

An excerpt from "Breaking the Word: Homiletics," *Emmanuel* 119:1 (2013) 66-85 by Raymond F. Collins.

A few days ago, I returned to my home in Rhode Island from a stay in Michigan where I spoke on the scriptures during the three-day annual convocation of the priests of the Grand Rapids diocese. Their theme this year was preaching the Gospel of Paul and the Gospel according to Luke in Year C. The focus was to have been the Advent readings and it was.

Now Advent is behind us and the remainder of Year C lies in front of us. The challenge of preaching the writings of the apostle and the story written by the evangelist continue to face us. It is a challenge that homilists must successfully meet if they are to build up and spread the faith in this Year of Faith.

One part of our challenge is to enable those who hear our homilies to see and appreciate Jesus through the eyes and insights of Luke, the evangelist of the year. I shared with the priests of Grand Rapids an example that I often use.

Take any man, one that we might ask to stand up in church on any Sunday morning. People in the congregation have different impressions of him because their relationship with him is different from that of others. To one woman he may be a husband. To a child or several children he may be a father. To an old couple or a widow, he may be a son. To others, he may be a scout leader or Peewee league coach. To still others, he may be one of the readers at the 10 AM liturgy. To still others, he may be the manager of the local Staples. To others, he may be a neighbor. To others, he may be a poor driver, behind whom you do not want to be while you are in your car. And the list can go on. The point is that you come to know any human being from a particular perspective.

So it is with Jesus of Nazareth. There are many perspectives from which we can get to know him. Year C, when we regularly have readings from the Gospel of Luke, gives us a singular opportunity to appreciate the one whom we call Lord from the perspective of Luke, evangelist for the Hellenistic world.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 3, 2013

LITURGY:

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 7-19, an excerpt from Yahweh's call to the prophet Jeremiah, sets the stage for Jesus' attestation to his own prophetic ministry about which we hear in today's third scriptural reading.

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13 contains Paul's famous but often misunderstood paean on love.

Luke 4:21-30 begins with a repetition of the last verse of last Sunday's gospel lection.

Luke continues by saying, "And all were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." This is generally the kind of translation that appears in English-language versions of the text but one might ask whether these English words properly capture the sense of Luke's Greek text. After all, in both Matthew and Mark, Luke's "were amazed" paraphrases the other evangelists' "were astonished" (Matt 13:54; Mark 6:2). Matthew and Mark continue with "they took offense at him" (Matt 13:57; Mark 6:3), suggesting that the people's astonishment was negative rather than positive. In similar fashion, Luke's "amazement" led to Jesus' defending himself and the people becoming

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furious, to the point of wanting to throw Jesus head-first down the cliff. Perhaps, “gracious words” (*tois logois tes charitos*, literally, “words of grace”) really means “words about grace.” The people in the synagogue of Jesus’ home town were probably furious when they heard Jesus talking about God taking care of the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. That Jesus would make such an assertion infuriated the home-town folks.

From this perspective, the synagogue crowd’s “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?” is a critical question. Where does the home-town boy get off making statements like the one Jesus just made? Note that Luke omits the reference to Jesus’ kin found in Mark 6:3 and Matt 13:55-56.

Jesus challenges the people with a statement about a physician, similar to one in the rabbinic *Genesis Rabbah* 23:4, that speaks of the need to prove oneself in one’s native environment. Jesus then defends himself with a proverbial-like saying, “No prophet is accepted in his own native place.” This saying, in slightly different forms, is the only saying of Jesus that is found in all four canonical gospels (see Matt 13:57; Mark 6:4; John 4:44). It is also found in the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* (*G. Thom.* 31). A third piece of Jesus self-defense is his mention of two great biblical heroes, revered prophets who worked miracles outside of their native territory. Elijah worked a miracle on behalf of a Gentile woman who lived on the Phoenician coast, in modern Lebanon (1 Kings 17:1-6). Elisha was instrumental in the healing of Naaman, a general in the army of the Syrian king, Aram (2 Kings 5:1-14).

Jesus’ hearers were unconvinced. They burned with rage against Jesus. They wanted to kill him but Jesus escaped from their midst.

BROKEN FOR US:

Jesus words that the good news and the blessings of messianic salvation are not reserved for the in-crowd attracted life-threatening hostility. Jesus, nevertheless, persisted in the mission that God, through the spirit, entrusted to him.

