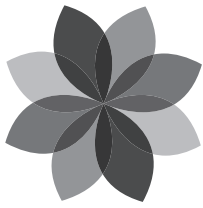


Year B, Volume 3

Season after Pentecost



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship

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Publisher's Note

“The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God,” says the Second Helvetic Confession. While that might sound like an exalted estimation of the homiletical task, it comes with an implicit warning: “A lot is riding on this business of preaching. Get it right!”

Believing that much does indeed depend on the church's proclamation, we offer *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. *Connections* embodies two complementary convictions about the study of Scripture in preparation for preaching and worship. First, to best understand an individual passage of Scripture, we should put it in conversation with the rest of the Bible. Second, since all truth is God's truth, we should bring as many “lenses” as possible to the study of Scripture, drawn from as many sources as we can find. Our prayer is that this unique combination of approaches will illumine your study and preparation, facilitating the weekly task of bringing the Word of God to the people of God.

We at Westminster John Knox Press want to thank the superb editorial team that came together to make *Connections* possible. At the heart of that team are our general editors: Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, and Carolyn J. Sharp. These five gifted scholars and preachers have poured countless hours into brainstorming, planning, reading, editing, and supporting the project. Their passion for authentic preaching and transformative worship shows up on every page. They pushed the writers and their fellow editors, they pushed us at the press, and most especially they pushed themselves to focus always on what you, the users of this resource, genuinely need. We are grateful to Kimberley Bracken Long for her innovative vision of what commentary on the Psalm readings could accomplish, and for recruiting a talented group of liturgists and preachers to implement that vision. Rachel Toombs did an exceptional job of identifying the sidebars that accompany each worship day's commentaries. At the forefront of the work have been the members of our editorial board, who helped us identify writers, assign passages, and most especially carefully edit each commentary. They have cheerfully allowed the project to intrude on their schedules in order to make possible this contribution to the life of the church. Most especially we thank our writers, drawn from a broad diversity of backgrounds, vocations, and perspectives. The distinctive character of our commentaries required much from our writers. Their passion for the preaching ministry of the church proved them worthy of the challenge.

A project of this size does not come together without the work of excellent support staff. Above all we are indebted to project manager Joan Murchison. Joan's fingerprints are all over the book you hold in your hands; her gentle, yet unconquerable, persistence always kept it moving forward in good shape and on time. We also wish to thank Pamela Jarvis, who skillfully compiled the dozens of separate commentaries and sidebars into this single volume.

Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing *Connections*. President Theodore J. Wardlaw and Dean David H. Jensen have been steadfast friends of the project, enthusiastically agreeing to our partnership, carefully overseeing their faculty and staff's work on it, graciously hosting our meetings, and enthusiastically using their platform to promote *Connections* among their students, alumni, and friends.

It is with much joy that we commend *Connections* to you, our readers. May God use this resource to deepen and enrich your ministry of preaching and worship.

ROBERT A. RATCLIFF
WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS

Introducing Connections

Connections is a resource designed to help preachers generate sermons that are theologically deeper, liturgically richer, and culturally more pertinent. Based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which has wide ecumenical use, the hundreds of essays on the full array of biblical passages in the three-year cycle can be used effectively by preachers who follow the RCL, by those who follow other lectionaries, and by nonlectionary preachers alike.

The essential idea of Connections is that biblical texts display their power most fully when they are allowed to interact with a number of contexts, that is, when many connections are made between a biblical text and realities outside that text. Like the two poles of a battery, when the pole of the biblical text is connected to a different pole (another aspect of Scripture or a dimension of life outside Scripture), creative sparks fly and energy surges from pole to pole.

Two major interpretive essays, called Commentary 1 and Commentary 2, address every scriptural reading in the RCL. Commentary 1 explores preaching connections between a lectionary reading and other texts and themes within Scripture, and Commentary 2 makes preaching connections between the lectionary texts and themes in the larger culture outside of Scripture. These essays have been written by pastors, biblical scholars, theologians, and others, all of whom have a commitment to lively biblical preaching.

The writers of Commentary 1 surveyed five possible connections for their texts: the immediate literary context (the passages right around the text), the larger literary context (for example, the cycle of David stories or the passion narrative), the thematic context (such as other feeding stories, other parables, or other passages on the theme of hope), the lectionary context (the other readings for the day in the RCL), and the canonical context (other places in the whole of the Bible that display harmony, or perhaps tension, with the text at hand).

The writers of Commentary 2 surveyed six possible connections for their texts: the liturgical context (such as Advent or Easter), the ecclesial context (the life and mission of the church), the social and ethical context (justice and social responsibility), the cultural context (such as art, music, and literature), the larger expanse of human knowledge (such as science, history, and psychology), and the personal context (the life and faith of individuals).

In each essay, the writers selected from this array of possible connections, emphasizing those connections they saw as most promising for preaching. It is important to note that, even though Commentary 1 makes connections inside the Bible and Commentary 2 makes connections outside the Bible, this does not represent a division between “what the text *meant* in biblical times versus what the text *means* now.” Every connection made with the text, whether that connection is made within the Bible or out in the larger culture, is seen as generative for preaching, and each author provokes the imagination of the preacher to see in these connections preaching possibilities for today. Connections is not a substitute for traditional scriptural commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and other interpretive tools. Rather, Connections begins with solid biblical scholarship then goes on to focus on the act of preaching and on the ultimate goal of allowing the biblical text to come alive in the sermon.

Connections addresses every biblical text in the RCL, and it takes seriously the architecture of the RCL. During the seasons of the Christian year (Advent through Epiphany and Lent through Pentecost), the RCL provides three readings and a psalm for each Sunday and feast day: (1) a first reading, usually from the Old Testament; (2) a psalm, chosen to respond to the first reading; (3) a second

reading, usually from one of the New Testament epistles; and (4) a Gospel reading. The first and second readings are chosen as complements to the Gospel reading for the day.

During the time between Pentecost and Advent, however, the RCL includes an additional first reading for every Sunday. There is the usual complementary reading, chosen in relation to the Gospel reading, but there is also a “semicontinuous” reading. These semicontinuous first readings move through the books of the Old Testament more or less continuously in narrative sequence, offering the stories of the patriarchs (Year A), the kings of Israel (Year B), and the prophets (Year C). *Connections* covers both the complementary and the semicontinuous readings.

The architects of the RCL understand the psalms and canticles to be prayers, and they selected the psalms for each Sunday and feast as prayerful responses to the first reading for the day. Thus, the *Connections* essays on the psalms are different from the other essays, and they have two goals, one homiletical and the other liturgical. First, they comment on ways the psalm might offer insight into preaching the first reading. Second, they describe how the tone and content of the psalm or canticle might inform the day’s worship, suggesting ways the psalm or canticle may be read, sung, or prayed.

Preachers will find in *Connections* many ideas and approaches to sustain lively and provocative preaching for years to come. But beyond the deep reservoir of preaching connections found in these pages, preachers will also find here a habit of mind, a way of thinking about biblical preaching. Being guided by the essays in *Connections* to see many connections between biblical texts and their various contexts, preachers will be stimulated to make other connections for themselves. *Connections* is an abundant collection of creative preaching ideas, and it is also a spur to continued creativity.

JOEL B. GREEN
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General Editors

Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

To derive the greatest benefit from Connections, it will help to understand the structure and purpose of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), around which this resource is built. The RCL is a three-year guide to Scripture readings for the Christian Sunday gathering for worship. “Lectionary” simply means a selection of texts for reading and preaching. The RCL is an adaptation of the Roman Lectionary (of 1969, slightly revised in 1981), which itself was a reworking of the medieval Western-church one-year cycle of readings. The RCL resulted from six years of consultations that included representatives from nineteen churches or denominational agencies. Every preacher uses a lectionary—whether it comes from a specific denomination or is the preacher’s own choice—but the RCL is unique in that it positions the preacher’s homiletical work within a web of specific, ongoing connections.

The RCL has its roots in Jewish lectionary systems and early Christian ways of reading texts to illumine the biblical meaning of a feast day or time in the church calendar. Among our earliest lectionaries are the lists of readings for Holy Week and Easter in fourth-century Jerusalem.

One of the RCL’s central connections is intertextuality; multiple texts are listed for each day. This lectionary’s way of reading Scripture is based on Scripture’s own pattern: texts interpreting texts. In the RCL, every Sunday of the year and each special or festival day is assigned a group of texts, normally three readings and a psalm. For most of the year, the first reading is an Old Testament text, followed by a psalm, a reading from one of the epistles, and a reading from one of the Gospel accounts.

The RCL’s three-year cycle centers Year A in Matthew, Year B in Mark, and Year C in Luke. It is less clear how the Gospel according to John fits in, but when preachers learn about the RCL’s arrangement of the Gospels, it makes sense. John gets a place of privilege because John’s Gospel account, with its high Christology, is assigned for the great feasts. Texts from John’s account are also assigned for Lent, Sundays of Easter, and summer Sundays. The second-century bishop Irenaeus’s insistence on four Gospels is evident in this lectionary system: John and the Synoptics are in conversation with each other. However, because the RCL pattern contains variations, an extended introduction to the RCL can help the preacher learn the reasons for texts being set next to other texts.

The Gospel reading governs each day’s selections. Even though the ancient order of reading texts in the Sunday gathering positions the Gospel reading last, the preacher should know that the RCL receives the Gospel reading as the hermeneutical key.

At certain times in the calendar year, the connections between the texts are less obvious. The RCL offers two tracks for readings in the time after Pentecost (Ordinary Time/standard Sundays): the complementary and the semicontinuous. Complementary texts relate to the church year and its seasons; semicontinuous emphasis is on preaching through a biblical book. Both approaches are historic ways of choosing texts for Sunday. This commentary series includes both the complementary and the semicontinuous readings.

In the complementary track, the Old Testament reading provides an intentional tension, a deeper understanding, or a background reference for another text of the day. The Psalm is the congregation’s response to the first reading, following its themes. The Epistle functions as the horizon of the church: we learn about the faith and struggles of early Christian communities. The Gospel tells us where we are in the church’s time and is enlivened, as are all the texts, by these intertextual interactions. Because the semicontinuous track prioritizes the narratives of specific books, the intertextual

connections are not as apparent. Connections still exist, however. Year A pairs Matthew's account with Old Testament readings from the first five books; Year B pairs Mark's account with stories of anointed kings; Year C pairs Luke's account with the prophetic books.

Historically, lectionaries came into being because they were the church's beloved texts, like the scriptural canon. Choices had to be made regarding readings in the assembly, given the limit of fifty-two Sundays and a handful of festival days. The RCL presupposes that everyone (preachers and congregants) can read these texts—even along with the daily RCL readings that are paired with the Sunday readings.

Another central connection found in the RCL is the connection between texts and church seasons or the church's year. The complementary texts make these connections most clear. The intention of the RCL is that the texts of each Sunday or feast day bring biblical meaning to where we are in time. The texts at Christmas announce the incarnation. Texts in Lent renew us to follow Christ, and texts for the fifty days of Easter proclaim God's power over death and sin and our new life in Christ. The entire church's year is a hermeneutical key for using the RCL.

Let it be clear that the connection to the church year is a connection for present-tense proclamation. We read, not to recall history, but to know how those events are true for us today. Now is the time of the Spirit of the risen Christ; now we beseech God in the face of sin and death; now we live baptized into Jesus' life and ministry. To read texts in time does not mean we remind ourselves of Jesus' biography for half of the year and then the mission of the church for the other half. Rather, we follow each Gospel's narrative order to be brought again to the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection and his risen presence in our midst. The RCL positions the texts as our lens on our life and the life of the world in our time: who we are in Christ now, for the sake of the world.

The RCL intends to be a way of reading texts to bring us again to faith, for these texts to be how we see our lives and our gospel witness in the world. Through these connections, the preacher can find faithful, relevant ways to preach year after year.

JENNIFER L. LORD
Connections Editorial Board Member



Connections

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1–8
Psalm 29

Romans 8:12–17
John 3:1–17

Isaiah 6:1–8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Isaiah 6:1–8 almost certainly originated as the account of Isaiah’s call. Its placement is surprising, since one would expect Isaiah’s call to appear at the beginning of the book, as in other prophetic books (see Jer. 1:4–10). Like other prophetic call narratives, it includes the divine voice and the prophetic response. Unlike the Mosaic model of call narrative found in Jeremiah 1:4–10, Isaiah responds positively, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa. 6:8). This makes the text attractive, but things are not as positive as they may seem when one reads beyond 6:8. Unfortunately, 6:1–8 is ordinarily treated in isolation from 6:9–13, a temptation reinforced by today’s lection and by the frequent use of 6:1–8 in ordination services.

Why is Isaiah’s call not in chapter 1, and what is the effect of its current placement? It is likely that an original form of the book of Isaiah consisted of what is now chapters 6–39. This would

mean that an original book was framed by two narrative sequences (chaps. 6–8 and 36–39), the first from the early career of Isaiah (approximately 740 to 734 BCE) and the latter from the end of Isaiah’s ministry (701 BCE). At some point, an editor or editors expanded the book of Isaiah by adding chapters 1–5 and 40–66. The effect, especially as it pertains to 6:1–8, is to suggest that Isaiah’s call came in the midst of pervasive disobedience on the part of Judah and its leadership. Preachers might reflect at this point on the likelihood that prophetic calls will come in the midst of a disordered and disoriented society, as was the case with Isaiah’s call.

Chapters 1–5 portray Judean worship as misguided and unacceptable to God (see 1:10–20), and the nation as a whole is characterized by systemic injustice and unrighteousness (see 3:13–26; 5:1–23). Such a sorry situation sheds light on Isaiah’s claim that he lives “among a

The Father, the Word, and Love

Now desire tends principally toward what moves it most; but what moves it most is what is loved most, and what is loved most is happiness. But happiness is had only in terms of the best and ultimate end. Therefore human desire seeks nothing except the highest good or what leads to or has some likeness to it. So great is the power of the highest good that nothing can be loved by a creature except out of a desire for it. Creatures, when they take the image and copy for the Truth, are deceived and in error. See, therefore, how close the soul is to God, and how, in their operations, the memory leads to eternity, the understanding to truth and the power of choice to the highest good.

These powers lead us to the most blessed Trinity itself in view of their order, origin and interrelatedness. From memory, intelligence comes forth as its offspring, since we understand when a likeness which is in the memory leaps into the eye of the intellect in the form of a word. From memory and intelligence love is breathed forth as their mutual bond. These three—the generating mind, the word and love—are in the soul as memory, understanding and will. . . . When therefore, the soul considers itself, it rises through itself as through a mirror to behold the blessed Trinity of the Father, the Word, and Love.

The image of our soul, therefore, should be clothed with the three theological virtues, by which the soul is purified, illumined, and perfected. And so the image is reformed and made like the heavenly Jerusalem. . . . The soul, therefore, believes and hopes in Jesus Christ and loves him, who is the incarnate, uncreated, and inspired Word—the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). When by faith the soul believes in Christ as the uncreated Word and Splendor of the Father, it recovers its spiritual hearing and sight; its hearing to receive the words of Christ and its sight to view the splendors of that Light. When it longs in hope to receive the inspired Word, it recovers through desire and affection the spiritual sense of smell. When it embraces in Love the Word incarnate, receiving delight from him and passing over into him through ecstatic love, it recovers its senses of taste and touch.

Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 84–85.

people of unclean lips” (6:5). Perhaps even more important, the extent of Judah’s unfaithfulness and disobedience documented in chapters 1–5 prepares the reader for the difficult commission that Isaiah is given in 6:9–13, and for the opposition that all who are called to prophetic resistance in such contexts can anticipate.

Even with this preparation, however, the connection between 6:8 and 6:9–13 remains difficult. It seems perverse on God’s part to call Isaiah to dull people’s minds, “stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not . . . turn and be healed” (6:10). The difficulty leads many to conclude that 6:9–13 was composed in retrospect to describe the actual response to Isaiah’s proclamation. In any case, while the difficulty of the portrait of a God who wants to stop people’s ears and shut their eyes endures, the connection between 6:8 and 6:9–10 clearly captures a persistent biblical reality: those

whom God calls to speak God’s word are regularly met with powerful opposition by people who are not open to hearing, discerning, or responding faithfully. For all practical purposes, the prophetic word solidifies resistance to God and God’s will! The encounter between Isaiah and Ahaz in Isaiah 7 illustrates this reality, as do thematic connections to other prophetic books.

If the connection between Isaiah 6:1–8 and 6:9–13 highlights opposition and resistance to the prophetic word, then we can identify several connections to other portions of the prophetic canon. For example, following closely upon the first version of Jeremiah’s temple sermon (Jer. 7:1–15), the divine instruction to Jeremiah is this: “So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you” (Jer. 7:27).

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah has been called and must speak; but there clearly will be no faithful

response. For all practical purposes, the prophetic word will have solidified the opposition. Jeremiah's "confessions," or better, "complaints," poignantly indicate that the prophetic word was roundly resisted and rejected (see Jer. 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–18).

Another instance of the prophetic word evoking and solidifying opposition is found in Amos 7. We do not have an account of Amos's call, but the vision sequence in Amos 7:1–8:3 may be related to his call. Amos's famous vision of the plumb line (Amos 7:7–9) evokes the vehement opposition of Amaziah, "the priest of Bethel" (7:10). Amaziah confronts Amos; he accuses Amos of blasphemy and treason; and then he basically issues an order for Amos's deportation. Again, the prophetic word has solidified opposition to God and God's word, as if Amos had actually intended to dull people's minds and prevent them from turning to God.

In a powerful oracle that targeted greed and systemic injustice, Micah announced judgment upon eighth-century Judah (Mic. 2:1–5). The response was immediate: "Do not preach—thus they preach—one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us" (2:6). Micah's audience was convinced God was on their side, no matter what (see 3:11). When they heard otherwise, their opposition was swift and resolute. The prophetic word again solidifies the resistance to God.

While the New Testament affirms that Jesus was more than a prophet, it also casts Jesus in the prophetic role. Hence, it is not surprising that Isaiah 6 shows up in the Gospels to characterize the response to Jesus' proclamation. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus alludes to Isaiah 6:9–10 to explain to his disciples that he teaches in parables so that people "may not turn again and be forgiven" (Mark 4:12; see also Matt. 13:13–15;

Luke 8:9–10). As with Isaiah 6, this seems strange, if not perverse. However, the intent of the Gospel writers may be to characterize the typical response to Jesus' proclamation and the embodiment of the realm of God. To be sure, some people responded positively, but Jesus' message and ministry were also roundly opposed. Jesus' very words and deeds solidified the resistance to God's claim and to God's will. So, Isaiah 6 became an appropriate commentary on Jesus' life and ministry.

Perhaps the most prominent homiletical direction to pursue is to affirm that God calls people to say and do things that are richly rewarding but deeply demanding. So, while accepting a prophetic call may be deeply fulfilling, one can anticipate stiff, even violent opposition. The message of Isaiah 6:1–8 and its connections were captured by Reinhold Niebuhr when he wrote the following: "If a gospel is preached without opposition it is simply not the gospel which resulted in the cross. It is not, in short, the gospel of love."¹ Because Jesus invited disciples "to take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34), Isaiah 6:1–8 and its connections invite us to move beyond the priesthood of all believers to what we might call the prophethood of all believers.

Lest all this sound overly discouraging, note that the book of Isaiah makes it clear that it is not ultimately God's intent to evoke opposition. Rather, God wants people with open eyes and ears to experience the saving knowledge that the prophets proclaim (see Isa. 29:18; 32:3; 35:5; 42:16, 18–19; 43:8, all of which reverse Isa. 6:9–10). While taking up a cross may be difficult, it is the way to life (see Mark 8:35). The ultimate intent of Isaiah 6 and Jesus is not to solidify resistance, but to invite faithful discipleship.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Knowing what to preach on Trinity Sunday is hard. Harder still is knowing how to preach the Trinity from the Old Testament. Inauthentic and

exegetically unsound ways to do so are legion. Fortunately, today's reading from Isaiah lends itself to faithful reflection on the triune God.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1929/1956), 140.

Trinity and Mission. Call narratives like Isaiah 6 raise the daunting question of what it means to be chosen to fulfill God's purposes. In Scripture, frequently those who receive the call realize its potential to upend their lives, and so they quite understandably resist. Daunted by his call, Jeremiah objects due to his youth and inexperience in public speaking, believing he will be ineffective as a prophetic witness (Jer. 1:6). Confronted at the burning bush with God's call to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt, Moses issues a series of increasingly desperate questions and excuses, finally pleading with God just to send someone else (Exod. 4:13). God tells Jonah to "go at once to Nineveh, that great city," to indict the Ninevites for their wickedness; Jonah heads out for Tarshish instead, with the express purpose of escaping this responsibility (Jonah 1:1–3). In light of this pattern of prophets seeking to evade their vocations, Isaiah's enthusiastic "Here am I; send me!" stands out for its willing acceptance of the divine commission (Isa. 6:8). Preachers may encourage parishioners to imitate Isaiah in being alert and ready to respond courageously when they discern God's call in their daily lives.

Whether the recipient is willing or not, the divine call lends itself to a simple summary: *Go*. Its focus is outward. God calls us to proclaim, to serve, to follow, always on behalf of others. When God calls us to move beyond ourselves, that call mirrors the life of the Trinity. The distinction between the "immanent" Trinity (the internal relationships among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the "economic" Trinity (the external relationship between the triune God and the world) is contentious.² Yet theologians on all sides of the argument agree that the Trinity involves an unending movement of love and joy toward the created order. Out of the surplus of divine love God speaks the world into existence. At the climax of the Trinitarian narrative, God wholly joins with the sad lot of humanity in love, in order to redeem that world, as the Nicene Creed reminds us:

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit

and the Virgin Mary,
and was made human.

Finally, the incarnate and risen One promises to pour out the Holy Spirit upon his followers for the purpose of empowering their mission to the world (Acts 1:8–9). As we engage in that mission, along with Isaiah we will find ourselves joining the outward movement of God's triune love.

The Pivot Point. Two droids show up at Luke Skywalker's farm on Tatooine. A woman walks into the bar and asks the performer to play "As Time Goes By." A worried police chief says, "You're going to need a bigger boat." Plucked from the fire, a ring reveals strange words long hidden. A giant tells a young boy, "Yer a wizard, Harry." On the day of her coronation a new queen can no longer conceal her magical powers, and discovers she no longer wants to.

These movie scenes are famous because they represent *pivot points*, moments when the arc of the story starts to move in a new and definitive direction. Isaiah 6 begins at just such a moment: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty." Uzziah's death marks a transition from a period of political stability to the looming Assyrian crisis. Yet it is far more about a change in God's time. This is a *kairotic* event in which the will of God can be more clearly seen and the presence of God more keenly felt. God is doing something in the life of the world, and we are called to be part of it.

The preacher should remind the congregation that divine pivot points often do not arrive with burning bushes or smoke and seraphim. When people review their lives, they often remember seemingly unremarkable but decisive moments: they glimpsed someone across a room; a friend mentioned a job posting they had seen; an encouraging word enabled the first step toward recovery from addiction. Ask them how that crucial day had begun, and they will say it was just like any other. No doubt Isaiah thought he would just pop into the temple for a minute. God the Spirit can be sneaky that way. We should be on the alert, lest God's new thing start without us.

2. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970); Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

The Holiness of Divine Love. God's holiness is on full display in Isaiah 6. What is that holiness? To declare something "holy" originally meant to set it apart from ordinary things. Here, the term points at least partially to transcendence. Throughout Isaiah, God is known as "the Holy One of Israel." Here in the temple, the prophet encounters God, who is wholly other.

Isaiah's personal and communal confession brings a moral consideration into the story. Confronted by the presence of God, he is overcome with a sense of unworthiness, not finitude. What made him unworthy? One flawed yet frequent Christian interpretation holds that holiness equates to uprightness or blamelessness. According to this view, the contrast to Isaiah's unworthiness is God's moral purity.

Yet both Jewish and Christian traditions have discovered within the mystery of divine holiness something far richer and deeper than simple blamelessness. For example, in early Eastern Christian theology, *perfection* often stands in for holiness, as both are divine qualities in which humans can participate. The fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa rejects the idea of perfection as the simple absence of flaws,

insisting instead that its essential character is change or, more specifically, growth in love of God and neighbor.³

The desert fathers and mothers extended this conversation by insisting that, given a choice between compassion and uprightness, they choose compassion. One time a member of a monastic community was put on trial for violating his vows. The other monks summoned Abbot Moses, famed for his holiness (that is, his uprightness), to join them in passing judgment. As they saw him approach, they noticed he was carrying a basket with holes from which sand was spilling onto the ground. When asked to explain, Moses said, "My sins are running out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I come to judge the sins of another!"⁴ The accusing brothers thought they were promoting the community's holiness by protecting its good reputation. Yet by identifying with—and hence seeking to reclaim—the erring brother, Moses' action is remembered as the more holy, for it more fully expressed the gracious character of holiness refracted through the prism of divine love.

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3. Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection," in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, The Fathers of the Church 58 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 95–122.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1977), 40.

Trinity Sunday

Psalm 29

- ¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- ³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- ⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, “Glory!”
- ¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 29 presents numerous points of connection with the narrative of Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh in the temple (Isa. 6:1–13). Both texts picture Yahweh enthroned as a high God among a community of numinous beings. As members of the divine council, these beings attend to Yahweh with praise constantly on their lips. While the texts give glimpses of God’s appearance, they also suggest that humans cannot comprehend the power of God with their eyes. Rather, the voice of God emerges as the most powerful divine attribute in each of these texts.

Psalm 29 begins with a series of imperative statements directed to *bene ’elim*, literally, “the sons of gods.” This phrase refers to a divine

council (see Job 1–2; Pss. 82:1; 89:6–7), numinous or “heavenly beings” that attend to Yahweh as the high God seated in their midst. The text is not clear who exactly constitutes this community. The “sons of gods” may be understood as the planets, stars, sun, and moon. All of these heavenly bodies were thought to be deities in other ancient Near Eastern religions. “The sons of gods” could also be construed as the “heavenly host” of angels, divine messengers who do the bidding of God in the world (see Ps. 103:21).

The identity of speaker(s) in these opening verses is also unclear (Ps. 29:1–2). Perhaps it is the heavenly hosts summoning themselves to

bear witness to God's power. It may be that it is a human community calling out for God's praise throughout the heavens. In any case, Psalm 29 suggests that the primary function of the divine council is the exaltation of Yahweh. Three times the text calls for them to "ascribe" to Yahweh "glory" and "strength" (vv. 1–2).

This threefold ascription of Yahweh finds a close parallel to the triple declaration of God's holiness in Isaiah 6:3. In the prophet's vision (Isa. 6:1–8), Isaiah can see only the bottommost part of the divine form, the hem of Yahweh's garment that fills the temple (v. 1). Yet Isaiah can see seraphs, six-winged hybrid beings, flying around Yahweh's throne (v. 2).

Such numinous beings are often pictured in ancient Near Eastern art with their wings overshadowing other gods or people in gestures of protection. In Isaiah's vision, however, the seraphs use their wings not to protect someone else. Instead, they use their wings to protect themselves from the glory of Yahweh. God's power is so great that it overwhelms all other sources of power in the heavens and on earth. As if in response to Psalm 29:1–2, these seraphs in Isaiah 6:3 ascribe glory to Yahweh:

And one called to another and said:
 "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts;
 the whole earth is full of his glory."

Psalm 29 and Isaiah 6 thus give us a similar account of what happens in Yahweh's throne room. Praise resounds.

