

## BOOK REVIEW

GOSPEL LIGHT: JESUS STORIES FOR SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS,  
John Shea. (New York: the Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998) ISBN0-8245-1709-1, Paper, \$14.95

John Shea begins GOSPEL LIGHT book by quoting a poem by the Sufi mystic Rumi:

“Very few can sit down  
in the middle of the first itself....  
We need intermediaries.”

Shea proposes that gospel stories, or as he calls them, Jesus stories, are intermediaries for “the fire itself,” and through them, we can be warmed by the Spirit’s fire.

The great spiritual traditions direct us to “go within,” where we will find hidden treasure. The fruits of this journey, we are promised, will be self-knowledge—wisdom. The first part of this book shows how the gospel stories are a resource for this journey for a deeper spiritual consciousness. However, going within is not easy since we live in an action-filled outer world. Our culture is not oriented to developing an inner life. Shea suggests that we are hesitant to go within because we do not trust introspection. We are, he says, “addicted to without” and to chronic busyness. To take the interior journey we will need encouragement and guides and so Shea directs us to the Jesus stories.

This is not a book for solitaries who want to escape from the world. Rather, it focuses on the Jesus stories and how they can guide us to the well within that will help us see and hear better; discover direction to randomness and find peace amid the frantic world in which we live. In other words, we go within so that we can return better grounded and with wisdom to live out our commitment to God in this world.

Shea first provides guidelines for how to discover the treasures waiting for us in the Jesus stories. He cautions that the Jesus stories are too familiar to us; we have too much knowledge about them. Reading this book as preachers we take his advice to heart. It is our occupational hazard that when we approach gospel stories we might jump to the conclusion that we already know the point of each. We have a too-ready interpretation at hand and might conclude we already know what we will preach. If this presumption is true and I suspect for us “veterans” it may very

well be so, our preaching probably reflects this over familiarity and the resulting vocational ennui. Shea wants to suggest ways to approach the Jesus stories that will enable them to do for us what the disciples on the road to Emmaus experienced when Jesus opened the Word to them----that our hearts also burn within us as we experience the fire the stories mediate to us.

The author is an experienced preacher and speaks from his personal experience. He admits that he had fallen into a “utilitarian approach” which preachers will recognize he would go to the text, stare at the gospel and hope something would “pop up” in time for preaching. But he found this method of preparing deadly. He suggests we need to “apprentice” ourselves to the story; by entering into a period of creative listening to the text. To do this he proposes a series of “moves”—major steps in an intense listening process. These moves parallel the classical approach to scripture: “Lectio” (reading), “Meditatio” (meditation), “Oratio” (prayer), “Contemplatio” (contemplation) and “Operatio” (action). He summarizes these five steps into three: Study, Mediation and Integration. He says he “shuttles” back and forth between them.

STUDY or “Careful Attention”—the phase in which he seeks help from scriptural scholars. But he warns that as valuable as the work of gifted biblical scholars is, this stage is not a substitute for personal engagement. Preaches must creatively interact with the text, otherwise there will be no illumination. When we “apprentice” ourselves to the text, we discover an emerging wisdom for our lives. The fruit of this apprenticeship is a “alternative spiritual language and a symbolic understanding of the people, places and things involved” (page 59). But, though spiritual wisdom begins to emerge at this stage, study is not the end of the process.

MEDITATION or “Personal Witness.” Here the spirit of the text awakens our own spirit, stirring our mind to see and understand. Here we are enlightened, even if only for a moment, with spiritual wisdom. At this stage the wisdom we receive moves the story towards a universal application and this we preachers will recognize as a very “preachable” moment as we discover a common human condition addressed by the text. Here we experience illumination and begin to see more clearly.

INTEGRATION—“THE TREASURING OF WISDOM.” At this stage Shea suggests we “play Mary.” He notes how Jesus’ mother pondered the Word she heard and treasured it in her heart. We “hold fast” to this “treasuring stage,” for it begins a process of integration, when an initial spiritual insight begins to enable us to see and hear “persistently from a spiritual point of view” (page 63). Thus, we

undergo a change that goes to the very depth of our being and transforms how we see, hear and act in the world. Through personal struggle and slow development, the Jesus story becomes our own.

Shea sums up these three phases to illumination in this way:

“During the study phase the language is story-tied, analyzing character and mapping out plots. There is a lot of Jesus, disciple and adversary talk. In the meditative phase, a language develops that is story-indebted, but not story-tied. The Jesus-disciple-adversary language fades out. In its place is the more general language of spiritual teaching, and theological reflection. Through the phase of integration this language unfolds into the words of personal struggle. Personal storytelling is now added to the Jesus story and its developed spiritual wisdom to complete the process of making the Jesus story our own” (page 65).

Now we are ready to “offer” (preach?) the Jesus stories to others, for what the Spirit has given us must be given away. What Shea has outlined sounds, to this preacher, like a contemplative approach to the Word that will bear fruit in the heart of the preacher and yield a “word” for preaching. At this point of the book, he imagines how a person could bring the fruits of this kind of imagination to a small group and guide them to a deeper immersion into a gospel story. Thus, the method he proposes becomes useful for those who lead scriptural reflection groups. But again, this method is a very useful contemplative exercise, or wrestling match, that will yield to the preacher a blessing for preaching.

Part two of GOSPEL LIGHT has six chapters, each opens up a specific Jesus story. Following the method he has outlined, Shea shows how Jesus’ stories are the intermediaries that can take us “within” and then “without.” His reflections make for great meditative reading as he opens us to receive the wisdom of the stories he has chosen.

For us preachers, Shea has provided a method with rich examples to enable us to mine the Jesus stories for personal insight, but also for a word to speak to listeners as hungry as we are to hear and be transformed by God’s Word.

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