

**The Spiritual Wisdom
of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
and Teachers**

Year A

On Earth as It Is in Heaven

John Shea



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Preface

Writing this Resource

The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers is a set of four books based on the Sunday Gospel readings in *The Revised Common Lectionary* and The Roman Missal's *Lectionary for Mass*. There will be one volume for each of the liturgical cycles: A, B, and C. The fourth volume will explore the Gospel texts that are suggested for feasts, funerals, and weddings.

These books have a triple audience. The primary audience is Christian preachers and teachers who use the Gospel texts of the Lectionary cycle in their preaching and teaching. The secondary audience is all Christians who consult and meditate on the Gospels as a guide for their lives. The third audience is spiritual seekers of all faiths and no faiths who are drawn to the realistic spiritual wisdom of the Gospels. I hope that the books of this series will be a help to all three audiences.

Preachers and Teachers

Over ten years ago, Rev. Wayne Prist of the Center for Development in Ministry thought Lectionary-based preachers and teachers should gather before Advent, Lent, and a section of Ordinary Time to review the Sunday readings. Although many excellent Scripture scholars were available to facilitate and resource this project, Rev. Prist wanted something different than scholarly exegesis. "I think we should focus on the personal, preachable, and teachable meanings of the texts." He asked if I wanted to give it a try. I said, "Why not?"

But I also said I would have to limit myself to the Gospel texts. I knew this would result in a lopsided approach, the type both Scripture and liturgical scholars lament. However, this was not because I preferred the Gospels to the other books of the Bible the Lectionary uses. Nor was I subtly advocating for fewer scriptural readings for Sunday liturgies. The reason for the Gospel restriction was both personal and practical.

Personally, I had meditated on Gospel texts for years and, quite simply, I felt that I had more to say about them than other texts. Practically,

the days were scheduled from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. If we were going to cover six to nine Sundays, we had to set limits. So we began a series of three days each year, one each for Advent/Christmas, Lent, and Ordinary Time. The title of the series was "Gospel Food for Hungry People."

The days were well attended and are still going on. There have also been many spin-offs. I have given weeklong and weekend retreats on Gospel stories. I developed a course, Gospel Narratives and Spiritual Development, that I taught at Loyola University of Chicago, Assumption University of Windsor, and Retreats International at Notre Dame. I have also given workshops on using Gospel stories in preaching and teaching to Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Mennonite, Presbyterian, and Catholic clergy. It is out of these experiences of talking and listening that I gradually became clearer about what I was doing and what would be helpful.

Cards on the Table—Face up

At one of the workshops on learning to listen and tell Gospel stories, a participant asked, "What are your basic assumptions when you come to the Gospels?" Seeing my own assumptions accurately was no easy task. I am usually too busy acting out of them to notice them. But I tried to articulate some of the "pre-understandings" I brought to the texts. I concluded with, "There, the cards are on the table." He responded, "Yes, but they are face down."

I want to try to turn a few of the cards face up.

I am a storyteller, and I have always gravitated toward the literary forms that are present in the Gospels, in particular the narrative structure of the whole Gospel and the narrative structures of the specific stories within the Gospels. So I tried to give the stories a close reading, paying careful attention to the interplay of plot and character. I saw that Gospel stories had particular characteristics that encouraged reading them in a particular way. I outlined these characteristics and gave interpretations of specific stories in *Gospel Light: Jesus Stories for Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

But my ultimate interest and the interest of the preachers and teachers were not literary. We were interested in theological and spiritual meanings that could connect with contemporary life. Attending to the literary form had to be a means to that end. I found that if I focused on the mindsets of the characters and how Jesus complimented, critiqued,

praised, and excoriated those mindsets in the light of his own mindset, I could uncover the raw material of spiritual development.

This raw material was the images, ideas, attitudes, and actions that either opened or closed the mind to the Divine Spirit and either facilitated or blocked the flow of spirit into creative speech and action. Therefore, the shorthand name for this endeavor is a “literary-spiritual interpretation.” I have developed this approach at length in the introductory essay to this resource book, “Preaching and Teaching the Gospels as Spiritual Wisdom.” I encourage all who would consult the Sunday-by-Sunday pieces to take the time to read this essay. That essay puts all the cards on the table—face up.

In the Marketplace

I knew that eventually I wanted to write resource books for preachers and teachers using this approach. However, when I looked at the market, I found there was no shortage of Lectionary-based resources. Some rehearsed the latest academic positions on scriptural texts, providing updated historical, philological, and theological information. Often they geared this information toward “themes” that would be appropriate for preaching and teaching. Some were very process oriented, helping the preacher or teacher attend to the text through carefully worded questions and imaginative exercises. Some developed theological themes that integrated the three readings, and then positioned the three readings within the larger liturgical season. Some strove to integrate the scriptural text into the liturgical movement as a whole. Some enumerated homily hints and teaching aids that would make the text “come alive.” Some supplied stories, individual examples, and cultural analyses that could be used in preaching and teaching. Some went beyond the role of a resource and created a homily or teaching that the preacher or teacher could read to congregations or students. These resources addressed different concerns depending on what they considered important and helpful to the preacher and teacher.

Although the type of resource I envisioned did not fit any of these categories, I learned a great deal from consulting them. They did many things remarkably well, and that meant I did not have to “reinvent the wheel” and do the same material. I envisioned preachers, teachers, and spiritually interested people having a number of Lectionary-based resources on their book shelves. I wanted to provide one more book that would complement but not compete with the type of resources

that were already out there. The intended audiences would correlate what they needed with what each resource had to give. The ultimate goal was to be helpful.

A Middle Ground Resource

I wrote a proposal to the Lilly Endowment to fund the writing of a Lectionary-based resource that focused on the spiritual wisdom of the Gospels. This resource would be written in consultation with an ecumenical advisory board (Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopalian). They generously funded the proposal, and I began writing a resource that I characterized as a middle ground.

On the one hand, I do not enter into the scholarly debates on the meaning of texts. I am not a Scripture scholar, but I am a voracious reader of Scripture scholarship. So scholarship has always been consulted, but it stays offstage. It is deep background for the close reading of the text. Nor do I provide instructions in hermeneutics. I do not try to coach preachers and teachers in the art of literary-spiritual interpretation. As important as this skill is, it is beyond the definite and limited help this resource offers.

On the other hand, I do not give explicit instructions on *how* to use the spiritual wisdom of these Gospel texts in preaching and teaching. This resource book starts a process without ending it. It stays a considerable distance from concrete acts of preaching and teaching. It does not seek to structure stories and thoughts in ways that make for effective preaching and teaching. As important as this concern with the actual delivery of the spiritual wisdom of the Gospel is, it is beyond the limited and definite help this resource offers.

Therefore, the middle ground was between remote exegesis and actual delivery. What I wanted to create was substantive pieces of Gospel spiritual wisdom. These pieces would flow from the specific Sunday Gospels, develop spiritual perspectives, and address contemporary situations. The wager was: if these pieces were sufficiently intelligent and relevant, preachers and teachers would find a way to use them.

Writing the Middle Ground

However, as I wrote this middle ground between scholarship and actual preaching and teaching, it proved to be bumpy territory. I quickly decided that each Sunday piece should have two parts. The

first part would be a commentary that gives a close reading of the Gospel text from a literary-spiritual perspective. I wanted a firm grounding in the Word. The second part would be a teaching that develops a spiritual insight that had surfaced in the reading of the text. The Gospels initiate spiritual wisdom, but they seldom fully flesh it out. This part would try to bring the spiritual wisdom of the Gospels into dialogue with contemporary life. However, as I actually began writing, both parts underwent development.

Commentaries have been around a long time and are plentiful. They also have a reputation for being repetitious. I knew I did not want to rehearse the standard material, but I found myself re-saying things that had been said many times before. Nor did I want to be pulled into scholarly debates and take sides. Yet the urge to join the discussion was great.

The very richness of the Gospel stories and texts also became a temptation. Every symbol cried out for elaboration; every image begged for reflection; every single-sentence idea yearned to mature into a paragraph. I had caught the writer's disease: "This is too interesting not to include." The commentary section became scattered and unwieldy and, as a result, unhelpful.

So I was forced to discipline myself and choose a consistent path through the text. I could not consider everything. I had to make a choice for one reading and unfold it in a brief but insightful way. However, discipline has never been easy for me. Although I have tried to be lean, there are some Sundays when the commentary bulges. This is especially true for those Sundays with long Gospel readings, especially the Johannine stories of the woman at the well, the man born blind, and Lazarus on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Cycle A. But, in general, the rich overflow of the text was left on the cutting room floor.

The second part is a teaching that develops a spiritual theme from the Gospel and connects it to contemporary life. At first, I tried to be consistent from Sunday to Sunday. This teaching part would always have the same elements—an experience told in story form, a reflection on the experience, a connection to some doctrinal or ethical piece of Christian faith, and, where possible, a tie-in to a specific Christian denominational tradition. But I soon realized this was not a helpful harness but a straight jacket. It did not allow the movement of the mind or inspiration of the will.

So the form of the teachings became very diverse. The forms differ from Sunday to Sunday. Some Sundays I elaborate a spiritual teaching

in the form of ideas. On other Sundays stories and poems predominantly carry the teaching. Sometimes there is cultural commentary that uncovers commonly held assumptions that either contradict or support the spiritual wisdom of the Gospels. Sometimes I have inserted a personal note that I hope is not so idiosyncratic that others cannot appreciate it. Although the teaching stayed rooted in the Gospel, it grew in many different ways.