Our proclamation of the gospel message should be true to the gospel message and our prophetic calling. We are not called to preach to people who want their ears tickled (cf. 2 Tim 4:4); we are called to preach the gospel as Jesus preached it. We dare not shy away from the challenge of today’s reading, refuting the idea that God’s blessing and his good news are destined for the in-crowd and only for them, as if the marginalized and outsiders need not apply.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

February 10, 2013

LITURGY:

Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 describes the call of Isaiah during a vision that occurs while Isaiah was in the temple.

1 Corinthians 15:1-15 features one of the church’s oldest creedal formulas.

Luke 5:1-11 is Luke’s version of the call of the first disciples. As it stands, it has no clear parallel in the other Synoptic gospels. On the other hand, some features of the story are similar to those found in Mark and Matthew’s description of the call of the first

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disciples (Mark 1:16-20; Matt 4:18). The story about the miraculous catch of fish resembles a post-resurrection story found in John 21:1-11.

Within the narrative frame of Luke’s gospel, the episode appears after Jesus has begun his public ministry. He has already given his inaugural discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30), performed an exorcism (Luke 4:31-37), healed Simon’s mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39), cured many people (Luke 4:40-41), and preached in a number of Judean synagogues (Luke 4:42-44). Apparently Luke intentionally deferred the telling of this story until after he had given his readers a survey of the kind of ministry that would be Jesus’.

Three aspects of this story should be noted. The first is that, whereas previously in Luke’s narrative Jesus’ teaching authority is confirmed by his exorcisms and healing miracles, now Jesus’ teaching authority is confirmed by a nature miracle, a miraculous catch of a great quantity of fish. Second, the call of Simon and the mission of catching men occur after Jesus’ cure of his mother-in-law, a reversal of the sequence of the incidents in Mark and Matthew. Third, the focus of the story is the call of Simon. In some ways and with different imagery, the story is Luke’s account of the primacy of Peter found in Matt 16:17-19. It anticipates Jesus’ words to Simon during the Last Supper (Luke 22:31-34). Simon is identified by name five times in the story. Only in Luke 5:8—and for the first time in Luke’s gospel—is he also identified by his nickname, “Peter” (cf. Luke 6:14).

The scene that Luke sets is of Jesus standing on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret, aka the Sea of Galilee, sharing the word of God with a crowd of people. In Luke’s gospel, the “crowd” is a stock character, a generalized reference to Jesus’ audience (cf. Luke 4:42; 5:1, 2, 15, 19, 29; 6:17, 19; and thirty other places in the gospel; see also Luke 3:7, 10).

Jesus sees some fishermen cleaning up after a night’s work, apparently a fruitless night’s work (Luke 5:5). Luke’s mention of two boats recalls the two boats implied in the Markan-Matthean story of the call of the first disciples (Mark 1:16-20; Matt 4:18). Mark’s story mentions only the boat belonging to Zebedee. Jesus gets into one of the boats, Simon’s, and asks him to push out from the shore. When he does so, Jesus sits—the rabbinic posture while teaching—and teaches the crowd. Simon’s boat has become Jesus’ pulpit.

Thereafter, the narrative focuses on Jesus’ dialogue with Simon but others are on the horizon. The narrative mentions their nets (in the plural), presents Simon as saying “we have worked hard all night,” speaks of their partners (*metochois*, indicating a business relationship and anticipating the sharing of temporal goods found in Acts), identifies these partners as the sons of Zebedee, and concludes with “they left everything and followed him.” They became disciples, followers, of Jesus.

In this episode Simon appears in the Lukan gospel for the first time. Luke did not mention that Simon was present when his mother-in-law was healed (cf. Luke 4:38-39). Simon is clearly the spokesperson for the disciples. He addresses Jesus as “Master” (*epistata*), a form of respectful address that implies previous acquaintance with Jesus. Simon is a sinful man (v. 8). Not only does the narrative description of Simon in this manner recall the motif of prophetic unpreparedness (see the call of Moses in Exod 6:28-30; of Isaiah in Isa 6:5, found in the first reading in today’s liturgy, of Jeremiah in Jer 1:6, and of Paul in Acts 9:1-5), it also anticipates the theme of sinners who respond

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positively to Jesus in the Lukan narrative (Luke 5:30, 32; 7:34, 39; 15:1-2, 7, 10; 18:13; 19:7). The narrative so focuses on Peter that Jesus's words about catching people is addressed only to Simon. Simon's brother Andrew is not specifically mentioned in the Lukan story (cf. Luke 6:14).

