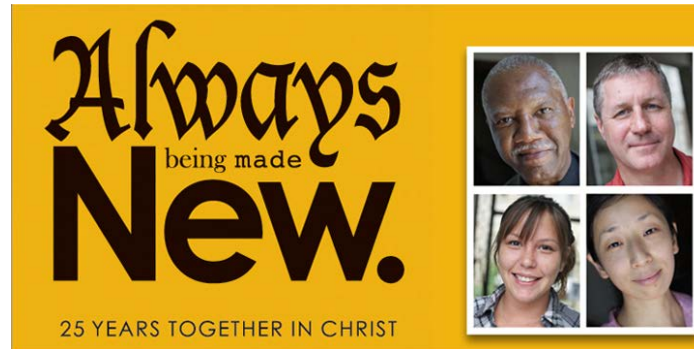




Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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2013 Churchwide Assembly Bible Studies

Background Papers

Community Conversations with Isaiah, Luke, 2 Corinthians, and Revelation

Included in this resource are four background papers for each of the biblical conversations to be held during the 2013 Churchwide Assembly. A participant's study booklet that contains the introductory materials as well as participant handouts for each day of biblical conversation and study is also available.

Here you will find more in-depth background material for each passage. This resource is intended for leaders and any others who wish to prepare for each day. The background material for Isaiah 42:1-12 was written by Wilbert "Wilk" S. Miller, pastor of First Lutheran in San Diego, California. The material for Luke 22:14-23 was written by Dirk Lange, professor of worship at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. The material for 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 was written by Julia Fogg, professor of New Testament scholar at Pacific Lutheran University and a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor who also serves as pastor at Messiah-Messias Lutheran Church in Pasadena. Preliminary work for 2 Corinthians was prepared by David Vásquez, campus pastor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. The material for Revelation 21:1-6 was written by Peggy Wuertele, pastor and Coordinator for Missional Leadership, Region 7. Further bibliographic information is available at the end of each of the following background pieces.

ELCA Churchwide Assembly Bible Study: Isaiah 42:1-12

Tuesday, August 13, 2013

Prepared by the Rev. Wilbert "Wilk" Miller

Isaiah 42:1-12

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not
quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
4 He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the
earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
5 Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens
and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth
and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
6 I am the LORD,
I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept
you;

I have given you as a covenant to the
people,
a light to the nations,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the
dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in
darkness.
8 I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

9 See, the former things have come to
pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of
them.
10 Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
11 Let the desert and its towns
lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits;
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the tops
of the mountains.
12 Let them give glory to the LORD,
and declare his praise in the
coastlands.

Luther, “Liturgy and Hymns” (LW* 53:333)

Of Psalm 96:1 (“Sing to the Lord a new song”), Luther writes, “For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it.”

Psalm 96:1 O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Literary and Historical Reflections

The book of Isaiah is often divided into three parts: chapters 1-39 (Proto-Isaiah); chapters 40-55 (Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah); chapters 56-66 (Trito-Isaiah). The first part of Isaiah, ascribed to Isaiah son of Amoz (1:1), was written in the eighth century B.C.E. Second Isaiah is believed to have been written toward the end of the Babylonian exile, shortly before 538 B.C.E. Trito-Isaiah is thought to have been written shortly after God’s people returned to Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile.

Second Isaiah, from which this passage comes, was written to the people in exile approximately 50 years after the southern kingdom, Judah, was captured by King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C.E. Many of Judah’s brightest and best had been hauled off to Babylonia as the royal city, Jerusalem, was conquered, and the beloved Temple destroyed.

While God’s people likely were not treated viciously while in exile, nevertheless, year-by-year, memories of the homeland faded and the songs they had once sung to God were gradually forgotten. Imagine forgetting the songs deep in your soul, songs you first heard before you could walk, songs like “Jesus Loves Me,” “A Mighty Fortress,” “Beautiful Savior,” and “Silent Night.” God’s people exchanged the beloved songs they had sung at weddings and funerals for the exotic songs of their captors that certainly did not go deep into the soul. One is reminded of Psalm 137: 1-4:

*By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us
one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

The text for our consideration, Isaiah 42:1-12, is the first of the four servant songs in Second Isaiah. These songs are used in the church’s worship life primarily during Holy Week. Isaiah 42:1-9 is used on Monday in Holy Week (it also used on the Baptism of Our Lord—Year A and on the day of Saint Barnabas, Apostle); Isaiah 49:1-6 on Tuesday; Isaiah 50: 4-11 on Wednesday as well as Palm Sunday; Isaiah 52:13–53:12 on Good Friday.

There has been considerable debate regarding who the servant was meant to be. While the Christian community has typically viewed the servant as Jesus, that is unlikely who Isaiah had in mind. Perhaps Isaiah viewed the servant as a personification of Israel, as the original Isaiah, or even as Cyrus of Persia who brought about the unlikely events that enabled God's people to return to Jerusalem.

