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Homiletics

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HOMILETICS

INTRODUCTION

The repeated comment that Concordia Seminary professors preach in their classrooms and lecture in the chapel can be partially tested again in this selection of sermons from the seminary pulpit. Some will read these messages with a liturgical eye, considering whether they effectually moved the hearers to the response of worship. Others may read them from a systematic stance or out of an exegetical interest, comparing what is being heard by today's students with their recollections of what they heard in their student days. They are offered here for all of those purposes.

There is a basic significance to all of these messages, however, which ought not to be overlooked. Read them as sermons from men of faith addressed to men of faith. Try to hear them as in a frame of lessons from the Scriptures surrounded by the hymns of the church and the prayers of the people of God. Test them as confessional witness offered to men who will soon make their ordination vows. It may be of some pertinence that this introduction is being written without knowing the specific sermons that will be included in the selection. As from a homiletics professor, the introduction avoids any blanket approval of technique. As from a liturgics instructor, it indicates that the relationship between words and worship remains a difficult balance. As to their testimony to Jesus Christ and their use of His Gospel as a power to faith and salvation, it now goes all the way: Jesus Christ and His Gospel will be there.

GEORGE W. HOYER

The Vision in the Tower

CARL GRAESSER JR.

November 13, 1970

There is a grand old American tradition of calling institutions of learning "Ivory Towers." How would you view Concordia Seminary? Up on a hill, tucked away from the world, glorious in archaic stone? One department they call practical—should we call the others impractical? Looking back on 131 years, our purpose today is not really to argue to what extent Concordia Seminary is or is not an ivory tower. Rather, it is to borrow this picture of a tower and note that towers can be used for other purposes than running away from reality.

A tower can be used to see better, to have a clearer view. We want to suggest today that this tower, Concordia, be it ivory or no, is here also for the purpose of having visions! You and I need visions, like that of Isaiah 51, the Old Testament Lesson for this week. It is a prayer, a call to the glorious arm of Yahweh, but almost a creed. First it

extols God's powerful arm in creation, then in the historical salvation of the Exodus, and finally it depicts the glorious coming rescue of Israel from Babylon and their return to Jerusalem.

Awake! Awake!
Put on might!
O arm of Yahweh!

Awake!
As in days of old,
ages long ago.

Was it not you
who hacked Rahab in pieces?
who ran the dragon through?

Was it not you
who dried up sea,
the waters of the great abyss,

Who made the sea-depths
a way for the redeemed to cross?

Those whom Yahweh has set free shall
return
and enter Zion with shouts of triumph!

Everlasting joy will crown their head.
Joy and gladness will pursue them,
but sorrow and sighing will take flight.
(Is. 51:9-11)

What beautiful poetry! How stirring to picture God's powerful creative arm by considering the old pagan myths of creation and their battles with the sea monsters Rahab and Leviathan that they depict and then demythologizing them, barely. How stirring to see that same powerful arm as the arm of the warrior God, Yahweh, the God of the Exodus. This arm is now called on to do battle again, to rescue Israel so that she may return to Zion. And what a return! It is a veritable, liturgical procession, with people singing through the desert. One can almost see the banners. No murmuring this time! Sorrow and sighing take flight. What a vision!

Or is it too much? Is it just overstated hope, perhaps even a pathetic hallucination? Just look at the situation! As we understand it, the prophet is singing to a group of displaced Israelites in far-off Babylon. Judah has fallen and Jerusalem is in ruins. In fact the Babylonians would say that their god Marduk had overcome and defeated Yahweh. Yahweh was now in eclipse, and one could not even worship Him properly because He had no temple. And even if the faith of these displaced Israelites could rise above such talk, there was that haunting, nagging reason to wonder whether Yahweh really cared for them any longer. Was this exile not just what the prophets had foretold? Was it not punishment for faithless breaking of covenant?

And yet this prophet of exile has the courage to announce that the Persian king, Cyrus, who recently had won a few victories, was no less than Yahweh's chosen messiah. He would topple Babylon and send the

exiles home to Jerusalem. And more! When the nations would see that Yahweh controlled even the emperor Cyrus to save His people Israel, they would see the glory of Yahweh and all nations would come streaming to Zion to worship there. That vision is pretty strong stuff, isn't it? Who would believe that report?

Now look how it came off. It began well, as Cyrus did send them back to build the temple. But after that, where was the glorious arm of Yahweh? Few Israelites wanted to leave the big city, Babylon, and go back to the sticks of Judah. In fact, it took a couple of prophets to goad them finally into building the temple, but they had to weep when they compared it to Solomon's. There was so much intermarriage in the community that the kids could hardly speak Hebrew anymore. David's dynasty was done for. By any honest judgment the land was only a tiny backwater in the Persian Empire. Where was the mighty arm of Yahweh?

But there is another vision just a chapter and a half later.

He had no form or comeliness that we
should look at Him,

And no beauty that we should desire Him.

He was despised and rejected by men . . .

We esteemed Him to be one stricken and
smitten by God and afflicted.

But He was wounded for our transgressions. . . . (Is 53:2-5)

No less remarkable a vision! The warrior God of the past had a new battle plan. Victory was still the goal, but now it was to be gained by defeat—through suffering, sacrifice, and servanthood. You and I need to share this vision also; in fact, we need to keep both these visions in balance before us. Victory comes through service, and if necessary, even dishonor.

If that Jewish nation lacked glory, it was only part of the battle plan. In the fullness of time that arm of Yahweh came and took

the form of a tiny child, born not in the palace of a king, but nonetheless anointed to bring in the kingdom. And this One recognized the vision of a suffering servant and took it upon Himself. Of course, when He had followed that servant route even to the cross, people said that they really had proof that the glorious arm of Yahweh was *not* in action in that Jesus. "We thought he was the Messiah." But of course the arm of Yahweh was in that crucifixion! *Christus Victor — surrexit!* God's victory is ours and sets us free from exile. How good to see this vision!

And how much better it is to see this astonishing victory come to pass in ourselves, to see that old Rahab inside actually slain and run through — and then the miracle of the new creation from that dead hulk that the arm of Yahweh raises up. Lo! It has the form of a servant! There is joy in experiencing that powerful arm in oneself and among the brethren. But it takes the vision, or it doesn't seem to happen.

We need the vision, since the world around us does not seem to have one. And the people of the world think that they can tell it to us the way it is.

Does it seem to you that you are really displaced — in exile?

Does it seem to you that this place is really not Zion at all, but more like Babylon?

Do the gods of this world appear to have triumphed in your life?

Does it bother you that there are so few who wish to rebuild the temple?

Does it bother you that the young are no longer able to speak the ancient sacred language of the fathers?

Then get you up to the tower, and pray that He will give you a vision:

The vision of that arm of God that made the stars and set each in its place — and has also made you and put you in this place, among us.

The vision of that arm as it enfleshed itself in the form of a Servant who was obedient unto death that you might have victory and life and fellowship with God.

