

***Crossways International Handout for Gospel Readings—
February 7, 14, 17 (Ash Wednesday), 21, and 28 (2010)***

February 7, Epiphany 5: Luke 5:1-11

Mark 1:16-20 describes an event that takes place after Jesus' baptism, temptation, and initial proclamation. We read the following:

- * Jesus calls Peter and Andrew (in *boat one*) while they are fishing. 1:16-18.
- * He then calls James and John (in *boat two*) while they are mending their nets, 1:19,20.

See also the parallel narrative in Matthew 4:18-22.

A similar incident is reported in John ch. 21. However, in John's narrative the event takes place *after Jesus' resurrection*. Reference is made to seven disciples, and to the number of fish they catch—153. Some see "153" as referring to the number of different kinds of fish then thought to exist. Others see it as a reference to the number of nations thought to exist on Planet Earth.

When dealing with the incidents referred to above, it is helpful to give thought to Ezekiel 47:1-12—especially vv. 7-10. Ezekiel states that when the messianic age finally breaks in, a vast quantity of fish will be appear in an unlikely place—where the waters of the Kidron valley flow into the Dead Sea.

5:1-3: In Luke 5:1-13, while Jesus is teaching the crowds on the shore of the Lake of Gennesaret (the Sea of Galilee), He sees two empty boats on the lake's shoreline. Reference is made to three fishermen, Simon Peter and James and John, who are busy washing their nets. Jesus gets into Peter's boat, and asks Peter to take Him a little distance away from the shoreline. It is interesting to note that Jesus' enters Peter's boat without any previous introduction. While seated in the boat, Jesus teaches the crowds gathered on the nearby beach. (In Jesus' day, rabbis taught while seated.) Luke makes no reference to what Jesus taught.

5:4: Jesus then tells Peter to take his boat farther out into the lake, and let down his nets for a catch. When He says to Peter, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch," *put out* is a singular verb, and *let down* is a plural verb.

5:5: Peter at first responds in a negative manner. He says that he and his colleagues (apparently James and John) have fished all night, but caught nothing. In Jesus' day, fishermen fished at night. Why? Their nets were made of dark thread—which the fish could see during the day but not at night. Today, fishing in the Sea of Galilee is carried out during the day because the nets are made from transparent thread (e.g., nylon), which the fish cannot see. Despite his initial negative response to Jesus' request, Peter does what Jesus has asked him to do.

5:6: Peter, James, and John then catch so many fish that their nets begin to break!

5:7: Apparently, other (unnamed) fishing partners are nearby—in the second boat. Peter and those with him call to them for help. The combined group then loads so many fish into their boats that the boats begin to sink.

5:8: When Peter realizes that he is in the presence of the awesome power of God, he becomes very conscious of his own sinfulness and unworthiness. His word of address changes from *Master* (v. 5) to *Lord* (v. 8). He falls down before Jesus, addresses Him as "Lord," and begs Him to go away—for he, Peter, is a sinful person.

5:9,10: Not only is Peter amazed, but so too are all those with him—including his partners, James and John. Jesus then tells the group of fishermen not to fear. After all, they are about to experience a career change. They will now devote life to *fishing for people* to share Jesus' message with them.

5:11: The implications of v.11 are most profound. When the fishermen reach the shoreline, *they leave everything and follow Jesus!*

God's people, need to note that Jesus calls His brothers and sisters not merely to *believe in Him*; He calls them to *follow Him*. The implications are enormous.

- * We own nothing. God made and owns all things.
- * We cannot give anything go God. We merely manage that which belongs to God.
- * We are called to serve God full time—by serving those around us, those both near and far, in all that we think, say, and do.
- * Jesus' message is not about *prosperity* theology. It is about *servant* theology.

Ernest Campbell, who once served as pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, wrote the following:

“It began innocently enough—a friend recommending a book by Jon Sobrino. The Salvadoran Jesuit blew most of my ducks out of the water. He threw a hat down on my scrabble board and messed up many of my combinations. He forced me to contend for the ground that I had claimed. The question that Jon Sobrino put to me I must share with you: ‘Are you following Jesus, or believing in Christ?’

