth century B.C.E. (cf. Jer 32:12-16; 36; 43:1-7; 45). The message of the book attributed to him is quite similar to that of the Book of Jeremiah. The Book of Baruch was probably composed just before the middle of the second century B.C.E. to encourage the Jewish people after the 168 B.C.E. capture and desecration of the temple by the notorious Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Scholars note that the book has been influenced by many Old Testament texts, including Second Isaiah and the Book of Daniel.

Today’s reading is a message of consolation for the Jewish exiles and for Jerusalem. A prophetic voice speaks to Jerusalem, consoling her and assuring her that deliverance will come. The prophet tells Jerusalem to take off its mourning clothes and put on festive garments as it prepares to greet the returning exiles (cf. Isa 40:1-11; 52:7-10). This festive attire includes royal garments and insignia (v. 2). God is about to let his glory radiate from Jerusalem.

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As was the case in last week’s reading from the Book of Jeremiah, justice is a preeminent quality of the restored Jerusalem. Jerusalem is to wear a cloak of justice, a robe of righteousness. As in last week’s reading, Jerusalem is to receive a nickname. In Baruch the new epithet is “The peace of justice, the glory of God’s worship [“godly glory” in the NRSV].” The first phrase recalls Isa 32:17, where peace is said to be the result of justice. Adding to the text’s emphasis on justice are the final words of the reading, God will lead the exiles “with mercy and justice for company” (Bar 5:9).

Thus prepared, Jerusalem is to be on the watch for the return of the exiles. They were taken into exile on foot, but they will return in a glorious caravan with God as their leader (cf. Isa 40:10-11). The caravan comes from the east, the traditional place of exile, but the returnees will come from east and west (cf. Bar 4:37). Not only does God lead them, he also prepares the way for them. God will level the hills and fill in the valleys, making the return trek that much easier (cf. Isa 40:4-5). And God will see to it that trees and forests provide shade for the returnees (v. 8). Their return to Jerusalem is a sign of God’s mercy and justice. The implicit message of the text is that the exiles, once returned to Jerusalem, will remember God’s mercy and affirm God’s justice in their lives.

BROKEN FOR US

The reader will surely note that in comparison with the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, Luke expands the citation of Isaiah 40 found on the lips of John the Baptist (cf. Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3). The additional verses, Isa 40:4-5, speak of the straight paths, the leveled hills, and the filled-in valleys by means of which God will prepare for the return of an exiled people. These are the very verses of Isaiah echoed in Bar 5:7. The Baptist uses these verses to speak of the return of the people to God; the prophet uses them to speak about the return of the exiles to the city of God.

The reading from Baruch challenges us to think about the many manifestations of God’s mercy in our lives. The memory of exiled Jews returning to Jerusalem—in 2009 we might also think of the establishment of the State of Israel after the Holocaust—prompts us to think about the way that God has shown mercy to us, not only in the limited sense of the forgiveness of sin, but in the many blessings that we experience each and every day. For these we give thanks as we celebrate eucharist.

We must not, however, forget that God accompanies the manifestation of his mercy with a call to justice. The God who shows mercy is a God who is accompanied by justice. He leads his people to a place that is called “the peace of justice.”

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

December 8, 2009

LITURGY

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 is a reading from the benediction, the epistolary *berakah*, with which the body of the Epistle to the Ephesians begins.

Luke 1:26-38 describes the Annunciation scene.

Genesis 3:9-15, 20 is an excerpt from the Yahwist’s creation story (Genesis 3). The excerpt picks up the narrative after the man had eaten of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, contravening God’s will in this regard. The reading begins with an imaginative portrayal of the

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guilt and anxiety that leads sinners to hide from God (cf. Ps 139:7-12). The author uses dialogue to get his point across. The author portrays God in human terms. Like a father, God calls out to his child, “where are you?,” “what are you doing?” Admitting fear, the child has been in hiding. But then, he is caught. He had eaten the forbidden fruit.

The reference to Adam’s nakedness is one of several allusions to the mystery of human sexuality that occur in Genesis 2-3. In today’s narrative the experience of nakedness alludes to the guilt and anxiety that affects the sexual experience of many human beings. Often, more basic human sins, violence, exploitation, among them, are expressed in the way in which people live out their sexuality.

