

The Preacher's Task: Robert W. Bertram to Lori Cornell (and Every Proclaimer)

Co-Missioners,

This coming Sunday, the Second of Advent, will feature St. Luke's introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist (Lk. 3:1-6). In contrast to his co-evangelists, Luke kickstarts his account with a dramatic rollcall of regional potentates. His point, at least in part, is to trumpet John's ministry as an event of monumental significance in human history, so important that one needs to know not only where it happened, but when.

Luke, we think, could not have guessed how accurate his assessment of John's importance would turn out to be. He could not, for example, have done what you're about to do, which is to trace a direct line from the first-century banks of the River Jordan to the late twentieth century pulpit of a little Lutheran church on the western edge of the North American continent. Kent, Washington: that's the historian's precise "where." The "when" is December 5, 1993. The "what" is an urbane Robert W. Bertram filling the sandals of the roughhewn Baptist as he urges one of his last and better students to fill those sandals too.



Bertram works through Paul to make his points. You'll want to keep Romans 10 handy as you read. Paul, of course, is the greatest of all the Baptist's successors, laying out John's case with a post-Easter clarity that John did not enjoy and that hosts of Baptist-wannabes have muddled badly in the centuries since. (They're doing it still.) At issue is "the forgiveness of sins" as the option God prefers to the standard procedure of making sinners pay up. At stake is the confidence of those sinners in the astonishing announcement, sprung on the world through John for the first time ever, that God in Christ is making this option available not merely to some—the few, the chosen, the genetically correct—but to each and every sinner, shabby bloodlines or behavior being suddenly beside the point.

"Give us this option," says Bob the Baptist to Lori Cornell, the person he was talking to on that night of her ordination twenty-five years ago. "Tug us into Jesus."

We thank God for Lori this Advent. She's been editing our "Sabbatheology" text studies since A.D. 2000, a task she manages

with consummate skill and unflagging regularity. Her day job finds her serving as pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church, Federal Way, Washington, with prior calls to Christ Lutheran, Lakewood, and First Lutheran, Tacoma, both of these also in Washington. Whether as editor or pastor, she keeps delivering the Word Jesus (see below) with a single-minded intensity that would do the Baptist proud and cause her mentor Bob to beam. [Our forthcoming conference](#) at the end of January would be a good place to meet her.

This hitherto unpublished sermon was tucked away in Lori's files. We assume she unearthed it in the first place for some personal refreshment in the reason of reasons for the work she's been doing these past 25 years. She plans after Christmas to send us a reflection on that. Meanwhile she thought to grace us with the sermon itself. For that we thank her indeed. There's not a one of us, ordained or lay, who won't benefit from a close reading.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

"Put in the Word Jesus."

**A Sermon by Robert W. Bertram at the ordination of Lori A.
Cornell, December 5, 1993**

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Romans 10:13-17

¹³[The Scripture says] 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' ¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom

they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' ¹⁶But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' ¹⁷So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.

I

**Dear Preacher Lori,
Put in a Good Word for us.
Put it in our hearts and lips.
Put in the Word Jesus.**

This text from Paul's Letter to the Romans begins with a quotation from the prophet Joel, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32). Notice, "calls upon the name of the Lord" not the way a saint calls upon the Lord in prayer, but the way a guilty defendant on trial for his life calls across the courtroom to some influential character witness to please put in a good word for him and save him. In such a fix, knowing who that witness is, by name, would be pretty important, wouldn't it? Do you get the picture? Joel and Paul are picturing life, our ordinary daily lives, as some momentous courtroom drama. "Everyone," they say, is continually on trial and the stakes are life or death, being "saved" or the opposite.

You may have sensed something of that trial atmosphere in your own lives just from the way you talk. So much of what we say sounds as if we are trying to vindicate ourselves before some unseen Judge. For example, you may feel compelled to explain why you are buying a new car or why you want to postpone marrying until after college or why you are moving your parent to a

nursing home or why you voted for the other candidate or why you have been so tired lately. Anyone of these explanations, though you seem to be speaking them to mere human beings, could just as well begin with the words, "Your Honor," as if addressed to God. People talk like defendants not just when they are psychologically defensive but also—especially!—when they are being grownup and responsible. They talk as if some ultimate Authority on some cosmic bench *demand*ed their response, demanded that they give an account of their stewardship, demanded that they justify themselves. Responsible people talk like that, so I have read, even when they don't believe in a Last Judgment, even when they don't believe in God. They will sense that they are ultimately answerable. Their speech betrays them. So does ours.

However, the way we justify ourselves in our speech, with our lips, does not honestly square with what is in our hearts. The righteous, lawful reasons we ascribe to ourselves when we *talk* contradict the unrighteous, unlawful reasons which actually motivate us. John Smith in so many *words* is one person, John Smith at *heart* is someone else. He is never "as good as his word." Even he suspects that about himself. So does his wife, also his children, especially his boss. Just imagine how contradictory, how two-faced Smith must look to the Judge who has to conduct this incriminating trial, whose law it is which cuts right through the hypocrisy between lips and heart. Of course, Mrs. Smith, too, when up against the Judge, stands convicted of the same heart-and-lip disease. So do the kids, not to mention the boss.

