

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 117:6 (2011) 544-562 by Raymond F. Collins.

The liturgical year’s semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Matthew comes to an end on November 20, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King. Thereafter the Sunday readings in Ordinary Time will be taken from the Gospel according to Mark. The oldest of the canonical gospels, Mark was written about 70 C. E., the year that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.

Advent does not belong to Ordinary Time. Thus, the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Mark does not really begin until January, 2012. Nonetheless, two readings from Mark have been appointed as Sunday gospel lections on the first two Sundays of Advent in Cycle B of the liturgical year. Respectively, these are an exhortation to vigilance and the beginning of Mark’s story about Jesus.

When preaching from the gospel according to Mark, homilists should remember that they are preaching from the oldest of the canonical gospels. The story of Jesus, as told by Matthew and Luke, is much more imbedded in contemporary Christian culture than is the story of Jesus told by Mark. We must be wary lest insert details that are found only in later texts into our exposition of Mark’s gospel. To the extent that we do so, we will be preaching from the Gospel according to Matthew or the Gospel according to Luke rather than reflection on the meaning of the Gospel according to Mark.

Liturgists often advise that we take the current liturgical year as an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the story that Mark tells. Among the books that can help us to do that are *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* by Francis J. Moloney (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), *The Gospel of Mark* by John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington (Sacra Pagina 2. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), *Mark* by M. Eugene Boring (New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006), and *Mark* by Mary Ann Beavis (Paideia. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 4, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 is a passage from Second Isaiah that Matthew, Luke, John, and subsequent Christian tradition used to describe the preaching of John the Baptist.

2 Peter 3:8-14 is an exhortation to prepare for the coming of the Day of the Lord.

Mark 1:1-8 is taken from the Prologue to the Gospel according to Mark, the oldest of the four canonical gospels.

Several times in Mark’s story about Jesus, Jesus tells various characters that they should keep his identity as a secret (Mark 1:44; 3:12; 8:30; 9:9). But the readers of Mark’s gospel know from the outset who Jesus is. He is identified as the Christ, the anointed one who is the Messiah of Israel (cf. 8:29; 14:6 1; 15:32). He is identified as the Son of God, a person with special powers from God, God’s agent. The use of this title in the prologue of the gospel anticipates the confession of the centurion at the cross (Mark 15:39) but at this point in the history of the early church the “Son of God” title does not yet have the precise theological connotations that it will acquire in later centuries.

The story of Jesus is the good news, the gospel (*euangelion*). In secular Greek usage the term refers to an important announcement, the birth of an heir in the royal household, a victory in

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battle, or some activity of the gods. Mark uses it to describe the story of a person, the first time that the term was used in this way. “Gospel” is one of Mark’s favorite terms, generally used without further qualification (Mark 1:14-15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9). It is also found in the appendix to the gospel in Mark 16:15. At this point in the development of the Christian lexicon, “gospel” did not yet mean a written text. The “gospel” was simply an announcement of good news.

A conflation of scriptural passages follows the identification of Jesus. The passages are attributed to the prophet Isaiah but only the second passage (v. 3) comes from Isaiah, where it is found at the beginning of Second Isaiah (Isa 40:3). The first passage (v. 2) comes from Mal 3:1, with some tweaking in the light of Exod 23:20.

The conflated Scripture is introduced by a well-known formula, “as it is written.” The formula was often used by Paul and is also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Typically the formula links the cited scriptural passage to what precedes it. Accordingly an increasing number of biblical scholars think that the scriptural passage applies to Jesus rather than to John the Baptist, as it does in the later canonical Gospels. Additional reasons for reading the text in this way is that Mark typically uses “Lord” (*kyrios*) of God rather than of Jesus (see Mark 5:19; 11:9; 12:11, 29, 30, 36, 37; 13:10), that Mark’s tweaking of the Greek Scriptures has a “christological slant,” and that the Greek text of verse 4, “John the Baptist appeared in the dessert” seems to be the beginning of a new story. The opening *egeneto* is almost equivalent to “once upon a time there was John, a man who was baptizing. On this reading of the text, Jesus is the messenger sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will tell them to get ready for the coming of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14).

