



For the Renewal of Repentance: The Lukan Texts for Lent*

GARY M. SIMPSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

“When our lord and master Jesus Christ said, ‘repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” With these opening words of Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*, the Reformation erupted on the western Christian world. The renewal of repentance has often energized God’s mission and ministry. For instance, one might recall the mission of the eighth-century Hebrew prophets or of John the Baptist or of Peter on Pentecost or even of Jesus himself. The Lukan texts for Lent (Series C) in their distinctive way proffer a renewal of repentance for mission and ministry today.

First Sunday in Lent: Luke 4:1-13

Let’s not be tempted, this narrative is more about testing and trial than about temptation. So also, I would venture, are the narratives that portray our lives. Temptations always, of course, accompany times of trial, but the lasting significance resides in the dynamic of testing.¹

Luke claims world-historical significance for the testing of Jesus by placing this trial immediately following a lineage of Jesus that reaches all the way back to the first human and even to God. Cosmic claims are on trial here. Not “if,” but

*Craig Koester, Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, and Ann Svennungsen, Pastor at Edina Community Lutheran Church, Edina, Minnesota, joined me in conversation concerning these texts. I thank them for their stimulation and insights.

¹David Tiede rightfully emphasizes the “testing” dynamic of the “temptation” narrative; see David Tiede, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 98.

rather “since” you are the Son of God, what kind of Son of God will we have here?² Will Jesus’ mission and ministry be that of the Son *of God*, or of a son going his own autonomous way? The outcome of this trial becomes a christological testimony that initiates missional testing for Lukan readers then as well as now.

Each new “temptation” raises the stakes for Jesus’ inaugural time of trial. Certainly the quite human need for bread presents a formidable trial as to whether or not the mission of this “son of Adam” will “proceed out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3b). Luke, in comparison with Mark and Matthew, expands *diabolos*’ claim to rule the world. Luke thereby poignantly proclaims to the more hellenized of his readers (or to the more secularized of today’s readers) that this Son of God will undermine conventional worldly power-brokering and empire-building on whatever level.³ Jesus’ inaugural time of trial culminates in Jerusalem which is where his final

trial will also take place. In both cases Jesus refuses to put God on trial directly but rather accepts his testing as testimony “of God.” The devil, having lost this case, awaits a change of venue (Luke 22:3-6).

In the contemporary context of the growth industry in books and programs on “spirituality,” this Lukan pericope proclaims both warning and promise. Even though Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit,” he is “led by the Spirit” into this cosmic conflict. Missional “spirituality” does not exempt one from testing but rather inaugurates such times. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit does not lead one on an exercise routine with an ascending growth line into higher and higher levels of well-being and virtue. As Reinhold Niebuhr has succinctly noted, there arises a “new peril of evil on every new level of the good” (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, p. 316). On the other hand, Luke offers the divine promise that a renewed leading of the Spirit will accompany each new peril by *diabolos*. Though Jesus is never, of course, summoned to repent, our times of testing are “an opportune time” for the renewal of repentance.

Second Sunday in Lent: Luke 13:31-35

We now journey from Jerusalem’s temple pinnacle to Jerusalem’s misplaced self-assurance; from Jesus’ refusal to live autonomously without God to Jerusalem’s refusal (“you would not,” 13:34) to live with the one who comes in the name “of the Lord.” “Forsaken” (13:35), “desolate” (First Reading), and “enemies” (Second Reading) are the troubling names that emerge from this Sunday’s texts—texts of terror indeed.

Here we have a “struggle of wills”: the intention of an adversary, the determination of “the one who comes,” the unwillingness of Jerusalem, and the fulfillment of God’s will.⁴ In the midst of this struggle comes the prophet’s compassionate lament, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often would I...and you would not!” (13:34). Indeed, isn’t it precisely such passionate longing for the other that heightens the prophetic indictment, “Behold, your house is forsaken” (13:35).

²Both Tiede (*Luke*, 100) and Frederick Danker emphasize this point; see Danker, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 101.

³Danker throughout his commentary is particularly proficient at indicating Lukan rhetorical devices for appealing to hellenized readers who might not share the metaphorically rich biblical background of Luke’s Jewish readers. There’s a “to the end of the earth” mission rhetoric here (Acts 1:8).

⁴Tiede, *Luke*, 256.

Luke’s stage is now set. The “truth,” “most excellent Theophilus,” is the divine “must” (*dei*, 13:33) which will not be thwarted. That much truth we have in the journey to Jerusalem. The full truth and nothing but the truth of the divine necessity awaits the arrival in Jerusalem.

Here we get a foreshadowing that the divine necessity is likewise divine irony—*irony*, that “condition of affairs...opposite to what might naturally be expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). As the ironic drama unfolds, some well-intentioned Pharisees warn Jesus, “Herod wants to kill you, therefore flee Jerusalem.” Jesus concludes, nevertheless, “Herod wants to kill me, I must go to Jerusalem.” While life may be full of such ironies, divine irony locates itself in “the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross” (Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 20). Here lies the wisdom of the cross. The empowering which we need in

order to renew our repentance comes from the enervating which God suffered on the cross.

Third Sunday in Lent: Luke 13:1-9

“Ye who think ye stand, take heed lest ye fall” (1 Cor 10:12). This exhortation from the Second Reading stands as an appropriate hermeneutic for the gospel narrative as well as for the renewal of repentance for contemporary audiences.

Luke narrates a classic problem articulated precisely in Proverbs 10:22-30: “When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever....The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.” Such axiomatic religious wisdom can lead to speculation about why bad things happen to good people and to unbounded dickerings about better and worse sinners. Jesus short-circuits the axiomatic wisdom: “[but] I say to you.” In cases of this kind of suffering, tragedy, and death, Jesus refuses second-order discourse about “them.” Jesus’ pastoral wisdom presses persuasively on contemporary pastors/proclaimers.