The vision that that arm of God — if you will just believe it — will put on the form of another weak servant, namely you, to bring back the exiles to Jerusalem.

So up to the tower where the view is clearer and where the line forms for the procession through the desert, back to Zion. Then sorrow and sighing will take flight.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this. Amen.

Job's Wife

Luke 7:11-17

RALPH W. KLEIN

September 15, 1970

This week's Gospel raises the question of how we are going to face suffering, distress, and death itself in our lives. When one asks that question, he thinks of turning to a book like Job, or maybe even, as one poet, Thomas Carlisle, recently did, to Job's wife. She's the one, you know, who said, "Curse God and die since distress has come upon you."

Job's wife is often caricatured as a second Satan since she said "Curse God and die" though a few would like

to have their own biography encapsuled in one phrase in or out of context.

At least she didn't prostitute theology and make believe to dust her husband's ashpit.

We don't know whether she brought out
snacks
or started a barbecue to feed his friends
who were so hungry to devour him.

Perhaps she had to take a job
to shield herself from the poorhouse and
provide
for doctor's bills — if one would come —
and to take her mind off what the patient
looked like
and all that had happened to her as well
as him.

Job did not cry which doesn't mean she
didn't.

It's hard to have a hero for a husband.¹

Death and distress. We find it in our-
selves, and we find it in others. Listen to a
prayer recently published in "Inklings":

Dear Lord, who is my neighbour?

He is the man next door.

When he is ill

he coughs in the night, and I hear him
spit.

He lets himself go, and is a nuisance be-
cause he does not eat, and grows thin
—and what will become of him?

When he is well

he is the first to get up, first to mow the
lawn, first to paint his house, and
first to clean his car.

Day and night I hear his life: he is so
close to me.

He is too close to me.

He is near to me: in fact, he reminds me
of myself.

He is flesh of my flesh and bone of my
bone.

I wish he would go away, because he
troubles me with his joys and with
his sorrows.

But he must not go away. He is the

reflection of God to me, and without
him I cannot live.

Father, teach me to know my neighbour,
and to love him, through Jesus Christ,
our Lord.

Heavenly Father,

We reckoned that we were men living
in a man's world — that we knew human
nature, and needed no one to tell us about
life. But Jesus gives us a clearer view of
life's possibilities, and shows us what it
is to be truly human.

We admit that by our ignorance, prej-
udice and exploitation we have reduced
man's stature, and robbed life of its splen-
dour.

Father give us back our glory, through
Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Heavenly Father,

You set before mankind the possibility
of life and good; but we are afraid that he
is choosing death and evil.²

How do we face the death that we are
choosing? I have a picture of a tombstone
that appeared in an advertisement in *Satur-
day Review* recently. It also talks about
death.

Here lies the mind of John Doe who at
30 stopped thinking.

He was going to set the world on fire.
Sure.

Full of ideas about how to make it big.

He was going places. Right to the top.
Then suddenly he ran out of gas, went
flat, dried up. He hasn't had a new idea
in . . . who knows?

About the only place he's gone is to the
office and back [should we say to the
classroom and back, to the pulpit and
back?] When he talks, who listens?
Certainly, not his boss [should we say
his students, his congregation?].

¹ Thomas John Carlisle, "Job's Wife," in
Celebration! (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970)
(used by permission).

² Used by permission from *More Contem-
porary Prayers*, ed. Caryl Micklem (Grand Rap-
ids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 49—50.

Like a zombie, he just goes through the motions. He acts . . . dead.

The fact is, when you stop thinking, stop acting creatively in today's revved-up world, you really *are* dead.

Ever wonder why?

The advertisement goes on to tell us why: because we didn't buy the *Great Books!* But we've seen this death in ourselves. We have judged pastors who seem to be dead, while we too stop thinking creatively and acting creatively. And when we are dead in that way, one would think that we would turn to that center of today's Gospel, to Jesus who said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" For it is His Father who gives us life and brains and creativity and emotions. He even preserves and renews them. And so, in our mental death we can look to Him for our life.

The trouble is, you can be deader than that. You can be stiff-dead, no-breathing dead, cold, dead-in-the-ground dead. And it was to such a person, whose horizontal posture I shall someday assume, that Jesus of Nazareth said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" Here you have God's good news for another situation, God's life for a world in which all sorts of things reduce life—distress, sickness, suffering, death. But God through Jesus brought life and rolled back another frontier. It was astonishing to those who were there. They said, "A great prophet has arisen among us, a prophet just like Elijah and Elisha" (cf. 1 Kings 17:23 and 2 Kings 4:36). St. Luke adds, "God has visited and redeemed His people," quoting the familiar words from the Benedictus of Zechariah. God was really at work visiting His people in their specific problems. In the following verses the evangelist records the story of how the disciples of John came to Jesus

and said, "Are You the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" And Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you see and hear—blind see, lepers are cleansed, dead are raised up. I *am* the one who is to come. I *am* the Messiah." It's also in this context that the evangelist Luke first uses the word "Lord" about Jesus. In this good news of God for our life-and-death situation, in this answer to our great problem, we see not only a carpenter at work, but the Lord.

The trouble is, you can be deader even than that. To put it in the old words, "You can be dead in trespasses and sin." Life without God, or apart from God, is life against God. More than that, life without God, apart from God, is death. And this Jesus, who raised up this young dead man, is the one who also in our baptism said to us, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" When the name of Father, Son, and Spirit was invoked on us, we were brought from death to life. The trouble is, we're still surrounded by death. We still find within ourselves those powers that war mightily against God, that reach out for death. And Jesus must now empower us, just as he empowered us through the waters of baptism, to use water again, to drown that old, death-dealing foe.

We're surrounded then by death, death at an early age, the death of the mind and the death of the ambitions. We're threatened by our own biographical death which is always just ahead of us. We're surrounded by those powers which would pull us away from God and that life we have with Him.

And so we must look to that Prophet, to that Visitor from God, to that Messiah, to that Lord, and hang on that life-giving word from Him, "Young man, I say to you, arise!"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Forgiveness and Unity

ERWIN L. LUEKER

January 21, 1971

As the Octave of Unity passes its midpoint and hastens to the end it seems to be apparent that the observance lacked verification in reality. Most of the smoke does not seem to come from peace pipes but from smoldering dump heaps.

The Second Helvetic Confession maintains that unity consists in points of doctrine. By faithful study of the Scriptures men should ultimately understand God in the same way, confess Him with the same words, and sing to Him the same songs. In the Protestant Utopia the Spirit would guide men into a conformity in which everyone would have the same time schedule for the vast formations of the universe and the same formula for each drop of blood that reddened the Place of the Skull.

Four hundred years later diversities and factions still multiply. Not that Christians didn't try for unity. Some tried to stretch people into conformity on the rack. Laws of the land and red swords made it more expedient to agree than disagree. The more humane used persuasion maintaining that the honest mind has the ability to reach the one proper understanding of words. There were those who held that visible separations contributed to invisible unity. Others tried to make logical formulations so exact that they could not be contradicted. That verbal struggle may not end until he who has best mastered linguistic jiu-jitsu kneels alone in the center of the ring and thanks God for unity.

