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Luke 1.⁵⁻⁷

⁵There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judæa, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. ⁶And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. ⁷And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

meditation

In his first two introductory chapters, Luke lays out the message of his entire Gospel. He does so through eight narratives that examine the people and happenings surrounding Jesus' birth. He begins with a story about Zacharias and Elisabeth, whose names—God remembers and God promises—are symbolic. Their names inform us that God has made promises of salvation in the past and that now, in Jesus, God is remembering and accomplishing those promises.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke demonstrates that the world's natural mode of judgement is utterly flawed. What the world judges as impressive is shown to be low. What the world looks down upon, God highly prizes. While Luke heaps praise on the uprightness of Zachariah and Elisabeth, he also highlights their lowly status through his notice of barrenness. However unfair, in their culture, and in many others as well, to be barren, childless, is a stain upon the character of husband and wife.

In addition to showing the lowly status of a favored couple, Luke uses the couple's barrenness as a signal. We met several barren couples in the course of reading the Hebrew Bible. We think of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Hannah, and Manoah and his unnamed wife. In each case, the notice of barrenness was followed by a miraculous birth of a son (Issac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, Samson). Each son was born through the power and God, and each son accomplished some salvific work in Israel.

Through his notice of Zachariah and Elisabeth's barrenness, Luke signals, like a flashing neon sign, that we are to be on the look out. An amazing boy is about to appear on the scene. The boy will be an instrument in God's hands to bring salvation to Israel. He will be the forerunner of a second, much more impressive son. The first son will be unworthy to even act the part of a slave and undo the sandals of the second.

In addition, Luke signals that his story is one in which God will exert his power in the lives of individuals barren of the powers necessary to heal, change, and manage their lives.

In his preaching, Paul notes this theme of barrenness and references the example of Abraham and Sarah, who were promised a son but remained barren well into their "golden years." They might have given up hope. However,

"Being not weak in faith, [Abraham] considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory [power] to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (Rom. 4.¹⁹⁻²¹).

But, Paul's interest, like Luke's, is more than antiquarian. He draws out a spiritual lesson that is applicable to all of us.

"Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was

delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4.²³⁻²⁵).

Just as the faithful couple was incapable of producing the promised child, and so was required to rely upon God alone for the fulfillment of the promise, so too, we are incapable of finding the right standing (justification) with God that we all so desperately desire and seek through our own, individual efforts. Like the ancient couple, we must not become so focused on our inabilities, or barrenness, that we lose hope and stop trusting in God’s ability to make of us something we cannot make on our own.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 1.²⁶⁻³⁰

²⁶And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, ²⁷To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And the angel came in unto her, and said,

“Hail, thou that art highly favoured,
the Lord is with thee:
blessed art thou among women.”

²⁹And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. ³⁰And the angel said unto her,

“Fear not, Mary:
for thou hast found favour with God.

Meditation

Mary, we are informed, “was confused at [Gabriel’s] utterance and wondered about what kind of greeting this could be.”¹ We could also translate that Mary “was confused at his utterance and wondered at how great this greeting was.” We might consider that it was the glorious majesty that surrounded the angel, Gabriel, that confused her and instilled her sense of wonder. Conditioned, perhaps, by accounts of angelic visitation such as Moroni’s visit to Joseph in which we are presented with a nighttime room that became “lighter than at noon” and a “personage” who hovered in the air and whose “robe [was] of most exquisite whiteness... beyond anything earthly,”² we might assume that Gabriel visited Mary in much the same way. Yet, scripture is replete with stories of “angels” who go unrecognized at the time of visitation and announcement. For example, two “angels” visited Lot in Sodom. Neither he nor the people of the city who were suspicious of them and thought to do them harm, seem to have recognized them as “angels”³ as we so often think of them.

Maybe Gabriel’s appearance was accompanied with an impressive display of glory. But, if so, the text does not mention it. Really, it is uncertain that Mary was even aware that she was in the presence of an angel. So, maybe it wasn’t a display of power and glory that confused and set Mary to wondering. If it wasn’t, what was it that confused and set her to wondering?

A careful reading of the text without preconceived notions suggests that perhaps it was the greeting itself. According to the KJV, Mary “was troubled *at his saying*,” or “confused *at his utterance*.” Further, “she wondered at *how great this greeting was*.” So, we must have another look at the greeting.

“Rejoice,⁴ O highly favored one!
The Lord is with you.”

So, what was it about the greeting that left her confused and wondering?

¹ Author’s translation from verse 29

² See JSH 1.³⁰⁻³¹

³ See Genesis 19. The KJV identifies them as “angels” in the first verse. Though the number of visitors is different, the same visitors who visited Lot in the 19th chapter, seem to have visited Abraham in the 18th chapter where they are simply described as “men”—the difference in number, perhaps, being the result of a different source.

⁴ This is the author’s translation of the most accepted text. The word that the KJV translates as “Hail” and I as, “Rejoice” was a common greeting. But the greeting is more than an announcement that “I see you.” It contains within it a hope for happiness.

To Mary, I suggest, the greeting seemed too complimentary. Mary did not know this about herself. She did not feel this about herself. As her later response to her cousin's, Elizabeth, warm and exalting greeting shows, Mary thought and felt of herself as a woman of low status. Somehow, between her visit with Gabriel and Elizabeth, Mary had come to intuit the mission of the son she was carrying.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”⁵

Mary's son would not only change the way people felt about themselves but change their actual status. Mary, it seems, was his first patient. She was first to experience the miraculous transformation he brought into the lives of those he touched. And the initial intimation, the first inkling that she was more than she thought—that God thought more of her than she thought of herself—came with the angel's exalted greeting. Here, in this greeting were her first intimations that she was not “lowly,” but was “favored,” and that she had the happy attention and attendance of that God who is holy; who is the Greatest of all.

Is it not a source of confusion and wonderment to find that one is far, far more than they imagine themselves to be? Is it not a source of confusion and wonderment to find that God is anxious and sincerely willing to be present in our lives? Is it not a source of confusion and wonderment to discover that through our relationship with Jesus, who “is not ashamed to call [us] brethren,”⁶ we find our potential, our favor, or blessedness, and our worthiness of the Divine presence.

Oh, but what wonderful confusion! What wonderful wonderment! And, as Mary discovered in the angel's greeting and as she bears witness in her Magnificat, it is a confusion and wonderment that is open to us all.

Oh, yes, “it is wonderful, wonderful to me!”⁷

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁵ Luke 1.⁵²⁻⁵³

⁶ Heb.2.¹¹

⁷ LDS Hymn #193, “I Stand All Amazed.”

Luke 1.⁴⁶⁻⁵⁶

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,

⁴⁷And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

⁴⁸For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:

for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

⁴⁹For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰And his mercy is on them that fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹He hath shewed strength with his arm;

he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵²He hath put down the mighty from their seats,

and exalted them of low degree.

⁵³He hath filled the hungry with good things;

and the rich he hath sent empty away.

⁵⁴He hath holpen his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy;

⁵⁵As he spake to our fathers,

to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.”

⁵⁶And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house.

meditation 1

Since the American election of 2016, I have perhaps reflected and meditated on no scripture passage more than this one containing Mary’s Magnificat. If anyone, male or female, should ever be expected to understand and communicate the nature and meaning of Jesus, his life, and his ministry, what better candidate than his mother, Mary? God’s selection, lifting up, and magnifying of her—a “handmaiden” of “low estate—speaks volumes. And Mary knew it. So too did her Son, Jesus.

And they both knew that God was holy—someone unlike any other, completely out of the ordinary. They both knew and acted upon the revelation that the power of God was to be seen in his intention to invert the perverted manner in which this world estimated the value of individuals. He would cast the mighty from their thrones and enthrone those esteemed as lowly. He would feed the hungry to overflowing and let those previous rich scrounge for food. In all of this, God’s mercy would be manifested. We find ourselves rejoicing in such mercy and anxiously awaiting God’s inversion of a modern world gone mad.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

I have commented on today’s text many times. Today’s *Short, Simple Sermon* comprises the first in a series of sermons that we will entitle: “Jesus’ Heroic Reversals.” This series of sermons will focus on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

I might have named this series of *Short, Simple Sermons*, “Jesus’ *Surprising* Reversals,” for they are, often, surprising. However, Jesus’ reversals as recorded by Luke are intended to do more than surprise. They are meant to challenge, resist, and reverse the world’s value system, especially as it

weighs the worth of individuals. In challenging, resisting, and reversing the twisted value system, Jesus will surprise us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He will also surprise us by being critical of those whom society looked to as heroes and role models.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus' challenge to and reversal of the world's value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purpose and objective of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus' ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world's influences and values.

This certainly seems to be the view of his mother, Mary. In her famous Magnificat uttered in the presence of her cousin, Elisabeth, she makes no mention of the more traditional appreciations of her son's ministry. Rather, in her Magnificat, Mary discerns that God will work through her son to reveal, challenge, and reverse the world's distorted value systems.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

Mary's Magnificat, then, could be thought of as a kind of Divine mission call or mission statement issued to Jesus through his mother. How often did Mary remind Jesus of the call and mission to which God had ordained him?

Mary, of course, could utilize her own experiences as evidence of God's intent to bring about startling reversals. As the world judged things—and as she judged things under its influence—Mary had been a woman of “low estate.” But, much to her surprise, she had “found favour with God.” God reversed the way she would be thought of and remembered, as “all generations” would call her “blessed.”

Mary, then, entertained no doubts about her son's ultimate success. Hence, she could speak as if he had already accomplished his mission of reversal. We note the past tense of her verbs.

He *hath put down* the mighty from their seats,
and *exalted* them of low degree.
He *hath filled* the hungry with good things;
and the rich he *hath sent empty away*.”

“The mighty” are not thrown down from their power merely as punishment for the crimes that brought them to such power. The “rich” are not “sent empty away” merely as punishment for having purchased their wealth through the exploitation of the poor. Such reversals would set the universe right-side-up. They would also serve as warning to all. “What you earthlings call power is not real power. What you falsely call power can be gone in the blink of an eye. What you deem as wealth is transitory and undependable. What is real is the evil means by which you gained your false power and wealth. That reality, that evil will follow you far after your power and wealth has vanished into nothingness.”

By the time Jesus has finished his life's work of reversal, he will have turned the world upside down, topsy-turvy, and inside out. Those who might justifiably be thought of as heroes and role models will never look the same. In his kingdom, those who were thought first in the eyes of this world's kingdoms will be last. In his kingdom, those who were thought last in the eyes of this world's

kingdoms will be first.

This may not be such good news for the high and mighty. But for the likes of Mary, this is glad tidings of great joy. Little wonder that she exalted,

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”

Through Mary’s Magnificat, then, Luke has introduced one of his themes and one of Jesus’ principle objectives. Jesus intends to reveal the world’s twisted value system that devalues individuals and justifies the injustices that the “powerful” perpetrate against those that the world wickedly devalues. But he will do more than reveal those twisted values. He will serve those who have been devalued, thereby showing their true eternal worth, and challenging and reversing the world’s perverted values. Finally, he will let it be known that he expects those who would be his disciples to pick up his work of revelation and reversal.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 1. ⁶⁷⁻⁸⁰

⁶⁷And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;
for he hath visited and redeemed his people,
⁶⁹and hath raised up an horn of salvation
for us in the house of his servant David;
⁷⁰as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets,
which have been since the world began:
⁷¹that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all that hate us;
⁷²to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant;
⁷³the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,
⁷⁴that he would grant unto us,
that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies
might serve him without fear,
⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him,
all the days of our life.
⁷⁶And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest:
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord
to prepare his ways;
⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation unto his people
by the remission of their sins,
⁷⁸through the tender mercy of our God;
whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,
⁷⁹to give light to them that sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

⁸⁰And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

meditation

There is much unusual about the Baptist's rite of circumcision and the father's blessing that Zachariah pronounced upon him. First, the name, John. As the officiating priest commenced to name the boy after his father as was common and anticipated, Elisabeth corrected him, informing him that the boy was to be named, John. Those present for the rite "marveled all" at this unusual occurrence. Rather than being given a name celebrating and honoring his father or some other family member, the boy was to be given a name celebrating and honoring God, Himself: "God is merciful."

This focus on God rather than any mortal, including the boy over whom the blessing was pronounced, is also seen in his father's blessing. During a 200-word blessing, over three quarters is devoted to celebrating and honoring God and his labors in behalf of humankind, with less than 25% dedicated to the boy and the role he will play in God's plan of salvation. Of some dozen active verbs found in the blessing, all but one have God as the actor. God visits, redeems, raises up, speaks, performs, grants, saves, delivers, gives light, and guides, according to the KJV reading. John, on the other hand is passive in being "called," and then, as the sole verb given him, "gives knowledge." This unrelenting focus on God and His labors in the life of His people seems, as always, an appropriate, if an all-too-unusual focus.

Though the infant, John, surely did not comprehend his father's blessing at the time, he must have been taught it as he grew, both in word and example. For John the Baptist certainly learned this lesson well.

“This was he of whom I spake, ‘He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me.’”

“He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

“He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.”¹

“He,” says John of Jesus, “must increase, but I,” John says of himself, “must decrease.”² So it is with all the Lord's prophets. They must all decrease as Jesus increases. They, like Moses, the prototypical prophet, and John are not to be compared to Jesus. They could and can do no more than present laws and commandments, give counsel, and offer recommendations—“For the law was given by Moses.”

“But grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.”³

That's a big, “but.” Prophets, even the greatest and latest of them, have not one ounce of saving grace to offer. Their trustworthiness and fidelity fall far, far short of that of Jesus. Paul recognized this, though the Corinthian saints did not. So, he reminded them through his own life and example that

“These things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written...”⁴

“No flesh should glory in [God's] presence... according as it is written, ‘he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.’”⁵

Such understanding and priority is as uncommon as was John's blessing. We often become too enamored of the men and women around us. We forget, as the Psalmist rarely does, that God's “name alone is excellent.”⁶

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

¹ See John 1.^{15, 20, 23, 27}

² John 3.³⁰

³ John 1.¹⁷

⁴ 1 Corinthians 4.⁶

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1.^{29, 31}

⁶ Psalm 148.¹³

Luke 2.¹⁻⁷

*In those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ²(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶While they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

meditation 1

God found a “handmaiden” of “low estate” and lifted her up to become the mother of the Son of God, King of Israel. By so doing, God made Mary the first beneficiary of the work he intended to perform through Jesus and his ministry—the work through which he would “put down the mighty from their seats, and exalt them of low degree” and “fill the hungry with good things, and the rich he [would send] empty away.”¹

Mary’s son, Jesus, was destined to participate in both his mother’s “lowliness” and in her “exaltation.” His lowliness is seen in his infancy as he is dressed in rags and put to bed in an animal feeding trough found in an inn’s barn. He was born under the shadow of suspicion concerning his mother’s virtue and therefore his own legitimacy. Because he knew what it meant to be of “low estate,” he would feel special attachment to others so deemed. And he would know how, through God, to succor and to raise up those of “low degree.”

And whether we know it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, all of us are of “low estate” and of “low degree.” We all require the lifting up and exaltation that only he can provide. We who know and acknowledge our lowliness take comfort in the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. And we await the day when we can participate in the glory he achieved through his self-abasement.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

In the first series of atonement readings, we introduced the title, “The Savior’s Unity and Connectedness with us” with the passage found at Hebrew 2.⁹⁻¹⁸. Here, the writer teaches that “as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he [Jesus] also himself likewise took part of the same. Jesus, he exalts, “is not ashamed to call them brethren.”

In being wrapped in rags and laid in a feeding trough, God signals his sincere intention to form connections, to be one with even the poorest, lowliest of his “brethren.” He would not, however, do so passively. He would not express his attachment with them through soaring rhetoric. He would, instead, express his unity with them in actual deed. He would live with and as they live. He would suffer the indignity of poverty, as reflected through his infant dress and sleeping arrangement, all the while possessing infinite dignity. He would remain homeless, dependent upon the generosity of others for shelter: “But the son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matt. 8.²⁰).

¹ Luke 1.⁵²⁻⁵³

It is little wonder that John was surprised to have Jesus approach him for baptism. John's ordinance was, after all, intended for sinners and the remission of their sins. What need did Jesus, the Lamb of God, have for a sinner's ordinance? Whatever other reasons one might consider, this one must be among them: Jesus submitted himself to a sinner's ordinance to demonstrate his intention of being part of their lives, of being united with and connected to them. They were his "brethren," and he would attach himself to them.

I do not know where you would rank the example of divine connectedness that is reflected in the connection that Jesus made with the thieves that hung on either side of him at Calvary, but for me, it is very high up the list. Here, "he was numbered with the transgressors" (Is. 53.¹²). Here, he expressed his attachment to them: "Today, shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23.⁴³). I have listened in dismay as some have dismissed these comforting words through theological mind games. "No way two sinners are going to paradise to be with Jesus," they reasoned.

Oh fools, and slow of heart. Can you not see that Luke is finishing his Gospel the way he began it? By reporting a moment of at-one-ment. A moment of connectedness. A moment of comfort to all the lowly, all the needy, all the sin-bound?

So, Luke's notice that Jesus was found wrapped in rags and lying in a feeding trough was more than "biography." It was revelation. It was revelation that God had condescended, lowered himself to mix and mingle with lowly humans and that he would go as low as necessary to reach the lowliest.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 2.⁸⁻¹⁴

⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them,

“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy,
which shall be to all people.

¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,
which is Christ the Lord.

¹²And this shall be a sign unto you;
ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes,
lying in a manger.”

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Meditation

There is a good deal of encouragement and comfort flowing in the events that Luke recorded at the beginning of his Gospel. “Fear not,” the angel Gabriel spoke to Zacharias as he appeared to deliver the happy news that a child was on the way.¹ “Fear not,” that same angel spoke to Mary as he delivered the happy news that she would bear not only a son, but a king, a redeemer, a God.² “Fear,” promised Zacharias in the blessing of his son, John, would disappear through the deliverance of God, thus making it possible to serve God “in holiness and righteousness.”³ “Fear not” a “multitude of the heavenly host” spoke to a band of lowly shepherds as they delivered the happy news that “unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”

John may have “belonged” to Zacharias and Elizabeth, and Jesus, in some sense, to Mary, but, in fact, Jesus belongs to all of us for “unto you” was he born. And in him—this man who lets us take possession of him and who takes possession of us—in him we hear the good news of the good will that God possesses for and toward us. And yes, this good news chases away all fear.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ Luke 1.¹³

² Luke 1.³⁰

³ Luke 1.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁵

Luke 2.¹⁵⁻²⁰

¹⁵*As the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.”

