

John Shea. *Following Love Into Mystery: Feasts, Funerals, and Weddings*. The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010. 304 pages. Earlier volumes are: Year A: *On Earth As It Is In Heaven*, 2004. Year B: *Eating With The Bridegroom*, 2005. Year C: *The Relentless Widow*, 2006. \$29.95 each.

The publication of the fourth volume of John Shea's set of commentaries on the lectionary selections from the gospels provides the occasion for bringing them to the attention of preachers who have not yet discovered them. In the Preface to this fourth volume Shea reports on the responses he has gotten from a spectrum of readers, both clergy and lay, to the first three volumes. When he asked what they found interesting or helpful, the answers pointed to the fact that Shea's comments provided "an occasion for significant inner work that has had significant outer effects." (xiii) This has often been this reviewer's experience in using these volumes on a regular basis in preparation for preaching since 2004 when the series began to appear in print. And in fact in the first volume Shea envisions this: "This resource book starts a process without ending it" (Year A, xiv).

In all volumes the commentary is in two parts. The first part, *A Spiritual Commentary*, draws the reader into the substance of the text. While it is not an historical-critical commentary, the comments in this section are grounded in the fruits of the historical-critical perspective and more recent literary sensitivity to the texts. With that foundation, Shea goes on to focus on "the mindsets of the characters and how Jesus complimented, critiqued, praised, and excoriated those mindsets in the light of his own mindset." The Gospel text itself provides "images, ideas, attitudes, and actions that either opened or closed the mind to the Divine Spirit and either facilitated or blocked the flow of the spirit into creative speech and action." (*On Earth*, xiii). For example, in the commentary on John 1:1-18 (*Following Love*, 30-40), which is not the voice of Jesus but of the community of believers in song, Shea works through the text, a literary unit at a time. He notes how words are the means by which we reveal ourselves to another in order to create relationship. God's Word reveals itself to the world as "the ultimate source of everything there is." God's Word is life and light. As light it enables humans to "become aware of the life that flows through creation, connecting God and all things." In the human condition there is tragically darkness as well as light that actively, even violently resists the light. God's desire to bring light into our darkness is so strong that God even takes on our flesh, that is our mortality, in order to accompany us in our perpetual perishing. The witness, John, points to and encourages belief in the light. The darkness will not be victorious! From this exposition of the text, which articulates the "mega-plot of the Gospel," Shea chooses to focus on the promised victory of light over darkness. In the *Teaching* section, he takes up this theme, telling the story of his own experience of seeing his family Christmas tree shining in the darkness, and also a Cherokee story about how some trees came to lose their leaves while others remain ever green. This story provides an alternative image to darkness and light. The combination of lights and an evergreen tree becomes an image for Christmas as a feast in which those who believe in the victory of the Word made flesh over the world's darkness *defy* the world's darkness and barrenness. Shea quotes G. K. Chesterton: "A religion that defies the world should have a feast that defies the weather." So Shea fantasizes sending Christmas cards with the greeting, "Have a defiant Christmas!" But Shea does not stop there. The question is, How do we sustain the inner, spiritual change to which the Gospel and the image of the evergreen tree with lights invites us? The changes in our spirit come and go in varying degrees of strength. We are continually "experiments in incarnation." John, the witness to the Word, holds the key: repentance. "We

must become comfortable with this way of repentance. Repentance is not what sinners have to do. Repentance is just an inevitable aspect of living on the border of eternity and time, where transcendent love seeks embodiment in finite form.” (39)

This kind of reflection has consistently me in the direction of the homily. It has often sparked an insight Shea does not articulate, serving as a catalyst for my own reflection. But equally as often, Shea says something that I actually include and build upon. I have found this set of commentaries the most fertile source for preaching on my bookshelf.

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