

An excerpt from “Breaking the Word: Homiletics,” *Breaking the Word: Homiletics,* Emmanuel 119:3 (2013) 261-281.

Last November 13, after a 227-11-4 vote, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops made a timely statement. They issued a document entitled “Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily.” This was the bishops’ first document on preaching since they had published “Fulfilled in Your Hearing” thirty years previously. The recent document deserves a reading by every homilist but it has been widely neglected.

Among other things, the bishops noted that new circumstances and the needs of our times call for further reflection on the Sunday homily. They pointed to many such circumstances including the individualism of our society, the sexual abuse crisis, the widening economic gap between the rich and the poor, consumerism, racism, and the alienation of so many people from the faith.

Much of the exhortation rehearses familiar ground but the bishops observe, correctly, that the Sunday liturgy remains the basic setting in which most adult Catholics encounter Christ and their Christian faith. They also noted that many of these Catholics are not well educated in matters of faith.

Accordingly, following the lead of Benedict XVI in his post-synodal apostolic exhortations, “*Sacrosanctum caritatis*” (2007) and “Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church (2010), the bishops say that, “the catechetical aim of the homily should not be neglected.” An effective homily, they note, takes its cue from the very nature of the Scriptures, but its teaching function is not to be neglected. The homily is neither an exegesis of the Scriptures nor a dogmatic exposition, but preaching the Word should nonetheless be “doctrinal and catechetical.”

In my own preaching, I always try to teach something and allow the congregation to deepen their understanding of the faith. How gratified I am, when a well-educated Catholic recently said to me, “I always learn something in your homilies.”

As I was developing my reflections on this spring’s gospel lections, I was struck by the way in which the first readings give us ample opportunity for catechesis on the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ prayer for the unity of his disciples was a stark reminder of how much ecumenism has become “a blast from the past.” In the context of the political discussions on abortion and gun control, I could but think of Jesus’ own pro-life stance. And as so many women are searching for a model of faith, why do so many of us relegate Mary Magdalene to the status of a village whore, which she was not?

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THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

June 2, 2013

LITURGY

Genesis 14:18-20 describes Melchizedek’s offer of food and drink to Abram (see v. 24 for Abram’s response), the blessing of Abram, and the latter’s gift of tithes to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High.

1 Cor 11:23-26 contains the oldest narrative of the institution of the Eucharist.

Luke 9:11b-17 is Luke’s account of Jesus feeding a hungry crowd. Unlike Matthew and Mark who have two such stories, Luke has only one (cf. John 6:1-13) which parallels Matt 14:13-21 and Mark 6:32-44. Luke has reworked his Markan source in such a way that he highlights “The Twelve.” His story begins by having the Twelve, rather than “the disciples” coming to Jesus with the suggestion that he send the crowd away so that they can get something to eat. He has transposed to an earlier section of the account the remark about the size of the crowd (*andres pentakischilioi* v.14a; cf. Mark 6:44). Thus, the narrative concludes with the mention of the symbolic twelve baskets. This emphasis on the Twelve links the narrative to the missionary instructions given to the Twelve in Luke 9:1-6.

The miracle story is rife with symbolism. The location in “a deserted place” and the grouping of people recall the exodus story in which God fed his people with the gift of manna (cf. Exod 16:4-36). The role of the Twelve in assisting Jesus in feeding the people—beginning with Jesus’ “Give them some food yourselves” (v. 13) —points to the role of the Twelve in serving people and their role in table fellowship (cf. Luke 22:24-27; Acts 4:35; 6:1-2). The ritual gesture of taking bread, blessing it, breaking it, and giving it (v. 16) anticipates the gestures that Jesus will use at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19), the institution of the eucharist.