So this middle ground resource became smoother terrain by tightening the commentary and loosening the teaching. This combination seemed to work. The ecumenical advisory group commented: "It got the ball rolling," "It gave me the idea I needed," "It showed me something I didn't see," "It made me think more deeply," and "It made me read the Gospel differently." These resource pieces were doing something without doing everything.

Logistics

There are some practical issues about the layout of this book. The audience for this resource is ecumenical. Therefore, the Sunday Gospel readings are taken from both *The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)* and the *Lectionary for Mass* of the Roman Missal (*LM*). For most of the Sundays the readings in both these lectionaries are the same. In that case, the spiritual commentary and teaching is the same. On some Sundays there is more text recommended either by the *RCL* or *LM*. For example, on the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time the *LM* has Matthew 22:34-40 and the *RCL* for Proper 25, the same Sunday, has Matthew 22:34-46. In that case and all the others cases like it, the extended text is included and receives commentary. But the teaching section reflects only the text that is shared by both lectionaries.

There are some specific situations that need comment: (1) In the *RCL* the same text, Matthew 7:21-29, is recommended for both the Ninth Sunday after Epiphany and Proper 4. It can be found under the Ninth Sunday after Epiphany. (2) The Transfiguration story (Matt 17:1-9) is the reading for Transfiguration Sunday in the *RCL* and the Second Sunday of Lent in the *LM*. It can be found under Transfiguration Sunday. (3) On the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, *LM* has Matthew 5:13-16 and the *RCL*, for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, has Matthew 5:13-20. But verses 17-20 are included in the *LM* Sunday reading for the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Therefore, verses 17-20 are commented on in the text for the Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time. (4) On

the Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time the *RCL* has Matthew 10:26-33 and the *RCL* for Proper 7, the same Sunday, has Matthew 10:24-39. Therefore, the text for the Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time and Proper 7 begins with verse 24 and ends with verse 33. Verses 10:37-39 are included in the text for the Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time and Proper 8. (5) The Sunday text for Proper 13 includes Matthew 13:31-33, but those verses have already been included in the commentary for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

As mentioned above, the full scope of this set, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*, will not only include volumes on Cycles A, B, and C. It also includes a fourth volume on feasts, funerals, and weddings. This volume works with the Gospel texts suggested for these liturgies. Therefore, Christmas and the Sundays to the feast of the Epiphany, all of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, Pentecost, Holy Trinity Sunday, and the Marian feasts will be in the fourth volume. The Gospels for those feasts are not included in this volume on Cycle A.

Circling the Hat

There is a spiritual exercise entitled: circling the hat. A hat is placed in the center of a circle of people. Each person is asked to describe the hat from the vantage point of their place in the circle. As the circle moves, people see the same hat but from a different perspective. When the hat has been completely circumnavigated, there is a full and well-rounded appreciation of the hat. In one way people have been looking at the same hat, but in another way they have been seeing it just a little differently.

In working with the Gospel texts of Cycle A, I had a “circling the hat” feeling. St. Matthew has some themes that figure regularly in what he has to say. He revisits them throughout his Gospel. For example, he stresses the need for personal initiative in appropriating the teachings of Jesus. He says it forthrightly in the images of storm, rock, and sand on the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time; he intimates it with the symbol of a wedding garment on the Sunday of Proper 23; he returns to it with lamps and oil on the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time; and it is not far from Peter’s failed attempt to walk on the waves in the story for the Sunday of Proper 14. It is the same theme, but each text gives it a distinctive treatment.

The same is true with the readings from St. John on the Sundays after Easter. They circle around how Jesus’ death and resurrection affect his

relationship with the Father and with his disciples. They explore it on the Second Sunday of Easter with the resurrection narratives of the appearances of Jesus to the disciples and to Thomas, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter with images of sheep and sheepfold, and on the Fifth and Sixth Sundays of Easter with direct spiritual teaching about the stronger-than-death communion of the Father, the Son, and the disciples. Each Sunday we circle the hat, each Sunday seeing a nuance we had not previously appreciated.

This circle-the-hat approach has strong backing in spiritual traditions. In Jewish spiritual teaching there is the story of the Rabbi who began to tell a story in a sermon. A man stood up and said, "We've heard that one." The Rabbi responded, "Did you pray today?" The man answered, "Yes." The Rabbi said, "Did you pray yesterday?" The man again answered, "Yes." Then the Rabbi said, "If you prayed yesterday, why did you pray today?" Sacred texts and their insights are not about conveying information or even communicating knowledge. They are more like prayer. Each time we ponder them they bring us into the presence of God. It is salutary to circle significant spiritual themes, appreciating them from many angles.

Jelaluddin Rumi, the Sufi mystic and poet, had a different reason for returning to sacred texts and themes. He compared sacred stories to bath water. Both were meant to mediate fire to the person. The bath water brought physical fire to the skin; the stories brought spiritual fire to soul. So Rumi thought we should enjoy sacred stories and themes because they cleanse us "with a secret we sometimes see—and then not."

Spiritual wisdom is a sometimes thing. It is not our conventional way of thinking, and so it appears to us as a secret. When our eyes are cleansed by a teaching, they are not completely opened. They close again. We see the secret—and then not. So we have to return and grasp it again. When we meet sacred texts and themes for a second or third time, we welcome them as old friends who will converse with us and bring us their ancient wisdom in a new way.

Occasionally, in the teachings that accompany the Sunday texts, I found myself circling the hat. Although the majority of the teachings work with a different idea or theme each Sunday, there is some overlap. For example, I circled the hat of calling Jesus both brother and Lord on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord and the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 27. On both the Second Sunday and Fifth Sunday of Easter the mystery of our communion with the de-

parted is unfolded. How we move from being a “hearer of the Word” to a “doer of the Word” is tracked on the Ninth Sunday, the Twenty-Eighth Sunday, and Thirty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, Propers 4, 23, and 27. There are other examples of overlapping themes. But they are not repetitious. Each treatment sees the idea or theme from a different perspective, from another stopping place on the circle.

On Earth as It Is in Heaven

There is no way to summarize the spiritual wisdom in the Gospel readings for Cycle A. It ranges widely, touching in original ways on many concerns. Also, it is profound. It demands pondering, luring the ones contemplating these texts far beyond conventional ways of thinking.

But there is a key idea, an underlying perspective that is important to comprehend. This perspective is captured in the phrase that I have used as the title for this volume of spiritual commentary and teaching, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven*.

As every Christian knows, this phrase appears in the Lord’s Prayer. But not every Christian realizes how startling and foundational it is. In the context of the Gospel, the Lord’s Prayer is both Jesus’ personal way of praying and the prayer he teaches to his disciples. Therefore, it is the way he transmits his interior consciousness to his followers. If a large part of the portrait of the disciples in the Gospels is that they lack understanding, much of it can be traced to their inability to “get into” this prayer. The mind of Christ is available in the prayer, but it is not easy to put on that mind. The structure of Jesus’ awareness is offered to all, but it is a strange offering.

The ordinary way we think is that we are earthlings. We are a bundle of needs on every level. We scramble for food, clothing, and shelter. We seek out social security and position. We need to be affirmed on a regular basis and told we have dignity and worth. A successful life is one where needs are successfully met. The spiritual wisdom of Jesus acknowledges these multiple hungers and thirsts and then proceeds to go in another direction, “stepping over” these blatant, screaming facts.

Jesus does not begin on earth. His prayer begins with the consciousness of his communion with God and all creation. He is aware of his solidarity with all there is (Our), and that he and everything else are receiving life from a loving Ultimate Source (Father), a Source that transcends creation (in heaven) even as it intimately sustains it. In short, his awareness is structured by a sense that he is the Son of God.

When he tells the disciples to pray in this way, he is encouraging them to begin in the same place, as sons and daughters of a loving transcendent reality.

If we can cultivate this heaven consciousness, it will drive us down to earth with the agenda of the Father. We will stay in touch with his name, be energized by his will, and pursue his kingdom. We are not earthlings praying to heaven for our needs. We are heaven's children with the clay of earth in our hands, molding it into the world God envisions. The more disciples pray this prayer, the more they enter into this Christic identity of incarnating Spirit into the affairs of earth.

Therefore, to say "on earth as it is in heaven" presupposes we have a heaven consciousness. But this transcendent awareness is not easily attained or sustained. So the spiritual wisdom of Cycle A often takes the form of reminding people who they really are, telling them how not to get caught in lesser identities, warning them about the need to personally work at this, and showing them how metanoia (a change of mind) is the only doorway into the kingdom of heaven.

This heaven consciousness unfolds into earthly actions. But what actions are the ones that carry the divine will and the divine intentions for the new organization of human life onto the earth? So the spiritual wisdom often takes the form of telling people to resist certain types of behaviors, telling them how to redefine family and neighbor relations, teaching them how to relate to the demands of the state and the pieties of religious traditions, and reminding them what is at stake in how they live their lives.

On Earth as It Is in Heaven symbolizes the good news project of Jesus, and of anyone who would ponder the spiritual wisdom of the Cycle A readings. All—Christian preachers and teachers, Christians who want to enter more deeply into the spiritual wisdom of the Gospels, and spiritual seekers of all faiths and no faiths—are welcomed.

Introduction

Preaching and Teaching the Gospels as Spiritual Wisdom

Summary: Preaching and teaching the Gospels as spiritual wisdom is a wager. It presupposes Christian congregations and individual believers are ready to listen and learn. They are interested in developing themselves spiritually, but they are not quite sure what it entails or how to go about it. This combination of interest and ignorance opens them to the vision of spiritual transformation in the Gospels. A key feature of this vision is spiritual wisdom. Spiritual wisdom is the catalytic agent. It churns the mind and begins the process of change. When preachers and teachers present the Gospels as spiritual wisdom, they facilitate and resource a process of spiritual transformation.