¹⁶And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Meditation

The glad tidings of great joy that a heavenly host delivered to a band of lowly shepherds did not go unheeded. Indeed, the shepherds did not receive it with patient quietude or passivity. Rather, they leaped into action. They “came with haste” to see the announced “Saviour, which is Christ the Lord,” now but a babe. And, having seen the small bundle of glad tidings lying in a manger wrapped in rags, they went out actively and “made known abroad” what they had heard and seen.

Neither did the shepherds’ song go unheeded. While those who heard their song certainly did not comprehend the magnitude of the glad tidings, “all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them.”

Such wonderment is often the first humble step toward the comprehension and discovery of God. And with discovery comes the desire to glorify and praise God. Such praise is a sign and gift of the Spirit.¹ Indeed, “it is good to sing praises unto our God.” Praise is “pleasant.” “Praise is comely.”² Praise is pleasing to God.

We are grateful for the Christmas Season when we can double and redouble our efforts to follow in the ancient shepherds’ footsteps. A season in which we can hasten to know better the Lord. A season in which we can feel anew the wonder of his Being. A season in which we can instill a sense of wonder in others. A season in which we can speak and sing and pray our praise to God; a God who cannot be praised too much, about whom we cannot say enough.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ See 2 Nephi 31.¹³

² Psalm 147.¹

Luke 2.²⁵⁻³⁵

²⁵And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. ²⁶And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, ²⁸then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

²⁹“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
according to thy word:

³⁰for mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

³¹which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

³²a light to lighten the Gentiles,
and the glory of thy people Israel.”

³³And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. ³⁴And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother,

“Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel;
and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

³⁵(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,)
that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Meditation

We often look for “consolation.” We look for evidence of God’s “salvation.” We look this way and that for evidence of his love and participation in our lives.” We can seem insatiable in our need for proofs. Too often, we look in all the wrong places.

The just and devout Simeon also looked for “consolation” and “salvation” and evidence of God’s love and presence. But, as he entered the temple and saw the baby Jesus in Mary’s arms, he knew his search was over. His gaze shifted from whatever jumble of inferior and often false proofs he had observed before and fixed itself upon Jesus.

Here. Here. Here was all the evidence one could ever need of God’s salvation and love and devoted presence. Here was the one evidence that could never fade or wither. The one eternal proof that no moth and no rust could corrupt and no thief break through and steal (See Mt. 6.²⁰). Yes, “*In this was manifested the love of God* toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world” (1 Jn. 4.⁹). Holding this one true, infallible, and inalterable proof in his arms, Simeon was satisfied. No other proofs were needed. He could now live and “depart in peace.”

We should be so consoled. We should be so satisfied. We should all feel the reality of the great Passover salute, “Dayenu”—“it is enough,” “it is sufficient.” All our needs are met in him!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 4.⁴⁰⁻⁴⁴

⁴⁰Now when the sun was setting, all they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto him; and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them. ⁴¹And devils also came out of many...

⁴²And when it was day, he departed and went into a desert place: and the people sought him, and came unto him, and stayed him, that he should not depart from them. ⁴³And he said unto them, "I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent."

⁴⁴And he preached in the synagogues of Galilee.

Meditation

After miraculously healing "every one of them" who were "sick with divers diseases," Jesus "departed and went into a desert place." Those who witnessed and benefited from Jesus' healing power did not know where this "desert place" was. But, still, they "sought him." They "looked for him." They "searched for him." The Greek word suggests that this hunt for Jesus' location was conducted in an ardent manner.

The desire to find Jesus was strong. The multitude was highly motivated. Whatever trouble it was to find out where Jesus was, it was not too much trouble. However far away Jesus was, it was not too far to go. However much wandering it required to find him, it was not too much wandering to be with him once more. Whatever the difficulty, they would find Jesus.

Having found Jesus, the multitude "stayed" him. The word used here is in an intensive form. It represents something more than simple "holding." It is "holding fast." It is a "grasping onto." When performed in relation to another, it can mean to "restrain." The crowd attempted, whether by physical or verbal means Luke does not say, to keep Jesus from leaving. Now that they were once more in his presence, they would do whatever they could to remain there for as long as possible. The thought of Jesus leaving, the thought of living without him was unsettling and unwelcome.

As much as all this tells us about the multitudes, I suggest, it tells us just as much about Jesus. He drew people to himself. People felt drawn to him. This Galilean response to Jesus reminds us of another multitude and its response to Jesus.

Jesus had spent many, many hours ministering to and teaching a large multitude that had gathered at Bountiful. Observing the multitude's fatigue, Jesus informs the people of his intention to leave and return after they had opportunity to rest. Then, the text informs us,

"When Jesus had thus spoken, he cast his eyes round about again on the multitude, and beheld they were in tears, and did look steadfastly upon him as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer with them."¹

Just as the Galilean multitude would endure any amount of travel to find and be with Jesus, the Bountiful multitude would endure any amount of fatigue to be and remain with Jesus. Jesus is just that attractive. There is simply no one like him. Isaiah felt this reality about him when he went by the name of Yahweh.

"I am God, and there is none else;
I am God, and there is none like me."²

¹ 3 Nephi 17.⁵

² Isaiah 46.⁹

So too, discovered the Psalmist.

“For who in the heaven can be compared unto the Lord?
Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the Lord?”³

The multitudes of Galilee and Bountiful, as did Isaiah and the Psalmist just how attractive, just how incomparably desirable Jesus is? How about us? What about you? Have you made this, the greatest of all human discoveries?

What difficulties, then; what wanderings; what fatigue; what effort are we willing to endure to find Jesus and enter his presence? Are any too much to ask when the reward is so utterly complete? How cherished are the moments that we have with him? What are we willing to do to have him always with us; to have him “not depart” from us?

Yes, there is no wondering about the hymnist’s sincere plea. May we make it our own as we sing

“Be near me, Lord Jesus;
I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever,
And love me, I pray.”⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

³ Psalm 89.⁶

⁴ “Away in a Manger”

Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴

¹²*When he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, “Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.”

¹³And he put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, “I will: be thou clean.”

And immediately the leprosy departed from him. ¹⁴And he charged him to tell no man: but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.

meditation 1

Introduction

Rarely do we begin our meditations with an introduction. However, we should note that the following meditations associated with Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ are follow-up meditations to three previous meditations in which we examined the choice of the word, “atonement” to represent Jesus’ salvific work, the meaning of the word as we understand and use it, and how the word represents the central and eternal character trait of Divinity.¹

In these meditations, we have suggested that atonement is best seen as “connectedness,” “attachment,” “linkage,” and “unity.” The word, atonement, reflects God’s feelings of connectedness to humans. This divine connectedness to others is central and internal to God’s character. It is as eternal as He is. Atonement existed before Jesus’ earthly ministry and will exist for all time.

The central purpose of Jesus’ ministry was to reveal the nature and character of his Father. In regard to atonement, Jesus revealed rather than created Divinity’s connectedness to humans. Jesus’ revelation of divine connectedness was immeasurably superior to the revelation of any other ministry, before or after, which attempted or attempts to reveal the nature of God and the extent of His connectedness to humanity. Jesus’ revelation of God and of His atonement—connectedness—was superior because Jesus was, as the Book of Mormon states, “God, Himself, or, as Paul states, “in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2.⁹).

Jesus’, and thus the Father’s, divine connectedness to humanity was exhibited in his incarnation and in his every word, thought, and action from the cradle to the grave. Having been resurrected, having ascended into heaven, and having sat down on the right hand of God, Jesus, as his Father, continues to feel connected to humans and continues to act upon those feelings for the benefit and advancement of the human race.

If they are to be happy, endure, and progress, human beings must embrace Divinity’s connectedness to them, develop themselves, the divine character of at-one-ment, connectedness, and act upon that character in this life and on into eternity. There can be no enduring and progressive existence without, first, connectedness to Deity, and then connectedness to all others, indeed, to all that exists in nature and in the cosmos. It is impossible, then, to overestimate the value of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the New Testament Gospels that report his lifelong example and revelation of divine at-one-ment.

In this meditation, we examine an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus’ earthly

¹ “Meditation 2: The Choice of the Word, Atonement,” “Meditation 3: The Meaning of The Word, Atonement,” and “Meditation 4: Atonement as the Central, Eternal and Divine Characteristic of God,” all found on the Atonement page of this sight.

ministry. As a picture is worth a thousand words, we want to examine atonement as connectedness utilizing scripture passages from the life of Jesus rather than passages that address atonement as connectedness in principle. We will look at passages that describe atonement as connectedness in principle in future meditations.

a man covered with leprosy

In Luke’s narrative, “a man full of leprosy” approached Jesus. He “fell on his face, and besought him, saying, ‘Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.’” It is important to note that the leper was “full of leprosy.” He was “covered” with leprosy. His was not a mild case of leprosy. No one could have mistaken his condition or the severity of his leprosy. We are shocked at the very fact that the man could bring himself to approach Jesus, whom he clearly believed to be a holy man of God. Before, considering the leper, himself, and Jesus’ willing and radical response to him, we should take a moment to consider what the Hebrew Bible has to say about lepers and what it would have us understand about the leper’s status with their community and with God. This will allow us to understand the nature of our shock at the leper’s approaching Jesus and the reason for viewing Jesus’ response to him as radical.

But, first, perhaps a warning is in order. We can and should find symbolism in the leper and his experience with his community and with God. However, we must not make a caricature of ancient lepers. Ancient Israelite lepers really did exist. They were real people with real thoughts and feelings. They lived out all or parts of their lives under the conditions and stigmas described in the Hebrew Bible. So, the teachings found in the Hebrew Bible—teachings that reflected not only upon the character and status of lepers but upon the very character of God—had real, life-altering impacts on real thinking and feeling people. In addition, these teachings had an impact on every believer’s thoughts about and feelings toward God.

With that warning in mind, we now turn our attention to the social and spiritual status of lepers as the Hebrew Bible describes them. We read the following in Leviticus.

“When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a scab, or bright spot, and it be in the skin of his flesh like the plague of leprosy; then he shall be brought unto Aaron the priest, or unto one of his sons the priest: and the priest shall look on the plague in the skin of the flesh: and when the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague in sight be deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him, and *pronounce him unclean.*”²

The key concept to glean from this passage is that leprosy is “uncleanness.” This refers to both the physical and spiritual. We should expand on the societal and spiritual nature and meaning of being “unclean.”

“And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: *he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.*”³

Because the leper is “unclean” and “impure” he is made to live in solitude outside an Israelite camp

² Leviticus 13.²⁻³, emphasis added.

³ Leviticus 13.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶

and, later, city. The leper is an outcast.

“Command the children of Israel, that they *put out of the camp every leper*, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; *that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell.*”⁴

The leper is made to live a solitary existence outside population centers because they “defile” or “dirty” those places where they live. Now, it is customary to think that quarantining lepers was the result of the fear of contagion and so an attempt to keep leprosy from spreading. It is likely true that they did not understand, as we do today, that leprosy was not easily communicated from one person to another. It required close, intimate, and extended contact with leprosy before it spread to another. But, *as far as the text is concerned*, the level of contagion that leprosy posed is neither here nor there. We cannot emphasize this too much: *The text does not mention the fear of human contagion as the reason for quarantining lepers.*

Or, perhaps, it would be better to say that the text does not mention concern over the possibility of lepers defiling other *humans*. Rather, the worry is that the leper defiles *God!* The leper is removed from “the camp,” not because humans lived there, but because God dwelt there: “that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof *I dwell.*”

God promised to dwell in the midst of his people. But He could not dwell in the midst of “uncleanness.” If there was uncleanness in the camp, God would be offended and leave. Using the language of atonement as we understand it, God would disconnect. Disassociate Himself from Israel. He would not know at-one-ment with a leper or a people who gave admittance to a leper.

Consider, now, the following passage.

“And thou shalt have a paddle [shovel] upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad [a Hebrew euphemism for your English euphemism ‘going to the bathroom,’ i.e., defecating] thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee: for the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp... therefore shall thy camp be holy: *that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee.*”⁵

What, the reader may ask, does this passage have to do leprosy and lepers? God’s response to human poop is remarkably similar to His response to lepers! Both offend his senses and cause him to “turn away,” disconnect, and leave. Such Biblical assertions about God as those found above likely influenced the Book of Mormon’s conclusion that “the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any *unclean* thing enter into the kingdom of God.”⁶ What was true of the kingdom of God was true of the camp. God could not abide where uncleanness was present.

Now, one might wonder why an ailment such as leprosy, seemingly only physical, would trigger such a negative divine reaction. We must remember that leprosy, like many illnesses,⁷ was associated with sin and thought to be indicative of sin. For example, as a result of Aaron’s and Miriam’s sin,

“The anger of the LORD was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed

⁴ Numbers 5.2-3, italics added.

⁵ Deuteronomy 23.13-14; emphasis added.

⁶ 1 Nephi 15.34, italics added.

⁷ Many examples could be sighted. Consider just these two: Psalm 38.1-7, and 1 Corinthians 11.29-30.

from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said unto Moses, ‘Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, *lay not the sin upon us*, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother’s womb.’”⁸

Leprosy was not only associated with sin. It was associated with death, both physical and spiritual.

To recap. Leprosy was indicative of sin. The leper was considered unclean and unholy. Because of uncleanness, the leper was made to live in solitude and outside populated areas. The leper’s removal from camps, villages, cities, synagogues, temples, etc., was the consequence of the fear that God would see the uncleanness and abandon the camps, villages, cities, synagogues, temples, etc. According to the Hebrew Bible, then, leprosy was a kind of anti-at-one-ment. Leprosy was thought to produce detachment from God rather than attachment, disconnection from God rather than connection.

All of this helps explain our shock that a man “full of leprosy” would approach Jesus. We are most assuredly justified in assuming that the man thought of Jesus as a man of God. Thus, he certainly must have considered it a strong possibility that Jesus would reject him and refuse, not only as any holy man would do, but as God would do, to be associated or connected with him in any way, shape, or form. The leper would certainly have known that on the off chance that Jesus should engage in any way with him, Jesus would, himself, become unclean and defiled. Once his engagement with the leper was discovered, Jesus, like the leper, would almost certainly have been excluded from synagogue and temple for at least twenty-four hours—and maybe longer, given that his engagement with the leper was not an accident, but was performed with such blatant disregard for accepted religious standards.

And yet, the leper approached Jesus. Why? How? Perhaps the leper’s approach speaks only of his desperation. But, I think, we can go further. Just as we are justified in assuming that the leper considered Jesus a holy man, we are justified in assuming that he must have considered it possible that the holy Jesus would not reject him, but receive and help him. He must have seen or heard something in Jesus that led him to think that Jesus might just be unorthodox and radical enough to ignore, flout, even, the Hebrew Bible’s prohibitions and the religious conventions of his day concerning engagement with a leper.

The leper was rewarded for his belief in both Jesus’ holiness and his radical unorthodoxy. Contrary to the Hebrew Bible’s assertions and the expectations of his day, Jesus, portraying and acting like God as he always did, put the lie to God’s detachment and disconnectedness with lepers. Like his Father, Jesus, was not offended by the leper and made no attempt to avoid him, disassociate or disconnect himself from him. He could not be defiled by puny, weak human uncleanness. Such human uncleanness was impotent in the face of divine power.

Yes, the leper was right to think that Jesus was a radically connected man. His life was one of connection and at-one-ment. As we will see in the following meditations, Jesus will reveal his own and his Father’s radical connectedness by quite literally attaching himself to the unclean and potentially defiling leper.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁸ Numbers 12.⁹⁻¹², emphasis added.

meditation 2

In this meditation, we continue our examination of Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ with its account of Jesus' encounter with a leper. This passage is an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus' earthly ministry.

In our first meditation, we examined leprosy and the social and religious status of lepers as the Hebrew Bible understood them. According to the Hebrew Bible, the theology and culture of Jesus' day, and their view of God and His character, the unnamed leper that approached Jesus would have lived a life disconnected from God and man for however long the affliction had rested upon him. Contrary to our expectations, the Hebrew Bible stresses that the quarantining of lepers was less about the fear of physical contagion among mortals and more about the fear of offending and spiritually defiling both man and God, for leprosy was closely associated with sin.

Yet, even with this millennia-long tradition, the leper approached Jesus. This approach was the result of more than desperation. It was the result of the Leper's belief, acquired we know not how, that Jesus might be both holy and unorthodox enough that he would, against all tradition and religious convention and whatever public ridicule he might face, engage the leper.

Still, the leper's approach was tentative. The leper "fell on his face, and besought [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me.'"⁹

Here, we wish to make a few observations about the leper's confession, "Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me." We call it a confession, for such it is. It is not presented in question form. The confession is such that we understand the nature and extent of the leper's "faith." By what means we do not know, but the leper came to believe that Jesus had the power to cleanse him. The belief in such a power is no trifle. Individuals had been suffering under the pains and stigma of leprosy as far back as history has recorded. Leprosy had been a stubborn foe of humanity that brought in its wake great societal and religious stigma.

While the leper seems to harbor little doubt about Jesus' *capability*, he did possess doubt about Jesus' *willingness* to cleanse: "If you want to..." And this is exactly where the rubber hits the road. What good is someone's capabilities if they refuse to use them out of a lack of desire? The leper seems to have considered the possibility that Jesus *could* cleanse him, but, for reasons we have already discussed, might not be *willing* to do so.

Our translation makes clear what the King James translation can, if the reader is not careful, obscure. The English "will" of the KJV is not to be confused with the English future "will" as in "shall." The English "will," as our translation makes clear, is the "will" of "desire," "inclination," "willingness," "wanting." Indeed, there is nothing of the future found in the leper's confession. The verb is present tense. The leper is looking for immediate cleansing in the present moment.