The learned sciences are not encouraging. Perception and subsequent knowledge, they say, are not dependent on the object alone, but on the object, its context, the transmission mood and media, the receptive organs, and the total experience and personality of the subject. Heraclitus allegedly said that we

never step into the same stream twice. We can add that we never see the same thing twice, hear the same word twice, or experience anything twice. If a man cannot agree with himself from day to day, how can he agree with others?

Unity, many say, can come only through empathy and sympathy. Communication was intensified. People lived together, worked together, played together, prayed together, sinned together. People flooded each others' country in waves. But togetherness increased *eros* rather than *agape* as lonely hearts shoved through crowds.

Is unity fantasy? Is the lilac blooming in the doorway related, not to the eternal beauty of poets but to the manure pile? Will the lion lie down with the lamb only when his stomach is straining around rabbits, kids, and other delicacies? Does the reason of man make him more beastly than animals?

Such questions are law in the theology of unity. There is no escaping their immutable reality. They are sure as the changing storms, ruthless as hurricanes. Our past is inescapable guilt, our present is where we do not want to be, our future is judgment.

Yet there is unity of the lion and the lamb, of wrath and love, of fear and hope. All the fiery anger of the world hisses around the cross even as all love urges forgiveness. Drawn into the radius of the cross we become strange creatures indeed. For we see everything unified with, in, and through Him who hangs there. We no longer see nations hardened into hate, but a world moving into unity. Colors are no longer demarcations of races, but potentialities for forming our Lord in ever more beautiful configurations. Denominational lines are delusions as growths of Christians on hills and valleys become the full stature of Christ in a cosmic reality. We

can no longer distinguish immature and mature knowledge as our imperfect vision, our limited understanding, and our endless errors are subsumed in the wisdom beyond even theological logic.

It is good to stand on the holy mountain and see things transfigured in Christ. It is good to have participated in the new Exodus of the new Israel before going down to the multitudes squabbling with the disciples.

Seven Friendly Warnings for the Would-Be Christian

ROBERT W. BERTRAM

January 26, 1968

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A little later there is something I have to say to you on the subject "Seven Friendly Warnings for the Would-Be Christian." But first there are three texts which are pertinent to that subject, which ought to be read in this connection.

The first text is from the *Rule* of St. Benedict, concerning the procedure of receiving new brothers into the monastic community.

Concerning the Manner of Receiving Brothers. When any new comer applies for admission, an easy entrance shall not be granted him: but, as the Apostle says, "Try the spirits if they be of God" [1 John iv. 1]. Therefore, if he who comes perseveres in knocking, and is seen after four or five days to endure with patience the insults inflicted upon him, and the difficulty of entrance, and to persist in his demand, entrance shall be allowed him, and he shall remain for a few days in the cell of the guests. After this he shall be in the cell of the novices, where he shall meditate and eat and sleep. And an elder brother shall be appointed for him who shall be capable of saving souls, who shall watch him with the closest scrutiny, and make it his care to see if he reverently seek God, if he be zealous in the service of God, in obedience, in suffering shame. And all the harshness and roughness of the means through which God is approached shall be told him in advance.

If he promise perseverance in his steadfastness, after the lapse of two months this Rule shall be read to him in order, and it shall be said to him: 'Behold the law under which thou dost wish to serve; if thou canst observe it, enter; but if thou canst not, depart freely.' If he have stood firm thus far, then he shall be taken into the aforesaid cell of the novices; and again he shall be tried with every kind of endurance. And, after the lapse of six months, the Rule shall be read to him; that he may know upon what he is entering. And, if he stand firm thus far, after four months the same Rule shall again be re-read to him. And if, having deliberated with himself, he shall promise to keep everything and to obey all the commands that are laid upon him: then he shall be received in the congregation; knowing that it is decreed, by the law of the Rule, that from that day he shall not be allowed to depart from the monastery, nor to free his neck from the yoke of the Rule, which, after such long deliberation, he was at liberty either to refuse or receive. He who is to be received, moreover, shall, in the oratory, in the presence of all, make promise concerning his steadfastness and the change in his manner of life and his obedience to God and to His saints; so that if, at any time, he act contrary, he shall know that he shall be condemned by Him whom he mocks. . . . (Sec. LVIII, Bettenson, 2d ed., p. 175)

The second text similarly advises the newcomer to reckon in advance the cost of discipleship, Luke 14:27-33.

Likewise the third text, Matthew 20:20-28.

In addition to this week's being the week for the Prayer of Christian Unity, it has also been designated by our pastoral staff as a week for celebrating the church's *mission*. That mission theme was prompted by our commemoration of the Conversion of Saint Paul. Conversion is not all, but certainly part of, the church's mission. In the course of this missionizing, has the church always given the convert, or the would-be convert, fair warning as to what he is in for—the way the Benedictine community did, or the way certain traditions in Judaism have done for the non-Jewish proselyte who was contemplating joining the synagogue? Perhaps the church owes it to those who stand on her threshold to combine with her invitation to them a friendly warning about the risks which await them in the church. I would like to suggest seven such friendly warnings which would enable newcomers to come into the church with eyes wide open.

For the church to alert the newcomer to her own problems is only fair. But it is more than fair. For the warning I have in mind has to do with problems which, to be very honest, are not really problems at all. For if they are problems, they are problems which no Christian would want to be without. So if in the warnings which follow you detect a large measure of tongue in cheek, then I can only say that you are very perceptive. It is a warning like the Volkswagen advertisements are warnings, which warn you that if you buy a Volkswagen you will suddenly lose the desire to buy a new car each year. Are you willing to put up with such a deprivation? Likewise it is a kind of private joke among us who live in the church of Christ that the problems of this household are the blessed problems of the blessed. If you have problems like those,

"happy are ye." So the friendly warning is not just fair. It is a subtle part of the invitation.

Problem number one. Once you become a Christian, you will find it increasingly difficult to commit a really enjoyable sin. Somehow all the old fun goes out of sin—not just the wicked sins like adultery and indolence and prejudice but even the pious sins. Take worry, for example. Ordinarily you would expect that worry is a mark of conscientiousness, the sort of thing which responsible people do and for which they might feel some pardonable pride—as, for example, when they say half proudly, "I'm worried about tomorrow's lecture," or, "I'm sure I failed that exam." But the trouble with Christianity is that it takes all the virtue out of worry. In fact worry itself becomes something to worry about, not just because worry is hard on the digestion but because worry is unbelief and because unbelief is, in the strong language of the Sermon on the Mount, hatred against God. It would be considerably more comfortable not to know that.