Therefore, this introduction has three sections.

- I. The Spiritually Interested Yet Spiritually Illiterate Culture
- II. The Vision of Spiritual Transformation in the Gospels
- III. How Gospel Texts Work As Spiritual Wisdom

These sections provide the background for the major focus of this resource book, a spiritual commentary and teaching on each Sunday Gospel for Cycle A of the *Lectionary for Mass* of the Roman Missal and *The Revised Common Lectionary*.

I. The Spiritually Interested Yet Spiritually Illiterate Culture

“It’s the only chance we have.”

The uncle of a young man who was just ordained a priest made this remark. He was introduced to the professor of homiletics at the reception after the ordination. The introduction was a simple, “Fr. Peterson teaches preaching at the seminary.”

And the uncle said, without pausing, “It’s the only chance we have.”

“What is?” asked Fr. Peterson.

“You know, liturgies, preaching, that kind of stuff.”

“Chance for what?”

“You know, God, sacred, Spirit, that kind of stuff.”

Many people would disagree with this uncle's novice foray into liturgy and theology. They would point out that "God, sacred, Spirit, that kind of stuff" is not confined to liturgies and preaching. The spiritual dimension of the human person and its grounding in God can come into awareness through any human experience. People experience their souls and the Divine Source of their souls through the experiences of love, protest, parenting, play, work, communion with nature, the passionate pursuit of truth, suffering, moral ambiguity, etc. This man is putting too much pressure on liturgy, particularly on preaching. He should wake up to wider possibilities.

However, the uncle, directly but inarticulately, is pointing to an expectation. He is spiritually interested, but he does not get many chances to explore that interest. He expects his church-going experience to acknowledge and develop this part of him that is not the explicit focus of his work and personal life. I do not want to make too much of this brief and flimsy conversational exchange, but I do not think the uncle is alone. Many churchgoers are spiritually interested but spiritually uninformed, and they are looking for wisdom and guidance to spiritually develop.

There is always a need to characterize both the people to whom Christian faith is being preached and taught and Christian faith itself. The point of the characterization is to find a common ground where people and faith meet. Of course, this characterization will always be partial. The people and the faith will always be more than their portrayals. The characterization only provides a working model. But a working model is necessary if preaching and teaching are to be clearly focused and if people are to be consistently addressed. The wisdom about using characterizations is to value them for what they can provide but to hold them lightly and not become overly attached to them.

A potentially useful characterization of contemporary people begins with the wager that they are spiritually interested. Many cultural commentators talk about a widespread hunger for the spiritual. This hunger is found in an intense way within religious traditions, but it is not confined to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Organized religion may be the home of the spiritual, but it is not its exclusive dwelling place. Interest in the spiritual is emerging in the corporate world, in the athletic sphere, in areas of social justice, in the struggles of community organizing, in particular movements (e.g., ecological, feminist, elder), and in health care. This interest also spans generations. It is present among the elderly, the baby boomers, Generation X, and even children.

This across-the-board interest suggests the image of America may be shifting from a secular culture to a spiritually interested culture.

Why is there an expanding interest in the spiritual?

Some commentators point to positive influences: contact with Eastern religions and spiritual philosophies, an increase in scientific knowledge that leads into mystery rather than away from it, a mind-boggling awareness of the reach of the cosmos, a deepened sense of our symbiotic relationship to the earth, a commitment to social justice and the well-being of all people, etc. Most people could add to this list both personal experiences and other cultural developments that stimulate interest in the spiritual.

Other cultural observers see the interest in the spiritual as a response to negative experiences. People are reaching for the spiritual as a way to reclaim dignity and purpose in the midst of fears, moral failures, and a general sense that “things are out of control.” According to these observers, the underlying energy of contemporary spiritual interest is the ambiguous and destructive events of our times: the ongoing horrors of wars that have demonstrated an increased capacity for violence, runaway technology that dehumanizes people even as it claims to advance their causes, economic uncertainty, terrorism, viral epidemics, increasing disparity between the rich and the poor, rampant and illegal greed in the business community, moral laxity among the leaders of the world, pervasive narcissism and restlessness, the frantic pace of life, the debunking of the myth of progress, etc. Most people could add to this list both personal experiences and other cultural developments that profoundly worry them, that make them pause and consider the possibility of the spiritual.

Traditionally, both positive and negative experiences have awakened people to the spiritual. Thus, in any given individual, the interest in the spiritual may emerge both as a recoiling response to certain negative experiences and as an inclination to pursue certain positive experiences. Positive and negative experiences work together to stimulate interest in the spiritual.

This contemporary interest does not signal one more period of “religious revival.” It is not an “idea whose time has come—again.” This interest, at least in some of its manifestations, is not in the spiritual life in itself, especially if this life is played off against physical, mental, and social life. Rather it is in the spiritual transformation of life as a whole. When the spiritual is understood and integrated into one individual consciousness or the consciousness of a community, it changes the quality of

physical, mental, and social life. In this way, the spiritual is not a competitive interest. It complements and reenergizes the so-called “worldly interests,” and the hope is that it will transform them in a way that will be beneficial to the next stage of human evolution.

This extensive interest in the spiritual has spurred some commentators to understand the spiritual as a permanent dimension of the human. It is a birthright, a raw potential that is hardwired into each person. It can be ignored and dismissed, but it cannot be erased. As with every given of the human condition, we must accept it as part of ourselves and develop its abilities. In the past this effort of spiritual development was pursued by only a few or restricted to the elite of organized religions. Today more are interested—even if they are interested only on their own terms.

However, this interest is not necessarily well informed. It is an open-ended sense that life has a deeper meaning and purpose than its physical, psychological, and social aspects promise. This intuitional sense of the spiritual turns people into searchers and shoppers, and the marketplace is glutted with products and services. Although “casting about” is a legitimate way to pursue the interest, some of the services and products come with *caveat emptor* labels. There is a great deal of false advertisement about what the spiritual is and how it can be developed. In particular, there are many half-baked spiritual ideas that cause confusion and, if people take them to heart, contribute to serious mental and social suffering. This is a time of both spiritual interest and spiritual illiteracy.

At its best, this spiritual illiteracy simply indicates innocence and unfamiliarity. It signals the spiritual is unexplored territory for most people, and this is to be expected. The forerunner of the current spiritual interest was secularity. Secular consciousness was a sustained focus on the fascinating adventures and urgent problems in the physical, social, and mental realms. However, theologians always pointed out that this focus was a severe restriction of consciousness. It pushed the spiritual dimension to the periphery or completely off the screen of consciousness. Secular awareness was another example of what G. K. Chesterton said about George Bernard Shaw: “He is like the Venus de Milo. What there is of him is perfect.” What there was of secular consciousness was fine. The problem was that the spiritual was missing. So when the missing spiritual enters awareness, it arrives as the new kid on the secular block. From the point of view of religious traditions, it is the oldest kid on the block. But from the point of view of an awakened secularity, it is an interesting but unknown quantity.

To characterize people as spiritually illiterate may sound harsh. But it is not meant as a criticism or a negative judgment on what concerns people pursue. Rather it is a recognition of a condition that keeps spiritually interested people open and learning. In fact, spiritual illiteracy is not merely the condition of the beginner. It is also the condition of the adept. No one ever masters the ways of the Spirit. Acknowledging that “we do not know” is crucial to spiritual growth. So when initial spiritual illiteracy becomes spiritually literate, it still must bow its head in ignorance and so, paradoxically, become wiser.

This combination of spiritual interest and illiteracy is a cultural mood. It is present both outside and inside organized religions. Within Christian churches it has a distinctive face. Many Christians profess their faith on a regular basis through prayer, participation in worship, ethical behavior, etc. However, according to the classic formulation, faith always seeks understanding (cf. e.g., St. Anselm). This understanding is more than the rational coherence of Christian revelation or the alignment of the truths of faith with other truths of history, biology, physics, politics, etc. Understanding entails the interior realization of faith perceptions and the integration of these perceptions into all aspects of life. It is precisely in this endeavor that there is both interest and illiteracy. Christians want this, but they are not sure how to make it happen.

This is the point of connection between people characterized as “spiritually interested yet illiterate” and the Christian faith. The Christian faith is a storehouse of spiritual wisdom that meets the spiritual interests of today’s Christians. If people have an “awakened desire” for the spiritual, Christian faith knows how to sustain this desire. If people have sketchy ideas about spiritual reality, Christian faith can evaluate those ideas and suggest adjustments and alternatives. If people wonder how spiritual reality is contacted and integrated, Christian faith knows both the intellectual and practical aspects of spiritual development. Christian faith may not be able to completely feed the contemporary hunger for the spiritual, but it can put food on the table.

In particular, the vision of spiritual transformation in the Gospels is appropriate. It correlates closely with the contemporary interest in the spiritual. When people open to the spiritual influence of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels, their bodies, minds, intimate relationships, and social commitments are healed. The spiritual is not reduced to these effects, but the advent of the spiritual affects the whole of human life. In addition, the Gospels leave no doubt that this is not an easy process.

Falling away is at least as prevalent as pushing ahead. In short, the Gospels can be read as a demanding invitation into an untapped human potential. This is an enticement for spiritually interested yet spiritually ignorant seekers.