Isaiah 42:1-4 contains three parts: in vv. 1-4 God calls the servant to bring forth justice in the earth; vv. 5-9 reveals the qualities of God who will bring about that justice; and vv. 9-12 speak of the new song of God to be declared by the servant which will sing of new things and, in those new things, glory will be given to the Lord.

Devotional Reflections and Questions about the Servant and the New Song

In the midst of exilic despair and amnesia, Second Isaiah came singing a new song (42:10), a counter-cultural song different from the enemy's, a song of hope and possibility. This song is not one of hopelessness and resignation like those the people of Judah had been singing as they wallowed in their piteous captivity. This song is upbeat, exciting, and visionary. This song is reminiscent of the Exodus tradition that recalls the remarkable actions of God freeing Israel from the stranglehold of Egypt's powerful Pharaoh.

This song sings of a servant. *Who believed or believes yet today that Judah's salvation and hope will come through such an unlikely servant singing such an unlikely song?* This servant will sing of "justice to the nations" in a nonviolent manner. This justice will not come by means of a servant who matched war horse with war horse, saber with saber, or might with might; instead this servant "will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (Isaiah 42:3, 4). What a vision!

This suffering servant will bring about justice "to the nations," and his teaching will spread through all the earth. A new song indeed! When one nation after another rises and falls by means of powerful armies and sophisticated weapons of war, this servant will bring about judgment and in so doing "will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..." (vv. 2, 3).

It is almost unimaginable that a "light to the nations" will come in such a gentle manner. This servant will announce a remarkable vision as God opens the eyes of the blind and brings out the prisoners from the dungeon (v. 7).

How must the people of God have felt when Isaiah came singing this new song? Think of a time when you have heard new music—maybe the Beatles for the first time in the 1960s, maybe "Lift Up the Cross" when the "new" *Lutheran Book of Worship* came out, maybe "Blessed Spring" or "All Are Welcome" when the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* resource was first placed in the pews. These new songs might have been jarring at first: we could not quite figure how the music went, the rhythms felt poles apart from anything we had heard. As with many new songs, there might have been some complaining and a longing to retreat to the familiar no matter how stale—it takes courage to sing a new song.

Theological and Missional Reflections and Questions

As noted, Second Isaiah's words inevitably cause the Christian community to think of Jesus, the one who refused to lift a finger against his enemies, who in his final week of life seemed so passive (cf., Passion Sunday). As Jesus drew closer and closer to death, he had few and fewer words to say, even as his arms were outstretched helplessly on the cross. *Is it any wonder we view Jesus as the suffering servant?* Through his death and resurrection comes our salvation, not by mighty armies and sophisticated weaponry, but through deep, nonviolent love. One is reminded of the words of Søren Kierkegaard when thinking of this suffering servant, "The tyrant dies and his rule ends; the martyr dies and his rule begins." (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, translated by Alexander Dru; Fontana/Collins, London, 1965: 151)

The prophets seem like "teeter-totter" characters, God's fools one might say. Their message is counter-cultural, almost always marching to the beat of a different drummer. Their songs are jarringly dissonant to the dominant culture's ears in every age and invite us to examine our own lives and the situations we face with new and critical eyes. When the prophets' songs sound overly judgmental and harsh, the dominant culture's songs are typically cheerful ditties that ignore the harsh realities many poor and oppressed people are facing. When the prophets' words are filled with hope, the dominant culture experiences massive depression and loses the capacity to envision a new tomorrow. As a more recent saying would have it, the prophets have the uncanny ability to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. And yet, no matter how disparaging the prophets' words may sound, Brevard Childs has noted that every prophet, somewhere, somehow, offers some word of hope. This is a warning for all self-proclaimed prophets! For those who cavalierly use the prophets' words in strident and thoughtless attempts to "afflict the comfortable," considerable care should be taken not to lose the sliver of hope no matter how obscure that hope may seem. Conversely, those who use words of hope willy-nilly when judgment is the necessary word should look carefully at their motives. Hope without judgment and judgment without hope are flimsy excuses for God's life-giving word. God's word is far richer than much of what is often passed off as "prophetic" and always bristles at any attempts to domesticate its vibrancy. God refuses to accept the sorry excuses of the status quo and yet God also inevitably errs on the side of mercy for all God's children.

Walter Brueggemann writes: "Without the preparatory work [of grief], the offer of hope is too easy and too much without context to have transformative power, much like having a Sunday victory without the loss of Friday...The first dimension of hope that responds to loss and grief is an utterance of newness that has the rhetorical effect of resituating the listing community..." (Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010:88).

Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" sings: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." It is in Israel's brokenness that somehow its heart is softened to make room for God's astonishing goodness. Even after harsh words of judgment, God offers hope and forgiveness for a broken people. One thinks of the many 12 Step programs that gather in our church social halls where people come facing enormous loss and grief in their lives; it is in the desperate pit of failure and addiction that hope so often arises and life is cherished

anew. The prophet's task is inevitably to step into such desperate situations, offering judgment when necessary and hope when it seems so far away.