Problem number two. You will not even be able to take pride in your new sense of sin. You will be all set to feel good about the fact that you can feel so bad, only to learn that what is wrong with that in turn is that it denies the forgiveness of sin. That, in fact, is the unforgivable sin, not because it is more sinful than other sins but because it refuses to be forgiven, because it refuses to let itself be suffered out of existence by someone else (I refer to Jesus Christ) who did not even commit the sin in the first place. And believe me, there are some sins for which it just does not seem right or manly to ask Him to take responsibility. Yet not to do so is seriously to underrate Him. It is to pretend that His atoning love can be out-sinned. There is something gratifying, I suppose, about thinking of yourself as being beyond help, and something awfully humbling

about learning that in Christ you are nothing of the kind.

Problem number three. You may think it is hard to believe that people are as *bad* as Christians claim. That is nothing. Wait till you hear how *good* they claim people can be. "A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." "The holy Christian church, the communion of saints." "Beloved, now are we the sons of God." And who is "we"? The same folks who are the sinners. Saints and sinners simultaneously. The hardest thing about the Christian Gospel—the "good news," as we call it—is not its bad news about fallen humanity but its good news about the new humanity. Most often it will seem too good to be true.

Problem number four. The real poser, though, is what Christians say about Jesus Christ. You would think we would be content with saying, as we do in our creed, that He is "very God of very God . . . incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the virgin Mary . . . was crucified . . . the third day He rose again." But no. That much, we say, the devil knows too. The crux (if you will pardon the pun) of our faith is in the words "for us." We have died out on our sin and our trouble because He has destroyed it in His own body *for us*. He has gone to all the trouble, He has taken the trouble, He has taken the trouble away—for us. We come alive because He is life *for us*. All this He has done, as the creed says, "for us men and for our salvation." The problem is that there will be times when you will have all you can do to utter these words, "for us"—that is, to utter them without choking up or dancing for sheer joy or making a bit of a fool of yourself, a fool for Christ. Beware especially of Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday.

Problem number five. You will be scandalized by what you believe. As any pious, reasonable man knows, in this world it is a basic law of life (and of God) that you ought to deserve what you get. Yet Chris-

tians claim that the cross lifts you above that law, above that order of retribution and deservedness, out of this world, and confers on you the freedom and the value, shall we say, of a minor deity. How does it do this? *Gratis*, by grace alone. That claim, again and again, will strike you as downright unlawful, unlike normal life, unlike the normal God. The claim will seem irresponsible, or at least impractical. But your big problem will be, not just believing it, but explaining why on earth you do believe it. Almost against your better judgment, the claim claims you.

Problem number six. One of the most trying things about life in the church is the church herself. You are aware, of course, that church people are not angels. At least not yet. In fact your reason for avoiding the church this long may have been that, as everybody says, "the church is full of hypocrites." Honesty compels me to admit that once you are inside, your suspicions will only be confirmed. Actually, matters get worse. Once inside, you will be under constraint to love these hypocrites. Nothing could be harder—nothing except the discovery that they love you on the same terms, indiscriminately. That is a problem: getting used to being loved regardless of who you are. It would all be much easier if the church were not what she is: a company of sinners being treated like a "communion of saints." If you're not accustomed to eating and drinking at the same table with deity, or to singing and dancing in the midst of the saints of all ages, you might find the church to be rather fast company.

Problem number seven. When you join the church, you have everything to lose. Not only the money you could otherwise save, but all the other dear savings as well: face-saving, time-saving, health-saving, life-saving. A Christian can lose face simply by turning the other cheek, by closing an eye, by opening his mouth, by swallowing hard. Bearing the cross can cost you your sleep, your diges-

tion, your longevity. However, letting go of these things is not the big problem. The big problem is letting go of them with a straight face, without laughing. Your impulse will be to break out in Spirited laughter. You will be tempted to exult, "I couldn't care less," "I have nothing to lose but myself," "I count all loss as gain because of Christ," "the kingdom ours remaineth," and other similarly reckless expressions. In the end the hilarious impulse will be more than

you can restrain. When that happens, you will have no choice except to let yourself go, and simply cheer. The appropriate exclamation at that point is "Hallelujah" — which is the Biblical equivalent of "Hurrah for God," the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is a problem, in other words, of self-restraint. You will face that problem sooner or later — or, more accurately, forever and ever.

Won't you come in, please?

"But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask Him"

Mark 9:32

RICHARD P. JUNGKUNTZ

June 12, 1963

They understood not — and yet, they *were afraid to ask*. One wonders sometimes whether this pregnant observation of the evangelist is not also a fairly accurate description of us and of our own religious disposition — if not always, at least more often than we should perhaps care to admit. At any rate, I should like to have you think with me about this matter of asking questions, about the place that raising questions has in a theological education, or, for that matter, in theology itself, or even in the church as such.

They understood not that saying. What was that saying which the disciples did not understand? In the verse just before our text we are told: *He taught His disciples and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him; and after that He is killed, He shall rise the third day*. What was the saying? It was the Word of God, it was the Gospel, it was the very heart of the Gospel! That was what they did not understand.

And why were they *afraid to ask*? The text does not tell us directly, but from the context we can see that it was because they suspected that the answer might not be one

to their liking. They suspected it would run counter to some of their preconceived ideas; it could well shatter some of their cherished illusions; it might indeed make them very uncomfortable, prick their bubble of pride, even blast their smugness into shreds.

This text compels us to take a long, hard look at ourselves; at least it compels me to look at myself. I have been teaching just about long enough to know how easy it is from my end of the classroom to take a dim view, even an angry and critical view, of the fellow who raises uncomfortable questions, who asks directly and unabashedly: What does this mean? or, What does that mean? And I mean, what does it really mean? Because that, of course, is always a disturbing question, that question of meaning. It is easy enough to make assertions, easier still to parrot assertions that one has heard someone else make. But to look behind the assertion, to inquire about its meaning — that is disturbing. It is disturbing because more often than not it forces us to reexamine our presuppositions, our mode of thinking, our attitudes, even our convictions. Yet that is exactly what must happen if we are not to become smug and proud and carnally secure

in our possession and in our handling of the precious Word of life that has been entrusted to us.

The disciples, at least on this occasion, *were afraid to ask*. In the very next verse, however, we are told that Jesus *asked them*. In fact, Mark uses exactly the same word, *epērōta*, of Jesus that he had used of the disciples, as if to emphasize that there is a connection here between the disciples' neglecting to question Jesus and our Lord's undertaking to question them. And a connection there is indeed. For what happened to the disciples when they failed to raise the sort of question they should have? Mark tells us: *They disputed among themselves who should be the greatest*. And isn't that what always happens? When we are afraid to raise a question, afraid to ask the questions that do arise in our hearts and minds, when indeed we have no questions at all anymore, but only answers—then it is that we find the time as well as the pride and inclination to fall to disputing among ourselves about just such matters as personal station and rank and authority and mint and anise and cummin and all the other trivia that grow like rank weeds on the periphery of our religion.