II. The Vision of Spiritual Transformation in the Gospels

Antonio Machado, the Spanish poet, once said of Christ,

All his words were
one word: wake up!

He might have added some other forceful imperatives. "Waking up" belongs to a family of images in the Gospels. Christ also enjoins people to "see, hear, rise, and find themselves." These images are the positive side of a paired process. People are asleep and they have to wake up, lost and they have to be found, blind and they have to see, deaf and they have to hear, dead and they have to rise to life.

These images, taken from physical life, point to the changes of consciousness and action that are necessary to respond to Jesus and his preaching. When both John the Baptist and Jesus cry out, in essence "Change your mind (*metanoete*), the Kingdom of God is near" (translation mine; cf. Matt 3:2) they stress the need for a different level of perception in order to respond to the spiritual dimension of life characterized as God's Kingdom. This different level of consciousness unfolds into different ways of speech and action. The basic spiritual maxim is: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17). Spiritual transformation is comprised of understanding and action.

Therefore, we will explore the surface state of consciousness and action known in the Gospels as being asleep, blind, deaf, dead, and lost. Then we will portray the depth state of consciousness and action known as awake, seeing, hearing, rising, and being found. Of course, the next step will be to investigate the perils and possibilities of moving from the surface state of consciousness and action to the depth state of consciousness and action through hearing the Word.

Asleep, Blind, Deaf, Lost, and Dead

"As [Jesus] walked along," St. John writes, "he saw a man blind from birth" (John 9:1). This is the human condition. This is not a man or

woman who has lost sight through accident. It is what has been present from the beginning. Human birth equals spiritual blindness. The Johannine Jesus makes the same point with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). He tells him he must be born not only of water (physical birth), but also of Spirit. "What is born of the flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is Spirit." This instruction to Nicodemus is meant to help him "see the Kingdom of God." However, all he can reply is, "How can these things be?" He remains blind to the spiritual. Spiritual consciousness is a human potential, but it is not easy to actualize.

This condition of being asleep, blind, deaf, lost, and dead refers to spiritual ignorance. At its most basic, spiritual ignorance means the spiritual dimension of life simply does not enter into consciousness. In Luke's Gospel, the people who fail to take into account the spiritual are called foolish. There is the barn builder (Luke 12:16-21) who talks to his soul as if it was a physical reality, "Soul . . . relax, eat, drink, be merry" only to find out it belongs to the spiritual realm as God directly addresses him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you." When the disciples on the road to Emmaus interpret Jesus' life and death only in sociopolitical terms, the risen, incognito Christ says in frustration, "Oh, how foolish you are . . . !" (Luke 24:25). At this point, it is not a matter of a muddled understanding of God, self, neighbor, and creation. It is simply lack of attention to the spiritual as a whole.

In St. Matthew's Gospel Jesus comments directly on this spiritual obtuseness. Between the parable of the sower, seed, and soils and the interpretation of the parable, Jesus quotes Isaiah and says these words have been fulfilled:

You shall indeed listen, but never understand,
and you shall indeed look, but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them. (Matt 13:14-15)

Although Jesus will tell them parables that will express and communicate the spiritual dimension, they will not be able to grasp their meaning. Their physical senses are fine; they see and hear. But their ability

to understand with their heart, the spiritual center of their being, is underdeveloped. The result is that they will not turn for healing. They will not be made whole by the inclusion of the spiritual into their self-understanding.

Physically Preoccupied

One reason for this spiritual density is preoccupation with the physical. In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus advises, "[D]o not worry about your life, what you are to eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear" (Matt 6:25). This is not an attack on the legitimate concerns of physical life. Rather it is pointing out how physical life monopolizes awareness and causes anxiety. Later in the passage, Jesus will make the same observation in shrill, almost hysterical, tones. "Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'" We all know the panic and terror that instinctively arises when our food and shelter are threatened. Is there any alternative?

Jesus suggests there is a bigger picture to take into account. This bigger picture can enter awareness by focusing on the present experience of birds and flowers. When we attend to the birds and the flowers, we can appreciate the gift dimension of our life. Life is not only strenuous and often anxious effort; it is also an act of receiving sustenance from the source of life. This change of consciousness can transform how we relate to our basic needs. "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be *given* to you as well" (Matt 6:33). However, when we identify with the anxiety over the precariousness of our physical life, it dominates awareness, and we are asleep to this spiritual possibility.

The way the physical restricts consciousness is also the background for the Markan Jesus' painfully plodding gastrointestinal teaching on defilement. The context of this teaching is the question of what foods are clean and unclean. The assumption is that people can contaminate themselves spiritually by eating certain foods. Jesus refutes this assumption: "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things which come out are what defile" (Mark 7:14). Jesus moves awareness from physical exteriority to spiritual interiority.

The ability to receive this new teaching entails breaking the stranglehold the physical has on human awareness. This is not an easy task. Later, the disciples ask for an explanation of his teaching. A frustrated

Jesus begins, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see . . ." (Mark 7:18) and then he goes on to explain how food goes into the stomach and is eliminated. He contrasts this with the heart out of which come evil thoughts, the true source of defilement. However, monitoring different foods is easier than scrutinizing the conniving heart. Strict allegiance to physical laws takes consciousness down a path that makes it difficult to appreciate the subtleties of spiritual realities. Often the spiritual is not perceived because the eyes and ears are mesmerized by the physical.

The Gospel of John also highlights how the physical can block our appreciation of the spiritual. Jesus' healings and miracles are signs, manifestations in the outer world of the inner spiritual reality that animates all things. However, what people immediately come into contact with are these physical sights and sounds, and many cannot get beyond them. They do not trace the physical to its spiritual source.

One of the most flagrant examples of this is the feeding of the five thousand with the five barley loaves and two fish (John 6:1-14). After the people had eaten, Jesus perceived that they would come and make him king by force. This is an indication that they have remained on the physical and social level. They have not seen the sign for a sign. Its gross reality is what engrosses them. Jesus avoids them by withdrawing into the hills, a place where spirit is nurtured in prayer and solitude.

Later, Jesus will say to them directly, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26). Then Jesus tries to move their consciousness to the spiritual dimension. "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." This is the constant struggle of people who hear and see Jesus in John's Gospel. Can they move from the physical sights and sounds to the spiritual truth of his identity, and through that identity, to the eternal life he desires to give? More often than not, the physical captures consciousness so thoroughly that it blocks out the spiritual.

Socially Preoccupied

Preoccupation with the social also blocks out the spiritual. In Luke's story of the wedding feast, those invited politely excuse themselves because of other commitments:

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my

regrets." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." (Luke 14:18-20)

People who are spiritually asleep, blind, deaf, lost, and dead people do not look that way. They appear to be engaged, energetic, and even entrepreneurial. They are making deals and marrying spouses. In another passage, Luke compares them to the people of Noah's time: "They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them" (Luke 17:27). These people know everything except what St. Luke considers the one thing necessary (see Luke 10:42).

St. Matthew's Gospel continually harps on the human drive to look good before others. The religious acts of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting are vitiated because people engage in them "in order to be seen" (Matt 6:1-18). This outer emphasis keeps people from the interior contact with their "Father who sees in secret." This same conviction is expressed in the question, "What does it profit [persons] if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" (Luke 9:25). Vigorous efforts in the social world for advancement and gain preempt spiritual inquiry and development. And, of course, some of the Pharisees are consistently badgered because they love the outer world of salutations in the marketplace, being called teacher, long tassels and widened phylacteries on their clothing, and the outside of the cup (cf. Matt 23:1-8, 25). All these "loves" keep their consciousness outside, busy with everything except what counts. Therefore, they are blind guides leading the blind (see Matt 15:15). Spiritual sight is denied them.

Social preoccupation takes a particularly dark turn when it becomes addicted to maintaining present unequal economic arrangements. The Gospels often present the people on top as vigilant about their position and willing to do anything to keep it. Gentile leaders are criticized because they "lord it over" those whom they are supposed to help (Matt 20:25). The rich man who wears fine clothes and feasts can ignore the naked beggar who starves at his gate (Luke 16:19-31). Religious leadership can put heavy burdens on others and "not lift a finger" to help them (Matt 23:4). The healthy can push the sick to the edge of the crowd (Mark 10:48 and parallels). Men can plan to stone a woman in order to trap a prophet (John 8:3-6). Righteous and sinner never share a meal. When people are obsessed with the rules and regulations that govern the relationships between Jews and Gentiles,

men and women, rich and poor, leadership and led, the spiritual dimension is crowded out. Quite simply, defending social and financial dominance takes time and energy. It also produces people who are asleep, blind, deaf, lost, and dead to the spiritual.

A Dangerous Misperception

A misperception that often thrives in spiritual circles is that the physical and social realms in themselves are hindrances to spiritual development. This is not true. They are essential dimensions of the good creation, and full spiritual development entails transforming our relationship to them in the light of spiritual reality. However, in order to do this, consciousness must learn to disengage from these dimensions and welcome the more elusive spiritual. At first, this appears to be a simple calculus. We can only get so much into our head at one time; and when the head is full, we refuse access to whatever knocks for entry. We think and dwell on the physical and social too much. We should open the door to the spiritual.

However, it is more than a “shared time” arrangement. The Gospels think exclusive preoccupation with the physical and social results in negative mental states. We are filled with worry, anxiety, nitpicking attitudes, defensiveness, violent thoughts, narcissism, boredom, and fear. We are so turned in on ourselves that we do not take pleasure in the physical or feel secure in the social. It is only when the spiritual is allowed in that we inhabit the physical and social with grace and pleasure. Without the spiritual, we are only partly living. We go through the motions—eat, drink, dress, sex, talk, listen, buy, sell, save, spend—but something is missing. Therefore, breaking the hold of the physical and social on our consciousness and attending to the spiritual is for the ultimate purpose of returning to the physical and social with the pleasure, meaning, and passion that the spiritual bestows.

