

Notes on
The Gospel of Doubt

Selected Poems of
Simon Bar-Jonah



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Prologue: On the Spit

A meditation on events in Luke 5 and beyond. The poem was originally written in the 3rd person, the result of a guided "Lectio Divina" meditation. As I was listening to the Scripture being read, I was visualizing the story—and the first thing that struck me was that, as Jesus stepped into Peter's boat, it rocked slightly. Did Jesus "rock Peter's boat?" Oh, yes. And more than just slightly. But in terms of historicity, most of that would come much later, as Peter didn't initially "stick" with Jesus.

The following morning during personal meditation I returned to visualization of the passage, and that's when the emptiness of the boat struck me, and the water dripping from Jesus' foot. And the poem just sprang forth from that, and lots of questions about the intention of Jesus' actions in this passage.

Later that day, I think it was, I reconsidered the POV. Years ago, I had played Peter in a powerful Good Friday drama—so I carry a lot of his character inside of me. And it struck me that the original third-person POV was an unconscious attempt to keep that connection at a distance. So I reeled it in, and made it personal. As the poem was written to be read aloud, I thought that made it work much better. Peter is writing this much later, looking back on the event and revisiting it in his mind. And then he can see, as one reader noted, "that the future is being rehearsed."

Unworthy

A reflection on John 1:35-51. This was Peter's first calling to follow Jesus, and it was indirect, courtesy of his brother Andrew. A "Harmony of the Gospels" makes a good case that this was NOT the same encounter as documented in Matthew 4 and Mark 1. Andrew's first encounter with Jesus was in the company of John, and they spent the day with Jesus. Andrew then recruited Peter, who met with Jesus and was then dubbed "Cephas," or Peter (Anglicized Latin). In following Peter's time with Jesus, I studied the Thomas/Gundry Harmony in the NASB.

Career Day

A reflection on Mark 1:16-20. The parallel account is Matt. 4:18-22. As will be made more plain as this cycle of poems progresses, a good deal of speculative extra-biblical biographical detail emerges in this work. Here Peter reveals some of what he feels about his familial occupation... and a sense of chronic underachievement.

Ex Nihilo

Peter writes here in the persona of a demon, a reflection on the events of Luke 4:31-41 (parallel Mark 1:21-28), Peter's first encounter with Jesus as exorcist/healer. He sees much of himself in the demon's reaction to Jesus—so the demon's POV is comfortable for him. It's a strange enough thing for anyone to get into the mind of a demon; stranger still to think of Simon Peter doing so. But we all afraid, to some extent, of the control we will lose by yielding to Jesus. The demon just has more *clarity* about that loss of control—and the fear of lost control—and more clarity about the desire for control. Aren't a great many of us really afraid that Jesus will tear our comfortable little worlds apart? Even those of us who have very little are frightened by the story of the widow's mite. It all sounds good in Sunday School lessons... but how many of us really want to give literally everything over to God? We are all somewhat demonic in our response to Messiah.

Now Wounded

Mark 1:29-34 contains the most complete account of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (paralleled in Matt. 8:14-17 and Luke 4:38-41). Peter's role as a son / son-in-law is being challenged by Jesus invading his life. But Peter's *wife* is the real key player in the story. Men respond to so much of the world as "threat." It's so much a part of the way we think. The different accounts of the event with Peter's mother-in-law yield insight to this piece, because of what's *not* recorded. Peter's reaction isn't recorded—in Scripture, he's there but wholly passive—and his wife is *completely missing*. But we know from the epistles that she's there with him later on. So what happened? How did the two of them respond to Jesus and his ministry? She undoubtedly loved him; but at this point in his life, he was not very admirable. Peter is on a very interesting journey, and he can't have been very comfortable with the obvious awe his wife expressed toward Jesus.

Panem et Circenses

Peter reacts to the circus atmosphere surrounding Jesus' early ministry. To a certain extent, Jesus' early miracles might have seemed like parlor tricks. But the pace of the "show" steps up quickly with a quick series of exorcisms and healings. It must have been head-spinning for a man who previously spent his days isolated on a boat with a handful of men engaged in repetitive, mundane chores. Following Jesus, by contrast, was Showtime. Parallel accounts: Matt. 4:23-24; Mark 1:35-39; Luke 4:42-44.