But does this mean now that simply raising questions is a virtue in itself? By no means. Everything depends on the purpose of the question and on the spirit in which it is raised. There is such a thing in theology, too, as the snotty question—if you will pardon the expression, although I mean it quite literally. We all remember the very

first question ever recorded in Holy Scripture (Gen. 3:1), *Yea, hath God said?* The expletive that introduces this question, the little word "yea"—in Hebrew *aph*—also means nose, heavy breathing, a snort of anger or scorn. *Hmph, hath God said?*—a snotty question indeed! Now any time a question is raised in such a spirit, the spirit of arrogance or unbelief or malice, it is as damnable as was that fateful question of the serpent in Eden.

Then there is also the selfish question that masks itself in pious phrases. We think of Judas: *Why was not this ointment sold and the money given to the poor?* Or there is the tempting question of the Pharisees: *Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?* All these and many more belong in the category of questions which St. Paul condemns when he says: *Foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strife*.

But the honest question, the question that rises from a heart that has been touched by the Word of God, by the cutting edge of the Law and by the healing balm of the Gospel, the question that aims only to *understand the Lord's saying*, but really to understand it, the question that wants to do nothing else but to go to the heart of the saving Gospel no matter what it may cost in loss of pride and prejudice—that question we must always be as ready to raise as we are sure that Christ's own Holy Spirit is ready to answer it, and to answer with the Word that never deceives nor leads astray. Amen.

Chapel Address on the Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN

March 25, 1971

The church's calendar calls this day the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, carefully calculated back nine months from the date that the church finally selected to keep as the birthday of our Lord. Thus it is the day of the revelation of the divine motherhood of the woman that God chose to bear His Son.

We have something else to celebrate today. This is the day that commemorates the "fulness of the time" of which St. Paul speaks in Galatians 4:4-5: "When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Today commemorates that crucial moment in history when God's purpose of redemption would brook no further delay, when God's plan of reconciliation of the world with Himself that He had formulated before time began entered the phase where the divine "must (*dei*)" asserted itself, when the love of God for you and for me and for every other human being refused to wait for another dawn. On this day God sent forth His Son as the great apostle of His purpose—to become a human being, to be born of a mother like every other human being, to be born under the limitations and the restrictions and the requirements and the demands that burden every other human being, to be born under what St. Paul calls "Law." The purpose of this apostolate was to buy us back like slaves in the marketplace so that for our servitude we might receive sonship.

This is accordingly a day to celebrate the Gospel—the Gospel of our redemption, to put it explicitly. The Gospel of our re-

demption is the Gospel in its most abrasive and scandalous and uncomfortable and offensive form. It is the Gospel of the incarnation, of God becoming a human being. It is the Gospel of deliverance, with its disconcerting reminder of something that we proudly prefer not to ponder—that we were natively slaves, human animals in the thrall of the demonic powers, unable to free ourselves, needing to be freed by someone else, and actually freed by his death, the death that ended the life that began this day and by the victory that conquered that death.

I am deeply moved by the account of the annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the third gospel every time I reflect on it. I also confess that sometimes I am inclined to prefer the unembroidered businesslike directness and brevity of the first gospel: "When Christ's mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit."

My problem, of course, is conceptualizing the account in the third gospel. It is all highly instructive, which is what it was intended to be. But I do not live in the environment in which the Holy Spirit moved the early Christian community to remember what had happened on the day when the fullness of the time had come about in precisely the way that the third gospel sets it down.

How am I to think of the encounter of the Mother of God with St. Gabriel? I have no experience by which I can reconstruct what the third gospel is trying to tell me. I have worshiped with angels and archangels—indeed, I do it at every celebra-

tion of the Sacrament of the Altar. I also try hard—but not very successfully—to do so with the constant awareness of my companions in worship that the word “evermore” in the Preface implies. But I have never *seen* an angel, and when I meditate on this pericope I have a problem. I am reasonably sure that St. Gabriel did not look to the Blessed Virgin Mary like the winged and brocaded heavenly visitant of the 1969 Christmas postage stamp. The part of the picture that I reconstruct in my mind where St. Gabriel stands is accordingly very often a bit blurred. It comes into focus only as I remember that St. Gabriel has turned up before in the Biblical narrative—at the annunciation of skeptical St. Zechariah standing beside the altar of incense in the temple, and, possibly even more importantly, in the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 8 and 9. Here, I remember, the prophet saw Saint Gabriel as having the appearance of a man (Dan. 8:15) and the prophet quite flatly says that the same *man* Gabriel came to him “in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice.” (9:21)

Then I recall that the appearance of Saint Gabriel is less important than the message that he brings. The message is the same in the third gospel and in the Book of Daniel. It is the assurance of God’s final and ultimate victory. This tells me why it is Gabriel that is the bearer of the messages to Saint Zechariah and to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Just to underline the point, the third gospel not very slyly introduces the seventy weeks of Daniel’s vision (9:24-27) in the form of the 490 days—seven times seventy—between St. Gabriel’s annunciation to Saint Zechariah with which the third gospel’s infancy narrative begins and the presentation of our Lord in the temple with which the same narrative ends. This warns me to attend to the fact that Gabriel has come to the Blessed Virgin Mary with another message of divine victory. This child will accomplish

the saving purpose for which He came into the world, “to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8) or, if you prefer the language of Daniel 9, to insure that “the decreed end is poured out on the desolator” *par excellence* (Dan. 9:27). Just as God’s victory in Daniel 8 and 9 is final and decisive, so is His victory in Christ. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. Of His kingdom—a phrase that the church carefully worked into the Creed of the 150 Fathers that we say before the altar—there shall be no end! (Luke 1:32-33)

But there is one other item. It turns up in the words of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She has to say it before the celestial messenger can leave. It is of course past our imagination that she would have said “no” to God. But it is *she* that must say “yes.” Obviously this is not the synergism that imagines that an unrebored person can contribute to his conversion. The Blessed Virgin Mary is, in St. Gabriel’s words of greeting, *kecharitōmenē*—that is, one in whom the action of divine grace has been going on for a long time, long enough to justify a past perfect participle. God’s grace had been preparing her for this hour—and for the many years ahead when she would have to be the one who after giving the Son of God birth would have to provide the nurture that would see Him increase in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and human beings. And so she said her “yes.” How much she really understood of the ultimate meaning of the chain of Old Testament assurances that the third gospel puts on Saint Gabriel’s lips we cannot know. There are significant indications in the gospels that her understanding was limited and that the mag-

nificent implications of the words of St. Gabriel unfolded only as the church reflected on them year after long year. But she understood enough to say her "yes" to God.

And that's the way it is today, on March 25, 1971. God comes with His plan to each of us whom He has called by the Gospel, enlightened in baptism, hallowed and kept in His holy Christendom. It is a plan that has a place for us, individually. We too are *kecharitōmenoi*, in whom the grace of God has been working ever since our baptism. We may not understand all the implications of God's plan for us. Our theological grasp of it may well turn out to have been defective in spots. But when we become aware that God is calling us concretely to be co-workers with Him, as St. Paul puts it in a passage (2 Cor. 6:1) that the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration, 2, 66) applies

in just this kind of context, we have to respond. We can do so in the assurance that with God no thing (*rhēma*) is impossible; we stand within the scope of His power if we say: "Let it be to me according to Your word (*rhēma*)." It is not at all important who plays Gabriel to our Mary. When the Word of God comes to us, the Lord who gave us the grace that has structured our lives in Christ so far is ready to give us the further grace that enables us to say our "yes" to Him: "Let it be to me according to Your word." You almost have to say it in Greek to catch the parallel with another formula: *Genoito moi kata to rhēma sou*. The other formula is the one that our Lord has put on our lips whenever we pray, the formula that puts us at His disposal when we say: *Genēthēto to thelēma sou*, "Let Your will be done!"