Awake, Seeing, Hearing, Living, and Found

If people who are asleep, blind, deaf, dead, and lost are not conscious of the spiritual because they are preoccupied with the physical and social, what do a people look like who *are* awake, seeing, hearing, living, and found? People who are awake, seeing, hearing, living, and found are aware of the spiritual depth of their own beings and how that depth opens to God and receives energy from God. From this

starting point, they realize a communion with both creation and neighbor and a call to incarnate this consciousness in personal behavior and social policy.

Consciousness of Self and God

In the opening scene of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6–7) Jesus sees the crowds and goes up on a mountain. The mountain gives Jesus a higher perspective, and he speaks what he sees from this higher point of view. People are a blessedness that manifests itself in circumstances as varied as mourning, peacemaking, mercy, and persecution. Furthermore, people are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They bring both zest and illumination into creation.

Of course, this truth about people is in danger. Salt can lose its savor; light can be snuffed out by a basket. In other words, people are something they might not be aware of and, therefore, something they might not enact. Jesus' words are an effort to awaken them, to make them seeing, hearing, and living. He is finding the lost, and that is why Antonio Machado also has written that Christ said:

Find the you that is not you
and never can be.

Jesus came "to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). This does not mean particular people but the spiritual dimension of all people "the you that is not you and never can be."

Finding this "you" takes the form of spiritual self-knowledge. The Lukan Jesus suggests this approach when he corrects the Pharisees' outer-centeredness with, "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21; NRSV alternative trans.). The Gospel of Thomas carries it further.

If your leaders say to you, "Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky," then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. Rather, the (Father's) kingdom is within you and it is outside you.

When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty. (GT 3)

The initial step on the path of awakening is knowledge of ourselves as more than physical, psychological, and social organisms.

However, this self-knowing is simultaneously a knowing of God. When we see the truth about ourselves, we see that we are God's children: "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). St. Augustine knew this connection. "A person must first be restored to himself/herself, that making of himself/herself as it were a stepping stone, he/she might rise thence to God." At a later moment of Christian history, Bossuet emphasized the same path. "Wisdom lies in knowing God and knowing oneself. From knowledge of self we rise to knowledge of God." This interior movement of knowing oneself in such a way that one knows God is characterized as "going in and going up."

More precisely, "going in and going up" is the distinction between introspective interiority and transcendent interiority. In introspective interiority we "go within" and witness the activity of the mind-body organism. In doing so, we become intimate with ourselves and understand our bodily messages, our personality, our motivation, and the myriad "tapes" our minds carry and play. In this process, we can gradually shift awareness from what we see about ourselves to ourselves as the seer.

This begins the process of "going up." We realize we are transcendent to the processes we are observing. We also realize we are capable of this transcendence because we are rooted in a larger transcendence. We are grounded in God, and our initial awareness of this reality is that it sustains us by its own life. When this happens, we have a vibrant realization of what it means to be a creature whose life is ultimately not its own. We have, as it were, found the soul and through the soul found the God who loves us. Many consider this the essential realization in spiritual development, the key to becoming awake, seeing, hearing, living, and found.

Consciousness of Creation and Neighbor

Waking up, seeing, hearing, living, and finding yourself entails more than self-knowledge and knowledge of God. St. John begins his Gospel by connecting the Word with God, with creation, and with the spiritual illumination of people. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . All things came into being through [the Word] . . . What has come into being in [the Word] was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:1-4). In other words,

all things are sustained by divine life. When this divine life enters into the human world, it becomes a light in the mind. The light in the human mind allows people to see the life that is everywhere. When people wake up to the fact they are children of God, always sustained by divine life, they also notice everything else is also sustained by divine life. They are not separate, isolated individuals but common citizens of creation. They are brothers and sisters of the universe.

In particular, they are brothers and sisters of one another. Jesus' double commandment to love makes this connection. If we love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, we will uncover ourselves as God's creation. This self-knowledge becomes the lens through which we see others and realize they are sustained in the same way. This allows us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Although we respect all the differences along physical, social, and mental lines, we also acknowledge we are spiritually in intimate communion with one another.

Consciousness and Action

Therefore, awakening, seeing, hearing, living, and being found means a breakthrough in understanding ourselves, God, creation, and neighbor. But according to the spiritual maxim, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:17), the new understanding must be translated into action. In St. John's story of the footwashing and footdrying, we are given a glimpse of spiritual consciousness in action. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God . . ." (John 13:3). This is the child of God consciousness, an awareness of his communion with God who is imaged as a Father who has trusted him with all things. He knows his origin and his destiny and the potential of the present moment to reveal the Father, the generative source of love. God consciousness drives Jesus into action, pushes him along the path of incarnation. He becomes lovingly involved with feet, the symbol of our journeying on the earth. The essence of the Word, as Word, is to become flesh.

St. John paints a detailed picture of how this Word becomes flesh. "Jesus . . . got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him" (John 13:3-5). Jesus' knowing unfolds into a doing, and the doing, because it comes from a spiritual consciousness, carries the spiritual care of this higher order. The excellence of this care derives

from the sustained focus on each aspect of what is needed to deliver the care. He is no place else but in the towel, basin, water, and feet. His spiritual consciousness translates into the painstaking process of loving the physical.

St. Matthew also stresses the need for consciousness to unfold into action. The Sermon on the Mount ends with Jesus warning his listeners that only hearing his words will not protect them from the storms of life (see Matt 7:24-27). They must put his words into action to become a house built on rock. Also crying "Lord, Lord" will not be enough. They must *do* the will of the Father (Matt 7:21). In a similar way, people may accept the invitation to the wedding feast, but they will have to have a wedding garment to remain inside (Matt 22:13-14). The wedding garment symbolizes a willingness to be married, to seriously engage the work of the kingdom. In another parable (Matt 25:1-13), all ten virgins have lamps, the illumination provided by Christian faith. But only five have oil for their lamps, the symbol that they know how to make the lamp come alive through good works. The spiritually awake, hearing, seeing, living, and found are those whose minds and wills are engaged, who both understand and act.

Awake and Asleep, Seeing and Blind, Hearing and Deaf, Living and Dead, Found and Lost

Individually and collectively, we are a people in the making. Our consciousness is a moveable feast. We participate in darkness and light, in remembering and forgetting, in sleep and wakefulness, in seeing and blindness, in hearing and deafness, in dead and risen life, in conditions of being lost and in the homecoming joy of being found. In the Gospels the words and deeds of Jesus have the power to move people along the path of illumination and action, toward the positive sides of these pairs. Hearing the Word becomes the catalyst of *metanoia*, the change of mind and behavior that indicates we are responding to the kingdom of God.

However, there is a realistic assessment of the success of Jesus' preaching and teaching. Crowds vacillate; individual seekers both embrace his words and turn away; disciples do and do not get it, sometimes in the space of a few lines; religious leaders are consistently hard hearted, refusing to be moved. Jesus is a word that needs pondering in order to be received, and that pondering often leads to costly change. Many are not capable of this pondering or willing to pay the price of

change. Others hear and respond, and so they begin the arduous process of spiritual development.

The parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils (Mark 13:3-8) shows the variations on this struggle to wake up through encountering the words and deeds of Jesus. It is so central a parable that St. Mark comments, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). The tendency is to think each soil—side of the road, rocky, thorny, and good—represents a different type of person. But a more inclusive approach interprets each soil as each person under different circumstances.

This is certainly how it has played out in my life. I have stonewalled some seeds so successfully that they were exposed to the birds of the air; I have received some seeds with joy, but I did not take them into my heart and ponder them and so they withered; I have allowed the thorns of my cares, pleasures, and finances to choke the growth of the seed rather than allow the seeds to transform the thorns into flowers; and I have "gotten it together" and produced fruit. These intimate and intricate dynamics of seed and soil spell out the struggle to move from sleep to wakefulness, blindness to sight, deafness to hearing, from being dead to being alive, and from being lost to being found.

Attention

The seed that falls by the side of the road and is devoured by the birds means we do not have the time or inclination to entertain the teachings of Jesus. The side of the road is not the middle of the road, the place where we normally walk. If we would consider the seeds, we would have to alter our routine, step outside the way we work. But this does not happen because the devouring birds do not allow it.

The devouring birds are symbols of our inattention to the seed, our failure to heed and consider what we have heard. The seed of the word is given no chance. As soon as it lands, it is taken away. The Gospel interpretation is that these birds are like the devil. The devil, *diabolus*, does what his name signifies. He breaks things apart. When we are this first soil, there is brief contact with the Word, but no real coming together at all. The seed and the soil are quickly separated. The seed may be a wake-up call, but we turn away and go back to sleep.

Understanding

The seeds that fall on rocky ground meet thin soil, but they manage to quickly spring up. The soil is receptive, but it is not deep enough. Without root, the fledging growth cannot bear the heat of the day, and it withers. This symbolizes situations where we hear the word and receive it with joy but do not work on realizing its truth into our lives. The word is incompletely understood, and so it cannot withstand counterarguments and violent attacks.

The importance of understanding the Word is distinguished from amazement. In the Gospels people are often amazed at Jesus' teachings or healings. Sometimes this amazement is a first step toward understanding. When the amazement of people causes them to praise God, they are beginning to understand the nature of God and become spiritually seeing. Amazement is a draw that leads to further exploration.