Center Ring

Peter reflects on the events of Luke 5, standing by mostly as a privileged spectator. Short line breaks felt right for this piece. Something about the deconstruction of the roof.

Lamentation

Peter reacts to the party at Matthew's house after Jesus calls the tax collector to follow him, as recorded in Luke 5:29-32, Matt. 9:10-13, and Mark 2:15-17. Matthew understands that he's no better than others in the room... and it's not comforting.

Confession

The product of two weeks of contemplation of Jesus' lessons about the Sabbath (John 5, Matt. 12, Mark 2, and Luke 6, from Peter's perspective), learning on the Sabbath through Spiritual Formation practices, and a silent retreat at St. Andrew's House at Hood Canal during which I contemplated my own guilt. The key musing I had going into silence was the following: The Sabbath commandment is not an ideal, any more than the commandment not to kill is an ideal (see: Matthew 5). The laws are given as an exercise to demonstrate to us that we are woefully incapable of faithfully observing even a compromised approximation of an ideal... because we can do nothing under our own power. Once we have learned that lesson through our failed efforts at faithful observance of the command, then we can move on to the next *very* difficult step and ask: what would the ideal look like—in the spirit of Matthew 5? What would resting in God *really* look like? Not just a one-day-a-week observance with a ritualized, liturgic beginning and end but... what? Two days a week? Three? Seven? What would continuous reliance on God look like, rather than a mere resting from our usual pursuit of our every-day, very human compulsions? Ultimately, the difference is between a life of pleasing self and a life of pleasing God.

Form Letter

Peter's sarcastic and self-righteous reaction to finding himself counted among the other 11 disciples (Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6: 12-16).

The Dream

For the first time (as I conceive it) Peter gets totally outside himself in response to Jesus' ministry. Is it because he's now been designated an Apostle? Is it because of the power of the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matt. 5-7 and Luke 6)? Is the Spirit finally moving in him stronger than his ego and self-doubt? Or is it just the confluence of certain influences in the author of the poem? I was mulling over how to approach this piece when I attended a *lectio divina* session

with my Spiritual Direction group. During the session, which was pretty mystical in its effect, a lot of imagery (and words) came to me (and others) which found its way into this poem. Coinciding with that, Jenn and I had had some pretty profound discussions in the preceding days about the "Beatitudes" and their significance. In any event... Peter writes in "prophetic" mode here.

A Salt on the Senseless

A second response to the Sermon on the Mount. "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless." This poem is a prayer of hope, really. As Peter reflects on the impossibility of what the Lord demands, he sees the mundanity of our failings... and the way to the solution. We do not have to "fix" anything; we just have to believe that God is bigger than all our smallness. Seek: seek wholeheartedly and single-mindedly, and we shall find. Is Peter up to the challenge? Well, that's another matter... as it is for us.

Credo

Peter's reaction to the possibility of going to a Roman Gentile's home for a healing. From Matthew 8 / Luke 7—Jesus' first miracle after the Sermon on the Mount. Not what Peter was expecting. Not what *we* would have been expecting. A strong announcement from Messiah that his priorities are not ours.

Faith to Enter Nain

After the events of Luke 7, Peter reflects on certain texts of the Hebrew scriptures and applies them to what he has seen. (The Lazarus story gets such good press that we mostly forget that this truly outrageous and spectacular event took place probably two years prior. It would have been absolutely shocking.)

Elegy for the Baptist

From Luke 7 / Matthew 11. From my notes while working on this poem: "It's natural to go down to the Jordan and see reeds blow in the wind. John the Baptist was not natural. We may find wonder in a Terrence Malick-like fascination with the natural and the mundane; but what really makes the landscape come alive? We long for the *extraordinary*, but then mistrust it when we find it... because it does not 'belong' in the picture."

Doing the Math

From Matthew 11. Peter mulls over the paradoxes of Jesus' words about John the Baptist, and the cities that have rejected him thus far in his ministry.