Every miracle story follows a three-part schema in which the narrator describes a need, a ritual gesture or authoritative utterance by the miracle-worker and a proof of the miracle. In the story of the feeding of the five thousand, the evangelist summarizes the proof in this way: “They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets” (v. 17). The first sentence alone would have sufficed to say that the miracle worked but in Luke’s narrative, there is something more. That the crowd was satisfied recalls the beatitude about the hungry being filled (*chortasthesesthe*, in the future). The beatitude is realized in Jesus’ feeding the crowd.

The second sentence in the proof of the miracle gives rise to additional reflection. That there were leftovers speaks of the abundance of God’s gifts to his people and recalls Elisha feeding the people when God said “They shall eat and have some left” (2 Kgs 4:44). Abundance of food is not the result of the power of money (cf. v. 12) but comes from the power and munificence of God. The more-than-enough food anticipates the eschatological banquet (cf. Luke 14:15-24). Luke Timothy Johnson notes that the ritual meal of the Qumran sectarians likewise anticipated the eschatological banquet. Cf. *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 147.

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BROKEN FOR US

The readings of today’s liturgy—all three of them—and the feast that is celebrated suggest that today’s homily should focus on the eucharist. There are points that should not be forgotten. One is that the eucharist is the gift of *food*. By means of the eucharist God feeds his people. Another is that the gift of the eucharist is part of the trajectory of God’s dealing with his people. It was prepared for by the biblical narratives about Moses and Elisha. It is realized in Jesus’ feeding the crowd and in our celebration of eucharist. It anticipates the eschatological banquet of the consummated kingdom.

Still another is that God’s feeding his people is a communal event. God feeds those who are assembled, the people in the desert, the hundred people fed by Elisha, the five thousand men fed by Jesus, and the apostles at the Last Supper. God’s gift of food to his people always has a communal dimension. The “I” with which many receive the eucharist should give way to the “we” of the people of God.

TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 9, 2013

LITURGY

Kings 17:17-25 tells the story of the raising from the dead of the son of the widow of Zarephath in response to Elijah’s prayer.

Galatians 1:11-19 begins a series of five readings from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.

Luke 7:11-17 resumes the semi-continuous reading of the Gospel according to Luke. The semi-continuous reading was broken off after February 10, the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Today’s passage tells the story of Jesus raising the only son of the widow of Nain from the dead. The story is found only in Luke among the Four Gospels and belongs to the body of Lukan material that portrays Jesus as a prophet. The great prophet Elijah raised a widow’s son from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24, today’s first reading) as did Elisha (2 Kgs 4:32-37). Jesus, the prophet, could do no less.

Followed by his disciples and a large crowd, Jesus went to the town of Nain, a town about twenty-three miles southwest from his base of operations in Capernaum. As he approached the city, a dead man was being carried through the gates of the city. Apparently he was being carried out for burial; hence, the large crowd of people from Nain who were following the bier. At the time burial grounds were located outside the city walls, so as to preserve the inhabitants from defilement. That the young man was the only son of his widowed mother makes the story all the more poignant; with his death she had lost her sole financial support.

In verse 13, Luke introduces Jesus as the Lord (*ho kyrios*) for the first time in his gospel narrative. Subsequently Luke will regularly use the title for Jesus. Now he tells us that the Lord was moved with pity (*esplanchnisthe*) for the widow. The verb, whose literal connotation

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suggests that Jesus’ innards were affected, is often used to describe an experience of profound emotion. Full of compassion, Jesus tells the mother not to sob any more.

The resuscitation takes place as a result of Jesus’ authoritative utterance, “Young man, I tell you, arise” (cf. Luke 8:54). At this the young man sat up and began to speak. Then Jesus restored him to his mother. Luke uses the very words that are found in 1 Kings where it said that Elijah “gave the son to his mother” (1 Kgs 17:23). The resuscitation also prepares the way for Jesus’ response to the inquisitive disciples of John the Baptist which includes, among many miracles, that the dead are raised (Luke 7:32).