We should note, too, that the leper is looking for "cleansing," not "healing." Now, it is true that in the case of the leper the two are almost synonymous. But we should consider the possibility that the text reads "cleanse" rather than "heal" because the man's suffering was predominantly emotional and spiritual rather than physical. He was less interested in having clear skin than in reconnecting with others, with society, and, especially, with God. In asking to be cleansed rather than healed, the leper demonstrates that his priorities are spiritual and focused on God and his relationship with Deity.

⁹ Author's translation.

Jesus' response to the leper's confession was, "I do want to. Be clean."

I don't know of any bigger three-word affirmation than this: "I want to." Jesus WANTED to cleanse the leper. He DESIRED to cleanse the man. This is a profound statement of character. It is a profound statement about the kind of being Jesus was and is and, through association, the kind of Being God is. Jesus and his Father WANT to be there for others. They wish to engage with others in ways that heal, cleanse, and advance.

This "wanting" to help and be there for others is indicative of connectedness, association, attachment, at-one-ment. But, this connected wanting is only one indication of Jesus' at-one-ment with the leper. Just as powerful is the manner in which Jesus expressed his "wanting" and "willingness." That will be the subject of our next meditation.

But, before moving on to our next meditation, we want to conclude with one last thought. Like the leper, we often believe and boldly proclaim our belief in Jesus' power to do good and positively affect those into whose lives he enters and acts. But this is only half the truth. At the same time that we believe in his capabilities, we are often unsure of his desires and whether he wants to enter our lives, messy as they are, and act. John Calvin, one of the great discerners of the workings of the religious mind, put it like this.

"There are very many who so conceive God's mercy that they receive almost no consolation from it. They are constrained with miserable anxiety at the same time as they are in doubt whether he will be merciful to them because they confine that very kindness of which they seem utterly persuaded within too narrow limits. For among themselves they ponder that it is indeed great and abundant, shed upon many, available and ready for all; but that it is uncertain whether it will even come to them.... This reasoning, when it stops in mid-course, is only half. Therefore, it does not so much strengthen the spirit in secure tranquility as trouble it with uneasy doubting. But there is a far different feeling of full assurance that in the Scriptures is always attributed to faith....

"There is no right faith except when we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God's sight. This boldness arises only out of a sure confidence in divine benevolence and salvation.

"Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence which Paul elsewhere calls 'peace'... Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God's judgment. Without it the conscience must be harried by disturbed alarm, and almost torn to pieces."¹⁰

The leper reminds us that Jesus is more than capable and that his capabilities know no bounds. But he also WANTS desperately to use them for our benefit. It is not so much his capabilities that ties him to us, drives him to be connected and unified with us. It is his *wanting* that most powerfully testifies to his connectedness, his at-one-ment with us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹⁰ (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 561).

meditation 3

In this meditation, we continue our examination of Luke 5.¹²⁻¹⁴ with its account of Jesus' encounter with a leper. This passage is an example of atonement as connectedness as found in Jesus' earthly ministry.

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In our second meditation, we saw that in spite of this millennia-long tradition, "a man full of leprosy" approached Jesus. This approach was the result of more than desperation. It was the result of the leper's belief, acquired we know not how, that Jesus might be both holy and unorthodox enough that he would, against all tradition and religious convention and whatever public ridicule he might face, engage the leper. While the leper was not certain of Jesus' willingness, he seems to have had some degree of certainty about Jesus' capacity to cleanse him: He "fell on his face, and besought [Jesus], saying, 'Lord, if you want to, you have the power to cleanse me.'¹¹"

Jesus responded, "I do want to."

Now, we must have a closer look at exactly how Jesus cleansed the leper. His manner of cleansing serves as an example of Jesus' connectedness with the leper—the at-one-ment between Jesus and leper. Jesus, we are informed, "put forth his hand, and touched him." We first consider the word, "touched."

The King James' "touch" does not begin to describe the level of engagement and connection—at-one-ment—that Jesus formed with the leper. It is not intimate enough. It is not sustained enough. It is not committed enough. It is not faithful enough.

We translate, "He extended his hand and *laid hold* of him.' The Greek word that the King James Bible translates "touch" and that we translate as "lay hold of" is *apto*. It means "to fasten onto," "to engage," "to take part in," "to join," "to set upon." This word describes, for example, the "touching" that goes on between two wrestlers. It also describes the "touching" that goes on between a loving husband and wife during sexual intimacy. Both circumstances involve a considerable degree of "touching."

When we envision Jesus touching the leper, we should not envision a quick poke with the finger, a brief hand to the shoulder, or even the momentary laying of a hand on the leper's head. No! We should envision an embrace—an extended embrace that no one present could possibly have missed. This "touch" speaks volumes. It speaks volumes about Jesus' character, Jesus' revelation about God, and Jesus' revelation of God's at-one-ment.

Obviously, to touch and, more, embrace someone is to form a literal and physical connection with

¹¹ Author's translation.

and to them. For however long a touch lasts, a touch literally connects two people. They are attached, linked together. Through a touch, they become one mass—indeed, with Jesus hugging the leper, gravity would work on them as if they were one. It is entirely consistent with the meaning of the word to say that they are in a state of at-one-ment. By physically touching the leper, Jesus was, for as long as the embrace lasted, physically connected to, attached to, linked and at-one with the leper. Jesus' act of touching the leper is as much an act of atonement as any act in which Jesus ever engaged.

There is no telling how long it had been since the leper had experienced a loving human touch. But the engagement, the connectedness, the at-one-ment of Jesus' touch went well beyond the physical. As Jesus physically laid hold of the leper, he also became one with him emotionally and spiritually. Jesus took part in and became one with the leper, his sickness, and the attending uncleanness, suffering, guilt, and self-doubt. Jesus set upon his leprosy, seized it, and removed it. There was a kind of physical and emotional transference, as it were, of the man's leprosy and un-holiness to Jesus.

So Jesus' physical touching of the leper carried emotional and spiritual meaning. Jesus' physical touching of the leper is symbolic of atonement. The connection, the linking of Jesus and the leper that Jesus' touch was at-one-ment. In so uniting with the leper, Jesus touch put the lie to the millennia long claims that God was offended by uncleanness and could have no association, no connection, no attachment, no atonement with uncleanness. Jesus' touch of an unclean man revealed God's eternal and enduring connection to even the least among us.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.¹²⁻¹⁶

¹²*In those days, he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. ¹³And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; ¹⁴Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, ¹⁵Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphæus, and Simon called Zelotes, ¹⁶And Judas the brother of James, and Judas Iscariot, which also was the traitor.

meditation

We know next to nothing about these men, these disciples, these apostles. The New Testament Gospels are not about them. The gospel is not about them. What scripture tells us about them is not particularly complimentary and so what we do know about them is not all that impressive. Standing with Jesus—a light whose “luster [is] above that of the sun at noon-day”—their light shines dimly, a little in excess “of the stars in the firmament” (1 Ne. 1.⁹⁻¹⁰). And yet, unlike so many before and after them, they recognized Jesus for who and what he was and is. Though they did not understand what it meant, they knew that he was Messiah. And they knew that there was nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to, to find and feast upon “the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6.⁶⁸). They came to know that He was God and that “God is love” (1 Jn. 4.⁸).

This was enough. Is it enough for all of us. With this we are equipped to go out into the world and bear witness to him who is “the bread of life” (Jn 6.³⁵), the most fundamental need of our spiritual existence and advancement.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.²⁰⁻²⁶

²⁰Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled.

Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.

²²Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.

²³Rejoice y in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.

²⁴But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.

²⁵Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger.”

Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.

²⁶Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!

For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

meditation

I am always intrigued, but not surprised, by our seeming preference for Matthew's version of the Beatitudes over that of Luke. With their high standards, both versions of the Beatitudes are extraordinarily challenging. However, in my judgment, Luke's version raises the stakes.

For example, Matthew's "poor in spirit" is illusive. What does it mean to be "poor in spirit," and who is "poor in spirit"? How does one measure and judge whether one is "poor in spirit"? We can and have discussed and debated such questions ad-naseum, always with the same disappointing and unsatisfying results. One suspects that this is just the way we like it. Keep it ambiguous so we do not have to ask harder questions, and face more troubling realities.

But Luke's version grants less shade. Who is "poor"? Answering this question is relatively simple. Real, temporal poverty is easily measured. We can look at our own life and determine whether we are "poor" or not. Finding ourselves lacking "poverty," we wonder if we are "blessed" and whether ours is the "kingdom of God." But, worse yet, we can observe the very real poverty of millions of our fellow citizens. We do not much care for them. They are lazy. We "reproach," justifying our reproach by imagining that their poverty is somehow related to a spiritual defect. We chaff at the idea that the great God of Heaven is particularly interested in their plight, their poverty, and considers them the blessed ones. Blessed over us? This is all too galling. Better to rush back to Matthew—after all, it more closely resembles the Beatitudes found in 3 Nephi of the Book of Mormon.

Of course, Luke's account throws even less shade with its parallel, "Wo unto you that are rich." No spiritualizing this! No reading a nonsensical, "wo unto you that are rich in spirit." Similarly, Luke's Jesus pronounces a blessing upon those who are "hungry," those who "weep," and those who are "hated" and disrespected, while pronouncing a "woe" upon those who are "full," who are always happy, and those who are well-spoken of, the respectable.

What the heck is Luke up to with all this nonsense? When we sense what looks to us like a world turned up-side down, one wonders if Luke is not giving us a glimpse into a more authentic Jesus. It was no less than Jesus' own mother, after all, who warned us about her son and his desire to turn the world upside down in precisely the same way Jesus indicates in Luke's version of the Beatitudes.

“He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Lk. 1.⁵¹⁻⁵³).

Yes, Jesus' "gospel," or "good news" might be something very different than we imagine. For some, the "good news" might actually be troubling, "bad news." I can't help but think of that very folksy LDS hymn, "Whose on the Lord side, Who?" Apparently, not the temporally rich, full, content, or well-thought of. It is, indeed, enough to make one's head spin.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.³¹⁻³⁶

³¹“And as ye would that men should do to you,
do ye also to them likewise.

³²For if ye love them which love you,
what thank have ye?

For sinners also love those that love them.

³³And if ye do good to them which do good to you,
what thank have ye?

For sinners also do even the same.

³⁴And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive,
what thank have ye?

For sinners also lend to sinners,
to receive as much again.

³⁵“But love ye your enemies,
and do good, and lend,
hoping for nothing again;
and your reward shall be great,
and ye shall be the children of the Highest:
for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

³⁶Be ye therefore merciful,
as your Father also is merciful.

meditation

I often think of Jesus as he carried his cross to Golgotha and then submitted to its cruelty. I have wondered many times what thoughts passed through his mind. I can't say, of course. But I feel very, very confident that his thoughts did not revolve around the power and glory that would come to him because of his sacrifice. Rather, I think it likely that his thoughts centered on each of us and the blessings that would enter our lives because of his self-sacrifice.

Sometimes it feels like we, contrary to Jesus' example, require assurances that there is something in it for us before we will commit ourselves to do that which is simply right and good, and is a beneficial to others. But in this portion of Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we are admonished to follow Jesus in giving up all thought of "what's in it for us." We are admonished to be merciful ("perfect" in Matthew's telling) as our Father in Heaven is merciful; to do good to and for those who don't look good on us and may not appreciate our efforts in their behalf.

How dramatically would the keeping of these admonitions change the nature of life on earth as we know it! How dramatically different would human society be! How dramatically different would the world be if everyone treated everyone else as they themselves wished to be treated? What a different world it would be if everyone acted consistent with their divine heritage! If everyone acted as children of God and imitated his self-denying mercy toward others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.³⁷⁻³⁸

³⁷“Judge not, and ye shall not be judged:
condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned:
forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:

³⁸Give, and it shall be given unto you;
good measure, pressed down, and shaken together,
and running over, shall men give into your bosom.
For with the same measure that ye mete
withal it shall be measured to you again.”

meditation

We have all needed to measure something. How many feet and inches long is your living room? How many cups of sugar are needed for your dessert recipe? How many pounds did you gain after all the holiday feasting? Hopefully our tools—tape measure, measuring cup, scales—are accurate. Hopefully, for example, the inch is really an inch. If the inch is only $7/8$ inch, we measure our living room to be smaller than it actually is. If our cup of sugar is actually $7/8$ cup, our dessert will be a disappointment.

We measure people and ideas around us continuously. We must. But we must do so accurately, according to some accepted, maybe even divine standard. If we use faulty standards, we might shortchange and devalue others. Jesus warns that when we devalue others, we become subject to the same devaluation. But when we are generous in our measurement, others will be generous to us. We receive a “good measure... and running over.

If Jesus practices what he preaches, and if he, indeed, is a reflection of God, his Father, then we can take great comfort in the knowledge that we are and will be judged by an extraordinarily generous God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.³⁹⁻⁴²

³⁹And he spake a parable unto them,
“Can the blind lead the blind?
Shall they not both fall into the ditch?
⁴⁰The disciple is not above his master:
but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.
⁴¹“And why beholdest thou the mote
that is in thy brother’s eye,
but perceivest not the beam
that is in thine own eye?
⁴²Either how canst thou say to thy brother,
‘Brother, let me pull out the mote
that is in thine eye,’
when thou thyself beholdest not the beam
that is in thine own eye?
Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out
of thine own eye,
and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote
that is in thy brother’s eye.

meditation

It probably shouldn't. Jesus is addressing something that is deadly serious. Yet, the truth is that this passage has always brought a smile to my face. I can't help seeing this gigantic beam, the size of a ship's mast or a home's long rafter sticking out of this tiny little eyeball... and chuckling just a bit. I wonder if Jesus smiled.

We are wont to measure others' flaws in feet, yards, meters, miles, even—Jesus addressed this just before this passage. Others' flaws speak to a lack of character. We measure our own flaws in millimeters, microns, as tiny as a splinter. Our flaws speak to a momentary lapse in judgement, inconsistent with our character.

Jesus, however, reminds us that it is often exactly the opposite. There are moments when we see the beam in our own eye as just that, a beam. But this does not keep us from performing surgery on another. In fact, it often seems to drive us to dig deeper into the other's wound. There may be times when another could use our help getting a speck out of their eye, but we should be sure that we have first gotten the beam out of our own, lest we do irreparable harm. We all go through periods when we are blind to our flaws. But Jesus invites us to be on guard of such delusion. He encourages us to deal with our flaws. Only then can we know how to and actually be a healer to others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.⁴³⁻⁴⁵

⁴³“For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit;
neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

⁴⁴For every tree is known by his own fruit.

For of thorns men do not gather figs,
nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes.

⁴⁵“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart
bringeth forth that which is good;
and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart
bringeth forth that which is evil:
for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

meditation

In comparing plant production to human behavior and speech, Jesus is actually addressing more than simple “behavior” and “speech”—our “works.” He is focused on “fruits,” “outcomes,” “consequences” of our works.

Consider a farmer and what constitutes a good farmer. Suppose a farmer works, and works, and works. Every time we pass by, we see him working in the field. Then imagine that come harvest time, he has no crop to show for all his efforts. Will he be counted as a good farmer? No. He will not be judged by how hard he works or how many hours he spends in his labor. He is a farmer to produce a crop, “fruit.” He will be judged on his harvest.

So it is with us. We are to determine our “goodness” or “evil” not simply by our works, but the fruit our work produces. Bad behavior and bad speech produce deleterious “fruit,” i.e., outcomes and consequences for individuals and societies that are subjected to them. On the other hand, good behavior and good speech produce positive or good “fruit,” i.e., outcomes and consequences for individuals and societies that are the beneficiaries of them.

God does not simply call us to labor in his vineyard. The question that Jesus would have us ask is, “How impactful are we in the lives of individuals and the functioning of society? What are the outcomes of our labors? Is the world a better place for our having been and labored in it?”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 6.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁹

⁴⁶“And why call ye me, ‘Lord, Lord,’
and do not the things which I say?

⁴⁷Whosoever cometh to me,
and heareth my sayings,
and doeth them,

I will shew you to whom he is like:

⁴⁸he is like a man which built an house,
and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock:
and when the flood arose,
the stream beat vehemently upon that house,
and could not shake it:

for it was founded upon a rock.

⁴⁹But he that heareth, and doeth not,
is like a man that without a foundation
built an house upon the earth;
against which the stream did beat vehemently,
and immediately it fell;
and the ruin of that house was great.”

meditation

What could make more sense or be more consistent with rational and predictable explanations of the causes and effects of discipleship than what is found in Jesus’ analogy of building construction? In his analogy, Jesus has explained how to build a house. When one builds a house on a foundation, as per Jesus’ instructions, the house will endure the, often, harsh weather conditions it will face. When one ignores Jesus’ instructions and dispenses with the foundation, the house will not endure those same conditions.

While the builder would be clueless as to how to build a house without Jesus’ instructions, and while it is the builder’s observance or non-observance of the building instructions that determines whether the house stands or falls, Jesus need not—and, I suggest, normally does not—thereafter act as an active agent in “making” or “causing” the house to stand or fall. Whether the house stands or falls is not the consequence of God’s active agency in “blessing” or “punishing.” Whether the house stands or falls is the natural consequence of it having been built in such a way as to withstand harsh weather conditions or not.

So it is in our discipleship. The “blessing” that God provides comes in the form of his providing instruction on how best to navigate this world in preparation for navigation within the next. When we follow his instructions, we very naturally successfully endure the oft-harsh conditions of mortality and are better prepared for whatever conditions immortality may present. If we do not follow his instructions, we will very naturally fail to navigate the harsh conditions of this world and be unprepared for those of the next.

This is not active “blessing” or “punishment” from a God either pleased or angered. It is the natural consequence of having followed or not the instructions so graciously provided and so necessary for successful navigation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 8.²⁶⁻³⁹

²⁶And they arrived at the country of the Gadarenes, which is over against Galilee. ²⁷And when he went forth to land, there met him out of the city a certain man, which had devils long time, and ware no clothes, neither abode in any house, but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he cried out, and fell down before him, and with a loud voice said, "What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God most high? I beseech thee, torment me not." ²⁹(For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For oftentimes it had caught him: and he was kept bound with chains and in fetters; and he brake the bands, and was driven of the devil into the wilderness.)

³⁰And Jesus asked him, saying, "What is thy name?"