Confronted with their disobedience, the primal couple pass the buck, they pass the blame rather than accept responsibility for their actions. There is even the suggestion that God himself is to blame for Adam’s disobedience. After all, it was God who had created the woman. Blaming others is often a way that humans deal with their own errors and sins. “It’s not my fault,” we so readily say when we are caught in wrong-doing.

The primal harmony between humans and their environment is disturbed by human sin. This is imaginatively portrayed in a scene in which God, acting as a human judge, segregates the serpent from other animals. God condemns the serpent to a kind of solitary confinement or exile. Yahweh’s cursing the serpent introduces the motif of the hostility and mutual fear that exists between snakes and humans. Humans will try to kill snakes by crushing their heads; snakes attack the heels of human beings. In verse 15 the expression “offspring” refers to the entire human race rather to a single individual within the human race.

The narrative continues with the punishment of the woman and the man, but this narrative (verses 16-19) has not been taken up in the liturgical text which concludes the reading with the story about the naming of Eve. In Hebrew the name of Eve (*hawwa*) is related to the word “living” (*hay*). The woman is the mother of all human beings.

BROKEN FOR US

Some Jewish and many early Christian interpreters understood the words about the enmity between the woman and the snake as a reference to the Messiah’s eschatological victory over Satan. Although several biblical texts use a snake as a symbol of Satan (see Wis 2:24; John 8:44; Rev 12:9; 20:2), this is not the primary meaning of the text. Any interpretation of Gen 3:15 as a proto-Gospel is at best an accommodation of the biblical text. It is, however, this traditional but accommodated sense that led to the selection of the reading from Genesis 3 as the first reading for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Rather than focusing on the tradition’s accommodation of the text, the homilist might do well to use the text to focus on the reality of human sin, with its anxiety, its feelings of guilt, its expression in sexuality, its denial of responsibility and its blaming of others. These aspects of human sin are dimensions of the human experience. What we celebrate today is the divine initiative in freeing humans from their sin, with all its varied expressions and consequences.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 13, 2009

LITURGY

Philippians 4:4-7 invites us to rejoice because the Lord is near.

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Luke 3:10-18 continues the presentation of the preaching of John the Baptist (see Luke 3:1-6 in last Sunday’s liturgy).

Zephaniah 3:14-18a comes from the final chapter of the Book of Zephaniah. Its basic theme is joyful song and praise. The first verses, verses 14 and 15, resonate with the Psalter’s enthronement psalms (cf. Pss 47; 97).

The reading begins with a prophetic voice urging Zion to begin the singing of joyful songs. It is, of course, the inhabitants of Zion who are expected to sing these songs of joy. Zion and Jerusalem are addressed as “daughter.” Female terminology was often used of cities in biblical literature; the voice addresses the city of Jerusalem “daughter,” thus evoking the special relationship that existed between the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Yahweh, their God.

The reason for all this joy is that God has commuted whatever punitive sanction he had decided to inflict upon the city. He has, moreover, repelled the enemies of his people. Yahweh’s actions restore joy and confidence to the people. He is among them (see Zeph 3:5), as their savior, their deliverer. Yahweh is king of Israel and is recognized as such (see Isa 44:6). He rules as a saving Lord over his people.

Verse 16 seems to be a sort of commentary on the joyful celebration captured in verses 14-15. When Yahweh rules as king of Israel, Jerusalem will hear a voice saying, “Don’t be afraid; take courage.” “Don’t be afraid” is a classic expression of encouragement (see Isa 41:14; 44:2). Without Yahweh’s help, Jerusalem had all sorts of evil to fear. With Yahweh’s saving presence, the inhabitants of the city had nothing to fear. The importance of Yahweh’s saving presence is reiterated in verse 17, where Yahweh is proclaimed as a mighty savior, that is, a victorious warrior. He will join in Jerusalem’s celebration, singing the kind of songs of joy that are heard on festive occasions.

