

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Emmanuel* 116:1 (2010) 75-94 by Raymond F. Collins.

The education of the laity, particularly the adult laity, is a major challenge for the staff of most parishes. Even mini courses are not very well attended. Those who do attend are generally only the most interested of our parishioners; and they are few in number. The less interesting the topic of a mini course, the smaller the attendance. Indeed, in most parishes it is only presentations on current hot button issues, followed by discussion, that generate any real interest.

Given this situation, most of us would probably not try to give a course, even a short one, on the Hebrew Scriptures. Our efforts, were we to make an effort, would for the most part be in vain. We have, nonetheless, an opportunity to teach the people about these Scriptures when we use the first reading of the liturgy as the basis for our homilies.

That this is so was brought home to me just a few weeks ago. Since I began writing these homiletic reflections with a concentration on the first reading, I have attempted to follow my own advice and preach on the first reading. I have done so on all but one or two Sundays in the past couple of years. And so it was that I was standing outside St. Luke’s church in Barrington, Rhode Island, after Mass on Sunday a few weeks ago. One of the parishioners asked me if he could ask a question. The request was not unusual but it reminded me of the importance of speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures when we preach to the people. The parishioner’s question came in the form of an inquisitive comment, “In your homily you called God ‘Lord,’ I thought that Jesus was Lord.”

What a teaching moment the Lord had given me!

## **FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

February 7, 2010

### **LITURGY**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-11** contains the fullest creedal formula in the New Testament, to which Paul has added a reflection on his own call to be an apostle.

**Luke 5:1-11** tells the story of Jesus commissioning Simon (Peter).

**Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8** is an abridged version of the call of Isaiah (Isa 6:1-13). To provide the reader with a sense of the historical reality of the event, the narrator situates the prophet’s vision in the year that King Uzziah died, that is, in 742 B.C.E. The narrative locates the vision in the Holy of Holies of the temple in Jerusalem. This setting is in keeping with a major theme of First Isaiah, namely, that the great and powerful God of Israel exercises dominion from Jerusalem. Isaiah’s presence in the temple may suggest that Isaiah was a priest or Levite who was called to be a prophet.

The Bible narrates the calls of several different prophets. A passage from the story of Jeremiah’s call (Jer 4:1-10) was read during last week’s Sunday liturgy. See also 1 Samuel 3:1-4a; Ezekiel 1:1-3:11; Amos 7:14-15; and Isaiah 40:1-11. Typically the account of these calls includes a vision of God majestically enthroned in heaven. The call of Isaiah differs from these accounts in that it is located in the temple where Isaiah sees God seated on a throne with seraphim in attendance. Their chant consists of a thrice-repeated affirmation of God’s holiness. The repetition of “holy” provides the affirmation with special emphasis. God is utterly sacred, removed from all defilement and moral impropriety.

God is identified as “the Lord of hosts.” This designation makes reference to God’s

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heavenly entourage and contrasts with the earth which is filled with God’s glory. God is, in other words, the Lord of heaven and earth. The way that God is identified in the seraphic chant is First Isaiah’s favorite way to speak about God. The epithet, “Lord of hosts,” occurs forty-six times in the oracles of First Isaiah.

In the presence of God and aware of his sinfulness, Isaiah fears for his life. A sinful person may not stand in the presence of the holy God (see Exod 33:18-20). The king, the Lord of hosts, forgives sinful Isaiah. One of the seraphim in the Lord’s entourage takes an ember from one of the altars in the temple and uses it to sterilize the prophet’s lips. That the gesture of forgiveness and purification focuses on Isaiah’s lips and mouth is indicative of his prophetic vocation. As a prophet, he is to speak the word of the Lord. The biblical narratives of the call of Jeremiah and of Ezekiel include a similar motif, God putting words into the prophet’s mouth (Jer 1:9-10; Ezek 2:8-3:3).

The narrative concludes with Isaiah overhearing a divine soliloquy, in which the Lord associates the heavenly beings with himself. “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” At that point the prophet understands the vision. “Here I am, send me,” he responds. Moses and Samuel responded to God’s call in similar fashion (see Exod 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4).