Isaiah was certainly sensitive to the signs of the time. Isaiah 42:1-12 is teeming with hope. It is not time for judgment but rather for new hope: "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them" (42:1). What a remarkable message for forlorn people. When some could only see desolation, heartache, and continued captivity, Isaiah announced hope, freedom, and new things.

And the church today—as numerical statistics of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America go downward, as our beloved congregations shrink and in some cases close, how might the words of Second Isaiah give us hope—or should they?

Douglas John Hall writes:

"How could we have been listening to the Scriptures all these centuries and still be surprised and chagrined by the humiliation of Christendom? How could we have honored texts like the Beatitudes ("Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...") and yet formed in our collective mind the assumption that Christian faith would be credible only if it were popular, numerically superior, and respected universally? How could we have been contemplating the "despised and rejected" figure at the center of this faith for two millennia and come away with the belief that his body, far from being despised and rejected, ought to be universally approved and embraced?" (Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, Augsburg Fortress, 2003:70).

Could it be that God is calling our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our synods, and our congregations to follow in the footsteps of the suffering servant? Perhaps we are being called to the creative work of putting God's love to compelling new music for this age. Of course, to sing a new song in the midst of inexplicable heartache, massive change, and frightening decline, can be disconcerting. To sing songs that proclaim that God will never forsake us when so many signs seem to indicate otherwise requires enormous courage and breathtaking ingenuity. And yet, that is what God calls the servant church to do. Over and over again, God call us to sing a new song, when the old songs, no matter how worn and hackneyed, seem the preferable choice. We, the servants of God, are called to courageous music-making, teaching new cadences that will offer hope, unique melodies that will help people see God's presence again, and stunning harmonies that will lead all God's children to a new day.

As the hymn "The Church of Christ in Every Age" sings, "Then let the servant church arise, a caring church that longs to be a partner in Christ's sacrifice, and clothed in Christ's humanity." That is a new song!

Questions:

1. Do the words of Isaiah 42: 1-12 afflict you or comfort you? Why?
2. Given Isaiah 42: 1-12, what new song might you, your congregation, your synod, and/or our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America sing? In your context, does the song need to be one of judgment or of hope?
3. Prophets always seem countercultural, singing a new song when others are perfectly content with the songs of the past. In your mind, who are the prophets today and what songs are they singing?
4. What song has sustained you in your time of exile? Or think of a song that upon first hearing was almost impossible to sing and yet with time became a source of comfort and uplift. What are some characteristics of these songs?

Wilbert "Wilk" Miller serves as the pastor of First Lutheran Church in downtown San Diego where in addition to a vibrant worship life there is a considerable outreach ministry to the homeless and working poor. He grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia, and attended Wittenberg University, Yale Divinity School, and Lutheran School of Theology at Philadelphia (STM work in worship). He has served congregations in a variety of settings: Calvary Lutheran Church (inner-city Philadelphia); Augustana Lutheran Church, Washington, D.C. (downtown D.C.); and St. Paul's Lutheran Church (suburban Philadelphia in Ardmore, Pennsylvania).

ELCA Churchwide Assembly Bible Study: Luke 22:14-23

Wednesday, August 14, 2013

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Dirk Lange

Luke 22:14-23

14When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. 21But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. 22For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" 23Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this.

Luther, Small Catechism (Sacrament of the Altar)

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? Answer: The words "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.

Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament" (LW 35:67)

By means of this sacrament [of holy communion], all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community. This is the true unity of Christian sisters and brothers.

Psalm 85:10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Historical Reflections and Question

The Gospel of Luke is contending with a hostile world. The Gospel was written sometime around 80-85 CE in the midst of a very pluralistic society (Syrian Antioche). Luke is attempting to demonstrate to the nascent Christian, largely Gentile community that God continues to be faithful to God's elect people even though the holy city and the temple have been destroyed (around 70 CE). Luke wants to show that God's faithfulness, has taken on a particular form in Jesus. God's faithfulness is extended to all peoples, including the Gentiles (Luke's primary audience). Jesus is God's prophet who, breaking away from strict rules of adherence to ritual customs, invites the outcast, the poor, women, the lame, the blind, rich tax collectors, and Samaritans into God's mercy. These invitations, this inclusion of all those previously excluded, usually happens at meals! In the Revised Common Lectionary, Luke is coupled with readings from the prophet to underline this particular interpretation of Jesus' life and ministry in this Gospel. Jesus is also the rejected prophet. This rejection becomes a major theme of the sermons in Luke's other writing, the Acts of the Apostles.

