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"TEXTS IN CONTEXT"

Promises, Promises

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It is a June morning, hot and bright. Marc Kolden of the systematics department at LNTS, David Tiede, President of LNTS, Walter Wietzke, Jr., Pastor at St. Mark Lutheran Church, St. Paul, and I are meeting in David Tiede's office to discuss the Advent texts for series C. I am the scribe, the one designated to write the Texts in Context article for this issue. Since this is an issue on feminism, I have decided to present the ideas of the group as they occurred in the conversation. It is a model which feminism has commended to the academy. So this will be a raw, uncooked piece, different, but for all that faithful, in its fashion, to the assignment. However, there is fiction here. Let the reader beware. This is my reconstruction of the discussion. None of the participants can be held responsible for what I have written.

It is just after chapel and coffee. After greetings and a brief setting of rules, we open with prayer. What we need is rain, rain for the crops in the fields of food which sustain us. We pray for enlightenment and rain, three of us just back from synod conventions where the people are desperate for it. Then we open our Bibles, Kolden and Tiede their well-worn Nestle-Alands. The manuscript for President Tiede's forthcoming commentary on Luke sits beside my yellow legal pad. After a short comment on why there are two Gospel pericopes for the day (the Roman Catholics prefer the Palm Sunday text to Luke's apocalypse), we begin.

The First Sunday in Advent: Luke 21:25-36.

Tiede: History is what we are dealing with here. Luke's history. In this pericope, Jesus is giving his version of history: cosmic history and current history. When portents appear in the sky, the nations will stand helpless, and people will faint with terror at all that is coming upon them.

This cosmic history ties back to the previous verse 24, a more historical

account of the fall of Jerusalem when "Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Linking the cosmic to the present historical situation allows Luke to witness to the reign of Jesus in the present. All of this language comes from the intertestamental rhetoric about the restoration of Israel and the coming of the Son of man. When that happens, in Luke's view, Jesus' dominion will be for all to see. As Moses says in Deuteronomy, the Gentiles will come to discover that God remains faithful to Israel (32:35, 36, 39). God will be just. God could have destroyed Israel but did not, in order that all would see the glory. The biblical witness is clear: God's plan for redemption, or plot for the future, is not in our hands.

Wietzke: People wonder about signs and wonders these days, about the end times, how they will come. The irony in this text is that Luke makes the *eschaton* not the end of things, but the coming of Christ. As people think about how they should make closure, Christ comes with liberation, a beginning.

Tiede: The force and the function of this material, these dread warnings, to the people is "hang in there." The promise is for you. This is all promise talk.

Wietzke: We want signs, not promises.

Tiede: These signs are big, cosmic. They raise the question for Luke's audience: Who is running the world? When this text comes up in the church year, we've just celebrated Christ the King Sunday. That should be instructive. This new, coming reign is not a palace coup. This is God's way of ruling. God has always been in charge.

Kolden: We have to remember this story is set before the crucifixion. We know that the final conflict is coming—and how it turns out. But the way the lectionary has it, the people in the pew hear this text as a prophecy of Jesus' coming at Christmas, as a baby, when it is another kind of advent: Christ's return as a powerful liberator. This is the great problem of Advent preaching. The culture wants Christmas and small babies, and we are trying to put the cross back into Christmas. Here the Jeremiah text works beautifully to shore up Advent by giving us the promise of a branch out of David who will execute justice and mercy.

Tiede: Well, that's the trouble here all right: the passion, not the birth, occurs after this text. This shows how difficult it is for God to keep the promise. Even the earth will be in travail. Humanity needs God to keep these promises. People may even think they want the promise fulfilled, but they do not know how badly it will hurt. The Day will close upon you like a trap.

Kolden: Bonhoeffer writes that Advent is like sitting in a prison cell waiting for someone to open the door, waiting for the word which will release you from prison. Danker says that the word for redemption (*apolytrosis*) is an unusual word, a technical word, meaning the redeeming of a slave.

Tiede: Anna uses it. She says that this child is meant for the redemption of Israel. She announces it to all who are looking for the "redemption." Put that talk next to the crucifixion. What happened to the promise of this miraculous baby? It is looking grim by this time in the story. Jesus is about to get killed. What happened to the promise?

Kolden: The Advent collects (better put in the SBH) had it right. "Stir up, O Lord, we beseech thee, thy power, and come." That is to say, things look bad, but this is your redemption drawing near. I mean the stirring up of God's power

is going to bring trouble, but it will also bring redemption.

Tiede: The force of the text is against Christmas sentimentality. It is easy to believe that the powers of chaos are in charge at this point in the life of Christ.