It is a fundamental rule of the cosmic court, as Paul reminds us, that if you hope to make it in life by the righteousness of the law, then you will have to live by that righteousness (10:5)—or, as the case may be, die by it. The Judge, being simultaneously our Creator, has the power of life and death. All the same, there is nothing arbitrary about this Judge's rulings.

They are impeccably fair and lawful. If, as we said, you prefer to stake your case on your own life's record, as most folks do, then the Judge will agree to that and will hold you to just that record—the record, of course, of your heart as well as your lips. Nothing more, nothing less. That you may count on. By the same token, when the record you present does not hold up—and does it ever?—and you do not survive, there will be no cause to complain about a mistrial nor any need to appeal. Fair is fair. The trouble is, none of us can stand that much fairness.

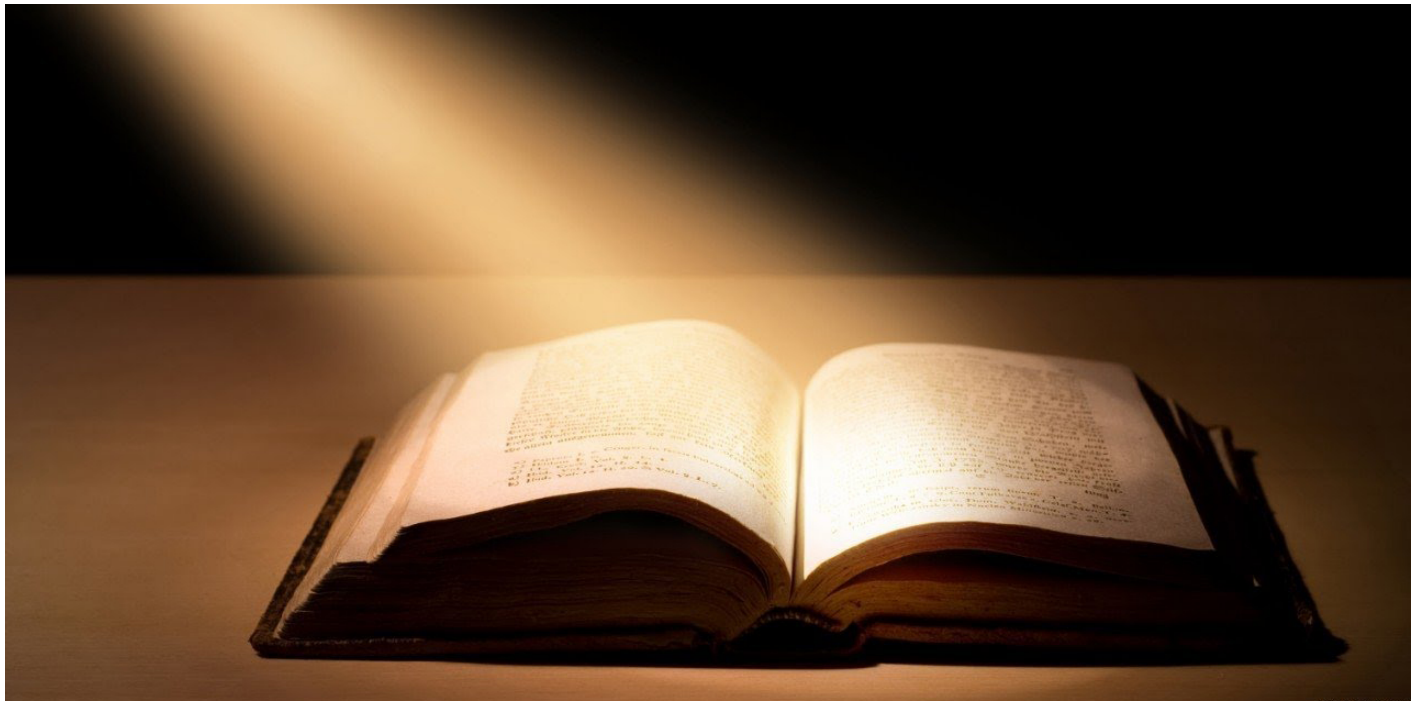
II

**Dear Preacher Lori,
Put in a Good Word for us.
Put it in our hearts and lips.
Put in the Word Jesus.**

Is there no other way through this ordeal? As Christians you know there is. As Christians you know there is an alternative to “the righteousness of the law,” namely, what Paul calls “the righteousness from God” (10:3), a flat-out gift from the Judge. Even so, in the here and now where we are daily summoned to the stand, the other righteousness of Christ does seem totally other, doesn't it—terribly remote. When the very sin that incriminates us is closer to us than our own skin, as close as our hearts and lips, then by comparison this totally other Christ seems exasperatingly farfetched. He seems long ago and far away, gone with the dead past. Then, as Paul knows from experience, our faithless hearts grumble. Who will fetch Christ back from the dead (10:7)? For our day in court is now. Or if Christ is raised he must be raised somewhere beyond the stars. So again we whine, Who will fetch him back down (10:6)? For down here is where we are withering under interrogation, trying to fast-talk our way out of a terminal case of cardiac deceit. Sure, Christ may be our Friend in court, our court-appointed

Advocate, but in this court? Would he sully his professional reputation in sordid proceedings like these where lips perjure their own hearts, where talk is cheap, where names are dropped, where words are merely that: words, words, words?