The account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Luke is just such a meal. The Last Supper is a meal of invitation to all. More than an invitation, this meal is one of Jesus' primary means of revealing God's promise of forgiveness for all people. "This is my body, which is given for you." Luke's Gospel also ends with a meal – when the disciples of Emmaus recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread. God shows up in the meal! The Last Supper takes on a different character, however, from other meals. In this meal, the outsider is an insider. Judas, who will betray him, eats with Jesus. Jesus gives himself to Judas, despite knowing what will happen. Jesus shares the bread and the cup with him. Jesus gives himself while we are all yet sinners, betrayers, those who forget and turn away. *And are we not all insider/outsideers?*

Question:

1. How do the challenges facing Luke's audience help expand our understanding of the Last Supper?

Literary Reflections and Questions

The Last Supper narrative begins what is known as the Farewell Discourse in Luke's Gospel. When we think of farewell discourse, we usually think of John's Gospel but this is a common form of speech for someone about to die and it follows a particular and well-established pattern (establishment of authority, transition of power, warnings, farewell, sending out). Think of the household gathered around the one about to die. What is significant in this particular farewell discourse is that, at its center, is a meal in which Jesus promises himself to the community forever.

The meal begins in v.15 with an announcement of the pending suffering and concludes in v.21 with an announcement of betrayal. And in the midst of this dual announcement, Jesus expresses his deep desire (his eagerness) to share in this communion, this fellowship with his followers. This eagerness, this desire for communion marks the remembrance. Jesus is "remembered," that is, Jesus returns and is present every time we eat and drink this meal together. The "remembrance" is lived as a community.

The whole chapter (Luke 22) moves from preparation, to a meal, and then to a post-Last Supper talk. Having established the community, the communion in himself, in his own life, Jesus now calls the disciples to attentiveness in tending to that community, to the relationships within community (starting with a deep awareness of how people and groups within faith communities will fail). Grounded in this meal, Jesus now invites the disciples, in the following verses, to consider what attitude to hold as they set out to form and shape an ever-increasing number of followers of Jesus.

The placement of the Last Supper is critical to Luke's message. It is too easy for us to separate the meal out of its setting. We think of the weekly Sunday ritual or we image a scene as the one depicted by Da Vinci! Yet, the verses that surround this meal-sharing story place the meal firmly in relationship to the life of any Christian community. In his farewell discourse, Jesus continues to name the many tensions and issues that the community will face: some will leave the community, some will betray the community, leadership will fail, tensions will arise as to who should be included (or excluded). *Does this sound familiar?* Yet in the midst of this tension is the

meal hosted by the One in their midst who keeps roads open, who welcomes all -- building up, nurturing and affirming the community. This meal is no mere remembrance of the past, it is an invitation into “the new covenant in my blood.”

Questions:

2. What difference does it make to an understanding of the Last Supper that it is one part of a whole farewell discourse?
3. If you were to create a painting of the Last Supper, what would it look like if painted according to Luke (as different from Da Vinci!)?

Theological Reflections and Questions

This meal is the Passover meal which celebrates freedom from slavery and looks forward to a coming day when all creation will be free. The supper derives its pattern from deep in the history of God’s redeeming love. Despite the night, despite the tension and betrayal, it is celebrated, not promising a magical transformation but deeply aware that in the midst of the trials of this life, God is always feeding us: “Take this...”. God is a God of forgiveness, offering God’s self continually to the betrayer, you and me. Liturgically, we recall this truth when, in the Words of Institution, we begin: “In the night in which he was betrayed...”

And yet, and still, the meal is celebrated as community. Martin Luther opens up for us this deeply communal understanding of the meal. In very generous language of the Small Catechism, he writes, “The words ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sins’ show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament...” In the meal shared, betrayal is overcome and we receive forgiveness, life and salvation. God is continually creating anew. But what, you might ask, is the connection between community and the forgiveness of sins?

In our practice of the sacrament of Holy Communion, as we kneel at the altar rail, too often we imagine that moment as an intimate communion between Jesus and me. In a very individualistic approach, we forget what is at the heart of the sacrament, not only for Luther, but also for Luke. The meal affirms and nurtures a communion among the followers. One way that Luther describes this communion is as follows: “This fellowship consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament.” (LW 35:51). Luther will almost never speak of Jesus, when writing about the sacrament, without adding “and his saints” (that is, and all who follow).

In this sacrament, we receive Christ and all his saints. We receive Christ and the vastness of God’s love for us. Here we have the meaning of the “the forgiveness of sins”! This forgiveness is very expansive. This forgiveness is reconciliation. This forgiveness is continual renewal in the Holy Spirit, always being made new. The forgiveness, yes of “my” sins, but also of my neighbor’s sins, continually sustains a communion. As forgiven people, as reconciled people, we come together and bear each other’s burdens. We are new creation.

Here, in the meal, is another way of speaking of the forgiveness of sin. It is a complete union, a communion with Christ and with all those who gather around the table with me, it is a communion in one body. The forgiveness of sins disrupts the foundations we create and gives us

God's foundation. It is freedom, freedom from all what weighs us down. It displaces, breaks down the old creation, the walls we build around ourselves (sin, in other words) and places us ever anew in God's work of new creation, in communion, in a real fellowship.