However, amazement can also be a block to understanding. When Jesus is trying to bring Nicodemus into spiritual consciousness, he tells him, "Do not be amazed that I told you, you must be born anew" (see John 3:7). He is afraid amazement will addle the mind and keep Nicodemus from following his teaching. When the women enter the tomb and see the young man in white on the right side of where they laid him, Mark tells us the women are "utterly amazed." But the man in white cautions them, "Do not be amazed!" (Mark 16:5-6; NAB). He wants them to understand, not just to be stupefied. At the birth of Jesus, when the shepherds tell what they have seen (see Luke 2:15-19), all who hear it are amazed. But Mary, both mother and disciple, ponders the events in her heart. Comprehension is more valued than astonishment.

Understanding is also distinguished from love. The most poignant relationship in the Gospels is between Jesus and Peter. Peter generously and impetuously receives Jesus and his teaching. But he doesn't always get it. He intuits that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16), but he cannot grasp that suffering is part of that identity. He wants to be able to walk on the sea of danger as Jesus does and he asks for the ability, "command me come to you on the water" (Matt 14:28). But he sinks, and Jesus places the problem squarely on his "little faith" (v. 32; emphasis mine), that is, his failure to understand and grow into *great* faith.

It is in the footwashing and footdrying episode (John 13:1-11) that Peter's rocky ground condition is most clearly seen. Peter fiercely resists Jesus' act of service. Jesus interprets this resistance as a lack of understanding. "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you

will understand" (v. 7). Then Jesus warns Peter that the refusal to be washed means they will have to separate. Peter cannot bear this possibility, so he enthusiastically moves from a footwashing to a bath. "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (v. 9). However, Jesus is not talking about a physical washing but about the spiritual ability to receive love from God. Jesus and Peter are experiencing, what people today call, a "disconnect." Peter may be fiercely attached to Jesus, but he cannot quite fathom him.

Jesus says that Peter will move from attachment to understanding "later," afterwards. This means after his denial. Peter boastfully tells Jesus he will lay down his life for him. In his own mind, this is a sign of his love for Jesus. But Jesus responds, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times" (John 13:38). The morning of Peter's enlightenment will only follow the night of his ego failure. He will understand the need to allow God to enter him as a source of strength and renewal only after his reliance on himself has failed. His attachment and allegiance to Jesus does not substitute for understanding.

When we call Peter the rock, we may mean that he is a firm foundation for the Church. But if we consider Peter the second soil of rocky ground, we may learn a great truth about the Church as the following of Christ. At one time or another, most Christians have been amazed at the teachings of Jesus and have felt great love for the one who spoke and lived them. At the same time, the teachings remain a permanent puzzlement, and Jesus himself is a larger-than-life figure always ahead of us on the road. This second soil condition is a real place to be: amazed at the Word, lovingly attached to the Word Made Flesh, and yet not being on a path of understanding either the teaching or the Teacher. This second soil is a definite advance on the first, but it points to work that still needs to be done.

Integration

The seed that falls on the third soil finds itself among thorns. If it is to grow, it must deal with this competitive environment. Like the rocky soil, the thorns pose a threat to the growth of the seed. But it is a different kind of threat. There is nothing wrong with the soil. In fact, the soil is highly productive. The question is: how will the seed deal with everything else that is growing? If the second soil needs under-

standing to be more hospitable to the seed, the third soil needs to learn to integrate the seed with the thorns. This is not an easy task.

The seed symbolizes the spiritual teaching of Jesus and the thorns symbolize “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19). Of course, humanity is a combination of spirit and world. Ideally, the spiritual is folded into and transformative of physical, social, and psychological life. Spirit and world are brought together. However, these two aspects have often been characterized as rivals, and so one must dominate over the other. In this situation the parable thinks the world often wins and chokes the seed. This predicted success of the thorns is often what happens. The spiritual is not integrated; it is eliminated.

The Lessons Learned

The fourth soil to receive the seed, the good earth, is the soil that has learned the lessons of the first three failed attempts of the seed and the soils to produce fruit. St. Luke characterizes the people of this soil as those who “hold [‘the word God’] fast” (8:11, 15). They do not let the birds of the air take it from them and devour it (8:4). They have learned how to keep the word close. They do not let their minds wander into other affairs and forget the teachings they have heard. The teachings become their life companions; they develop strategies on how to attend to them.

These people of the fourth soil hold this word fast “with a generous and good heart” (Luke 8:15; NAB; see NRSV). This means they have pursued a deeper understanding of the word. The heart is the spiritual center of the person. It connects the person to God, the only Good One and the source of all goodness, and it is the place from which creative action in the world springs. When the heart is good, it is because it has learned to open to God and receive divine goodness. When it is generous, it has learned to mediate this goodness into the world. St. Matthew reflects this deeper understanding of the heart as good and generous when he encourages the hearers of the word to let their light shine before people. These people will see their “good works and give glory to [their] Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Human goodness will be a manifestation of divine goodness. The heart now understands its communion with God and neighbor. It is fluid, receiving from God and giving to others. It is no longer the non-understanding rocky soil.

Those of the fourth soil who hold the Word fast “with a generous and good heart” (Luke 8:15; NAB) have to “bear fruit with patient endurance” (8:15). This is what is necessary for the integration of the spiritual into the physical, social, and mental realms. Spiritual integration is not easy or fast. It is a painstaking process, and we can become impatient and abandon it. Perseverance is prescribed. If all these things are in place, fruit flows naturally, new action emerges from the new consciousness.

Therefore, the Gospels present a picture of spiritual transformation as a movement from preoccupation with physical need, social standing, and financial security to a realization of a deeper self who is in communion with the divine source, in solidarity with other people and creation, and who mediates Spirit into the physical, social, and mental realms. The catalyst of this transformation is hearing the Word and the consequent activities of attending, understanding, and integrating this Word into the full range of the human project.

III. How Gospel Texts Work As Spiritual Wisdom

Therefore, the Gospels as a whole, all of the many words of the many texts, can be approached as *the* Word; and the Word can be characterized as spiritual wisdom that is meant to trigger spiritual transformation. However, in order to preach and teach the Gospels in this way, there is a need to have some theory of how spiritual wisdom works, what its strategies are, and how it evaluates success and failure.

Spiritual wisdom is a form of artful language that targets the mind in order to open the person to the Spirit. Therefore, the goal of spiritual wisdom is to open the person to receive Spirit from God and to release that Spirit in the world. However, in order to do this, spiritual wisdom focuses on the mind. The mind is the gatekeeper of both the soul’s access to God and the soul’s capacity for creative action in the world. Spiritual wisdom addresses the mind, the way it opens and closes to God and the way it blocks and facilitates action. It acts on the mind to increase attention to the spiritual, develop understanding of the spiritual, and integrate the spiritual with physical, social, and mental life.

It does this skillfully with language used for maximum effect. Spiritual wisdom employs clever and endlessly inventive ways to dismantle forms of consciousness that contribute to sleep, blindness, deafness, and being dead and lost, and it constructs forms of consciousness that

contribute to wakefulness, seeing, hearing, living, and being found. In the service of this process, it is shameless in the strategies it employs.

Spiritual wisdom may conform to its stereotype and take the shape of inspirational and lofty thoughts—but only if they work. Jesus may rhapsodize:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:25-30)

But does it work? Does the mind turn toward Spirit or world in a new way? Spiritual wisdom does whatever it takes to make this happen.

Sometimes spiritual wisdom criticizes how the mind clings to positions even when experience refutes them: “Even after you saw” that “tax collectors and prostitutes believed [John],” “you did not change your minds and believe him” (Matt 21:32).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom plants a new idea: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist evil . . .” (Matt 5:38-39).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom argues the implications of a wrong response: “whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet, know this: the kingdom of God has come near’” (Luke 10:10).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom exposes false logic:

Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?—for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. (Luke 11:17-20)

Sometimes spiritual wisdom explores the implications of a significant experience:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:17-20)

Sometimes spiritual wisdom confronts wrong actions: "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me" (Mark 14:6).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom spars with metaphors: "[Jesus] answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'" (Matt 15:26-27).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom sings of the world that is possible:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. (John 4:21, 23)

Sometimes spiritual wisdom weeps over the world that is: "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matt 23:37).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom blows on the ashes of the heart till they flare to flame: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

Sometimes spiritual wisdom dances on the line between possibility and impossibility: "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt 19:23-24).

These are just some of the concrete strategies of spiritual wisdom. But whatever the particular strategy, the general intent is to honor, scold, cajole, threaten, compliment, bully, confront, and caress the workings of the mind until it "understands and does" these things. Therefore, spiritual wisdom is not always pretty, and it is not always effective. But it is a strenuous effort to massage the mind in such a way that it can open and receive Spirit from God and release that Spirit into the world.

Conclusion

Preaching and teaching the Gospels as spiritual wisdom begins with recognizing the spiritual interest and spiritual illiteracy of people and the way the Gospels can speak to their situation. The Gospels provide a model of spiritual transformation that is triggered by hearing the Word and pondering it as spiritual wisdom. When we learn to attend, understand, and integrate the spiritual wisdom of Gospel texts, we move in starts and stops from being asleep to being awake, from blindness to sight, from deafness to hearing, from being dead to being alive, and from being lost to being found. It is a journey of consciousness and action. And it is never finished.

First Sunday of Advent

Matthew 24:36-44



Staying Awake in Everyday Life

A Spiritual Commentary

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only the Father.