Whose Name I Wear

Writing from the fictive presumption that Peter has a personal connection with the woman who washed the feet of Jesus at the home of a Pharisee (see Luke 7). Also fictive is the presumption that the woman also has a personal connection with the host, also named Simon. Here, Simon Bar-Jonah grapples with relative orders of sinfulness and identity. Whose name *does* he wear? Has he taken Christ's name in vain?

Yon Holy Mess

Peter's reflection on traveling with Mary Magdalene in the context of demonic exorcisms and healings, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, and an "evil and adulterous generation." See Luke 8 and Matthew 12. "Interview with a Demoniatic," if you will.

Hence the Harvest

Peter puzzles over the failure of Jesus' family to respond positively to his ministry... in the context of the parable of the sower. (Peter wasn't the only disciple to make the association. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all connect Jesus' "Who is mother? and who are my brothers?" remark with this parable. For the strongest instance of this connection, see Luke 8, where the good doctor presents a unique sequence for the mention of family and the parable.)

The Kingdom of Simon

Peter privately questions the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven after scratching his head over several of Jesus' parables. He's embarrassed about not "getting it." See Matthew 13. (Yes, this is an extrapolation. But think about it: the disciples all said they understood... but their behavior indicated they did not. So either they really *thought* they understood and *didn't*, or they said they understood and didn't. Based on my own experience, I surmise the latter. And since this is my poem, I can do that.)

Where Hope Lies

Peter "in the moment" following the stilling of the waters. See Luke 8 and Psalm 11... and think a bit about the connection / paradox of Psalm 11 and Matthew 5.

What I Must Be

Peter adopts an unusual point of view to record the events in the region of Decapolis. See Mark 5. Also a reflection on Psalm 16. The land of the Gadarenes occupied the ancient region settled by the tribe of Gad; so while it was largely Gentile in Jesus' time, the population was likely mixed. The presence of the swine (anathema to the Hebrews) or their choice as the alternate

host of the demons may be significant or incidental. Poetically, Peter chooses to identify with the unclean.

Night Psalm

Having just survived a near sinking of his vessel on the Sea of Galilee, Peter contemplates setting sail once more on those same waters... with the added bonus of knowing that 2000 demon-possessed pigs now lie beneath those same waves. Most sailors are superstitious, and Peter is no exception. He has nightmares about the prospect. See Mark 5... and also Psalm 17, which inspired this piece. I wonder: Did the demons throw the swine into the sea? If so, why didn't they throw the *men* into the sea? Or did the swine just go mad from the presence of the demons? If so, why didn't the men likewise throw themselves into the sea? Or did Jesus cast the swine into the sea to dispose of the demons? If so, why? Perhaps to test the resolve of his disciples, who had a hard time dealing with a little bad weather on the outbound voyage.

Call & Response

Peter writes about the events of Mark 5:21-43 (and parallel accounts). The call and response are the words of the woman and girl who are the subjects of the passage. The lament of the woman is based on Psalm 25 and Psalm 26. The spirit-filled vision of the girl is inspired by Job 33. The narrative invention is that the girl's father and the woman's husband are the same man... that the woman lost her family as a result of her perpetual ritual uncleanliness. (A lot of study in Deuteronomy and Numbers went into this piece!) At the point of death, the girl prays not for *herself*, but for her mother. "God rescued me from the grave, and now my life is filled with light." (Job 33:28) "You brought me up from the grave, O Lord. You kept me from falling into the pit of death." (Ps. 30:3) "You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!" (Ps. 30:11-12) A further note: All three accounts of these two seemingly unrelated incidents record the fact that the woman had been bleeding for twelve years, and that the girl was twelve years old. Somehow, for all three writers, those were very important but unexplained details. In all three accounts, also, the incident with the woman also *interrupts* the incident with Jairus and his daughter. So as a writer, I decided to explore why these facts were important—and invented a connection between Jairus, the girl, and the woman. So in my invented history, Peter knows all this because he knows these people—and is very moved by the tragedy of that personal disconnection, and the tension between what being faithful to the Law costs this family, and the joy that faithfulness to God brings them in spite of it. So he writes from that perspective.