Questions:

4. How do you encounter both law and gospel in the story of the Last Supper?
5. In your own worship practice, how could the meal look more like such a real fellowship?
6. How does Luke's account of the Last Supper and Luther's focus on forgiveness and reconciliation both root us in the tradition and insure that we are always being made new?

Missional Reflections and Questions

One of the remarkable realities of both Luke's and Luther's descriptions of the supper is that they both send us forth in mission. As a community grounded in this "real fellowship," as Luther describes it, we are nurtured and strengthened to go out into this world of neighbors, both familiar and very different. In the sacrament we receive Christ and the whole communion of saints. We are inserted into this company who continually receive God's gifts. In this meal, Christ takes all our burdens upon himself (Luther: "all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all"). Christ removes from us all self-centeredness that weighs us down and blocks our way to the neighbor, to the other, to the stranger, to the outsider. In this meal, Christ gives us to each other. We do not go out alone. All burdens, sins, merit, suffering are shared. We bear each other. And when it happens that I am empty, or lost, or hopeless, my sister, my brother will carry me.

But this meal does not only nurture the community as it witnesses to reconciliation and peace, the meal also offers a vision for all of life, for human communities, for the earth. The meal gives us a gospel economy. At the meal, all are equal and all receive equally. There are no special guests, whether they be named priest, presider, pastor or have other titles. The meal embodies the radically new community into which we are born through our baptism. It says: there is a little bit of food here but enough to go around. We don't need excess. If there is superabundance, it is to be shared without profit. The earth is also cared for: these things, bread and wine, are simple things of the earth. In harvesting the grains and the grapes, we use what has been given without spoiling creation. The sacrament is a stark reminder for us that we are called to care for the earth and not exploit it.

At the end of the meal, we are sent out into the world: "Go in peace, serve the Lord!" Or, as the old Huguenot liturgy exclaims: "Go in peace. Remember the poor!" We go out, sent as the body of Christ. But in the world we find the body of Christ already present, in the poor, the suffering, the outsider... Christ already in the world. This is the remembrance Jesus calls the disciples to at the Last Supper: Do this in remembrance of me. We don't go back 2000 years to find the cross, rather, we look out at the world around and see where the cross is present today. Just as the disciples, so we are continually sent out of the closed circle, out of the community, to find Christ already waiting for us outside.

Questions:

7. What does God's friendship as witnessed in the Last Supper imply for us and for a new creation?
8. What does it mean to be the body of Christ?

Dirk Lange's ministerial experience has covered a wide spectrum of activities, but all under one umbrella: liturgy in the lives of people. As a brother of Taizé, he was engaged with the prayer and songs of Taizé. His book *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption, Theology* (Fortress Press, 2009) explores Luther's sacramental theology and begins rewriting theology through the lens of the liturgy. He is currently Associate Professor of Worship at Luther Seminary.

Sources:

- Robert J. Karris, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990)
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ELCA Churchwide Assembly Bible Study: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Thursday, August 15, 2013

Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Julia Fogg

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

On Christian Liberty (LW 31:360)

So it is with the works of a believer. Being by his faith replaced afresh in paradise and created anew, he does not need works for his justification, but that he may not be idle, but may exercise his own body and preserve it. His works are to be done freely, with the sole object of pleasing God. Only we are not yet fully created anew in perfect faith and love; these require to be increased, not, however, through works, but through themselves.

Psalm 90:16-17 Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

Historical and Literary Reflections

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, Paul articulates the theological climax in his argument thus far. To understand this climax, it is helpful first to look at the context of the whole letter, particularly chapters 1-8, to see exactly what Paul means by “new creation” and “ambassadors for Christ” and how being a new creation makes “ministers of reconciliation” in local church communities.

2 Corinthians is one letter in a longer conversation between Paul and the believers in Corinth, including 1 Corinthians, a “lost letter” and a “letter of tears” (2:4). Although many scholars have divided 2 Corinthians into multiple letters in attempts to reconstruct this conversation, there is no extant manuscript evidence to support such multiple letter theories. Additionally, growing literary, rhetorical, and thematic evidence suggests 2 Corinthians should be read as a single letter.

When we read 2 Corinthians as a single, integral letter with a sustained argument, we see that Paul has two goals. His first goal is that the Corinthian believers accept his invitation to reconcile with him after some personal and public fall outs including a disastrous face to face visit (2:1), concerns with Paul’s apostleship (12:11-13), and tensions around the collection in chapter 12. Paul’s second goal is that the Corinthian believers contribute to the collection that the Gentile churches in Asia are gathering for their fellow believers, Jewish Christians in Judea (8:1-7).