BROKEN FOR US:

With its focus on Simon, the spokesperson, for a band of fishermen, this story teaches that the role of church leaders is to bring people from their perils, symbolized by the perils of the deep encountered by fish, and bring them to shore, the place where Jesus stands.

Our mission as leaders and members of the church is not to weary of our principal task, bringing others to Jesus.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

February 17, 2013

LITURGY:

Deut 26:4-10 contains a reflection on Israel's exodus experience.

Romans 10:8-13 speaks about the saving proclamation of faith.

Luke 4:1-13 constitutes Luke's version of the temptation of Jesus. The narrative is unlike the parallel accounts in Mark (1:12-13) and Matthew (Matt 4:1-11) insofar as Luke combines material of the Sayings Source (Q), also found in Matthew, with the main elements of the Markan story. As a result Luke presents his readers with an image of Jesus having nothing to eat and being tempted by the devil for forty days. Obviously, Jesus was hungry at the end of this "biblical" period of time and the scene is set for the sequence of three individual temptations that Luke has taken over from the Sayings Source.

Peculiar to the Lukan account is the emphasis on the twice-mentioned Holy Spirit in the setting of the scene. Luke describes Jesus as "filled with the Holy Spirit," a characteristic turn of phrase that Luke uses to speak about prophetic figures in his two-part story (cf. Luke 1:15, 41, 67; Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 11:24; 13:9). The Spirit of God is in control of the entire scenario. The Spirit led Jesus into the desert so that Jesus could be tempted by the devil.

Mark identifies the tempter as Satan. Matthew calls him the devil, the tempter, and Satan. Luke is consistent in identifying the tempter as "the devil" (*diabolos*). The epithet appears in all four sections of the Lukan narrative, the introduction and the accounts of three individual temptations.

The sequence of the three temptations is different from that found in Matthew. Both narratives begin with the bread temptation but differ from one another in their order of presenting the other two temptations. Scholars dispute among themselves as to which of the two orders is more faithful to the order in the Sayings Source.

There is, however, no doubt that Luke's order is faithful to Luke's theological emphases and represents a logical geographic itinerary. The first temptation is in the desert, the second in a high area, presumably the Judean hills/mountains, the third in Jerusalem itself. As for theology, Luke's order has the temptation in the temple in the

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climactic position, reflecting Luke’s singular emphasis among the Synoptists on Jerusalem and its temple. Moreover, the first and third temptations begin with the devil’s taunting “If you are the Son of God.” This raises the issue of Jesus’ identity, revealed at his baptism (Luke 3:21-22, read on January 13, the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus) and explained in Jesus’ homily in the synagogue of Nazareth (4:14-21, read on January 27, the third Sunday in Ordinary Time).

The homily reveals that Jesus was not to work miracles for the sake of working miracles. Thus, in response to the devil’s first challenge—a more modest challenge than the challenge in Matt 4:3, where Jesus is challenged to produce a bakery full of bread—Jesus rejects the challenge with a quotation from Deut 8:3.

The homily—still to come in Luke’s gospel but read to our congregations a month ago—teaches that Jesus was not anointed to be a king. Rather; he was anointed by the Spirit for another kind of mission. His mission was set forth by God and so Jesus responds to the devil’s suggestion that he take control over the kingdoms of the world and manifest his glory with a dismissive “You shall worship the Lord, your God and him alone shall you serve,” words taken from Deut 6:13. Jesus was not called to rule, to be a political figure.

The third temptation focuses on the temple. The devil challenges Jesus to show off. After all, if God commands his angels to prevent David from stubbing his foot (Ps 91:11-12), how much more—the *a fortiori* argument well attested in the accounts of Jewish disputes—will God urge his angels to take care of his own son.

The devil engaged Jesus’ in a battle of the scriptures; Jesus retorts with a quotation of Deut 6:16, “You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.” The response repeats the verb that described the purpose of Jesus’ presence in the desert (cf. v. 1).

“If you are the Son of God” brackets the three temptations, making of them a single literary unit. With the third temptation, the scenario has come to its end. The devil leaves Jesus only to return as an antagonist later in the Lukan story (cf. Luke 11:14-20).

BROKEN FOR US:

A story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is used as the gospel lection on the First Sunday of Lent in all three years of the triennial liturgical cycle. The lections are different from one another.