Commentators note that the Hebrew text of verses 17-18 is difficult to understand. One author underscores this difficulty by beginning her commentary on verse 18 with “This verse is unintelligible” (Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah* [AB 25A. New York: Doubleday, 1994], 145). These difficulties notwithstanding, commentators all agree that the two verses speak about Jerusalem’s salvation.

BROKEN FOR US

The third reading of today’s liturgy continues Luke’s description of the preaching of John the Baptist; the first and second readings proclaim joy at the presence of the Lord. These are appropriate readings for the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally called “Gaudete Sunday,” “Rejoice Sunday.”

The first reading is taken from a book of the Bible that is used in the liturgy of the Latin church about as often as the Book of Baruch. Apart from today’s liturgy, a passage from Zephaniah is read on the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time Advent in Cycle A (Zeph 2:3; 3:12-13). Another (Zeph 3:1-2, 9-13) will be read on Tuesday in this third week of Advent. And a third (Zeph 3:14-18) has the status of an optional reading for December 21.

Since Zephaniah is so unfamiliar to most of the congregation, it fitting that the homilist should use the text of Zephaniah and focus the homily on the joy that results from the presence of God among us. Zephaniah and Paul speak of this joy in terms which indicate that they were barely able to contain themselves as they proclaimed the joy of God’s people which realized and acknowledged the presence of the Saving God among them. What a contrast with the superficial and transitory joy experienced by children who are so happy with the presents that they receive at Christmas but soon cast them aside! What a contrast even with the more serious sources of

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joy that adults experience at this time of year, the Christmas parties, the card from a longtime friend, and the traditional family gathering. All of these are sources of real joy, but they pale in insignificance when compared with the joy of which the prophet speaks and the apostle writes. For biblical authors true joy comes from an experience of the saving power of God.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 20, 2009

LITURGY

Hebrews 10:5-10 uses sacrificial language to describe Christ’s coming into the world.

Luke 1:39-45 describes the “Visitation” scene, the meeting of the pregnant Mary with her kinswoman, the pregnant Elizabeth.

Micah 5:1-4a is a prophetic passage from the Book of Micah that, like Jer 33:14-15, the Old Testament reading for the First Sunday of Advent, announces the coming of a new David. Scholars think that the poetic oracle substantially dates back to the eighth century prophet. The passage will be familiar to many in the congregation since verse 2 is cited in Matthew’s story of the Magi (Matt 2:1-12), the “gospel reading” for the Feast of the Epiphany

In the verse that immediately precedes today’s reading Jerusalem is identified as Bat-gader (Mic 4:14). This nickname means “fenced-in maiden” and alludes to the fact that the king of Israel was under siege in Jerusalem at the time. In contrast with the great but besieged city of Jerusalem stands the little town of Bethlehem. Ephrathah may be another name for Bethlehem; alternatively, it may refer to the clan of Judah to which Bethlehem belonged. It is from Bethlehem that a “ruler in Israel” will come.

Delbert Hillers notes that Bethlehem is significant in two respects. On the one hand, it is the town from which the great king David came; on the other, it was a very small town to have produced such a great king (See Delbert J. Hillers, *Micah* [Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 65). Hillers also observes that the story of a ruler coming from Bethlehem is another example of the Old Testament’s fondness for rags to riches stories.

In any event, the reference to the “clans” of Judah recalls the organization of Israel at the time of Moses and Joshua (see the “thousands” in Numbers 1, 26) and places the promised ruler within a broad sweep of Israel’s political history. “From ancient times” is a reference to the time of the great king David. The promised leader is not called a king; rather he is described as a “ruler.” The term seems to have been deliberately chosen either to avoid the use of the title “king,” a designation now reserved for Yahweh (cf. Mic 4:9) or to suggest that the new leader will be different from the kings with which Israel had become familiar.

Verse 2 announces that when the mother of the ruler has given birth to him, the rest of his kindred, David’s “brothers” (cf. 2 Sam 19:11-13), will return from exile. The oracle uses the traditional Ancient Near Eastern metaphor of the shepherd to describe the function of the promised ruler. He will be great, his reign extensive (cf. Ps 72:8). That the ruler is described as “one of peace” may be a pun on the name of Solomon, David’s son. If so, “this new king will combine the qualities and achievements of David and Solomon,” say Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman in their Anchor Bible commentary on Michah (see *Micah* [AB 24E. New York: Doubleday, 2000], 476).

