



## *Texts in Context*

# Prayer on the Prairies: Rogation Days in Changing Times

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### I. THE CONTEXT—AN AUGUST WITHOUT HARVEST

THE CHURCH KNOWS THAT PRAYER IS ALWAYS THE ORDER OF THE DAY, AS ST. Paul commands in 1 Thess 5:17: “pray without ceasing.” However, we often need a little direction in our prayers. Sometimes what we accept as sound liturgical and exegetical traditions work, and sometimes they don’t. In North America the primary occasions for prayerful reflection on God’s blessings on agriculture, the land, and our communities have been harvest-related holidays. Canada celebrates Thanksgiving on the second Monday of October and the United States on the fourth Thursday of November. These are civil holidays with many rich and well-loved traditions that have been used by the church to speak of the way God has blessed us and answers our prayers. But sometimes the faithful need more than harvest festivals to speak to the depth of their souls.

On November 24, 1999, the three congregations of our parish, along with the local Roman Catholic community, gathered together for a Thanksgiving service. To be sure, all of us had reason to be thankful. Minnesota’s unemployment rate was at an all-time low, wages in local industries were good, and our congregational budgets were being met. The very fact that we were there said that all of us, in one way or another, had received our daily bread. The next day folks ate turkey, mourned the empty places at our tables, watched a football game, and

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played with the new grandchild. (At least that's what happened in our house.) But Thanksgiving had a hollow ring to it. For how can you be thankful in a year with no harvest?

During August and September of 1999 there was an eerie quiet about this place where I live. It should have been the season of harvest, but few combines were in the field, the air did not carry the sweet nutty scent of fresh grain and chaff, trucks weren't hauling a new crop, and farm families who usually work those days from dawn to dusk found other things to do. Because of a very wet spring less than half of the cropland in the county was even seeded, and when the rains kept on through the summer much of the grain that was growing was ruined. For the seventh year in a row, the harvest was nothing to write home about.

The parish I've served for the past thirteen years consists of three rural congregations in the east end of Pennington County, Minnesota. This is in the northwestern corner of the state, about forty miles from the Canadian border and a little more than seventy miles from the Red River and North Dakota. We are on the edge of the rich prairie farmland that spreads west from here to the foothills of the Rockies, and a few miles east of us begin the mixed forests that make their way to the Great Lakes and over the Canadian Shield. For the better part of a century people here have cut wood, raised small grains and cattle, poultry, and hogs, and they have done their best to make a living. But these last years have seen great changes. Beginning in the early '90s a series of wet years lead to an outbreak of fusarium head blight, also known as "scab" in the United States or "tombstone" in Canada. This fungal disease hit the wheat and barley, reducing yields and quality to the point where many farmers quit growing those crops.<sup>1</sup> The epidemic worked in harmony with a general decline in commodity prices, wild fluctuations in the dairy and hog industries, and changes in agricultural financing to put ever more pressure on farm families. The social, legal, financial, and spiritual consequences of what has taken place on the farm these last years will take years to sort out. And all this has happened while the general American economy was booming and even in Northwest Minnesota there was plenty of off-farm work for those who wanted it. The bottom line was that in 1999, as in every year since I've been serving this parish, a few more families quit farming.

I remember one of my seminary classmates, a pastor from east Africa, talking about his farm back home after he had visited a church in rural Minnesota and seen an industrial North American seedtime. He said that he and his family planted their grain at the end of the dry season in ankle-deep dust, trusting that the wind would blow and rains would come. They planted their crop with a mixture of fear,

<sup>1</sup>Estimates are that in northwest Minnesota alone nearly 3 million acres of wheat and barley have been affected by scab blight since 1993, with total cost to producers in the billions of dollars. Local farmers report that in the early '90s barley yields in the 75-100 bushel-per-acre range were common. By 1999 few farmers even planted barley—the malting industry in this area is almost a thing of the past. For more information see Jochum Wiersma, et al., "Minnesota Impacts—Small Grain Program Goal to Reduce Scab Incidence," online: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/mnimpacts/impact.asp?projectID=226> [cited 28 December 1999].

faith, and hope, for sometimes the seed they had buried would have been their children's next meal. He then wondered aloud if there was such hope in America. In contrast to his story, I thought about my father's father, who farmed for fifty years in Dakota at the south end of the Red River Valley. Grandpa used to say, "We never lost a crop." It was simple truth. He wasn't bragging; the seasons had been very good to him, and he had really never lost a crop. However, these last years have led me to see that Grandpa's times are gone and that my African classmate's picture of hope and faith is not as foreign to us as it may have been a generation ago. At seed-time, many farm families are putting their way of life on the line, and the picture from Psalm 126 of "those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing" is all too real.