#### BROKEN FOR US

The first and third readings in today’s liturgy are call narratives. Each of them stresses the unworthiness of the one who is called to be God’s spokesperson. The narrative of the call of Isaiah emphasizes the prophet’s willingness to serve as God’s spokesperson; the narrative of the call of Simon focuses on his mission. Each of the narratives highlights the reality of the event. The Isaian narrative places the call at a historical moment in time; the Lukan narrative provides a specific geographical setting for the telling of the story of Jesus calling Simon.

Today’s readings provide material for a number of important homilies. It may be difficult to choose from among them. One homily might well focus on the call of Isaiah and Simon, perhaps mentioning how enriched we have been because God chose these persons as his spokespersons. Another homily might focus on our own prophetic calling, a calling that is ours despite our faults and our sinfulness. As people who have been baptized in the name of Jesus we share in his calling as priest, prophet, and king. Yet another homily might focus on God and his majesty. From time immemorial the chant, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,” has been incorporated into the church’s eucharistic prayer. The acclamation is also often used in Jewish liturgy.

#### SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 14, 1010

#### LITURGY

**1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20** contains Paul’s rebuttal to those who denied the resurrection of the dead.

**Luke 6:17, 20-26** is an excerpt from the Sermon on the Plain, analogous to Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount.

**Jeremiah 17:5-8** is a short poem that echoes Psalm 1. Scholars debate among themselves as to whether Psalm 1 is the source of Jeremiah’s poem or whether it is the poem

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which lies at the origin of the psalm. Psalm 1 begins with a beatitude that contrasts the fate of the blessed with the fate of the wicked. The sequence is reversed in Jeremiah, which begins with a curse followed by a beatitude. Placing the beatitude after the curse allows the poet to emphasize the fate of the blessed.

The poem makes use of the rhetorical device of contrast to highlight the protection that God affords to those who trust in him. The first part of the poem pronounces a curse upon those who trust only in mere human beings, whose hearts are not turned to the Lord as the focus of their lives. The poet uses agricultural imagery to underscore their fate. He likens those who place all their trust in humans to a shrub that shoots up in the desert. Since there is hardly any water in the desert, the shrub has little hope for survival. The salty ground from which it shoots only ensures that it will not survive.

A contrast between blessings and curses is a specific literary expression of the rhetorical device of contrast. Deuteronomy 27-28 uses the device to sum up the message on the book in a kind of peroration. In Jeremiah’s poem the “blessed” are contrasted with those who are cursed. “Happy” or “fortunate” might be a better translation of the Hebrew word [“blessed”] with which the beatitude begins. Beatitudes frequently appear in the Old Testament, most often in the psalms. Typically, as in Jeremiah 17, there is a single beatitude. The core of the beatitude is verse 7, “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is in the Lord.”

Then, with agricultural imagery that is the reverse of the imagery used to portray the fate of the accursed, the poet compares those who trust in the Lord with a tree that is planted by running water. No matter the heat of a day or a drought that falls upon the land, the tree that is planted by a running stream will flourish and bear fruit. The hardy and fruit-bearing tree provides a sharp contrast with the desert’s withering and dying shrub.

## BROKEN FOR US

On first reading, the similarity of their literary forms provides the link between today’s first and third readings. Beatitudes are essentially one-liners; every beatitude is virtually an expression of congratulations.

The poet expands the beatitude of Jeremiah 17:7 with an agricultural image. Luke’s collection of beatitudes, three short beatitudes followed by a longer beatitude, is a literary endeavor, the result of editing. In the oral tradition that preceded their being brought together as a literary collection each of the beatitudes would have had an independent existence. The juxtaposition of several beatitudes deprives the individual beatitudes of their rhetorical force.

It should be noted that the three short beatitudes in Luke are essentially synonymous. The poor, the hungry, and those who weep because they are suffering are really the same group of people. They are the down-and-out, the destitute of this world. These people are said to be happy because Jesus is there for them. They are not happy because they are poor. Their poverty cries out for help; Jesus provides it.

On closer reading, there is theological similarity between the first and third readings. The prophet’s poem pronounces a curse on those who trust in humans rather than in the Lord and a blessing upon those who trust in the Lord. Luke’s woes are a condemnation of those who trust in material wealth and all that comes with it; his beatitudes pronounce a blessing on those who cry out to the Lord from their misery. Today’s homily might well center on the need for trust in the Lord, not only by those in various difficult situations, but especially by the affluent and the comfortable.