“Plunge into the Gospels anywhere and you will likely find Jesus asking someone to follow. The Greek verb is *akaloutheo*. It represents a dominant motif. Why, then, do we hear so little about following Jesus in the church today? I've been in, with, and around the church for more than 50 years. Not when I was in the communicants' class; not when I joined the church; not when I became a candidate for the ministry; not when I was ordained; and never in any of my services of installation. Always the questions have dealt with belief. ‘Do you believe in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Do you believe in the veracity of the Scriptures and the Westminster Confession? Do you believe in the unity and purity of the church?’

“‘Do you believe in Christ?’ It isn't hard to answer that. What is wanted is an affirmative response to treasured propositions about the Second Person of the Trinity. But when someone asks, ‘Are you following Jesus?’, this can get to be expensive. This question has to do with my lifestyle, my attitudes, my values, my surrender.

“If I'm following Jesus, why am I such a good insurance risk? If I'm following Jesus, why, when I have done my giving, have I so much left over for myself? If I'm following Jesus, why do my closets bulge when so many are unclothed? If I'm following Jesus, why do I have so many friends among the affluent and so few among the poor? If I'm following Jesus, why do I have so much privacy in a world that is starved for love? If I'm following Jesus, why am I tempted to overeat in a world in which so many beg for bread? If I'm following Jesus, why am I getting on so well in a world that marked Him out for death?

“Are you following Jesus or believing in Christ? Unfair, you say; the two are inseparable. Theoretically, yes, but pragmatically, no. We separate them all the time. If we must, let us err on the side of *following*. For one can believe without following, but one cannot follow without believing.”

February 14, Transfiguration: Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

(In what follows we shall focus in particular on Luke's Transfiguration narrative (a profound event!), and then offer a few summary comments about 9:37-43.)

In the verses that precede Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration, Luke points out that Jesus, the Son of Man (the true People of God; see Daniel 7:13), is present at every moment through history. Yes, He would be present when Jerusalem fell to the Romans. With the destruction of Jerusalem, Christianity broke free of the narrow limitations of Judaism and reached out to the world-at-large to establish a radically different worldwide Kingdom. As the disciples began to understand, the Final Age of the world broke in with Jesus' Person and ministry. Jesus did not focus merely on "getting people into heaven." He focused on helping people understand that to belong to Him is to belong to His Heavenly Kingdom now and forever. He calls His brothers and sisters to live *now* (in this present world) as they will *then* (after He finally reappears).

9:28: Where the transfiguration event took place is not known. Some suggest that it took place on Mt. Hermon (in present-day Lebanon). However, what matters is not *locality*, but *implication*. Luke tells us that Jesus went up on a (nameless) mountain *to pray*—a detail found only in Luke's account of the transfiguration). We read frequently of Jesus praying before great events in His ministry.

Only Luke makes reference to a time-frame of "about *eight* days." Matthew 17:1 and Mark 9:2 refer to "after *six* days." Perhaps Matthew and Mark have in mind a Sabbath day—and Jesus has come to bring endless everyday rest to His brothers and sisters. Perhaps Luke links *eight* to the first day of the week (seven plus one), Sunday—the day of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus takes with Him Peter, James, and John—His *inner circle*.

9:29: While Jesus is praying, the appearance of His face changes and His clothes become dazzling white. The radiance of the divine glory that once descended from heaven upon the face of Moses (see Exodus 34:29-34) now transforms Jesus' appearance and reveals His true identity.

9:29: The three men now see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus. However, both Moses and Elijah met and spoke with God at Mt. Sinai; see Exodus 19:1-8, ch. 24; 1 Kings chs. 18, 19. The entire worldview of the disciples had been fashioned by what these two key figures from the past represented. The truths that surfaced during the transfiguration event summoned the disciples to rethink those worldviews!

