

Reading the Gospel with Solentiname



© Sarah Monroe, 2013

This publication was made possible through the generosity of the Episcopal Evangelism Society. This study is dedicated to those I met on the U.S.-Mexico border, modern day economic refugees, fleeing political and economic oppression in the southern parts of the Americas. .

Note

This is intended to be a companion to the book *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname*, edited by Philip and Sally Sharper. This book is abridged from the four-volume set *The Gospel in Solentiname*, by Ernesto Cardenal. This abridgment contains reflections and art on thirty-one gospel passages, from the annunciation to the resurrection, by a group of campesino farmers from the Nicaraguan island of Solentiname. It is compact and brief, perfect for use in a short Bible study. It is one of the few Bible commentaries and studies that represents the conversation and work of Christian Base Communities and provides an important model for grassroots, liberationist Bible study.

While some of what is said relates to a time and place long past, Using this as a companion book on the streets could be a useful way to introduce liberation theology and the base community model. These ideas, while dated, also have much to teach us in a time when a growing number of Americans are facing economic instability, alienation from the church, and a search for their own dignity.

Introduction

In the late 1970s, a group of farmers and fishermen in Nicaragua held Bible studies, reading the gospels together and asking what their lives had to do with the stories of the Bible. They lived in an island chain is called Solentiname. Their conversations were tape recorded by the local priest, Ernesto Cardenal, who held services in the open air. These conversations were published and the books, instead of being by experts about the Bible, are stories of ordinary people and how they found the Bible important in their lives. Each reflection on each passage is accompanied by a piece of art, painted by people in the community to represent what the gospel meant to them.

Father Cardenal writes about this; “Every Sunday in a Solentiname, a remote archipelago in Lake Nicaragua inhabited by *campesinos* (peasants), instead of a sermon we held a dialogue on the gospel reading. The *campesinos*’ discussions were often more profound than thos of many theologians, but they reflected the simplicity of the gospel readings themselves. That is not surprising. The *gospel*, or good news (good news to the poor), was written for them, by people like them” (from the introduction to *The Gospel in Solentiname*, by Ernesto Cardenal).

When we study the Bible, we are trying to do the same thing. It is nice to have information by people who have studied the Bible in great detail, but the truth is, all of us have the right to read the Bible and find our own stories in its pages.

These people in Nicaragua were facing some difficult circumstances. These conversations all happened under the dictatorship of General Somoza and the country was facing civil war. The dictatorship was a cruel one and many people suffered under it. During the war, many small towns, including the settlements on Solentiname, were swept up in the fighting and some were de-

stroyed. Several of the people who speak in these studies died during the fighting.

What is most important to me about these little Bible studies is that ordinary people in Nicaragua were looking to the Bible to find that God was on the side of the poor and the oppressed. In the story of Jesus, they found their own stories and they found that Jesus was on their side. They sometimes called this liberation theology—finding freedom for themselves in the Bible.

We may not always understand the context that these Solentiname residents were living in and we may not always agree with their conclusions. They do not always agree themselves. But perhaps they can help us find Jesus a little better and understand what the Bible might be saying to us, in our time and place and circumstances.

Introductory Session: Talking about Context

We are about to start a rather lengthy Bible study on the life of Jesus as found in the gospels. As our companion, we will look at this book, *The Gospel in Solentiname*. In some ways, it will be like reading the Bible with people from Nicaragua who lived many decades ago.

But, first, I want to think about what it is like living where we are in the United States. I want to particularly focus on our community and how it relates to the rest of the country and perhaps the world. I want to talk about our spiritual, our economic, and our political realities.

What is unique to where we live? What do we love about it? What do we struggle with? Who are “the rich” and who are “the poor” in our context?

What kind of problems do we face? What are our struggles? What kind of oppression do we face?

What are we doing to resist? What are our gifts? What do we have to give to the community and the world?