After summoning the voices of the divine council, the psalm then turns to describe the voice of Yahweh (Ps. 29:3–9). This voice (*qol*, literally "sound") is the most powerful force in the world. In the context of the psalm, thunder represents Yahweh's voice (v. 3). Thunder can be a harbinger of destruction and fire (v. 7); it also accompanies the rain that refreshes the land and brings life to the soil. Thus, for the psalmist, thunder is the perfect way to describe the complex range of Yahweh's activity in the world. Yahweh's power issues from heaven, capable of bringing forth both salvation and destruction.

The association of thunder and "the waters" in verse 3 also testifies to God's power. Like the ancient Near Eastern storm gods, Yahweh was understood to be the conqueror of the chaotic sea. Yahweh's power over that primeval force was demonstrated at creation, when Yahweh subdued the sea, bringing order into the midst of chaos. Verse 10 gives yet another picture of God's triumph over the waters of chaos; Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood. Though the sea rolls and threatens to overwhelm the land, the sea also witnesses Yahweh's power and kingship by the very fact that it stays within its borders. These waters also respond to Yahweh in the theophanic storm, becoming agitated and excited when Yahweh's voice thunders.

Yahweh's voice has an effect on everything, not just the waters. It also booms throughout the countryside (vv. 6–7). It shakes even the biggest living things, the colossal cedars of Lebanon (v. 9). No place is beyond the reach of Yahweh's voice. Everything responds to God's voice, including Yahweh's faithful in the temple. The human community in the temple thus mirrors the divine community, the *bene 'elim* (vv. 1–2). All voices glorify Yahweh, whose voice sounds throughout heaven and earth.

The psalm ends with a plea. Verses 1–10 have described the powerful voice of Yahweh, how Yahweh reaches into the world and rules it with unquestioned supremacy. Verse 11 presents the human community making a petition for divine empowerment. Such a plea recognizes that the people exist in great need of God's power. On their own, they are not powerful. They are not at peace. The community needs the blessing of a powerful God to survive and thrive in this world.

Theophanies like the ones described in Psalm 29 and Isaiah 6 overwhelm the senses, even though they grant just a glimpse of the glory of God. When heard in worship, they invite those gathered to revel in the majesty of God; bold, stirring sounds of brass, drums, and pipes are in order, or any combination of instrument that can thunder forth.

Like those in the temple, worshipers may respond in praise. There are numerous compel-

ling choral versions of Psalm 29, as well as hymns that employ its themes. The response may come in a classic declaration such as the Gloria Patri, or a new hymn such as Paul Vasile's rousing "Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me."¹ Of

course, given the pairing of Psalm 29 with Isaiah 6:1–8, the incomparable "Holy, Holy, Holy" is also a fitting congregational response, especially on Trinity Sunday.

JOEL MARCUS LEMON

1. See *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 582.

Trinity Sunday

Romans 8:12–17

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In today’s lection Paul continues his discourse contrasting life in the Spirit (*pneuma*) with life lived according to the flesh (*sarx*), which begins in Romans 8:1. While this passage is often read as instructive for individual life, it is more accurately interpreted as a call to a way of living as community made possible by *pneumati theou*, the Spirit of God. Throughout Romans 8:12–17, Paul uses the plural form of “you.” So, we can continue to hear Paul’s exhortation to reconsider the way we live our communal life.

Today, members of a congregation are often referred to as a “church family.” This language is consistent with terms Paul uses in Romans to describe common life in the Spirit. He declares those who are led by the Spirit of God to be children of God, to have received the spirit of adoption as children of God. This is no new revelation. Attending to the particulars of Paul’s language can help nuance our understanding of what it means to be *family*. In 8:12, Paul says we are not debtors (*opheiletai*) to the flesh (*sarx*) and are not to live according to the flesh. A clue to interpretation lies in the word *opheiletai*, which refers to social and religious obligations or debts. In Greco-Roman culture obligations were first to gods, then to country, then to parents.¹ For Paul, this ordering of obligations is born of the flesh, the material, the distorted human world. To live life in the Spirit (*pneuma*) is to be obligated first to the one God and then to God’s family constituted

by the Spirit. What, then, is the proper fealty of a Christian to their country? Which family has a primary claim upon our lives—our time, our money, our prayers, our gifts?

Paul includes within God’s family all who are led by the Spirit of God. He echoes Jesus in the Synoptics: “A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:32–35; see also Matt. 12:48–50; Luke 8:20–21). Doing the will of God, being led by God’s Spirit: that makes one kin. Spirit ties supersede blood ties in God’s family. This seems a particularly hard message for contemporary Christians to hear. The nuclear family reigns supreme in American culture. How might the church help reorder our understanding of all who have a claim on our time, love, and resources?

While Paul uses male-gendered terms throughout 8:12–15 to refer to God’s children, he switches to the neuter term *tekna* in verses 16–17. This is also when Paul begins using the language of inheritance, calling the *tekna* of God heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. Paul employs similar language about inheritance, adoption, and children in Galatians,

1. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 493.

but there he uses the phrase, “if a son [NRSV child] then an heir” (Gal. 4:7 RSV). By the time he writes the Letter to the Romans, Paul has adopted the more inclusive term *tekna* to refer to inheritors. By using this word, Paul signals that all God’s children are entitled to God’s inheritance without regard to gender. Together with Christ and without distinction among them, all God’s children witness to God, inherit God’s promise, suffer, and are glorified.

This new family that suffers together and together receives God’s promises of a future, a hope, and a home with God is created by the Spirit. The Spirit enables the community to turn away from living out distorted patterns. The Spirit leads God’s children away from fear and into life. Paul uses the word “Spirit” twenty-two times in Romans 8, more than in any other passage in all his letters.² It is profoundly important to recognize the life-giving, life-ordering role that the Spirit plays in our common life. The proclivity of the Spirit to enable healthy family life is also witnessed to in Galatians 5:22–26, where Paul discusses the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Other important qualities of Spirit can be gleaned by reading this passage in conjunction with the other readings for this Sunday. Romans 8:15–16 says, “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Greek word translated here as “cry” is *krazomen*. It is an onomatopoeic term describing a raven’s cry or caw. It suggests an inarticulate cry or shout full of emotion. A good contemporary illustration of *krazomen* might be the Mexican *grito*: “It is a high-pitched, sustained howl emanating from every corner of the lungs and touching the sky. Heard at family celebrations, usually to the brassy strains of mariachis, the *grito* is a primal shout, a cry for joy that moves the soul and rattles the spirit.”³ When the Spirit witnesses to God, She does not speak in a whisper. She sends up a *grito* from the depths.

While today’s lections from Isaiah and Psalms do not refer to God’s Spirit, they both convey the power of God vocalized. Psalm 29 says that God’s voice “breaks the cedars,” “flashes forth flames of fire,” “shakes the wilderness,” “causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare.” It is powerful and full of majesty. It moves the world. In the lection from Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of being in the temple with God. In Isaiah 6:3, a six-winged seraph calls out, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The verb root for “call” is *qara*, which means to “call, cry, shout, or scream.” Verse 4 says the posts of the threshold were shaken by the *qol*, the voice of the one who cried out.

The voice that witnesses to God is a voice that emanates power, a voice that upsets foundations, a voice akin to God’s own voice. That voice and that power flows through all God’s children via the Spirit. What if God’s children did not hold back, but let their primal shouts loose for the world to hear? What foundations might be moved?

The lection from John 3 has a lot to say about Spirit. Jesus tells Nicodemus one must be born anew to see/perceive the reign of God. Nicodemus does not understand. Jesus explains: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit [*pneuma*]. What is born of the flesh [*sarx*] is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5–6). Not only are the children of God *led* by the Spirit; they *become* spirit. This suggests an ontological change to those who do the will of God. It is not just relationships and priorities that are transformed in the family of God, but human beings. Do we know that we *are* spirit, that God saturates our very being? Spirit is what allows us to be a family of hope and promise, a family of world-changers and love-bringers. Together, with Christ, we suffer. Together, with Christ, we cry out and move the world. Together, with Christ, we rise.

ERICA A. KNISELY

2. Roberto Pereyra, “The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul,” *DavarLogos* 13, no. 2 (2014): 8.

3. Juan Castillo, “Échale! New App Keeps the Cherished Mexican ‘Grito’ Close at Hand,” *NBC News*, October 1, 2015; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/echale-new-app-keeps-mexican-grito-close-hand-n436966>.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Flesh/Spirit, debt/debtors, Spirit/children/heirs, slavery/Abba/Father, suffering/glory: double relations and correlating oppositions and connections fill this passage, offering us frames for our own thinking and acting. While our worship, churches, and communities are all part of the same web, flowing through the systems that compose our humanity, we often think in binary terms and not in correlated ways, and we act as if these spheres of life were separated. Paul's binaries expose contradictions we face in our own contexts that threaten separation, and they suggest how we might think constructively in terms of correlating oppositions and connections.

Our spirituality, for example, is often marked by a duality that opposes body and soul, or flesh and spirit. To worship in spirit too often means to worship with our mind, striving after proper knowledge of God. Our bodies are often thought to hinder our spirituality. The flesh is often portrayed as the enemy of what is holy, the source of sinful desires that lead us astray. However, when our bodies and the Spirit of God are understood and felt as living together, as one and in wholesome ways, our faith is strengthened and our desires rest in God. We start to see that the understanding that equates bodies with sin, and desires with a narrow moral code, entails guilt and shame, not freedom and responsibility. So, we are called to ponder the connection between our bodies and the presence of the Spirit.

Where is the Spirit in our bodies? Where is the body in the Spirit? We often do not know where the Spirit of God is in us. If we remind ourselves that our life was breathed into us by God, we understand that the Spirit of God is in our breathing. Breathing is a connection between mind and body. There is no distinction between body and Spirit, since we are always breathing. Our breathing has to do with the breath of God given to us when we were "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). When our bodies are celebrated as the house of the Spirit of God, we gain a connectedness that we might call a life of the Spirit, in our bodies. God's Breath/Spirit indwells our bodies. The life

of the Spirit is in our bodies, and there is no life of the body outside of our Spirit.

Unless we hold on to this relation as one, forms of disassociations will make us live in disconnected realities, and we will hold on to dualisms that make us suffer, dualisms that often involve hierarchies—for example, when we think that nature is of less value than human beings. We disassociate nature and culture and think they are opposite, when they are in fact part of each other, of the same and yet different life. Moreover, this disassociation makes us think that we do not have limits and that the earth is out there to be taken, used, and exploited. If we can sustain a spirituality that holds together human beings and nature, as we consider the life of the Spirit in us, we would consider animals as having rights, ecosystems as habitats full of living creatures to be protected. In the same way, we would not use pesticides in our crops that endanger bees and our environment.

As the text says, "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:16–17). The Spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit creates the conditions for us all to become heirs of God and Christ. Thus, in the body and flesh, we must hold nature together with us as we also must hold each other's suffering.

This collective movement of belonging and mutuality is the living of God's glory enfleshed in our community. In this way, the Spirit of God in our flesh will mean honoring the earth, caring for all sentient beings, mountains, waters, and minerals. The Spirit of God in our flesh will also mean freedom to love one another, to the point of living in a community that does not cling to the spirit of the world, but holds on to the Spirit of God, who shows Godself in and through our actions and our loving of one another.

When we are connected in body and flesh, the Spirit will lead us. While some people are intolerant of others' mistakes, saying, "If they messed up, they must deal with the consequences," we

will say, “We are each other’s keepers,” which is somewhat the same as what Paul is saying here: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (v. 14). Being the children of God by virtue of our baptism makes us responsible for each other’s lives, no matter how badly some might go astray. In the same way, when we see the bees dying, we will promptly fight for their lives and well-being.

When we are free from disassociated ways of thinking and living of our society, we can think and act differently, discerning the ways in which everything and everyone belong together, and as a result we can live a fuller and more joyful life.

We learn with each other to be responsible for ourselves and for everyone. Then we can all feel free in the Spirit and not cling to the isolated ways of the flesh of the world. We are freed from cultural systems that say: “You are on your own.” Instead, we say together: “Abba! Father!” which meant, in that time, fidelity to the God of love, in contrast to calling Caesar “father” and giving fidelity above all to Caesar.

The first Christians were engaging in civil disobedience, dismissing the “father” of that time and calling upon the presence of the living God as their Father, the one who would sustain them. Surely, in our time, we have learned to call God “Mother” and other names. When flesh and Spirit are brought together, God is understood

expansively beyond the patriarchal limits of the masculine. In fact, we undo the masculine as a form of dominance. When the Spirit lives fully in our bodies we are free to call God Mother, Lover, Friend, Rock, and so much more. For the presence of life in fullness carries the many names of God.

If we have the Spirit of God bearing witness in our spirit, in our bodies, our lives can be fully renewed and constantly restored. Carrying the very breath of God in us, our spirituality finds its fullness in all bodies: the earth and sentient beings. Fully connected with God, the earth, birds, fishes, meadows, our neighbors and ourselves, we all become children of God, beloved by God, Abba. Entangled in this vast notion of grace, we find the breath of God in our communities by the way of seeing the Trinity as an ever-encompassing event of connections, connectivity, mutualities, and entanglements.

We can now engage differences and complexities because we are one and many with God and with one another. In other words, we can say that the whole is our being together in God. Now, we are better prepared to pay attention to our differences and be aware of what breaks us apart, and what divides us from the whole. Then we might understand what it means to be “glorified in God.”

CLÁUDIO CARVALHAES

Trinity Sunday

John 3:1–17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Today’s reading from the Gospel of John interrupts the lectionary focus on Mark, shifting our attention to the mystery of the Trinity and the transformative depths of the teachings of Jesus. The cryptic dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus stacks up polarities between heaven and earth, perishing and eternal life, condemnation and salvation, flesh and spirit. This symbolic language is rich in images and provokes us to plumb the depths of its meanings. Precisely because of its profundity, however, such discourse does not deliver ready-made clarity. Given the depth of Jesus’ teaching, it is not surprising that a major theme in John is the misunderstanding of Jesus’ signs and teaching.

This encounter with Nicodemus highlights confusion over Jesus’ teaching. Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus is a teacher (rabbi) who comes from God (John 3:2). Nicodemus himself is “a teacher of Israel,” but he cannot fathom Jesus’ words. He interprets being “born from above” into new life literally (v. 4), and so he does not understand how the status “child of God” is given to humanity. Moreover, Nicodemus has been trained to think earthly society reflects the structure and mores of heavenly society. Jesus’ references to being born of Spirit, in contrast, clearly delegitimize tying the status “child of God” to such worldly distinctions. Nicodemus is conflicted, for while he accepts that the signs

Jesus performs establish that he is a teacher who has come from God, he does not understand the meaning and implications of Jesus' teaching.

Who is a child of God? The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus revolves around this question. In the society of Jesus' and Nicodemus's day, birth cemented a person's place in society. In the society of first-century Palestine, unlike present-day North American society, achievement, work, education, or movement from one place to another rarely changed the status established at birth. Of course, even today, birth status can deliver a host of advantages or subject one to a lifetime of discrimination. We face the same challenges, if to different degrees. In Jesus' day, social status depended almost entirely on the status of the kinship group into which a person was born. Jesus of Nazareth, coming from a group with roots in Galilee, was near the bottom of the social hierarchy. A stunning reversal, obvious to John's first readers, is played out in this conversation. Nicodemus, a ruler (*archōn*) in Jerusalem, by far outranks Jesus, a peasant from Galilee. Yet Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus comes from the "presence of God," and he accepts Jesus as *his* teacher.

This dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus performs and displays a disruptive gospel truth. For whatever else it may mean when Jesus describes a child of God as someone who is "born from above," it means this person is born into a new family, a new kinship system, a *koinōnia* that rejects earthly hierarchies.

Paradoxically, access to this new status and quality of life comes to believers through what is considered to be *dishonorable* in Nicodemus's society: humiliation and death on a cross. Crucifixion was both a physical and a social death. As a social death, it stripped the person of social standing, making them vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse. Furthermore, hanging from the cross outside the city gates was a not-so-subtle reminder of social rejection. The paradox lies in the fact that Jesus, who "comes from the presence of God," is humiliated through death on the cross. Perhaps this status is also conferred on those who believe in him?

Nicodemus appears again later in John's Gospel in two scenes that bracket Jesus' presence on the

cross. In both scenes, birth status plays an important role. It appears that Nicodemus accepted Jesus' teaching about being born again as children of God. In the first scene (7:45–52), Nicodemus appears to defend Jesus' right to a hearing, but he is put down by his fellow Pharisees, who appeal to Jesus' social origin and status in Galilee. To be born and bred in Galilee, a place considered by Judeans as "unclean," is to be part of the periphery. Jesus does not deserve a hearing because "no prophet is to arise from Galilee" (7:52).

Nicodemus appears again as a witness to the entombment of Jesus' body (19:38–42). From the worldly perspective of those who have not been born again, the process of crucifixion has progressively shamed, humiliated, and dishonored Jesus. Nicodemus, however, no longer sees through the ideological lenses of this world, for after the crucifixion Nicodemus appears with Joseph of Arimathea, treating the body of Jesus with costly spices and placing him in a rich man's tomb—all of which contradicts what the world sees as Jesus' shamed social status. Seeing with new eyes, Nicodemus honors Jesus as someone who "comes from above." These actions suggest Nicodemus was open to being taught by Jesus, for his are the actions of a person seeing with the eyes of one born again.

Although the other readings for this day were conceived and crafted in very different circumstances, they echo and enrich the images of God found in the Gospel text. In Isaiah's call narrative, God commissions him to be a bridge between heaven and earth, an essential aspect of prophetic service: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" (Isa. 6:8). The psalm emphasizes transcendence. God is enthroned not only in the temple, as in Isaiah, but over creation, over even the chaos of the flood. Romans, too, links the powerful, transcending rule of God to the daily life of human beings. In this text, the Spirit of God is the messenger, transforming believers into children of God. God's intimate, loving care for humanity and the physical cosmos is clearly emphasized in these texts, in sharp contrast to an idea of a detached, hubristic deity—the sort that mirrors so many earthly rulers.

Images related to the Trinity also fill today's other lections: God the Mother/Father enthroned in Isaiah's vision; the wind representing the Spirit in John's Gospel; the Son talking about himself with Nicodemus. Two verses in the Gospel reading powerfully portray the *relational* character of the Trinity in *action*: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16) and "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (v. 17). In the Gospel of John, "'world' refers to three entities: the physical world, Israel as God's chosen [ideal] humanity, and Judeans as enemies of John's community."¹ God eternally relates lovingly to the world in all three of these senses in a positive, life-giving way that includes even enemies.

Many in our pews have a deeply held image of God that does not correspond to the idea that God loves the world and is self-giving. This is especially true, for example, of people who are part of a Christian community yet do not feel personally connected. It is also true of those who need to strive for recognition, instead of accepting that they are God's children. God is distant in such scenarios, and it is very easy to live out of a deistic frame of mind. This Sunday is an opportunity to heal and transform these distant images of the Trinity, to proclaim a gracious God who knows and loves us intimately, and to help us all glory in our status as members of one family, children of God.

RENATA FURST

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Nicodemus at Night" might be a good starting point for looking at the complex character of Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a learned man, yet he is unable to understand the truth given plainly to him by Jesus. There is a sense in which he knows this, which is why he comes to Jesus under cover of night, when "The dark houses seem / Like sepulchres, in which the sleepers lie / Wrapped in their shrouds, and for the moment dead."² The preacher might examine what we, like Nicodemus, do to hide our lack of knowledge. Teachers may say there is no such thing as a stupid question, but many of us are not willing to test that premise! Nicodemus, with his reputation for knowledge, is eager to learn and does not hesitate to pose his question.

The preacher might consider conversations that take place at night: campfire stories, slumber-party secrets, late-night confessions or declarations of love to a sweetheart or friend. There is something intimate and freeing about late-night conversations, where faces are half lit and background clutter fades away. Why might Nicodemus have stepped out in the dark to meet

Jesus? It might have been out of embarrassment or concern about negative consequences if he were seen consulting this radical teacher, who had just disrupted the operations of the Jerusalem temple (John 2:14–21). It might also have been motivated by a desire for a private conversation, for words half whispered, true, and life changing.

Whatever Nicodemus's reasons, we can ponder what we might learn from this approach. To what sorts of unexpected approaches might we want to be open? Which methods of evangelism make sense for particular people and particular congregations in your care?

We see Nicodemus twice more in this Gospel. In John 7, Nicodemus admonishes others to listen to Jesus before judging him. In the end, in John 19, Nicodemus provides myrrh and aloes to embalm Jesus. What began under the cover of night has become an honor that stood the test of daylight and public acknowledgment. Though Jesus called Nicodemus out for his apparent lack of understanding, Jesus did not reject him—and Nicodemus did not reject Jesus.

1. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 246.

2. "Nicodemus at Night," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Windham, NH: Windham Press, 2013), 379.

We never find out whether Nicodemus accepted the “born again”/“born from above” proposition. We are not told whether he considered himself a follower of Jesus. We know only that he is there at the end. Perhaps Nicodemus’s persistent presence is proof that those among us who have questions and doubts, who speak of our spiritual questions in the dark of night but not in front of peers, may have a place in the kingdom as well.

This lection is assigned for Trinity Sunday; here Jesus discusses all three members of the Trinity with relational language that connects them. The preacher might use this text as a springboard to theological reflection on the Trinity. Indigo Girls band member Emily Saliers (a preacher’s daughter) sings, “Try making one and one and one make one, twist the shapes until everything comes undone” in her song “You and Me of the 10,000 Wars.”³ Many congregants will relate to her language. The Trinity can be hard to understand. The preacher might take this opportunity to note that perfect understanding is not prerequisite to receiving the love of the triune God to which the rest of our pericope bears witness.

John 3:16 is one of the best-known verses in the Bible. Many parishioners will be able to recite it by heart, even if they were not raised in the church. The very familiarity of the verse may limit appreciation of its radical promise. The preacher might work to make manifest to parishioners the stunning intensity of God’s love for us as articulated in this verse and prominent throughout the Bible. One way of describing this love might be found in the enchanting Sam McBratney children’s book *Guess How Much I Love You*.⁴ Caregivers in the congregation may recognize its famous line, “I love you right up to the moon and back.” Some older parents may remember the game where kids and elders would playfully and joyfully seek to best one another: “Well, I love you to the stars and back,” “I love you to infinity and back,” “I love you to infinity times infinity!”

The lection ends this pericope at verse 17, but after the born-again language and the beloved

John 3:16, verse 17 might not get its full due. This one line—“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”—might be used to reread the preceding passage to teach us the reason for God’s sending of the Son. Jesus is sent not to condemn Nicodemus, who does not quite get it, nor to condemn the ordinary believer, whose lack of understanding or action worries them. The Son has been sent to save.

To illustrate this, the preacher can draw on stories unique to the congregation’s region. National stories could include, for example, the West Nickel Mines School shooting in an Amish school, where the community, despite enduring horrific violence and the deaths of five children, did not condemn the shooter or his family, saying that was not what Jesus had been brought into this world to do. This highlights the radically gracious character of the love of God revealed in the life, works, and teachings of Jesus.

What could add to the extent of “love you to infinity times infinity”? Love that is utter and absolute apart from anything earned or deserved; love that flows despite my flaws, failures, and shortcomings; love that embraces me despite my moments of neglect, wrongdoing, ambition, and spite; love even for those so lost that they lash out in violence; love even for enemies. This is the love of Jesus, the love of God, a gracious love for one and all, a freely given love stronger than any self-condemnation, a love stronger than the hatred or bitterness that so justly flows from the injustice and abuse we have suffered from others.

As we survey daily news about our world, we realize, as did first-century Jews and Christians struggling under the oppressions of empire, that the world deserves condemnation. We realize, however, even as we identify and strive to aid those hurt by the world’s injustices, that God sent the Son not to condemn the world but to save it, not to bring condemnation but to reveal gracious love. The preacher may want to clarify that this does not mean we forget the prophets

3. “You and Me of the 10,000 Wars,” composed by Emily Saliers, appeared on the 1990 Indigo Girls album *Nomads, Indians, Saints* and was produced in a remastered format in 2000.

4. Sam McBratney, *Guess How Much I Love You*, 25th anniversary ed. (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2019).

and the prophetic aspects of Jesus' ministry, and it does not mean that we fail to name and condemn oppression and exploitation, but it does mean the prime and ultimate source of our passion is the gracious love of God, a love embracing each of us, a love for all—oppressed

and oppressor, abused and exploited and those who exploit—a love through which all are born again, thanks to the work of the Son, so that we might be born again, born through the Spirit, children of God's love.

SUSAN K. OLSON

Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28)

Hosea 2:14–20

Psalm 103:1–13, 22

2 Corinthians 3:1–6

Mark 2:13–22

Hosea 2:14–20

¹⁴Therefore, I will now allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

¹⁵From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

¹⁶On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” ¹⁷For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. ¹⁸I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. ²⁰I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

According to Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, Hosea 2 “is among the most important presentations of covenantal theology in all of the Old Testament.”¹ Chapters 1–3 of Hosea are held together by an extended marriage metaphor. Hosea’s marriage to the unfaithful Gomer is analogous to the marriage—that is, the covenant—between God and unfaithful Israel. The historical circumstances of Hosea’s marriage and family life are irrecoverable, but the pertinent point is clear enough: just as Hosea’s marriage and family life are in total disarray, so is the relationship between God and Israel. God’s people are wedded to Baal and the ways of Baal, rather than being faithful to God and God’s ways.

The names of Hosea and Gomer’s children communicate the chaotic results of the infidelity—namely, divorce. The name of the daughter, Lo-ruhamah, is traditionally rendered

as “Not pitied,” but a better translation would be “Not motherly loved,” since one of the forms of the underlying Hebrew root means “womb” (Hos. 1:6). The second son’s name says it all. Lo-ammi, “Not my people,” is a precise reversal of the traditional covenant formula (v. 9).

Hosea 2 is framed as a speech by these two children to their mother. The divorce is evident from the outset, “for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband.” As the chapter unfolds, it is clear that Israel has wedded itself to the various manifestations of Baal, the Canaanite deity known elsewhere as the god who rode the clouds, and thus who made it rain so that the land would be productive (see esp. 2:5, 8–9, 12). Baalism represented the attempt to manipulate the means of production—making it rain—rather than to honor the ultimate Producer. This is still a temptation. Consider how frequently we attend to GNP, the Dow,

1. Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 247.

or other leading economic indicators, rather than thanking God for the abundant gifts that sustain our lives.

In Hosea's context, fidelity to Baal meant infidelity to God. Divorce was the result, or so it seemed. There is an abrupt shift at 2:14; and 2:14–20 is all about a reconciliation, indeed, a remarriage (vv. 19–20). In this remarriage, everything will be right, as indicated by the phrases “in righteousness” and “in justice” in 2:19. The restored relationship is founded upon “steadfast love, and . . . mercy” (v. 19). The Hebrew root underlying “mercy” is the same root in the name Lo-ruhamah.

The remarkable contrast between 2:1–13 and 2:14–20, along with explicit mention of “covenant” (2:18), is why Brueggemann and Linfelt conclude that Hosea 2 is so important, but the connection between 2:14–20 and 2:1–13 also necessitates a strong word of caution. The displeasure of the aggrieved husband, God, is expressed in violent actions toward the wife. She is stripped and exposed (2:3; cf. 2:10) and physically restrained (2:6). When we hear that the wife is suddenly wooed again in 2:14, we recognize a pattern uncomfortably close to the contemporary pattern of spousal abuse. There is a cultural chasm between ancient Israel and our time, but the imagery is potentially dangerous. In the Bible, it is almost always women who represent infidelity (e.g., Jer. 3:1–5; Ezek. 16, 23). So interpreters must be very careful, lest these texts be used against women. Some interpreters conclude the danger is so acute that these texts are irredeemable. In any case, extreme caution is in order. The point is *human* infidelity in the face of divine love and provision.