And he said, "Legion:" because many devils were entered into him.

³¹And they besought him that he would not command them to go out into the deep. ³²And there was there an herd of many swine feeding on the mountain: and they besought him that he would suffer them to enter into them. And he suffered them. ³³Then went the devils out of the man, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked.

³⁴When they that fed them saw what was done, they fled, and went and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then they went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid. ³⁶They also which saw it told them by what means he that was possessed of the devils was healed.

³⁷Then the whole multitude of the country of the Gadarenes round about besought him to depart from them; for they were taken with great fear: and he went up into the ship, and returned back again. ³⁸Now the man out of whom the devils were departed besought him that he might be with him: but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹"Return to thine own house, and shew how great things God hath done unto thee."

And he went his way, and published throughout the whole city how great things Jesus had done unto him.

Meditation

I have often thought that if he had it to over again, Luke might tell the story found in today's reading without including the bit about the pigs. Why have I thought so? Because the pigs often, in my experience, distract from Luke's central point. I have been involved in discussions of this story which turned to and came to focus on "demon possession" or the importance of mortal bodies—"the fact the evil spirits were so willing to enter pig bodies demonstrates how important and desirable it is to have a body."

I am having none of it. For me, the point of the story is the transformation and renewal that Jesus brought into the life of an extraordinarily disturbed individual, and the hope that it holds out to me that I too can be transformed and renewed through my own encounter with Jesus.

The man's transformation is found in descriptions of him "before and after" his encounter with Jesus. For example, the man who had been out of control and uncontrollable before his encounter with Jesus, is found "sitting at the feet of Jesus" docile and controlled after the encounter. Then again, upon first encountering Jesus, the man thought of Jesus as a tormentor, not someone with whom one would wish to associate. But afterward, the man is anxious that he be allowed to remain with Jesus, then and always.

Not only, then, was the man transformed, but God in the person of Jesus, was transformed. The kind of Being God is, was transformed in the man's mind, and, through him, in the mind of every one who reads his story. I know that this story has transformed and renewed me personally. It has

transformed my view of God and the kind of Being he is. And it has transformed me such that I long to sit at his feet and enjoy his healing and accepting influence now and into eternity.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 10.³⁸⁻⁴²

³⁸Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. ³⁹And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. ⁴⁰But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me."

⁴¹And Jesus answered and said unto her, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: ⁴²but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Meditation

The first thing we should most certainly say about this passage is that Jesus's rebuke of Martha should not be thought of or utilized as a sexist attack. There is no question whatsoever that both genders are equally gifted at and guilty of pursuing inferior worldly concerns and thus, being distracted by the inferior and hindered in far more needful spiritual and eternal pursuits.

It is clear from Luke's account and Jesus' instruction that the problems with misplaced priorities are many. First, there is waste. We waste time and thought and energy on things that are of little consequence. Translating things of little consequence into things of deep importance impacts our entire world of priorities. Soon we are rich with that which we do not need and poor in that which is most necessary. Second, there is hindrance. Because we spend so much time and thought and energy pursuing that which is not truly needful, we have little or no time or thought or energy to spend on those things that are most needed. If we do happen to devote a little time or thought or energy to the "one needful thing," it is too often cursory and distracted. We appreciate the needful thing less than we might otherwise have done. The thing of most consequence becomes boring and less enticing, thus reinforcing our perverted priorities and causing us to spiral higher into the zone of inconsequential desires and actions.

These two problems are obvious. A third might escape our notice. Perverted priorities impact our relationships. We see this in Luke's narrative, as Martha becomes, first privately then publicly critical of Mary. We see the one with perverted priorities attempting to set the standard for everyone else. If everyone else yields to the bullying, then the entire society becomes one of perverted priorities. In addition, others, along with their needs, are more easily and justifiably ignored and devalued. The individual is dehumanized, viewed as a mere tool to be used for another's ends. These three problems are debilitating.

But there is perhaps yet another, more serious problem. There is one priority, indeed, there is One Being who is most needful and most needed in our lives. He is, like Lehi's tree that is symbolic of him, "most desirable above all things" and "most joyous to the soul" (See 1 Ne. 11.²² & ²³). When we become distracted by other, inferior priorities, our relationship with Him suffers—the one thing that we can least afford.

Looking into the future, Alma saw the coming of the Son of God. Seeing Him, Alma concluding that though "there be many things to come...there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people" (Al. 7.⁷). Used correctly, the Season of Lent provides an opportunity for us to re-evaluate our priorities, jettison what is of little consequence, and work to further develop and deepen our relationship with Jesus, the most indispensable necessity of life.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 22, 2024)

Luke 15.¹⁻⁷

¹Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, “This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.”

³And he spake this parable unto them, saying, ⁴What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ⁵And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. ⁷I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

meditation

Today’s reading has many times left me wondering. Wondering about several things. So, I’ll title today’s meditation, “Have you ever wondered?”

Have you ever wondered at how often the Gospel’s report of sinners coming so openly and confidently to Jesus?

Have you ever wondered what it was about Jesus that permitted them to approach him so trustingly?

Have you ever wondered why so many that think of themselves—likely accurately—as “sinners” avoid Jesus or think that Jesus avoids them?

I can’t help but think of Adam and Eve, whom we like to say didn’t really even sin but only transgressed—as if the latter is not as bad as the former—far from being drawn to God and confident in His response to their having eaten the forbidden fruit, went into hiding, avoiding Him like the plague. And isn’t that what many of us do when we sin and feel guilty? We hide from God, fearful of his... what... sternness, contempt?

So, I wonder, again, what was it about Jesus that drew and comforted the sinner rather than repelling them? What kind of compassion, acceptance, agreeableness, openness, understanding, etc., did he exude that drew rather than repelled the sinner? And, is he still the same today? Based on the admittedly little amount of time that I have spent with him, I have to say, “yes,” he is the same today. He is compassionate, accepting, agreeable, open, and understanding of us.

Here’s another thing I’ve wonder about. Maybe you have too. What’s up with all the Gospel narratives about dinner parties?

Well, sure, I guess you could conclude that they were simply part of Jesus’ history. He had to eat, didn’t he. And he, like most people, often ate with others. But I am quite certain the Gospel writers left out many events that were simply part of Jesus’ history. So, why do they report so often on Jesus’ sitting and eating... with anyone, let alone with sinners?

I guess you’ve attended dinner parties. Had someone over to your place, maybe. Gone to someone else’s home for dinner. Enjoyed a meal with friends at a restaurant. If you think about it, it is pretty intimate. Maybe the only other part of our day-to-day life that is more intimate is sex. I mean there is all that mouth opening and closing. There’s that tongue moving about. There’s all that crunching and munching—even with the very best of etiquette. There’s all that wiping.

Then, too, there are all the little revelations that come with conversation. There's someone else seeing our home, our possessions, our tastes, our habits, our cleanliness and orderliness—or the lack thereof. Yip, there is a great deal of opening up that takes place around a plate of food.

I wonder. Wonder if this is part of the Gospel writers' message. "Open up. Let Jesus draw you in with his attractive personality. Don't worry, you won't be sorry. He won't make you sorry you came. You won't walk away empty. You'll leave filled. Filled with love and hope and gladness. And the feeling will last... and last... and last.

And how about those Pharisees and scribes? I've wondered. Perhaps you have too. I've wondered how anyone could be so confident in their righteousness. It's pure delusion, of course. But they are so sure in their delusion. It seems that they thought of themselves as "just persons, which need no repentance." How could anyone in their right mind think that? It is a wonder.

That's another wonder. How could Jesus speak of "ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance"? Such "persons" do not exist! Not only are there not ninety-nine of them, there isn't even one of them. I wonder at Jesus' graciousness in this instance. He was prepared to let it go; to let the scribes and pharisees hang on to their delusions of righteousness although, eventually, he had to come out swinging (See, for example, Mat. 23).

Well, I could go on wondering. But we have time for only one more. Have you ever wondered why the shepherd lifted the sheep and "layeth it on his shoulders"? Why did he carry the sheep back to the fold? Why not lead it? I mean, the sheep got itself into its predicament. Shouldn't it show a little personal initiative? Contribute a little something in its return trip home?

It's made me wonder what kind of shape the sheep was in. It's made me wonder about its state of mind. Could it see straight? Could it think straight? Was it even capable of walking? Was it shivering with cold? It makes me wonder, alright. Why do we repenting and repentant sinners so often think so much of ourselves and our pitifully small contribution to our rescue? Why are we so often "proud" of our having the sense to repent? Why do we act as if we were not carried on someone else's shoulders? What makes us think that we are any different than any other sinner?

Well, I am guessing that Lent can be used for wondering. To let the wonder of scripture fill us. Let the wonder of God and His compassion, acceptance, agreeableness, openness, understanding, etc., fill us. Let the wonder of so many's attraction to Jesus' fill us. Let the wonder why anyone in their right mind would turn away from him, not trust him, think that they would go it on their own. Why? Why? Why, I wonder?

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 12, 2024)

Luke 17.³⁻⁶

³“Take heed to yourselves: if thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. ⁴And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, “I repent;” thou shalt forgive him.”

⁵And the apostles said unto the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

⁶And the Lord said, “If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, ‘Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea;’ and it should obey you.”

Meditation

I’m thinking that if I asked, “Is Jesus a hypocrite?” you would respond with a resounding “No!” Am I wrong? “No?” Then, I guess you’d say that Jesus practices what he preaches. “Absolutely.” Well, then, maybe we could have a look at what Jesus teaches about forgiveness in today’s reading.

“If [thy brother or sister] trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, ‘I repent;’ thou shalt forgive him.”

This is extraordinarily difficult on several fronts. First, there is the inherent difficulty of forgiveness itself. It is hard enough to forgive a single painful trespass against us. The trespass can be so hurtful. And holding on to our anger and grievance can feel so good. But even this is far too simple for Jesus’ consideration. He ups the ante and asks us to forgive—and that over and over and over again—another’s repeated trespasses. Not one time, or two times, or three times, or ten times, but every time—this is the effect of “seven times” as it is a symbol for completion, wholeness, etc.

Maybe there’s a hearty soul among us that could, hearing the trespasser’s expression of repentance, pull off such a heroic effort. But, herein lies another of its challenges. How am I supposed to take the trespasser’s repentance seriously when he or she repeatedly trespasses against me—on the same day!? Why, if they were sincerely repentant this repeated trespassing wouldn’t be happening, would it? There would be a forsaking of the attitudes and actions that lead to the trespasses. Thus, we might conclude that their repentance is insincere and unworthy of a forgiving response.

And here is maybe the most difficult, infuriating, and unfair thing of all: Jesus does not consider or address the apparent insincerity of the “repentant” trespasser. It’s as though we and he are not supposed to care. Or is it that we have misunderstood what “sincere repentance” looks like. Maybe it is not in us to change on a dime—at least not often. Maybe it is in our nature to hold onto attitudes and actions that cause trespasses to proliferate, over and over and over again. Maybe Jesus is calling on us to look into the mirror, see our repeated trespasses, and acknowledge that our brother or sister and us are the same, and deserve the same consideration. No wonder the apostles, astounded at Jesus’ insight and expectations, exclaimed, pleaded, “Increase our Faith.” “It is too much, what you are suggesting. We’ll need lots of help to pull this off!”

So, Jesus’ expectation is difficult. Enough said about that. Let’s get back to our original question: “Does Jesus practice what he preaches?” Do he and his Father forgive as they tell us to forgive? It is difficult to believe. In fact, it is as hard for us to believe that they forgive us with the consistency and generosity they counsel us to forgive others as it is for us to forgive as they ask! Upon hearing that they do follow their own advice, we might be forgiven for exclaiming: “Increase our faith.”

So, there we go. Another item on our Lent “things-to-pray-about” list. Lent is a good time to explore with God the nature and extent of His own forgiveness. It is a good time to work to increase the nature and

extent of our forgiveness toward others. It is a good time to plead with Almighty God, “Increase our faith.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 29, 2024)

Luke 18.⁹⁻¹⁴

⁹And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “¹⁰Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. ¹¹Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. ¹²I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.’

¹³And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

Meditation

Luke is the only Gospel writer to record Mary’s Magnificat. In it she shares her insight into her child’s surprising and scandalous intention of turning the world and its topsy-turvy values upside down.

“He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away” (Lk. 1.⁵¹⁻⁵³).

Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus presented individuals whom society might overlook or even look down on as heroes or role models. At the same time, he often portrayed those who would normally be thought of as heroes or role models in a less than positive light. Today’s parable is one such example. It is difficult to imagine and describe the shock and scandal that this parable is likely to have created in his audience. The scandal is, however, easy to see. They killed him for such societal insolence.

In today’s reading Jesus presents two individuals for our consideration. One is a respected, the other disrespected member of society. Both offer sincere prayer. There is no reason to doubt either’s claim. The Pharisee likely performed all the good that he claims to have done, while the Publican’s confession of being a sinner is to be taken as an accurate self-evaluation. Yet, when the sinner left the temple to go home, he was right with God. The Pharisee was not.

What gives?

Jesus seems to find self-importance and self-righteousness one of the more disagreeable human traits. It is one that runs contrary to God’s expectations of us. At the same time, Jesus highly values humility, or the willingness to acknowledge humiliating truths about ourselves. The Pharisee could not find his way to humiliation, perhaps because he did not trust God to respond compassionately. The Publican, perhaps because he had no other choice, expressed the humiliating truth about himself and trusted God with that truth.

In addition, Jesus does not care much for religion that has feelings of superiority as one of its major objectives. The Pharisee’s prayer indicates that he cared most about proclaiming his supposed superiority. That false sense of superiority is, likely, what he loved best about his faith. As the Publican’s open confession attests, he did not much care about appearances.

There are many other lessons that we might draw from Jesus' parable. But for today, in light of the Lent Season and its focus on confession and repentance, we would simply point out, again, the faithfulness of God when it comes to our sins and sinfulness. We can, like the Publican, confess our sins, no matter how humiliating, and, far from being upbraided, find ourselves being pronounced, justified, right with God. The Publican's prayer can act as a signpost, leading us in the way to obtaining all that we hope to receive from the Season through voluntary confession of humiliating self-truths.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: February 16, 2024)

Luke 22.¹⁴⁻²⁰

¹⁴And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him. ¹⁵And he said unto them, “With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer: ¹⁶For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

¹⁷And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves: ¹⁸for I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come.”

¹⁹And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.”

²⁰Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.

Meditation

I hope that it is not too obvious to say that the Exodus of Israel from Egyptian bondage is the most celebrated event of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. The writers of the Book’s histories and the prophets who preached among the descendants of the rescued slaves returned to it over and over again. The constant returning to the event not only served to remind descendants of the event itself, but, more importantly, to remind them about the character of Yahweh and one of his most deeply held values: justice for and rescue of oppressed peoples.

One of the very first things Israel learned about God was that he is an emancipator. This was certainly their first actual experience with Him. While the Passover dominates the landscape of the Hebrew Bible, followed closely with the exile of first Israel and then Judah, with the addition of the Christian Bible, or New Testament another event replaces and surpasses Yahweh’s rescue of Israel from slavery. That event, of course, is Jesus’ emancipation of all humankind through his suffering and death.

But both events, the old and the new are really the same. Both testify to God’s enduring commitment to justice for and rescue of oppressed people—whether that oppression be physical, emotional, spiritual, etc. So committed is Deity to justice and rescue that he will achieve them at any cost to himself. For Jesus, this meant entering “the grasp of [that] awful monster; yea that monster, death and hell” (2 Ne. 9.¹⁰). Thus, it is appropriate to see the Jewish Passover and the Christian sacramental meal of bread and wine as serving the same end. Both serve as occasions to commemorate the same Divine reality and celebrate the same Divine character: God searches for, watches over, and delivers oppressed people.

This truth adds to the significance of bread and wine as emblems of the sacrament. Like Egypt’s Israelite slaves, oppressed people often lack the economic resources necessary to a healthy and happy life. Thus, a provision of bread and wine signifies the Lord’s watchful care over oppressed people and his supply of resources necessary to life. Individuals oppressed by sin and guilt lack the spiritual resources necessary for a healthy and happy spiritual life. Thus, the sacramental bread and wine signify the Lord’s supply of the spiritual nourishment necessary to life and salvation.

Even during the journey from spiritual bondage to complete spiritual freedom, the individual requires divine sustenance. Thus, Yahweh’s supply of Manna during Israel’s journey in the wilderness. All of this adds meaning to Jesus’ declaration,

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and

giveth life unto the world... I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6.^{32-33, 35}).

But, the oppressed are given more than bread and water enough for basic sustenance. As the 5,000 who were fed by Jesus’ miraculous multiplication of bread and fish, the oppressed are filled to full. With extra to spare, all oppressed are invited to come and partake without money and without price in a feast of fat things” (See DC 58.⁸).

Lent is a time to reexamine our attitudes toward the sacrament, our understanding of it, and the uses to which we put it. It is a good time to appreciate the “desire” with which Jesus desires to join us in commemoration of his desire to emancipate. It is a good time to partake of the true manna that came from heaven. It is a good time to join him in his search for people oppressed by all manner of afflictions, and strive to provide them with the bread and water, literal or symbolic, they require to live happy and healthy lives.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 26, 2024)

Luke 22.³⁹⁻⁴⁶

³⁹And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him. ⁴⁰And when he was at the place, he said unto them, “Pray that ye enter not into temptation.”

⁴¹And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, ⁴²saying, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”

⁴³And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. ⁴⁴And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. ⁴⁵And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow, ⁴⁶and said unto them, “Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation.”

Meditation

After a brief introduction in which he shares his strategy of record-keeping—a strategy suggested by his brother, Nephi—Jacob begins the Book that bears his name with a series of admonitions. We find this admonition among them:

“Wherefore, we would to God that we could persuade all men not to rebel against God, to provoke him to anger, but that all men would believe in Christ, and view his death...” (Jac. 1.⁸).

This is good advice for any time of year—advice that can greatly enhance one’s sacramental experience, for example—but is especially good advice during the Season of Lent and Easter. It is hard to imagine that one could make better use of one’s time than to review, imagine, envision, and see with an eye of faith the greatest and most chilling events in human history—the suffering and death of God.