This pericope follows immediately on the heels of the powerful judgment discourses spoken in 12:35-59. “At that very time” (13:1) “some” attempt to deflect such judgment away from themselves toward some other “them.” How all too typical of the human condition! We moderns (and postmoderns) are also adept at externalizing. In addition, our contemporary affection for the adequacy of causal explanations escalates our use of diversionary tactics. Jesus, however, twice brings the judgment home by employing first-order discourse: “unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (13:3, 5).

Such poignant homiletical direct address could leave contemporary preachers wobbly. If that be the case, the preacher might resort to Jesus’ own quite quotable words as a refrain throughout the sermon. The renewal of repentance just might depend on such discourse. Even so, calls for repentance often bear little “fruit,” and repentance itself seems to be dead (“three years” [13:7] is a Semitic expression for completeness, i.e., completely dead). Still, the vinedresser’s own direct plea for manure “this year also” can only be the very words of divine mercy itself. The renewal of repentance most certainly depends on this discourse.

Fourth Sunday in Lent: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Toward the end of the 19th century, A. Jülicher “cleansed the parables from

the thick dust with which the allegorical interpretation had covered them.”⁵ He did so by asserting that parables promote a single point of the widest possible generality. This interpretive perspective has long dominated much preaching on the parables—my own included. However, one single point of the widest possible generality will in short order render imaginations inoperative, those of proclaimers as well as hearers. No wonder preachers often overhear one another murmuring (!) about preaching on such familiar parables as this one.

This parable, popularly known as “the prodigal son,” can go by many names, thus glutting the imagination with proclamatory grist. The “parable of the lost son” maintains the connection between 15:11-32 and 15:4-10—the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. This kinship brings to mind the refrains of “joy in heaven” (15:7) and “joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10). Such “good news of a great joy” (2:10) arrives, perhaps surprisingly, during renewals of repentance with an invitation to “Rejoice with” (15:6, 9).

The elder brother in this “parable of the elder brother” angrily refused to participate in the rejoicing (15:28). For this reason the parable is also known as “the lost sons.” Both (!) are lost. Both (!) are prodigal, the elder having squandered the father’s presence and possession (15:31), not to mention the merry-making of “the fatted calf.” The parable commences with the younger son lost and culminates with the elder son lost. With only one prodigal found, is there any wonder that in this last of “the parables of the lost” the refrain of “joy in heaven” itself remains lost? What proclaimers and hearers alike do find at the end of this oft-described “open-ended” parable is the “the waiting father” (cf. Helmut Thielicke’s book of the same title).

This waiting father—this running, embracing, kissing one—has “compassion” for the lost who are “yet at a distance” (15:20), even (especially?) those who are paradoxically “always with” (15:32). This waiting one faithfully feeds proclaimers and hearers alike with the feast to come. How ironic that earthly murmuring—“This man receives sinners and eats with them” (15:2)—makes for “more joy in heaven” (15:7). Such a parable on a platter proves to be a banquet of great joy for prodigal proclaimers when we squander the parabolic imagination.

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Luke 20:9-19

“Heaven forbid!” (20:16, NRSV); “God forbid!” (KJV, RSV, NEB). With the bad news announced, experienced heralds are prepared for deep human cries. There’s something cross-cultural here. Profoundly unnerving news has the capacity to bring out the universally human. Most often what triggers the telling is some genre of violence whether rooted in human perpetration or neglect (both far too often the case!), or in disease or accident or natural disaster. Even to this day we moderns might, if a causal explanation is not readily forthcoming, be caught calling these latter violent contingencies “acts of God.”

What’s unimaginable to many (most?) moderns and postmoderns is that *God* would be the Author of the bad news announced. The Jewish people amongst Luke’s audience, however, heard this parable precisely so, since Isaiah’s familiar judgment song of the vineyard (5:1-7) surely came to mind. In both texts God’s

⁵Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972) 19.

judgment rests upon Jerusalem (the preceding events in Luke are Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his weeping over Jerusalem, and his cleansing of the temple). There’s no question; the people with their “Heaven forbid!” hope to hinder “a real possibility.”⁶ The Pharisees, while they categorically reject the validity of Jesus’ parable “against them” (20:19), likewise understand that Jesus had invoked *God* against them.

Contemporary proclaimers cannot assume that their audience holds to this divine imagination. Today’s religious imagination often holds (unbiblically!) to an automatically too kindly divinity. Surely, neither God’s actions nor Jesus’ parables could actually be “against” anyone! User-friendliness indelibly marks our marketing milieu. Perhaps after centuries the renewal of repentance has met its match in “marketing to felt needs.” Heaven forbid!

Thank God, today’s proclaimers have specifically this parable with its cruciform coloring. From its earliest mission days the church, borrowing from Psalm 118:22, preached just this rejected stone now resurrected (see Acts 4:11 and 1 Pet 2:7; Ps 118 also shows up in today’s gospel, in the gospel for Lent 2, and in the “Palm Sunday” gospel). Furthermore, proclaiming this

stone was precisely the emboldening (Acts 4:13, 29-33) needed by the disciples, since they too had been “broken” and “crushed” (Luke 20:18).

As the missional church found out, this stone both crushes and brings to life! After all, this stone is “the Lord’s doing” (Ps 118:23), the Lord’s “new thing,...a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (First Reading). For who could possibly embrace God’s enervating judgment without having already been embraced by such an empowering cruciform word? The emboldening proclamation of this Crucified One is itself the needed power for the renewal of repentance. Proclaimers, then and now, have God’s word on it!

⁶Tiede, Luke, 342.