Credo Redux

See Matt 9:27-34 and Psalm 31. Peter still thinks this is about learning, and about how the heart is shaped by knowledge. But a change of heart must be wrought by deeper forces than the mind in order to stick. He is still destined for failure... and much of it. But this is a fitting conclusion to Act One, as it were, of the Good News of Peter's transformation. It might be helpful to revisit his original "Credo." (Also note how Peter neatly aligns his own familial rejection with that of Jesus. A little inflated opinion of himself, perhaps? An interesting shift for a man who has previously had such a poor self image.)

A Letter Home

Peter is perhaps over-invigorated by the results of the disciples' deputation. See Matthew 10. Kind of makes me think about the discouragement I have felt about the lack of "results" from personal "witnessing" and "evangelism." Perhaps such failure is good for us. I'm not sure what inflated idea of my own importance I would have if I went around casting out demons. I'd probably have my own TV show and ferry myself about in a chopper.

Less Than Learned

I picture Peter holding one of the twelve baskets of leftovers following the "feeding of the 5000" and thinking, "What just happened?" See one of the parallel accounts in Mark 6:35-44.

A Miktam of Simon

With apologies to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Peter gets kind of giddy about walking on the water... and writes about the giddiness with a certain satiric detachment. The fullest account is in Matthew 14, verses 24-33.

Devil's Food for Thought

There are a lot of different ways to interpret the fine points of Jesus' teaching in John 6 regarding the "Bread of Life." In this poem, Peter celebrates the small victory of actually limning the truth behind what Jesus said... and glosses on the irony of being the disciple who affirms the testimony of demons from earlier in Jesus' ministry. It's not enough, after all, to acknowledge Jesus as Lord... as Peter will later demonstrate, as well as Judas. Read John 6 and about the events following the "feeding of the 5000" and then compare with the text of Psalm 69. There are very interesting parallels.

A Child's Garden of Vice

Peter is pleased with himself that he "gets" Jesus teaching in response to the Pharisees' criticism about the washing of hands. In his mind, he was just asking for clarification about Jesus parables "for James and John, because they're a little slow in the uptake." We know from later historical details, though, that Peter does not really "get" the distinction about what's "clean" and "unclean." So here, once again, he misses the mark a bit. See Mark 7.

Revile Us Again

Peter reflects upon the feeding of the 4000 (Mark 8:1-9, in one of the parallel accounts), and makes connections with Psalm 78. "Ebenezer Scrooge, the sins of man are huge!" And they are also cyclical. If we think we are exempt from age-old patterns of short-sightedness and denial, we are fools. But God does not long for "revival" as we do. He desires a "long obedience in the same direction," as Eugene Peterson describes perseverance. There is hope, but it lies not in men... it lies in the Spirit.

Interrogative

Peter is highly intrigued by the healing of the blind man, and the progressive return of his sight. See Psalm 88:18 and 92:3. We are all too often seduced by our own limited understanding of the Kingdom, and getting in pissing contests, as it were, over whose deficient vision is "better" than the other's... when all will pale in the Presence of true insight. How much better to embrace the value of every tale or doctrine or metaphor or parable, however imperfect, that increases our understanding of God? Without worshiping any of them? Mark 8:22-26.

Who I Am

The primary reference here (Matt 14:16-20, in the most complete account) is probably obvious. What may not be so obvious is the depth of Old Testament reference material behind Jesus' words "upon this rock." This isn't about Peter at all, but about Jesus' identity as the foretold lithic savior. Peter is dead on in his statement about who Jesus is, of course; but it's really little credit to him. I had been reading a sequence of "rock" Psalms leading up this passage in the Gospels, and it couldn't be more obvious—especially to a first-century messianic Hebrew. cf Psalm 18:2, 61:2, 62:7, 89:14, 89:26, 91:2, 92:15, 93:2, 94:22, and 95:1 for just a smattering. (Also a very subconscious nod to Bill Cosby here. Jenn pointed out certain similarities to his Noah routine after the fact...)