God, the mysterious and transcendent Father, is the only reality who knows when the event called “the coming of the Son of Man” will happen. So we on earth cannot plan for it in the normal way. Since we do not know when it will arrive, we cannot schedule our preparation. We do not know when we should stop doing “business as usual,” focus our attention and energy on the upcoming event, and start getting ready. The way we prepare for the “coming of the Son of Man” will have to be different.

For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Although we do not know *when* it will come, we do know something about *how* it will come. It will be like it was in the days of Noah. Although the people in the “days before the flood” were usually considered evildoers, this is not what St. Matthew’s Jesus stresses. He characterizes them as caught up in the everyday affairs of life—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. There is nothing wrong with these activities except that they are all consuming. They keep them from “knowing” something deeper, something of vital importance for their well-being. They are ill prepared, and so the flood carries them away. “[T]he coming of the Son of Man” has an element of danger in it if you are inattentive. Therefore, the preparation project for the “coming of the Son of Man” is not to be caught unaware.

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

These two images continue the themes of everyday life and danger. Preparation for the day of the Lord does not mean stopping everyday life. Both men, the one “taken” into the kingdom and the one left behind, are out in the field. Both women, the one “taken” into the kingdom and the one left behind, are grinding at the mill. It is not that one is out in the field and the other is praying, or that one is grinding at the mill and the other is in the temple. So the encouragement of the text is not the strategy of traditional piety—to quit the tasks of everyday life and engage in religious activity, especially when you know a major religious moment is about to occur.

So where is the difference between these two men and women? If both are doing the same things, why is one taken and one left?

The text does not explicitly consider this question. But the context suggests that inner vigilance and awareness make the difference. On the visible, outer level both men and both women are the same. Therefore, the difference must be interior. It must be on the level of awareness. Attentiveness seems to be the lesson to draw from the comparison of the “days of Noah” and the day of “the coming of the Son of Man.” And, in the next line, the storyteller makes it explicit in a bold injunction:

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

The event called “the coming of the Son of Man” is now also properly called “the day of the Lord.” Although we do not know when it will come, its importance for the well-being of people is strongly stressed. The negative images of being swept away in a flood and left behind in the field or at the mill are complemented by the image of having your house broken into. Not to be ready for this day is to suffer severe consequences.

However, everything hinges on how “the coming of the Son of Man” and “the day of the Lord” is understood. A literal approach sees it as the cosmic coming of an end-time figure in an outer, visible way to judge the

living and dead. There will come a day when Jesus will return and those who have fallen asleep, who have not faithfully practiced his teachings, will be judged negatively. We cannot prepare for this judgment at the last minute for we do not know when the last minute will be. Therefore, enlightened self-interest would dictate ongoing, scrupulous observance.

The difficulty of this approach is connecting fidelity to Jesus' teachings with a coming but not-yet-arrived cosmic event. When the second coming does not come, it is difficult to stay poised and waiting. Even when we are assured that second coming delayed is not second coming denied, vigilant awareness devolves into "hoping to hear in time." When a questioner asked Pope John XXIII what he would advise people in the Vatican to do if he heard Christ was coming a second time, he responded, "Look busy." This great comic line depicts the ordinary way we think. The thunderous command to "stay awake" is reduced to "wake me when he's near." And if he is never near or if people have cried "wolf" too often and said he was near but he was not, the rationale for fidelity and attentiveness is undercut.

But "the coming of the Son of Man" and "the day of the Lord" can be understood in a different way. They can be interpreted as symbolic code for God's invitation into the fullness of human life through Christ. The Lord is eternally present to human life, creating, judging, redeeming, and calling it to fullness. However, we are often not aware of this permeating divine activity. When, through the teachings of Jesus, God's redeeming presence enters human consciousness, it is "the day of the Lord" and the "Son of Man" has arrived. We never know when this will happen. So we must "stay awake through the night." This breakthrough can happen at any time. When it does and our attentiveness receives its gracious communication, we are dry in Noah's ark, taken into the Kingdom, and safe in our own house. "[Y]ou know what time it is . . . it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep" (Rom 13:11).

Teaching

There is a story entitled, "What is the World Like?":

God and a man are walking down the road. The man asks God, "What is the world like?"

God replies, "I cannot talk when I am thirsty. If you could get me a drink of cool water, we could discuss what the world is like. There is a village nearby. Go and get me a drink."

The man goes into the village and knocks at the door of the first house. A comely young woman opens the door. His jaw drops, but he manages to say, "I need a glass of cool water."

"Of course," she says, smiling, "but it is midday. Would you care to stay for some food?"

"I *am* hungry," he says, looking over his shoulder. "And your offer of food is a great kindness."

He goes in and the door closes behind him.

Thirty years go by. The man who wanted to know what the world was like and the woman who offered him food have married and raised five children. He is a respected merchant and she is an honored member of the community. One day a terrible storm comes in off the ocean and threatens their life. The merchant cries out, "Help me, God."

A voice from the midst of the storm says, "Where is my cup of cold water?"

Spiritual traditions always warn people about becoming lost in the world. (They also warn about being lost in God, but that's another issue.) The demands of everyday life are merciless. There is always more to do and not enough time to do it. A friend of mine wants inscribed on her tomb the saying, "It's always something." At times this constant activity may be boring; at other times it may be exciting. But from the point of view of the story it breeds lack of attention to the demands of God.

What is the world like? The answer of the story is that it is a place of forgetfulness. Or, in the metaphor of Matthew's text, it is a place where we fall asleep. We do not stay attentive to the spiritual dimension of life. Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, working in the field, and grinding at the mill take all our time and, more importantly, take all our mind. When this happens, we find ourselves lacking passion, purpose, and pleasure. As one perplexed person put it, "How can I be so busy and yet so empty?"

This dominance of everyday activity is particularly true in the Christmas season. Already busy people become busier. They have to prepare for the season, which often means more shopping and more work. Unfortunately, this frantic preparation often puts people to sleep spiritually. People begin to long not for the birth of the Christmas Christ, but for the lazy, doldrums days of January. The rush of the season works against the message of the season.

Almost everyone has experienced his or her spirits being depleted and even defeated. However, often the alarm does not go off. We toler-

ate what T.S. Eliot called, "living and partly living." We wrongly treat spirit as a luxury. If our bodies are hurting, we will pay attention to them and work hard to recover our physical health. If our financial security or social status is under attack, we will struggle and fight ceaselessly for our money and position. But we will allow our spirit to languish and even atrophy. This tendency to neglect spirit may be the underlying insight of Matthew into the people of Noah's time. They valued everything but the Spirit that ultimately sustained them.

How are we to keep spiritually aware in the midst of everyday activity? How are we to keep awake while working in the field and grinding at the mill? This is not easy. We may have the desire, but we may lack the know-how. And to shout the command, "stay awake!" (v. 42; NAB) as St. Matthew's Jesus does, may strengthen commitment, but it does not show a way forward. We need to complement desire with strategies.

Some friends of mine, long-time victims of the stress of everyday activities, suggest smuggling spiritual exercises into the world of work. A Jewish doctor says a Hebrew prayer of purification every time she washes her hands. She explains that the prayer is not meant to purify but to remind her that the person she is treating is more than their disease. In other words, she stays awake to the spiritual dimension of people while she attends to their bodily distress.

A man pauses before a Christmas tree in the building where he works. He brings to mind the connection between heaven and earth and ponders the theological truth that creation is grounded in God. He says that as long as he holds onto this truth, his day goes better. "I notice more. I see the deeper sides of people. And I'm more patient, and respectful." The awareness of Spirit brings pleasure, passion, and purpose.

Spiritual exercises help us "stay awake through the night." These exercises may be the rituals and prayers of a faith tradition that we engage in with other people. But they may also be home grown practices. Personal "things" we have learned to cultivate in order to stay focused on the deeper dimension of life. These practices become the path to the Gospel value of constant, vigilant awareness. And constant, vigilant awareness is the precondition in order to know and respond to the "coming of the Son of Man" and the arrival of the "day of the Lord."

Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1-12



Leading the Heart

A Spiritual Commentary

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This suggestive opening gives the impression John simply materialized in the desert of Judea. He appeared “out of nowhere.” We are not told how he got there. We are just told he is there, and that is how to picture him—suddenly there, with all the disruptive impact that implies. “Suddenly appearing” moves the mind to mystery. His presence is not an arbitrary happenstance. Something is afoot; the hidden energies of history are at work. A mystery is unfolding.

The very place of his appearance is an opening into that mystery. The desert is outside the circle of the village and the gates of the town, far from the supports of civilization. It is a place where spiritual seekers go to confront the inner demons and beasts, to strip off the accretions, to purify the mind, to return to essentials. As Lawrence of Arabia put it, “The desert is clean.”

This purification climate of the desert complements John’s activity, an activity so central to him it becomes part of his name. He baptizes people, washes off the toll of living, returns them to freshness. He pushes them beneath the water and pulls them out, ready and eager for the sky. As the prophet predicts, “Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her” (Hos 2:14; cf. 2:16 NAB: “So I will allure her; / I will lead her into the desert / and speak to her heart”). That is John’s vocation. His work is to lead the heart to the place where God will speak.

This “heart-leading” is called *metanoia* (repentance). This term carries the double connotation of changing your mind and your behavior. It signals a need to go beyond your present mindset and allow a new mindset to drive new actions. If this repentance is engaged in correctly, people will be open to the “kingdom of heaven.” This reality—the king-

dom of heaven—is at hand but only the repentant will see it and reach for it.