If we make this clear, then Hosea 2:14–20 can be appreciated as an extraordinary expression of divine grace in response to human sinfulness. As such, it connects to a theme not only of Hosea, but of all Scripture.

The juxtaposition of judgment (2:1–13) and promise grounded in mercy (2:14–20) is characteristic of Hosea. It begins in chapter 1, where the judgment of 1:2–9 is followed by the promise of 1:10–11; and the macrostructure of the book displays this pattern. The promise that begins in 2:14–20 extends through chapter 3, and the rest of the book proceeds as follows:

chapters 4–10: judgment; chapter 11: promise; chapters 12–13: judgment; chapter 14: promise.

The theological significance of this pattern is profound, for it communicates that God's judgment is not a matter of punishment. In short, God is not essentially retributive. Rather, God is essentially gracious; God never wills to punish. It is the people's covenant infidelity, manifest as disobedience and injustice, that in and of itself results in “punishing” consequences. God always wills to restore, to set right, to reconcile.

The need for prophets to criticize and to warn is real, because disobedience creates catastrophic results. This is demonstrated in the first passage of chapters 4–10. As 4:1–3 suggests, there are creation-wide consequences of human infidelity. The creational language of 4:3 connects back to 2:18 and makes it clear that God wills harmonious life for humans, wild animals, and birds alike. When disruption occurs, it is not God's doing; it is human malfeasance. In short, God does not will the disappearance of the one million species that may go extinct in the next few years. It will be our doing.

Hosea 11 strikingly connects to and reinforces 2:14–20. God's response to a disobedient people, here imaged as a son rather than a spouse, is not wrath but compassion (11:8–9). God promises to be “the Holy One in your midst” (v. 9). In the midst of a people whose “deeds do not permit them to return to their God” (5:4), God will have to do the turning if the relationship is to continue. God promises to do so. This is not holiness as traditionally understood, that is, separation for purity's sake. This is holiness reimagined as pure grace! There is clearly a lesson here for self-appointed guardians of purity.

The pattern of juxtaposing judgment and promise is not confined to Hosea. It occurs in virtually all the prophetic books. In this regard, the prophetic books are connected to a crucial moment in the Pentateuch—Exodus 32–34, the golden calf episode—where God's response to disobedient Israel is to forgive. The episode culminates in Exodus 34:6, God's self-revelation to Moses. Not surprisingly, two of the keywords from Exodus 34:6 occur in Hosea 2:19: “steadfast love” and “mercy.” In one further connection, these two words are also the keywords in Psalm 103, the psalm for the day. Each term

occurs four times; see “steadfast love” in 103:4, 8, 11, 17 and “mercy”/“merciful”/“compassion” in 103:4, 8, and 13 (twice). In narrative, in prophecy, and in song, the tradition celebrates God’s amazing grace!

In an overwhelmingly graceless North American culture and in congregations populated by many who generally seem to believe that God is out to get even with sinners, we probably can never preach too often about grace. Hosea 2:14–20 and its connections afford the preacher this opportunity. Plus, in a world threatened with

ecological catastrophe, it is important to realize that our gracious God is in covenant relationship not only with us humans, but also “with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground” (Hos. 2:18; see Gen. 9:1–17). This is at least an implicit invitation to be as expansively gracious as God is gracious (see Luke 6:36). If we fail to be so and to act accordingly, the chaotic results will not be what God wills but what we have wrought (Hos. 4:1–3).

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Today’s first reading can be deceptive. It contains lovely, intimate words of promise, peace, and plenty from God to Israel. Hosea 2:14–20 articulates the prophetic theme of forgiveness and restoration as fully as any passage in the Hebrew Bible. The pattern of prophetic literature is to juxtapose passages like this one with others that announce divine judgment, so we can expect a stern word of warning to precede our passage’s message of hope.

We may still not be prepared for the severity of Hosea 2:1–13, where words of anger rise to the level of violence. God promises to “kill [Israel] with thirst” and to take no pity on its children. Chapter 1 contains a similarly harsh message. God instructs Hosea to marry Gomer, “a wife of whoredom,” who symbolizes unfaithful Israel. When they have children, God instructs Hosea to give them names of vitriolic significance, including “Lo-ruhamah” (“No compassion”) and “Lo-ammi” (“No people”), for “I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them” (Hos. 1:6) and “you are not my people and I am not your God.” (v. 9). This final word of judgment directly contravenes God’s covenantal promise to Israel, offered repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exod. 6:7; Jer. 7:23; Ezek. 36:28).

When taking up difficult passages such as these in Hosea, the preacher should choose a specific interpretive strategy. One possibility

involves identifying the character through whose perspective we are meant to understand the story. In this case, there are two possibilities: Hosea and Hosea’s family. While the former might seem the natural choice, the preacher would do well to consider both.

The Wounded Heart of God. From Hosea’s perspective, the contrast between 2:1–13 and 2:14–20 is meant to make clear that God is not unaffected by Israel’s idolatry. Medieval theologians insisted on divine impassibility, the idea that God, being utterly complete in God’s own self, was not susceptible to hurt or grief on the basis of human actions. It is hard to imagine they had read Hosea. The prophet speaks for a God scarred by Israel’s infidelity, because God is deeply in love with Israel. Hosea’s own feelings about Gomer’s rejection fuel the prophetic imagination here; he knows from wrenching personal experience the consequences within the life of God of Israel’s faithless actions.

The work of Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park can help us understand the depth of what Hosea’s God is going through. In *The Wounded Heart of God*, Park brings the East Asian religious concept of *han* into conversation with Christian theology.² *Han* is the spiritual and psychic pain born within the human heart as a result of cruelty, hatred, or oppression. *Han* further victimizes those who suffer

2. Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

Engraved upon the Heart

The gospel and the law agree in this, that they are both from God, and that there is something revealed in each concerning the nature, will, and works of God. There is, however, a very great difference between them:

In the revelations which they contain; or, as it respects the manner in which the revelation peculiar to each is made known. The law was engraven upon the heart of man in his creation, and is therefore known to all naturally, although no other revelation were given. “The Gentiles have the work of the law written in their hearts.” (Rom. 2: 15.) The gospel is not known naturally, but is divinely revealed to the Church alone through Christ, the Mediator. For no creature could have seen or hoped for that mitigation of the law concerning satisfaction for our sins through another, if the Son of God had not revealed it. “No man knoweth the Father, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.” “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee.” “The Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” (Matt. 11:27; 16:17)

In the kind of doctrine, or subject peculiar to each. The law teaches us what we ought to be, and what God requires of us, but it does not give us the ability to perform it, nor does it point out the way by which we may avoid what is forbidden. But the gospel teaches us in what manner we may be made such as the law requires: for it offers unto us the promise of grace, by having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith, and that in such a way as if it were properly ours, teaching us that we are just before God, through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The law says, “Pay what thou owest.” “Do this, and live.” (Matt. 18:28. Luke 10:28) The gospel says, “Only believe.” (Mark 5:36). . . .

They differ in their effects. The law, without the gospel, is the letter which killeth, and is the ministration of death: “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” “The law worketh wrath; and the letter killeth.” (Rom. 3:20; 4:15. 2 Cor. 3:6) The outward preaching, and simple knowledge of what ought to be done, is known through the letter: for it declares our duty, and that righteousness which God requires; and, whilst it neither gives us the ability to perform it, nor points out the way through which it may be attained, it finds fault with, and condemns our righteousness. But the gospel is the ministration of life, and of the Spirit, that is, it has the operations of the Spirit united with it, and quickens those that are dead in sin, because it is through the gospel that the Holy Spirit works faith and life in the elect. “The gospel is the power of God unto salvation,” etc. (Rom. 1:16).

Zacharius Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Columbus, OH: Scott & Bascum, 1852), 104–5.

hurt by subjecting them to resentment, anger, and feelings of worthlessness. It is an insidious reality, in that those who carry the burden of *han* almost inevitably cause harm to others, thus extending and enlarging its cycle of hurt. While a Christian theological dimension is not part of *han*’s original meaning, Park has applied the idea of *han* to the relationship between God and humanity. Specifically, Park claims that even God experiences *han*, as God’s children choose time and time again to invest their loyalty and love in that which is less than God.

This is why the preacher must approach today’s reading within the context of the rest of Hosea 1–2. When YHWH speaks words

of mercy and commitment to Israel in Hosea 2:14–20, we know what they cost. Human unfaithfulness has broken God’s heart. In an overwhelming act of compassion, God opens up to the possibility, even the likelihood, that God’s people will break that heart all over again. Hosea leaves little room for uncertainty about what the vulnerability of love means for God—who chooses to love us anyway.

The Unreliable Narrator. The problem with Hosea’s perspective is that itch of recognition we experience when we read chapters 1 and 2. Both chapters vacillate between words of ugly accusation and venomous rage on the one hand,

and kind forgiveness and commitment on the other (a similar pattern happens elsewhere in the book of Hosea, esp. chap. 11). The uneasy feeling we have when Hosea gives voice to rage, then mercy, then back again, derives from its similarity to an abusive relationship, in which violent accusations of infidelity often alternate with insistent expressions of affection designed to woo the battered partner. Told from Hosea's perspective, we are meant to hear the denunciations of 2:1–13 as justified by Gomer's/Israel's behavior, while the gentle words in 2:14–20 reveal the true content of the prophet's and his deity's hearts. Yet, is that how Gomer and the children would have experienced the story line of chapters 1 and 2?

Literature has a term for storytellers like Hosea: the unreliable narrator. One of the best-known examples of this device occurs in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, an Agatha Christie mystery where (spoiler alert) figuring out whodunit is rendered nearly impossible by the fact that the narrator is the murderer.³ In a novel with an unreliable narrator, the reader must discover the truth by listening to what is not being said. In biblical passages like Hosea 1–2, we must adopt a similar strategy if we are to hear the word of God.

As we have seen, the book of Hosea magnifies the faithfulness of God by contrasting it with Israel's faithlessness. Yet if we read the book from the neglected perspective of Gomer and the children, the metaphor on which that contrast is founded—Hosea's marriage to an undeserving, faithless wife—falls apart. Once we recognize the abusive dimension of Hosea's

words and actions, we realize that his assurance that he (like YHWH) will love and protect his family does not tell the whole story.

Adding Gomer's point of view to that of Hosea helps prevent the greatest misperception to which this passage might give rise: that God either does not care about abuse or condones it. Further, it helps us understand why so many people in our churches believe God cannot love them. They have heard too many preachers employ the rhetorical strategy (deriving in part from passages like ours) that insists we must first focus on our unworthiness if we want to understand God's goodness. Whether the listeners on their own, or the preachers and then the listeners, someone got stuck at the unworthiness part.

Perhaps the time has arrived for another strategy. To be sure, we are not the people we were supposed to be, but does that diminish God's love and compassion? Does not our existence still derive solely from our creator, and would we still not wish to devote our deepest gratitude to God as a result? Perhaps this week preachers might focus on God's worthiness alone, and give the human unworthiness a rest.

Elsewhere the book of Hosea moves beyond the freighted metaphor of Hosea and Gomer's marriage. Chapter 11 describes the depth of God's compassion toward Israel, that wayward yet never forsaken child. Chapter 14 pictures Israel as a garden that YHWH longs to tend and cultivate. A sermon that mentions these passages can help clarify something that chapter 2 tries (with uneven success) to proclaim: the prophet's message of God's loving forgiveness.

ROBERT A. RATCLIFF

3. Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd: A Hercule Poirot Mystery* (New York: William Morrow, 2011).

Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28)

Psalm 103:1–13, 22

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—

³who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,

⁴who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.

⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹²as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

.....

²²Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 103 is framed as an interior monologue in which the psalmist exhorts his soul to do two things: to bless the Lord and not to forget what God has done (Ps. 103:1–2). In the Hebrew Bible, to bless someone is simply to speak a good word about them. A blessing can be prospective, that is, a statement that expresses a desire that one's future will be filled with good things. A blessing can also be an indicative statement about the present, a positive assessment about

one's character or actions. For example, one might bless someone by saying, "What you do is valuable," or "You have worth." Blessings can be also be retrospective, statements that recount the good deeds one has done in the past.

In the context of Psalm 103, retrospective blessings predominate. The psalmist looks back on all of God's benefits (v. 2), the good things that God has done. God has healed, restored, and forgiven him (vv. 3–4). Moreover, God has

exalted the psalmist so that he is constantly satisfied by God's care and nourishment (vv. 4–5).

To be sure, the psalmist is not the only one to have benefited from God's actions. After announcing the ways that God has helped him, the psalmist shifts to describing God's good deeds for the community (vv. 6–18). God vindicates those who suffer oppression (v. 6). God has done so for generations, back to the time of Moses and the exodus (vv. 6–8). God also forgives those who have sinned (vv. 9–12). Even though humans break faith, God is faithful to God's promises. God makes a covenant and keeps it (vv. 7, 17–18). In short, God's forgiveness of the individual psalmist is in keeping with how God has worked throughout history.

While recounting God's gracious actions for the community, the psalmist compares God's love with that of parents for their children.

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those
who fear him. (v. 13)

While the imagery is drawn explicitly from the sphere of paternal care, the idea of maternal care is nevertheless implied. The word for "have compassion" here (*rakham*) is related to the word for womb (*rekhem*). Thus, the relationship between God and God's people is best characterized here as that between a parent and a child rather than an exclusively paternal relationship.

The metaphor of humanity as God's children (v. 13) immediately gives way to a meditation on the transitory nature of human life (vv. 14–16). While verses 14–18 are not in the lectionary, they are nevertheless essential for understanding the logic of the psalm. These verses reveal that God's care for the people is not based on human goodness or strength. In fact, the opposite is the case. The psalmist claims that God loves us because God knows who we are. God knows we are made out of dust. God loves the weak, the vulnerable, the fragile. Humans are like the grass that flourishes for a season and then fades (v. 15–16). This temporariness of human life makes the enduring love of God all the more remarkable. It extends to our children, and to our children's children (v. 17).

Modern popular psychology suggests that many problems can be addressed by adjusting

one's interior monologue. Rather than harboring negative thoughts about one's self, one should say (so the conventional wisdom goes), "I'm good. I'm strong. I'm powerful. I can do anything."

The psalm, however, presents a different sort of interior monologue. Rather than blessing himself as the self-help books might suggest, the psalmist blesses God, recalling who God is and what God has done. He describes God's faithful love for the sick and the weak (v. 3), how God redeems those whose lives are in the pit (v. 4), those who are oppressed (v. 6). If our interior monologue matches the psalmist, we remember that we are among those who are in great need, and that God loves the needy. God loves us not because we are strong, but because our lives are so fleeting and because we are so frail. Acknowledging our frailty can liberate us. It can unite us with our community. It can inspire us to live with the gratitude and joy that the psalm reflects.

Psalm 103 and Hosea 2:14–20 both focus on the love and forgiveness of God in spite of our frailty and our failings. Unlike the psalm, however, the prophet employs an extended metaphor of Israel as an unfaithful wife being wooed back to God, her husband, after a period of infidelity. Its imagery draws upon concepts of love and marriage that are quite different from the cultural context of much of liberal Protestantism.

The main theme of Hosea 2:14–20 is God's love for God's people and God's eagerness to forgive. Many modern readers may find that message difficult to discern, given the patriarchal ideal that appears in the text. The immediate context of this lection is even more problematic, for it describes an adulterous woman being publicly shamed and her children punished as well (see esp. Hos. 2:2–6). By juxtaposing Psalm 103 with Hosea 2, the lectionary provides a welcome alternative for exploring the theme of God's steadfast love in spite of human frailty and folly.

Both metrical and responsorial settings of Psalm 103 may be sung in worship. This psalm has also inspired a number of popular praise choruses, including Andraé Crouch's gospel classic "Bless His Holy Name" and Matt Redmon and Jonas Myrin's soaring "10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)." While these can be good

options, a caution is in order. Some paraphrases reinforce an individualistic spirituality that is largely discontinuous with Scripture's witness to God's saving work in the world. In Psalm 103, the psalmist's individual experience is part of a much larger pattern of God's actions with

God's people. It is worthwhile to highlight the fact that Psalm 103 blesses God by recalling a wide scope of God's work in the world. God's salvation is both individual and communal.

JOEL MARCUS LEMON

2 Corinthians 3:1–6

¹Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; ³and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, ⁶who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In today's lection Paul responds to questions challenging his ministry. Where did these questions come from? The "peddlers of God's word" (2 Cor. 2:17)? Doubts arising within the congregation? We do not know, but the issues are clear: Paul is accused of being self-commendating, he has no letters of recommendation, and he lacks competence. Paul responds by redirecting the Corinthians' gaze: look at yourselves.

Letters of recommendation were a necessity in the ancient world. They proved people were who they said they were. They were guarantors of identity and authorization. Why would Paul need such things? Paul had founded the church; he had revisited it; he had written to it. Paul and the Corinthians had had difficult moments, but those very difficulties had cemented the relationship.¹ He could remind the Corinthians that they knew him personally, and he could tell them, "You yourselves are our letter" (2 Cor. 3:2). They should need no further authentication.

Throughout this passage Paul stresses the idea of the truth of the gospel being written on the heart. The letter written on the heart reflects the new covenant (Jer. 31:33–34), which was also said to be written on the heart rather than engraved on stone.

The same is the case for Paul's competence. It comes from God. Paul says, in effect, "Look inward at your hearts and upward toward God to observe the effectiveness of my work."

Paul then expands upon his discussion of the new covenant. He contrasts the law, written on stone, with the Spirit, who writes upon hearts. The one is the ministry of death (referring back to 2 Cor. 2:15–16); the other is the ministry of justification. This contrast is extended to Moses, who had to veil his shining face (Exod. 34:29–35). That was the glory of the old covenant, which was transcended by the greater glory of the new. This does not mean that the Jews were rejected by God (see Rom. 11:1–2). It means that the greater glory has now been manifested.

The Corinthian correspondence contains no extended theological exposition (as does Romans), nor does it offer simply a brief greeting with short doctrinal reflections (as do 1 and 2 Thessalonians). It discusses theological issues in relation to congregational problems.

The appearance of outsiders in Corinth is one of those issues. Who are these outsiders? It is tempting to identify them with the people Paul disputes in Galatians, but observing precepts of the law, particularly over circumcision, does not seem to be the issue in Corinth.

1. See Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible 32A (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 30–48, for an analysis of Paul's correspondence with the church in Corinth.

Rather, Paul's concern is the character of the new covenant itself.

The other lections for this Sunday are Hosea 2:14–20 and Mark 2:13–22. They have a common thread: God's grace has created a new situation. The Hosea passage, which follows God's symbolic rejection of the people in chapter 1, is all expressed in the future tense. Almost every verse begins with God saying, "I will . . ." God promises to end the worship of Baal, thus purifying the people from their idolatry. God promises peace and prosperity. Above all, God promises that the people will be loved forever.

The Gospel reading from Mark, concerning the call of Levi, exemplifies these promises. The text says nothing about Levi that would indicate any merit or special qualities. All we know is that he was one of the despised tax collectors. Nevertheless, he is called and he comes. The issue is not Levi's worthiness or lack thereof. The issue is the summons of Jesus.

The reference to letters "written on human hearts" in verses 2–3 brings Jeremiah 31:33 to mind: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." It also seems to echo Ezekiel 11:19–20: "I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (cf. Ezek. 36:26–27). Paul has drawn the themes of a new covenant and a people with new hearts from the prophetic tradition. In that venerable tradition, obedience to the law had always been a matter of spirit as well as faithful observance of God's holy statutes.

Paul's own understanding was that the time of the law was over. It had served as a tutor until the coming of Christ, but with that coming, the tutor was no longer needed (see Gal. 3:24–25).² This passage from 2 Corinthians does not have

this nuance. In the Corinthians passage, the Spirit gives life, but the letter—the law—simply kills.

Paul's attitude toward the law is complex; understanding it requires that we examine several passages. First, Paul never says that the law itself is bad: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12). Further, he does not hold that the law is too arduous to be performed. He was, he said, blameless as to righteousness under the law (Phil. 3:6).

The problem lay in the psychological effect of the law. The very fact that the law prohibited something made people want to do it (Rom. 7:7–8). This is the work of sin, and humans are incapable of escaping this dynamic on their own; but the Spirit, working within, sets us free. The time of the law, necessary though it was, is now over. We are in a new era.

This passage offers multiple opportunities for the preacher. One is the question of what validates one's ministry. Most working pastors have multiple credentials. These are the results of hard work and lots of time. Nevertheless their final validation is exactly what Paul says it is: a living congregation. Pastors must encourage their congregations to see themselves as the work of God, and pastors must learn to regard themselves as instruments in God's service.

A second area of preaching on this text has to do with the law. Contemporary Christians tend to regard Paul's critique of the law as a relic from another time. However, that critique applies to any law that becomes a basis of self-justification before God. Such laws are not just statutes. They can be social customs, prejudicial norms, or even ingrained habits. Pastors can explain how Paul's analysis of the way that laws can kill applies just as much to our time as it did to his. This is not a matter of old covenant versus new covenant. It is a matter of avoiding any attempt at self-justification before God.

A third homiletical possibility arises from the theme that binds the lectionary passages together: the newness of God's work. What is really new in the gospel? These passages speak of a new covenant, a new time of forgiveness,

2. The NRSV translates the Greek *paidagōgos* as "disciplinarian," which does not capture the sense of the Greek original. A *paidagōgos* was a slave who was both a teacher and a guardian of boys until they reached adulthood.

and renewal. That which the Bible promises still holds, no matter how grim and terrifying our present circumstances might be. Preaching

good news in troubled times is a perennial obligation of the pastor.

DAVID W. JOHNSON

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Trust is our most fundamental social value. Families, communities, nations are built on trust. If I do not trust, I cannot have any relationships—not with a spouse, children, pastor, governor, or president. To trust is to render ourselves into somebody else’s life. When we trust, we lean on somebody, we are able to give, to share, to live with and participate in various forms of relations—but to trust is so difficult.

To trust is difficult because we have all heard testimonies or had hard experiences of broken trust that have placed us and others in difficult situations. To trust is to risk vulnerability, for we have a wide range of expectations that summon different hopes that translate into forms of trust that can easily be frustrated and broken. We hire a pastor who is not doing the job we expected; we marry someone who is not turning out to be the person we had expected and trusted them to be. Of course, there may also be frustration. The pastor may find people are not responding in the ways she was promised, or a partner may say we are not proving to be whom they had trusted us to be when they entered into the covenant.

Trust is complex, and a plethora of issues defines what trust might be. Trust depends on how we were formed. Our education depends on social, spiritual, racial, sexual, and economic upbringings. To trust or to doubt or even to be scared depends on the signs we receive from life. Some white people move to the sidewalk across the street if walking toward a Black person. Some persons coming home from work cross the street to avoid crossing paths with a beggar. Some Black people freeze at the sight of a police officer. Some immigrants have issues giving out their names or addresses. We are all formed by the conditions and upbringings of our societies, and we need to be aware of both intended and unintended feelings about diverse others.

In this text, Paul is working in such a framework of trust and mistrust. Who is to be received? How should communities treat their guests? He is entertaining the possibility of receiving someone on the basis of a different sort of “letter of recommendation.” For him, Christians should be living letters of recommendation, known by their fruits. Thereby, through lives of faith and works of love we can build bonds of trust. Paul challenges a culture of mistrust with a deep assurance of trust based on love.

Paul is establishing an embodied way of being, relating, and testifying in the world. He is calling for bodies that are incarnations of God’s love and hospitality, for hearts fired by the gospel. When we live out incarnational love, we ourselves become Christ’s letter sent to the world. Filled by the Holy Spirit, in our living we embody the gospel of Jesus Christ to each other. Local churches become communities, *koinōnias* embodying the kingdom of God. Ideally, we have such a confidence in each other that we can enjoy full trust, a trust rooted not in the person but in the God whose Spirit fills and inspires us. The gift we receive from God is the gift of just and loving community, of life under a new covenant, life under the guidance of the Spirit who gives life and sustains us in this new covenant.

This is all seriously unrealistic, right? Does not what Paul is calling for here amount to “holy irresponsibility”? Is the apostle not showing too much trust? We live in a world of sinfulness. People abuse each other, exploit each other, steal and practice all forms of violence. What are we to do, living between Paul’s demand to trust and a world where suspicion, not trust, is the smart play, where naive trust is more likely to facilitate greed and exploitation than love and justice? There is no gainsaying this tension in the real world. We must be realistic, but Paul will not allow realism to breed cynicism. We need

strength and street smarts to hold these poles together. We need wisdom to work with ambiguities and paradoxes, risking love and working for what is loving, while protecting against being played and exploited.

I propose we start this challenge within ourselves. Can we call ourselves letters of recommendation from God? Letters of Christ to the world? What we need is to learn how to trust God more fully. We cannot have a God that is only a language spoken from elsewhere. Rather, we must speak of God from deep within. This trust in God is deeply connected with trust in ourselves. Trust in ourselves comes only when we are affirmed by God and our people. Trust can grow; trust is a competency in itself, another fruit of the Spirit. If we find this deep trust, we can feel that we fully belong to God, in whom we find our origin and our end. As Paul says, "Our competence is from God" (2 Cor. 3:5).

Christian mystics can help us in this movement of trust. Thomas of Celano, biographer of Francis of Assisi, quotes Francis's words: "The preacher must first draw from secret prayers what he will later pour out in holy sermons; he must first grow hot within before he speaks words that are in themselves cold."³ Catherine of Siena envisioned Jesus saying, "Dearest daughter, as I took your heart away from you the other day, now, you see, I am giving you mine, so that you can go on living with it forever."⁴

This deep connection with God causes the divisions between our trust in ourselves and

our trust in God to fade away. When our trust in God is the trust in ourselves, and the trust in ourselves is the trust in God, we do not fear trusting people or even ourselves. We then have the competence to get closer to the oneness of God and the world. Moreover, this connection keeps expanding.

When our trust is a place of strength, we also learn to trust the earth. If we are all *humus*, made of the soil of the earth, we also belong to the earth, created and loved by God; the animals are as well. When we grow in this expansive competency to trust God fully, there is no separation between God, our neighbor, the earth, and the animals. Everything belongs to God and we trust in this God, who is intertwined in everything. If we see trust in God in this way, we can also trust the mountains, the birds, and the animals for they all carry the assurance of God's love. We do not see mountains' and animals' existence only for our desires. Instead, we care for each other. We belong to all, and all belong to us.

Our faith is a constant call to trust. To trust God is to go deep into God's love without reservation, fear, or caution. To trust God is to plunge into the deep waters of God's love. This love helps us connect with God's whole creation and build communities of love where people trust each other. By way of God's love and trust, we become God's trusted recommendation letter to each other, Christ's trusted letter to the world.

CLÁUDIO CARVALHAES

3. Brother Thomas of Celano, *The Lives of St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), 295.

4. Blessed Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena: The Classic on Her Life and Accomplishments as Recorded by Her Spiritual Director* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2009), 144.

Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28)

Mark 2:13–22

¹³Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him.

¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

¹⁸Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁹Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

“Why is Jesus not concerned about holiness?” “If Jesus wanted to live a truly holy life, would he not choose his table companions more wisely?” “If Jesus and his disciples are really interested in holiness, why do they not fast more often?” Such questions would have arisen in the minds of many of the scribes, Pharisees, and other eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry, as they watched him eating with tax collectors and sinners, and as they saw that Jesus and his disciples ate as usual, while the Pharisees and John’s disciples fasted. The social perspective of Jesus’ time expected a teacher to make good use of public opinion, but Jesus was not very good at navigating the social mores of his day. Indeed, rather than consistently upholding the law, he appears regularly to trespass against it.

Usually, meals in the ancient world did not include people of different social strata. From soup kitchens to three-star Michelin

restaurants, one finds much the same situation has endured to this day. When people of different social standing did dine together in the Greco-Roman world, people with different status were seated in different rooms and offered a quality of food that mirrored their rank. In addition to the question of social status, the ritual purity of the people and food at various tables would be a concern for religious leaders. Jesus’ practice of eating with tax collectors and sinners consistently and starkly violated all such mores of purity and social stratification.

Tax collectors were viewed with disdain, not only in the Jewish circles surrounding Jesus, but also generally in the ancient world. Greek writers and rabbinical literature attest to the contempt in which they were held. “Rabbinic texts link tax collectors with robbers, murderers, and sinners; tax collecting appears in rabbinic lists of despised trades that no observant

Jew should practice.”¹ Oppressive levels of taxation were a means used by Rome to control and plunder conquered peoples. Worse, in the Judean context tax collectors were allowed to make money by collecting a percentage of tax greater than that due Rome—even if this meant pushing people into de facto slavery or debtors’ prison. Moreover, since tax collectors were typically drawn from among conquered peoples, they were acting as collaborators with Roman colonial rule. This describes Levi, a Jew who worked for the Romans as a tax collector. In the eyes of people in Jesus’ world, tax collectors were vectors of social sin and ritual impurity. In fact, Jesus does not contest this identification of tax collectors as “sinners.” When Jesus calls upon Levi, saying, “Follow me,” Levi responds by leaving behind his job as a tax collector.

Jesus heals several people in Mark’s Gospel before he calls Levi, tax collector and son of Alphaeus. Immediately before calling Levi, Jesus has been teaching (Mark 2:13), but we are not told explicitly how Levi knows Jesus. We are told that Levi responds without hesitation to Jesus’ command, “Follow me.” Today’s reading focuses on the fact that needy, ostracized people like these “sinners” are among the people Jesus has been sent to gather and with whom he shares his meals. The text also makes clear that many responded, were healed, and readily followed Jesus. This makes it clear that holiness is found in the process of *restoring* those marginalized by sin or disease, not in relating to and dining only with the righteous. This passage, therefore, conveys a message of hope to sinners; a call to responsible holiness to all who would be truly righteous; and a call to be open to fellowship with oppressors and others living lives that are considered far from righteous.

This theme of Jesus reaching out to have fellowship with marginalized people was probably very important to Mark’s original audience, who lived in a time when Christians were first being identified as a distinct religious cult after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. These *readers* may have had the experience of religious authorities considering them sinful, because as Christians they did not fully

live within the law. There are also marginalized people in *the story*, whom Jesus considers to be sinful (such as Levi, an agent of Roman oppression who causes people real harm). The power of the passage is the call to have table fellowship with those whom one considers to be sinful. This is a powerful message in our current age of intolerance.

The second half of this reading focuses on the polarity between disciples who fast and those who do not. Jesus reframes the issue of the pursuit of holiness by evoking the traditional image of a wedding feast as a moment of God’s grace. Should the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? Surely not. Fasting is appropriate when mourning is called for. It is a solemn form of self-deprivation during which a person looks for God’s guidance. A wedding feast, by contrast, celebrates new social bonds between families of similar status and honor who are joined together through the couple’s matrimonial bond. In this subsistence society, where food scarcity is common, a wedding feast is a gesture of hope and confidence that God will grace the community with abundant food in the future.

The other texts in Proper 3 enrich the interpretation of this Gospel text. In Hosea 2, written from an eighth-century-BCE perspective, God becomes a bridegroom who marries an imperfect, wayward Israel, healing and restoring her from her impurity. The wife brings dishonor to the husband, creating a situation in which the threat of famine highlights sin. The appropriate response is repentance, signified by fasting or abstention. In today’s reading, however, we see Israel gradually brought back to a relationship with her husband for no other reason than the compassionate character of God, demonstrated as righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and mercy. Jesus’ healing, teaching, and table fellowship, as well as his association with tax collectors and sinners, are a direct expression of this mercy. Second Corinthians 3:3 evokes this idea of transformation and acceptance in a more subtle way. Transformation is written by the Spirit on human hearts, not on stones.

When is an old custom appropriate? When is it time to innovate? When is it appropriate

1. Adele Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 194.

to follow the law? When is it appropriate to adapt to new circumstances? The comparisons between patching a new garment with old cloth and putting new wine in old wineskins address this issue using examples from everyday life that encompass the work of both men and women. Social relationships among Jesus' disciples should reflect their relationship to their Master, not the religiously accepted requirements for holiness. Fasting behavior should reflect the sorrow of mourning. Feasting is the appropriate response to the presence of God among them.

How can the meaning of fasting or feasting connect with readers/listeners today? The issue is meaning and motivation. It is possible to fast

for positive reasons: to restore health to the body, express sorrow, or refocus the mind and heart on God. Similarly, it is possible to feast for negative reasons: out of gluttony, or to maintain or create a particular social status. Today's Gospel challenges listeners to think about their relationship with food, whether eating or fasting, as a response to God's presence in their midst. It also challenges people in churches to discern whether they are able to embrace the "tax collectors" and "sinners" of our world—those who share in the company of Jesus, the bridegroom who is sent as an expression of God's deep, persistent love and mercy.

RENATA FURST

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Falling as it does in Ordinary Time, this passage might not receive as much attention as others. That is a pity, for it contains considerable homiletical treasure. The passage illuminates both the nature of Jesus' life and the call of God upon us all. Specific subthemes about widening the table, rejection of outdated or unfair laws, and the new thing that God is doing in our midst are all viable sermon topics.

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning."² Another highly segregated occasion is mealtime. We tend to eat most of our meals with those who match us in every demographic. Our daily bread—breakfast and lunch, at least—is ordinarily shared with family. We and our children typically sit elbow to elbow in the lunchroom with colleagues and classmates similar to us. People at our dinner parties often look a lot like us, and, again, on Sunday morning the faces around the Eucharist tend to be similar to ours. Jesus calls us to expand that table, to welcome all to join. He calls Levi, one clearly outside his social group, to become a disciple, and he joins the longer table at Levi's house.

The BBC period drama *Call the Midwife*, based on a memoir by Jennifer Worth, depicts the day-to-day lives of midwives working in London's East End. Set in the late 1950s, the series shows midwives delivering babies and tending to a variety of other medical situations in an impoverished neighborhood. In the opening episode we see newly qualified nurse Jenny Lee in her first official post. Her midwifery training had not particularly prepared her for the ways poverty manifests itself in the living conditions of her charges. Sent to perform a prenatal checkup for Conchita, a woman preparing for her twenty-fifth child, Nurse Lee arrives just as the family sits down for tea.

Conchita throws large pots of stew onto the table, and the family picks up spoons and helps themselves, eating directly from the pots. The eldest daughter urges Nurse Lee to eat, and Nurse Lee whispers that there are no plates. The daughter shrugs and tells Nurse Lee to do as she has been told. As the scene ends, we see the posh young woman in her crisp uniform dipping her spoon into the pot and eating—gingerly at first, but with more and more enthusiasm, out of the common bowl she shares with Conchita's disheveled and hungry children. This scene is

2. Martin Luther King Jr., quoted; http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol05Scans/17Apr1960_InterviewonMeetthePress.pdf.

not unlike the experience of a common meal at the Common Cathedral in Boston, and ministries modeled after it, where the homeless host the homed, and meals are shared.

Following this line of thought, congregants might be urged to consider the people with whom they are most likely to share a meal, both literally and figuratively, and to contemplate ways that their church's table might be built to be longer. Congregants (and preachers) might also be urged to look for those opportunities where they might join tables already set, similar to the experience of Jenny Lee and Conchita's family. When we consider lengthening the table, we might think only of how those with resources might share more effectively—an important sentiment, to be sure—but it is just as important to find ways to receive God's grace through others and to join tables already set.

Jesus is clearly not one to follow the letter of the law, the rules and conventions of the day. After discussing his dinner party with tax collectors and sinners, he is called to task for his disciples' failure to fast. His group is compared to the Pharisees and the disciples of John, who are, apparently, following the rules. Jesus defends his disciples' behavior by reminding them that the bridegroom is present, and therefore the wedding guests have no need to fast. There will be time for that in the future. The clever response seems to mollify his questioners, but the truth is deeper: Jesus has come to change the rules.

The Broadway musical *Matilda*,³ based on a book by Roald Dahl, includes a delightful song where Matilda takes the listener through several classic stories with sad endings and questions why these stories were not interrupted, asking, for instance, why someone did not take the poison from Romeo's hands. "Sometimes," the precocious five-year-old sings, "you have to be a little bit naughty." While Matilda's mischief seems, at a glance, merely cute, it cuts to a deeper story. Matilda's misdeeds target adults whose behavior is clearly abusive and the rules they make, particularly those of Ms. Trunchbull, the headmistress, which are cruel and nonsensical. With "naughty" behavior, Matilda is

able to protect her peers and call into question harmful rules.

A less lighthearted example of choices made to ignore the law in favor of justice would be found in some of the stories told by the organization No More Deaths. The faith-based organization seeks to end death and suffering in the US-Mexico borderlands. Members engage in a variety of activist interventions toward these ends, including some that violate US law. One member, Scott Warren, was arrested in 2018 for providing injured migrants with food, water, and basic first-aid supplies. What is the appropriate response to laws that are unfair or cruel? How might our congregations use their faith to respond?

Another option would be to take the words of Jesus more literally and craft a sermon around what it means to be present with the bridegroom now, and how to celebrate with joy while such celebration is possible. How might our worship be more joyful? How might our lives be more joyful? How might we celebrate, despite all the challenges we see?

Jesus reminds us that patching unshrunk cloth onto an old coat is a futile endeavor. The new patch will pull away, rendering the hole bigger. Similarly, as new wine ferments, it will expand wineskins, causing old, less flexible skins to explode. In short, the new thing is powerful and growing. It deserves to stand on its own. The challenge is that some of us, as individuals and as congregations alike, get overly attached to the old. We can find it hard to let go of what has been in favor of what might be—even when that new thing is born of God's gracious love for us.

An example of new wine in new wineskins would be Enterprise Community Partners, a nonprofit that, among many other projects, has partnered with houses of worship to create low-income housing. In the mid-Atlantic region in particular, the organization works with churches and other houses of worship to sell unused land or, in some cases, to sell their entire property in order to build housing for those that might not otherwise be able to live in those

3. Tim Minchin, composer, lyricist, *Roald Dahl's Matilda: The Musical* (London: Wise Publications, 2012).

neighborhoods. As more and more churches struggle with what to do with their large buildings, for some at least, the faithful answer is to put their communities into new wineskins, so that the gospel mandate to provide for the least of these might be enlivened.

Whichever approach the preacher pursues with this Gospel lesson, the passage will serve to illuminate the signs and wonders of the Pentecost season. Surely the signs of God are evident in this passage and in our corporate lives!

SUSAN K. OLSON

Proper 4 (Sunday between May 29 and June 4)

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20) and
Deuteronomy 5:12–15
Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18 and
Psalm 81:1–10

2 Corinthians 4:5–12
Mark 2:23–3:6

1 Samuel 3:1–10 (11–20)

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the LORD called, “Samuel! Samuel!” and he said, “Here I am!” ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. ⁶The LORD called again, “Samuel!” Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” ¹¹Then the LORD said to Samuel, “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. ¹²On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever.”

¹⁵Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” He said, “Here I am.” ¹⁷Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” ¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, “It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him.”

¹⁹As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. ²⁰And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD.

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The interpretive focus on 1 Samuel 3 is often exclusively on 3:1–10. Lessons derived from these verses include things like this: even children are called by God; God speaks at the most unexpected times; be sure to listen carefully for God’s voice. These lessons are edifying and important. When verses 1–10 are heard in connection with verses 11–20 and in both immediate and larger contexts, it becomes clear this is not just a story for children.

When 1 Samuel 3 is heard in its entirety, it is clear that the boy Samuel was being called to do a grown-up job. The situation is critical: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days” (1 Sam. 3:1), which means there is a shortage of guidance and a lack of effective and faithful leadership. Samuel will fill the vacuum. By the end of chapter 3, Samuel is no longer “the boy . . . ministering to the LORD under Eli” (v. 1). Rather, he is “a trustworthy prophet of the LORD” (v. 20). The word of God is no longer rare, “for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD” (v. 21). Having been transformed by the word, Samuel is now prepared and positioned to deliver a much-needed divine word “to all Israel” (4:1).

The crisis into which Samuel is called is even clearer when we observe the connections between 1 Samuel 3 and its wider context. The preceding book of Judges has narrated an emerging crisis of leadership. Gideon is the last of the judges to achieve “rest” for the land (Judg. 8:28). Samson, the final judge, can only “begin to deliver Israel”

(13:5) from a Philistine threat that continues into 1 Samuel. The final section of the book of Judges (chaps. 17–21) is a horror story of major proportions. Leadership is entirely lacking: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25; see also 17:6; 18:1; 19:1).

In the midst of this crisis, Samuel provides stability. Even though he himself opposed the creation of a monarchy to deal with the Philistine threat (1 Sam. 8:1–18), he would prove to be a key figure in moving Israel from disarray and near dissolution to some semblance of stability, especially with the emergence of King David. The monarchy would eventually prove to be an unfaithful institution as well, but God would raise up more prophets to deal with later crises.

The Gospel of Luke sees parallels between the birth circumstances, growth, and ministry of Samuel and Jesus. The events leading up to the births of both Samuel and Jesus are extraordinary (see 1 Sam. 1; Luke 1:26–45). Both Hannah, Samuel’s mother, and Mary, Jesus’ mother, sing songs in conjunction with the births of their sons—and the songs are noticeably similar (1 Sam. 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55). Both celebrate God’s incomparable deeds, carried out especially for the lowly and needy, who are exalted, while the powerful are brought low. Both Samuel and Jesus, we are told, grow physically and “in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52; see 1 Sam. 2:26). God was revealed

in and through Samuel and his word (1 Sam. 3:19–4:1), and such was certainly the case with Jesus as well.

Samuel was called to be a transitional and transformational leader. Traditionally, 1 Samuel 3 is interpreted as an invitation for us too to listen for God's call. Beyond that, however, it is also a challenge to discern what God needs us to do in our world. As Bruce Birch concludes, "We are called to become the channel for God's prophetic word to our own time."¹ In view of the persistence of poverty and hunger in the United States and the world, along with the growing gap between rich and poor, it would be appropriate to attend to Hannah's and Mary's proclamation that God exalts the lowly and brings low the powerful. While preachers may not be able to convince their parishioners to think of themselves as prophets, they may at least encourage their congregations to be a "channel for God's prophetic word to our own time."

The Ten Commandments, found in the lection from Deuteronomy, are often dismissed as outdated "thou shalt nots" that have little to do with contemporary life. Connecting them to their narrative context can help to correct this impression. The formulation of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 represents a second version of the commandments (Deuteronomy means "Second Law"). This version is very close to the first version in Exodus 20:1–18.

The major difference involves Deuteronomy 5:12–15 in comparison to Exodus 20:8–11. In Exodus, deliverance from captivity and death precedes law giving. In short, the commandments are not rules to be obeyed in order to earn one's salvation or prove one's merit. Rather, they are *torah*, "instruction," offered to a liberated people so that they will be able to stay free. The lives of liberated people should look very different than life under the oppressive conditions of the Egyptian Empire. This original setting of the Decalogue remains relevant for the second version. In Deuteronomy, the people are poised to enter the land. The issue is whether they will

be able to stay free as they undertake a settled existence.

While the word "Sabbath" means basically to stop, more is at stake than simply a work stoppage, although rest itself is helpful and needed. Two Sabbath connections point to what more is involved. The first mention of Sabbath in the Bible is in Genesis 2:1–4 ("rested" represents the Hebrew root), and it is the creational rationale for Sabbath observance that is featured in Exodus 20:11. Because we can assume that God does not really need to rest, Sabbath in Genesis 2:1–4 suggests taking the time to delight in and enjoy creation. God's delight in creation invites our delight in creation. The Sabbath commandment thus has an ecological reach. Sabbath observers will be creation preservers. Notably, animals are included as participants in Sabbath observance (Deut. 5:14).

Unlike Exodus 20:11, the rationale for Sabbath observance in Deuteronomy 5:15 is the remembrance of captivity in Egypt and God's liberating work. As suggested above, Exodus is the narrative setting for the first version of the Decalogue. This alone suggests that Sabbath observance is about freedom. Memorably, this includes freedom from the oppressive reality of being defined solely by work and productivity, as Israel had been defined in Egypt.

There is an earlier mention of Sabbath in the manna story in Exodus 16, where a double portion is given on the sixth day so that the people can rest on the seventh day (see esp. Exod. 16:22–30). Such reliance upon God for gracious provision of enough for everyone is a marked contrast to life in imperial Egypt. In Egypt, food had become commodified, resulting in plenty for the few and little for the many. Sabbath observance in this context means equal opportunity for all to eat.

Amid the ongoing threat of ecological catastrophe, it would be appropriate and faithful for the preacher to recover and emphasize the creational dimensions of Sabbath observance. In the midst of a production-oriented, consumerist society that encourages greed, it would be

1. Bruce Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 2:994.

appropriate and faithful to proclaim Sabbath as, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, “an *act of resistance*”² whereby we refuse, for God’s sake, to be defined by production and consumption.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Call stories feature prominently during the first few weeks of the season after Pentecost in Year B. On Trinity Sunday we share Isaiah’s vision of YHWH in the temple, asking, “Whom shall I send?” (Isa. 6:1–8). On Proper 3, Jesus rouses Levi from his seat at the tax booth with an invitation to “follow me” (Mark 2:14). God’s call of the prophet to marry Gomer in Hosea 1 creates the context for the words of divine forgiveness and mercy in Hosea 2:14–20, the first reading for Proper 3. Now on Proper 4 we hear the Lord’s repeated calls to the young Samuel and witness the child’s struggle to figure out exactly who is calling him. The preacher might explore this story by means of other examples of divine call in Scripture, Christian history, and theology.

Dangers of the Call. Did God speak within the biblical stories more often than today? Those tempted to reach that conclusion may be surprised to read the disclaimer that opens today’s reading: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread” (1 Sam. 3:1). Might this have been partly because the call of God can be such a fraught experience, subject to misunderstanding both by recipients and their listeners? When Samuel hears God’s voice, he seems to have no context within which to locate it. Even on the third call, he still thinks it has to be Eli. Would we be any less befuddled? In a classic comedy routine, the late Richard Pryor could not tell if the voice he once heard coming from a darkened alley belonged to God or a couple of guys with a baseball bat.³

Not knowing how to listen for the voice of God is one thing; thinking there is no need

to do so is another. That is the problem confronting Swain Hammond, the protagonist in Peggy Payne’s short story “The Pure in Heart.”⁴ A highly educated Presbyterian pastor in a university town, Hammond considers himself rational, ethical, and immune to flights of fancy (an assessment with which his congregation approvingly agrees). So, of course, when God speaks to him in a manner that Hammond cannot explain away, his whole world is upended. The worst part is his church’s reaction. When Hammond feels compelled to tell them of his experience, they go through their own turmoil before eventually deciding to allow him to remain their pastor. His gratitude for their understanding curdles when he realizes they are simply humoring him. They refuse to contemplate the possibility that what he heard was the life-altering call of an undomesticated God who might just be calling them as well.

Discerning the Call. How can we be sure we are hearing the voice of God rightly? How can we know we are really being called to stake out risky ground, change our life course, or offer potentially life-altering advice? Most especially, how can we know we are hearing the authentic call of God, rather than the murmurings of our own hearts?

In our complicated world of flawed humans, the chances that God’s call will definitively authenticate itself are slim. Like Swain Hammond’s church, often we cannot or do not want to understand that to which God is calling us. This is where discernment comes in. We know we must test the call in order to gauge whether it comes from God, ourselves, or some other

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 73.

3. “Richard Pryor Meets God,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvyaQezvmNo.

4. In C. Michael Curtis, ed., *God: Stories* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 222–35.

source. That process of discernment is almost always rendered easier when others are involved. Without Eli, Samuel the boy never becomes Samuel the prophet and judge. Without Ananias, Saul of Tarsus never becomes the apostle Paul (Acts 9:10–18). When the wind of the Spirit blows in a person's life, it is the same Spirit who gathered the community to which that person belongs. Seeking the Spirit's leadership in that community will almost always result in a more fruitful and faithful discernment than will doing so alone. Had Hammond's congregants "test[ed] the spirits" (1 John 4:1), they likely would have perceived that their pastor was not the only person to whom God was speaking.

Scripture as Call. The church's history is full of those who, having read of God's call in Scripture, hear that same call on their own life. Antony, the founder of Christian monasticism, was only one of many to take notice of the story of the rich young man (Matt. 19:16–22) and decide that they must heed Christ's call to sell all they have and follow him. Encountering Paul's struggle in the book of Romans with the relationship between law and grace, Martin Luther felt himself led more deeply into that same struggle, emerging with a theological realization that helped spark the Protestant Reformation. Hearing a reading from Luther's commentary on that same book of Romans, John Wesley experienced God's call to a deeper joy in and assurance of his salvation.

The preacher would do well to prepare for a similar possibility on Proper 4. Somewhere in the congregation is someone who has been denying and rationalizing away an insistent tug on their life, possibly inaudible yet no less real. Hearing God's call to Samuel might be just what they need to surrender to that tug. God grant that they find a group of Christians—and a Christian preacher—willing to take the possibility seriously.

Call and Covenant. This morning's reading from Deuteronomy, in which Moses shares

for the second time the Ten Commandments (specifically, the commandment to observe the Sabbath), feels like a tough homiletical nut to crack. Along with the (presumed) familiarity congregants bring with them to the subject, the Decalogue has for some time been a hot zone in our society's ceaseless culture wars. Yet the combination of the way this passage frames the commandments and the way it is conjoined in the lectionary with the story of Samuel's call offers possibilities preachers might want to consider.

When Moses brings Israel together in Deuteronomy 5, he makes clear that the covenant God has made with Israel forms the necessary context for commandments such as keeping the Sabbath holy. A community entering into a different lifestyle every seven days is what faithfulness to the covenant looks like. Contrary to the individualistic readings we often bring to the Decalogue, the life it describes makes sense only when a group of people have agreed to live that life together.

This is where the divine call comes in. God always calls people into covenant faithfulness, and that faithfulness in turn fulfills the call to witness and service. A story from the last century casts light on this interplay between call and covenant. During the 1918 influenza pandemic, the hospitals of Philadelphia were overwhelmed, especially their nursing staffs. The city's Roman Catholic archbishop issued a call to nuns in the area to leave their convents and offer volunteer nursing services. More than 2,000 of them did, providing compassionate care while risking their own lives and health.⁵ Why did this group of Christians take decisive action when many others turned away in fear? Might it be that their monastic vows prepared them for a life of covenantal service, expecting to hear God's call at just such a moment as this? The preacher can remind the congregation that they too can hear that call if they open themselves to hearing it together.

ROBERT A. RATCLIFF

5. Kiley Bense, "We Should All Be More Like the Nuns of 1918," *New York Times*, March 20, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/opinion/coronavirus-nuns.html>.

Proper 4 (Sunday between May 29 and June 4)

Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18

¹O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
³You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
.....
¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.
¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.

Psalm 81:1–10

¹Sing aloud to God our strength;
 shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
²Raise a song, sound the tambourine,
 the sweet lyre with the harp.
³Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
 at the full moon, on our festal day.
⁴For it is a statute for Israel,
 an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
⁵He made it a decree in Joseph,
 when he went out over the land of Egypt.

I hear a voice I had not known:
⁶"I relieved your shoulder of the burden;
 your hands were freed from the basket.

⁷In distress you called, and I rescued you;
 I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
 I tested you at the waters of Meribah.
⁸Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;
 O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
⁹There shall be no strange god among you;
 you shall not bow down to a foreign god.
¹⁰I am the LORD your God,
 who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
 Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.”

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18. The reading from 1 Samuel AND this corresponding psalm focus on God’s immediate knowledge of the human condition and God’s access to our thoughts and emotions. Such knowledge is mysterious, even paradoxical, for God’s glory seems far removed from the mundane realities of life. Yet God attends carefully to us and intervenes when we call.

Psalm 139 provides a meditation on God’s knowledge of the human condition in the context of prayer. The psalmist addresses God directly, stating who God is and what God does. In doing so, the psalm draws us into the relationship between God and the individual psalmist. When we speak the words of the psalm, we hear our own sense of wonder at God’s creativity and care: “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13).¹

The psalm begins with a series of statements about God’s knowledge and the inability of human knowledge to comprehend it (vv. 1–6). God knows every place the psalmist goes and everything the psalmist does (vv. 2–3, 5). God’s knowledge extends even into the psalmist’s thoughts and intentions (vv. 1–2, 4). This pervasive knowledge is possible because God’s presence is inescapable (vv. 7–12). God can go anywhere, high or low (v. 8), east or west (vv. 9–10), dark or light (vv. 11–12). Nothing is beyond God’s purview.

The lectionary resumes with a meditation on the actions of God (vv. 13–18). Here the psalmist focuses on the mystery of existence and the origin of human life. God’s actions extend before and beyond the limits of any one lifetime (vv. 15–16). Such a realization spurs the psalmist to praise (v. 14). Yet considering the depth of these divine mysteries finally leaves the psalmist overwhelmed and unable to articulate the majesty of God’s power (vv. 17–18).

The meditations on divine knowledge (vv. 1–6), divine presence (vv. 7–12), and divine action (vv. 13–18) provide the justification for the psalmist’s request in the final verses (vv. 19–20), the only direct petition in the psalm. While outside the lectionary, these verses are the climax of the psalm. After extolling God’s power, the psalmist finally asks God to use that power to bring about salvation from the enemies.

The statement that the wicked currently surround the psalmist (vv. 19) complicates the psalm’s earlier claims about divine knowledge, presence, and action. The affirmations of God’s intimate awareness of the psalmist might suggest that the psalmist is in a state of quiet confidence, resting secure in the knowledge that God is there, no matter what. Yet the last verses of the psalm reveal that the psalmist is in fact in crisis. The psalmist clings to the notion of divine presence so forcefully because the threats to the psalmist are so immediate. Survival depends on

1. This verse has been frequently cited as a proof text in contemporary controversies about abortion and the reproductive rights of women. When evaluating the utility of this or any proof text, it is important to keep in mind the larger context. The verse appears amid other descriptions extolling God’s knowledge. The psalmist’s central claim is that divine awareness and ability far surpass that of humans.

That Insight into Spiritual Things

We need not fear spiritual pride then, in following Christ's call, if we follow it as men in earnest. Earnestness has no time to compare itself with the state of other men; earnestness has too vivid a feeling of its own infirmities to be elated at itself. Earnestness is simply set on doing God's will. It simply says, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth," "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" Oh that we had more of this spirit! Oh that we could take that simple view of things, as to feel that one thing which lies before us is to please God! What gain is it to please the world, to please the great, nay, even to please those whom we love, compared with this? What gain is it to be applauded, admired, courted, followed, compared with this one aim, of not being disobedient to a heavenly vision? What can this world offer comparable with that insight into spiritual things, that keen faith, that heavenly peace, that high sanctity, that everlasting righteousness, that hope of glory, which they have who in sincerity love and follow our Lord Jesus Christ?