Matthew, Take Note

Ps. 107:2. Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! It's easy, in hindsight, to see Jesus' "stumbling block" rebuke in Matt. 16:21-23 for what it was intended to be. No so easy for Peter, in the moment. Here, I imagine that he responds positively to this "test" of his character, rather than negatively, precisely because of all the sniggering that probably came from his fellow disciples. He would choose a response that boosts his standing. Also cf. Ps. 105:19, 106:30, 102:18-22, 102:23, and 105:37.

All Things

Peter is taken aback on the Mount of Transfiguration (from Matthew 17). It's easy to mock Peter from the distance of 2000+ years. But his instincts toward enshrinement are pretty sound for an aspiring Good Hebrew. There's a lot that he really does "get." Also see 2 Kings 2:9.

Fantasy of Misfiguration

So... Peter's brain goes into overdrive. See Mark 9. He imagines that things might have gone different if he, James, and John (well, primarily if *he*) had been on hand for a failed exorcism instead of up on the mountain. Peter is starting to understand that Jesus will move on at some point, just as Moses and Elijah did... and that means someone has to take up the mantle when the torch is passed (to deliberately mix metaphors, and stir well before spooning out). He's figuring it's to be him, and getting quite full of himself, drawing on his memory of the stories about Moses on Sinai and Nebo, and of the stories about Elijah on Sinai and Carmel. (Interesting side note: How far did Jesus travel during his forty days in the wilderness? Did he also possibly visit Sinai, as Elijah did?)

Poser

The reference here is obvious. Peter reflects using an ancient Hebrew poetic form, the "Hebeku." Matt. 17:24-27.

Worst Things First

See Matthew 18; cf Psalm 124. Peter can see that he's no child-like servant... but he's hopeful that enough groveling might at least qualify him as the most humble of the losers.

Ode to Ministry

Peter begins to see what pastors today always learn: ministry would be great "if it weren't for the people." See John 7... and Psalm 133 for the optimist's view.

United Affront

Peter writes from the crowd's POV after the controversies in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. John 7.

The Wordless Wonder

The apocryphal passage in John 8 about Jesus and the adulteress is one of the most celebrated in Scripture, and it's quite short. Mining it for something new to say is, shall we say, a battle of words and wits. One thing leapt out at me, though... after about my twelfth time through it over three weeks. The Scripture says, rather obliquely, that the crowd "heard" what Jesus wrote in the dust. An interesting idea. And when I ran across similar language in the second half of Isaiah 29, I almost completely threw out my previous three attempts and re-wrote from the ground up. So in this final stab at the passage, Peter gets some insight into how the Kingdom of God is immanent, and confounding to the wise.

Dialogue

Written for my late wife on her birthday. From John 8. Here, Peter interprets what he hears Jesus tell the Pharisees—shedding further light, as it were, on what Peter read into the encounter with the adulteress earlier in the day. (With a nod to the clams of Norman Dubie's "Ars Poetica.")

Apocalypse of Posteriority

In this piece, I imagine that Jesus has told the 12 ahead of time about his plans for the 72 (or 70, depending on your translation)... and that Peter "leaks" the news because of his own inflated sense of importance. See Luke 10... and contrast with the tone of Psalm 8, perhaps. With a significant deliberate homage to one of my favorite films and screenplays.

Neighbors Like These

Peter gets some idea of the significance of Jesus' parable of the "Good Samaritan" in Luke 10. He doesn't quite get all the way home with his thoughts, but does see that Jesus' words do stand the worldview of many Psalms, such as 9 through 12, completely on its head. So he writes from the POV of the victim. Really, this story ought to be called "The Other Who Loves" rather than the Good Samaritan. The traditional title just doesn't do justice to the meaning.

Dialogue 2

Seeking to justify ourselves, we can turn to just about any passage of Scripture and say, "See? I've done what you asked. Can I take a break now?" Peter is starting to get that, and has further

reflection on the incident with the young lawyer and the parable of the “good Samaritan” in Luke 10, as he reflects on Psalm 15.

What I Want for You

See Psalm 18 and Luke 10. Peter begins to get insight into Kingdom priorities, and what God wants instead of what Man wants. We are so easily satisfied, and so easily dissatisfied.