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## **FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT**

February 21, 2010

### LITURGY

**Romans 10:8-13** speaks about faith and the confession of faith, about justification and salvation.

**Luke 4:1-13** is Luke’s version of the temptation of Jesus.

**Deuteronomy 26:4-10** is a substantial part of a confession of faith in the form of a story that is told in one of the last chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy. (Deut 26:1-11). The context in which the story was told was the liturgy celebrated at Israel’s central sanctuary during the Feast of Weeks (see Deut 16:9-12), the harvest festival during which the first fruits of the crops were offered to the Lord.

Today’s reading begins with a liturgical directive by Moses. A basket containing the first fruits is to be given to the priest who will place it before the altar. Eventually the priests who served at the sanctuary would eat the offerings. In the meantime, the fact that the offerings were placed before the altar served as a symbol that they were a gift to God.

The first part of the story describes the ancestors of Israel at the time of the Exodus as “a wandering Aramean.” This seems to be a reference to Jacob (Israel), the nation’s principal ancestor. When Israel’s ancestors first went to Egypt they were a relatively small group of nomads living as aliens in a foreign land. By sheer force of the number of their progeny they became a numerous and powerful group.

The second part of the story describes Egypt’s oppression of the Israelites. The story of one form of this oppression is movingly told in Exodus 5. Deuteronomy’s simple reference to Egypt’s maltreatment of the Israelites is noteworthy in several respects. First, the story is told to serve as a warning that aliens are easily abused. Second, the story gives no evidence of animus towards Egypt; the abuse of aliens by those in power is presented in matter-of-fact fashion. The powerful are expected to abuse aliens. Third the use of the first person plural, “us,” indicates that those who listened to Moses identified with their oppressed ancestors.

Part three of the story tells how the Lord listened to the cries of the oppressed. That God hears the cry of the poor is a major teaching of the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 15:9, for example, warns Israel not to neglect the needy in their midst, lest they “cry out to the Lord.” The Lord heard the cry of the Israelites oppressed by the Egyptians and led them to freedom. The story’s reference to God’s power and prodigies serves as a reminder that Israel’s freedom came as a result of a divine initiative; it did not stem from human activity.

Moses did not enter the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 31). The narrative placed on Moses’s lips in today’s reading anticipates Israel’s arrival in the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey. In the Promised Land first fruits, harbingers of the crop yet to come, are to be offered to the Lord. There, the Lord God, Deliverer of Israel, is to be worshipped.

### BROKEN FOR US

During Lent, as on most Sundays which are not part of the liturgical “ordinary time,” there is not necessarily a connection between the first and third readings in the Sunday liturgy.

Today, however, there is a superficial connection between the readings since each of

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them makes reference to the dessert. A closer reading of the texts reveals a more fundamental connection. Jesus’ scriptural responses to the devil are all taken from the Book of Deuteronomy; each of them refers to an event associated with the Exodus. In Deuteronomy’s narrative, Jesus’ first response (Deut 8:3) hearkens back to God’s gift of manna to the wandering Israelites. Jesus’ second response (Deut 6:13) has the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32; Deut 9:16-17) as part of its background. After the third temptation, Jesus’ dismissive response (Deut 6:13) recalls Israel’s testing Yahweh at Massah and Meribah because of the lack of water (Exod 17:2-7).

In these times, when there is so much discussion about immigrants, both legal and illegal, the homily might appropriately focus on the plight of the alien who cries out to the Lord for deliverance. The reading encourages us to offer something of the plenty that God has given us as a token of thanksgiving but it also reminds us that the plenty that we have contrasts with the situation of our ancestors as aliens in the land. With few exceptions the ancestors of all of us were once aliens in North America. This should serve as a reminder that we must not neglect, still less, demean, the aliens in our midst. Israel did not forget its history; neither should we.

## SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

February 28, 2010

### LITURGY

**Philippians 3:7-4:1** is a complex reading that speaks about the imitation of Paul, the enemies of the cross, and the transformation of the body at the resurrection of the dead.