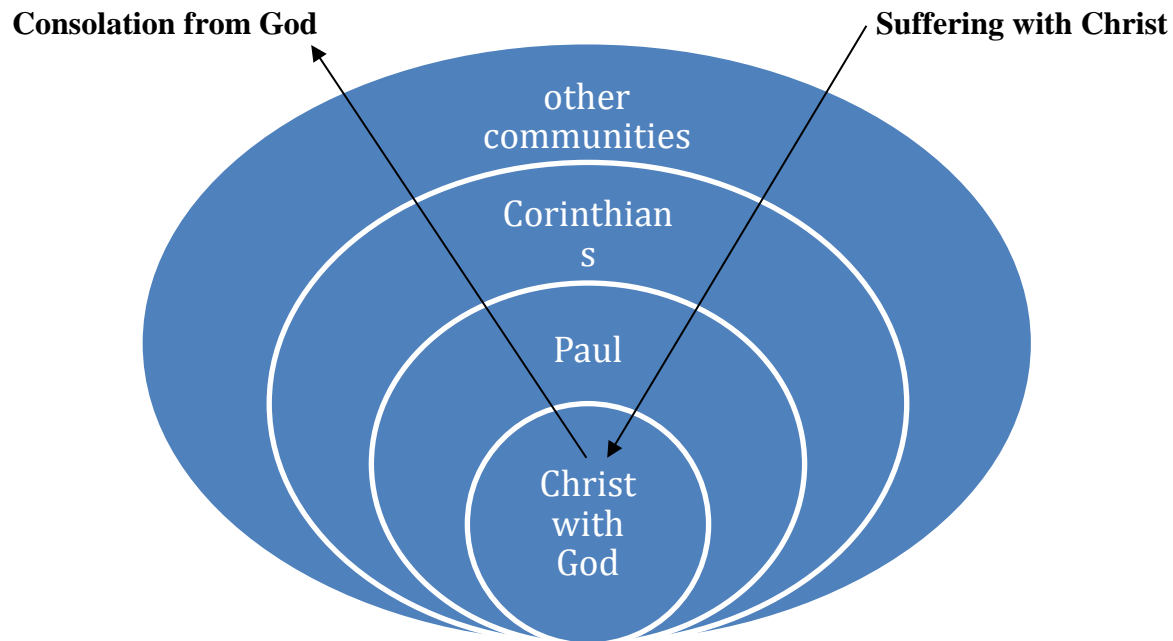
Thus both of Paul's goals aim at reconciliation between people: first between a community and their leader (7:2), second between two communities of rich cultural heritage and diverse social statuses (8:13, 9:1-5 Gentiles and Jews). Paul describes both kinds of human reconciliation (individual-community and community to community) as responses to the divine reconciliation of God with the world that the Corinthians have *already* experienced in Christ. Paul's theological move here is not unlike Luther's understanding of grace received from God as gift, which is then acted out in service to neighbor.

Furthermore, Paul's two goals of reconciliation (individual/community and community/community) depend on one another for success. If Paul does not succeed in convincing the Corinthians to reconcile with him, they certainly will not trust him enough to contribute to the collection with the other churches in Asia Minor (8:20-21). And, if the Corinthians don't contribute to the collection, Paul's bragging about their contribution to convince other churches to contribute will fall flat and even jeopardize the entire fundraising effort (8:24, 9:1-4). Paul will be a "liar" not just in Corinth, but now in all the Asian churches, and perhaps even in Judea.

Yet there is something even more devastating at stake for Paul than his own reputation, and that is the fundamental premise of the gospel. The good news of Christ is that God reconciles ALL people to God. "There is neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Gentile." God does not respect status. And for Paul, Christ is the testimony of God's reconciliation: a Jewish Messiah who is reckoned to be righteousness for all people by his faithfulness to God on the cross. Or, to say this another way, God invites all people into communion—with God first, and also with each other—based on Christ's faithfulness and the work of the Spirit, not our own. For Paul, the two goals of reconciliation (individual/community & community/community) are grounded in God's action of reconciling the world to God's self in Christ. At stake then, is Paul's witness to, and the church's embodiment of the divine reconciliation that is simultaneously new creation.

So Paul bets everything on God's power to reconcile, to bring life from death, and to create anew. This threefold power of God grounds his confidence in both his tenuous relationship with the Corinthians and his risky venture collecting money from Gentile churches for Jewish-Christians living in poverty at the edge of the Roman Empire. If Paul can convince the Corinthians to reconcile with him—this is a demonstration of God's work in them to make them (Paul and the Corinthians) more like Christ. If Paul can convince the Corinthians to participate in the collection so that Gentile Christians are gifting the Jews through whom God gifted Christ to the world (8:8-15), this collection will testify to and embody the living Christ in the world.

In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul introduces a relationship of reciprocal sharing (diagram below). The sharing begins with God and comes from God (consolation, forgiveness, reconciliation). Paul writes: God consoles us in our suffering, so that when you suffer, we may console you with the consolation with which God consoles us. In other words, Paul is suffering affliction on behalf of the Corinthians—not as a martyr—but in order to pass along God's consolation in pure empathy with other communities when they also suffer with Paul.