Dear Diary

Here I let Peter speak forward into my own life. As I dwell on the events of Luke 11, I struggle with the “historicity” of events that seem to duplicate those recorded in Matthew 6 and 7... events which supposedly happened a year or two earlier. Why the dead-on similarities? Why the distinct differences? Who got it “wrong”: Matthew, or Luke? Maybe neither? A close examination of Scripture can be disturbing—but also highly worthwhile. You may be forced to contend with yourself: why you want to know certain things, and what that says about *you*.

So It Begins

Jesus’ indirect teaching about the tree that fails to bear fruit three times (Luke 13) hits home with Peter... especially in the context of other words about division, and the coming of fire. I imagine that Peter connects this in his head with Isaiah 1:31, and vows to himself to stand strong in the weeks to come.

Mutineers

A little bit of doggerel, and commentary on the events of John 9 and Luke 13. Who knew that Robert Louis Stevenson had read Peter’s poems, eh? Nice of him to include an homage in *Treasure Island*.

The Impastor

After having been at the center of so much of the action, Peter again finds himself an observer as the disciples follow Jesus toward Jerusalem (John 10). He “gets” Jesus’ parables about the sheep and shepherd, but has a hard time seeing himself as anything but a fifth wheel at this point. Doubt and self-loathing creep in again. I was listening to a lot of Switchfoot when dwelling on these passages, and Jon Foreman’s “Restless” played deeply into Peter’s mindset.

In the Valley of Vision

Peter reflects on the lessons recorded in Luke 13-14. cf Is. 21 and 22, Ps. 118, and Is. 25:6. We understand the nature of apocalypse very poorly, methinks. And, of course, Peter also is often in error. This piece, however, almost purely reflects something that I have learned from this

exercise—one among many things, naturally, but one I think is so important in this troubled time.

Behold the Lamb

It's no accident that Luke 15 comes hard on the heels of Luke 13 and 14. And it's no accident that the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" is not an isolated teaching, but in continuity with the rest of Luke 15. I truly wonder what Peter made of this teaching. I pray that it was something similar to what I dreamt up.

One Helluva Tip

"A righteous king is coming, and honest princes will rule under him. ... Justice will rule in the wilderness and righteousness in the fertile field" (Is. 32). Peter can see that something isn't quite right in Jesus' parables about the "unworthy steward" and the rich man in Luke 16. His inward assessment runs like this: "Let me tell you how to shortchange God—and then won't you be happy to receive me into your eternal hell-hole?" He writes this piece to make sense out of a piece of difficult teaching.

What Happens Next

Most movies depict the raising of Lazarus (John 11) a big moment of epiphany. But it's not like Jesus had never raised someone from the dead before. The key thing that was different this time was that he had *let Lazarus die*. And that had big implications. Peter doesn't realize just how big yet, but he's got some glimmer of it...

mistaken

Not long before Jesus leads his disciples into Jerusalem for the final visit, he tells them about the unexpected advent of the Kingdom (Luke 17). Peter reflects on the extraordinary ordinariness of his master's life and coming death—and the ordinary things in which the disciples might be engaged when the Son of Man appears in glory. Insight that is nonetheless off the mark... as it must be, given the subject matter and a foreshadowing. Peter writes here in one of his favored forms: Hebeku, if you will, three stanzas of 7/12/7 syllables.

II Hezekiah

Peter notes similarities between Jesus' encounter with "the rich young ruler" (Luke 18, for instance) and Isaiah's account of King Hezekiah. He models a rich man's lament after the Prayer of Hezekiah, recorded only by Isaiah... and frames it with his own self-righteous commentary

(also cribbed from Isaiah). The title is taken from the oft-used scriptural "source" for non-scriptural but spiritual-sounding aphorisms.

Long Suffering

Peter does not see himself in the Parable of the Workers in the Field (Matt. 20)... but he can imagine another application of the teaching. He reflects on all those he has seen healed, and wonders about those whose pleas remain unmet. This was very hard teaching for me to accept as I sat daily beside my wife as she slowly died.