The scene is set with the appearance of John “the Baptist.” Mark uses a participle to describe John. He is the one who is baptizing. The ritual gesture of turning back to God was accompanied by a message that urged the people to repent. John apparently made quite an impression. Mark’s hyperbole says that the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him. What they saw was a person clothed in simple nomadic attire and living off the land. Mark’s choice of words to describe John may have been influenced by the biblical description of Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8). Later in Mark’s story, Jesus identifies John with Elijah (see Mark 9:11-13).

John’s message is given in verses 7-8. He first says that a mightier one—language that hearkens back to the vocabulary used in the Greek Bible to describe God (Deut 10:17; Isa 40:10; Job 22:13; etc.)—and that with regard to the coming one he has a status less than that of a slave. The Babylonian Talmud teaches that untying the master’s sandal was one task that a slave should not be required to do (“Marriage Deeds” 96a [*b. Ketubbot*] 96a).

Then John compares his activity with that of the mightier one. His activity consists of immersing people in water. The activity of the one to come is giving the gift of the Spirit. Ezekiel 36:25-27 used sprinkling with water as a metaphorical description of God’s gift of the Spirit. The outpouring of the Spirit was a sign of the final times (Joel 2:28-32; cf. Acts 2:17-21). Giving the gift of the Spirit, Jesus assumes a divine function.

BROKEN FOR US

As an Advent reading, the opening of Mark’s gospel presents two figures sent to prepare God’s people for the coming of the kingdom. Jesus prepares the way and gives the gift of the Spirit. John preaches repentance for the forgiveness of sins and employs a cleansing ritual that connotes new beginnings and turning to the Lord.

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THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 11, 2011

LITURGY

Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11, cited by Jesus as the program for his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:18) talks about the gift of the Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 rehearses the staccato-like series of exhortations with which Paul brings his oldest letter to a close.

John 1:6-8, 19-28 is an Advent departure from the reading of the Gospel of Mark in the liturgical year’s Cycle B. As last week’s reading from Mark 1:1-8, it focuses on the figure of John.

Although the Fourth Gospel often speaks about John’s activity of baptizing and says that he has been sent to baptize (John 1:33; cf. John 1:25-28, 33; 3:23; 4:1), it never calls John “the Baptizer” nor does it call him “the Baptist.” In the Fourth Gospel, John’s role is to be a witness to Jesus. He is introduced into the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel as “the Witness.” He came to testify to the light. His role as witness is underscored by the three-fold mention of “testimony/testify” in the first part of today’s gospel lection.

The formal beginning of the second part of the reading continues the motif: “And this is the testimony of John” (John 1:19). The idea of testimony has judicial overtones; we immediately think of testimony given in a courtroom. Such ideas are not foreign to the idea of witness in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is constantly put to the test and must testify. The climax of the motif is Jesus’ trial before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16).

The first real inkling that testimony will be a major theme in the Fourth Gospel comes with the double interrogation of John. He is first interrogated by a group of priests and Levites, presumably Sadducees, sent by Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. They ask him about his identity, “who are you?” John replies with a formal denial, “I am not the Christ.” They ask him if he was Elijah, whose return was expected by many Jews. John’s denial that he was Elijah differs from the description of John by Jesus in Matt 17:10-12; Mark 9:11-13. They ask him if he was the prophet like Moses promised in Deut 18:15, 18. Again, a denial comes from John’s lips. The intensity of the questioning increases when the interrogators ask, “Who are you? . . . What do you have to say for yourself?” Using the words of Isa 40:3, John claims his proper role as witness to Jesus.