Let us beg and pray Him day by day to reveal Himself to our souls more fully; to quicken our senses; to give us sight and hearing, taste and touch of the world to come; so to work within us that we may sincerely say, "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and after that receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of Thee: my flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."

John Henry Newman, "Divine Calls," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 8 of 8 (London: Longmans, Green, Co., 1920), 31–32.

God's intervening to bring about justice and salvation (vv. 19–20).

The text of Psalm 139 often appears in affirmations of God's care. These may come in responsive calls to worship or assurances of pardon. The text is even more likely to appear in song, especially in hymns or praise choruses. The psalm is appropriate for such usages, to be sure. Yet one must be careful not to treat the text as an antidote to low self-esteem. The psalmist describes himself as "wonderfully made" (v. 14), not primarily to glorify the creation, but to glorify God the creator.

When Psalm 139 appears in worship, one should acknowledge, as the psalmist does, that the presence of God is needed because of the immediacy of injustice and oppression. Psalm 139 ends with a plea for God to act against the wicked, who pose a mortal threat to the psalmist.

The reading from 1 Samuel also confirms the idea that the divine presence is manifested in times of trouble. God appears to the young boy amid societal disarray (Judg. 19–21; 1 Sam. 3:1) and in spite of failed religious leadership (1 Sam. 2:11–17). Even though the word of God was "rare in those days" (1 Sam. 3:1), God was still making contact. God calls out to

Samuel in a clear, direct, and immediate way (e.g., 1 Sam. 3:4).

Psalm 81:1–10. Along with the first reading of the day, Psalm 81 describes how a community should respond to God's saving actions. In Deuteronomy 5:12, we find the command to "observe the sabbath." This version of the Ten Commandments differs from the Sabbath rule found in Exodus 20:8–11. In Exodus, the commandment recalls the priestly account of the creation of the world (Gen. 2:2–3). The people should rest because God rested on the seventh day at the beginning of time (Exod. 20:11). In Deuteronomy 5, however, the Sabbath commandment recalls how God intervened with a "mighty hand and an outstretched arm" to bring about salvation from slavery (Deut. 5:15). The command to keep Sabbath refers not to the origins of the cosmos but to origins of a community, those whom God delivered from oppression. In Deuteronomy, God's care for God's people is the justification for everyone to rest, to take care of yourself and those whose labors support your own.

Like Deuteronomy 5:12, Psalm 81 also begins with a command, a summons for the

community to respond to God's saving acts. The text begins with a call to praise God. The whole band is called into service: voices, tambourine, lyre, harp, and trumpet (Ps. 81:1–5). This call to praise God is not optional. It is a matter of law, a “statute” and an “ordinance” (vv. 4–5a) that likely refers to the command to keep the Sabbath in Deuteronomy.

The latter half of the lectionary psalm verses assumes the form of an oracle in which God speaks directly to the people (vv. 5b–10). God recounts the story of the exodus, how God relieves the burdens of the people, how God hears the cries of the people and answers them. God's action motivates the people's praise and mandates that nothing can stand between God and God's people—no other loyalties, no other gods. The psalm concludes as it began, with a command. At the beginning of the psalm the

people are called to open their mouths in praise, and at the end God commands the people to “open your mouth wide” so that God may continue to care for God's people, by nourishing them and sustaining them (v. 10).

Since many Christian communities have bound Sabbath keeping to Sunday worship, musical settings of this psalm are particularly appropriate during Sunday services. Whether sung or read responsively as a call to worship, Psalm 81 highlights the importance of setting aside time to remember and celebrate what God has done. God's saving action prompts us to care for ourselves and others (Deut. 5:12–15). It prompts us to lift our voices together in praise (Ps. 81:1–5a). It prompts us to trust God now as we have done in the past (Ps. 81:5b–10). God's faithfulness continues.

JOEL MARCUS LEMON

Proper 4 (Sunday between May 29 and June 4)

2 Corinthians 4:5–12

⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In this passage, Paul continues his exposition on the nature of the apostolic ministry. He does not seem to have any particular opponents in view in these verses, although 4:5, "For we do not proclaim ourselves," repeats a theme of chapter 3: Paul has no need of self-aggrandizement. But from that point, his discussion is a more general description of the life of apostles, a life marked by paradox, expressed in a series of antitheses.

This series begins with a commonplace illustration: "we have this treasure in clay jars" (2 Cor. 4:7). The "treasure" looks back to 4:1, the ministry itself. The clay jars are the apostles. The force of this metaphor might be missed today, since clay jars are not household items, but in Paul's time they were common. Clay jars had little value in themselves. Their only worth was in their use as storage receptacles. A twenty-first-century Paul might have written, "We have this treasure in tin cans."

The antitheses follow. They have a common, almost rhythmic pattern. In each pair of antitheses, the first term—"afflicted," "perplexed," "persecuted," "struck down"—describes what apostles are on their own. The second term—"not crushed," "not driven to despair," "not forsaken," "not destroyed"—demonstrates what

they become through the power of God. These comparisons are summarized and made explicit in the concluding antithesis: death is carried in the apostles' bodies in order to make life in Christ manifest. Paul concludes this selection by reminding his hearers that all this is for them, a point he emphasizes repeatedly in the subsequent parts of the letter. This is summarized by the well-known verse: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (5:19). This message is not just verbal. It is displayed in the lives of the apostles: "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh" (4:11). The suffering itself proclaims Christ.

The antitheses in 4:8–10, moving though they are, are rather abstract. Paul does not detail any of his sufferings. Already, in 1:8–9, he has said that because of an experience in Asia he was driven to despair. Later in the letter, in 11:23–27, he details his sufferings as an apostle: he has been whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, in constant danger, and often naked and without food.¹ Paul is absolutely sincere when he says that he has been afflicted in every way. He

1. Many scholars regard chaps. 10–13 as a separate letter that at some point was added to chaps. 1–9.

sees his sufferings as reflecting the suffering of Christ, and consequently as a witness to Christ.

Being united with the death of Christ in order to share in the resurrection is a frequent theme in Paul's letters. In Romans 6:3–11 he associates it with baptism: to be baptized is to die with Christ in order to be raised with Christ. This also means that the body dies to sin.

The connection of the body with sin and death is a constant in Paul's letters. Death, sin, and the body are often associated with each other. They form a kind of slavery. Freedom is found in Christ. The postbaptismal life of the believer is itself a kind of resurrection, the death of both sin and death (cf. John 12:24).

The lections associated with this reading are Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Mark 2:23–3:6. Both of these passages have to do with keeping the Sabbath. In Deuteronomy 5, keeping the Sabbath is associated with the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt, whereas in the parallel in Exodus 20, the Sabbath commemorates God's rest from the work of creation. There are no exceptions or qualifications in either version of the commandment.

The Gospel reading is quite different. It tells two stories about Jesus and the Sabbath. In both stories, the Sabbath command is broken, once by the disciples and once by Jesus himself. The Pharisees here are critical of this breach of the law; in the second passage they are even watching for it. Jesus' act of healing in the synagogue on the Sabbath catalyzes the plots against him.

Uniting the three lectionary texts in a sermon would be a difficult task. The 2 Corinthians reading does not have the law in view, while in the other two passages it is prominent. If the preacher wants to discuss the law, other passages from Paul would be more appropriate. A sermon based on 2 Corinthians 4:5–12 would have to relate the lives of apostles to the death and resurrection of Christ. It also would have to convince the hearers that they are, in fact, apostles, in that they themselves are bearers of the Word. Another approach would be to apply the distinction between clay pots and treasure to contemporary life. Church members might not have any difficulty comparing themselves to clay pots, but they would have difficulty identifying

the treasure that those pots contain, particularly if that treasure is associated with trial and suffering rather than achievement and success.

The presence of those whom Paul regarded as pseudoapostles forces him to catalogue his own sufferings. He does not want to boast, but he is willing to remind the Corinthians of what he has endured. Nevertheless, Paul always strikes a note of hope in the power of God to sustain him and make his ministry fruitful.

Contrast this with Jeremiah. Paul appears to have Jeremiah 1:5 in mind when he writes to the Galatians that God had set him apart before he was born (Gal. 1:15). Jeremiah suffers under the burden of being a prophet in a way that Paul apparently does not suffer in being an apostle. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick," Jeremiah writes (Jer. 8:18). "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me" (8:21). Of course, the word that Jeremiah was instructed to declare is rather different than Paul's message. Jeremiah foretells disaster. His message is not without hope (see esp. Jer. 30–33), but that hope lies on the far side of the proclamation of guilt and suffering God has told him to proclaim.

Paul, by contrast, exudes confidence. Even when he despairs of life (see 2 Cor. 1:8), he does not despair of God. His hope is based on the resurrection of Christ, which teaches that life is present even within death (1:9). Paul could write, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you . . . was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes.' For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes'" (1:19–20).

The tension between God's "Yes" and God's "No" can be the basis of sermons, especially when dealing with modern figures. Lottie Moon, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King all had to say both a "No" and a "Yes." The "No" was for the sake of the "Yes." It was a "No" to certain social issues—unequal status and treatment of women, Nazism, racial discrimination—that compromised or denied the "Yes" of God. Pastors must be honest about when and why God says "No," and understand that the "No" is always for the sake of the "Yes."

DAVID W. JOHNSON

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Every night I pray with my kids and part of our prayer goes like this: “And now, give us a good night. We are not afraid of the night, because you are the night with us, and we are the night with you. You are the darkness in us, and we are the darkness in you.” I was afraid of the night when I was a kid. By associating God with the night and darkness, I want my son to know that day and night, darkness and light are parts of a whole and all belong to God. God is light and darkness as we, God’s image, are also made of light and darkness.

Nonetheless, there is a part of darkness that tries to hide from the light, and that inner part of us has to do with our deep fears. This part tries hard to not see the light of God. This form of darkness tends to lead us into confusion and destruction. When Paul mentions the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:6), he is talking about a light that expels any destructive darkness. To know the glory of God is to be free from confusion and self or collective destruction. Paul knew the glory of God and was able to see how God’s glory could transform individuals and communities.

Under that light, Paul was a slave for Jesus, which means he first and always worked in fidelity to the gospel of Jesus, no matter the cost. Paul knew the cost in his own body. His body was marked by the bruises of the world; the scars of life covered him with sadness, frustrations, betrayals, sickness, and injustices. In Galatians 6:17 he says, “I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.” This was not a metaphor. In 2 Corinthians 11:24–27 he relates:

Five times I have received . . . the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless

night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

The key to Paul’s endurance was to live under this light and know his light was held in and by God. He learned how to engage life *from* knowledge of that light. In our text the modifier “but not” (or “and yet,” “although,” “in spite of,” “however”) changes everything. It says Paul lived under the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God,” and concretely names how God’s grace is sufficient for Paul. The entire edifice of his theological reasoning hangs upon the glory and sufficiency of this light.

The transformed realities that the “but not” entails are essentially figurations of Jesus. In the light of the transfiguring reality of Jesus, oppressive, threatening, and frightening worldly realities are seen in the light of the grace of God. Thus, if I say, “I’ve been lonely,” the *yet* of God will add, “*yet* not alone!” If you say, “I’ve been betrayed,” the *but not* of God will continue, “*but not* destroyed!” If we say, “We have no jobs,” the *however* of God will say, “*however*, God will sustain us.” If we say, “The earth has been destroyed,” the Spirit of God will say, “in spite of its destruction, I am the One who keeps the earth alive.”

Paul’s theology is deeply marked by God’s modifiers, for Paul knew God was the one who modifies our lives in Jesus Christ. To live in the light is to live empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the possibility to utter the words and know the transfiguring reality of “Jesus Christ,” our “yet,” “although,” “but not,” “however,” and “in spite of” whatever goes on in our lives. These are our Christian markers.

We are a people of the *yet*, of the *but not*, of the *however*, of the *in spite of*! I will start with some possibilities, and you can create your own:

Life is hitting us hard, YET . . .

Somebody in my family is sick,
BUT NOT . . .

My ministry is impossible right
now, HOWEVER . . .

The world is indeed crumbling, but
IN SPITE OF THAT . . .

The last word of God for us is always a redemptive “yet,” “but not,” “however,” or “in spite of that.” We are always moving in and through Jesus and the ways this holy modifier transforms us.

The ways we see the work of the Holy Spirit depend on our theologies and our interpretations of history. The condition of the possibility for God’s theological modifiers to fulfill their potential has to do with the ways we see our lives in the world. In order to get into the fullness of God’s modifier, we have to go deeper into our relations with those suffering.

For example, we, nonindigenous North Americans, must acknowledge the ways our official histories fail to consider indigenous people in their own sovereignty and even portray them as savage or docile. In order for the *however* of God to kick in fully and entail God’s full redemption, we have to come into a new awareness of their side of the history. Once we realize that “their” history is also “our” history, including our complicity in injurious practices that have been experienced by indigenous peoples as death dealing and culture erasing, we will gain a new appreciation of the indigenous nations, we will fight for them and honor them. Only then will the *but not* of God make real sense.

We could say the same about the ways the United States has treated Black people. Unless we fully address the historical horrors with which Black people have been afflicted under

slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing dynamics of white supremacy, the *in spite of* of God will serve only those who are in power and not those trying to survive and flourish under the crushing power of racism. We could say the same for the ways this country has treated women and still keeps them from places of major power and authority, often burdening them with high pressure and lower salaries. We could also mention the poor, who are criminalized and subject to guilt and shame for not achieving economic self-sufficiency.

The *however* of God will show up powerfully only when we fully repent, Paul says in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” When we understand that our Christian mission is messy and calls us to places where it is not easy to go, when we go after the homeless and find them a home, when we look for children without conditions to study and offer our help, when we all become responsible for those who cannot afford health insurance, when each of our communities makes a commitment to one another’s full well-being, then we will become God’s “however,” “in spite of,” “but not,” and “yet.” Ministering together, we can be God’s modifiers in the world, making the life of Jesus “visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11) as we continue the struggle until justice can kiss peace (see Ps. 85:10).

CLÁUDIO CARVALHAES

Proper 4 (Sunday between May 29 and June 4)

Mark 2:23–3:6

^{2:23}One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ²⁵And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” ²⁷Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

^{3:1}Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ²They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” ⁴Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. ⁵He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

What counts as “work” that violates the command about Sabbath rest? In this pericope the disciples pluck heads of grain and Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Are these violations of the Sabbath? Jesus’ question summarizes the issue: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (3:4). Our response to this question reveals what type of God we imagine we worship. Do we worship a God who establishes laws to be followed, no matter their concrete impact in specific circumstances? Do we worship a God who wants us to make exceptions if they are necessary to promote love, justice, and wholeness? Indeed, what is God’s purpose in establishing the Sabbath?

Jesus and his disciples are going through grain fields on the Sabbath, plucking heads of grain. They are not harvesting the grain for storage or sale, but to satisfy their hunger. The Pharisees interpret this as breaking the Sabbath. Jesus does not deny that technically they are correct, but he makes clear they have failed to discern the spirit of the law. Jesus cites the example of

David, who enters the house of God and eats the bread of the Presence. Ahimelech, the priest who allows this (1 Sam. 21:1–6), and David, who instigates the action, clearly understand that the need of David and his men to eat takes priority over the technicality of the law. As Jesus says, David, a faithful ancestor, transgressed the holiness of the sanctuary by entering and eating (Mark 2:26). This establishes a criterion for understanding a violation of the Sabbath: there is no true violation of the Sabbath if one’s actions meet essential needs of oneself (the disciples, David) or others (David’s men, the man with the withered hand); for “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (v. 27). The legalistic interpretation of Sabbath rest, of these Pharisees in particular, does not reflect the understanding of all Jews in Jesus’ time, nor in ours.

Mark’s Gospel records at least eleven scenes in which Jesus is challenged publicly by his opponents. Challenging Jesus publicly is an attempt to shame him by questioning his and his

disciples' actions. The challenges in this passage occur during the period of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee, and they make clear that Jesus is more than a match for those who would challenge his authority to teach and heal. All three Synoptic Gospels record this healing, which takes place in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus asks the man to extend his hand. The man does so and is healed. This is an unmistakable sign of God's presence, one that Jesus' opponents, a group of Pharisees, cannot contest. Legalism, a narrow view that plagues many religious traditions, is overcome by the generosity of God's love and mercy.

Unable to accept public defeat, the moment when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand marks a turning point for this faction of the Pharisees, for after this they seek to destroy Jesus by other means. Their focus is not on the meaning of the healing, but on their loss of social status. The story ends with Jesus grieving their hardness of heart. For even as eyewitnesses to a wondrous gift from God, they refuse to understand God's overwhelming concern for our well-being. They refuse to see how God's concern means that when a conflict arises between meeting human needs and meeting Sabbath requirements, the need to meet human needs takes precedence, for the Sabbath was made for our well-being.

Mark's Gospel was probably written for a community of Hellenized Jews or Christians living outside of Israel. Their physical location and social origins would have placed them on the periphery of contemporary society and on the periphery of those whom the Pharisees who challenged Jesus would have considered "righteous." As outliers, they would probably have identified with the tax collectors and sinners or the man with the withered hand in these stories. Jesus' inclusive table fellowship and concern for people's wholeness and well-being would have been a welcome source of consolation in a Gentile world that did not respect the Sabbath.

The other readings for today shed light on these two stories of challenge and response between Jesus and his opponents. Typically, the concept of "Sabbath rest" is interpreted primarily through Genesis 1, where God "rests" on the seventh day. Humans emulate their creator,

and therefore "rest" and worship God. This view of God and humanity sounds as if everyone must take a break from exhaustion, but the idea of "rest" is more akin to blessing. In our day, this might look like release from the tyranny and exhaustion of the blue screen: phone, tablet, or computer. We raise our eyes from never-ending work to drink in the restfulness of the created world.

The reading from Deuteronomy 5 records the depth of meaning and the central role Sabbath plays in the faith and life of the Israelites. It focuses attention on the presence of God among them and in doing so limits the slavery of never-ending work, such as they had experienced in Egypt. Furthermore, Sabbath rest encompasses all levels of society, from Israelite males to people on the margins—women, foreigners, and their own slaves. Sabbath rest even extends to domestic animals, whom humans put to labor for their own sake. Sabbath worship was instituted not only to respect God, but also to bring rest and wholeness into the lives of all members of the community.

Sabbath rest from toil creates space to remember the character of God. Psalm 81 celebrates the response of a God who listens and removes the burdens of slavery: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket. In distress you called, and I rescued you" (Ps. 81:6–7). The psalm also celebrates the fact that God not only saves, but also provides sustenance for his people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide and I will fill it." In a world where many die of hunger and in slavery, this Scripture holds out a hope or vision for a world that has not arrived at this Sabbath rest.

Regular freedom from toil for *everyone* is an alien concept in our society, where so many have to labor continuously just to make ends meet. Work is a blessing that can turn into a curse when there is no opportunity given for meaningful rest. In the world described in Deuteronomy, even creatures that provide sustenance for humankind—oxen, donkeys—are allowed to rest because all are "good" in God's eyes (Gen. 1). This is a far cry from our society,

where not only scores of creatures but multitudes of humans are forced to toil continually. Even many with ample power and wealth have internalized nonstop work as a virtue.

As Jesus makes clear in this pericope, we worship a God whose goodness should incline us toward a whole, rich, and balanced life, a God who established the Sabbath for humans, not a God who would have us sacrifice humans for the sake of the Sabbath. This is a God who wants us

to provide weekly Sabbath rest for all creatures, including the rich and powerful, those who are poor and desperate, and those who minister to both. Sabbath rest is not merely cessation of activity; freedom from nonstop toil restores wholeness, and thus holiness to the world. Do we provide Sabbath rest for fellow creatures? Do we provide Sabbath rest for ourselves, for those who minister and serve others?

RENATA FURST

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Predominant themes in this pericope include observance of the Sabbath, limits of Sabbath rules, and a theology of disability. Careful observance of the Sabbath was a critical and distinctive marker of belonging to the house of Israel. The practice was so central to Jewish identity that any challenge of it would be both immediately evident and critically important. In the preceding verses (Mark 2:1–22), Jesus continually pushes against the letter of the law by healing the paralytic man, eating with sinners, and not fasting. Jesus ups the ante when he pushes against the Sabbath rules, for Sabbath observance was very important to the house of Israel. Clearly, Jesus is doing a very new thing here. The old ways cannot be assumed.

Notably, Jesus nowhere questions the importance of the Sabbath or Sabbath keeping. This is about Sabbath only inasmuch as Sabbath is immeasurably important—therefore making any exceptions or reinterpretations a visible sign of Jesus’ authority in interpreting the importance of the Sabbath.

A sermon exploring the practice and the limits that Jesus imposes could be a very useful way of beginning a conversation with a congregation about contemporary Sabbath practice and experience. Many congregants might think Sabbath keeping old-fashioned and unwarranted. Others might think it is strictly Jewish. A sermon could look at the historical observance and newer experiences of Sabbath keeping, focusing

on the role Sabbath might play today in personal and communal life. What does it mean to experience Sabbath in light of contemporary lifestyles? What circumstances would warrant breaking the Sabbath?

We are people in need of rest. Many of us live in communities where response to “How are you?” is more likely to be “Stressed” or “Busy” than “Fine, thank you.” We laugh when peers quip, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” We skip vacation days, come to work sick, multitask from the beach. A 2018 study of American workers showed that 47 percent did not use all their allotted paid vacation days and 21 percent left more than five days unused.¹ Sundays, once sacred days of worship and rest for Christians, are increasingly crowded with work, home responsibilities, and children’s activities. We need rest but wonder how to fit it in.

MaryAnn McKibben-Dana’s *Sabbath in the Suburbs* explores one family’s attempt at creating and practicing Sabbath observance while balancing two careers, three young children, and the pressures of managing a household. Over the year of their experiment, the couple negotiate what Sabbath means to them, and set intentions for their family’s observance. At one point, after the family’s own rules trip them up, the family turns Sabbath into an adverb. They do things “Sabbathly.” They might have to break their intentions with a trip to the grocery store, but by slowing the experience and being

1. See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2018/05/21/why-america-has-become-the-no-vacation-nation/#126562204c53>.

mindful, they can undertake the experience Sabbathly. In the chapter “January,” McKibben-Dana muses, “Maybe Sabbath is a vaccination against the breakneck speed of life.”² Taking the vaccination metaphor further, we might be convinced, like bedtime-protesting youngsters who “do not feel tired yet,” to inoculate our bodies and souls in advance of hard days ahead.

If Sabbath is made for us, where are the loopholes? Where might we do things Sabbathly instead of by a rule book? Jesus offers the answer in his statement. Sabbath is a gift to us, not a ritual we perform for God. Jesus’ hungry disciples pick grain on the Sabbath, so our hunger takes priority over Sabbath rest. Jesus heals on the Sabbath, so reducing suffering takes priority over Sabbath rest (though exhausted pastors might also remember that even Jesus takes a boat to escape needy multitudes in order to find rest).

What does it mean to rest? Why is rest good and vital? When do we put our (good and appropriate) need for rest aside for the sake of other goods for ourselves or for the good of the community? Is Sabbath inherently a practice of the privileged? How do those whose lives involve running between multiple jobs or working on someone else’s schedule fit into the practice of Sabbath? If economic realities prevent a traditional block of Sabbath time, how might we invite congregants to live Sabbathly? Further, how might we engage in the social justice work that brings the possibility of Sabbath rest to all?

In addition to the issue of Sabbath, the story of Jesus healing the man with the shriveled hand raises the issue of miracles and healing stories, which are tricky to preach. In almost every sanctuary, someone is praying for a miraculous healing, and someone else is mourning a healing prayer that was not answered in the way they wished. Preaching miracles and healing stories treads on fragile ground.

The preacher might consider, then, what it means to be healed, and further, what it means to be disabled or ill. Are disabled individuals broken? Mistakes? Evidence of sin? While

most of us rightly recoil from such derogatory images, persons with disabilities regularly report hearing such language directed at them. One BBC article describes harmful or demeaning encounters that persons with disabilities have experienced at the hands of Christians, including being subjected to unwanted healing prayer in public places, such as the London tube.³

This Gospel story offers an opportunity to take on the concept of healing and God’s vision for all of God’s children—in whatever form their bodies and minds appear. Are not people with disabilities whole and complete as they are? It is true that the Bible is rife with stories of Jesus’ miraculous healings. In Jesus’ day, disability was equated with poverty and exclusion. It is often unclear what, exactly, Jesus is curing. Is the physical healing an end in itself, or is it a means to bring about justice for the person with the disability?

Many persons with disabilities consider inaccessible environments and attitudes, not their physical disabilities, to be the barriers to full participation in common life. For more insight into the theology of disability, the preacher might consider the works of Deborah Beth Creamer, Nancy Eiesland, Jennie Weiss Block, Bill Gaventa, and others who are contributing to this growing field. The Collaborative on Faith and Disability’s website and events are also an excellent source of information.

It makes sense, then, to consider what purpose the actual healing in this story serves. It is, of course, a challenge *from* the Pharisees. It is also a challenge *to* the Pharisees. It gives them a technical objection upon which to base their murderous plans. Once again, Jesus demonstrates his power and authority to the Pharisees, enraging them, but probably terrifying them as well. The man with the shriveled hand did not ask to be healed, at least not as the story is narrated. He may have wanted to be healed. He may have felt complete as he was. We know nothing about what his life was like after this short object lesson, or for that matter, what it had been like before it. We do not know why

2. MaryAnn McKibben-Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family’s Experiment with Holy Time* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2012), 69.

3. Damon Rose, “Stop Trying to ‘Heal’ Me,” April 28, 2019; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>.

he was selected out of any number of other individuals that might have wanted or needed healing. Whether or not his hand needed to be fixed, who he is, and how he feels about this healing are all immaterial. It is not about the

hand. It is about the power. The healing of the man's hand pales in comparison to the spiritual gift he receives. He has seen the power of Jesus up close, and by extension, so have we.

SUSAN K. OLSON

Proper 5 (Sunday between June 5 and June 11)

Genesis 3:8–15 and 1 Samuel 8:4–11
(12–15), 16–20 (11:14–15)
Psalm 130 and Psalm 138

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1
Mark 3:20–35

Genesis 3:8–15

⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” ¹¹He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹²The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” ¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

1 Samuel 8:4–11 (12–15), 16–20 (11:14–15)

^{8:4}Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his

chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

¹⁹But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” . . .

^{11:14}Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.” ¹⁵So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The Adam and Eve story deals more intimately with humanity and its flaws than the majestic “Seven Days of Creation” story, which presents an all-powerful being who only speaks and all is done, with Sabbath rest built into the very fabric of the created universe. Scholarship has typically dated the “Seven Day” account as postexilic (post-587 BCE) and have therefore read it in comparison with the ancient Babylonian creation stories (among others) that pit the storm god (Marduk) against the sea god (Tiamat)—a battle between storm and sea that is, without doubt, alluded to in the phrase of Genesis 1:2: “the *ruach*/storm/wind of God hovered over the face of the deep waters”).

Sermons could emphasize the Hebrews’ interaction with, and severe criticism of, ancient empires and their mythologies of power, especially the Babylonian traditions that emphasize cosmic warfare, rather than a single God creating in peace and, furthermore, arguably make humanity a central concern, rather than a mere “side show” of cosmic gods at war. Genesis, in fact, often critiques imperial mythologies of violence.