Hang it All

"One of these things is not like the other," like they used to say on Sesame Street. In Luke 19, Peter gets conflicting messages. On the one hand, the "parable of the ten minas" appeals strongly to his sense of divine justice and the Messiah as Stormcloud King. On the other hand... there's that deal with Zaccheus. Either the Kingdom of heaven looks awfully forgiving and chummy, or it looks like a blood bath. And Peter can't decide which Jesus is talking about. From our perspective, we can see that Jesus doesn't say, "The kingdom of heaven is like" anything in that parable, and it's very likely a parable of negative contrast rather than a parable of positive simile. After all, Jesus tells it immediately after his encounter with the blind men and Zaccheus in Jericho (of all places) and immediately before his final "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem. We can note that Zaccheus, in fact, "took up what he did not lay down" and "reaped what he did not sow." He was a good deal like the hard master in the parable. And yet he was shown mercy by Jesus, even though he was one of those bum Jews that Jesus was about to throw down. Was Jesus rewarding Zaccheus because he was "shrewd as a snake" and still "innocent as a dove"? Is the Kingdom really about performance and ROI? I think not. Jesus did not treat Zaccheus as he deserved... nor did Jerusalem get what it deserved. Peter riffs on Isaiah 51 in this piece, turning a messianic text about Jerusalem's salvation into a dirge of retribution. This make sense in the context of the disciples' general inability to understand what Messiah was actually going to usher in.

12 Days Uncaritas

Peter would really like to feel good about the poor... but the more he thinks about it on the eve of the Triumphal Entry (and the more he reflects on the social quality of those who follow Jesus), the less he likes the idea. Let's face it: as much as we like to talk about care of the poor, very few of us can stomach front-line ministry to them for more than a couple years. And there's only one thing more annoying than parasitic losers who simply refuse to help themselves... Christmas songs that just don't end. See John 12.

Bound for Glory

Peter doesn't have the luxury of hindsight to process the "triumphal entry" (Mark 11, for instance). He's still relishing the thrill of victory, not yet realizing that the agony of defeat is the real gateway to glory. And he likes how Jesus' posse rolls at this point. A little too much.

I Don't Want to Go to Jerusalem

Peter, of course, sees himself above such cowardice. But, in the wake of the "triumphal entry" and associated teaching (Mark 11 and John 12, and following), and being able somewhat to put himself in the shoes of others, rather than the "shoes of the fisherman," he writes a lament for those (supposedly) less stalwart than he.

Truth to Power

As the events of this piece unfold (Luke 20, Matt. 23, Mark 12), Peter notices the widow throughout and observes her. He writes what he imagines she wishes she could say.

Not Taken

Peter's takeaway from Jesus' warnings about "end times" just days prior to the Passover (Mark 13). Peter was wrong about a great many things; I fancy that, this time out, he was paying a lot better attention than most of us do.

The Shoes of a Fisherman

From Mark 14, with a nod to Jeremiah 12. Peter's final "Hebeku." Peter hears Jesus words about where His road leads, and ponders what others might see from his POV—were they to walk in his shoes. As I pondered what Peter might ponder, I asked the question of myself also, and projected it into Peter. I wrote this through a season of a lot of anger at the daily bouts of seizures Jenn was suffering.

I.t I.s I

Peter condenses a great deal of the events of The Last Supper, Jesus' arrest at Gethsemane, and the events that followed. Again remembering that these are Peter's reactions as he experiences them, all he can see here is his betrayal, denial, and the ensuing guilt. Resurrection and grace will come later. And so it is with a great many of us.

In Tongues Unknown

John 21. Jesus' final intimate conversation with Simon Peter yields this very poignant stage-setting for what will actually become of Peter's calling. It's confession, it's repentance, and it's true soul-searching.

Epilogue: Hell or High Water

I wrote this final piece in a kind of summer-camp-syndrome ennui. I had just spent three very intense years with Peter, and I knew I wouldn't be going on with him through the Acts of the Apostles... which Mike Gunn (and others) has rightly pointed out should be called "Acts of the Spirit"... through the Apostles. I really did not consciously connect it to Prologue: On the Spit, and even after three years of preparation of the manuscript it took Zoe Prince's artwork to really show me how I had truly come full circle with Simon. As I read it today, on the day of the book's publication, it strikes me that it almost sets the stage for a sequel...