Since the prophecy contained in this oracle was not fulfilled during the entire history of the Davidic dynasty, some scholars take it to refer to a superhuman figure associated with God

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from the beginning of time (so, Andersen and Freedman, 468) while others take it as a messianic prophecy that Christian tradition finds fulfilled in Jesus.

BROKEN FOR US

It is obvious that there is no immediate connection among the three readings. Since some scholars affirm that Micah 5:1-4a is best understood as a messianic passage, anyone who preaches on the Fourth Sunday of Advent should consider the first reading as a messianic prophecy. When Messiah comes, his reign will have all the qualities of the reign of the great Israelite kings, David and Solomon, and much more.

Christian tradition, beginning with the Gospel according to Matthew (Matt 2:6) considers the prophecy to be realized in the coming of Jesus, the good shepherd (John 10:14). It is obvious that the prophecy about Jesus’ messianic kingdom looks beyond the birth of the baby in Bethlehem. The fulfillment of the prophecy even looks beyond Jesus’ public ministry to his coming in power and glory, his Parousia (see Mark 14:61-62; cf. Matt 26:64; Luke 22:70), when the kingdom is handed over to the Father (1 Cor 15:24). Only then will Messiah’s reign embrace the ends of the earth; only then will Messiah’s peace be fully realized.

NATIVITY OF THE LORD

December 25, 2009

LITURGY

Since the November-December 2007 issue of *Emmanuel* focused on the readings for the Mass at midnight and the 2008 November-December issue featured the readings for the Mass during the day, the readings given here are those for the Mass at dawn:

Titus 3:4-7 which highlights the significance of baptism within the context of the appearance (*epiphaneia*) of Jesus Christ.

Luke 2:15-20 which describes the shepherds’ response to the angelic proclamation that a Savior was born and

Isaiah 62:11-12, the final verses of a poem that celebrates Jerusalem’s vindication and restoration. The verses epitomize the eschatological hopes expressed in Isaiah 60-62. The reading explains the meaning of events, especially the preparations for the parousia-type of appearance of the Savior that are graphically and imaginatively portrayed in Isa 62:10.

To picture what is happening in verse 11 we should think of a great parade, perhaps a presidential cavalcade. When someone asks why the streets are blocked off, crowds are gathering, there’s a parade or police cars and official vehicles, and there is so much activity, someone might shout, “The president’s coming,” and the answer would be had.

In the ancient world, the coming (*parousia*) of a victorious general or king merited an analogous kind of activity. “The savior is coming!” The victor would be proclaimed as “savior” because he would freely bestow some of the booty as a gift upon the people who received him, often according a special benefit to the city itself. Third Isaiah uses the experience to describe the coming of the Lord, as Savior. The gifts that he is bringing, “the reward,” are freely bestowed. They signify the reversal of Israel’s fortunes, bestowed as a gift, the gift of the divine presence.

Earlier in Isaiah 62, an oracle proclaimed, “You shall be called by a new name, pronounced by the mouth of the Lord” (Isa 62:2). Conferral of the new name is the focus of

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verse 12. The people will be called “holy people” (cf. Isa 63:18), that is dedicated to the Lord and to the service of the Lord. They will also be called the “redeemed,” delivered from their oppression (cf. Isa 35:8-10). The city itself will also receive a new name. It will be called “Frequented,” a city sought out, a destination city. It will also be called “Not Forsaken,” a city neither abandoned nor to be abandoned. The new names bestowed upon the city of Jerusalem signify a reversal of its fortunes. Never again will it desolate and abandoned because of war and oppression.

BROKEN FOR US

The reading from Third Isaiah places the celebration of Christmas within an eschatological context. The birth of the Jesus, as a Savior who is Messiah and Lord (Luke 2:11), is a harbinger of salvation to come. The birth of the infant anticipates Jesus’ saving death and resurrection. Jesus was recognized as Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one, when he died on the cross as the King of the Jews. He was recognized as Lord in his resurrection, the first phase of the eschatological event that culminates in his Parousia, when salvation will be accorded to the ends of the earth.