To the proof of the miracle in verse 15, Luke adds an important choral response. Filled with awe, the crowd identifies Jesus as a great prophet who had been raised up in their midst. This recalls the promise of a prophet made to Moses (cf. Deut 18:15, 18). It echoes the response to what had been accomplished through Elijah in 1 Kgs 17:24. The crowd recognizes that God is at work in what Jesus has done in raising the young man from the dead. God has indeed visited his people (cf. Luke 1:68).

That news of what happened spread rapidly throughout the region is a motif that often appears in the Synoptics’ accounts of Jesus’ miracles (cf. Luke 4:37; 5:15; etc.). In this particular instance, the motif also helps the evangelist to prepare for the message that John’s disciples brought to him (Luke 7:18).

BROKEN FOR US

Jesus’ restoration of life to the son of the widow of Nain suggests that he was “pro-life.” Being pro-life was, according to one of the Fourth Gospel’s mission statements, the purpose of his mission (cf. John 10:10b). But was Jesus really pro-life, as people understand that expression today. For many, Jesus’ action in raising the man to life was not a pro-life action. All he did was raise a man from the dead and restore him to his mother.

What does it mean to be “pro-life?” After last December’s tragic shooting in a Newtown, CT, elementary school, when asked about their attitude towards gun control some pro-lifers responded that that was not what they were about.

My own diocesan weekly published a front page article that featured a newly elected pro-life legislator. After Newtown, she revealed that she was pro-gun. Another person featured on the front page proclaimed that tax dollars should not be used for abortion but that every woman has a right to abortion insurance coverage if she has the means to pay for it.

During the lengthy war in Iraq, I had a conversation with a man who was pro-life. He thought that the war in Iraq was justified—despite papal condemnations—so that we destroy them on their own turf .

Today’s gospel reading should prompt the reflective believer to consider what it means when he or she claims to be “pro-life.”

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ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 16, 2013

LITURGY

2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13 contains the prophet Nathan’s rebuke of David after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah.

Galatians 2:16, 19-21 is one of the important New Testament passages in which Paul writes about justification through faith.

Luke 7:36-8:3 tells the story, found only in Luke, of the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus’ feet.

The setting of the story is that of a meal hosted by Simon. He was a Pharisee, a law-abiding Jew. This characterization of Simon is an important feature of the narrative. Four times in verses 36-39 Luke mentions that Simon is a Pharisee. Simon is an upright Jew; the woman, a sinner. Contrast of juxtaposed figures is an important element in literary characterization (see my, “Who Are You? Comparison/Contrast and Fourth Gospel Characterization,” in Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* [Library of New Testament Studies 449; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013], 79-95).

The meal apparently takes place in the atrium of the home where Jesus is reclining on a cushion, the normal posture of those at a “proper dinner.” This allows the woman who had heard about Jesus’ presence at the meal to come by and anoint his feet with myrrh, which she had carried in an alabaster jar. She is characterized as a sinner but Luke does not elaborate on the nature of her sin, except to suggest that she was known to be a sinner. There is no suggestion that her sin involved anything sexual. In the culture of the times, her sinfulness may not have even implied her personal sin—her husband may have been involved in a sinful occupation, for example. Nonetheless, the woman’s weeping seems to suggest her personal repentance.

Simon takes umbrage at this association of a sinner with his guest (cf. Luke 5:30; 7:29-30). Within himself he questions whether Jesus was a real prophet. As a Pharisee, he assumed that a prophet had to uphold certain “standards.” Reading his reaction—Luke does not focus on Jesus being a mind-reader—Jesus asks to speak. Then his host, Simon, addressing Jesus as “teacher” (*didaskale*), a common form of address to Jesus in Luke’s gospel (cf. Luke 3:12; 9:38; 10:15; 11:45; 12:13; 18:18; 19:39; 20:21, 28, 39; 21:7), gives Jesus leave to speak. As so often in Luke’s gospel, Jesus is the featured after-dinner speaker.