A second interrogation occurs when John is confronted by a group of Pharisees, also sent by the authorities in Jerusalem. Picking up on the previous investigation, they ask him about his baptizing. Why is he baptizing, preparing for the coming of the kingdom, if he is not one of the end-time figures expected by the Jews? In response, John shifts the focus from himself to Jesus who is “the coming one” whom “you do not know” (*ouk oidate*). The as yet unnamed coming one (see John 1:29) is not really known and understood by the interrogators, let alone properly appreciated by them. As in Mark’s narrative read as part of last week’s gospel lection (Mark 1:7), John proclaims the distance between himself and Jesus by referring to his unworthiness to untie Jesus’ sandals.

BROKEN FOR US

“Who are you?” is the question that John was asked. He answered that he was the

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witness, the one whose role in life was to bear witness to Jesus.

“Who are you?” is a question that each of us may well ask of ourselves. The immediate reply might be “I am a mother” or “I am a lawyer.” But somewhere in the mix at the top of the list should be, “I am a believing Christian,” “I am someone who gives witness to Jesus by what I say and by what I do.”

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 18, 2011

LITURGY

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 is an oracle of the Lord, conveyed by the prophet Nathan, that promises a Davidic dynasty.

Romans 16:25-27 speaks of the revelation on the mystery of salvation.

Luke 1:26-38 is that announcement of the birth of Jesus. Luke’s opening words, “in the sixth month” (cf. v. 36), not reprised in today’s reading, links the announcement to Mary with the temple announcement of the birth of John to Zechariah (Luke 1:8-23). Although there are significant differences, the two birth announcements are parallel in many respects.

Notable among the differences is that Mary has not particular claim to being honored by God (cf. Luke 1:6). She was simply a young woman “betrothed” to a man named Joseph, of Davidic origins. Legally bound to Joseph (cf. Deut 22:23), she was most likely twelve or thirteen at that time and had not yet engaged in sexual intercourse (v. 34). Luke obviously thinks of Mary as virginal in the biological sense but does not stress the point. For him, the narrative is about what the graciousness of God will bring to pass. The Davidic character of Jesus will be fully realized in the resurrection when Jesus sits at the right hand of God (cf. Luke 20:41-44; Acts 2:25-34; 13:22, 34; cf. Ps 110:1).

Gabriel’s appearance—the name means “God is my mighty one”—is troubling to Mary. She doesn’t know what to make of it. The angel greets her with “Hail, full of grace”—words which will be reprised in the “Hail Mary.” The NAB’s translation more faithfully renders the Vulgate’s *gratia plena* than it does the play on words in Greek that is translated “Greetings, favored one” in the NRSV and as “Hail, Gifted Lady” by the well-known Catholic biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson (in *The Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991, 36-37). She is one upon whom God’s favor, his gratuitous gift (*charis*), rests. In some ways the scene, especially the announcement itself (v. 31), resembles the biblical narrative of the announcement of Samson’s birth (Judg 13:2-7).

The messianic implications of the initial announcement are clarified in the following verses (vv. 32-33) whose composition was strongly influenced by 2 Sam 11:16, the first scriptural reading in today’s liturgy. The same biblical text was also used in a messianic sense in the Dead Sea Scrolls (see *4QFlorilegium* 10-13). According to Luke, Jesus is the realization of the promise that God had given to David through the prophet Nathan. The evangelist uses one of his favorite theological titles, “Most High” to speak about God (cf. Luke 1:35, 76; Acts 7:48; 16:17). On the other hand, “house of Jacob” is a rather archaic way of speaking about Israel (cf. Gen 46:27). The scene makes it clear that Jesus is “son of God” in a way that is quite distinct from that of the many sons of God in the Hellenistic world. He is the holy one (cf. v. 35; Acts 3:14; 4:27, 30) the one who belongs to God and will accomplish God’s will.

Mary is incredulous. The angel reassures her with a promise of the overshadowing

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presence of God (see Luke 9:34) and the gift of the Spirit (see Acts 1:8). Unlike later accounts, for example, that of the third-century *Protoevangelium of James* 8:3; 20:21) the narrative doesn't discuss the details of Mary's pregnancy. The reader is simply left in awe at the power of God. “Nothing is impossible with God.” These words of the angel recall similar words used apropos the barren Sarah's giving birth to Isaac (Gen 18:14). As a sign that God will bring to pass what has been promised, Mary is told about the pregnancy of Elizabeth, now in its twenty-fourth week.

