

# PROPOSAL

## INTRODUCTION

Attached is a sampling of weekly commentaries on Biblical scripture that follow the three-year cycle of Christian liturgical readings of the Revised Common Lectionary.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Appendix contains reimagined rituals of Holy Communion that reflects an invitation to a new commitment to partnership with a non-theistic, “*kenotic God*”<sup>2</sup> in the ongoing salvation work of non-violent, distributive, justice-compassion. This project is grounded in the work of biblical scholars such as Karen Armstrong, Marcus J. Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, and Amy-Jill Levine, as well as the transforming work of Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox, whose theology of Creation Spirituality has reclaimed Catholic mysticism from “original sin” to “original blessing” for post-modern cosmology.

## METHOD

### **Four Questions For the Apocalypse**

The underlying framework for the commentaries is a series of four questions.

- 1) What is the nature of God? Violent or non-violent?
- 2) What is the nature of Jesus’ message? Inclusive or exclusive?
- 3) What is faith? Literal belief, or trust in God’s realm of distributive justice-compassion?
- 4) What is deliverance? Salvation from hell, or liberation from injustice?

These questions address what might be seen as apocalyptic times for humanity on Planet Earth. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century – much like the First Century – finds human social structures embroiled in political, social, spiritual, and theological issues that demand serious consideration of the answers to those questions. Unlike the First Century, 21<sup>st</sup> Century humanity is also confronted with the distinct possibility of a holocaust that is not confined to individuals, tribes, or nations, but threatens the existence of planetary life as humanity has known it for 100,000 years.

---

<sup>1</sup>*Revised Common Lectionary*, Consultation on Common Texts, Washington, D.C., 1992.

<sup>2</sup>See John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (Harper SanFrancisco, 2004) pp. 288ff.

## ANALYSIS

Two choices arise from the answers to these four questions.

If the answers are Violent, Exclusive, Literal Belief, and Salvation from Hell, then the context for personal, social, and political life is Empire, and the theology of Empire: *Piety, War, Victory, Peace*.<sup>3</sup> Christianity has been in danger of diverting into false paths from the beginning. One of those false paths, which is all too easily found in John's Gospel, opposes Christian "enlightenment" to the "darkness" of Jewish tradition. Another is the path that leads to collaboration with political empire. The four horsemen of the apocalypse – War, Famine, Disease, and Death – galloping down the ages out of the Revelation of John of Patmos – have brought humanity to the brink of extinction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We continue to terrorize ourselves with their seeming inevitability. Whether or not that metaphor is the one that prevails depends upon how humanity (not just Christians) ultimately answers the questions.

If the answers to the four questions are Non-violent, Inclusive, Trust, and Liberation, then the context for personal, social, and political life is participation in the ongoing work (struggle) for distributive justice-compassion – *i.e.*, Covenant. Distributive justice-compassion is radical fairness, which is in direct opposition to the retributive "justice" of normal social systems. Instead of payback and revenge, distributive justice-compassion offers grace and radical fairness. The Covenant to participate in establishing such a paradigm is with a non-theistic, *kenotic* god, a force which – in Crossan's words – "is the beating heart of the Universe, whose presence is justice and life, and whose absence is injustice and death."<sup>4</sup> The Covenant then reflects the inclusive peaceable kingdom described by the Old Testament prophets, in which "none shall hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain."

The choice in these commentaries is clear.

## RESULTS

John Shelby Spong has called for a profound change in the practice of Christianity, that can carry us both back to its roots, and forward into a new Christianity that is relevant to life in the Third Millennium.

I see in this moment of Christian history a new vocation . . . to legitimize the questions, the probings, and, in whatever form, the faith of the *believer in exile*. . . . [A] conversation and a dialogue must be opened with those who cannot any longer give their assent to those premodern theological concepts that continue to mark the

---

<sup>3</sup>*Id.*

<sup>4</sup>*Id.* p. 291.

life of our increasingly irrelevant ecclesiastical institution. . . .  
[T]he time has come for the Church to invite its people into a  
frightening journey into the mystery of God and to stop  
proclaiming that somehow the truth of God is still bound by either  
our literal scriptures or our literal creeds.<sup>5</sup> [Emphasis added]

The Commentaries are intended to address the “so what” question, begged by the continuing, ground-breaking work of The Westar Institute’s Jesus Seminar scholars. Now that we know what the historical Jesus probably actually said, taught, and did, so what? What does our Christian scriptural tradition mean now? Can we rely on the canon? What does this knowledge do to (or for) Christian liturgy – specifically, such defining rituals as Baptism and Holy Communion? The Jesus Seminar is actively encouraging churches to focus on these questions, with the purpose of expanding biblical literacy, and developing dialogue on liturgy.

In his most recent book, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, Marcus J. Borg contrasts doctrinal Christianity with an “emerging paradigm,” which has been “the dominant understanding in divinity schools and seminaries of mainline churches” for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The problem is, that “emerging paradigm” has largely remained behind closed seminary classroom doors, buried in unpublished Masters of Divinity theses, and has not made it into the minds of the people occupying the pews in church on Sunday morning.

These commentaries and accompanying liturgies are intended to provide courage to clergy and enlightenment to lay leadership in the sometimes “frightening journey” described by Spong, to integrate personal spirituality with 21<sup>st</sup> Century cosmological realities. This series is a contribution to that dialogue for clergy, and a catalyst for progressive, lay-led Bible study groups.

### **Who Are The Elves?**

Finally, these commentaries contain a short-hand term that illustrates the frustration of many worship leaders when confronted with the seeming unrelatedness of many of the liturgical readings proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL).<sup>6</sup> A clergy friend (now retired) describes the cherry-picking among the various portions of scripture as having been put together by “drunken elves.” The RCL provides its own clues as to how and/or why certain passages from Old Testament scriptures are paired with certain passages from the New Testament. The most recent version certainly is its own testimony to the hard work of coming up with a three-year cycle of “common texts” that Catholics and mainline Protestant Christians can use throughout the Christian liturgical year of Sundays, Holy Days, Feast Days, and Seasons.

---

<sup>5</sup>John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity must change or die* (HarperCollins Publishers 1998) p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>*Revised Common Lectionary*, Consultation on Common Texts, Washington, D.C., 1992.

But as these Commentaries point out, all too often the Old Testament readings are snipped out of context in order to support Christian messianic claims to the detriment of Jewish wisdom, thereby robbing Christianity of a rich source for understanding the message of Jesus himself. Worse, such selectivity legitimizes Christian hegemony, supercessionism, and ultimately anti-Semitism.

While “The Elves” may seem to be subject to quite a bit of abuse in these commentaries, no individual disrespect is intended. In addition, it is by no means an insult to the nobility of those of the Elven Race (as described by J.R.R. Tolkien) who long ago abandoned Middle Earth to its fate – a caution to those who use proof-texting to justify compliance with Empire.

#### REFERENCES

Borg, Marcus J., *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (Harper One, 2006).

Crossan, John Dominic and Reed, Jonathan L., *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’s Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (Harper SanFrancisco, 2004).

Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing* (Bear & Company, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1983).

*Revised Common Lectionary*, Consultation on Common Texts, Washington, D.C., 1992.

Spong, John Shelby, *Why Christianity must change or die* (HarperCollins Publishers 1998).