It is my testimony that as one diligently and faithfully strives to “view Jesus’ death,” there are few limits to the revelation that might come. As I have followed Jacob’s admonition, I have seen things beyond compare and things beyond my ability to describe. I have had a peek into that cup that Jesus held in his trembling hand. There is good reason, I think, why I have been given only a peek. Anything more than a peek might undo me. What small part I have seen was truly awful to behold. As I witnessed the small part that I was privileged to witness, I was both saddened and depressed, as Enoch was when he saw the Son of Man’s suffering—Enoch “bad bitterness of soul... wept” and said, “I will refuse to be comforted” (Moses 7.⁴⁴)—and thrilled—again, as Enoch when “his soul rejoiced, saying: ‘The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world’” (Moses 7.⁴⁷).

There is a whole world, a whole universe found in the cup that Jesus’ begged the Father to remove. We investigate that cup in detail in other meditations. For now, we note that Jesus himself, once before a large Nephite multitude and then in private discourse with Joseph Smith, called the cup “bitter” (3 Ne. 11.¹¹ & DC 19.¹⁸). This is surely one of the great understatements of all time. It seems clear that Jesus did not pick this imagery of a “cup” frivolously. The imagery had a long history. It seems beyond dispute that this cup came to be symbolic of the pain and torment of sin which brings to the sinner a deep sense of Divine disapproval and wrath.¹ It is, then, an apt symbol of hell. Joseph Smith was once given a peek into the abyss of hell. But, again, it was but a peek.

“I, the Lord, show it by vision unto many, but straightway shut it up again; wherefore, the end, the width, the height, the depth, and the misery thereof, they understand not, neither any man except those who are ordained unto this condemnation” (DC 76.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁸).

¹Mos. 3.²⁵⁻²⁷; Ps. 11.⁶; Ps. 75.⁸; Is. 51.^{17& 22}; Jer. 25.^{15-17, 27}; Jer. 51.⁷⁻⁹; Ez. 23.³²⁻³⁴; Rev. 14.¹⁰⁻¹¹; Rev. 16.¹⁹; Rev. 17.⁴⁻⁶; Alma 40.²⁶; D&C 29.¹⁷; DC 43.²⁶; DC 101.¹¹

Fortunately for Joseph, he had not been “ordained unto this condemnation.” But, I suggest, Jesus had been “ordained unto this condemnation,” not for any guilt of his own, but for our guilt of which he took ownership. He did descend into hell. He “descended below all things” (See DC 88.⁶ and 122.⁷⁻⁸). If this realization is not shocking enough—the *Holy One* suffering the pains of hell—the miracle of his survival is infinitely more startling and miraculous. Anyone and everyone else would be undone by a descent into the deepest, darkest crevice of hell’s the bottomless pit.

“And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people” (Mos. 3.⁷).

Jesus not only survived these unfathomably dark and lifeless depths. He triumphed. He conquered. There is much else to learn from today’s reading. But to have a view, if only a short peek, of the power that Jesus exercised in our behalf in order to conquer first the cup and then the cross... well, that’s an admonition to be prized, heeded, and experienced above all else. And it is a witness to Jesus’ unimaginable supremacy to any and every other person who has or every will inhabit this globe.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 25, 2024)

Luke 22.⁴⁷⁻⁵³

⁴⁷And while he yet spake, behold a multitude, and he that was called Judas, one of the twelve, went before them, and drew near unto Jesus to kiss him. ⁴⁸But Jesus said unto him, “Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?”

⁴⁹When they which were about him saw what would follow, they said unto him, “Lord, shall we smite with the sword?”

⁵⁰And one of them smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear. ⁵¹And Jesus answered and said, “Suffer ye thus far.” And he touched his ear, and healed him.

⁵²Then Jesus said unto the chief priests, and captains of the temple, and the elders, which were come to him, “Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves? ⁵³When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me: but this is your hour, and the power of darkness.”

“No, God, the Father, did not kill Jesus. He is not responsible for his death. Neither his “offended honor,” nor his commitment to “justice” demanded that Jesus die. Wounded human pride, human injustice, human will to power, and human violence killed Jesus. Humans alone are responsible for the death of a God. I don’t know how many times I’ve said it. I’ve said it in one-on-one discussions. I’ve said it in groups of dozens and hundreds. I’ve said it in posts found on this site. I’ll say it again here. God the Father is in no way responsible for the death of His dear Son. Resisting such strong assertions, some have pointed to the fact that Jesus foretold his death. Others have quoted Jesus’ words to Peter when the latter attempted to protect Jesus from arrest.

“Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (Jn. 18.¹¹)

Jesus’ foreknowledge of his death is, they claim, evidence of its divine necessity. Jesus resisted Peter’s violence, they assert, not because he was resistant to violence, but because he understood himself to have been sent by God to be arrested and killed. However, it could just as likely mean that in sending Jesus, the Father expected him to resist violence at all costs—not because he was to die, but because he was to reveal the unalterable non-violent character of God. Jesus was sent to earth as much to live as to die. Both served as examples to the rest of us. In addition, his living was intended as a daily revelation of the character of God and whatever other immortal Beings inhabit the cosmos. Humankind might have learned everything it ever needed to know about God had it given Jesus a regular life-span to reveal his Father through daily living and teaching.

But those who watched the revelation unfold rejected the revelation. The God that Jesus was revealing was contrary to every worldly principle and tradition. Jesus’ revelation was particularly contrary to the spirit of violence that has pervaded and flooded the earth since humanity’s earliest history. So, Jesus’ revelation of God also ended up serving as a revelation of the character of humankind. Nowhere were these two revelations made plainer than in the violence that was perpetrated against Jesus—from his arrest to his crucifixion.

Jesus, it seems to me, is clear about this. Of his arrest, Jesus said to his assailants, “This is your hour.” It wasn’t the Father’s hour. No one is to blame for Jesus’ arrest and eventual death but those who did the arresting and the killing, along with those who supported or remained silent about them. Perhaps those who continue to put the blame on Father, or only slightly less disagreeably, upon his sense of “justice,” also bear a little responsibility for Jesus’ suffering and death. For it may be that it is just such attitudes that would allow it to all happen again.

In a sense, of course, it has all happened again. And again. And again. Innocent victims continue to die violent deaths in the name of God and the false “justice” the world assigns to Him. Given that “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,” (Matthew 25.⁴⁰), the world has over and over again arrested and killed Jesus anew as the “power of darkness” continues to prevail. Easter, along with its Season of Lent, is a good time for us to reexamine our understanding of God, the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, along with our treatment of the vulnerable who are always among us. It is long past time that we repent of any and all violence we perpetrate or allow to be perpetrated against both God and human. With wars all over the globe, including those in Ukraine and Gaza, this seems like a particularly poignant time for more discerning reflection about human violence and its incompatibility with God and an enduring life with Him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 25, 2024)

Luke 22.⁵⁴⁻⁶²

⁵⁴Then took they him, and led him, and brought him into the high priest's house. And Peter followed afar off. ⁵⁵And when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the hall, and were set down together, Peter sat down among them. ⁵⁶But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, "This man was also with him."

⁵⁷And he denied him, saying, "Woman, I know him not."

⁵⁸And after a little while another saw him, and said, "Thou art also of them."

And Peter said, "Man, I am not."

⁵⁹And about the space of one hour after another confidently affirmed, saying, "Of a truth this fellow also was with him: for he is a Galilæan."

⁶⁰And Peter said, "Man, I know not what thou sayest."

And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. ⁶¹And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." ⁶²And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.

Meditation

The three synoptic Gospels were written and structured in such a way as to allow us to divide Jesus' earthly ministry into two parts. During the first part of his ministry, Jesus offers displays of his power and greatness through a series of miraculous interventions in the life of sick, suffering, vulnerable, and threatened people. Everyone, including his closest disciples, were impressed. Some were impressed so as to honor him. Others were impressed so as to see him as a threat and so rejected him. In the second part of his ministry, Jesus' displays of power and greatness are less numerous. However, he provides instruction concerning the nature of his power and greatness, discussing both its potential and its limitations. It could not, for example, be used for self-aggrandizement or violently to threaten or harm others. He was particularly careful about instructing his closest disciples about the proper and improper use of greatness and power. They struggled to understand.

The second part of the synoptic Gospels can often feel like a "study" in blind, undiscerning discipleship. Jesus' closest disciples are often clueless about the real nature of Jesus' Messiahship. We can lump Peter's denial of Jesus into this study of blindness. We can't be too hard on Peter or the other disciples, as such blind and undiscerning discipleship is not unique to them. It is pretty much the status quo for everyone who has known or heard of Jesus to the present day. He is remarkably patient with us; for we do not simply misunderstand and misinterpret principles that might be acknowledged as hard and obscure. We misunderstand and misinterpret the most fundamental aspects of his revealed character. In a sense, this is a denial of him not unlike that committed by Peter.

For whatever reason, Luke's account of Peter's thrice repeated denial of Jesus is gentler than either Matthew's or Mark's. In reading Luke's account, one might get away with imagining Peter's denials as almost apologetic. Perhaps he was even sheepish in his denials. Maybe calculating. Heck, I've even heard people claim he was inspired as otherwise he too might have been arrested and killed. And where would the church had been without its rock?!?

But Matthew and Mark would have none of such vain imagination. Peter was not cool, calm, and collected in his denials. He was not moved upon by the Holy Spirit, unless, of course, the Holy Spirit has a potty mouth. For over the course of two to three hours—plenty of time to reevaluate one's actions and strategies—Peter resorted, according to Matthew, to swearing false religious oaths. When that didn't alleviate others' suspicions, Peter angrily and vociferously "began... to curse and to swear." (See Matt. 26.⁷²⁻⁷⁴). Yes, the rock let lose with a torrent of four-letter words, thus demonstrating the seriousness of his denials.

Now. One might wonder what all of this has to do with Lent, and why we would focus on a story full of such profound failure. Well, first of all, it is a story that the Gospel writers present as fact. It is part of Jesus' final hours on earth. It is an important element in the Easter story. It is, then, part of that great circumscribed whole known as "truth." Secondly, we all have a bit of Peter in us. We fail Jesus often. And, as we have said, we deny him and aspects of his character in many ways.

But we might also have a bit of Peter in us in that as we recognize the many ways in which we fail Jesus, we, like Peter, mourn. After his multiple denials, "Peter went out, and wept bitterly." If we take the purposes and objectives of Lent seriously, we might at times find ourselves weeping bitterly as we boldly and faithfully confess our sins and the many ways we fail Jesus. But the Season does not call for us to remain in the depths. We can be, *will be* comforted if we faithfully accept Jesus' generous and lavish offer of grace that is so beautifully represented in the Easter Season. Then, through the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ we might discover, like Peter, that there is a day of the Lord's acceptance found on the other side of the darkness. Through our glorious Redeemer, we can find ourselves receiving

 "beauty for ashes,
 the oil of joy for mourning,
 the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness
that [we] might be called trees of righteousness,
 the planting of the LORD,
 that he might be glorified" (Is. 61.²⁻³).

May the Easter Season bring us such blessedness!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 2, 2024)

Luke 22.⁶³⁻⁷¹

⁶³And the men that held Jesus mocked him, and smote him. ⁶⁴And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face, and asked him, saying, “Prophecy, who is it that smote thee?” ⁶⁵And many other things blasphemously spake they against him.

⁶⁶And as soon as it was day, the elders of the people and the chief priests and the scribes came together, and led him into their council, saying, ⁶⁷“Art thou the Christ? Tell us.”

And he said unto them, “If I tell you, ye will not believe: ⁶⁸and if I also ask you, ye will not answer me, nor let me go. ⁶⁹Hereafter shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God.”

⁷⁰Then said they all, “Art thou then the Son of God?”

And he said unto them, “Ye say that I am.”

⁷¹And they said, “What need we any further witness? For we ourselves have heard of his own mouth.”

meditation

During Jesus’ first Kafkaesque “trial,” he was asked three questions. Not one of them was sincere. Not one of them sought the truth. All were intended to mock Jesus and to confirm what the questioners already believed or wished to believe. This mode of investigation is known today as “confirmation bias.” It is a serious problem. As Jesus’ trial shows, such dishonesty does more than reveal personal corruption and cause debilitating self-delusion. It gets people killed. By refusing to answer those who conducted their dishonest inquisition, Jesus refused to play the game. He allowed the questions themselves to stand as witness against his questioners’ guilt.

Jesus was asked his first question while blindfolded: “who is it that smote thee?” It was intended to belittle. The query drew no response from Jesus. I can’t help but think that Jesus could have answered the question and named the assailant. Jesus could likely understand his assailant’s thoughts and sense his assailant’s feelings even better than his assailant himself. The one with the blindfold could see better than anyone else in the room. The question meant to belittle Jesus only succeeded in revealing the smallness of the gathered mob and the greatness of Jesus.

The second question posed to Jesus is a study in dishonesty: “Art thou the Christ? Tell us.” Knowing that they had rejected his self-revelation from the beginning, Jesus did not waste time now trying to convince. But that does not mean that he was finished revealing. So, he revealed the truth about those who questioned him. “Your question is dishonest. You are not interested in learning the truth. You only seek to justify yourselves. It doesn’t matter how I answer, you will not believe me and only seek to use what I say against me.”

The third question was no more honest and sincere than the first two: “Art thou then the Son of God?” In response, Jesus’ answer was no more informative than the former, “You said it, not me.” At this point, Jesus seems to be resigned to his fate, and dismissive of his interrogators. He has judged them as beyond the pale and unworthy of respect.

But, in the midst of this Kafkaesque circus of dishonesty and contempt, Jesus dropped a hint about his future. This hint would be picked up again in Luke’s next letter—that of Acts. It would be picked up by other writers in the New Testament. It would be seen in vision and witnessed in Jesus’ future personal appearances—in both the “Old World” and in the “New.” It is central to our prayer life even today. Without it, our access to God would be severely limited. That “hint”?

“Hereafter shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God.”

He had maintained all along that he was *from* God. That he had been sent *by* God. Now, he would *return* to God; return to the intimacy of God's bosom. He would sit on God's right hand and advocate for those who approached God in the spirit of true and sincere investigation and query.

There is much to say about Jesus' privileged position at the right hand of God and the benefits that flow to us through it. But for now, during lent, we can use Jesus' intimate place with God as we attempt to "enquire after God." This inquiry must, above all, be conducted in the spirit of complete openness. There can be no attempts at "confirmation bias" in this inquiry. Only by avoiding this currently proliferating dishonesty of confirmation bias can we find the truth for ourselves. Only by avoiding this currently proliferating dishonesty can we follow Jesus' example of revelation. Only by avoiding this currently proliferating dishonesty can we act as an example to a "post-truth" world, act as a witness that not only does truth exist but that the truth will set one free—especially from the self-deception and self-justifying excuses of the fragile human ego.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 3, 2024)

Luke 23.¹⁻⁷

¹And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. ²And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Cæsar, saying that he himself is Christ a King.”

³And Pilate asked him, saying, “Art thou the King of the Jews?”

And he answered him and said, “Thou sayest it.”

⁴Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, “I find no fault in this man.”

⁵And they were the more fierce, saying, “He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place.”

⁶When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man were a Galilæan. ⁷And as soon as he knew that he belonged unto Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time.

Meditation

It seems unlikely that Luke anticipated or intended that his original reader and then future readers would have any sympathy for either Pilate or the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus before him. Certainly, in Luke’s telling, Pilate does not exactly offer a profile in courage and decisiveness. The Roman Curator’s stock will not rise as Luke’s story continues. At the same time, the Jewish leaders who bring Jesus before Pilate are not profiles in honesty and openness. Their stock, too, will go lower as Luke proceeds with his narrative. All, Roman Curator and Jewish leaders alike, are profiles in manipulation, dishonesty, and cowardice. But, this does not mean that the protagonists in our current narrative have nothing to offer the modern reader. In Luke’s hands, they act, however unwittingly, in revelatory ways, revealing the devious machinations of this “present evil world” (See Gal. 1.⁵).

First, for Pilate. What does he reveal? He seems to reveal himself to be a Roman with a sense, however weak, of Roman “justice”—a once “righteous justice” that was, over time, chipped away at until it became utterly capricious in the hands of Roman Emperors. Mostly, though, he reveals traits all too common among politicians: cowardice, for one, and a penchant for self-preservation for another. Justice must play second fiddle to the politician’s need for self-preservation.

We see this in Pilate’s decision to send Jesus to Herod. Initially, Pilate pronounced Jesus “not guilty.” With the immediate negative reaction of his audience, he realized, too late, that he had acted too quickly and with too little thought for how his decision might be received. This set him looking for a way out. The best way out of difficulty is often to find someone else to take the burden or the blame. In this instance, he found and eagerly turned the trouble over to another politician: Herod—someone, as we will see, that he couldn’t stand and for whom he had never shown the slightest sincere respect.

If all this sounds familiar, it should. Even today, it is standard operating procedure among many of the political classes. Many an American Republican political leader can’t stand the current GOP frontrunner for president. Yet, they cow tail to him and keep their contempt for him quiet lest his adoring mob grow angrier than they already are and threaten the politicians hold on power.

Now, for the Jewish leaders. They too serve as revelators in Luke’s hands. Whether Jesus intended or desired it or not, it would have been very difficult to listen to Jesus’ teaching and watch his actions and not contrast them to those of the Jewish leaders. But, of course, Jesus did intend that such contrasts be observed. When Jesus wasn’t openly and forthrightly (and not uncommonly) lambasting them for their rigidity, legalism, and inhumanity, his teachings and actions cast a bright light on the rigidity, legalism, and inhumanity of Jewish leadership and undermined their authority (It seems likely that Pilate would have, himself, observed, and agreed with Jesus’ assessment of Jewish leadership).

The Jewish leaders who brought Jesus before Pilate knew that their real reasons for wanting Jesus punished and even killed wasn't going to fly with the Roman Curator. So, in hopes of manipulating Pilate, they accused Jesus of being a political enemy to the Roman Empire. Their hypocrisy is obvious, of course. They hated the Empire and were no more interested in preserving its power than it was in preserving theirs. The Jewish leaders would have received any diminution of Rome's power with exultation, and a thousand thank offerings in the temple to boot. Nevertheless, they feigned loyalty to Rome and sought to manipulate Pilate by appealing to Pilate's loyalty to Rome.