Before the angel departs the scene, Mary identifies herself as a member of God's household, albeit in a servant's role. She is also a woman of faith, submissive to the word of the Lord (see Luke 8:21; 11:28).

BROKEN FOR US

Today's reading is clearly about what God has done for our salvation. The angel was sent by God (v. 26). God's favor rests on Mary (v. 28) who is the servant of the Lord (v. 38). Jesus is the holy one, the Son of God (v. 35). He will fulfill the messianic role that the Lord God will give him (v. 32). And nothing is impossible for God (v. 37). In preaching the gospel, the homilist should not neglect the primary theological thrust of Luke's narrative.

NATIVITY OF THE LORD

December 25, 2011

LITURGY OF THE MASS AT DAWN

For the Mass at Midnight see *Emmanuel* 116 [2010] 570-572.

LITURGY

Isaiah 62:11-12 speaks of the coming of the Savior to Zion.

Titus 3:4-7 is one of the great “appearance” (*epiphaneia*) passages of the Pastoral Epistles.

Luke 2:15-20 is a beautiful literary creation by Luke that tells the second part of the story of the shepherds. The first part of the story is, of course, the appearance of the angel who tell a group of shepherds about the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-14).

The appearance to shepherds is not incidental to the story of Jesus' birth. The new-born is the son of David, who in biblical tradition was the shepherd of the flock of Israel (1 Sam 16:11; 17:15; 2 Sam 5:2). The shepherds are the antithesis of the imperial power of the day. Low on the scale of power and without wealthy, they represent God's lowly ones, who so often appear as the beneficiaries of Jesus' ministry in Luke' gospel. Shepherds were so looked down upon that later rabbis would classify them as sinners (see the Mishhaic tracts “Betrothals” [*m. Qiddushin* 4:14] and [“The First Gate” [*m. Bava Qamma* 10:9]). The encounter of the son of God with lowly humans takes place not in the temple of Jerusalem but in some out-of-the-way place in the environs of Bethlehem, where “Shepherds' Field” continues to be pointed out to tourists and pilgrims alike until the present time.

The leitmotif of the narrative is the Greek word *rhema*. Sometimes the ambiguous term has the nuance of word, something that has been spoken. Sometimes the nuance is thing, something that has been done. In today's reading the word is translated as “the thing [that has taken place” in v. 15, “the message” in v. 17, and, in the plural, “these things” in v. 19. The reality of the message has come to pass; the promise has been realized.

Another important theme in the narrative is that of making known. Through messengers,

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the angels, God has made known (*gnorizo*) the birth of Jesus to the shepherds (v. 15). In turn, the shepherds made the story known to others (v. 17). The chain of announcements of the presence of the son of God has been started. The public character of the announcement is important to Luke (cf. Acts 26:26).

Mary stands in contrast with the announcement of these evangelists. As a woman of faith (cf. Luke 1:38, in last Sunday’s gospel reading), Mary contemplates the meaning of what has been brought to pass.

Reception of the good news that has been brought to pass leads the shepherds to glorify and praise. They are one with the angels (Luke 1:14) in glorifying God for his favor to human kind.

BROKEN FOR US

The story of the shepherds is a touching story. Together with the preceding scenes, Mary and Joseph’s trip to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7) and the appearance of the angels to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-4), the story of the shepherds constitutes what Johnson describes as “one of the most over-interpreted [passages] in the New Testament” (*Luke*, 51).

As he or she should have done in preaching the gospel on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the homilist should avoid excessively sentimental descriptions of the birth of Jesus. Today’s gospel lection tells us how we should respond to the announcement of the birth of the Savior, that is, with proclamation, contemplation, and praise.