Jesus’ short speech is the well-known parable of two debtors, one of whom owed about a year and a half’s ordinary wages, the other just a month and a half’s wages. The “debt” language (*chreopheiletai*, *opheilen*) recalls the “debt” language of the Lord’s Prayer (*opheilemata*, *opheiletais*, Matt 5:12). Simon’s response about forgiving the debt (*echarisato*) uses language that implies graciousness on the part of the one to whom the debt was owed. The verb *echarisato* is part of a word group that includes *charis*, commonly translated as grace.

Jesus continues the dialogue by saying that Simon had not welcomed him into his home with the usual gestures of hospitality. He may have invited Jesus as a guest but he certainly did

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not welcome him as a respected prophet. In contrast, the woman has compensated for each of the gestures that Simon had failed to perform, washing, kissing, and anointing. Because of what she has done, showing so much love for Jesus, Jesus declares that her many sins have been forgiven. The passive voice of the verb “forgive” suggests that her sins have been forgiven by God.

The story concludes with a silent choral response, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” The pensive questioning response is a sign of awe and wonderment (cf. Luke 7:25b). To the woman, Jesus says, “your faith has saved you.” This is the first time that Luke links together salvation and faith but it will not be the last (cf. Luke 8:12, 48; 17:19; 18:42). “Go in peace” was the common “goodbye” of that time.

The final three verses of today’s reading (Luke 8:1-3) begin with a summary statement about Jesus’ ministry. Such summary statements are part of the written gospel tradition, beginning with Mark 1:14-15. What is distinctive about Luke’s summary is the attention that he draws to those who accompanied Jesus, the Twelve and a group of female patrons who supported Jesus during his missionizing. As so often in his story about Jesus, the evangelist juxtaposes men and women.

Luke names three of the women: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. His two part introduction of Mary—as a woman from Magdala, the fishing village, and as a woman who has been exorcised by Jesus—indicates that this is the first time that she has appeared in his narrative. She is not to be identified with the sinful woman of the preceding pericope.

BROKEN FOR US

In a homily, *Homily 33*, most likely delivered in 591, Pope Gregory the Great linked together the story of the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in Luke 7, Mary of Bethany who also anointed Jesus’ feet (John 12:3), and the figure of Mary Magdalene. That homily gave rise to the myth of Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute. She appears as such in medieval art and continues to be so characterized by many Christians today, even by some who should know better. Perhaps the teasing salaciousness of the image makes it a best seller.

Today’s homilist might well dispel the myth and speaks about Mary Magdalene. Since today’s reading includes both Luke’s introduction of Mary Magdalene and the story of the sinful woman, it challenges the homilist to speak about the relationship between the two women. The gospel lection encourages and urges us to speak about the fact that the sinful woman was not Mary Magdalene. Mary was the faithful patron of Jesus, who continued to be with him to the end (Luke 23:49; 23:55-24:3). She is the woman whom Patristic tradition honored as “the apostle to the apostles” (cf. Luke 24:6-11; John 20:17-18).

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TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 23, 2013

LITURGY

Zachariah 12:10-11, 13:1 tells about Israel mourning for someone who had been pierced. It is virtually impossible to determine who the “pierced one” is.

Galatians 3:26-29 contains important teaching about the significance of baptism. Baptism creates a unity in Christ that transcends ethnic, social, and gender divisions.

Luke 9:18-24 contains an account of the first of the three passion predictions in the Gospel according to Luke (cf. Luke 9:43b-45; 18:31-34). The reading is easily divided into two parts, the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples (vv. 19-21) and the instruction on the Son of Man (vv. 22-24). Unlike Matthew and Mark who set the scene in Caesarea Philippi (cf. Matt 16:13; Mark 8:27), Luke omits the geographical reference and introduces the scene by noting that Jesus was praying. This is an important feature of Luke’s narrative, drawing attention not only to the prayer of Jesus but also to the importance of the narrative that follows (cf. Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:28; etc.).