Our focus is the Adam and Eve story. While it may have some ancient roots, the received version of this story appears also to date from a time after the catastrophic events of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. This seems a reasonable conclusion based on a story

that ultimately results in an “exile” from the garden as a result of human sin. As a way of dealing with the tragedy of Babylonian conquest, this story would then fit with many other exilic and postexilic biblical texts that blame that catastrophe on the people’s own sins (however troubling such a “self-blaming” theology certainly—and rightly—is for modern readers).

Ironically, however, this “self-blaming” theology (likely inspired by the preaching of Jeremiah and Ezekiel) at least offers the hope that if “we” got ourselves into this mess, then perhaps “our” repentance can move God to get us out of it. In fact, this striking “self-blaming” theology became a central theme in a later “Penitential Prayer” form that rose to prominence in postexilic literature (e.g., Dan. 9; Ezra 9; Neh. 9; cf. Bar. 1–2). These unique prayers report that the instructions and the warnings of God were clear: “From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case” (Ezra 9:7).

This wider context may help us to understand the greater significance of the Adam and Eve story and, more importantly, the gravity of their sin. It seems reasonable to raise questions about the sin of eating forbidden fruit. Why, we may wonder, did such an apparently

minor infraction result in such catastrophic consequences? The act, however, has a context in Genesis 2:

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden . . . and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flows out of Eden to water the garden. . . .

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Gen. 2:8–15)

The story features a strong emphasis on God's loving grace in all of creation. In this context, the disobedience of humanity is not merely about a piece of fruit, it is about an unbelievably shortsighted act of betrayal against God's overwhelming love—that had rather minor expectations. That seems to be the point of the simple command. The humans put their entire relationship with their Creator, *and their wonderfully favorable situation*, in doubt. Sermons could note how often we are tempted to reject acts of compassionate love from others, *and* from God.

First Samuel 8 also suggests God's strong reactions to the Israelite tribes wanting a human king. The famous passage portrays God seemingly shocked at the ingratitude!: "The LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods'" (1 Sam. 8:7–8).

Once again, the context is God's care for a people. The passage seeks to remind the people of their liberation at the hands of God. In fact, the "historical" books (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings) feature story after story of God's miraculous care. Israel's military "conquests" have not been through their own power but by God's miraculous protection: the exodus (Exod. 14); the defeat of Jericho; the victory

of Gideon's tiny army in Judges 7; miraculous deliverance from Philistines in 1 Samuel 7, and so on. In the light of these acts of protection against enemies more powerful than their military, "rejecting God" seems the height of folly.

First Samuel 8 goes even further. The passage strikingly emphasizes that if the people think that they can be so strong on their own—well, then, gear up! You will have to do it yourselves now! One of my undergraduates commented on the warnings of 1 Samuel 8 by summarizing: "Sounds to me like taxes and the draft!" Precisely. Among the warnings in 1 Samuel 8 is a description of preparing a conventional army for decidedly conventional warfare—no more miraculous deliverance. In fact, occasions of "miraculous" deliverance virtually disappear. There may well be a thematic connection between Israel's later ingratitude and Adam and Eve's assumption that they can "figure out their own care and feeding," responding to God's ultimate direction: "therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken" (Gen. 3:23).

Pride, it seems, involves not only an overconfidence at our ability to do things by ourselves, but also an inability to appreciate the help that others have given to us. One of the most striking realities of recent economic developments in the West has been the inability of company owners and managers fully to appreciate that they did not succeed "by themselves," and therefore the union and labor movements have time and time again had to remind them of workers' value.

In our Scriptures, time and time again, the writers portray Israelite sin as a lack of gracious thanks for what was provided. In the context of political conquest and occupation (after 587 BCE), these reminders were intended to propose a change of heart and mind—toward repentance certainly, but also away from habits of overconfidence that seemed to shut off a sense of gratitude, a gratitude that can lead us away from a focus only on ourselves.

Environmental concern, for example, is often born of a renewed sense of what God has graciously provided—and what we must not endanger by our ingratitude and overconfident actions. Sermons may note that human pride

discussed in biblical passages is often related to our making our own tools (swords *and* plowshares!), on which we think we can depend. Can

our proud feats of engineering sometimes result in destruction of God's gracious care?

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

These paired texts from Genesis 3 and 1 Samuel 8 appear to have little in common, separated by history and time, theology, and genre. Adam and Eve's confession and eventual expulsion from the garden of Eden seem unrelated and disconnected from changes in Israel's political and social organization as played out in Samuel's reluctant anointing of a king at the demand of his people. Careful attention to these two texts, however, reveals at least one common theme, providing a route for interpreting these passages for modern hearers. These iconic episodes from the Hebrew Bible, each in its own way, introduce what may be described as an onset of a great unraveling of the moral and social order.

On the one hand, Adam and Eve's acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil, by partaking of the fruit of a forbidden tree, leads to a sense of shame and embarrassment over their bodies, infusing self-awareness and distrust in all their relationships. As a consequence of their disobedience, they are punished by God, and life becomes difficult, harsh, and marked with hard labor and physical suffering. In their acts, all of humanity, indeed all of creation, unravels.

On the other hand, Samuel's warning to the people of Israel about the unintended consequences of establishing a monarchy is no contest for a population driven by frustration with leadership and insecurity, a fear of geopolitical enemies, a need for protection, and a desire to "be like other nations" (1 Sam. 8:20). Samuel's counsel and God's theocratic leadership are rejected for something more tangible, more recognizable, more secure. Israel rejects their God, and in like manner Samuel too is rejected.

Both stories inaugurate a new age, one filled with hardship, confusion, suffering, and implications for all of history. Both remind the reader

that human choices have moral consequences, and that the choices humans make reveal much about those who make them.

Genesis 3:8–20 begins with Adam and Eve, now aware of their shame and vulnerability, hiding from God among the trees. What prompts the two to take cover is the sound of God out on an evening stroll. God inhabits creation and is experienced in human terms, preferring to walk when there is a cool breeze. Finally, God calls out for Adam with a question that may seem odd: "Where are you?" The mere fact that Adam is hiding must have given God pause, and the question elicits a response from Adam about his fear and shame related to his newfound nakedness. God now knows something dramatic has happened. Adam's awareness of his own nakedness betrays the couple's disobedience. In predictable fashion, the blame game begins. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent.

The habit of blaming others for bad choices we humans make is as old as the first woman and man. Modern psychology roots the human tendency to blame others for one's mistakes and bad choices in the experience of punishment and shame.¹ The power of shame to shape human behavior and self-perception is observable throughout human history and, more often than not, leads to tragic circumstances. One approach to preaching from this text is to delve into how this story speaks to human nature and illuminates the relationship between shame and blame. What is it about the knowledge of good and evil that leads one to become aware of shame and seek cover?

Preparation for preaching on Genesis 3:8–15 should address popular misconceptions and patriarchal assumptions. An uncritical reading more often than not results in interpretations of

1. Bernard Golden, "Seven Consequences of Blaming Others for How We Manage Our Anger," *Psychology Today* online, November 10, 2018.

the story that blame Eve for the fall and relegate her to a second-class status. Blame is not simply an action within the story but is active in widespread interpretations of the text. Indeed, the writer of 1 Timothy (1 Tim. 2:11–15) exemplifies this danger when he interprets the story in terms of the blame and due subjugation of Eve, and finds there reason for the exclusion of all women from full participation in the church. He concludes that women should not teach or have authority over men because she “was deceived and became a transgressor” (v. 14).

A careful critical reading can challenge these and other commonly held notions about these verses’ meaning and purpose. As Phyllis Trible has observed, what follows disobedience is a fading of the distinction between male and female, for “they are one in hearing and hiding.”² Adam and Eve are “equal in responsibility and in judgment, in shame and in guilt, and in redemption and in grace,”³ and the punishment that follows is not a curse or a prescription, but a description of the consequences of a shared disobedience. Disobedient behavior and bad choices produce their own consequences for the actors and bystanders alike, and those consequences are sometimes more severe than any consequential punishment.

In 1 Samuel 8:4–11, 16–20, the elders of Israel were losing faith in the status quo of their governmental institutions. Fear and anxiety ran high. Samuel, their trusted priest and leader, was growing old, and neither of his sons came close to providing the moral or religious leadership needed to navigate the internal and external threats to the nation. If Israel was to survive, it would need what all other nations instituted, a king. A king would unify the people, provide a hierarchical structure for rule and order, and efficiently organize and employ a military capable of defending Israel against encroaching foes that

surrounded them in all directions. A king simply made sense, given the geopolitical realities of their world. Why not? Moses himself foretold the desire for a king and even granted permission for selecting a king (Deut. 17:14–15).

Frustrated, Samuel turned to God, and God instructed him to listen to the people and to warn them solemnly about the hidden costs of having a king. So, Samuel warned the people of the dangers of monarchical rule: a loss of autonomy, freedom, and ownership of material possessions. For Samuel, conditions under a king might well be akin to slavery. The irony, of course, is that it was God who delivered their ancestors from slavery and made them a free people. Fear and insecurity have a way of eroding memory, and Samuel’s warning goes unheeded. The people have decided, with little regard for the cost.

Samuel’s resignation to the popular will is reminiscent of a truism that every parent knows: sometimes we must learn from our own mistakes. There is no more powerful a teacher than raw experience. Failure to learn from the wisdom of experience of others stems in part from the deep need to prove oneself as the exception, free from the limitations and lessons of the past. A new king is anointed, security comes for a season, and Israel enters a new age replete with new challenges and hardships. Samuel watches from Ramah, hoping his worst fears will not be realized.

These two texts underscore moments in life marked by a sense of unraveling. In both accounts, life is filled with anxiety, disorientation, inevitability, and a recognition that the old order is crumbling. These are moments strangely familiar in our own time, and these two texts remind us that human choices have real consequences, perhaps none more significant than revealing who we are.

J. SCOTT HUDGINS

2. Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 13 (1973): 251–58 (256).

3. Trible, “Eve and Adam,” 256.

Proper 5 (Sunday between June 5 and June 11)

Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

²Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Psalm 138

¹I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;

²I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted your name and your word
above everything.

³On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.

⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.

⁵They shall sing of the ways of the LORD,
for great is the glory of the LORD.

⁶For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he perceives from far away.

⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand,
and your right hand delivers me.

⁸The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 130. Psalm 130 is known as one of the Songs of Ascent or pilgrim songs that are sung on a journey toward the Jerusalem temple to attend festivals. It could have been originally an individual poem and then later included in the pilgrim songs. Verse 8 leads us to think that the psalm was recited by the poet in the liturgical context of the community, however. Though the status of the individual is not clearly indicated in the poem, some biblical scholars guess that it is the Israelite king who repents his personal and communal sins before God, seeking forgiveness and redemption (Ps. 130:7–8), while perhaps facing a national crisis.¹

The poem has three movements. In verses 1–3, the poet cries to God for pardon from the “depth” of his heart. The tone then moves from confidence in forgiveness through repetition of the words, “wait” and “hope” in verses 4–7a, to the assurance of forgiveness grounded in God’s steadfast love in verses 7b–8. The style and choice of words of the poem are masterful in expressing the human predicament of the true nature of sin and the greatness of God’s gracious mercy.

This penitential tone of this psalm, along with its expression of trust in God’s steadfast love, is a fitting response to the first reading for the day. Genesis 3:8–15 tells a story about the nature of sin and has traditionally been interpreted as referring to an original sin brought about by the woman. As a result, this passage has molded traditional Christian belief as sexist and patriarchal.

Feminist interpretation now helps us read the passage more critically and appropriately. The story in Genesis 3 is not a weighty accusation of original sin, but an account of the responsibility of sin shared between the man and the woman, that is, the man’s “self-defense” of “his passive act of disobedience” and the woman’s initiative in eating fruit from the tree of good and evil.² The last two verses of the passage describe the reality of sin as broken relationships between God and humanity, between the human and the nonhuman world, and between the man and

the woman. As a response to the sinful situation, Psalm 130 reminds us that God’s steadfast love and forgiveness are greater than our sins.

The Gospel lesson appointed for the day, Mark 3:20–35, also assures us that all our sins will be forgiven, except blasphemies against the Holy Spirit, for such sins are against God, who is the one who forgives our sins (Mark 3:29). With the psalm informing the sermon, the preacher may help listeners reflect on the sins that they have committed consciously and unconsciously, as individuals and as a community, while proclaiming the forgiveness of a loving God.

Liturgically, Psalm 130 may be heard in a number of ways. A musical setting of the psalm may be sung by the congregation or a choir, either as a part of the proclamation of Scripture or as a response to the preaching of the Word. The psalm might also be adapted for use as prayer of confession and declaration of forgiveness.

Psalm 138. Although some biblical scholars consider Psalm 138 an individual expression of thanksgiving recited by a worshiper in the temple, many contemporary commentators interpret it as a royal song of thanksgiving that must have been sung by the king during great festivals, perhaps while traveling abroad on a military journey. In the Israelite understanding of kingship, a king is not merely the political leader—the warrior, judge, and ruler—but the religious leader as well, the mediator between God and his people. As the bearer of peace, justice, wisdom, and the welfare of the nation, the king prays to God by singing this psalm in a spirit of humility.

Psalm 138 is composed of three stanzas (vv. 1–3, vv. 4–6, and vv. 7–8), in which humility is presented as a defining characteristic of the ideal king in tandem with God’s character of steadfast love and faithfulness. In verses 1–3, the king worships God toward the temple with praises for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness (vv. 1–2), remembering how God has answered his prayers (v. 3). In verses 4–6, the psalmist

1. Mitchell Dahood, SJ, *Psalms III: 101–150* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1970), 235.

2. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1992), 14.

convinces us that in the future God shall be exalted by “all the kings of the earth” (v. 4) as the Lord of every king, since God is for and with the lowly. In verses 7–8, the king identifies himself with the lowly who need God’s help and prays with the confidence that God will continue protecting him from his enemies.

Psalm 138 is selected to respond to the reading from 1 Samuel that is appointed for this day. The description of kingship in 1 Samuel 8:4–11 (12–15), 16–20 (11:14–15) stands in stark contrast to that depicted in the psalm. While Psalm 138 depicts kingship as the state that is possible only when one depends on the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, Samuel declares to the Israelites, who demand him to give them a king, that the king will not be one of humility, but one who will enslave them.

Although the Israelites, like other surrounding countries, desire kingship as protection from international threats, says Samuel, they will have to pay for that protection with heavy taxes and physical labors (1 Sam. 8:11–18). This oppressive image of the king seems to be a later insertion into the mouth of Samuel to reflect the corrupt reality of Israel’s experience of kingship.³ Against these human political realities, Psalm 138 sings of the image of the true king as one who admits God’s lordship over the kings of the earth.

The Gospel reading for the day, Mark 3:20–35, echoes the theme of kingship. The entire

third chapter of Mark describes the clash between human politics and the politics of God. In the kingdom of the Spirit, the people do the will of God (Mark 3:28–30, 35), while in the human kingdom, the political and religious leaders work for their vested interests (v. 22). Jesus’ healing of the one with a shriveled hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath (3:1–7) is an example of the politics of God.

We live in a democratic society without a king. Yet Psalm 138 could readily be applied to our political situation. We tend to elect our political leaders based on our vested interests, without thinking about what true leadership looks like in the sight of God, and we often experience hardship as a result. By singing Psalm 138 in a liturgical context, we pray “for” us, especially when our human politics are off the rails of justice, and we join in Jesus’ prayer as a community, yearning for the actualization of the politics of God on the earth, when “your kingdom [will] come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Many denominational hymnals include Psalm 138 in the section of the Psalter to be used as a responsive reading to the first reading. A litany of Psalm 138 can also be used for the opening prayer. The psalm suggests the singing of congregational songs that emphasize the steadfast faithfulness of God.

EUNJOO MARY KIM

3. Jonathan Kaplan, “1 Samuel 8:11–18 as ‘A Mirror for Princes,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 4 (2012): 627.

Proper 5 (Sunday between June 5 and June 11)

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

^{4:13}But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke”—we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

^{5:1}For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Working with people is complicated, challenging, irritating, defeating, exhausting, and also joyous and rewarding. If one listens carefully, one can discern not only the criticisms of the Corinthians behind Paul’s self-defense in 2 Corinthians 10–13, but also, in the tone of Paul’s defense, his irritation and exhaustion over their verbal crucifixion of him. In terms of those who did God’s work in the face of intense opposition, one is reminded of Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel, a host of other prophets, and Jesus. Irritation and exhaustion are two understandable reactions to attack, but Paul also stresses an enduring hope and vigilance: “so we do not lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:16; cf. 4:1). Ministry makes those who serve others vulnerable. There is usually tension between worldly success and lives committed to service to others. This also provides the constructive challenge of living with what Victor Paul Furnish calls “apostolic confidence.”¹

From 2 Corinthians 2:14 to 7:16 the apostle has explained, cried, defended, pleaded, and prayed about this complicated congregation. Awaiting word on how the church responds to a letter delivered by Titus (2:12–13), Paul erupts into joy, but it is not until 7:6 that we hear the good news. One almost hears Paul saying,

“They like me!” One can be both unraveled by ministry and thrilled to serve others.

Paul knows his (and our) vulnerabilities—we minister in what he calls “clay jars” (4:7). Paul experiences defeats and disappointments (4:8–12). Paul also knows whose we are (God’s), who we are (children of God), and what we are called to do (new covenant mission; see 3:1–18; 4:5–6). So, Paul sees through the dismay into the glory, and his hope endures.

The OT biblical narrative (Gen. 3:8–21) does not shy away from explaining life’s defeats as the consequence of human corruption and systemic, worldly evils with which we are called to struggle, working for redemption at both personal and systemic levels. Even what appears to be good can turn out to be evil, and even our own families may find themselves caught up and made complicit with corruption (Mark 3:20–35).

Paul’s hope in 2 Corinthians 4:16 does not depend upon his denying his defeats (2 Cor. 4:8–12). What looks like death for him is actually life for the Corinthians (v. 12). Paul exhibits a posture of faith in the midst of ministry opposition. Paul’s words “spirit of faith” could refer to the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 12:9), but another view is that it refers to the enduring hope of the faithful.

1. Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible 32A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 277.

Intoxicated with Self-Love

The fall of Adam was disobedience to God, by which man turned away from the Divine Being to himself, and robbed God of the honor due to him alone, in that he *himself* thought to be *as God*. But while he thus labored to advance himself, he was stripped of that divine image, which the Creator has so freely conferred on him; divested of hereditary righteousness; and bereaved of that holiness with which he was originally adorned; becoming, as it regards his *understanding*, dark and blind; as to his *will*, stubborn and perverse; and as to all the powers and faculties of the soul, entirely alienated from God. This evil has infected the whole mass of mankind, by means of a fleshly generation; and has been inherited by all men. The obvious consequence arising from this is, that man is become spiritually dead and the child of wrath and damnation, until redeemed from this miserable state by Jesus Christ. Let not then any who are called Christians deceive themselves with regard to Adam's fall. Let them be cautious, how they attempt to extenuate or lessen the transgression of Adam, as though it were a small sin, a thing of little consequence, and, at the worst, but the eating of an apple. Let them rather be assured, that the guilt of Adam was that of Lucifer, namely, *he would be as God*: and that it was the same most grievous, heinous, and hateful sin in both.

This apostasy (for it was nothing less), was, at first, generated in the heart, and then made manifest by the eating of the forbidden fruit. Though man was numbered with the sons of God; though he came forth from the hands of the Almighty spotless both in body and in soul, and was the most glorious object in the creation; though, to crown all, he was not only a son, but the *delight* of God; yet not knowing how to rest satisfied with these high privileges, he attempted to invade Heaven, that he might be yet higher; and nothing less would suffice him, than to exalt himself like unto God. Hence, he conceived in his heart enmity and hatred against the Divine Being, his Creator and Father, whom had it been in his power, he was disposed utterly to undo. Who could commit a sin more detestable than this? or what greater abomination is there, that it was possible to mediate?

Hence it was, that man became inwardly like Satan himself, bearing his likeness in the heart; since both had now committed the same sin, both having rebelled against the majesty of Heaven. . . . For the devil, designing to imprint his own image upon man, fascinated him so entirely by a train of enticing and deceitful words, that man permitted him to sow that hateful seed in his soul, which is hence termed the seed of the serpent; and by which is chiefly meant, self-love, self-will, and the ambition of being as God. On this account, it is, that the Scriptures term those who are intoxicated with self-love, “a generation of vipers.” Matt. 8:7. And all those who are of a proud and devilish nature, “the seed (progeny) of the serpent.” So, the Almighty, addressing the serpent, says, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed.” Gen. 3:15.

Johann Arndt, *True Christianity: A Treatise on Sincere Repentance, True Faith, the Holy Walk of the True Christian, Etc.*, trans. A. W. Boehm (Philadelphia: Lutheran Book Store, 1868), 4–5.

Paul's enduring hope is made possible by the act of God in raising Jesus from the dead and making life eternal the final word (1 Cor. 15:1–28). This is not deluded optimism, for it is anchored in realism: the once-for-all act of God to turn death into life on Easter morning (2 Cor. 4:14).

At the heart of what Paul is saying here about a life of serving others is what Michael Gorman

calls “cruciformity,” a life conformed to the cross. Furnish frames what Paul is thinking here by saying ministry is “not dependent upon a curriculum vitae filled with glorious accomplishments,”² but a life of faithful service to others. Serving others becomes an embodiment of the life of Jesus. Jesus had been able to explain to his followers that they were to follow him in living

2. Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 288.

a cruciform life because the final word is not the cross but the transfiguration (Mark 8:31–9:8).

The life Paul lives, one devoted to people like the Corinthians, is a life for others, and this is a theme throughout 2 Corinthians 1–7. “Yes,” he says, “everything is for your sake” (2 Cor. 4:15). For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus inspires not primarily personal ecstasy about heaven but a capacity to endure evil for the redemption of others. What is at work in this Easter posture is “grace,” a power that finds a home in “more and more” (v. 15).

Paul’s move from 4:15 to 4:16 is a personal reflection expressed in a pastoral manner (in terms of “we”) so as to include all in the hope. Though death approaches all, he says, “our inner nature is being renewed day by day.” He can minimize the body’s aging process as a “wasting away,” a “momentary affliction,” “what can be seen,” and as “temporary,” in contrast to the eternal: “being renewed,” “eternal weight of glory,” “what cannot be seen,” and the “eternal” (vv. 16–18). The tone here is one of “buoyant assurance born of divine certainties.”³ None of this should be understood in terms of a disembodied soul or a devaluing of the body, but as embodied souls or soulish bodies in Paul’s Jewish sense.

Our lectionary takes us into a very difficult passage but stops at 5:1, which opens into verses about our “tent” and a “heavenly dwelling” (5:2) and being “naked” (v. 3) while desiring to be “further clothed” (v. 4), but this passage finishes with another source of Pauline hope in serving others: the internal presence of the Spirit as a guarantee (v. 5). His ministry for the Corinthians may well lead to death. In 5:1 he describes death as “the earthly tent . . . [being] destroyed,”

but he is confident, because of Easter, that “we have” not a “tent” but a “building from God, . . . not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (v. 1). It is wise, then, to read 4:16 through 5:5 as a continuous passage, with 5:6 echoing and emphasizing anew the hope of 4:16.

In serving the wideness of others in our community, we soon encounter, especially from those suffering from diseases or tragedies or from the elderly, questions about life beyond death. They want to know if there is hope for life eternal. Paul’s theology of serving others is shaped by a conviction we confess in the Nicene Creed and read about in 2 Corinthians 4–5: God raised Jesus from among the dead, and this gives us hope beyond disease, tragedy, and aging. Such hope does not mean ignoring the sinful and systemic realities of our world—it is a theology of *servicing others*! It means we serve others with hope, both for others and for ourselves, rooted in the conviction central to the Christian faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

If we rethink 2 Corinthians 2:12–7:16 in light of the criticisms leveled at the apostle in 2 Corinthians 10–13, we discover how Paul put together defeat and victory, disappointment and joy. The sufferings he experienced at the hands of critics—those who said his ministry was minimal, his success abysmal, and his skills nominal—were for him the glories of participating in the cross of Christ. When tempted to think that our service for others is insignificant, we might be drawn to think of Jesus, whose life ended on a Roman cross in utter shame and humiliation. Yet three days later a new story could be told, the story of Easter.

SCOT MCKNIGHT

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Ask a roomful of people, “Quick show of hands: how many of you plan to leave here younger than when you arrived?” You might hear some laughter, but no one ever raises their hand. *That* we age is never in question. *How* we age is all important. Growing older need not mean growing less

vital, enthusiastic, and engaged. Indeed, some of the youngest spirits we ever encounter may reside in some of the oldest bodies.

Classic films are rife with images of the young at heart. *Cocoon* (1985), directed by Ron Howard, is a classic example. A group of older adults

3. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 366.

find themselves reenergized and rejuvenated by alien cocoons deposited in a nearby swimming pool. The premise of the film is not nearly as important as the imagery of adults displaying what it means to be young once more. Youth is about fun and excitement and experimentation and exploration—qualities too easily quenched later in life. The film evokes the classic comment from the film *It's a Wonderful Life*: “Aw, youth is wasted on the wrong people!” However, in big and small ways, the characters in the film have to come to grips with what it means to grow old. Youth is not all it is cracked up to be, while being older is not such a curse after all. Despite limitations and diminishing capacities, there is potentially much to value in growing older: wealth of experience, a broader perspective, and a wisdom developed over time.

This idea of inner vitality, energy, and promise existing within, while the outer nature “wastes away” or “perishes” (2 Cor. 4:16), can be as true for neighborhoods, communities, and countries as it is for individuals. Over time, focus turns from what lies ahead to what no longer functions well. Our sense of blessing decreases, as does our willingness to give thanks and appreciation. What we see with our eyes can prevent us from seeing new possibilities and opportunities.

In some places, once-thriving neighborhoods decline, and residents lament bygone days when things were fresher and newer. It sometimes takes a new set of eyes to help people view what is good and possible and exciting in existing settings. Entire nations sometimes wish to return to greatness, and they become fixated on problems and decline. How desperately we seek visionary leaders to restore hope and purpose! This is essentially the tension that Paul identifies when we see with worldly eyes rather than eyes of faith.

A central theme in many stories contrasting the older with the younger is maturity. Growing older offers no guarantee of growing wiser, kinder, more intelligent, more generous, or more ethical. On the other hand, as we age, we gain perspective that only years can bring. We experience childhood from the eyes of parenthood, celebrate successes, mourn failures, lose parents, friends, perhaps even children; there is the potential to gain maturity and insight that comes only through the passage of time.

We require a grounding and center from which to draw responses in life that are more mature, just, compassionate, and grace-filled. While our exterior may “waste away,” our interior life may continue to flourish and grow, but only in a proper soil, a soil of faith in God. Aging happens naturally; maturity does not. Maturity requires hard work, important learning, gaining experience, and developing the skills of critical thinking. Without maturity, we cannot fully grasp the meaning and purpose of our lives and what impact we have on others.

It is sometimes said that the dominant culture in the United States is a “youth culture.” We revere the young, the beautiful, the new, that which is bright and shiny with promise. Such an attitude is fine, as long as it does not remain superficial or unrealistic; as long as it recognizes the hard work necessary to realize promise, and the unjust obstacles or misfortune (illness, accident, war) that afflict and derail the promise of so many; as long as it does not disparage or disrespect age and the benefits that accompany graceful aging; and as long as it remembers how much about life those who are young and have known only good health and wide-open horizons cannot understand.