THE HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

December 27, 2009

LITURGY

1 John 3:1-2, 21-24 speaks of the Father’s love for us, as a result of which we are children of God and have the obligation to do as God commands.

Luke 2:41-52 describes Jesus’ visit to Jerusalem and his encounter with the teachers there when he was only twelve years old.

1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28 is taken from the first chapter of the First Book of Kings, a book that is largely concerned with the story of David but has the name of Samuel, a Nazarite (1 Sam 1:11), priest (1 Sam 2:18; 3:1), prophet (3:2-4:1), and judge in Israel (1 Sam 7:3-17).

The early verses of chapter one describe Hannah’s frustration and sorry in not having born a child, her vow to the Lord at the shrine of Shiloh (1 Sam 1:11), and the blessing that she received from the priest Eli, assuring her that her prayer would be answered (1 Sam 1:17). Today’s reading picks up the narrative at that point, telling what happened when Hannah and Elkanah returned home after their visit to the Lord’s temple in Shiloh. In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a child who was named Samuel, meaning “the name of the Lord.” When it came time for Elkanah to visit the shrine in order to offer the customary annual sacrifice, Hannah did not go with him. In itself that is not unusual behavior for a woman, especially a new mother. The detail of Hannah’s not accompanying her husband contrasts, however, with her previous behavior (1 Sam 1:7), especially at the time of her visit to the shrine at Shiloh when she made her vow to the Lord.

The reference to Elkanah’s fulfilling his vow is best explained as an indication that, although Elkanah had the right to annul Hannah’s vow (Num 30:6-15) and keep his first-born son in the family, he supported Hannah’s vow that Samuel should be offered as a Nazarite. Unfortunately the liturgical reading omits verse 23 which suggests that Elkanah’s decision owed in a large part to his devotion to Hannah.

Nazarites (‘the consecrated’) were part of Israel’s story for a long period of time. They

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appear in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and in rabbinic texts. The oldest biblical story about a Nazarite is the story of Samson (11th century B.C.E.), who unwittingly failed to fulfill his vow (see Judges 1-16). Nazarites demonstrated their dedication to God by avoiding three kinds of behavior: drinking wine, having a haircut, and touching the dead. Initially, Nazarites fulfilled their vows as a life-long commitment; later on, some men made temporary vows as a Nazarite. According to Hannah’s vow, Samuel’s was a life-long commitment (1 Sam 1:11, 22, 28).

When little Samuel was weaned, Hannah and Elkanah brought him to the shrine at Shiloh. There Elkanah offered the customary sacrifices, a bull, some flour, and some wine. That the bull was three years old indicated that it was sufficiently developed to satisfy a requirement for sacrificial animals (cf. Gen 15:9). The ephah, a standard dry measure, was one tenth of an homer and was equal to about a half-bushel.

After the account of Elkanah’s sacrifice, the focus of the story shifts to Hannah who meets Eli, the priest who had blessed her at the time of her vow. Identifying herself as that woman, Hannah informed Eli that her prayer had been answered. The, fulfilling her vow, she dedicated her only son to the Lord, leaving him at the shrine to live his life as a Nazarite. The biblical narrative continues with the Song of Hannah, a canticle of praise that served as a model for Mary’s Magnificat (1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:47-55).

BROKEN FOR US

The readings indicated above are special readings for Year C. The story of Hannah, Elkanah, and Samuel is a beautiful story to ponder on the Feast of the Holy Family. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are *the* Holy Family, but Hannah, Elkanah, and Samuel are certainly a holy family. Their true-to-life story is a model for the Christian family. The biblical author tells their story in such a way as to highlight the birth of a child as a gift from God, for which the parents offer appropriate thanksgiving. It is a story of a man’s love for his wife and of the communication between them. It is a story of a faith-filled couple living their lives as an expression of their faith. Hannah, Elkanah, and Samuel provide the homilist with a unique opportunity to speak about the qualities of a faith-filled marital and family relationship.