9:30,31: Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus about (Greek text) His coming *exodus* (rescue event) that He is about to *complete* in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, few translations make use of these terms when referring to the contents of the conversation. However, Jesus came to carry out a "final exodus," a "final rescue" of God's people—something that He achieved once and for all when He gave up His life on a Cross and was vindicated in His resurrection. After all, Jesus did not come merely to rescue His people from the *political* dominion of Rome; He came to rescue them from the *spiritual* dominion of the powers of Satan, sin, and death.

9:32: No doubt, Jesus is strengthened by His visit with Moses and Elijah—even as He is eventually strengthened by the visit of the angel in the Garden of Gethsemane. The disciples are weary from lack of sleep on the Mount of Transfiguration, but manage to stay awake—and see Jesus' glory and the two great men who speak with Him. However, they do fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane just prior to Jesus "completing His Final Exodus" through His passion and crucifixion.

9:33, 34: As Moses and Elijah depart from Jesus' presence, Peter suggests to Jesus that he and the other two disciples should build three tents—one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. However, Luke states that Peter did not understand the implications of what he was saying. Was Peter suggesting that the messianic celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (or Tents) was at hand? Tabernacles was a word rich in meaning, with links to Moses' Tabernacle that was filled with God's glory, of God's constant care for His people during the wilderness wanderings, of the Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple, of the messianic day; see Exodus 40:35, Leviticus 23:43, 1 Kings 8:11f, Zechariah 14:16-19.

V. 35: The voice that speaks in this verse expresses a profound truth. It reflects Psalm 2:7 (a coronation psalm) and declares that, in Jesus, the Davidic line of kings was being restored—even though Jesus was a radically different kind of king from David. "Listen to Him" reflects Deuteronomy 18:15, and states that in Jesus, the a new, final, and radically different kind of "prophet Moses" has appeared on the scene.

V. 36: After the heavenly voice has spoken, Jesus is seen to be alone. The three disciples keep silent, and say nothing to anyone about what they have seen and experienced.

The truths that surface in this event are profound. God has shown up in the flesh-and-blood Person of Jesus. Jesus is the long-awaited King—but a King very different from what they Jewish people were waiting for. Jesus is indeed the final, long-awaited prophet. However, He will teach a way of life very different from that embraced by the Judaism of Jesus' day.

9:37-43: When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he had to deal with a mob swept into sensuous religious worship. When Jesus descends from the Mount of Transfiguration, He sees a day "darken into night" because of the people's unbelief. There is a touch of pity in the father's appeal, "my only child." Jesus addresses His audience as a "faithless and perverse generation." Eventually, Jesus heals the boy by rebuking the spirit that occupied him—and then gives him back to his father.

Worthy of thought: In Mark's narrative, the first thing Jesus does when beginning His ministry to the *Jewish people* is to cast a demon out of a man in a synagogue—on a Sabbath day; see 1:21-28. The first thing He does when beginning His ministry to the *non-Jews* is to cast a host of demons out of a Gentile in the Decapolis; see 5:1-20. In like manner, the first thing Jesus does after His identity and mission are revealed in a grand and glorious manner in His transfiguration is to cast out a demon.

February 17, Ash Wednesday: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Matthew 6:1-18 contains warnings about doing good in order to be seen, and gives three examples:

- * 6:2-4, almsgiving;
- * 6:5,15, prayer;
- * 6:6-18, fasting.

In each, the conduct of the "hypocrites" is contrasted with that demanded of the disciples.

Perhaps 6:2 ("hypocrites") relates to opposition between Pharisaic Judaism and the church of Matthew. The scribes and Pharisees desire praise and have received what they are looking for. In 6:5, the Greek verb *apecho* is a commercial term that has to do with giving a receipt for what has been paid in full.

In relation to **fasting**: The only fast prescribed in the Mosaic Law was that of the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16:31. However, the practice of regular fasting was common in Judaism. (See Didache 9:1. The Didache is the oldest known document of a class denoted as "Church Orders" containing directives for catechetical instruction, worship, and ministry. The single surviving

manuscript was transcribed in 1056.)