Many cultures greatly revere the aged. Respect is given to experience, to survival, to accomplishment, and to wisdom. The elders are sages and teachers, gurus and guides. They are not swayed much by the circumstances of the moment but keep the long view in sight. They draw from a deeper well of long and varied experience and are less likely to be swayed by fads and fancies.

A reality in our modern American context is that many of the elderly are consigned to retirement and rehabilitation facilities or nursing homes or are simply abandoned. It is incredibly difficult to maintain a sense of self-worth or value when one is displaced from one's home and essentially left alone, unvisited, and unloved. Many of our longest-living citizens are viewed as liabilities rather than assets. How we view aging and how we choose to treat others throughout the life span says a great deal about our values.

Again, what is true for individuals in our culture extends to our institutions and structures. Older can sometimes mean stuck, tired, or even irrelevant, but the opportunity for renewal,

reinvention, and revival always exists. The past can function in one of two fundamental ways: as an anchor that holds us in place, or as a foundation upon which we can build.

The adage “You can’t judge a book by its cover” contains a wealth of wisdom. The container can depict anything it wants, but the contents tell the real story. Children may conceal the comic book in the textbook cover, adults may dress up in elaborate costumes to disguise a variety of shapes and sizes, a fancy façade may be placed over the simplest structure, but it does not take much to discover what lies beneath or behind. Where there is depth, there is discernment. With a little digging, the truth can be revealed.

Preacher, take note. In this is a gospel message we all should heed: there is nothing to hide. Our earthen vessels are not our whole story. Who we are is defined by what we hold inside. When we are in relationship with God, we draw from a deeper center filled by the Holy Spirit. Our outer nature passes away, revealing the fruit inside, and

when it is the fruit of the Spirit, what we reveal is love and joy, kindness and peace, patience and gentleness, generosity and faithfulness and self-control. We become true witnesses to the goodness and greatness of God.

We have the opportunity to proclaim that as human beings age, it is all too easy to focus on what is lost rather than what has been gained. As structures show the wear of time, it is easy to dismiss them as worthless. Old traditions can be easily demeaned as quaint or out of date. What we cannot do, or can no longer do, looms large over what we are able to do. For older people, many simple things—bending over, climbing stairs, tying a knot—become Herculean tasks. Getting out of bed in the morning can come to seem monumental, but what we cannot do should never define us. No matter how diminished we might find some capacities, we still have gifts to give and value to contribute. As the earthly recedes, the heavenly emerges.

DAN R. DICK

Proper 5 (Sunday between June 5 and June 11)

Mark 3:20–35

²⁰The crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— ³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” ³³And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Chapter 3 of Mark opens with the well-known story of Jesus healing a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath. Jesus’ opponents here are Pharisees offended by Jesus’ healing. Their offense angers Jesus, but the text also immediately notes that he grieves their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5). This can be read as grace that *loves* enemies even as they *remain* enemies (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27–36). “Love your enemies” follows Luke’s withered-hand account (Luke 6:6–11). The preacher may reflect on the incredibly complicated existential dynamics such grace-qualified, righteous anger entails, a dynamic wherein one loves those whom one may fight—but only for the sake of what is loving and just for others (including oneself). Note how conceptually complex and emotionally fraught this grace-qualified anger is, in contrast to the simplistic “hate your enemies” anger dominant in Jesus’ day and not only influential but overtly affirmed as rational in ours. Today the very idea

of Christianity’s “love your enemy” is derided by haughty but existentially and spiritually simplistic streams of modern Western rationality, precisely when such love would mitigate against caricature and extremism.

To counter anti-Semitism, preachers can caution readers against generalizing from the legalism of this group of Pharisees to all Pharisees, let alone to all Jews. Notably, Jesus’ anger is precisely the righteous anger of Jewish prophets when they castigate those with means and power for prioritizing fidelity to law or ritual over fidelity to the needy (e.g., Mic. 6:6–8; Isa. 1:10–17). This concretely unfolds the meaning of Jesus’ proclamation that the Sabbath was made for humans, not vice versa (Mark 2:27). Such hard-hearted legalism is most devastatingly visible today when global elites, in fidelity to the discipline of markets, impose austerity measures on whole populations. Jesus’ anger over misplaced fidelity here is tightly related

to the impossibility of serving both God and mammon (Matt. 6:24), to the true righteousness that distinguishes sheep from goats (Matt. 25:31–46), and to the awakening that distinguishes the Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). All these names, in Jewish prophetic terms, what it is to “remember God.”

In his teaching and in his crucifixion by state and religious authorities, Jesus stands *within* the Jewish tradition of the prophets. This is especially important to note because the attack of the “teachers of the law” (Luke 5:17), who say Jesus is out of his mind and possessed by Beelzebul (Mark 3:21–22, 30), is preceded by the report that some Pharisees and Herodians were plotting to destroy Jesus (v. 6). Historically, this has been used to generate an opposition between Christians and Jews, as if Jesus is not a Jew speaking in the line of Jewish prophets, as if Mark does not explicitly tell of Jairus, a leader of a synagogue, coming to Jesus, and of Jesus healing Jairus’s daughter at his home (5:21–24, 35–43; cf. Joseph of Arimathea of the council, 15:42–46), and as if no Christians have mistaken fidelity to a form of Christianity (the confused fidelity of legalism) for fidelity to the Spirit animating Micah, Isaiah, the sheep, and the Samaritan.

Remembering all Jesus says about gracious love, a love so complex and transcendent it endures hatred and loves enemies for what is good, loving, and just, the preacher can speak against the stereotypes and extremism cultivated when anger turns into hatred. Even as Jesus is angered by and preaches against these particular Pharisees and Herodians, his anger and resistance are qualified by his love for them. Likewise, his anger toward tax collectors is qualified by his love for tax collectors (2:13–17), and his anger toward and resistance against the colonial abuses of Rome are qualified by his love for Gentile Romans (5:1–20; Jesus crossing the sea would clearly indicate to Mark’s audience that Jesus’ ministry extends to Jews and Gentiles).

Again, this conceptually and emotionally complex “love your enemies” dynamic displaces the enthusiasm, vengefulness, violence, and self-destructive dynamics of unqualified anger. When one also considers that Jesus is preaching and ministering in ways so threatening to the

established order that his opponents are literally plotting to kill him, the remarkable quality of Jesus’ uncompromising but gracious response to his opponents, and his refusal to stereotype and vilify them, becomes stunningly apparent.

Jesus’ gracious spirit is precisely the Spirit highlighted in Mark’s recounting of the deeds and teachings of Jesus throughout the Gospel. The Pharisees who are offended by Jesus’ healing of the man on the Sabbath not only deny in their hearts but openly reject or, one might say, “blaspheme against” this Spirit. As noted above, Jesus’ reaction to this blasphemy is both anger (over the suffering their hard-heartedness would cause) and grief (over their alienation from love).

Those who reject this Spirit “*can never have forgiveness*” (3:29). A familiar, misleading translation of this verse, “*will never be forgiven*” (e.g., NIV), has resulted in misplaced debate over an unforgivable sin, in the sense of some mysterious sin so horrible that it lies beyond the bounds of God’s grace. Once someone has committed this sin, the idea goes, it is impossible that they will ever be forgiven. This “impossible . . . ever . . . forgiven” is further facilitated by the reference to “eternal life,” which is easily heard in the sense of “everlasting life.” All this has led to a theologically bankrupt, spiritually self-centered, and emotionally harmful idea of an unforgivable sin.

It is vital not to equate “eternal life” and “everlasting life.” This is not to deny the possibility of everlasting life, but eternal life should be understood not in contrast to physical death, but in contrast to spiritual death (the death Paul talks about in Rom. 6:23), that is, in contrast to living alienated from God. “Eternal life” is not about a future reality, but about one’s present, living relationship to God (“the free gift of God *is* eternal life,” Rom. 6:23; cf. 6:11–14). To live eternally is to be saved, right now, to be living by grace. To live eternally is to live, right now, *forgiven* and, insofar as one is awakened to God’s grace for all (for oneself and for others), to live, right now, *forgiving*.

Since this describes two elements of living in the light of the grace of God, to live forgiven and to live forgiving are two sides of *the same* coin. This is the sense in which those who do not forgive are not forgiven: not as part of some

tit-for-tat dynamic, but because to live forgiven and to forgive are simultaneously part of living in the Spirit, living salvation in surrender to God's grace. It is in this sense that those who reject this Spirit "can never *have* forgiveness" (KJV is also good: "*hath* never forgiveness"). In this light—read not with the presumption that hate is the only rational response to people seeking to kill us—we can hear Jesus' statement as prophetic warning and lament over these particular Pharisees, whose hardness of heart not only contributes to the oppression of others, but also cuts them off from living forgiven, cuts them off from the grace of God.

We learn virtually nothing about Jesus' family here (Mark 3:31–35). They are obviously being manipulated by Jesus' opponents. It is impossible to know if they were willing participants or recognized the manipulation as quickly as did Jesus. Note that Jesus does not here reject love for family, but he does take this opportunity to reject the transforming of familial love into a kinship loyalty that would be privileged over the *koinōnia* created by fidelity to God, the divine *koinōnia* of gracious love that transcends all exclusivist kinship, ethnic, doctrinal, or nationalist appeals.

WILLIAM GREENWAY

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The Chinese sage Confucius insisted on "the rectification of names." The way social roles are named, he says, should explicitly and comprehensively determine the behaviors of those who occupy these roles. Father must *be* "real" fathers, Confucius insists, and sons must comport themselves as "true" sons—to say nothing of how rulers and subjects should mutually relate. Social order depends upon each and every member knowing their place and living up to culturally ideal norms.¹

In such settings, those who assign the names hold the power. In human history, attempts to exercise social control by the imposition of name-rectification have been pervasive.² When Jesus casts out demons, he seriously disrupts the social order of his day. Thus he provokes reactions from two different directions.

His family of origin responds with apparent anxiety to external social pressure. They name Jesus as "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21), that is, out of step, his behavior out of place. How challenging it must be to face down the members of one's own family! What *kind* of a son and brother is Jesus, whose behavior seems so far beyond the boundaries of established social norms? Not a "good son." One's social

identity—*who one is*—can be very difficult to disentangle from close kin. Jesus' roots are rural, peasant, uneducated. He comes carrying little in the way of social capital.

The scribes, members of "the guild"—the cadre of what might reasonably be regarded as fellow theological professionals—already have at best a tenuous relationship with Jesus. His teaching and healing demonstrate credibility, but he has none of their credentials. The perceived threat to their standing is sufficient to bring them all the way from Jerusalem in order to confront him in backwater Galilee. They put forth a hypothesis that purports to name the role of Jesus in society: not as a healer or a liberator, but as a threat; not as a servant of God, but as the lackey of a demon. In defense of this designation, they present a plausible-sounding explanation of how it might be the case: "He's one of them—a demon himself—after all, it takes one to know one. To exorcise a force so potent, you would have to derive that kind of power from the inside!"

Vocational, professional identity is deeply impacted by peer-group identity. If the religious leaders think Jesus is a demon, what are mere laypersons supposed to think—even, perhaps,

1. Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 54–60.

2. Resistance to such control has been evident as well. Note the sustained poetic critique offered by Lao-tzu in *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper & Row, 2006).

those who thought they had experienced a healing from Jesus? His vocation, in other words, is in peril from its outset.

Jesus seems here to be akin to “a man without a country.” He is a family member who does not fit the family role. He is a practicing, increasingly high-profile member of a faith community whose designated leaders accuse him not just of failing to be one of them and not being a team player, but also of being an alien intruder. How can someone so out of character be rightly named teacher?

Against this two-sided challenge, not just to his credibility but to his identity, Jesus does not attempt to defend his role as family member or teacher/healer/exorcist by providing counterevidence to the assumptions of his family or the assertions of his religious-political opponents. Rather, he undertakes his own reorienting rectification of names.

In the case of family identity, he introduces a deeply theological and radically countercultural redefinition of family: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (3:35).

Regarding vocational identity, Jesus first exposes the plausible-sounding rhetorical misidentification of himself with Beelzebul by subjecting it to exposure as an existentially self-undermining inconsistency. (Imagine a chain saw that cuts its own power cord.) Then Jesus addresses the heart of the issue, namely, that *he* is the one who can “bind the strong man,” the one who has the power to name what is demonic and, in so naming, to disempower it. Such power represents a serious threat to the authority of the scribes.

Both Jesus’ family and his religious critics, in the face of his disorienting words and deeds, do their best to control the narrative. Each group may do so out of deep conviction (“This *surely* is what is going on in the behavior of Jesus”). Each may also be driven by a bevy of fears for themselves, for the relative stability of a social situation that is itself beset by threat and trauma from the oppressive rule of Rome. Each may have skin in the game—self-interest to be protected or advanced by how the behavior of

Jesus can be spun. In all cases, how they want the narrative to turn out subverts the story as it is. Jesus, regardless of threats to his identity, is not about to have his mission and vocation undermined. Hence his deft, bold steps to take back the story.

Let us shift focus. The eternally unforgivable “sin against the Holy Spirit” of which Jesus warns has been the subject of consideration by scholars and a cause of consternation for many well-intentioned believers. “In a fit of temper, I blurted out: ‘Curse you, Holy Spirit!’ Oh, no! Am I eschatological toast?” The issue, however, is not about a slip of the tongue in a fit of frustration; rather, it has to do with the far greater danger of “talking oneself to (spiritual) death.” One can put forward a false narrative to protect one’s sphere of influence and control for only so long before coming to believe one’s own rhetoric—not merely positing a false alternative description of facts, but embracing a universe based on one’s own lies.

From that condition—wherein evil has been named as good, or wherein there is no difference to be sought or discovered between what is true and what is not—there may be no redemption possible. In that self-induced condition, how would one have facility to recognize redemption if it stood before one’s face? Various writers (e.g., Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis) have taught us that whatever hell may be, the door to it is dead-bolted from the *inside*, where one has rendered oneself unable to recognize, and thus impervious to, God’s relentless, never-ceasing redemption invitation. Such blasphemy cannot be forgiven, because receiving the fruits of forgiveness depends on being able to perceive one’s blasphemy.

Long ago Socrates challenged the Sophists, who taught promising young Athenians to “make the weaker argument appear the stronger” for profit—even at the cost of their own self-deception.³ Jesus, in Mark’s Gospel, may be warning against a kind of spiritual sophistry that redefines illusion as reality, and reality as illusion.

So, some questions: (1) Where are we as preachers likely to be carried away by our own

3. See “Apology: Socrates Speaks at His Trial,” in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

rhetoric, or fixated on a particular interpretational spin? (2) Where, in the vast array of media manipulation strategies inflicted on us and on our people, are we becoming unable to recognize the difference (or that there *is* a difference) between fact and fabrication? (3) Who

names reality for us, and how? For whom do we name it, and how?

Mark's Jesus illustrates for preachers the vocational imperatives of countercultural perception and proclamation, and of evoking both in those with whom we minister.

DAVID J. SCHLAFER

Proper 6 (Sunday between June 12 and June 18)

Ezekiel 17:22–24 and

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

Psalms 92:1–4, 12–15 and Psalm 20

2 Corinthians 5:6–10 (11–13), 14–17

Mark 4:26–34

Ezekiel 17:22–24

²²Thus says the Lord GOD:

I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;
I will set it out.

I will break off a tender one
from the topmost of its young twigs;

I myself will plant it
on a high and lofty mountain.

²³On the mountain height of Israel
I will plant it,

in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,
and become a noble cedar.

Under it every kind of bird will live;
in the shade of its branches will nest
winged creatures of every kind.

²⁴All the trees of the field shall know
that I am the LORD.

I bring low the high tree,
I make high the low tree;

I dry up the green tree
and make the dry tree flourish.

I the LORD have spoken;
I will accomplish it.

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

^{15:34}Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

^{16:1}The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." ²Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" ⁵He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is now before the LORD.”⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.”⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.”¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.”¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

These readings give us two views on “God’s responses to our crises.” To begin, the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah give us two similar perspectives on the experience of the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonian Empire, and the subsequent exile of a significant number of Judeans as prisoners of war. Ezekiel was among those already exiled in 597 BCE, and is thus a prophetic figure whose texts often provide opportunities for preaching themes related to the subordinated, the minority, but especially the migrant, because Ezekiel himself represents the Hebrew people forcibly evacuated and facing new challenges in new lands. In fact, all of Ezekiel 17, from which our few verses are taken, basically reviews the conquests of Judah by Babylon and the ill-fated attempts to seek help from Egypt.

At the beginning of Ezekiel 17, the prophet refers to a tree shoot being carried to “a land of trade, set . . . in a city of merchants” (Ezek. 17:4). The “eagle,” in this first case, is Babylon, carrying the king of Judah (and exiles) to Babylon, but also planting a new ruler back in Judah: The Judean ruler Jehoiachin was taken and “planted” in Babylon, while Zedekiah was “planted” back in Jerusalem. Zedekiah was tempted to side with a second “eagle,” Pharaoh (v. 7). Zedekiah’s attempted revolt brought down Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

In verse 22 Ezekiel finally changes the eagle imagery. Now God is the third and superior eagle who will take a “sprig” from the cedar, and plant it (back?) on Mount Zion. *What previous kings have squandered, God will restore.* The mistaken foreign policies of previous Hebrew rulers are rejected before God’s direct “restoration” recounted in Ezekiel 17:22–24. In short: out with the old, in with the new!

The story in 1 Samuel 15:34–16:13 is also about God’s intervention and restoration, but once again, the larger context of our reading suggests “out with the old” as well as “in with the new.” The Hebrew Scriptures contain mixed reviews of kingship in Israel and Judah. First Samuel 8 contains a serious warning about asking for kings. Other texts portray the beginnings of the monarchy as a time of high hopes. So, despite such a positive beginning (outlined in 1 Sam. 9), Saul’s reign is eventually doomed by his personal failures, and among these “failures” are some disturbing passages.

Just prior to our passage, before David is chosen, Saul is supposed to move against a very old enemy indeed—the Amalekites. The Amalekites are presented as an enemy from the time of the wilderness wandering (Num. 14), a bitter memory that is revived in this episode (1 Sam. 15:2). Saul is ordered to perform the “ban” against this enemy (i.e., the horrendous

This Kingdom of Christ

[Ezekiel] frequently compares the world to a field, or a forest, and the inhabitants of it to the trees therein; — an allusion exceedingly proper, considering the great variety and difference of condition both of the one and the other. The trees of the field are some high, some low; some green, some dry; some strong, some weak; some lofty, some contemptible; some fruitful, some barren; some useful, some altogether useless: so that you have all sorts of persons, high and low, of what condition, relation, or interest soever, clearly represented by the trees of the field; and these are the trees in my text.

. . . Hence, [in] verse 22 of this chapter, he calls them from their thoughtfulness about the destructions, desolations, and contentions that were amongst them in reference to their civil rule, to the consideration of that design which he was secretly and silently carrying on under all these dispensations. “I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon an high mountain and eminent: in the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it; and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell.” As if the Lord should say, There is a great noise in the world about setting up and plucking down of kings, in this their carnal rule; and many of you see nothing else, you will look no farther: but I also have my work in hand; my design is not bounded within these limits and outward appearances; I am setting up a King that shall have another manner of dominion and rule than these worms of the earth. . . . The setting up then of this kingdom of Christ, “who is the highest branch of the cedar,” and planting it in the church, the “mountain of Israel,” with the prosperity hereof, and safety of him that shall dwell therein, is the subject of ver. 22, 23.

John Owen, “The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of the World,” in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 15, ed. Thomas Russell (London: Richard Baynes, 1826), 420–22.

destruction of all living things during a conquest). However, in this episode Saul apparently allows greed to get the better of him, keeping many of the animals that were supposed to be destroyed along with the Amalekites.

When Samuel, the last judge and prophet, questions whether Saul has accomplished the bloodthirsty task as commanded, he protests against Saul’s claims that “all is well,” using the famous line, “What, then, is this bleating of sheep in my ears?” (v. 14). Saul appears to be condemned because he was insufficiently single-minded in carrying out the *total* annihilation of a people and their animals. To carry out what Saul was supposed to do, Samuel “hews” Agag (15:33, “in pieces,” the English rather gratuitously adds in many versions). This is, therefore, among the mistakes of Saul.

As now written, the historical books describe many episodes of Saul’s inexorable decline, and the first king is portrayed as growing ever more deranged and incompetent—even seeking to

kill David, whom he (rightly) perceives as a threat to his prestige and rule. It is important that our passage follows immediately from this startling description of one of Saul’s “failures,” just as Ezekiel’s “restoration” follows a condemnation of previous rulers! In 1 Samuel 15, God is finally portrayed as saying to Samuel, “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands” (v. 11). So, “out with the old.”

In our passage, then, God intervenes to renew the monarchy by naming David to save a monarchy threatened by Saul’s failures. Like reading the “pro-Saul” passage of 1 Samuel 9 immediately after the “anti-king” passage of 1 Samuel 8, we have here a rejection of Saul followed immediately by what is often read as one of the “pro-David” passages in 1 Samuel. It is sometimes thought that these “pro-king” passages were older traditions, around which a later editor added the clearly “anti-king” passages,

even heavily criticizing David (e.g., the Bathsheba story, Absalom's revolt, etc.).

Later reflection on David will suggest that even he was not allowed to construct the temple because, according to the Chronicler (writing several centuries after 1 Samuel), God tells David: "you shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood in my sight on the earth" (1 Chr. 22:8). This, despite the fact that the texts portray David's battles (like Samuel's orders to Saul to wipe out the Amalekites and their animals) as having been fought *at God's command*. Do we have in Chronicles some additional pangs of conscience with regard to the monarchy?

However, matters may not be quite what they seem. Is our passage about choosing young David entirely "positive"? In this passage, Samuel is shown the new king in a most unusual manner—a kind of contest. (Does Jesse have any idea what is at stake here? Surely he knows the authority of Samuel!) Each son of Jesse is "displayed" before Samuel, but God chooses only the most unexpected—a lowly young shepherd who was not even considered "in the running," but is described in 16:12 as physically attractive: "ruddy . . . beautiful eyes . . . handsome." There are curious aspects of this. First, the report on the *physical appearance* of David is rather unexpected after God directly states (1 Sam. 16:7) that God is *not interested* in outward appearance. Secondly, we have heard this before! Like David, we were also originally

introduced to Saul's father Kish, who, according to 1 Samuel 9, "had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he." It is hard to avoid a sense of *déjà vu*. Thus the text rather subtly may be suggesting, Are we making another mistake here? Sermons may emphasize our constant temptation to judge by appearances, even when told not to!

If we read this story with Ezekiel 17:22–24 and then suggest that both are only about "God's intervention toward a restoration," we risk avoiding the texts previous to both our passages. The restorations involved rejections. Ezekiel 17 rejects two previous rulers before "replanting" a sprig back in Jerusalem. In 1 Samuel, young David is chosen immediately following a clear rejection of Saul.

"In with the new" invariably also meant "out with the old." The new is typically the easier part; rejecting the old is hard. What seemed to work so well in the past is hard to give up, even when clear mistakes were made. Recognizing mistakes can be the hardest part of change, because it means that "restoration" will involve new directions. Churches search for new pastors that closely resemble the previous—even when times have changed—and sometimes even ignoring clear mistakes of the past. Our two passages, however, strongly suggest that "restoration" is not the same thing as "preservation."

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Ezekiel is never one to mince words or soften the harshness of God's judgment. The poetic and visionary quality of his prophecies makes them convoluted and difficult to understand. Ezekiel's conviction about the implications of Israel's embrace of foreign gods and trust in political alliances for security, however, leaves little doubt as to why captivity had fallen on his people. Babylon is divine payback for Israel's rebellion and idolatry; Ezekiel does

not let his people forget the cause of their plight.

Following a lengthy account of God's judgment, Ezekiel's tone shifts in chapter 17. Like sunlight breaking through clouds, his words of hope and promise emerge in these verses (Ezek. 17:22–24). Consistent with his use of imagery from the natural world, Ezekiel proclaims God's way forward for Israel. Exile and divine punishment give way to restoration and renewal. To

illustrate his point, the prophet shares a word from God and describes what is about to happen. God appears as a planter or arborist, cutting “a sprig” from the top of a mighty cedar tree, replanting it in soil, creating the beginning of a new tree from an old one.

Ezekiel must have loved trees, and he knew something about the process of reproducing fruit trees. One method is simply to plant seeds. An alternative is to replant tender shoots from the newest growth of an older tree. The newest growth emerges at the top of an older tree. New life from an older, established tree is best suited to root and grow as a new plant. Seeds may not withstand the challenges of soil and environment, but sprigs, if able to root, are more likely to grow.

Ezekiel’s description may also derive from the practice of grafting food trees in order to preserve their unique variety. Certain fruits are not simply the product of their own seeds, but are created and preserved by joining the old with the new. Grafting a scion (or tender sprig) to an older rootstock, the older tree is transformed into a new variety. In utilizing an older root system that is adapted to the soil and climate, a new scion from the top of a tree is given an environment conducive to producing a new tree and thus new fruit.

God’s promise of restoration prompts listeners and preachers alike to reflect on the importance of continuity, rootedness, and purpose. Ezekiel does not proclaim a new plant disconnected from the past, but one taken from the life of the old: a new sprig planted for the purpose of growing into a stately cedar. Value is found in its purpose, not its commercial value. Its purpose is to do what cedars do: grow branches and bear fruit, creating shade where all winged creatures find a home.

Trees are physical reminders of life in the natural world, but in the final verse we are reminded that the source of life is larger than any one physical manifestation, however inspiring or beautiful. Life itself is a gift of God. Like the trees, humanity is inextricably rooted in a source that is life itself. Trees remind us of the hope of restoration.

Restoration and renewal were not on the mind of Samuel, whose long and contentious

relationship with Saul ends when the two men leave one another for the last time, each heading to his respective home. Samuel is filled with resignation, and the scene in their story exudes a sense of foreboding and sadness. Samuel pleads with his people to avoid the dangers of anointing a king. But they want a leader like those of other nations. Samuel reluctantly gives them what they want. Saul becomes Israel’s first king. The struggles of Samuel and Saul play out over time, their lives intertwined in constant conflict. In the end, Saul’s leadership is marked by bad decisions, bad luck, and a predictable fate.

The passage describes the transition of leadership from Saul to David. A new chapter in Israel’s political, religious, and social life is about to begin, but the verses before us are more than just a record of transaction, selection, and anointing. The story is imbued with human feeling, emotion, and loss. Samuel grieves over Saul. It may seem odd that one so critical of the king’s choices and leadership, driven to anger and outrage in his relationship with Saul, and one so wary of monarchical rule for his people, would actually be beset with such grief. After all, Samuel could have easily rehearsed his earlier warnings and reminded the people: “I told you so.” However, the prophet’s life and ministry are inextricably tied to Saul. Samuel knows Saul. He has witnessed Saul’s strengths and weaknesses and held a front-row seat to the tragic drama. Samuel has felt the weight of Saul’s demise on behalf of their people, Israel. Samuel grieves for Israel, and for Saul.

The nature of grief, especially the deep and often conflicting emotions that emerge from its powerful foothold in human life, needs acknowledgment in these verses, and the text exhibits a tension between grief’s uncontrollable presence and the potential of healing, hope, and comfort. God enters the scene with an agenda, asking what some might hear as an unanswerable question, ill-timed at best and insensitive at worst: “How long will you grieve over Saul?” (1 Sam. 16:1). For God, it is time to move on.

There is work to be done. Move on to the important task of identifying and anointing a new king. God is about the business at hand. Why not? Their protection from the Philistines and other hostile powers depends upon finding

a sound and strong king. For Samuel, grief is not something one moves beyond easily or readily. Yet Samuel follows God's direction, moves forward, and perseveres. David is identified after a long search process, and he is anointed king. Once accomplished, Samuel heads home to Ramah, an indication that the past continues to haunt him. Samuel is not moving beyond grief, but with it into the future.