One often-overlooked feature of Luke’s story is that it is one episode in a series of connected scenes that reveal what it means for Jesus to be the son of God. That Jesus is the son of God is proclaimed in the baptismal episode (Luke 3:21-22). That the son of God belongs to human history is the point of the genealogy (Luke 3:23-38). That the son of God did not come among us as a miracle-worker, political figure, or priestly/temple figure is the crux of the temptation narrative (Luke 4:1-13).

That the son of God is a prophetic figure with a ministry to the marginalized and non-Jews is the focus of the following episode, Jesus’ appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth and his banishment from his home town (Luke 4:16-30), a two-part story that was read on January 27 and February 3, the third and fourth Sundays in Ordinary Time.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

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February 24, 2013

LITURGY:

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 tells the story of Abraham's covenant-making sacrifice.

Philippians 3:17-4:1 speaks about our heavenly citizenship.

Luke 9:28b-36 is a scene that Luke describes as taking-place about a week (cf. Luke 9:28a) after a group of sayings which include mention of the Son of Man coming in glory (Luke 9:23-27). Jesus takes his inner circle of three disciples, Peter and the sons of Zebedee, John and James, up a mountain to pray. The episode is also found in Mark and Matthew (Mark 9:2-10; Matt 17:1-9) but only Luke among the three Synoptic authors says that the purpose of Jesus' ascent of the mountain is prayer. Jesus is engaged in prayer, just as he was at the post-baptismal theophany (Luke 3:21-22).

Unlike the other two Synoptists, Luke says that the appearance of Jesus' face was changed. With them, he also says that Jesus clothes became radiantly white (cf. Dan 7:9, where the Ancient of Days had snow-white clothes). The law-giver, Moses, and the great prophet, Elijah, were talking with Jesus. The pair is cited in reverse order from the way that they are presented in Mark. Luke's order is not only chronologically correct; it also conforms to Luke's interest in Moses, an interest that especially appears in Acts, the second part of Luke's opus (cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* [Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991] 18-20). Both Moses (cf. Exod 24:15-18) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:8-13) had had an experience of God's presence on a mountain.

Among the Synoptists, Luke alone mentions the topic of the conversation among the three prophets, namely, Jesus' "exodus" and what he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem, echoing the Lukan narrative's particular interest in Jerusalem. Luke alone adds the homey detail that the three disciples had fallen asleep. Apparently it was the luminescence of Jesus' glory (vv. 31-32; cf. Luke 2:32) that wakened them. The mention of Jesus' glory (*doxa*) appears only in the Lukan account of the Transfiguration.

Fully awake, the disciples were able to appreciate Jesus and saw the two biblical heroes talking with him. Ever the ready spokesperson for the disciples, Peter blurted out, "Master (*epistata*, cf. Luke 5:5) it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" without realizing what he was saying. He knew a good thing when he saw one and didn't want the experience to end. Mention of the tents alludes to the Feast of Booths, a pilgrimage festival that, with the passage of time, had acquired eschatological significance (cf. Zech 14:16-21).

Things moved quickly with the appearance of a heavenly cloud which enveloped the three disciples. Not surprisingly, they were terrified. Then came a voice, speaking to the disciples, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." Whereas the heavenly voice speaks of Jesus as "God's beloved Son" in Mark 9:7 and Matt 17:5, in Luke the voice identifies Jesus as "God's chosen (*eklelegmenos*) Son" (Luke 9:35). The descriptive epithet is probably an allusion to the Servant of Yahweh, a prophetic figure who was destined to suffer and then be vindicated (cf. Isa 41:9; 43:10; 44:1). That the disciples should listen to Jesus is emphasized in all three Synoptic Gospels.

When the heavenly voice had spoken its piece, the experience came to an end. Without being ordered to do so (cf. Mark 9:9-10; Matt 17:9), the three disciples kept the experience to themselves.

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BROKEN FOR US:

In circumstances similar to those of last Sunday, the story of Jesus' Transfiguration is read on the Second Sunday of Lent in each of the three years of the liturgical cycle.

Were we homilists to concentrate on the particularly Lukan features of this transfiguration story, we should note that by means of the conversation between Jesus and the Old Testament figures the evangelist emphasizes that the Transfiguration provides just a glimpse of Jesus' glory as he moves towards Jerusalem and his farewell from this life. The glimpse provides encouragement to the disciples as they walk with Jesus to the denouement of the narrative that will take place in Jerusalem.

The disciples are seemingly indifferent. They fall asleep, unaware of what is happening around them. Are we who listen to the reading of the story like the disciples, oblivious to what is happening around us? Or do we try to stay wide awake, ready to look and listen?