6:1: The message of Matthew 6:1-18 might be summarized as follows: “Beware of practicing your piety (literally, “your righteousness”) out in public in order to be noticed—to catch peoples’ eyes and seek human admiration and applause.” To live that way is anything but a demonstration of faith. Those who live this way are not looking for a reward from their Father in heaven—and should not be surprised when they receive none. All they are doing is laying up treasure on earth, 6:19. When John Newman was made a cardinal, he declared, “I tremble to take this great honor lest I should be taking out my reward on earth.”

Jesus’ teachings on almsgiving (6:2-4), prayer (6:5,6) and fasting (6:16-18) follow the same pattern. Each paragraph contrasts the behavior of hypocrites with the behavior expected of Jesus’ followers.

6:2: When Jesus’ followers give alms, they must not be like the hypocrites. In the Greek world, *hypocrite* was the word for *actor*. In the New Testament, the word has the larger meaning of a moral or spiritual pretender, one who merely *plays* the part of righteousness without *possessing* the inner reality. In Matthew’s Gospel, *hypocrisy* is contrasted with *righteousness* (5:20), *perfection* (5:48), and *wholeness* (22:37-40). Only hypocrites feel the need to give alms out in public, in the synagogue and in the streets, to the accompaniment of trumpet fanfare.

6:3: Jesus urges His followers not to focus on when and where the giving of alms will make the greatest public impression. He calls them to give in such an unselfconscious fashion that even their left hand does not know what their right hand is doing.

6:4: Jesus’ followers are to give alms in secret—hiding the deed not only from public notice but also from themselves. They are to give alms, not to impress crowds, not to win words of gratitude from the recipients, but simply as God’s partners in divine generosity toward all—especially the poor and defenseless. Jesus combines traditional images and phrases from home and market to proclaim radically new moral insights—demolishing traditional systems in the process.

Jesus tells His disciples that *God is already their Father* (ten times in 6:1-18). God does not become fatherly or motherly, receptive and loving, as some kind of payment to a disciple who has piled up a sufficient heap of deeds well done. Although God likes good deeds better than evil deeds, He is repelled by posturing, disappointed by hypocrisy, and angry when people use other human beings only to draw attention to their own religious practices.

An Anglican clergy serving a parish near Oxford, England, shared the following insight: “When the day comes that I want people to notice me rather than Jesus, I invalidate my ministry.”

6:5-6: Hypocrites are consistent in that they pray the way they give alms. They love to put themselves on display in the synagogues and at street corners so that they might be seen. Jesus sets one extreme against another: prayer on street corners versus prayer in the tool shed or broom closet, display rather than secrecy, seeking applause from others rather than single-minded fellowship with God.

6:16-18: Jesus tells His disciples that when they fast, they are to do the opposite of what the hypocrites do. The hypocrites disfigure their faces so that their suffering may be conspicuous. They deliberately cease bathing, anointing their bodies, and combing their hair. They sprinkle ashes on their heads and put on a garment made of coarse materials. *They do these things to advertise their piety!*

Jesus does not forbid fasting (9:14-15), even though some prophets declared that God preferred justice to fasting; see Isaiah 58:3-9, Joel 2:12,13, Jeremiah 52:12. However, He urges those who

fast to go to extremes that are the exact opposite of the hypocrites; they are to anoint their head, and wash their face. They are to practice piety *for God's eyes only!*

6:19: Treasures in the ancient world included expensive cloth and finely woven garments, easily ruined by moths (James 5:2). If the treasure was a hoard of coins (Sirach 29:10), or an exquisitely carved box or paneling, or a barn full of wheat, it was vulnerable to being eaten away by rust or worms. Thieves could break in by digging through the mud-brick walls of a home, or by digging up a family treasure from its hiding place and stealing it, Matthew 13:44, 24:43.

6:20: The answer to human concerns for security is not to hire extra guards or to invest in more durable goods. It is to turn away completely from treasure on earth to treasure in heaven—to security beyond the reach of moth and rust, and from thieves who break in and steal. Jesus' words point to the vulnerability of human treasures and to the insecurity of a life that focuses only on such things.