For reasons good and bad, wise and foolish, Pilate found the accusation that Jesus was a political rebel unwarranted. In Pilate's estimation, Jesus was no threat whatsoever to the Roman Empire. In this, he showed himself lacking in discernment. For just as Jesus' teachings and actions shined a spot-light on the injustice of Jewish leaders and undermined their authority, his teachings and actions shined a spot-light on the injustice of the Roman Empire and would, eventually, undermine its authority.

Thus, the Jewish leaders, almost surely unwittingly, spoke a revealed truth when they accused Jesus of being a danger to the Roman Empire. It is certain that on no planet on which Jesus' teachings and actions might be accepted and imitated, can a kingdom such as that of the Roman Empire long endure. Indeed, Jesus, along with the principles for which he stands and which he teaches is, as scripture makes abundantly clear, a clear and present danger to all cowardly and deceptive politicians and to all unjust kingdoms, empires, countries and nations. Jesus is a very real threat to the kingdoms of this world.

So, what does all of this have to do with Lent? Well, first of all, this narrative is part of the passion narrative. But secondly, it can offer us an avenue of repentance. Lent is a good time to consider the sort of citizen of the world we are, and the sorts of demands we make of our politicians and governments. Lent is a good time to repent of our support—either through actively participating and condoning, or through silent and cowardly acquiescence—of government injustices, especially those perpetrated against the vulnerable, marginalized, and innocent. During Lent we can, if we choose, see the face of Jesus in every innocent victim. The Lent and Easter season are very good times to pray that “the kingdoms of this world” may become “the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ” and that he “reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11.¹⁵).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 5, 2024)

Luke 23.⁸⁻¹²

⁸And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceedingly glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.

⁹Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing. ¹⁰And the chief priests and scribes stood and vehemently accused him. ¹¹And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate.

¹²And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves.

meditation

We have all heard the proverb, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” The proverb goes back at least 2500 years. We see its twisted logic at the national level as far back in history as we can see. We see it today at both the individual and societal level. It is, today, operative the world over as individuals and nations jostle for dominance. America has played the game as well as any nation in history. The evil insight has produced millions upon millions of victims. But, most pertinent to today’s scripture and its accompanying meditation, the attitude expressed in the parable was as important a contributor to Jesus’ murder as any other.

The truth spoken by the proverb is intimately connected to the phenomena of the scapegoat. To oversimplify a bit, a scapegoat is an individual or group that two or more other individuals or groups select and victimize—emotionally, rhetorically, spiritually, and/or physically—in hopes of establishing peace, unity, and security. Often, the attackers are at odds previous to their coalescing around the victim. Their united effort against the victim often does bring reconciliation and unity, though it is normally highly volatile and temporary. Its magic soon loses its power and must be renewed as new suspicions and hostilities erupt. Scapegoating is a despicable, arbitrary, unpredictable, and uncertain means of achieving peace, security and unity. It is evil and Satanic.

Jesus was a scapegoat, but not in the way we often think of it. God did not scapegoat Jesus to create peace with a humanity at odds with Him. To think He did is, in my view, the basest form of theology. As Luke makes clear, it was Herod and Pilate and the Jewish leaders that created and used Jesus as a scapegoat. Like America’s modern GOP, Caiaphas could baldly, and without fear of blow back advocate grotesque attitudes, behavior, and public policy against a perceived threat and common enemy. Killing Jesus, Caiaphas proposed, would prove a boon to the nation. It would insure peace and security.

“Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” (Jn. 11.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰).

This insight is insidious, not inspired. In fact, I would make the argument, as I have elsewhere, that peace and security and righteousness and harmony would have multiplied immensely had Jesus been permitted a normal life span, another fifty years, say, to teach and act out his revelation of God and his life of love and peace and respect. The decision to kill Jesus united utterly desperate groups and had them working in concert for the first and last time in their long and tortured relationship. A mob, infected by the poisonous idea, joined the feeding frenzy and Jesus died an innocent victim’s death. The “peace” did not last long. It would not be long before Herodian, Roman, and Jew were once more at each other’s throats. Soon, Masada would become an apt symbol of the unsteady love affair that scapegoating produces.

Relationships are difficult. We all get out of sorts with each other. If the break is serious enough and our interest in renewing the strained relationship is strong enough, we often utilize a scapegoat. A husband and wife, for example, can find unity by identifying a common foe or foil. Two friends can repair a

wound between them by identifying a third party against which they can unite. All is well for a while. But it never lasts. It does not address the real, underlying issues. It is certain that a scapegoat and the uniting around a common enemy cannot create lasting relationships. It is not the foundation upon which an eternal marriage can be built. Eternity, the world of God and all glorious and glorified beings, do not and cannot endure upon any such twisted ideal or the actions it produces.

To the degree to which we condone or engage in this vile ideology and, thereby create innocent victims, we become implicated in Herod's and Pilate's and the Jewish leaders' deicide. We crucify Jesus anew for "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25.⁴⁰).

During Lent we should examine our relationships—with man, with woman, with child, and with God. We should repent, forsake, and seek forgiveness for the vile and ungodly practice of finding peace and wellness through the wounding of another. We can use the Season to influence in whatever humble way we can the society around us so that it, too, forsakes the vile and ungodly attempt to form unity through hatred rather than through love.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 8, 2024)

Luke 23.¹³⁻²⁵

¹³And Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴said unto them, “Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: ¹⁵no, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. ¹⁶I will therefore chastise him, and release him.” ¹⁷(For of necessity he must release one unto them at the feast.)

¹⁸And they cried out all at once, saying, “Away with this man, and release unto us Barabbas:”

¹⁹(Who for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison.)

²⁰Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them. ²¹But they cried, saying, “Crucify him, crucify him.”

²²And he said unto them the third time, “Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go.”

²³And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. ²⁴And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required.

²⁵And he released unto them him that for sedition and murder was cast into prison, whom they had desired; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

meditation

In examining today’s passage, I often asked students, “If you were asked to identify one or two things that you think Luke most wants to stress with this passage, what would they be?” How would you answer?

I do not know if it came to your mind, but one of my students’ not uncommon response was something as follows: “We, like Barabbas, are guilty of crimes. In our case, our guilt is sin against God and His law. We deserve to be punished and suffer spiritual death. But just as Barabbas was freed and Jesus took his place, so too does Jesus suffer our punishments in our stead. By this means, he ‘satisfies justice’ and makes it possible for us to avoid suffering for sin while allowing God to remain just.”

This substitutionary view of Jesus’ Atonement is very common with a long history. It is closely related to the idea of a scapegoat. In this socio-judicial mechanism, a goat (and sometimes a human, a Greek *Pharmakos*) has the guilt of individuals or society pronounced upon its head and then is either driven out or outright killed. Jesus is, in this scenario, the scapegoat.

I have often made known my reservations about this substitutionary “theory of Atonement.” Wherever one comes down on this question, it seems to me that this story of Barabbas is a weak and, indeed, flawed analogy concerning the substitutionary role Jesus is supposed to play in our judgement and our escape from the “grasp of justice.” Consider, for example, that in the substitutionary theory of Atonement, Jesus’ suffering in our place is presented as wholly “just.” Jesus’ substitution “satisfies” and “fulfils” justice’s requirements. Indeed, in accepting and participating in this substitution, God Himself is portrayed as just.

But in Luke’s narrative, there is nowhere the slightest, teeny-tiniest bit of suggestion that Barabbas’ release and Jesus’ arrest and death was “just.” Pilate is not portrayed as having acted justly. The Jewish religious leaders are not portrayed as having acted justly. Rather, Barabbas’ unwarranted release and Jesus’ unwarranted arrest and death are both portrayed as acts of utter and gross injustice. If one wants an analogy for Jesus’ supposed substitutionary role, it seems to me this is not the place to look. Best to look elsewhere (One can’t help but wonder if this substitutionary reading of today’s passage isn’t simply camouflage, allowing us to ignore injustice, avoid its uncomfortableness, and shirk the risks associated with resisting it in our own society—in other words, avoid following Jesus).

So, what is a better “main point” that Luke might be making? First, clearly, Jesus was innocent of any capital crime. He was a victim of the system. This system was administered by one, Pilate, who by his own admission thought Jesus innocent and saw in him no threat to the system (as we have said before, the assumption that Jesus was no threat to the system was erroneous, for Jesus most certainly did represent a threat, just not in the way that the system could conceive of as a threat—through the violent exercise of power). Secondly, the system that perceived him to pose no threat and found him innocent, nonetheless had him executed.

Those who administer this world’s systems of “justice” are all too often corrupt and unjust. All too often, those who administer these systems truly care little about matters of guilt or innocence. They do not lose sleep over victims of injustice. They are only interested in maintaining their power in a power structure that has the possession of power as its sole goal. Hence, Pilate’s yielding to the Jewish leaders’ obvious unjust charges against Jesus and their demand for capital punishment over the need for justice. Keep the people happy. Keep one’s power.

Luke, then, along with the other Gospel writers, increasingly presents Jesus as a victim of this world’s evil rather than a victim of God’s thirst for “satisfaction.” Jesus becomes the archetypical victim. He becomes a uniquely qualified advocate and source of hope for them. Lent gives us the opportunity to review the injustice perpetrated against Jesus, consider the injustices all too common in our society, and examine the sort of citizens of the world we are. It is a good time to consider Jesus’ voluntary victimization and what it means for our world and its victims. It is a good time for us to commit ourselves to join Jesus in one of his principal missions: to advocate for and bring justice and hope to victims of humiliation, cruelty, and injustice.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 11, 2024)

Luke 23.²⁶⁻³¹

²⁶And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus.

²⁷And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. ²⁸But Jesus turning unto them said,

“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me,
but weep for yourselves, and for your children.

²⁹For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say,
‘Blessed are the barren,
and the wombs that never bare,
and the paps which never gave suck.’

³⁰Then shall they begin to say to the mountains,
‘Fall on us;’
and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’

³¹For if they do these things in a green tree,
what shall be done in the dry?”

meditation

In his passion narrative of Jesus’ final days and hours, Luke has recorded numerous sad and painful moments: Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, his disciples’ abandonment and denial of him, Jesus’ trials and torture, the judicial decision to execute him. Luke will yet record more painful events: Jesus’ nailing to the cross, his struggle to breath, his dying words. We might almost pass over today’s reading as a bit of interlude between the suffering narratives. But, after consideration, we might decide that the tragedy of today’s narrative is equal to any that has proceeded or that will follow.

First, for my part, in reading page after glorious page of Luke’s account, I wonder at Jesus’ insights—insights into God, insights into human nature, insights into the path to human improvement and eternal progress. I am amazed over and over again by his ministry of service and love and compassion; at the many people whose lives he so greatly improved by an encouraging word, powerful touch, or kind action.

To be sure, he did not deserve to die the death he died. His mortal end was not fitting to his character. And so, I am disappointed by what effectively amounted to his final words, at least as Luke reports them. He will, of course, speak from his cross. But, while we can learn even from them, they were not really words of instruction. He could hardly breath, as is common to one being crucified. The few words he uttered came out in little more than short bursts of air between struggling breaths—half sentences, single words, groans of pain. His final words of instruction should have come in a crescendo of compassion and wise instruction. Instead, Luke has him serve up this dark and threatening finale.

“You women who follow me lamenting, you think this is bad? You haven’t seen anything yet. The worst of it is yet to come. If a truly innocent person such as myself can be made to suffer like this, just imagine how those not innocent will suffer. So, darker days are ahead for you and your beloved children. It will then be worse for you and yours than it is for me now.

“How bad will it be? You will wish you had never had children. Better to be alone in the world than to watch your children suffer as they will suffer. Die as they will die. In those days, you will desperately wish you were dead, finding it preferable to being alone in the world with nothing but the reminder of your children’s death to torture you.”

Such a finale of words simply does not seem to fit with all that has come before in Jesus’ noble life. Such darkness seems at odds with his earthly ministry and its purposes. I, for one, would have far preferred

different final words to have come from his godly mouth. But there they are. There's just no escaping them. They are what they are. They are, in the end, part of the Messianic message. They must be circumscribed into Jesus' life and ministry. They must be bravely circumscribed into the one great whole of truth. We must resist the temptation to turn away and ignore.

The words that Jesus spoke to those wailing women are a sad, sad testament to the madness of the human heart. Even Jesus, with all his hope and faith, could not deny what really was, what really is, what really always has been. The innocent are made to suffer in this world. As if the conditions of this world were not brutal enough, the world's mad and twisted actions and the values that drive them add to the suffering of the innocent. Jesus stands as a warning witness to this brutal truth. And Jesus warns—or is it a promise—the world will get its comeuppance.

During Lent we should consider the future that awaits us. Will Jesus' warning words reflect the truth of our future, or will we act to change them? Will the madness continue or will we adopt Jesus outlook? What will we do to try and stop the madness of the present evil age? What *can* we do to stop the madness? Will we continue to countenance victimhood and thus become victims ourselves, or will we demand the end to victimization. Lent is a good time for us to commit to follow Jesus; follow his example of service and love; follow his teachings, teachings that will make us and those we choose to serve authentically human in his world, and eternally glorious and progressive beings in the world to come. Now is a good time to decide whether and how we will advance Jesus' joyful vision of wholeness and wellness and peace or whether we will become participants in his final, dark vision of madness, ruin, and misery.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 14, 2024)

Luke 23.³²⁻³⁸

³²And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. ³³And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. ³⁴Then said Jesus,

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. ³⁵And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.”

³⁶And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, ³⁷And saying, “If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself.”

³⁸And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

meditation

In a laudable desire to comfort, the writer of Hebrews assured his readers that “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4.¹⁵). Thus, we have a very well informed and experienced tutor to direct us through life’s labyrinth of temptation. The writer succeeded in comforting, At least, he did me. I believe his witness and make use of it constantly.

But, in declaring that Jesus “was in all points tempted like as we are,” it seems to me that he was not being exactly accurate. It is saying far, far too little of Jesus’ temptations. It seems certain that his temptations went well beyond, infinitely beyond any temptation any other human being ever faced or will face. Indeed, he “descended below them all” (See DC 122.⁸). It is, in fact, impossible to imagine the sorts and levels of temptation that Jesus assuredly endured and transcended. But, as usual, that won’t stop us from trying.

Imagine, for example, having the power to deliver oneself from any discomfort, any suffering, any form of death. Imagine then experiencing the worst discomfort and the worse suffering, and facing the worse sort of death. Imagine, finally, not using the power you possess to deliver yourself from that discomfort, that suffering, and that death. What willpower! What love! And then, imagine that nearly everyone around you, friend and foe alike, tempts you to demonstrate the power you claim to possess to deliver yourself from discomfort, suffering, and death.

Imagine the appeal of action at the time of your arrest. Imagine the appeal of action at the time of humiliation. Imagine the appeal of action during your suffering. Imagine the appeal of action, not only to relieve yourself from the discomfort, suffering, and death, but from the humiliation and ridicule. Imagine how tempting it is to prove yourself right and everyone else wrong. Imagine how tempting it is to justify all that you have said and done, indeed, of your very existence. Or, if you are better than all of that, imagine how tempting it is to act so that others will be convinced of your righteous claims and thereby be saved.

It is no accident that the Gospels record the temptations that Jesus faced to ease himself of and deliver himself from all discomfort, suffering, and death. Though the first recorded incident of this temptation took place in the desert at the urging of Satan, it seems almost certain that it was part of Jesus’ life long before that. Though it might seem the temptation ended with his death, I often wonder. Does he suffer still? Does he suffer because of us? Is he ever tempted to end the suffering by eliminating us, the cause of so much divine suffering?

But, no, he continues to suffer with an eye towards others’ advancement. In Jesus’ final, “‘Eloi, Eloi,

lama sabachthani?’ which is, being interpreted, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’” we hear, perhaps, Jesus at his lowest, deepest suffering. He found out what all the rest of us so often feel, alienation from God. But, oh how much worse for him; for he had always lived in an intimacy with God that is beyond our present imagination.

“And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him” (Jn. 8.²⁹).

If there was ever a moment when he examined the possibilities of self-preservation, this must have been it. But, he endured. He resisted. He conquered. And thereby, he revealed the unimaginable grandeur of the Divine Character. And by that revelation, we are, or can be saved. So, no, focusing on Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross is not an exercise in morbid focus on the dying and dead Christ.

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God... But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1.^{18, 23-24}).

Lent is a good time to examine, learn, and apply the many, many lessons Jesus taught us from his high and lofty cross. It is a good time to discover that humble portion of power that we have and commit ourselves to use it, not for self-preservation, but for the betterment of all those around us. Today is a good a time to “deny” ourselves and “take up [our] cross, and follow” Jesus. “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 16.²⁴⁻²⁵).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 16, 2024)

Luke 23.³⁹⁻⁴³

³⁹And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us."

⁴⁰But the other answering rebuked him, saying, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" ⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss." ⁴²And he said unto Jesus, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

⁴³And Jesus said unto him, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

meditation

"To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Thus, according to Luke, Jesus spoke to a criminal. I think I've heard it all... the debates about this saying.

"It's a good example of why we believe the Bible only insofar as it is translated correctly," maintained one zealot, who, with his precise definition of "paradise," maintained that Jesus could in no way, shape, or form have considered a criminal worthy to enter "paradise"—at least as far as that astute theologian understood "paradise" and its occupants. "Thus, we must be dealing with a mistranslation."

"Well," once opined another, "What Jesus meant was that he would see him in 'spirit prison'" "Oh no," countered another, "haven't you read the Doctrine and Covenants. Jesus did not, himself, enter spirit prison, but only trained and authorized others to do so."

"But wait," another clever theologian reasoned, "remember when we serve others we are God's arms. So, when "missionaries" taught the criminal it really was as if Jesus himself were visiting him."

"But," another, not so confident budding theologian asked, "It says 'today'... doesn't it? Surely that's significant." "But Jesus was only talking to the second criminal, who, clearly, had repented. So, they will have seen each other 'today' in paradise."