On Remembering Names

ROBERT WERBERIG

March 13, 1968

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Our text is Numbers 6:22-27: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron and to his sons, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel; you shall say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.'"

Talk is cheap. The world is full of words. They assault our ears at every waking moment. They are there by the ream in the libraries and research depositories of our time. In the social intercourse of people billions of them are poured out in the already weighted air waves of our existence. And each one with its own Doppler effect flies past the ear to fade and ultimately to die, since it is true that human talk is ephemeral,

passing, and trivial — it comes and goes. But not so with God's Word. God's words are indivisible from their meaning, so that when God speaks, an act ensues. When God speaks, something actually happens. His Word is like a word that is thrown into the mainstream of history, which moves downstream to come ultimately to truth at His opportune time, to become a realized word — present and operative, alive and functional in the everyday experiences and histories of men. It is like a mustard seed. It is like a seed that grows secretly in some field, and because of the pressure of its own self-contained life, it continually drives toward the ultimate realization of its meaning — in fact, in time, in the structures of human experience.

That is the way it is too with names. It used to be different. They would call him Smith, they would call him Carpenter, they

would call him Weaver, they would call him Cartwright. And those words applied to those people; they meant something about what they did.

But now names are a dime a dozen. We give names to our children on the basis of audibly pleasant syllabification. Or else Grandpa or Aunt Minnie had a certain name and we loved Aunt Minnie and we loved Grandpa, so we give to our children the names of the people we love. Or else the name carries some kind of connotation about somebody way back in the past whom we remember with pleasant memories and pleasant association. Or else there is some "cute" or popular name that is current and that runs sort of like a stream through a generation, and so that name turns up by the thousands in the rolls and registers of our elementary schools.

But it is not so with the man who lived in the era of this text. The giving of a name in the Old Testament was closely tied with the person who was named. In many instances the name that was given by the Hebrew father to his child was a name that had a meaning. He applied a word to that person, and he became what he was named. It was not merely an idle wish—the way we sometimes end services—not simply a mere hope, but it was the sure expectation of that father that the name, the word, once applied to that being, would drive to the inevitability of its meaning in the fact and experience of life of the individual. He gave a name with a meaning, so that the meaning of the name would be the person. The father knew what he was doing when he called his son "the son of the right hand," Benjamin. And the father with a purpose called his son Joachanan as he looked forward, so that as the child grew, in its longevity it would be actually demonstrated by the child's life that Yahweh is gracious. His life would show it and manifest it; the words would say it; the life would be Yahweh in gracious operation. Thus,

when they called his name Jesus, it was for a reason, for He would save His people from their sins.

Every day in this place some latter-day son of Aaron, by God's command, pronounces the benediction on us and lays upon us God's name. We are named again and again. It is almost a sacramental repetition of the application of His name to us. It is almost as if God were trying by constantly putting it upon us to teach us what His name is. For He has made a name for Himself; His name is based on what He has shown Himself to be. When people saw and experienced what He promised in words and when those words "drove home" to fact and people experienced what He had promised when those words came to truth with them, they turned around and called Him by the name of His doing. And so He is Fortress and He is Rock and He is Shepherd. He is Guide, He is Deliverer, He is Shield. He is Buckler, He is Shade on my right hand, He is almighty Father. He is Lord, King, Light, Life, Salvation, Holy, Merciful, Loving, Forgiving, Everlasting.

God has a name, but He still seeks to *make* a name for Himself. Obviously it is the purpose of His people in time to declare His name. And thus He lays a daily word on us, that the word might press through to fulfillment, to total and complete reality in our life and in our time, so that He might make a name for Himself in this day and in this age and through this generation of His people.

This we fear, however, because we do not trust His Word. When we turn away from it, we are left to our own devices and our own words, and we put our trust in ourselves. Nobody really wants to be a nothing. Nobody really wants to be no thing. If one wants to wait for His name to come true, what does he do in the meantime? When faith is weak, we abandon His Word and trust in our own. We don't want to be a nothing. Rather we want to *make* a name for

ourselves, to be something and to be remembered, to avoid extinction and to resist non-being, to make something out of ourselves. The younger one is, the more this plagues him. But by shaking ourselves loose from the very ground of our being in our attempts to become something, we in fact become nothing. We expose ourselves to dangerous or destructive ways of living, or we engage in a hectic, neurotic life that is really diminutive, constantly diminutive, in its effect on our being. We fragmentize, pull apart, explode ourselves in half a dozen dimensions of our being, internally and externally, deforming our relations with people, with God, with our world, with ourselves.

God comes back every week, every Sunday, and every day for us, and He says, "Stop, look at the record, and when you look at it, carry the import of that record into the hearing of My benediction, that blessing which is the promise of My presence with you when I say to you, "The Lord bless and keep you.'" And He says, "Look, I'll take care of you, hold you in My guardianship, I'll be your protector, I will be your defender. As I was then, so I will be now and forever and ever." He says, "Look, and see My shining face, see My smile upon you. That smile is the fact of My attitude toward you. My face shines upon you to manifest My grace toward you. I love you. I hold you in My grace." He says, "Look, I hold you in the constant focus of My gaze, I hold you constantly wherever you are in the relationship of My steadfast love for you. Look, I hold you as the apple of My eye. You are graven on My hands, you are continually before Me. Your blessing is in this undisturbed and continued presence that I have with you. I lift up My countenance upon you, and in this is the ground of all your peace. This is so that you can respond, 'Our Father who art in heaven, let glory be given to everything that there is about You, to everything by which You are known. May You be hallowed for these

things.' This is so that you can see," He says, "the completeness of all things in Me and thus have My peace."

In this way the word of the benediction has come to truth in us. It is that blessing that is there when God is present. In the appearance of Jesus Christ at God's fullness of time the Word was made flesh, and He was a blessing to us because they called Him Emmanuel. We know Him by what He did and what He does. He died to take away our death. He lives to give us real and full being, to give us life. For it is in Him that we are assured of our ultimate blessing and protection. It is in Jesus Christ that the oil of gladness is poured out for all men and that the Father looks upon us with a face that smiles. It is through Him that we are held in this constant relationship of blessing and presence which constitutes the ground of our wholeness, which constitutes the ground of our peace. We who are baptized into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are now partakers of that divine image. And so I say with rejoicing, if my father's hair is brown, chances are my hair is going to be brown, and if my father's eyes are blue, chances are my eyes will be blue, and if my daddy's build is stocky, chances are that my build will be stocky, too. And if he is called holy, if he is called merciful, if he is called loving, if he is called just, if he is called blessed, if he is called everlasting, then this has great implications for me. I am reborn; I have a new Father; I am a sharer in a new heredity through a word that has come to truth in me — a word that never dies.