**Luke 9:28b-36** describes the transfiguration of Jesus, mentioning the exodus that he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

**Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18** describes the covenant that God made with Abraham. The passage is key to Paul’s understanding of justification by faith as the apostle himself explains in Romans 4.

The reading of Genesis begins with God reassuring Abram—the homilist should be aware that Abram had not yet received the name Abraham (see Gen 17:4-5)—that he will have his own son as his biological heir (see Gen 15:2-4). With oriental hyperbole, God promises that Abraham’s progeny will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

Abram believed in the Lord; he trusted that God would fulfill the promise that he made without any evidence to support it. Because Abram believed what the Lord had said, the Lord considered his belief as righteous. Abram put his trust in God and God considered Abram to be in a right relationship with himself. Abram was righteous.

From time immemorial within the history of Israel, the promise of progeny has been associated with the promise of the land. The Genesis narrative provides the readers of the Bible with some of the oldest evidence of the association of promise and land. The Yahwist’s narrative adopts a three-part pattern similar to that followed in Genesis 15’s account of the promise made to Abram (Gen 15:1-6). In the story of the promise of the land, 1) Yahweh makes a promise; 2) Abram protests; 3) Yahweh offers reassurance that the promise will be fulfilled. God’s promise (v. 7) mentions Abram’s migration from Ur of the Chaldeans, a place near the River Tigris. Abram’s protest (v. 8) consists of a demand for some proof. He is unwilling to accept an unsubstantiated promise. God’s reassurance (vv. 9-21) comes in the form of a covenant ceremony, narrated in abridged form in verses 9-12, 17-18 in today’s reading.

The slaughter and splitting of animals is an ancient covenant ritual (cf. Jer 34:18) which

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gave rise to the ancient expression “cut a covenant” meaning “make a covenant. The origins and meaning of the ritual are unknown. Many scholars, however, opined that the covenanting partners would walk between the two halves of the slaughtered animals, suggesting by means of this symbolic activity that a fate similar to that which befell the animals should happen to them should they fail to live up to their covenant agreement. The presence of the predatory birds provides a bit of artless detail to the narrative.

Abram’s sleep recalls that of the sleeping Adam at the time of the creation of Eve (Gen 2:22). The sleep of Abram, like that of Adam, symbolizes that he was not able to fathom the divine activity. In his sleep Abram received a divine revelation, in the form of an oracle (vv. 13-16, omitted from today’s reading) and in the form of a vision. The vision featured the appearance of a smoking fire pot and a burning torch. The “fire pot” was a clay oven used for baking. Together with the flaming torch, these implements symbolize God’s presence in fire (cf. Isa 31:9). The fire passes between the halves of the slaughtered animals, signifying God’s ratification of the covenant with Abram.

The final verse of the reading explains that a covenant had indeed been made. The reader might note that the word “covenant” (*berith*) appears for the first time in the reading in this final verse, as a kind of explanatory commentary on what had happened.

The land that God promised to Abram, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates, is more or less coterminous with the land of Israel during the Davidic monarchy (cf. 1 Kgs 4:21; 8:65; Isa 27:12). A wadi is the bed of a stream, a gulley or ravine. The wadi of Egypt, to which Gen 15:18 makes reference, is probably not the Nile but a river bed somewhat to the east, perhaps the Wadi el-Arish which lies a bit less than fifty miles to the southwest of Gaza.

## BROKEN FOR US

The Second Sunday of Lent in Cycles A, B, and C provides opportunity for reading the story of Jesus’ transfiguration according to the accounts provided by each of the Synoptic evangelists. The accompanying first reading sheds no particular light on the narrative account of Jesus’ transformation.

Today’s first reading does, however, provide insight into the season of Lent. Lent is a time for the renewal of God’s covenanted people. The covenant has its roots in the promise made to Abraham. His faith is a model of ours; in faith, we are among his offspring (see Gal 3:6-9). Through baptism we have been introduced into God’s covenanted people.

The triduum that follows Lent reminds us that the covenant with God in which we participate is the new covenant. Lent is a season when we, God’s holy people, take stock of the covenant, pledging to renew our lives so that we might live more fully as God’s covenanted people.