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John’s voice emerges out of his desert purification, and it is a cry from John’s heart to all hearts. It is not a small voice or a muffled desire. It is an all-out cry, an impassioned combination of invitation and announcement. It is fired by the perception that there is a promise at the center of repentance.

Repentance is not an end in itself. It is the first step in a process of fulfillment. The letting go is for the purpose of receiving. The stripping away is preparation for new clothing. The arduous task of clearing a path is for the arrival of what is deeply desired. John the Baptist knows that the way to the garden of human flourishing is through the desert of self-confrontation, and this insight is the energy of his passionate preaching.

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John wears symbolic clothes and eats symbolic food. Both the clothes and the food allude to people and processes in Israel’s history, people and processes that explore the dynamics of repentance.

His clothing recalls Elijah, in particular one chilling episode (1 Kgs 1:1-18). Ahaziah, the king of Israel, had fallen through some lattice-work and was seriously injured. So he sent messengers, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury” (v. 2). But Elijah, having been informed of this situation by an angel, waylays the messengers and tells them to return to Ahaziah with this message, “‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’ Now therefore thus says the LORD, ‘You shall not leave the bed to which you have gone, but you shall surely die’” (vv. 3-4). When the messengers tell Ahaziah, he asks them what the man who said these things looked like. They answered, “A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.” Ahaziah simply says, “It is Elijah the Tishbite” (v. 8).

Elijah harassed kings who did not remain faithful to YHWH and the covenant. John is the latest to wear Elijah’s mantle. He confronts Herod with his adulterous behavior, a behavior that shows a break

with the God of Israel. In fact, John's path is to expose all false kings, all those possessions and positions to which we give ultimate allegiance. John the Baptist does not allow deception. He is searingly honest. This unflinching honesty is a core component of repentance.

John's diet is a combination of inedible locusts and untamed honey. Locusts were one of the plagues that God, through Moses, brought upon Egypt. The purpose of the plagues was to soften the heart of Pharaoh so he would let God's people go. The locusts symbolized divine judgment, a judgment that was not arbitrary or vindictive but was always geared to bring about change. John swallows down divine judgment.

The wild honey recalls the God-given food of Ezekiel. God shows Ezekiel a scroll, written on back and front with words of "lamentation and mourning and woe" (Ezek 2:10). One might say it was a scroll of locusts. Then God says, "O mortal [NAB: 'Son of man'], eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel" (3:1). When Ezekiel eats the scroll, it becomes as sweet as honey in his mouth. The harshness of divine judgment becomes the sweetness of human fulfillment. John can hold together locusts and honey. He is the embodiment of the saying, "You are what you eat."

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

The experience John offers is very attractive. People are drawn to the invitation that there is a promise of fulfillment in repentance. At first glance it may seem like a forbidding message, but it is a forceful expression of a truth that every heart knows. So people leave their usual locales and journey to the Jordan where they acknowledge all that blocks them from God and neighbor. This acknowledgment is key to repentance and mind change. They are moving from a mind that was ignorant of its deceptions to a mind that acknowledges them.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Some of these people belong to established religious parties. Whatever else Pharisees and Sadducees are, they are characterized here as vipers. Vipers lurk along footpaths and spring out at travelers from beneath rocks. If a path is going to be cleared, it must be freed of vipers. Their poison stops progress.

The nature of their poison is externalism. They are afraid of divine punishment. So they will undergo John's baptism as an insurance policy against divine wrath. They will comply ritually, but their hearts will remain untouched. The Gospels often attack the mind set of "polishing the outside of the cup" (cf. Matt 23:25), of loving ceremony and show but neglecting the hard work of inner change. Therefore, John's injunction will be, "Get serious. This is about real change."

Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

John's strategy for "outside" people is to stay focused on the outside and demand that it change. They must modify their behavior. This new behavior will be proof that there has been a change of heart. If they say their hearts are changed without a corresponding change of behavior, you can be assured no real inner change has occurred. John is in a long line of prophets who insist the "proof is in the pudding."

Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

They may not hear this demand of John to produce fruit because they have a louder inner voice that drowns it out. This inner voice speaks a presumption that will inhibit their efforts to change, a presumption so deep they say it to themselves in the secret recesses of the heart. They are children of Abraham and that is enough. They might be able to "flee from the wrath to come" simply because they have Abraham's blood. There is no need for inner repentance for they can claim physical descent. They are part of the chosen people and this fact of their birth takes precedence over inner change and moral living.

John's response to this presumption is brutal. The Pharisees and Sadducees may prize and cling to their physical descent from Abraham. But this means nothing to God. What is special to them is nothing special to God. Children of Abraham are "no sweat" for God. He can raise them up from stones. It is not important in God's sight and so presenting it to God as a safeguard for salvation is completely wrongheaded.

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The way they are thinking deludes them. They must understand the imperative of the desert. Do not delay decision. The time is now. Either

produce or perish. Anything that contributes to vacillation or resistance must be eliminated. Do not play games and try to comply on the outside while remaining unchanged on the inside. Do not cling to automatic privileges like the prestige of your family or ethnic group or religion as a safeguard against divine command to change. None of these things will clear the path; none of them will open you for the coming Kingdom.

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John works with water for repentance; Jesus works with fire for Spirit. Both are needed, but one is greater. The goal is always superior to the means. Water cleans and waits. Fire enlightens and inspires. In a poem, "The Man Who Was a Lamp," I had John say:

I can denounce a king
 But I cannot enthrone one.
 I can strip an idol of its power,
 But I cannot reveal the true God.
 I can wash the soul in sand,
 But I cannot dress it in white.
 I devour locusts and turn them into honey,
 But I cannot lace his sandal.
 I can condemn the sin,
 But I cannot bear it away.

John is not Jesus, but the way to Jesus.

However, there is one dynamic they share. How you respond to who they are and what they say is crucial to your well-being. John lays an ax to the root of the tree. Jesus pounds the threshing floor with a winnowing fan. The result in both cases is a division. The productive tree stands and the unproductive tree falls. The wheat is gathered into barns and the chaff is confined to fire. John and Jesus are both offers that can be refused.

Teaching

So I will allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak to her heart. (Hos 2:16; NAB)

I have translated this, "The desert will lead you to your heart where I shall speak." The heart is the material pump of the body, the physical muscle that keeps blood flowing and the body alive. In biblical theology it becomes a metaphor for the spiritual center of the person. The "heart" is a space of consciousness where the person is both open to God and ready to act on that openness. It keeps spiritual life flowing and the spiritual person alive. To say, "the heart is hard," is to imply the person is not in conscious contact with God and consequently does not act out of that awareness. There is no flow. To say, "the heart is on fire," is to imply the person is in conscious contact with God and is acting out of that awareness. There is flow. It is the heart where the deepest contact with both God and the world is made.

But how do we get to the heart? How do we allow consciousness to rest in the spiritual center of our being?

The desert will lead us there. In particular, the person who lives in the desert will lead us there. But be warned. His tactics are rigorous. The heart is camouflaged by self-deceptions, and we are skilled in not looking at these most comforting delusions. But the voice crying in the wilderness is determined to make us look. There is something infinitely better than our present way of deception. But we will not be open to it until we acknowledge and let go of the avoiding strategies of the mind. Repentance is the path.

Repentance begins by entering the desert. The desert means "off on our own," far from the madding crowd. Until we enter into solitude and do some inner work, we are always a one-sided creation of other people. We are living a life we have not investigated and claimed. It may be a safe life, a well-respected life, and a well-rewarded life, but it is not our life. We need to purify and simplify, to come back to what is essential, and to rethink where we have been and where we are going. We need to uncover the core desires that drive us and evaluate them.

A first step on the path to the heart is: "Who taught us to flee from the wrath that is to come?" Who taught us to act only as a reaction to the possibility of injury? Why do we only do things to protect ourselves? In fact, we may have come to the desert in this half-hearted position. We are not seeking authentic living, but only some external compliance

that may keep us from harm. But heart action is not reactive behavior to the dangers of life. Heart action is the overflow of inner fullness. But we will not reach the heart until we realize how blindly we are attached to the reactive ego.

The path to the heart continues with the injunction, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘There is something special about us that God loves and this exempts us from this painful process of honest appraisal.’” In other words, we deceive ourselves. We identify with some aspect of “who we are” that we think will spare us. Then we market that delusion to ourselves and to others. The hard word of the heart leader insists that what God loves is this painful process. For it is through this process of “dis-identifying” with our “self-righteousness” that we open to the heart. The open heart receives God’s life and conveys it into the world.

When we arrive at the heart, we will know the truth of loving both God and neighbor. Until we arrive there, we are deluded. We live in what Reb Menahem Nendle of Korzk, known as the Kotzker, called a world of phantoms—false perceptions we treat as real. The story is told of the Kotzker:

One day he and Reb Hirsh of Tomashov came to bridge where several women began throwing stones at them.

“Have no fear,” said the Kotzker. “They are not real women, or are their stones real. They are mere phantoms.”

Reb Hirsh was silent for a moment, then asked, “Might we not be phantoms too?”

“No,” came the Kotzker’s answer, “as long as we have at some time had the genuine urge to repent.” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973])

The “genuine urge to repent” is an expression of our desire to be real, to be conscious of our ultimate grounding and live out of that grounding.

Why did the people come to John and submit to his harsh words and tactics? Why do we continue to journey to his desert? We sense the promise in repentance, the promise to move beyond half-heartedness and delusion, the promise to be real, the promise that will lead us to our heart.