Reminiscere is a time for remembering. As we look closely, however, it is not a matter of our remembering but it is the Lenten call of the church to the Lord that *He* should remember *His* name. Reminiscere is like saying to Him, "Father, think of us who struggle here in this age and in this time, and when You do, Father, remember. Remember the way You were in the Egyptian

sea and the name You made for Yourself there. Remember how You were in the trackless wilderness and at Jordan's edge. Remember how You were named for what You did there. Remember Cyrus and the days of the restoration. Remember the way You were in Jesus' incarnation, ministry, passion, death, and burial, and how You were in His resurrection, what a name You made for Yourself then! And when You remember, then remember also how You are and how

You have promised Yourself to be for us. Be present with us now, we say. Let Your name, Your Word, come to truth again. Make a name as then; remember, Father, and make a name now in us and through us." Reminiscere is a time when He says right back, "I have remembered; I have made Myself a great name, and now I propose to make it even greater. Here, take, eat. This is My body. Drink. It is My blood. Receive Me. I give you a new name. I give you My own." Amen.

Thirty-one Words

Advent II

JOHN S. DAMM

Dec. 9, 1970

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Will you listen again to the prayer with which we began today's eucharistic celebration: "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds . . ."

Those thirty-one words can roll off my lips so easily, and yet they contain the story of my whole life—and yours, too. But do we really know what we are praying for in this collect? It can be a very dangerous thing to make someone else's words your own.

We are asking God to send us His Spirit and to dispose us to let the Spirit do His work in us. Notice that we are not asking for the power to do anything ourselves, but rather to let something be done to us. *You stir up our hearts, O Lord.* We are not even attempting to renounce anything, but rather, we are asking for the ability to receive an incredible gift.

And the prayer is offered without condition and without reservation. "Here we are, Lord, flesh and blood people with our own thoughts and words and daily lives. Let Your Holy Spirit work His work in us. Let

Him shape us into Your way so that we can serve You the way You want to be served."

The thoughts expressed in that ancient collect are truly magnificent, but to pray it and mean it is not an easy thing. Indeed, if God takes us at our word and really does what we request, we are apt to get far more than we bargained for!

As I look at my own heart through the eyes of this collect I am amazed at the number of fierce roots I have thrust down into the heavy clay of this world. My mind is far from pure, deeply grooved as it is by practiced disobedience and self-importance. To have every motive set aside except those formed in me by the mind of Christ is not so easy. This collect of the advent of Christ actually asks many hard things of us.

One of these hard things is that by His coming we shall be asked to receive the gift of understanding. We shall be obliged to see the wound that sin has inflicted on us as individuals and on all the people of the world. We shall be able to see through the bandages people have laid over the wounds sin has dealt them. With the gift of Christ's coming we shall be able to see things as they really are and understand them in their true

perspective. This means that something of the hurt and the poverty and the injustice and hatred that keep people down will become agonizingly real to us.

We will better understand why this world of ours needs God's gift of the Advent Christ. And we will experience the impulse of that Christ who dwells within us urging and impelling us to move out toward those whose needs have become so desperately real to us.

In addition to the gift of understanding this collect asks us to accept the gift of trust. This, too, is a hard gift to receive. St. Peter walked on the stormy sea, but when his trust wavered, he began to sink, and Christ had to rebuke him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" What courage it would take to walk on the sea, even if we could see the face of Christ. But it takes even more courage to leave all our false securities, our leaking little boats of self-interest, and walk toward Him on the churned-up angry sea of our times. It would be a heroic thing to do even if we could see Him, but when His face is hidden, then it requires all the heroism faith can muster to say: *Enable me to serve You the way You want to be served.*

This requires that you literally live your life for the sake of people. This requires that you give yourself without reservation to the

carrying out of His will on earth. This is not easy to do. And yet the collect is realistic. God does not ask of you anything that you cannot do. He Himself supplies the power which enables you. You cannot command the power to serve with a pure mind unfettered by self-love, but you can accept the gift of forgiveness which is His enabling power for life. You can recall your baptism which gave you rebirth through forgiveness. You can continue to reach out for that forgiveness bestowed in every confession you penitently make and in every Holy Communion you devoutly receive.

When the Spirit enables each one of us to make this collect his own, we shall be able to see the results in each other in a thousand different ways . . . in the way we prepare for Christmas and practice its charities and taste its delights . . . in the way we handle the child on our knee and in the way we regard the Child in the manger . . . in our attitude toward the despised and lonely of this world and those who have no rooms in the inns of this world . . . in the reckless way we give of ourselves to others. And every Second Sunday in Advent as we pray this collect each one of us will know that those thirty-one words do not just roll off our lips but contain the story of our whole life.

Luther at Worms

CARL S. MEYER

April 19, 1971

The pealing of the carillon, the fanfare of the brass instruments, the stirring strains of Luther's hymns, and the spring beauty of nature combine for our joyful observance of the 450th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms on 18 April 1521.

Luther, the peasant's son, was appearing before the most powerful monarch of the age and perhaps the most important political group of the world of 1521. He was there to

defend his books and his teachings. In his dramatic address to the emperor and the nobles on the afternoon of the 18th of April he said: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

We, too, were involved in that historic moment.

That moment has a theological dimension. When Luther first appeared before the diet on the 17th of April, he was asked if the books, whose titles were read, were written by him. He acknowledged them. He was also asked if he was ready to retract. He replied: "Because this is a question of faith and the salvation of souls, and because it concerns the divine Word, which we are bound to reverence, for there is nothing greater in heaven and earth, it would be rash and at the same time dangerous for me to put forth anything without proper consideration . . ."

He was granted one day of clemency with the reminder that really he had known for some time why he had been summoned to appear before the emperor.

Then in that charismatic moment on the 18th, when he defended the books that he had written, he asked that his errors, if they be such, be overthrown "by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists." He would not want to begin by condemning the Word of God.

Luther's work endured because it was Scripture-oriented and Scripture-directed. Luther was a man of the Book, and he taught his and subsequent generations to love the Book. Not the pronouncements of popes, not the decrees of church councils, not the opinions of ecclesiastical officials, not the resolutions of church conventions, not even the imperial law, were to be the directives for his teachings, but the Word of God. Let us, too, say: "I am bound by the Scripture and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

The second dimension of Luther's appearance at Worms is a political one. His appeal to conscience in the presence of the emperor was a plea for religious liberty. Six months before the Diet of Worms (Nov. 1520) Luther had published his tract "On the Freedom of the Christian," in which he extolled the glorious liberty of the children of God,

made free from the Law, sin, death, and the devil. Now he pleaded that liberty be recognized in a way new to the world of the 16th century.