After celebrating this Thanksgiving in a year without a harvest, I've become convinced that it is simply wrong to wait until October or November to address issues related to agriculture and the land. We cannot wait for seasonal balance sheets to be filled out before we formally bring our concerns to God in prayer. A crisis of hope demands that the church give the faithful an opportunity to pray for God's blessing and ponder the word even in the midst of the agricultural cycle. And so with all this in mind, I invite you to consider a day on the liturgical calendar lifted from the far recesses of our common Christian attic: Rogation days.

## II. ST. MAMERTUS GIVES US A HOLIDAY—LUTHER OFFERS AN EXPLANATION

*Rogatio* is one of the Latin words for persistent and repetitive prayerful requests. Rogation days refer to the days from Sunday to Wednesday prior to Ascension that some liturgical traditions have set aside as days of penance and prayer for God's blessing on the land.

The story behind these all-but-forgotten dates on the liturgical calendar can be told in two contradictory ways. According to the more pious telling, in the year 473 St. Mamertus, bishop of Vienne in central France, instituted a solemn penitential procession so that the faithful would pray for God's blessing following a series of natural disasters. A more pragmatic version of the story says that the saint simply offered the Christian community an alternative to the popular Roman holiday of Robigalia, a day of processions and parties celebrated on April 25. On this date folks would go out to the fields, party, and make their petitions to the gods of agriculture, in particular to Robigus, the deity who protected their grain from blight. No matter what the reasons behind Mamertus's pre-Ascension call to prayer, the custom caught on. In 511 the Fifth Council of Orleans ordered all the faithful of France to observe Rogation days, and, as often happens, the rest of Europe followed the French custom.<sup>2</sup>

But Rogation days were by no means set in stone. These were seasonal cele-

<sup>2</sup>Gaspar LeFebvre, et al., *St. Andrew's Daily Missal* (New York: DDB, 1962) 557-561; Martin Luther, *On Rogationtide Prayer and Procession, Luther's Works*, vol. 24, ed. Martin Dietrich (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 85-98.

brations. The church always allowed for the flexible appointment for days of prayer appropriate for local conditions. Typically the Rogation services were held in connection with some significant point in the cycle of agriculture. These could include times when spring planting began; when the fall-planted grains, such as winter wheat or rye, emerged from winter dormancy, or when fruit trees and vines were blooming. The timing of these events in the orchard, vineyard, and field can vary greatly from place to place and year to year. For example, on the fifteenth of May some farmers in Pennington County are still seeding wheat, while their neighbors who truck their combines south to California or Texas are gearing up for harvest. Setting dates for Rogation gets even more complicated when we remember that Ascension Day is celebrated forty days after Easter (Acts 1:3). As the dates for Easter vary with lunar cycles, so traditional Rogation days can take place from late April until early June.<sup>3</sup> It is not unusual for us to see snow or to be cutting hay around Ascension.

According to old Roman rites, Rogation took the shape of a procession of prayer and penance even in the midst of the Easter season. The color of the day was Lent and Advent's violet, as opposed to Easter's white or gold. The assigned Epistle for Rogation was from James, reassuring the faithful that God does indeed answer prayer. The Gospel was from Luke 11 and is an explanation of the Lord's Prayer, "Ask and it will be given you; search and you shall find; knock and the door will be open for you." The Introit was based on Psalm 17 and the Offertory on Psalm 108, and together they stand as confessions of faith in a gracious God who answers prayer. Even though Rogation was an agricultural festival in which the faithful would process from the church into the fields to read the Gospel in open air, the basic theme of the day was the assurance that God heard and answered the prayers of the people.<sup>4</sup> The earliest Rogation days were celebrated as mid-week services from Monday through Wednesday, but as the years went on the Sunday before Ascension became the primary day for its celebration. Some older American Lutheran lectionaries, such as the one listed in the 1958 *Service Book and Hymnal*, reflect this tradition and list the Sunday before Ascension as Rogate Sunday and have a selection of hymns entitled "Rogation and Harvest."

Outdoor services complete with processions, banners, and all the rest can be a bit too much fun and things can get out of control. By Luther's day, Rogation had taken on the air of a spring fair complete with a good deal of what he labels, "inane babble and hilarity, to say nothing of even worse conduct and sin." In late May or early June of 1519 Luther offered a sermon on Rogation. He says that "there is more valid reason today for entirely abolishing all processions and also the holy days than there ever was for instituting them," and by the mid-1520s he would say

<sup>3</sup>According to western tradition Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the first full moon after March 21, the vernal equinox. Easter can be as early as March 22 and as late as April 25. See *Lutheran Book of Worship, Minister's Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 13. Rather than try to explain this to folks, I would encourage pastors to simply have their confirmation students memorize the formula. It's kind of fun!