Jesus initiates the dialogue by asking the disciples (*hoi mathetai*) what people (*hoi ochloi*, “the crowds”) were saying about him. The disciples respond by saying that some thought that he was John the Baptist returned to life, Elijah *redivivus*, or some other prophet restored to life. Mark 8:29, followed by Matt 16:14, simply says “one of the prophets.” Luke, however, draws attention to prophetic figures being raised from the dead, thus anticipating verse 21, “and on the third day be raised.” The disciples’ response sums up the very things that Herod had heard about Jesus, including the mention of some other prophet come back to life, causing the tetrarch to be perplexed (cf. Luke 9:7-10).

Jesus pressed the issue as he pointedly—note the emphatic *hymeis*, “you” in the Greek text—asked the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” Always the spokesperson for the disciples, Peter responds “The Christ of God,” God’s anointed one, a response that is different from the one found in the other Synoptic Gospels. In Mark 8:29 Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ; in Matt 16:16 Peter says that Jesus is the “Messiah, the son of the living God.” Peter’s answer elicits a rebuke from Jesus (cf. Mark 8:32-33; Matt 16:22-23) who then tells disciples not to tell anyone about the confession (cf. Matt 16:20), a more specified command than is found in Mark.

Luke’s specification (“this” in v. 21) sets up a contrast between the “God’s Anointed” of Peter’s confession and the self-referential “Son of Man” which begins the first passion prediction and the second part of today’s reading. The prediction is remarkably similar in all three accounts (cf. Mark 8:31; Matt 16:21). It is as “Son of Man”—an expression that basically means a male human being—that Jesus is able to be acted upon by others, made to suffer, rejected, and killed by other human beings and be raised from the dead by God. The reference to the elders, chief priests, and scribes is really a reference to the Sanhedrin.

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Jesus draws from the passion prediction an important inference for his disciples. If they are to come after him, to follow him as disciples, they must be willing to bear the cost of discipleship just as he bore the cost of his ministry among them. Self-denial is an ongoing effort as the present tense of the verb “come” (*erchesthai*) and the “daily” (*kath’hemeran*) indicate. Some of the moralistic philosophers of the time, such as Epictetus (e. g., *Discourses* 3.22.54-57) and Dio Chrysostom (e. g., *Orations* 77/78.41-42), spoke of the importance of self-denial in the pursuit of wisdom or for the sake of service to others. The self-denial that Jesus urges is of another sort. It is self-denial for his sake and the sake of his gospel. Whoever engages in that kind of self-denial will have true life.

BROKEN FOR US

As is often the case, the two distinct parts of today’s gospel lection force the homilist to make a choice. He or she must concentrate on one or the other part of the reading.

Should the homilist choose to focus on the first part of the lection, verses 19-21, he or she might speak about the images of Jesus that abound in the world of today. The issue is timely. Not only do we live in a society whose members follow many different religions; we also live also in a society in which many have abandoned the faith. How many times have we heard that the second largest “religious group” in the United States is “ex-Catholics?” What images of Jesus led them to abandon the faith that they had earlier embraced.

Then there is the issue of one’s personal images of Jesus. What are they? Are they orthodox images or mere figments of our imagination? Are they faithful to the portrayals of Jesus found in the Scriptures.

Should the homilist choose to focus on the second part of the reading, verses 22-24, he or she can talk about the cost of discipleship. What are we willing to give up for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of our Christian faith? Often the answer is not something financial or material, it is often an attitude or an ideology?

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

June 30, 2013

LITURGY

1 Kings 19:16, 19-21 describes Elijah’s invitation to Elisha to become his disciple.

Galatians 5:1, 13-18 speaks about Christian freedom and the fact that the entire law can be summed up in a single sentence, you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18b).

Luke 9:51-62 begins the evangelist’s description of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-18:14), a narrative that occupies about one-third of his story about Jesus. The two parts of today’s reading (vv. 51-56; 57-62) begin with a reference to that journey (vv. 51, 57). In keeping with Luke’s portrayal of Jesus as a prophet, the reading contains subtle allusions to the great prophets, Moses and Elijah.