On and on it goes... Our talking about things about which we know next to nothing as if we knew everything. And we will not even discuss my own wonderment at such moments: "Why do we call it 'spirit prison,' anyway, rather than 'spirit school,' for example. For, according to our DC theology it is a place of teaching rather than a place of torture, is it not?"

I often wonder why we are so intent on doing this sort of theology. Why do we attempt to turn Jesus into a Hasidic Jew commenting on every Biblical word? Notwithstanding all our theologizing, I, for one, don't know exactly what happens when we die. If Jesus, and then the criminal does, more power to them. But what I do know is what my eyes see under Luke's direction and what my personal encounters with Jesus teach me. Three men were suffering terribly. Two of them, unsure what came next, if anything, did not want to die. If there was any chance of surviving, they would take it. At this point, Jesus was their only hope. Hope. HOPE. Jesus offers hope. Even in these dire straits—his and theirs—Jesus seeks to comfort through hope. This is what I hear and see in Luke's account. This has been Luke's message about Jesus from the beginning.

For many years I read John 13-17 and looked only for the "theological insights" that Jesus, the master theologian, left his disciples in his final hours. But then, one day, I read with new eyes and a different heart the bad news Jesus delivered his disciples.

"Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, 'Whither I go, ye cannot come;' so now I say to you" (Jn. 13.³³)

And I read how very, very sad they were at this news. I heard the sadness in Peter's response.

“Lord, whither goest thou?... Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake” (Jn 13.36-37).

I heard their fear and anxiety and uncertainty. I heard their devastation. “What will we do without him? We've come to rely on him, how will we survive? What will become of us? We're in trouble... without him.”

And then I heard Jesus', “Let not your hearts be trouble...” (Jn. 14¹), and I understood. I understood that Jesus cared deeply for these men. He cares about all of us, as he would prove in the last hours of his life, more than life itself. He couldn't leave his disciples feeling sad, lonely, helpless, and hopeless. He must try. Try to comfort them. Bring the hope and promise that they had always felt in his presence.

It is through this lens, the lens of personable-ness, hope, and comfort rather than the lens of “theology” that I now read John 13-17. It is also how I understand Jesus' words to the thieves who accompanied him in death. They were words of comfort in a most trying time. This is the Jesus I have come to know. Jesus may be the greatest theological genius of all time. I don't know. I don't care. In my brief encounters with him, he has been busy comforting and offering hope. Now, that's a “theology” I can believe in.

The Lent and Easter seasons afford us the chance to do the kind of “theology” that concentrates on the Divine Character and its impact on our lives. It is a good time to seek the anchor of hope that Jesus is so expert in giving. It is a good time to commit ourselves to seeking out others who could use a little, or a lot, of hope and comfort through the pleasing word of God and through our own compassionate service. It is a good time to find ourselves and share with others this hope:

“And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me: Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father. Amen” (En. 1.²⁷).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 18, 2024)

Luke 23.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁹

⁴⁴And it was about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour.

⁴⁵And the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was rent in the midst.

⁴⁶And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit:" and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.

⁴⁷Now when the centurion saw what was done, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous man."

⁴⁸And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. ⁴⁹And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things.

meditation

According to the Gospel writers, only three hours passed from the time Jesus was nailed to the cross until he died. As these things go, this was a relatively short period of time to hang on the cross before dying. The Romans had crucifixion down to a science. They could and did crucify people in such a manner as to make them last for days on the cross.

But even only three hours must seem like an eternity when one is suffering the excruciating pain of crucifixion. It is not pleasant, thinking of crucifixion. To focus on it can seem sensationalistic, even grotesque and macabre. Why not focus on "the Living Christ"? And yet, every Sunday, millions of LDS folk gather for "sacrament service." Here, they remember Jesus' death. Here they break his body anew. Here they spill his precious blood again. The ordinance is about death. The only hint of life in this ordinance is the life that the participant is promised through the remembered and renewed death of Jesus Christ.

However unpleasant the imagined sights and sounds and smells of crucifixion, the Christian is to revisit them over and over and over again as they seek to come unto Christ and be redeemed and perfected in him. Indeed, so central is Jesus' crucifixion to our salvation that Paul thought it, essentially, synonymous with "the Gospel" and associated it with "the power of God."

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1.¹⁸).

The Seasons of Lent and Easter give us opportunities to remember, not just weekly but daily, hourly, the crucifixion of the Jesus, Son of God. They provide ample opportunities to confess the power of the crucifixion and the cross. They provide additional opportunities to remember that the crucifixion and the cross contain within them the very Good News of God's commitment to all of us.

The crucifixion and the cross may not be pleasant to consider, but we can, like Enoch of long ago, find indescribable peace and joy in them. Though he "refused to be comforted" because of the sin of humankind, when "Enoch saw the day of the coming of the Son of Man, even in the flesh; ...his soul rejoiced, saying: 'The Righteous is lifted up, and the Lamb is slain from the foundation of the world...'" (Moses 7.⁴⁷). May the message of the Easter Season bring us all such joy.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 20, 2024)

Luke 24.¹⁻¹²

¹Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. ²And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. ³And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴*As they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: ⁵and as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them,

“Why seek ye the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, ⁷saying, ‘The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.’”

⁸And they remembered his words, ⁹and returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the apostles. ¹¹And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.

¹²Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass.

Meditation

Right out of the shoot, Luke, like the other Gospel writers, seeks to instill within his readers a sense of wonderment, of amazement, of astonishment, of marvel and bewilderment. Their message is no ordinary message. The Man about whom they write is no ordinary man.

Amazingly, an elderly couple, barren even in their prime, are to have a baby; a boy who will prepare the way for Messiah.

A crowd, awaiting Zachariah’s exit from the temple and the pronouncement of the priestly blessing, “*marvelled* that he tarried so long” (Lk. 1.²¹). Angelic visits cannot be rushed.

Family, gathered for a son’s blessing, “*marvel* all” (Lk. 1.⁶³) at the choice of name: Yohanan, Yahweh is merciful, a foreshadow of what is to come.

Acquaintances of humble shepherds, who were audience to a choir of angels, “*wondered* at those things which were told them by the shepherds” (Lk. 2.¹⁸).

Exploring religious insights with the twelve-year-old Jesus, a group of wizened theologians “were *astonished* at his understanding and answers.” Even his parents “were *amazed*” to find him so occupied (Lk. 2.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁸).

All that wonder in Luke’s introductory chapters... and before Jesus has even begun his public ministry! Luke wants to be sure that we understand the extraordinary nature of the tale he has to tell. As the opening act in his ministry, Jesus attends his hometown synagogue and reads from the highly regarded Isaiah. “And all bare him witness, and *wondered* at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth” (Lk. 4.²²).

Soon after, Jesus enters Capernaum’s synagogue. There, worshipers “were *astonished* at his doctrine.” Their astonishment only increased as they witnessed Jesus deliver a man from the enslavement of “an unclean spirit.” “And they were all *amazed*, and spake among themselves, saying, ‘What a word is this!’” (See Lk. 4.³²⁻³⁶).

Peter “was *astonished*, and all that were with him” when Jesus produced a “draught of the fishes” after a toilsome but fruitless night of fishing on Lake Galilee (Lk. 5.⁹).

Later, on that same lake, Jesus’ always bewildered disciples grew even more so as he “rebuked the wind and the raging of the water” until “there was a calm.” “And they being afraid *wondered*, saying one to another, ‘What manner of man is this! For he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him’” (See Lk. 8.²²⁻²⁵).

Well, we could keep going, for Luke never lets up. He goes on and on with one amazement, one wonder, one astonishment after another, until, finally, even in dying, Jesus performs the greatest wonder of all. Indeed, even all the wonderful things he has said and done during his unparalleled ministry don’t, can’t prepare us for the wonder of today’s reading.

Faithful women, seeing that the entrance stone to Jesus’ tomb has been removed, enter Jesus’ tomb but “found not the body of the Lord Jesus.” Then, Luke reports, “they were much *perplexed* thereabout.” What did they think when two men in “shining garments” asked, and then announced, “Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen”? Whatever other effects this announcement had on the women, it sent them rushing back to the disciples to report their findings. Though the women’s report sent Peter dashing off to repeat the women’s journey to Jesus’ tomb, and allowed him to view the same empty tomb that they had seen, it could not undo the wonder—Peter “*wondering* in himself at that which was come to pass.”

Soon thereafter, Jesus would amaze the disciples by suddenly standing “in the midst of them.” Even then, “they yet believed not for joy, and *wondered*” (Lk. 24.⁴¹).

I, for one, can understand all this wonderment, amazement, and even bewilderment. There are times that I find the hugeness of Jesus soul incomprehensible. I marvel that such a great and noble Being would associate with, and that happily and eagerly, with a soul “so proud and rebellious as mine.” Nevertheless, I feel a little bit of what the Psalmist felt when he confessed,

“Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works
which thou has done,
and thy thoughts which are to us-ward;
they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee:
if I would declare and speak of them,
they are more than can be numbered” (Ps. 40.⁵).

Jesus’ resurrection leaves me speechless. I cannot begin to fathom what it means for me, for those I love, and for our future. No doubt, even the reality of it will leave me in wonder, amazement, and astonishment. The Lent and Easter Season is the perfect time to put the wonder back into our lives. It is as good a time as any—but any time is a good time—to read, nay, to conduct a concentrated search of Luke and his fellow Gospel writers in order to more deeply appreciate the wonder that they found in Jesus. It is as good a time as any to “view his wonder,” to close our eyes and open our heart and imagine. Yes, the Lent and Easter Season is as good a time as any to enter Jesus’ world of wonder and amazement and let the wonder of him fill our heart and mind and soul to overflowing.

So, have a happy and blessed Easter!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(*edition: march 28, 2024*)

Luke 24.¹³⁻²⁴

¹³And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs. ¹⁴And they talked together of all these things which had happened. ¹⁵*While they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. ¹⁶But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. ¹⁷And he said unto them, "What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?"

¹⁸And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, "Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass therein these days?"

¹⁹And he said unto them, "What things?"

And they said unto him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: ²⁰and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. ²¹But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done. ²²Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre; ²³and when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive. ²⁴And certain of them which were with us went to the sepulchre, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not."

meditation

"But we anticipated that he was on the verge of redeeming Israel." These words, uttered by two of Jesus' disciples, are painful to read. It is almost impossible to imagine the optimism, the hopes and dreams about the future that Jesus instilled in his closest disciples while he ministered day in and day out among them. We can permit them such optimism when we consider Jesus' incomparable character. We cannot commend their optimism when it was so often based on false hopes and dreams.

The Gospel writers give us insights into the glorious future that the disciples anticipated. We see that future, for example, at the time of Jesus' first warning concerning his looming rejection, arrest, and death. So impossible did this seem to Peter that he "rebuked," yes "rebuked" Jesus! Imagine that! Imagine just how sure and hopeful Peter must have been about the future that he could feel justified in and empowered to rebuke the Son of God! Later, at Jesus' arrest, Peter was so sure of Jesus', and thus his own, invincibility that he took up the sword to protect Jesus. Peter was ready not only to take on the small Jewish force sent to arrest Jesus, but the entire military might of the Roman Empire!

So, our heart breaks for these men when we hear their lament: "But we had anticipated that he was on the verge of redeeming Israel." I don't know what you hear in these lamenting words, but this is what I hear

"But..."

Translation: "Things, apparently, were not what we thought them to be."

"But we anticipated..."

Translation: "That was then, this is now. Our expectations have been shattered."

"But we anticipated that he was on the verge..."

Translation: "But now we see that he was not on the verge of anything."

"But we anticipated that he was on the verge of redeeming Israel."

Translation: "We now see that Israel is not to be redeemed."

Tell me that that is not heartbreaking. Now, it is true that their "expectations" were faulty. It is true

that as they walked this road to Emmaus, they continued to do as they had always done: misunderstand Jesus. But, we can forgive them their false expectations and their misunderstanding. We can certainly forgive them the heartbreak they felt and their lack of faithful endurance. They did not, after all, have the advantage that we have today. The advantage of hindsight. And what an advantage it is that we have! What lessons they have to teach us.

Lesson #1. We can expect dark times of fear and doubt. “Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Pet. 4.¹²), for “such... is common to man” (See 1 Cor. 10.¹³).

Lesson #2. Learn to manage your expectations. Be sure that you do not base your expectations on the world’s twisted and perverted values, interests, character, will, and intentions. Rather, be sure that expectations are based upon God, his character, his will, and his intentions: “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done” (Matt. 6.¹⁰).

Lesson #3. Never, ever give up on Jesus. Not even at the last minute. Not even *in* the last minute. Not even *after* the last minute. He can and often does surpass even our wildest *godly, truth-based* expectations. He “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3.²⁰).

Lesson #4. Stay alert to and accepting of the new truths and gentle corrections that so often come from Jesus. Though this lesson comes from a future reading from Luke 24, we can benefit from it today. Such “softness” has rarely been in vogue in a world with its perverted ideas of what constitutes “greatness” and “power.” It seems even less so today than ever before. It will often require God’s assistant to acquire and maintain such softness. Lehi had shattered every expectation his family ever had, and had disrupted everything they had ever believed. Thus was Nephi under necessity of divine assistance. “I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the worlds which had been spoken by my father” (1 Ne. 2.¹⁶).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 24.²⁵⁻²⁷

²⁵Then he said unto them, “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ²⁶ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” ²⁷And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

meditation

When we hear the question that Jesus posed to his two depressed disciples who traveled the road to Emmaus—“ought not Christ to have suffered these things?”—and witness him, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets,” expound “unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself,” we immediately begin to compile a list of Old Testament scriptures that seem to us “predictive” and “futuristic.” We think, for example, of Psalm 22, the first line of which Jesus prayed from his cross—“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”—and portions of which the Gospel writers seem to utilize as part of their passion narratives.

“All they that see me laugh me to scorn:
they shoot out the lip,
they shake the head, saying,
‘He trusted on the LORD
that he would deliver him:
let him deliver him,
seeing he delighted in him’” (Ps. 22.⁷⁻⁸).

“For dogs have compassed me:
the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me:
they pierced my hands and my feet.
I may tell all my bones:
they look and stare upon me.
They part my garments among them,
and cast lots upon my vesture” (Ps. 22.¹⁶⁻¹⁸)

We think of Isaiah’s insight into a servant of God who is made a scapegoat by a population unappreciative of him or his message.

“He has no appeal,
does not impress.
Though we look upon him,
we simply find nothing praiseworthy about him.
He is a worthless fellow,
dismissed by everyone,
a man mentally unstable through sin,
familiar with defilement,
and, as a man too ashamed to look others in the eye, he is thought contemptible.
He is simply not worthy of our respect.
But, in fact, it is our sickness not his own that he bears;
he bears up under the burden of our, not his, derangement
while we consider him struck,
violently beaten by God.
But, it is our outrageous behaviors that wound him;
he takes a pounding as a result of our wrongs—

[our belief] that the fix that brings wellbeing to the rest of us rests upon him,
and through the blows inflicted upon him we will find healing” (Is. 53.²⁻⁵, author’s translation).

Even if one accepts that such “futuristic” passages, relatively rare, refer prophetically to Jesus and his passion, they do not even begin to scratch the surface of an Old Testament God who suffers pain and hurt at the hands of his people. Indeed, if one believes that Jesus is “God,” and more specifically, the Old Testament God, “Yahweh,” then one is faced with a suffering, hurt, and wounded God in nearly every verse of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps I should explain. We are not far into the Book, a mere six chapters in fact, before we come face to face with a God in pain.

“When YHWH saw that human evil had spread throughout the land, and that every thought devised in the heart was only evil all the time, YHWH felt sorrow at having made man upon the earth, and was deeply distressed” (Gen. 6.⁵⁻⁶, author’s translation).

With the ensuing flood, we all too often see a God in a rage, lashing out at rebellious subjects. However, Joseph Smith’s imaginative reading of Genesis that is found in the Book of Moses is even clearer about a God who is in pain not rage.

“The God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: ‘How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?’ And Enoch said unto the Lord: ‘How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?... how is it thou canst weep?’

“The Lord said unto Enoch: ‘Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands...’” (Moses 7.^{28-29, 31-32}).

Here, then, we find the divine Jesus in pain. Why the surprise that he should experience pain and rejection while tabernacled in a body of clay? People in first century AD Judah were not much different than people in the pre-diluvian era. Indeed, first century A.D. Judeans inflicted the same sort of painful rejection upon Jesus that their ancestors had when he was known as Yahweh. From the moment they met, the relationship between Israel and Yahweh was fraught with misunderstanding and conflict. Divine hurt and pain were consequences of God’s commitment to his people. Jeremiah passionately and understandably mouthed Yahweh’s pain as Judah neared the end of its existence as a free and independent nation.

“For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt;
I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me.
Is there no balm in Gilead;
is there no physician there?
Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people
recovered?

Oh that my head were waters,
and mine eyes a fountain of tears,
that I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter of my people!
Oh that I had in the wilderness
a lodging place of wayfaring men;
that I might leave my people,
and go from them!” (Jer. 8.^{21-9.2})

It was another, unknown, Old Testament prophet, Zenos by name, who expressed with such pathos

the hurt and pain Yahweh suffers near constantly because of his unrelenting commitment to his children.

“The Lord of the vineyard wept, and said unto the servant: ‘What could I have done more for my vineyard?’” (Jac. 5.⁴¹)

Well, we could go on. And on. And on. There is hardly a verse anywhere in scripture, from Genesis 1 to DC 138 and beyond, in which God’s children did not and do not inflict pain and hurt upon him. His love and commitment to us, his children, can, at times, it seems, become almost a burden.

“Behold, I am pressed under you,
as a cart is pressed that is full of sheaves” (Am. 2.¹³).

It is truly amazing, a wonder, how long God patiently endured Israel’s and then Judah’s continual abuse. It is a wonder, *the* wonder of the world, of the universe, that God continues to patiently endure the abuse we heap upon him to this day. It is more than ample proof of the Psalmist’s testimony

“The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.
He will not always chide:
neither will he keep his anger for ever.
He hath not dealt with us after our sins;
nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as the heaven is high above the earth,
so great is his mercy toward them that fear him” (Ps. 103.⁸⁻¹¹).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 24.²⁸⁻³²

²⁸And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. ²⁹But they constrained him, saying, "Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them."