<sup>4</sup>See LeFebvre, *Missal*, 558-561, and Luther, *Rogationtide*, 87-88.

that it was right that processions were eliminated.<sup>5</sup> But it is significant to note that in 1519 he does not call for an end to Rogation celebrations. Instead, Luther urges the faithful to consider and enter into the power and validity of prayer, not only as a new agricultural year begins but every day of their lives.

Luther's views on Rogation days are driven by his deep faith in the power of God's word. The faithful pray not because of their own merit, but because they trust God's promise to hear their prayers, and they know God is faithful. He quotes 1 Tim 4:4-5, remembering that, according to Paul, "The creatures are blessed and sanctified by the word of God and prayer," and then goes on to speak of the Gospels being read "in the fields and in the open so that through the power of the holy Word of God the devils may be weakened and the air kept pure and, subsequently, that the fruit may grow vigorously and be a blessing to us."<sup>6</sup> To pray publicly for God's blessing touches all aspects of human life. From the good fruits of the earth, to the defeat of horrible disease, and on to a knowledge of the depth of human sin, these are some of the gifts Luther sees God offering to the faithful in prayer. Rogation days are but one more opportunity never to doubt the promise of the truthful and faithful God.

### III. CONTEMPORARY USES OF ROGATION TRADITIONS

The *Lutheran Book of Worship* has general prayers and petitions for the harvest of lands and waters, the conservation of natural resources, and concerns about the weather.<sup>7</sup> The annual *Sundays and Seasons* worship planning resources have a variety of special prayers, blessings, and suggestions for hymns that echo Rogation themes, while never making reference to the day itself.<sup>8</sup> The prayers are broad, gentle, well written, and quite generic. The *Sundays and Seasons* prayer for the spring of 2000 goes like this:

Almighty God, we thank you for making the earth fruitful,  
so that it might produce what is needed for life.  
Bless those who work in the fields;  
give us seasonable weather;  
and grant that we may all share the fruits of the earth,  
rejoicing in your goodness;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

These are the kinds of prayer that can be printed in a hymnal and used for years without risk. But to my ears they sound a bit like a "green thumb" version of the October 4, St. Francis Day, blessings of pets and animals. Harsher voices would say that in the light of convulsive changes in rural communities such prayers are distant, bland, and almost patronizing. They are a far cry from St. Mamertus's

<sup>5</sup>LW 42:90-91.

<sup>6</sup>LW 42:91.

<sup>7</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 49.

<sup>8</sup>*Sundays and Seasons* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999) 210 and 214.

penitential processions to the the field to plead with God to keep flood, drought, and blight at bay.

The National Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (NACD) was born out of the depression's dust bowl and is the national body that represents some 3,000 local conservation districts throughout the United States. Since 1955, the NACD has sponsored an annual "Soil and Water Stewardship Week" during the last week of April or first week of May. The NACD has consciously tried to tie soil and water stewardship observances to the traditions of medieval Rogation days, even though their goals are educational. They work within the knowledge that, because rural environments and communities are so vulnerable to fickle weather, matters of management and economics are very much entwined with expressions of faith.

Each year a theme is selected for Soil and Water Stewardship Week, and an advisory committee develops materials for use in churches of all denominations. Worship materials and other resources reflect the theme and are available from local conservation district offices. These include educational videos, litanies, prayers, bulletin covers, suggestions for scripture readings—even bookmarks and sermon outlines. For the year 2000 the theme is "Community Waters," and the golden rule of Matt 7:12, "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you," forms the basis of a discussion of how God's people should care for the waters flowing through their communities.<sup>9</sup>

Soil and Water Stewardship materials have been widely accepted by many rural congregations. They are good worship resources, and folks appreciate making healthy connections between their faith and daily work. In recent years these materials have also been shaped in such a way as to make them more useful in urban settings. For example, in 1999 the theme revolved around the development of backyard wildlife habitat, and this year's theme of water stewardship readily lends itself to confronting issues of municipal and industrial water usage and treatment.

For several years the parish I serve has purchased at minimal cost (about 50 cents each) tree and shrub seedlings from the conservation district and has distributed them to the worshipping community on Soil and Water Stewardship Sunday. The seedlings are taken home, planted, and serve as a concrete reminder that God's people are called to care faithfully for the earth. Both little children and older folks have responded very well to this melding of Rogation and Arbor Day traditions. It is a simple way to remind the faithful of their connections to the land.