Format

For a typical study, we will have several copies of the Bible and a copy of the companion book. We will begin with prayer and then have someone in the group read the gospel text for that day. After someone reads the text, we will have a brief moment of silence and then open it up for people to share a word or short explanation of what sticks out to them in the passage. This will take about 10 minutes.

Then, someone will read the comments from our companion group in Nicaragua and we will pass around the picture. I will ask people to reflect on what stuck out to them or what points make sense to them. We will spend a bit of time reflecting on what was read and on the painting.

We will end this time with another brief silence and we will read the gospel passage again. This time, people will be invited to do the same thing that people in Solentiname were doing. How does this passage speak to us, right here and right now? What about the story speaks to our stories? How are the experiences of the people in the Bible like our own? What can we learn from Jesus and Jesus' story? How does this help us find freedom and liberation?

In the following summary, I simply give the texts with a short explanation and a few possible questions that could come out of the readings for our own context.

The Annunciation

Luke 1:26-36

An angel comes to Mary to tell her that she will bear a son and will name him Jesus, which means “God is our salvation” or “our liberator.”

- What do you think a liberator is?
- People who stood up against the dictatorship in Nicaragua were often called subversives, people who were trying to undermine or challenge the government and the established order. Were Mary and the Holy Spirit subversive in some way in this passage?
- What does love have to do with all of this?

The Visitation

Luke 1:39-56

In this passage, Mary sings a song we call “the Magnificat,” praising God for the coming of her son as the savior and liberator of her people.

- What did Jesus come to liberate us from?
- What divides the rich and the poor?
- Do we liberate ourselves? How do we experience Jesus’ liberation?

The Nativity

Luke 2:6-7

Jesus was born in a stable, a barn basically; in this passage, God chooses to reveal himself in a poor child born in a pigsty.

- Why did God choose to reveal himself in poverty and humility?
- What is the miracle of birth?
- What does Jesus' birth tell us about how God thinks of the world and especially of people who have little in this world?

The Shepherds at Bethlehem

Luke 2:8-20

After Jesus was born, a group of shepherds were visited by angels and told to go and find the baby boy. They came in awe of what God was doing in the world.

- Why do you think Jesus was born in a stable and his family wasn't given a better place to stay?
- Did these shepherds find Jesus easier to relate to because he was poor like they were?
- What do the rich and poor need to be liberated from?

The Wise Men

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus' birth, a group of foreigners, wise men, came to King Herod who ruled in Jerusalem, asking about a boy born to be the Messiah.

- Herod, as Ernesto explains, was a cruel leader. Why did God not choose for Jesus to be born in a palace as the wise men expected?
- The priests of the time were often associated with the rich and powerful. Is this is often the same for church leaders today?
- What kind of gifts did the wise men bring?

The Flight to Egypt

Matthew 2:13-15

Herod, in a rage over hearing the Messiah had been born, ordered that all male children in the town of Bethlehem be slaughtered. Jesus and his family fled to Egypt for their life.

- The campesinos in Nicaragua were reading this passage during a difficult time, with soldiers patrolling their small town. How was this like Jesus' family fleeing from Herod's soldiers? Does this ever happen today?
- How are children persecuted today?
- What does Elvis mean when he says anyone struggling for liberation from oppression is Christ?

The Slaughter of the Innocents

Matthew 2:12-23

Herod's soldiers did indeed kill the innocent children of Bethlehem, leaving their mothers and fathers weeping for their lost children.

- Why were these children a threat to Herod?
- In parts of Latin America, those in power, sometimes with the backing of the U.S. government, sterilized women as part of "family planning." How do things like this still happen today?
- How can we work so that our children are born to freedom? How do our children represent liberation to us?

Jesus of Nazareth

Luke 2:41-52

When Jesus was twelve and visited Jerusalem with his parents, he slipped away and sat in the Temple. It took his parents some time to find him.

- How is the larger community important in a child's life? In all our lives?
- Nazareth was a tiny town beneath anyone's notice. What does it mean that Jesus was a Nazarene?
- How was Jesus growing into his future work and mission?