Paul suffers with Christ (whom God raised with new life) and experiences Christ's resurrection; the Corinthians suffer affliction with Paul and experience the consolation/ life/ resurrection/ hope that God sends them through Paul. This shared dialectic undergirds the entire letter. Paul experiences X with Christ and the Corinthians experience X with Paul (and therefore with Christ). Sharing in Christ's X, means also sharing in Christ's Y. So Paul shares Y and the Corinthians also share Y.

Paul also begins in chapter one with his own situation of suffering and affliction on behalf of his church (1:8). Rhetorically speaking, he is inviting the Corinthians' sympathy, and also laying the theological foundation that God works divine strength through human weakness. In this suffering, Paul (and Timothy, as well as others in Paul's network whom the Corinthians know) experience God's consolation and rescue. Next Paul addresses his seeming "flip flop" behavior with regard to not visiting Corinth when he had promised to (1:5). He can better console them now that they share in his affliction. He invites them to reconcile with him and to mutually forgive (2:17). In chapter 8, Paul will address the reconciliation between communities: Jewish and Gentile Christians, Corinthians with other Corinthians, and Corinthians with other Christian churches in Asia Minor.

Finally, Paul brings in the Spirit—the arbitrator and adjudicator of reconciliation, as well as a point of competition among Corinthians (arguing who has more spiritual gifts than the others). The Spirit is the guarantee of God's presence, as well as the renewing power of Christ among them. The Spirit makes reciprocal sharing possible between Christ, Paul, the Corinthians, the Gentile churches and the Jewish churches.

In truth we don't know how the Corinthians responded to Paul's invitation to reconcile with him and to participate in God's divine reconciliation of Gentiles and Jews into not two peoples, but one people, one church. The difference between Jews and Gentiles was an ethnic difference, but

also a religious one. *Is it not equally hard to imagine reconciling across such ethnic, linguistic, geographic, cultural and yes, religious boundaries today?* Reconciling differences was difficult for Paul and required an “apocalypse” or “revelation.” The result was a new vision—reconciliation, and a new creation—a shared body to embody Christ in the world.

What did that new creation look like for Paul? What does the new creation look like for us?

Lutheran Theological Reflections

Paul understood God coming to all people to make a new creation. *How does the Lutheran tradition prepare us to become a new creation with others in our communities?*

For whom are we taking a collection, and from whom are we ready to receive a collection? How is this work of sharing ourselves and receiving others part of God’s new creation, reconciled in Christ?

Lutherans are wonderful hosts. In a new creation, God is host and calls us to be guests. This too, receiving hospitality, is part of the reciprocity cycle that Paul describes. Indeed, it is hard to reconcile with one’s neighbor if one is not willing to accept their hospitality. *To whom are we called to be guests?*

Because we are reconciled to God, we can be reconciled to one another, and, in our communities we then live out God’s reconciliation serving one another. Luther understood God’s reconciliation, therefore, to have a broad effect on society—socially, economically, politically and, above all, inter-relationally. Those who had been disenfranchised now became part of the body of Christ in the priesthood of all believers. Not just peasants, but families living outside of their means, orphaned children, travelers. *Who are the disenfranchised in our communities today, and how are we living out our reconciliation to one another in service to them?*

Missional Questions

How is the Spirit leading us into reciprocal sharing (suffering/affliction as well as consolation, reconciliation/forgiveness as well as boasting in one another) today?

To whom are we ministers of reconciliation?

Who is ministering to us in the church, and calling us to reconcile, and where, with whom?

Have each person draw their reciprocity circles and ask the following questions: With whom is their congregation sharing in suffering/affliction? From whom are they receiving consolation and with whom are they sharing consolation? It is through these circles of reciprocity that Paul says God’s reconciliation works in the world. So God reconciles us FOR the ministry of reconciliation. But what is reconciliation? With whom do we need to reconcile and whom do we need to help move toward reconciliation?

How can the church embody Christ’s reconciliation across cultural boundaries, in ecumenical circles, even across religious boundaries?

Devotional Questions

How does Paul invite us, Christ's church, to be renewed in Christ?

Can you describe a new creation before you have created it? It sounds impossible, but we are often working to describe the church that God is calling us to be as God is creating us, and we often end up boxing in God's freedom to create without borders. In what ways can we help each other be led in freedom, open to becoming, willing to see how God is creating us anew with new neighbors?

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ELCA Churchwide Assembly Bible Study: Revelation 21:1-6
Friday, August 16, 2013

Prepared by the Rev. Peggy Wuertele

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Luther, Babylonian Captivity on Baptism (LW 36:67-68)

Baptism, then signifies two things—death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification. When the minister immerses the child in the water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth again it signifies life. (...) This death and resurrection we call the new creation, regeneration, and spiritual birth. (...) For this reason, as soon as we begin to believe, we also begin to die to this world and live to God in the life to come; so that faith is truly a death and a resurrection, that is, it is that spiritual baptism into which we are submerged and from which we rise.