Wietzke: This is so difficult in preaching. Our people do not think God is out there in the chaos. Popular opinion has God inside in the church. Manichaeanism seems easier. Abandon the world; it is evil. How to maintain the witness that the Incarnation keeps the sacred and the secular togetherthat's hard. It is now—today—our lives—that will be affected by Christ's return. The Incarnation says this.

Kolden: Still, Louis Bouyer the Catholic liturgical scholar says that no one is saved by

the birth of Christ.

Tiede: Luke does a lot with the birth narratives, but we have to see them in the light of who it is that is going to be crucified and why. Remember, the birth narratives here are in the context of Caesar Augustus and the conventions of the miraculous births in Roman literature. In the *Aeneid* Caesar moves from glory to glory. Luke shows us that God works in a different way. In addition to that, the Jewish party is praying for a new King David who will overtake Caesar.

One starting with Christmas could find it easy to read the Jesus story as a kind of log cabin story—anyone can be president. Rags to riches, manger to messiah.

Wietzke: But the story is rags to rags, or manger to cross. There is the difficulty. It's sweet to look back, hopeful to look forward, but what about Christ now, the presence of Christ today? Christ says to Peter, you do these things so you may obtain blessing, but I want you to be a blessing.

The Second Sunday in Advent: Luke 3:1-6.

Tiede: That takes us to chapter 3 where we can see both past and future. John, the son of Zechariah, comes in a historical moment and preaches about the future and what is going to happen. This is where Walter's concerns are met, though his proof text is Luke 12:56 where Jesus says "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Is this a critical moment?, the crowds ask John. Yes, he says, the kingdom of God is at hand, now.

Kolden: But Luke is back then; this is now. We are living in the future that John is speaking about. This is the end, not the present of John.

Tiede: Conzelmann says that Luke historicized the apocalypse and made it present. The present time is critical. That is the problem: can one have a sense of urgency for 2000 years? It's now, now, now. This is the time when one's profession of faith will be tested severely.

Look at Luke's history here. It sounds like "in the days of yore," once upon a time. Archaic language. That's Luke's design. Here he imitates the style of the biblical historians, not the Greco-Romans. And he's not talking about hoary antiquity, but history with which his readers are vaguely familiar, rather like we are familiar with Pearl Harbor. Though there are some funny things about the history, these are real people and places, and at the end we read that John is in prison for having confronted the king with his adultery. The people listed are, on the whole, scalawags and puppets. It is then that you hear John's stri-

dent word. Those who are in the seats of power are wicked, not virtuous. Remember that the Romans are rhetorically into virtue. They have interpreted history in terms of virtue; they think of the Christians as being "godless" for not worshipping the emperor. But the Christians are writing this new history from the underside of history. Things look different from that side. Luke is saying that God works in another kind of way from the high priest or Romans.

Kolden: What about the baptism for the forgiveness of sins? Did Luke just paste Mark and Q together at 6 and 7?

Tiede: It is where the pericopes are divided. But we have to remember that Luke thought they held together. If you break them apart, as the lectionary does, they sound quite different. It helps to look at the picture Luke gives us of John as compared to the other synoptics. Luke drops

the hair shirt and makes the prophet seem much less ascetic than he does in Mark. Even though Luke is the most radical in his economics, he is not very radical here. John suggests that the way to amend life is to share. It seems as though Luke wants to pull John back into a more prophetic stream and not stress his apocalyptic side.

Grindal: The birth narratives are helpful in understanding Luke's portrait of the Baptist.

Tiede: The parallels between John and Jesus are of interest. Luke gives as much attention to the annunciation of John as he does to that of Jesus, as well as the birth and naming of both John and Jesus. Jesus' childhood is given some attention, though John gets short shrift, except for the refrain, used of Samuel, "and the child grew and became strong in spirit" (1:80).

After that, we get little more from John except this text (3:1-18) which contains John's entire preaching. In Luke the imprisonment of John comes before the baptism of Jesus. Who baptizes Jesus? John is removed from the scene before the anointing. Jesus in 16:16 says that you had the law and the prophets until John, so John is the last of the great prophets.

Kolden: John is preaching repentance. Can you translate "repent" to change sides? Is this radical politics?

Tiede: Return...return to God seems better. This is a prophetic call to change how one lives. But verse 3 has repentance for the forgiveness of sins. On second thought, changing sides is not a bad way to put it. In Peter's sermon (Acts 2:38) we have it too: "Repent, and be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins." Christian repentance has that intent of changing sides. You were on the side of those who killed Jesus, now turn back, turn. You were at enmity with God; now repent, get with it, wake up and smell the coffee. Things will be bad for you if you don't submit to this authority. Submit to the new power. Like Alexander, who is not that long ago in history: submit to him, here comes the Macedonian army, welcome it. If you don't, well...