The Baptism of Jesus

Luke 3:1-20

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he was baptized by John in the Jordan River.

- Why was Jesus baptized?
- What did it mean that the Holy Spirit came upon him?
- How did this baptism speak of Jesus' mission as a Liberator or Savior?

Beheading of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29

John the Baptist angered Herod enough that he was imprisoned and finally executed.

- What did John want to know about Jesus?
- What does Jesus say is happening? When liberation comes, what does it look like according to Jesus?
- How did John challenge those in power? How should religious leaders in our own day challenge those in power?

Call of the First Disciples

Luke 5:1-11

Jesus begins to develop a following and he calls men who were fishing on the lake of Galilee.

- Have any of you ever fished, for food or for a living?
- Why does Jesus choose fishermen instead of people with more money or influence?
- What does it mean to be fishers of men?

Jesus Calms the Storm

Mark 4:35-41

In the middle of a great storm, when Jesus is in a boat with his disciples, he calms the waves and the storm.

- What does it mean to have faith?
- What kind of storms do we face in life?
- How does Jesus calm storms now?

The Wedding at Cana

John 2:1-12

Jesus and his disciples go with his mother to a wedding and, in the middle of the reception, they run out of wine. Jesus performs a miracle by turning water into wine.

- Do you think Jesus was afraid? Why? What about Mary?
- In the prophets, in the Old Testament, there are beautiful passages about how the coming of God's Messiah would be a time of abundance and wine and joy. Do you think Jesus does this miracle to show that this time is coming?
- Here Jesus is at a party. What kind of party do you think the kingdom of God is like?

The Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray.

- When Jesus prays, he uses the Aramaic word that means “papa” or “daddy.” If this is true, how can we talk to God?
- William says that we pray for things, but we have to also work to make them come about. Do you think that is true? How can we do that?
- What has this prayer meant in your life? Do you ever use it?

The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus sat down and began to teach people. He told them what it meant to be blessed and to be truly happy.

- The Hebrew word for the poor was sometimes “anawim,” meaning the poor of God. What does it mean to be poor in spirit?
- What kind of system is the kingdom of God? How are we supposed to live?
- How are “the poor in spirit” persecuted, in the past and even today?

The Rich Epicure and Poor Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus told a parable about a rich man who took no notice of a poor man outside his gates, until he died and found out that God cared for the poor man.

- What was the rich man's sin?
- Several people point in Solentiname that this passage has sometimes been used to say that poor people should be patient and wait. Do you think this is the point of the passage?
- What happens to the rich man? Do you think the rich listen to the Bible now?

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

Jesus told another parable about a man who was beaten by thieves and left at the side of the road. Three men walk by—two religious leaders who leave the man to die and a Samaritan who stops to help.

- Can religious rules sometimes keep up from following God and the gospel?
- What does Jesus say is most important?
- The Samaritan that takes care of the man who was hurt was a man who was of another race and religion. The Samaritans were despised by most people, but he was the one that Jesus praises. How is this important?

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-13

In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a man who planted his field with good seed and how some of it grew and flourished and how some of it did not.

- Why does Jesus use the example of seeds? Who would understand what he was talking about?
- What do seeds represent?
- How do we take part in the kingdom of God?

The Multiplication of the Loaves

Luke 9:10-17

One day, when Jesus was teaching and it was getting late, he blessed five loaves and two fish and shared that food with five thousand people.

- Why is there scarcity of food for many people? Where do people go hungry today?
- Does Jesus care about people's physical needs?
- How can we change how food is distributed? How does Jesus change things?

Mary Anoints the Feet of Jesus

John 12:1-8

Jesus was sitting at a table and a woman came up to him and broke open expensive perfume on his feet.

- Jesus says “the poor will always be with you.” Does that mean Jesus did not want his disciples to help the poor?
- This passage is often used to say that there will always be rich and poor and there is nothing we can do about it. Do you think that is true?
- What can we offer Jesus or each other that is valuable?