Psalm 46:4-5 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

Devotional Reflections and Question

When this writer was a child, my family did not attend church. But I loved to go and would accompany my neighbors to a fundamentalist, evangelical congregation where every service ended with a call to come forward and accept Jesus as your personal savior. This was especially important, it was said, because it was entirely possible that one would die that night in bed, and without heeding this invitation that would mean certainly burning in hell for all of eternity. This was the Cold War era and the preacher would often cite the book of Revelation to predict the coming end of the world—spelling out the symbolism for the Soviet Union, China and the United States, and describing the terrible events that we were going to experience. Along with not going to church on Sundays my family's weekly habit was to spend Friday nights watching horror movies on our black and white television. It is hard for me today to remember which was more frightening to a 10-year-old girl...the monsters we encountered in the sermon or those on TV! I don't remember ever hearing about the beautiful concluding vision of this writer we know as John of Patmos and the worship services I attended did not use the poetry and imagery of the

book as part of a beautiful and historic liturgy. So my earliest encounters with the book of Revelation were terrifying!

Question:

1. What early associations do you have with the book of Revelation? When you think about this book, what feelings do you have?

Literary and Historical Reflections and Questions

Many years have passed since that terrified young girl first listened to that preacher, and I have studied the book on my own and in seminary courses. The book of Revelation is also known by the name The Apocalypse, (which just means revelation!) and is part of a genre of literature that was widely known in biblical times and continues to be written today. Characteristics of apocalyptic literature include:

- a secret revelation given to a person or prophet, often in a dream or vision
- a mediator of the revelation such as an angel
- symbols involving animals, numbers and cosmic upheavals, often not self-explanatory

Apocalyptic literature flourished in Israel after the exile to Babylon when a kind of pessimism about the future replaced the hope of a king in the form of a new David bringing back Israel's glory. Instead apocalyptic writings stressed cosmic battles where God would initiate a new world order. Similar feelings of despair engulfed the early Church as the Roman Empire began to persecute it. Revelation was written during this period; most scholars believe somewhere between 70 and 95 CE. It is written by a man who calls himself John, writing from an island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos.

In the first century the Roman Empire dominated the known world. It was inconceivable to people at that time that any earthly power could defeat Rome. The empire was a military and economic engine that controlled all areas of life. Those who were citizens enjoyed special privileges, but those who were slaves or in the underclasses suffered greatly from poverty and oppression. Roman Emperors held ultimate power and styled themselves as gods. At times Jews and Christians were severely persecuted, although these persecutions were not wide spread. In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and laid siege to the city, slaughtering thousands. What made such domination possible was Rome's ability to access the known world by sea.

Questions:

2. What might be the message behind the phrase in verse 1, "and the sea was no more"?
3. Why might this vision of a new Jerusalem have been so powerful to the first readers?
4. How do these images speak to us about the way that God works?

Theological and Missional Reflections and Questions

Some interpreters believe that Revelation is only about the past, about history, a veiled description of the Roman Emperors of the period. Others, like that preacher from my childhood, believe that Revelation foretells the future and how the world will end. For Lutherans the book of Revelation speaks to the present. We encounter this mysterious book in beautiful words and powerful images in our hymns, in our liturgy, and during the Sunday lessons. When we show up

at church on Sunday, we do so anticipating an encounter with the living Christ in the word proclaimed and at the table. “Come, Lord Jesus” the Church prays expectantly...using the final words of the book of Revelation!

Questions:

5. What verses or images from Revelation resonate with you in worship?

Consider that the one who was seated on the throne (that is, Christ) promises: *“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”*

6. What do you think people thirst for today? What does the Church have to offer from the spring of the water of life?

This final vision that John receives is of a new city coming down from heaven, replacing the old that has been swept away. In this new city God dwells with his people, no longer in a faraway place. There is no more mourning, no more pain; there is no more death!

Some years ago, the ELCA used a slogan “In the City for Good.”

7. What vision do you think God has for the city/community where you live? How does your congregation participate in bringing about a “God-vision” for the place where you live?

8. When you hear the words from the one who was seated on the throne saying, “See, I am making all things new,” where do you see signs of things “being made new” in your present?

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Musician Biographic Information:

AGAPE* (Dave Scherer) has been inspiring people from Brooklyn to Bosnia for the last 15 years with his relational ministry "Hip Hop Outreach." Combining rapping, dancing, storytelling and his fluency in Spanish, AGAPE* communicates the love of God in Christ in a way that his listeners "get it." In addition to performing, Dave also finds time to attend seminary in St. Paul, Minn., and take walks with his wife, Carolyn, and son, Matthew.