

Weekly Reading – Monday, March 8, 2010

Before I turn to the lessons for this week, let me pose two questions to you readers of "Weekly Reading." Would making this more blog-like, including the option for reader comment, and comment on each others comments, be of interest/ value to you? The second question, would you pay for "Weekly Reading," say \$19.95 for a year? The two are related in that creating/ maintaining a blog would increase my costs. Please use the website feedback form to respond. In case you wonder, "Weekly Reading" current has about 700 to 1000 users a week.

Okay, on to the texts for Lent IV and March 14, 2010. I have been offering a thumbnail characterization of the overall theme of the week's lessons in recent weeks. That is easier when, as now, the texts more clearly relate. So this week's looks like God's Outreach Project or, if you prefer, God's initiative toward us. This is an important theme for those influenced by Reformed theology, but has been lost, to some degree, in subsequent iterations of liberal theology which put more stress on human action than on God's.

Joshua 5: 9 - 12

This short report comes from "the other side," the other side of the Jordan after the entry of Israel into the Promised Land. Note the subject of the verb in the opening verse, "The Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.'" It is God's doing. God has brought them out, led them out, brought them to a new land. It's grace, God's doing. To re-inforce this theme the people keep Passover, eating "the produce of the land," which they had not produced. Some will then take this as a cue to launch into themes of conquering and subjugation, but that is not the point the story scores. It is that their transformation is God's doing, not their own. Again to underscore this and their new status and location, the manna of the wilderness is over and done. No more manna. Now they have the crops of Canaan. Interesting how foods denote different stages of the journey: fleshpots of slaves in Egypt, manna in the wilderness, crops in Canaan. Also interesting that when a phase is over, it's over. No going back, no looking backward. A message for some congregations today?

II Corinthians 5: 16 - 21

If ever there were a text that stressed the initiative of God, this would be it! "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." It is God's initiative and then our response. The opening verse (16) about regarding no one any longer from a human point of view does have some context that is important. Paul is contesting those who he terms "super apostles," see II Cor 4, who point to their own great spiritual deeds of power and accomplishments as signs of God's power. To Paul this is the old Adam at work. Paul points to the cross, foolish to the wise. But as indicated the real center of the passage is God's radical initiative in Christ, who became sin that we might be made

righteous. One of the problems that mainline, theologically liberal folks sometimes have is they just don't think they need a Savior. We can manage this ourselves, thanks. Paul says, "you might want to give that another look."

Luke 15: 1 - 3, 11b - 32

Is this, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," the best-loved, best-known of the parables, or is it "The Good Samaritan?" What ever you answer, preachers are still challenged in dealing with a well-known story. It is helpful to note that the entire of chapter 15 is devoting to God's concern for, efforts to find, the lost. Which ticks off those who think of themselves as the righteous folks who have been good all along. So the opening verses give us the Pharisees, embodying this mentality, while the closing scene of the parable, focuses on the same mentality embodied by the older brother. But the emphasis does not really fall on either of the lost brothers (both are lost, one to vice, the other to confidence in his own virtue). The emphasis falls on the father who goes out to the prodigal, who takes the initiative. Last fall the NYT Book Review had a piece on Karen Armstrong's new book, *The Case for God*, in which she extols the virtues of apophatic theology, which emphasizes the human search for the unknowable God. The closing lines of the review relate to this parable and this week's theme. "Apophatic religion may be the most rigorous way to go in search of an elusive God. But for most believers, it will remain a poor substitute for the idea that God has come in search of us." That would be the overriding theme of Lent IV texts, the God who in Jesus Christ has come in search of us, we who are lost in a far-country.