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

John 4:1-42

Jesus was thirsty while walking through Samaria, a region with people who worshiped differently than he did, and he stopped to talk to a Samaritan woman.

- Jesus spoke kindly and openly to this woman, who was from a different social, religious, and ethnic background than he was. How is this important?
- What kind of water is the “living water” that Jesus talks about?
- What is the goal of humanity according to Ernesto? According to the Bible?

Jesus Enters Jerusalem

Matthew 21:1-11

Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus entered the great city of Jerusalem, riding a donkey, and his followers proclaimed him as their new king.

- Why did Jesus ride in on a donkey?
- How might this have angered those in power?
- This kingdom that Jesus announced, are we still waiting for it?

Jesus Drives the Merchants from the Temple

Matthew 21:12-17

When Jesus entered the Temple in Jerusalem, he saw the courtyards filled with people buying and selling. Angry, he drove them all out of the Temple.

- Olivia thinks Jesus drove out the people selling animals and trading coins because they were exploiting people. Do you think this is true?
- Has religion often been used for exploitation? How?
- Do young people today want change? Do we want change?

The Eucharist

Mark 14:12-25

The night before Jesus died, he had a supper with his friends, telling them that the wine was his blood and the bread was his body.

- Why did Jesus meet in secret with his friends? Who could he trust?
- The Passover was and still is a celebration of the Exodus. How is Jesus celebrating a new Exodus, a new liberation?
- When we celebrate the Eucharist, do we see ourselves in that celebration? Are we also the body of Jesus?

The Betrayal

Matthew 26:36-56

Jesus begged God to spare his life, but Judas betrays him and he is arrested in the garden and taken away.

- Death is a horrifying thing and it seems to horrify Jesus too. Why did Jesus have to die?
- Did Judas also betray his own people and his friends as well as Jesus?
- How are the poor betrayed today?

Jesus is Seized for Questioning

Matthew 26:57-68

Jesus was taken away to be questioned by the religious leaders, who met at night in an emergency session.

- What was Jesus accused of? Why was he tried in secret at night?
- How is this similar to the way our courts sometimes function today?
- Why do you think the book we are reading now was banned in Nicaragua during this time?

Jesus Before Pilate

John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

After Jesus was questioned by the religious courts, he was taken before the Roman governor to be accused in a political court.

- How is it that very religious people were part of condemning Jesus to death?
- What did Jesus mean when he said he was a king? How would that have scared those in power?
- How does Jesus show himself to be in solidarity with all those who suffer? What does that mean to you?

The Way of the Cross

Luke 23:26-32

Jesus was made to carry his own cross and as he was led out of the city, a group of women cried over him.

- How did these women show their support and love for Jesus?
- What is Jesus talking about when he says to weep for the future?
- Oscar talks about “the sufferings of so many Christs.” How many people today suffer like Jesus did?

The Crucifixion

Luke 23:33-49

Finally, Jesus is crucified, he is tortured to death by those in power.

- What does it mean that Jesus dies a cruel and horrible execution? Do people still suffer today?
- Jesus says that Paradise, that kingdom, would begin right then, that afternoon. How do we experience the kingdom right now, in our midst, even if there is still suffering?
- How is this different than the way we have been taught to think of Jesus' death?

Jesus is Laid in the Grave

John 19:38-42, Luke 23:55-56

After Jesus dies, he is buried by several of his followers in a borrowed grave.

- Two members of the religious courts come to bury Jesus, one of them is Nicodemus. Do you think Nicodemus remembered what Jesus told him about new life?
- How have we seen Holy Week celebrated? How do you think Jesus would want his death remembered?
- What is most important to you about the things Jesus did and said?

The Resurrection

Matthew 28:1-10

The story was not over when Jesus died. A few days later, women came to the tomb and found it empty. He had risen from the dead.

- Did it take courage for the women to go to Jesus' grave?
- How do we experience Jesus alive and among us now?
- Olivia says the news is also about our resurrection. How might we experience new life and resurrection?