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The journey from Galilee takes Jesus and the accompanying band through Samaria, roughly the central part of Palestine. Jesus “resolutely determined” (*to prosopon esterisen*, literally, “set his face,” an expression that recalls the resolute determination of Ezekiel to go to Jerusalem in Ezek 21:7-8) to make his way to Jerusalem. That he sent messengers (*angelous*) before him recalls the story of Moses in Exod 23:20-21 (cf. Luke 7:27).

The messengers were to prepare the way for Jesus, but the Samaritans were not receptive because Jesus’ group was on its way to Jerusalem. The animosity between the Samaritans and Jews was legendary and is reflected in the gospel stories about the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19) and the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42, esp. v. 9). Returning to Jesus, the messengers suggested that they might follow Elijah’s example and bring down fire upon their opponents to destroy them (cf. 2 Kgs 1:10). Jesus was indeed a prophet but a prophet of another sort. He was not out to destroy but to save (cf. Luke 19:10). Hence he rebuked the disciples just as he had previously rebuked them when they misconstrued what Jesus was about (cf. Luke 9:21).

The second part of the gospel reading (vv. 57-62), containing material from the Sayings Source (cf. Matt 8:18-12), features the challenge of discipleship by means of a short dialogue between Jesus and a would-be disciple. The first would-be disciple is ready to follow Jesus anywhere but Jesus tells him, using metaphorical language, that he is without a proper home. This was also the situation of some itinerant philosophers in the first century C. E.

The second volunteer was ready to follow Jesus, but had one more thing to do, namely, bury his father. The obligation to do so was an important element of filial piety (cf. Tob 4:3-4; 6:13-34; 14:11-13). Jesus dismisses the volunteer’s suggestion with an enigmatic “Let the dead bury the dead” and invites him to engage in the preaching of the kingdom of God.

The third would-be disciple has another request, that he be allowed time to say goodbye to family and friends. Jesus’ use of the image of the plow recalls the biblical story of the call of Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19-21, today’s first reading) in which Elijah who had tapped Elisha to be his disciple allowed him to go home and celebrate before taking up his new role. Jesus would have none of that.

The bottom line is that following Jesus demands radical discipleship.

BROKEN FOR US

Last week’s gospel lection spoke of the cost of discipleship. Today’s selection continues the theme. There is a price to be paid if one is to be a disciple of Jesus. It may demand the sacrifice of comforts that others have, a home and an opportunity to celebrate with friends and family. It may even involve the forgoing of otherwise important responsibilities. Following Jesus resolutely must have top priority in the life of the follower of Jesus.

While scholars and mystics appreciate the Fourth Gospel for its depth of theological and spiritual insight, preachers often find it a difficult gospel to preach. There are many reasons for this. Among them is that a good part of the gospel consists of extended discourses, whose several verses are intertwined with one another. Another is that the Fourth Gospel is replete with rich symbolism, which is sometimes difficult to understand. Still another reason why the gospel

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is so difficult to preach is the sometimes mystic heights to which it reaches. These receive symbolic expression in the eagle, long used as the symbol of the gospel’s anonymous and unknown author, popularly identified as “John.”

Apart from the summer-time use of John 6 in Cycle B, the Fourth Gospel does not appear in semi-continuous fashion in the church’s three-year cycle of Gospel readings. The Easter season does, however, allow the gospel to be proclaimed to our Christian faithful. This year the Johannine story of the woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11) serves as the gospel reading for the Fifth Sunday of Lent. All told, the coming Sundays--if the Easter vigil is to be included--provide us with six opportunities to preach on the Gospel according to John.

These Johannine readings provide us with a unique opportunity to see Jesus as the Beloved Disciple saw him. What a wonderful opportunity for us and our congregations to have, to fly on the wings of an eagle!