6:21: Jesus calls His disciples to cut any chain that links their joy, peace, and security to the ebb and flow of markets and fortune. When their treasure is in heaven—if what really counts is the name, sovereignty, and will of God—then their heart, life, and joy will rest on a foundation as firm as heaven itself.

February 21, Lent 1: Luke 4:1-13

In Mark's narrative, after Jesus is baptized (1:9-11) the Spirit drives Him into the wilderness where He spends forty days; 1:12,13. During this period, He is "tempted by Satan"—only three words in Mark's account!

Matthew's temptation narrative (4:1-11) is much longer, and consists of three incidents.

Luke's temptation narrative (4:1-13) also consists of three incidents, although the final two are in reverse order from those in Matthew.

Luke's temptation narrative is preceded by his version of Jesus' genealogy, 3:23-38. While Matthew 1:1-17 traces Jesus' origins back to Abraham and David, Luke traces them all the way back to Adam. Luke's genealogy focuses on Jesus as a "New Adam"—as a new beginning to the human race.

In His *baptism*, Jesus is anointed for His Messianic work; in His temptation, that work is put to the test. The temptations are not so much personal trials as they are a Messianic struggle. Will Jesus walk the way of a Servant-without-limit, or will He expect His Father to serve and deliver Him in miraculous ways from anything unpleasant? The implications of Jesus' temptations are profound; note Hebrews 2:17,18 and 4:15.

4:1,2: The Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness of Judea. (Luke delights in speaking of Jesus' total surrender to the Spirit!) While there, He no doubt meditates on His coming Messianic work. Some looked on the desert as the devil's haunt; see Tobit 8:3 (an apocryphal writing). Jesus spends forty days in the desert—during which time He eats nothing and is famished.

4:3,4: The devil now confronts a hungry Jesus and urges Him to prove that He is the Son of God by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. In other words, resort to the miraculous to meet your own needs! Jesus refuses, and points out that one does not live by bread alone; see Deuteronomy 8:3. *Throughout His ministry, Jesus never does anything just to benefit Himself.*

This first temptation presumes the presence of Jesus' miraculous powers. It challenges the

implications and consequences of Jesus being prepared to be a suffering Messiah—and a servant of others without limit. However, Jesus will never yield to the prospect of seeking His own physical comfort and pleasure rather than doing the will of His Father.

4:5-8: Satan now offers Jesus dominion over “the kingdoms of the world” over which, he claims, he has been given authority. Lies! Satan has not been given authority over the kingdoms of the world; he has usurped it. He does not own them, and they are not his to give. No doubt Jesus was repulsed by Satan’s suggestion. Jesus can see beneath the seductive shams of worldly systems to the delusions of sin.

It is significant that Satan suggests that Jesus seek political dominion over the world. The Jewish people of Jesus’ day were hoping to achieve just that for themselves. In dealing with this issue, it is most important to understand the significance of the term “son of man” in Daniel 7 (see 7:13), and to understand how Jesus radically reinterprets that term in relation to His own person and ministry. (The term “Son of Man” is used 82 times in the four Gospels. The Greek word for “gospel” [good news] is used 12 times in Matthew and Mark, but never in Luke or John.) Jesus did not seek to dominate the world, but to serve the world and to establish an “upside down, back-to-front” servant-kingdom.

4:9-12: Luke’s infancy narrative opens and closes in the Temple, 1:4–2:38. The final verse of his Gospel speaks of the disciples being continually in the Temple blessing God, 24:52.

The third temptation (according to the order of Luke’s Gospel—but the second event in Matthew’s narrative) takes place on the pinnacle of the Jerusalem Temple. The pinnacle was at the southeast corner of the Temple area; 450 feet below it lay the Kidron Valley. Luke states that Satan takes Jesus to this location. Satan’s temptation invites, “Be a popular Messiah! Offer a godly show of the miraculous—and win the eyes and hearts of all in Jerusalem.” However, Jesus’ way of winning Jerusalem was to walk the servanthood and suffering—to the point of giving away life itself.