That, says Paul, is exactly where Christ is waging our defense, right in the most unclean, most non-kosher parts of our anatomy, our lips and hearts. That close to us Christ is, in so many words as we talk about him, in a name as we call upon him, a word which stirs in our hearts. He is not afraid of being contaminated as he makes himself into a Word on our tongue, a Word in our innards. Remember, this rabbi has chutzpah. Like a good Jewish mother he does not shrink from what is non-kosher, not where his own are at risk. What's a mother to do? Sabbath or no sabbath, he climbs down into whatever ditch they have fallen. On Good Friday his accusers, the finicky priests, had to keep themselves pure and so disdained to enter Pontius Pilate's pagan praetorium. But not rabbi Jesus. Without so much as holding his nose, he walks right into the praetorium, off-limits though it was. For there were we. And what did you confess in the creed this morning, that "he descended into hell"? Well, then, do we suppose he could be scared off by hearts and lips frail as ours? Right in the thick of our interrogation he inserts himself as something so commonplace as a *word*, a Greek word or an English word, that can be mouthed by sinful lips or felt by sinners' hearts.



Where, once more, is this Word, Jesus? This “Word,” says Paul, “is near you, on your lips and in your heart... For if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:8, 9). You and I marvel that the Lord comes to us boldly in ordinary bread and wine and that he drowns and rises again with us in ordinary water. But at the center of this sacramental marvel is that he comes to us first of all so abjectly incarnate, so utterly accessible as words. Without him as Word, the bread and wine and the water could not be consecrated. Nor could we. As Word, as ordinary human speech, he slips in as just one more word among all the other words which clutter our hearts and lips, just as pronounceable, just as tape-recordable, just as profanable. For his chutzpah way of cleaning up our language is not to rise above it all but to infiltrate it at its roots where lips debase it and hearts die of it.

It is from this secret, hidden recess of our sinner-hood that our Public Defender now goes public. He speaks out for us at the most indefensible point of our testimony. At the very point in

the trial when the sentence of death is about to fall, out comes the confession, "Jesus is Lord" and ... "God has raised him from the dead" (10:9). The courtroom falls silent. Is it our imagination that at this tense moment the austere Judge winks back a grin of recognition? Does this Word from our poor hearts and lips, this out-loud Jesus, have clout with the Judge? Is this Jesus Your Honor's very own namesake? Have the two of them, the Judge and Jesus Our Go-Between, been in cahoots all along? Still, that does figure, doesn't it? For this Christ of God is the one, the only one, who *is* as good as his Word. And he has put in that Good Word for us right where it most hurts—and most saves: in our hearts and on our lips.

III

But logical or not, you may want to raise one last objection. So you ask, Would the cosmic Judge and the court-appointed Advocate jeopardize their whole elaborate plot by entrusting it to something so fragile and unimpressive as preaching? Of course. The medium fits the audience. You were expecting maybe an angel? Think what that would do to faint hearts and lips like ours. It may have taken angels to get the process started. But they, you will recall, promptly turned the job over to quite earthy shepherds. And from that point on it has been shepherds ever since. "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (10:17).

The whole process of re-wording our self-incriminating hearts and lips with the new Word, the Word Jesus, *comes* to us in the same way we *receive* it, namely, through the altogether human hearts and lips of preachers. This delivery process, too, which is what preaching is, comes from a stage-frightened heart and sometimes unsure lips of a young woman like Lori. The Word comes quite humanly to other hearts like her own, heart to heart. The eternal Word of God, mind you, who as we know by now is an

audacious gambler, allows himself to be passed along by a preacher's voice through her hearers' ears to their ambivalent hearts and out again on their confessing lips. The skittish angels must be biting their nails. "Don't drop him," they groan. And yet shepherds like Lori have an advantage over angels. She is one of us. It takes one to know one.

The wonder is that preaching works. But it does. And it works not because of the preacher, not even because of her hearers, though they can all quite easily abort the entire re-Wording process. And they do. That is how vulnerable the preached Word is. But that is also his power. Though this Word reverses the whole course of the cosmic trial in our favor, though this name Jesus outranks all other names, it comes to us—he does—downsized to our condition, lip-sized and heart-shaped. The size and shape of Lori Cornell. But how is she to proclaim him unless she is sent? That is what is happening tonight.

**Dear Preacher Lori,
Put in a Good Word for us.
Put it in our hearts and lips.
Put in the Word Jesus.**



Rev. Robert W. Bertram



Rev. Lori A. Cornell

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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