In the letter which he wrote to the emperor Charles shortly after he left Worms, he said: "It does not seem to me to be right or just to deny the Word of God. . . . My conscience is bound by the Scripture passages which I have quoted in my little books." He complained that he could not obtain his one obviously completely Christian wish, "that the Word of God should remain free and unbound for me."

Religious liberty did not come to the Holy Roman Empire as a result of Luther's plea. The princes, indeed, made a plea for ordering religion in their territories as would seem right to their consciences at the Diet of Speier in 1526. This was refused them at the Diet of Speier in 1529, and their protest gave them the name "Protestant." Then in 1555 the Peace of Augsburg allowed the prince to determine the religion of his territory. We thank God for the religious liberty which we enjoy under the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. I am not saying that Luther's plea at the Diet of Worms is a direct cause of the adoption of the First Amendment. The advocates of religious liberty in the free churches and among the Anabaptists need to be given their due. Nevertheless, Luther's plea on the 18th of April 1521 was of important consequence for us.

Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms also had an existential dimension.

When moves were being made by the elector Frederick the Wise and others to have Luther appear before the Diet of Worms, he expressed his willingness to come. "It would not be right for me to doubt that I am called by the Lord if the emperor summons me," he said. It was of slight importance to him if God did not want to preserve him. Not his safety or any danger that might come to him

were of consequence, but the cause of the Gospel. True, he did not want Charles V to stain his hands with the shedding of his (Luther's) blood. But, he said, "Certainly it is not up to us to decide whether my life, or for that matter my death, will bring greater or less danger for the Gospel and the public welfare."

For that reason he wrote: "Christ lives, and we shall enter Worms in spite of all the gates of hell and the powers in the air." Christ lives! Here you have the Easter motivation for Luther's trust and confidence in God and his fearlessness in the presence of the emperor.

"Christ lives!" This, too, should be the source of our strength when we are tempted to negate the Gospel because of the importance of the group in which we find ourselves. "Christ lives" should sustain us when we are tempted to deny the Gospel because of the fear of personal consequences, if we maintain it. The favor of God is far more important than the favor of the mighty, and trust in God for His protection is far more effective than trust in the powerful.

That trust in God sustained Luther, for instance, when he returned to Wittenberg in

March 1522. He would go to Wittenberg with a far higher protection than that which the elector could give. He told Frederick, "Your Electoral Grace suffers no harm and danger in body, estate, or soul on my account, whether Your Electoral Grace believes this or not." Was this mere bravado on the part of a braggadocian individual? By no means. It was the simple trust and confidence of a man who took God at His word and believed that God would protect him, because Christ lives.

My friends, when such existential situations confront you—and they will—may God give you strength and courage to maintain the Gospel because you have the Easter assurance, "Christ lives!"

Luther's appearance at the Diet of Worms 450 years ago can be rehearsed for the sake of history, and that would have its own justification. We can do it because we were involved there. Luther made his plea before the emperor, the plea of a man whose mighty fortress was God, whose conscience was captive to the Word, buoyed by his confidence in the Almighty. Luther the hero taught us the meaning of the Scripture, of religious liberty, of trust in God. Those are our heritage. Amen.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT APPROACH TO

THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES?

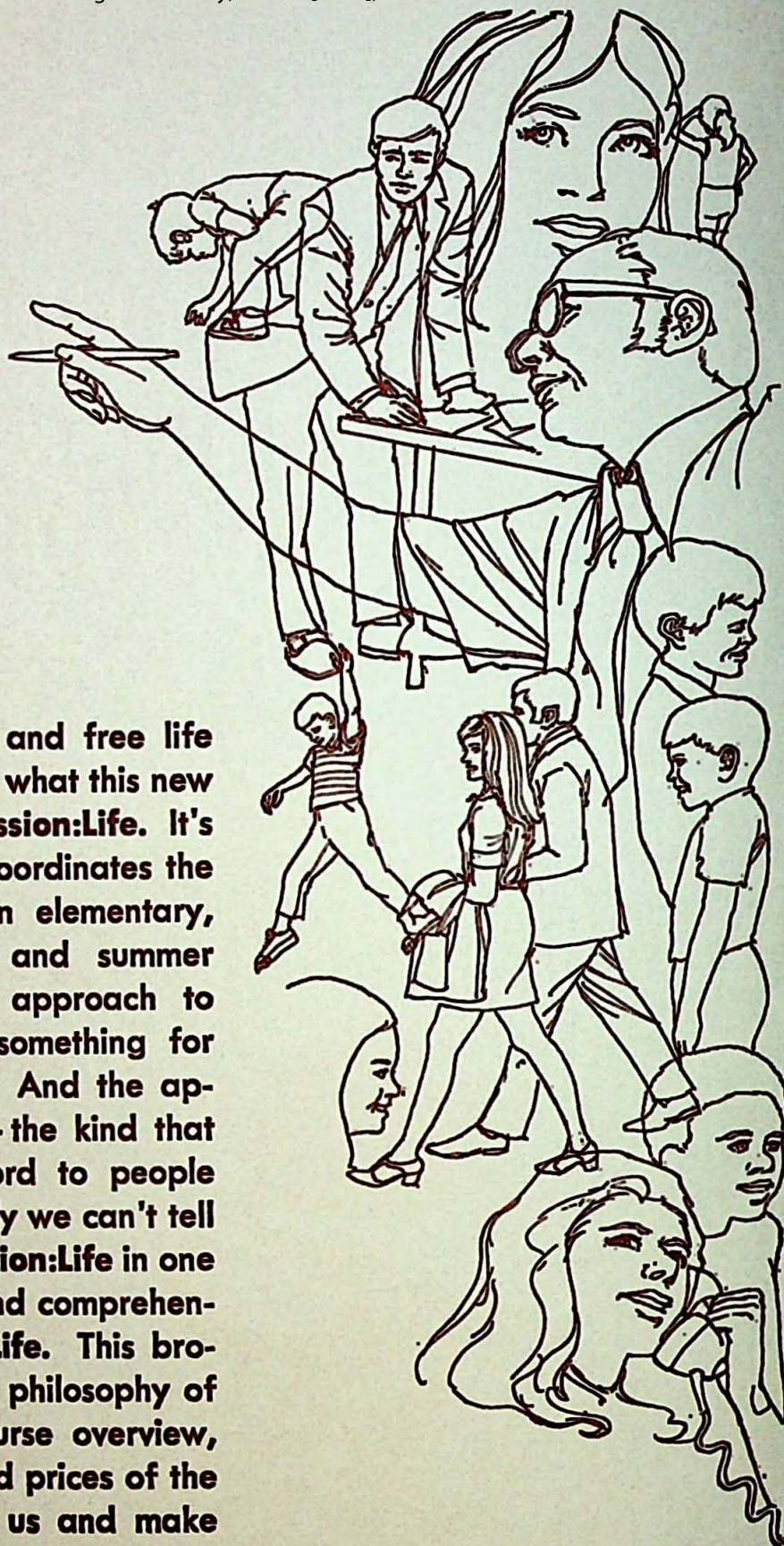
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