Although the devil knows how to quote—but twist—scripture, Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. Salvation is not achieved outside the ordinary laws of existence, but within the normal, humble (and at times sorrowful) way of faith.

4:13: After the devil has finished every test, he departs from Jesus until an opportune time. As in other concluding lines, Luke prepares his readers for the future—for the final, decisive struggle with satanic forces in Jerusalem.

It is important that God’s people understand Jesus’ ministry as a battle with the demonic. The demonic says, “Live for self!” Jesus says, “Live to serve Me by serving those around you.” What a difference! The more we understand this issue, the more we understand that the Lord’s Prayer is really a war cry. Its final petition should read, “Deliver us from *the evil one*.” More translations are now rendering that final petition in this manner—e.g., the NRSV. We do well to ponder John 12:31 and 17:15, and to bear in mind that, in John’s passion narrative, on the cross Jesus declares Himself to be the Victor and gives away His life as the ultimate servant act; see 19:30. Although Jesus gets crucified, Satan gets nailed!

February 28, Lent 2: Luke 13:31-35

13:31: The passage under review makes reference to an incident involving Herod Antipas—an incident mentioned only in Luke’s Gospel. (Note also the references to “foxes,” the Herodians, in 9:58.) The dialog outlined raises a question: Did the Pharisees want to save Jesus from Herod (who ruled Galilee and Perea), or did they want to lure Him into Judea and Jerusalem where they were powerful enough to secure His condemnation?

13:32: Jesus' reply reflects a note of bitter irony. Herod is nothing but a "fox"—crafty, without honor, and totally self-centered. The Jews regarded the fox as the most sly and seductive of animals—and linked the word to a weak and worthless man.

Those to whom Jesus ministers must note how Jesus carries out His servant ministry: He casts out demons and constantly cures the sick. The term "third day" means a limited period of time. In relation to Jesus finishing His work on the third day, note again John 19:30.

13:33: Jesus will not be sidetracked by any fear of what Herod Antipas might be planning to do. He must continue on His way to Jerusalem. After all, Jerusalem has quite a reputation in relation to how it has treated God's prophets! The *grand finale* to His own ministry must take place in that tragically deluded city! And although Jesus' followers will say, "Oh, no!" at the cross, His Father will say "Oh, yes!" on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday morning!

13:34: Jesus' words reflect the spirit of Jeremiah's grief in relation to Jerusalem's refusal to heed his message; see Jeremiah 12:7, 21:14, 22:6. Jesus longed to gather God's people into His care and Kingdom, even as a hen seeks to gather her chickens under her wings in a time of serious danger—as, for example, when grass or forest fire breaks out. But sad to say, those who see what Jesus does and hear what He says refuse to come to Him to find eternal security.

In Matthew's Gospel (see 23:37-39), Jesus speaks these words when He is already in Jerusalem, and the events of Palm Sunday seem like a distant memory.

V. 35: The final section of this verse is a quote from Psalm 118:26. The Jews chanted this psalm when observing the great pilgrim feasts, especially Tabernacles—their autumn harvest festival. It was chanted during the Palm Sunday procession when Jesus entered Jerusalem just prior to His crucifixion. However, in the present context Jesus is referring to the final breaking in of the Messianic Age. The final feast of Tabernacles must wait until the Jewish people are ready to understand Jesus' divine identity and the true nature of His Kingdom—and to participate in its eternal joys.

So, Jesus continues on His way to Jerusalem and its Temple. Scholars suggest that the city's population in Jesus' day was about 55,000. Some suggest that *at least* 9,000 priests served on the Temple's staff—but not necessarily on a full-time basis. Although the "top brass" of the priests lived in Jerusalem (and in luxury!), few ordinary priests did—and went to Jerusalem for a week only twice each year. About 80 percent of Jerusalem's residents earned their living through their involvement in the Temple's "salvation marketing system"—by providing pilgrims with accommodation and food, and by selling them the animals used in the sacrificial system. Little wonder, then, that Jesus' attack on the Temple system gave rise to fierce opposition and anger on the part of priests and tradesmen. Jesus was placing their ability to earn a living under serious threat!