Kolden: That brings up the question Lutherans always ask: what is the gospel here? That everyone should see God's salvation as in Mark?

Tiede: Bruce Chilton writes that when John says the kingdom of God is near it means that God is gathering strength. This is a statement about God, don't miss it.

The Third Sunday in Advent: Luke 3:7-18.

Tiede: This is a completely different piece for Advent, though it needs to be held together with the previous Sunday's text. Here is the threat and challenge. The other lessons for the day are wonderful: Rejoice! But here we have the axe, the winnowing, the fire. This time the promise is in the Old Testament; the Gospel is pretty severe.

Kolden: All the wheat has to go through the winnower. It is both encouragement and reproof.

Tiede: He's just told them the facts.

Kolden: Helmut Koester says that *evangelion* doesn't necessarily mean "good" news all the time, just "news." Is it true that John in the gospels never uses *evangelion* as a noun, always as a verb? So this is to make a declaration of what God is doing, something that God is up to. This is the news, then, not necessarily good news. If the story is a story of what God has done, it is news by definition.

Tiede: John has been exhorting the tax collectors to be honest, and Luke says he preaches

"good" news to the people with those exhortations. He's really giving it to them, but with it he preaches good news. Notice also in 3:18 that the news is given to the people—that is an interesting word. That is a sign of restoration. For Luke "multitudes" may be a negative noun; the "people" are a sign of the restoration.

The Fourth Sunday in Advent: Luke 1:39-55.

Grindal: This is fun, but we've got to move on.

Tiede: Back to the beginning: the Visitation, Elizabeth's pronouncement to Mary, and the baby John leaping at the sound of Mary's salutation. These are typical stories of the birth of wonder children in the Bible, when barren women bring forth children and dedicate them to the Lord. Hannah's song is almost the same song as the Magnificat; we get a recapitulation of what God has done before. Samuel is like John. Jesus is like David. All this gives some credence to the idea that the Magnificat is really the song of Elizabeth, for she too has prayed to have a son. When Mary asks Gabriel how this miraculous birth will be possible, as Sanders says in his commentary, "Sarah stands on her tiptoes and calls down through history to Mary, 'It's possible, Mary, it's possible."'

Grindal: History again.

Tiede: These two chapters are loaded with both Hellenistic and Jewish historiography. The first four verses of chapter one are a proper Hellenistic preface to a history. Then verse 4 is straight out of the Old Testament. All the rest of chapters 1 and 2 are incessantly scriptural. Conzelmann thinks that these two chapters are added. If Luke is Gentile, which has been the tradition, these chapters make no sense. Luke wouldn't care about making that strong a connection to the Old Testament. They don't make sense without anew understanding of Luke. I think he was a Hellenistic Jew and that the book is about the struggle within the Jewish community as to who is being faithful to Israel—the Christian party or the others. We can't prove that Luke was circumcised. Yet, he knows the Old Testament so well. Who was a Jew?

These questions were under great debate in those times. The rabbis were

not kind to Paul. All Jews were Hellenistic at this time—we forget how deeply Hellenized the entire known world was. Jewish identity comes to be an important question. Once Jerusalem is destroyed, the rabbis begin to be quite restrictive about who is a Jew. In Luke the word "Jew" often would be better translated "Judean."

The real question of Luke is: who is a follower of Jesus, and who is being faithful to Israel? Who is the heir of the promise? Paul answers the question in Galatians: Those who trust in God. On that basis the Gentiles can be included. The test case is Jesus. Those who believe Jesus is Messiah are in, those who do not are cut off. For Luke, Jesus is God's way of gathering strength, God's way of ruling.

Kolden: We have it in the Jeremiah text. This is how God is going to keep the promise.

Tiede: Simeon sees it later when he sees that Jesus is the one, and he blesses Jesus and his parents with terrible words. It will not be easy for God to keep this promise. It's one thing to hear the promise, another to receive it. Still Simeon says that he has seen his salvation, not his destruction.

Grindal: Anne Pederson, my English teacher at Augsburg, spoke on this text every time

she could. I'll never forget how she held out her arms as she spoke saying that for Simeon to hold the baby Jesus in his arms was to hold the knowledge of his death and salvation at one and the same time.

Tiede: Advent raises the stakes for the Christian, of Christmas: are you looking for your salvation, or are you not?

With that we rose from our discussion, packing up books and papers, speaking of the blessings we found in our mutual study of the Word and the great fun it is to study God's Word. As we walked out into the burning heat of the day, still talking of our pleasure in the presence of the Word, we did not see a sign of a cloud in the sky, but for the moment our hearts were rejoicing in God's Word.