The NACD has too much experience with drought, flood, erosion, dust, field and gully washouts, and polluted streams, and its soil and water stewardship materials see in these natural and/or human-made catastrophes an exhortation to the biblical vision of faithful stewardship. I have great respect for their faithful adapta-

<sup>9</sup>For more information about this material, contact the conservation district office in your area or the NACD Service Center, 408 E. Main, P.O. Box 855, League City, TX 77574-00855.

tion of the Rogation traditions. The call to pray for God's blessings on field and farm should naturally bring us to examine our handling of natural and agricultural resources. One hopes that such an examination would, in turn, lead us to act in responsible ways—as St. James writes: “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22).

Still, even the excellent effort of our conservation districts strays from St. Mamertus's call for prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel amongst the furrows. Remember—the problem is disease. *Fusarium* head blight—scab/tombstone—infects the ground. It has been seven years since a decent barley and wheat crop has been harvested in eastern Pennington County, Minnesota. In this context an exhortation to faithful soil and water stewardship can seem very empty. It is like hearing the preacher tell you to take your vitamins and quit smoking during the funeral of a child who died of leukemia—it is just out of place. There are times when the best use of a liturgical tradition is not to adapt or change it to meet our perceived needs, but rather to dive deep into it and let the power of God's word do its work.

#### IV. MAY 28, 2000—ROGATION DAY

In the year 2000, Easter is late and May 28 is the Sunday before the Festival of the Ascension. If we have favorable weather this spring, farmers should be finished with seeding the east end of Pennington County by the middle of May. By May 28 the grain should be up, cattle will be on summer pastures, and people will be cutting their first crop of hay, fixing machinery for the first cultivation of row crops, or mixing chemical for weed and fungal control. High school graduation will have taken place the previous weekend, and on Monday the local veterans will honor their dead with Memorial Day observances. If the weather has been wet and cold, chances are that folks will be biding their time and waiting for word from their crop insurance agents, wondering if it's even worth the time and money to seed this late in the season. According to the tradition of St. Mamertus, this day would mark the beginning of Rogation observances. Of course, the tradition says that we can be flexible and adapt things to local circumstances. You could use an earlier or later day for Rogation, or you can ignore the tradition. But after a Thanksgiving with no harvest this seems as good a time as any to pray for God's blessing. But what is the text for the day?

If you follow the Revised Common Lectionary, the lessons for May 28, 2000, are for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, and they work very well with the NACD's theme of “Community Waters.” The first lesson from Acts 10:44-48 is the conclusion of Peter's encounter with the Holy Spirit poured out on gentile believers following his visit with Cornelius. Here the disciple sees that God shows no partiality and he asks out loud, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people?” (Acts 10:47). This is the second time in Acts where questions about water, baptism, and the gentiles are raised. In Acts 8:36, as they journey through the desert, the Ethiopian says to Phillip, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” In

both cases the faithful must answer back and say that water for our neighbor is not to be denied. Our use and care of community waters is a matter of faith. The lesson from 1 John 5:1-6 speaks of how those who have been born of God keep the commandments and believe that Jesus is the son of God. John then goes on to speak of the one who came by water and the blood. This cryptic language leads the faithful to ponder not only the ministry of Christ, but our Lord's passion and the mystery of the baptism and the supper. Again, it does not take much of an exegetical leap to pick up themes of water and our relationship to our neighbors. Finally the Gospel, John 15:9-17, reminds us of the commandment to love one another, and then offers us the promise that the Father will give us what we ask in his name. Issues of water are not directly addressed in this text. But how can any one be confused concerning what the commandment of love requires of us? Are we "friends of Christ" and do we "abide in his love" if we foul water flowing downstream towards our neighbor—or worse yet, if we give them no water at all? The call to responsible stewardship in these lessons is very clear and the preacher ought not avoid it.

As nicely as the lessons for the Sixth Sunday of Easter fit themes of Rogation, I think we need to go ever deeper into the tradition and think about the old Roman Mass for Rogation days. Here the rubrics call for the removal of the festive Easter paraments and a quiet return to the somber violet of Lent as God's people pray for the defeat of blight. If the weather is nice, rural congregations could make a Rogation procession out of the nave to the field or pastures at the edge of the churchyard. Even in larger towns and cities the ushers could open the windows and let the wind carry the word of God and the prayers of the people out of the sanctuary into the countryside. And for a text? I would suggest that we read the same Gospel that Luther mentions in his sermon of Rogation from 1519. It is, perhaps, a lesson that raises more questions than it answers. How do we pray? For what do you pray? What are the will of God, daily bread, and times of trial? Have you ever gone to your door at midnight just to stop the knocking? Why did God create blight? Knock? Search? Ask? I have yet to come across an interpretation of this gospel text that will satisfy the intellect. Sometimes, all I can do is listen to the one who says, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32 KJV). This is the best I can do. So I will trust that you will hear the words of the one whose thanksgiving is spoken on the way to the cross.

#### V. THE TEXT—LUKE 11:1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread.



And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (NRSV). ⊕