^{30*}As he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. ³¹And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. ³²And they said one to another, "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?"

meditation

I confess that I tend to keep myself a little aloof from my ecclesiastical leaders. There is only so much of my heart that I will give them. I simply do not trust them with all of it. No matter how good, and I have had some good leaders, they are not worthy of such trust. I don't mean this as a knock on them. They are, after all, mere men (or women) like me. I've been one of them, and I am not to be trusted with the whole of any human heart.

A few years ago, I enjoyed the leadership of as good an ecclesiastical leader as one could hope for. He was a good man. He lacked no self-confidence but possessed not one bit of arrogant. I appreciated his rare ability to balance these two things. He treated everyone with the utmost respect. Nevertheless, I only allowed his nose so far into my tent, pushing carefully back whenever he tried to enter too far. One day, with a smile on his face, he shook my hand and drew me close. "You're really not very impressed with me, are you? Don't really trust me."

I *was* impressed by his ability to discern my feelings for and response to him.

"It's nothing personal, President," I replied. "It's just that, well," here I pointed a finger upwards, "I've met the man upstairs. After that encounter, nobody much impresses me."

He smiled with an amused twinkle in his eye, nodded his head, and walked away. We continued to get along just fine, me keeping my distance and he, knowing, understanding, and respecting why. Actually, truth be told, I think he was pleased.

I can be impish. Perhaps that comes out from time to time in my sermons, homilies, and other writings. But, I am deadly serious about this. I have met Jesus. And he is incredible. He is magnetic. I am drawn to him as no one else. I trust him as no one else.

He has had and has now this effect on many. He had this effect on the two disciples who traveled the road to Emmaus. They did not recognize him. Why should they? As far as they were concerned, he was dead. End of story. Truth is, even after spending day after day with him, they never really "recognized" him. Never really understood who and what they were dealing with in Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, after just a brief encounter on the road, Jesus drew them to himself. After just a brief encounter, and when Jesus made as if to part company with them, they felt a desire, a need for a little more time with this stranger.

"Abide with us."

Roughly three years earlier, Jesus had had the same effect upon a group of citizens from Capernaum. Jesus had spent the day teaching in the local synagogue. He had healed a man there. He had entered Peter's house and, there, healed Peter's mother-in-law. He had spent the evening healing individuals with "divers diseases." Then, bright and early the next morning, Jesus "departed and went into a

desert place.” Seeing that Jesus was planning to leave the city, “the people sought him, and came unto him, and stayed him, that he should not depart from them” (See Lk. 4.³¹⁻⁴²).

I understand completely. That is just how I felt. For days. And days. I longed for his presence. More. I wanted more. And it isn't simply about what he did or does, either. It is about him. His character. He possesses such a very, very attractive personality.

Nevertheless, Jesus must be out and about. He must visit as many people as possible. Not long after leaving Capernaum, he found himself in the region of the Gadarenes. Here he met another multitude, this one named Legion. Initially, anyway, this crazed and demonic multitude was not so please to see him. But, Jesus calmed the crazed man and caste out the demonic multitude. He who was once naked, uncontrollable, a threat to all who met him, and a threat to himself¹ was found “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind” (Lk. 8.³⁵).

But, as always, Jesus must be on the move. The local population, having had no meaningful encounter with Jesus, was glad to see him go. But, “the man out of whom the devils were departed besought him that he might be with him” (Lk. 8.³⁸). As Jesus so often does, as he must do, he sent the man off, commissioning him to bear witness of his encounter; bear witness to Jesus' magnetic and energizing character. We assume he did.

It was, according to the Book of Mormon chronicler, about a year after Jesus' death² when another multitude, this one on the other side of the globe, discovered the same magnetic personality and felt the same unquenchable thirst for Jesus and his presence. This time, the resurrected Jesus had overwhelmed a multitude with his invitation that they “come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet” (3 Ne. 11.¹⁴). After thousands had experienced their own private audience with Jesus (3 Ne. 11.¹⁵) and, together, had fallen down “at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him” (3 Ne. 11.¹⁷), Jesus spent a full day teaching his “doctrine” to those latest captivated by him.

Hours and hours had passed since his initial appearance. Jesus could discern that people were growing tired. “It's time for me to go,” he announced. “You go home and rest. Tomorrow we'll meet again, and I'll teach you more.” The chronicler then records this.

“When Jesus had thus spoken, he cast his eyes round about again on the multitude, and beheld they were in tears, and did look steadfastly upon him as if they would ask him to tarry a little longer with them” (3 Ne. 17.⁵).

Jesus had not yet healed a single person, at least not physically, as he had in Capernaum or among Gadarenes. Yet, the people were drawn to Jesus. This attraction was and is about more than his ability to heal or his gift and insight as a teacher. It is about him. It is about his personality. He, he is magnificent!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ See Luke 8.^{27, 29}; Matthew 8.²⁸; Mark 5.2-5

² See 3 Nephi 8.⁵ and 10.¹⁸

Luke 24.³³⁻⁴³

³³And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, ³⁴saying, “The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.”

³⁵And they told what things were done in the way, and how he was known of them in breaking of bread.

³⁶And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, “Peace be unto you.”

³⁷But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. ³⁸And he said unto them, “Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.”

⁴⁰And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, “Have ye here any meat?”

⁴²And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. ⁴³And he took it, and did eat before them.

Meditation

In our previous three *meditations* on Luke 24.¹³⁻²⁴, 24.²⁵⁻²⁷, and 24.²⁸⁻³², we found two of Jesus’ disciples engaged in serious conversation as they traveled to the village of Emmaus within days of Jesus’ crucifixion and death. As they approached the village, the resurrected Jesus, unrecognized by them, “drew near and went with them.” As the three walked together, Jesus queried the disciples over the nature of their conversation.

During their recitation of recent events, especially of Jesus’ death, Jesus felt their sense of confusion, discouragement, and doubt. He responded to their feelings by teaching them that Jesus’ suffering and death were consistent with the teachings of the Hebrew Bible and with the character of its God, Yahweh.

Impressed by his instruction, the disciples pleaded for Jesus, still unknown to them, to “abide” with them for an evening meal. Upon sitting down to eat with them, Jesus “took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.” Then, we are informed, “their eyes were opened, and they knew him.” Upon returning to the other disciples and reporting that they had seen the resurrected Jesus, the two explained that though they had not recognized him for quite some time he was finally “know of them in breaking of bread.”

Two times, then, Luke has reported that the key to the disciples’ recognizing Jesus was to be found in his blessing and braking of bread. He might have repeated other elements of the narrative, but this seems to be the one that Luke wishes the reader to consider. Jesus was recognized in the blessing and breaking of bread. What, then, are we to learn from this? What application might it have to our own understanding and recognition of Jesus and the significant place he holds in our lives?

I don’t know how you answer these questions, but here is just one thing that among many that I have found. Some years ago on a gray and dreary autumn Saturday morning in Michigan, I stood at the back of a chapel awaiting the beginning of a memorial service for a recently departed member of the ward. Clusters of others were scattered about the chapel engaged in fairly mundane, though hushed conversation. The conversations came to an end and the mood grew somber as the deceased’s casket was rolled into the front of the chapel and placed immediately in front of the sacrament table.

After the memorial service, I returned home and gave it little thought. The following morning, I stood in nearly the same place at the back of the chapel as I had the previous day. My eyes went to the front of the chapel where the casket had stood. Of course, the casket was no longer there. But something

was there. Something far more significant. My eyes rested on the “sacrament table” covered by a clean white “tablecloth.” Under the tablecloth, I could see the ridges of each sacrament tray’s raised handle. Except, I did not see a table or a tablecloth or the indications of sacrament tray handles. What I saw that day was a shroud. And under that shroud, I realized, was a body. At one end, I could see a ridge where the deceased toes were raised. At the other end, I could see another ridge, this one the deceased nose. In between, I could see the ridges of several ribs.

As I sat down, I could not keep my eyes off that shroud. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that I was present, not to attend some ordinary “meeting.” I was here to attend a “service.” A memorial service. I was here because someone had died. But, no, someone had not died. Not yet. But someone would die, very soon. And not just anyone. We were about to rebreak the body and re-shed the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. We were about to sacrifice, crucify him anew.

We did so, so that our “eyes might be opened.” So that we might better understand him. So that we might recognize him. So that we might know him. And in understanding, and recognizing, and knowing him, we might “always remember him.”

We might remember many things about him. But on this, “the Lord’s day,” through the simplest of ordinances, we remember most that our Great and Holy God is, in his utter dedication to us, a self-sacrificing God who suffered and died.

While we remember that his sacrifice is the greatest of all sacrifices. We are invited to follow him. Imitate him. We are invited to offer our broken heart, so incapable of beating as it should, upon the altar and await the healing and renewing that comes through that great and last and infinite sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We are invited to shed our selfish will and allow Jesus to reform our will in the image of his own self-sacrificing will.

Yes, Jesus is recognized as much in his death as in his life. We do worship a living Christ. But we also worship a dying Christ. Every. Single. Week. We worship a dying Christ. Yes, it is in this breaking of his body and this shedding of his blood that our eyes are open to the recognition of who he truly is and of what his greatness consists.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 24.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁹

⁴⁴And he said unto them, “These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.”

⁴⁵Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and said unto them, “Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: ⁴⁷and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸And ye are witnesses of these things.

⁴⁹And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

Meditation

While traveling incognito with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Jesus had utilized scripture to offer evidence that his suffering and death—caused by wicked men and their institutions, made possible by Jesus’ unwillingness to exercise his power to save himself, and always a matter of confusion and shame among his disciples—was consistent with scripture and was the means by which he could “enter into his glory” (Lk. 24.²⁵⁻²⁷). After the two disciples returned to Jerusalem and gathered with other disciples to report their encounter, Jesus appeared to all of his disciples. Even so, the skepticism that had accompanied each previous report of Jesus’ resurrection continued. Even after Jesus invited them to examine his wounds as proof of his identity, “they yet believed not for joy”—it was just too good to be true. Thus, Jesus repeated with all the disciples the perusal of scripture that he had previously conducted with only the two in order to demonstrate once more that “it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day.” Perhaps sensing that the disciples were finally beginning to catch a glimpse of the importance of his suffering and death, Jesus took the tutorial one step further:

“Thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: *and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations*, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.”

Here, Jesus’ disciples learn four things, at least as I count them. First, they learn that Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection are intended to draw a response from those who become aware of them. That response is repentance.

Second, they learn that there is a divine response when one responds to Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection with repentance. That response is the remission of sins.

Third, the revelation of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, with their accompanying repentance and remission of sins is not meant exclusively for Jewish eyes and ears and hearts only. It is intended for “all nations.”

Fourth, having introduced the first three fundamental truths, Jesus informs his disciples that they are to bear witness of these truths. However, like Hyrum Smith two thousand years later (See DC 11.²¹⁻²²), they required further preparation before setting out on such a world-changing mission.

This is a boatload of information, all reduced to two scriptural sentences! It will require a series of longer homilies to address each of the truths Jesus teaches in these two sentences. Since this is billed as a *meditation*, our review here will be necessarily brief and limited in scope.

The disciples were not sophisticated theologians. Shoot, who are we kidding, they weren’t

theologians at all. So, we wonder, at this early stage, what did they make, what *could* they make of Jesus' suffering and death in light of his resurrection? And how did they formulate a "repentance" that drew its inspiration and power from Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection?

Jesus had warned his disciples about his coming rejection, arrest, suffering and death on multiple occasions. One gathers from the record that, in actuality, Jesus never let his disciples forget it. His predicted rejection, suffering, and death looked, to them, like failure, humiliation, and defeat on his part and, attached to him as they were, left them with feelings of personal confusion, anger, and shame. It is certain that when the actuality finally presented itself, these feelings were magnified, combined, as we see in Luke 24, with feelings of discouragement and hopelessness.

But as the reality of Jesus' resurrection slowly dawned on them, they saw that his rejection, suffering, and death were not failures or cause for humiliation after all. Nor was his refusal to exercise his power to preserve himself a sign of weakness. Rather, all of this was preliminary to his victory and glorification. They had, they realized, judged things wrongly. They had judged Jesus by the world's twisted standards of personal worth and power. So, Jesus' victorious resurrection brought a change of mind and caused them to think of things differently—this "change of mind" or "new way of thinking" is the basic idea behind the Greek word, *metanoia*, translated as "repentance."

Personal worth, greatness and power and victory, health and wellbeing and happiness were not what the world preached them to be and were not acquired as the world claimed. Personal worth, greatness and power and victory, health and wellbeing and happiness were not based on dominating. They weren't based on the acquisition of prestige or wealth or more power—false assertions that Jesus himself had rejected from the moment he entered the wilderness to be tempted of the Devil to his final mortal breath.

Rather, personal worth, greatness and power and victory, health and wellbeing and happiness flowed as one rejected the world's twisted views and adopted the views of Jesus, who, in choosing to serve others rather than himself, had simply adopted the views of his Father. They flowed by bending to the will to Jesus and his teachings. They flowed by living a life consistent with Jesus' character, which was simply a reflection of his Father's.

This, then, is what the disciples would preach. Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection draws us to repentance by exposing the lies that the world propagates every single day of our lives—about personal worth, greatness and power and victory, health and wellbeing and happiness; about the very standards by which the value of a life is measured. Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection allows us to view things through new eyes.

With our rejection of the old and our perception of the new, not only do our attitudes change, but our behavior changes. As our behavior changes, sins are remitted—"let go," "hurled off." This "remission of sins" is still dependent upon God. It continues to be a matter of grace. It cannot be "earned." But, it is less about some magical divine eraser wielded by God and angels, and more about the fact that, through the grace of God's revelation through Jesus, we see sin for what it is—something we could not otherwise do—and, with his aid, reject it. We reject that which the world defines as personal worth, greatness and power and victory, health and wellbeing and happiness, along with the very standards by which the value of a life is measured. We accept and live by Jesus' ideals of personal worth, greatness and power and victory, health and wellbeing and happiness, and the very standards by which the value of a life is measured.

The reader can see, then, that the message of "repentance and the remission of sins," is something much more than stopping bad, even evil habits. It is the rejection of a complete world view and the

adoption of the divine view of existence itself. It is the adoption of Jesus' view and a striving to live as he lived. Serving as he lived. And, maybe, even dying as he died. It is to reject false ideals of personal worth for true ideals of personal worth; to reject false greatness for true greatness, false power for real power, false victory for real victory, false health and wellbeing for real health and wellbeing, false happiness for real happiness, and false notions that measure the value of life for real.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Luke 24.⁵⁰⁻⁵³

⁵⁰And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. ⁵¹And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: ⁵³And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen.

Meditation

Addressing the confusion and discouragement over his death that the two disciples who were traveling to Emmaus possessed, Jesus asked, “ought not Christ to have suffered these things?” (Lk. 24.²⁶). Upon appearing to all his gathered disciples and finding them similarly confused and discouraged, Jesus asserted that “it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day” (Lk. 24.⁴⁶). Soon thereafter, Jesus ascended into heaven. Though he did not, he might have said “it behoved Christ to ascend into heaven and be enthroned on the right hand of God.” Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection were essential and necessary aspects of his atonement. But even with his resurrection, all essential and necessary aspects of his atonement were not yet complete. These, without his ascension to and enthronement in heaven, would have been incomplete and unfinished.

We should, then, understand today’s reading, with its narrative of Jesus’ ascension, as one central to his atonement. Jesus and his first disciples seemed to have had this view. When Jewish leaders interrogated Jesus as to his identity, Luke records Jesus’ response: “Hereafter shall the Son of man sit on the right hand of the power of God” (Lk. 22.⁶⁹). In the first recorded public address made by any disciple, Peter witnessed that “God raised up” Jesus and that he was “therefore... by the right hand of God exalted” (Acts 2.³²⁻³³). An early and influential church leader, Stephen, bore witness at his execution that he saw “the heavens open, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (Acts. 7.⁵⁶). The apostle Paul, who participated in Stephen’s execution, later testified that Jesus had been raised from the dead and “sitteth on the right hand of God” (Col. 3.¹). The writer of Hebrews bore witness that Jesus, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12.²). The same author summarizes one of his main points with, “Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb. 8.¹).

“What,” one might ask, “does Jesus do at and from that privileged place?” Early church leaders have ready answers.

Jesus, Peter announces, “is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; *angels and authorities and powers made subject unto him*” (Pet. 3.²²). We need not, then, fear any authority or any power for any reason. Paul prays that the saints in Ephesus would come to understand and appreciate “what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he [God] wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and *set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet...*” (Eph. 1.¹⁹⁻²²). Thus, Paul assures the saints of Rome that they need not worry about being condemned or overcome in any fashion by anyone or anything because “Christ that died, ye rather, that is risen again... is even at the right hand of God, who also *maketh intercession for us*” (Rom. 8.³⁴).

Jesus stands between us and any opposing angels, authorities, principalities, powers, might, or dominions, thus protecting us from their threats. We sometimes read things such as the following and imagine that in making intercession, Jesus somehow protects us from and makes us acceptable to Heavenly Father, allays his wounded honor, or satisfies his demanding justice.

“I am Christ, and in mine own name, by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them” (DC 38.⁴).

But this, I think is wrong. Jesus does not protect us from Father, or his wounded honor, or his demand for justice because there is no need to do so. He does defend us against Father’s accusations, because Father makes no such accusations. Such accusations come from the fallen angel, Lucifer. No, the Father feels about us, as Jesus does. Jesus does not stand between us and Father. He stands with Father, and together, they stand with us. They stand with us against every angel and all authorities, principalities, powers, might, or dominions. Few examples of Jesus’ in his intercessory role are more exemplary, powerful, or touching than that found in 3 Nephi.

“Jesus groaned within himself, and said: ‘Father, I am troubled because of the wickedness of the people of the house of Israel.’ And when he had said these words, he himself also knelt upon the earth; and behold he prayed unto the Father, and the things which he prayed cannot be written, and the multitude did bear record who heard him.

And after this manner do they bear record: ‘The eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father; and no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak; and no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father.’

When Jesus had made an end of praying unto the Father, he arose; but so great was the joy of the multitude that they were overcome” (3 Ne. 17.¹⁴⁻¹⁸).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!