The grief of Samuel and the complicated, even contradictory, emotions that gather around loss are important for any preacher who utilizes this text. Grief serves as an entry point for many hearers whose own lives are burdened with the full range of feelings and beliefs surrounding loss and disappointment. Samuel's grief reveals honesty about the ambivalence that marks human relationships.

Samuel's complex relationship with Saul is captured by the colonial American painter John Singleton Copley in a painting that hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Titled *Saul Reproved by Samuel* (1798), the painting depicts

Samuel with his arm extended and pointing toward Saul, who is surrounded by a marching column of his army. Copley's use of light penetrates the darkness and highlights both the red tunic of Saul and his humiliated, downturned face responding to the rebuke. Samuel, moving ahead of the marching column of soldiers, is contorted in his posture; he stands sideways yet moves forward, his back neither completely turned to Saul nor fully facing him. Copley's Samuel rebukes the king yet continues to march in step and move ahead in the parade.

With David's anointing, Samuel ushers in the promise of a new era of restoration and renewal for Israel. A new king emerges, and an old king is retired. A new chapter begins. As for Samuel, he returns home alone, yet forever tied to his people, to Saul, to history. In the end, the burden of Samuel is rooted in an identity inseparable from that of his people. His life is indeed more a graft than a seed. Being right does not always set one free.

J. SCOTT HUDGINS

Proper 6 (Sunday between June 12 and June 18)

Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15

¹It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
²to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
³to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
⁴For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.
.....
¹²The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
¹³They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
¹⁴In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap,
¹⁵showing that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Psalm 20

¹The LORD answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
²May he send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion.
³May he remember all your offerings,
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices.
⁴May he grant you your heart's desire,
and fulfill all your plans.
⁵May we shout for joy over your victory,
and in the name of our God set up our banners.
May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.
⁶Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with mighty victories by his right hand.
⁷Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.
⁸They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright.
⁹Give victory to the king, O LORD;
answer us when we call.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15. Psalm 92 is a hymn of thanksgiving and praise for God’s work, recited to music in the public worship in the temple on the Sabbath. The psalmist is identified as the king, yet the worshiping community participates in singing the song. It is noticeable that the divine name Yahweh (the LORD) appears seven times in the song, reflecting the meaning of the Sabbath, the seventh day.¹ Verses 1–4 and 12–15 include praise, thanksgiving, and benediction. While verses 1–4 are a call to worship with the joyful sound of a variety of musical instruments in praise of the saving acts of God, verses 12–15 are a climactic ending in a sapiential style with a blessing upon the righteous, following the psalmist’s testimony to God’s great power over his enemies (Ps. 92:5–11). The images of “the palm tree” and “a cedar in Lebanon” symbolize the fruitfulness and strength of the righteous and signify God’s righteousness to the people of God. Verse 15b (“he is my rock”) confirms trust in the Lord.

It is worth noting that the Mishnah, the first rabbinic literature, describes Psalm 92 as “a song for the future time, the day that shall be all Sabbat and rest in life everlasting (*Tamid* 7.4).”² This eschatological conception of the Sabbath connects Psalm 92 with the first reading, Ezekiel 17:22–24, which is the coda of the chapter. In the previous verses, Ezekiel prophesies the judgment of God on the Babylonian exiles. He reverses his message in verses 22–24 by announcing the good news of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. This promise of God for the future of Israel is depicted through the same image of the cedar tree that is used in Psalm 92:12–15. In both readings, God is described as the one who is growing the cedar tree to be fruitful. God’s sovereign power over the nations is the source of hope for the people of God.

The images of the palm tree and a cedar in Lebanon in Psalm 92:12–15 relate also to the Gospel reading, Mark 4:26–34, in which the kingdom of God is conveyed in the image of a

full-grown tree. While the psalmist identifies the growing and flourishing tree with the life of the righteous, Jesus compares it with the kingdom of God. Both are based on the faith that God is working for justice and peace on the earth.

In our reality, where we often see the suffering of the righteous, Psalm 92 should be continuously sung as a reminder of God’s promise. By singing the song, we eagerly anticipate the Sabbath, the day of rest for the righteous, and pray that it may come true soon. A hymn such as “When in Our Music God Is Glorified” reflects the tone and content of Psalm 92. Verses 12–15 of the psalm, with images of fruitful flourishing, might provide rich language for a benediction.

Psalm 20. Among various hypotheses about the historical background of Psalm 20, the prevailing opinion is that it was sung regularly at the New Year’s feast, to celebrate Yahweh’s kingship in conjunction with the enthronement of a new king in Jerusalem.³ The multiple pronouns used in the psalm (“we,” “I,” “you,” “he,” and “they”) indicate that it was a community (“we”) song led by the priest (“I”) for the king (“he” and “you”) to God (“he” and “you”). Considering that Israel was a small country geographically, up against the political and military hegemony of strong neighboring countries, this psalm is a song of the powerless, united in the conviction that God protects them from their enemies (“they”) through their king, who was chosen and anointed by God.

Psalm 20 comprises two stanzas. In the first stanza (Ps. 20:1–5), the community blesses the king, affirming that God will answer his prayers, protect him, accept his sacrifices, and help him succeed in his plans. In the second stanza (vv. 6–9), the priest affirms the salvation of the community by reciting that God will answer its prayers for the king and the nation (v. 6). As their response to the priest, the community reaffirms their faith and trust in God, who is the ultimate source of victory (vv. 7–9).

1. Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Psalms,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 476.

2. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 657.

3. Cf. Terrien, *Psalms*, 218; Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 206.

The reading appointed for this day, 1 Samuel 15:34–16:13, tells the story of David’s anointing by Samuel. It emphasizes that God’s standard for choosing the king is different from that of human beings, because the Lord does not see “the outward appearance,” but “looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). What, then, does it mean to look on the heart? What does the Lord see in David’s heart? The story indicates that David is far from the conventional image of the king. He is neither tall in stature nor physically proud like other warriors. Instead, he is the youngest son, the one who tends the sheep in the pastures. This implies that God looks on David’s heart, that is, his humility and his compassion for the weak. In response to the first reading, Psalm 20 is a recitation that the people’s king is like David, God’s anointed one, chosen by God’s standard and blessed by the right hand of God (Ps. 20:6b).

In the Gospel reading, Mark 4:26–34, the youngest or the smallest plays an important role in the kingdom of God. A mustard seed that is “the smallest of all the seeds on earth” (Mark 4:31) grows to be “the greatest of all shrubs,” so that “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (v. 32). This parable of the Mustard Seed resonates with God’s way of doing things: God chooses the smallest, who walk humbly with God, and anoints them to become the agents

of the kingdom, in which all people can make their homes and live harmoniously.

In general, anointing is a divinely appointed ceremony that is part of the inauguration of the king. The Bible indicates that anointing with oil or with the Holy Spirit signifies God’s blessing or call on a person’s life, who then humbly walks with God and participates in God’s transforming work for the world. In this broad sense, Psalm 20 can be sung as a prayer for those who are the smallest, but who are called by God to become the greatest. Just as the psalmist describes the life of the anointed by singing that “[s]ome take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the LORD” (Ps. 20:7), so those who are called by God humbly trust in the power of the Lord.

Since Psalm 20 includes the voices of the priest and of the people of the worshiping community, it can be recited as an ensemble reading. For example, in a musical setting, a worship leader could take the role of the priest by reading verses 1–4 and 6, while the congregation reads verses 5 and 7 as the ritual community. The last verse (v. 9) can be read by all together in harmony. Consider also singing a metrical or responsorial setting of the psalm as a response to the first reading.

EUNJOO MARY KIM

Proper 6 (Sunday between June 12 and June 18)

2 Corinthians 5:6–10 (11–13), 14–17

⁶So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. ¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The apostle Paul, like some Jewish contemporaries, fellow Christians, and many in his world, did not believe death was the final word. Unlike the Platonists, Paul thought death led to resurrection into an embodied life. Unlike others, Paul believed this new, embodied, resurrection life resulted from the resurrection of Jesus. What gave Paul hope was the eschatological gift of the Spirit, which for him was evidence of the unshakable reality of the resurrection (2 Cor. 5:5).

This conviction of an embodied life after death gave the apostle a Spirit-shaped faith that could say, “So we are always confident” (v. 6). Verse 6 forms an incomplete sentence; verse 7 offers a sudden clarification; verse 8 resumes verse 6 and completes it! The term translated “confident” (from *tharreō*) means “daring, courageous, bold,” even “audacious” (see 5:8; 7:16; 10:1; Heb. 13:6). Paul is expressing not arrogance but the conviction that God will not let death have the final word. That means the opposition he faces, no matter what antagonists

might do to him, will not finally be victorious. He confesses this conviction is “by faith, not by sight” (5:7). If he were to rely on external observation or the likelihood of success, he would reconsider his mission. If he were to rely on the external realities of people in Christ dying, he might rework his entire theology. However, he has an Easter-based faith.

Conviction about an embodied resurrection life beyond death gave the apostle Spirit-inspired, Easter eyes. So intimate was his relationship with the Lord that, while he could concede that “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord,” his eyes were fixed on pleasing the Lord (v. 9). Though his claim has been susceptible to misunderstandings, Paul is not here degrading the earthly body (see 4:16–18; 5:1–5). He is simply contrasting it to the greatness of the presence of the Lord. Earthly bodies and intimacy with God, and also resurrected bodies and perfect intimacy, are affirmed. As Ralph Martin says, while we

are in the present body we are “in communion with God,” but we are “nevertheless in a foreign land” as we long for and await the kingdom of God.¹ One can assure others that absence from the body is presence with the Lord, however one explains the intermediate state.²

Pleasing God is not about becoming a sycophant, nor should it stem from a lack of self-esteem. It is graciously relational life that expresses our love for God as we are empowered by God’s love for us. Emphasis on pleasing God shaped a number of Paul’s statements (Rom. 12:1–2; 14:18; Phil. 4:18; Eph. 5:10). The translation “make it our aim to please him” (v. 9) could be rendered “cherish pleasing him” or “are greatly honored to please him” or “aspire to please him.” Paul knows he does not always do this, but he does always aspire to live this way.

Those who most firmly believe in divine judgment should today be the most progressive on issues of social justice. “All of us,” Paul announces, “must appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (5:10; cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–15; Rom. 14:10; Matt. 25:31–46). Those who go to Corinth today can see the massive judgment seat in the center of the city. Notably, the criterion for most judgments in the Bible is behavior (though see Rom. 2:14–16; 1 Cor. 4:4–5). Judgment is not based on affirming the right tenets of faith, however important they might be. Justification is by faith, and in that regard we are made righteous through Christ (2 Cor. 5:18–19).

At the same time, this does not negate judgment about works: “so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (v. 10). On the one hand, there is the significance of a final judgment so that God, who knows and sees all, can make all things right. On the other hand, our works today are judged in accord with God’s desire for justice for all. Too much in our world is not right—drug and sex trafficking that destroys innocent lives, diseases for which there is not yet a cure, broken families, and systemic evils of all sorts. What we who love justice and peace

most want and for which we should work is for evil to be unmasked, unraveled, and realigned with God’s goodness and righteousness.

Waiting for God’s judgment, then, does not mean sitting around waiting for God to act. Rather, this kind of waiting means acting out what is said in 2 Corinthians 5:10. That is, we should do now what we know that kingdom envisions for our world. For one example, Guy Nave shows how confidence in God’s final judgment played an important, society-changing role for America’s slaves: “The belief that one’s present reality was not the final reality, however, not only empowered slaves not to lose heart and to confidently endure, but also enabled them to reject their current reality.”³

Confidence in God’s final judgment is why Paul is confident in preaching the gospel (vv. 11–13). His motivation, which itself shaped his conviction that gave him Easter eyes, is “the love of Christ [that] urges us on” (v. 14). Debates continue about whether this is our love for Christ or Christ’s love for us (the consensus), but 5:14–15 virtually announces that Christ’s love is the apocalyptic act of God’s gracious love in the death of Christ, a death that undoes death and turns it into life eternal. This act of God, which also includes the gracious gift of the Spirit, urges or controls or directs us to carry on in confidence. If one (Christ) died for (in the place of) all (and all means all), then all who have died in Christ have died so that the “all . . . might live no longer for themselves” but for Christ (5:15; cf. Rom. 6:3–5).

The Spirit gave Paul eyes to see through death and systemic evil into God’s apocalyptic act in Christ to make all things right. That gave him a Spirit-empowered perspective. What he means by “a human point of view” or “according to the flesh” (*kata sarka*, 5:16) derives from his own conversion experience and looking at others through the lenses of death, of systemic evil, of sinfulness and sickness. A human point of view cannot get beyond the opposition to what is right and true, cannot find the courage to press

1. Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Nashville: Zondervan, 2014), 266.

2. Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 124–25; Scot McKnight, *The Heaven Promise: Engaging the Bible’s Truth about Life to Come* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2015), 45–49.

3. Guy Nave, “2 Corinthians,” in Brian K. Blount et al., eds., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 316.

on, and looks at humans with a cynical sneer that surrenders to hopelessness. Not Paul. He sees all humans through what God has done in Christ. He sees Christ not only as the crucified one, but as the crucified and raised king. He sees humans not as “old” creation but as “new creation,” where “everything has become new” (5:17; cf. Isa. 42:9; 43:18–19; 48:6; 65:17; Gal. 6:15).

Paul’s Spirit-generated eyes of faith know that “all this is from God” (5:18) and this God—in Christ—is “reconciling the world to himself” (v. 19). Whatever our mission, and wherever we might be located, we should be open to the Spirit giving us Easter eyes, so we can see beyond the evil to the goodness of God making the world new.

SCOT MCKNIGHT

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Christians in the modern age face serious challenges that have been around since the very inception of the faith. These challenges may be greater today than ever before. Some center around these questions: “Are you in your right mind? Are you a rational human being? Do you display good common sense? Is there consistency between what you believe and what is ‘true’?”

Philosophers have wrestled for millennia with the question “What is truth?” Seldom have human beings come to a definitive and final conclusion. Most classical and modern philosophers believe there is such a thing as “absolute truth,” but few have claimed to grasp it (the majority of postmodern philosophers believe that all truth is relative). Atheism and agnosticism are on the rise worldwide, yet not believing and not knowing are choices of faith just as surely as choosing to believe in a higher power or a spiritual path.⁴

It is fascinating to discover what other people think and believe, especially when such perspectives differ from our own. Some people believe in ghosts, unidentified flying objects (UFOs), extraterrestrial life forms, witches, demons, angels, a flat earth, fairies, warlocks and wizards, levitation, extrasensory perception (ESP), and a variety of superstitions (such as bad luck being caused by black cats, stepping on cracks, walking under ladders, breaking mirrors, and so on). Others believe in Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, yetis, that sexuality is a choice, that Elvis Presley is still alive, that cell phones cause cancer, and that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks. At the same time, some do

not believe humans cause climate change, that we ever landed on the moon, that the Holocaust really happened, that evolution is true, that the earth is billions of years old, that dinosaurs ever existed, or that tobacco has harmful health effects. Each of these lists could be expanded endlessly, and it is not difficult to find people who will defend or refute anything and/or everything on such lists. Many of us may wonder, “Who in their right mind could possibly believe that?” It is difficult to set subjective filters aside and view things from an objective perspective.

Paul and other early leaders of the Christian movement faced similar questions and the challenges that accompanied them. From early days, some saw the followers of Jesus as being “filled with new wine” (Acts 2:13) and attributed the joy and energy of the faith to inebriation. According to Mark, Jesus’ own family and friends questioned his sanity. Who in their right mind would talk about resurrection from the dead, cleansing of sins through water baptism and transformation through Spirit baptism, eating flesh and drinking blood, unconditional love and unmerited grace? What about traditional interpretation of the Law? What about doing things in accord with long-established traditions? Only crazy people would buy into such a topsy-turvy new paradigm.

Preachers might point out that Paul was OK with that. Addressing the dualistic Greek world, Paul was able to speak persuasively to two co-existing yet contrasting realities. One could choose to walk by sight, or one could choose to walk

4. John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

by faith (2 Cor. 5:7). One could choose to claim an earthly home, or one could choose a heavenly home (1 Cor. 15:40; 2 Cor. 5:1; Col. 3:5–17). One could focus on exterior appearances, or one could focus on inner truth (2 Cor. 5:12).

We can look at others from a human point of view, or we can look at others as Christ sees them (1 Cor. 2:5). What seemed to some foolishness, Paul claimed was true wisdom, granted by God alone (1 Cor. 3:18; 4:10). The key to moving from a worldly, human, limited view to an expansive, spiritual, transformed view was Jesus the Christ. Once a person committed to Christ, that person became a new creation, able to think and see in new ways (2 Cor. 5:17).

Our canon of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures is the mere tip of the iceberg of all the writings, beliefs, and core tenets of the early Christian movement. From bizarre gnostic writings to widely respected and accepted writings of the Apostolic Fathers, a vast, eclectic, and complex map of Christian thought was drawn. Over time, new spiritual explorers investigated, tested, and confirmed or rejected various elements. Boundaries and borders defining “orthodoxy” (right belief) emerged. Slavery, in our Bible taken for granted as acceptable and ordained by God, is now viewed as deeply evil and unacceptable. The place, status, and roles of women, very limited in Scripture, have been greatly expanded as our understanding of gender differences has evolved. Many afflictions attributed to evil and demonic forces we now believe to be rooted in diseases or mental illness.

At no time does this mean that the Bible is wrong, but simply that our understanding and ability to interpret and apply it has progressed. For many believers, the Holy Spirit is still active in the church, and our understanding of God’s will is not limited to what is written in the Bible. Revelation is an active and dynamic experience.

In a skeptical age, the tendency is to enter into argument and debate. Preachers might stress that Paul offers an alternative to persuading people to accept new thinking and practices: try it yourself. Instead of simply taking our word for it, experience it firsthand. Having

a discussion about prayer is a very different experience than praying.

A biology professor and a theologian met for coffee on a regular basis, discussing and debating the reality and value of religion. The biology professor vehemently opposed organized religion, taking the position that spirituality was a delusional distraction at best. After many fruitless hours of disagreement, the theologian finally issued a challenge: apply a good and rigorous scientific method to three practices—prayer, meditation, and fasting. Engage for a month, keep a journal, reflect on what is experienced and discovered. At the end of the month, the biologist confessed that she was not ready yet to buy into religion wholesale, but she could not deny that something significant happened and that she began thinking and reflecting in a substantially different way.

This is a wonderful example of relational evangelism, reflecting the open invitation of the early church. In the minds of many, evangelism means handing out tracts and issuing a very specific invitation to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. Relational evangelism models the earliest practices of the Christian movement by engaging people individually or in small groups, exploring together beliefs and understandings, and extending an open welcome to participate in the rituals and practices of a spiritual community.⁵

We may find ourselves in endless arguments about truth, reality, faith, religion, and the existence of God. To truly walk by faith instead of sight, to truly trust that faith in Christ has the power to transform life, and to truly believe in our hearts things that other people doubt and question, we need to let go of the desire to “win the argument” and instead extend an invitation for others to share in the experiences that have been so meaningful in our own lives. Often a lasting faith is caught more than taught. Let us live in such ways that others witness in us the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) and cannot wait to find out what makes such a difference in our lives.

DAN R. DICK

5. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Proper 6 (Sunday between June 12 and June 18)

Mark 4:26–34

²⁶He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Today’s lection invites the question “Why be cryptic?” It says Jesus spoke publicly *only* in parables (Mark 4:34) and acknowledges the cryptic character of parables, saying that Jesus explained everything in private to his disciples (indicating the disciples, too, needed explanation). Why not explain everything to everyone? Why is the Teacher cryptic?

This gestures toward Mark’s so-called messianic secret (v. 11). In Mark’s opening chapters, Jesus from Nazareth, a backwater in imperial Rome, gains fame with blistering speed, attracting multitudes not only from Galilee, but from “Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon” (3:7–8; cf. 1:45). Jesus’ fame becomes so significant that Pharisees and Herodians actively conspire “to destroy him” (3:6). At the same time, he does not permit “demons” and “unclean spirits” to speak precisely because “they knew him” (1:34; 3:11–12). When the disciples ask, “Why parables?” (4:10), Jesus moves from cryptic to confounding, saying he uses parables so that people will “not perceive . . . not understand . . . not turn again and be forgiven” (4:12). All this intensifies the cognitive dissonance.

Immediately, however, we appear to be invited to relax into Mark’s simple, allegorical

interpretation of “the sower” (4:13–20). Allegory is inherently comforting because it involves no new understanding, merely the association of known entities (e.g., “rocky ground” equals “ones with no root”). Anyone paying attention to Jesus’ explanation for using parables and his talk of new wine and fresh wineskins (2:22; cf. Matt. 9:14–17; Luke 5:33–39) will worry: “It’s a trap.”

The preacher may compare Jesus’ spiritual genius to the Buddhist master having novices meditate endlessly upon koans such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Asking “Why parables?” is like asking, “Why koans?” Mark’s allegorical interpretation is like a textbook answer to the koan question: “to defeat the limits of the reasoning mind and stimulate awakening to deeper spiritual truth.” Theoretically correct. However, understanding the purpose of koans theoretically is different from undergoing spiritual enlightenment through disciplined meditation upon them. Theory is vital to but different from spiritual awakening.

Consider poetry. Being able to explain the allusions, form, and so forth of a poem about losing one’s parent or child is essential to understanding the poem. However, being able to explain those essential mechanisms is different from being imaginatively taken up into living

the discrete experience of pain the poem contours. When dealing with spiritual matters—in contrast, say, to directions for roasting broccoli—theoretical understanding is essential but nonetheless needs in a sense to be forgotten to enable awakening to the reality invoked.

The Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously coined the phrase “second naïveté” to describe this dynamic vis-à-vis Scripture. “First naïveté” remains ignorant of original context, original language, doctrinal significance, the play of one’s own prejudices, and the like. Resolving first naïveté with informed understanding is essential to truly interpret a text, in contrast to unwittingly reading one’s own ideas out of it. Spiritual understanding requires, on the far side of technical work, a reopening to the text, a second naïveté. Such opening to the text lies at the heart, for instance, of *lectio divina* (which is itself reliably a true reading/awakening only insofar as one has resolved first naïveté).

All this may suggest an answer to the question “Why parables?” Perhaps Jesus uses parables because they resist quick resolution, because they push us toward listening with ears that can hear, toward hearing that brings transformation and forgiveness (4:23). Perhaps Jesus is concerned over the simplistic understanding of the multitudes. Perhaps this is also why he tells the demons not to tell anyone who he is (1:34), namely, because he understands the threat of people labeling and understanding him in accord with established categories, and so never being pushed beyond theory to spiritual awakening.

In other words, perhaps parabolic teaching is a way of preventing closure at the level of the cataphatic (i.e., of preventing legalism), a way of ensuring opening to the apophatic. In this regard, we may remember James 2:19, which also distinguishes true belief in terms of a spiritual transformation that goes beyond correct knowledge that we *share* with unclean spirits—“even demons believe—and shudder.” Notably, in this sense, to understand the parable of the Sower by, for instance, correctly correlating “rocky ground” with “ones with no root” is spiritually empty, understanding that looks without perceiving.

With regard to first naïveté and the two parables in today’s lection, it is notable that they

are two of numerous “kingdom” parables found in the Gospels (e.g., see several at Matt. 13). It may be helpful to think of each parable about the kingdom of God as adding a brushstroke or two to the fullness of our vision. The parable of the Sprouting Seed would seem to stress the miraculous character of the growth of the kingdom (the work of the Spirit?), and may suggest that just as a gardener does not create plants but facilitates their growth and delights in their fruit, so we do not design or build the kingdom but should strive to foster its emergence and to delight in its fruits (perhaps compare the fruits of the Spirit at Gal. 5:22–23).

When Jesus’ listeners heard the parable of the Mustard Seed (also found at Matt. 13:31–32 and Luke 13:18–19), they would immediately have been reminded of another of today’s lections, Ezekiel 17:22–24, which speaks of God taking a sprig from the top of a cedar and tending it until it becomes a “noble cedar,” bearing fruit and providing homes for “winged creatures of every kind” (Ezek. 17:23). These brushstrokes seem to kindle a spirit that is alert and alive to the Spirit, even in marginal and insignificant places (like a manger), and to kindle a spirit that anticipates a kingdom providing shelter for diverse peoples and creatures.

Some have tried to mitigate the patriarchal “kingdom” with “kin-dom.” Jesus, however, explicitly rejects privileging of kinship over *koinōnia* (Mark 3:31–35). There is no denying the problem with “kingdom.” Indeed, it is hard to be more critical of kings and kingdoms than last week’s lection from 1 Samuel, where the Lord, hostile to the very idea of kings, tells Samuel to warn the people a king will take their sons and daughters for his own purposes, will take the best fruits of their fields, and will make them into slaves (1 Sam. 8:9–20). For the prophets and Mark, monarchy is a fact of life. Invoking alternate vocabulary would have been toothless.

The clever but subversive—and therefore risky and powerful—move the prophets and Jesus make is to portray God as the paradigmatic monarch and to configure monarchy explicitly *in terms of love and justice*. So, the true king or queen is just, gracious, planter of the sprig, like the God who seeks to bless all peoples through God’s own people (Gen. 12:1–3). This

clearly distinguishes a true king from a tyrant, who is really no monarch at all; so it would be just to overthrow them (Calvin uses this strategy in sixteenth-century Europe).

Today in the United States—to be sure, not everywhere—we can critique monarchy and patriarchy directly, so substituting some other term for “kingdom,” such as “the *koinōnia*,” is wise. In sum, preachers can avoid simplistic

rejection of biblical “kingdom” language, explain the faithful, subversive power of prophetic and Gospel depictions of God as king, explain the subversive impact of Jesus’ depiction of the kingdom of God (in contrast to, say, the kingdom of Herod or the empire of Nero), and explain why in our context Gospel fidelity calls for new language.

WILLIAM GREENWAY

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

When I was a small child, my father introduced me to vegetable gardening. Step by step we prepared the soil, lined out shallow furrows, positioned pea seeds, covered them over, and watered the ground. Early the next morning my father found me out in the garden scratching the ground, searching for edible peas.

Arnold Lobel, who writes a series of children’s stories called *Frog and Toad*, tells a similar tale. Frog gives Toad some flower seeds to plant. He promises that Toad will have a garden “quite soon,” but cautions him that gardening is “very hard work.” Toad proceeds to plant the seeds, then promptly commands them: “Now seeds, start growing.” They do not. Toad repeats the order more and more loudly. Frog tells Toad his seeds are not growing because Toad’s shouting frightens them. He counsels Toad to “leave them alone” and let the sun and rain do their work.

Toad, however, hears only that his seeds are afraid, and undertakes a series of day-by-day moves to calm his seeds and cajole them into growing. He sets out candles at night, since they might also be afraid of the dark. He reads his seeds stories, sings them songs, quotes poems to them, plays music for them. (All these are actions that might calm *him* if he were afraid.) After many days of unremitting effort, Toad finally collapses in utter exhaustion. Frog returns for a visit to find seedlings well above ground, and Toad sound asleep. Frog awakens Toad to the news that his garden is finally growing. Toad is, of course, very pleased, but admits:

“You were right, Frog. It was very hard work.”¹ Indeed—hard work that has had nothing at all to do with the growing!

Children chuckle knowingly as they hear and read the story. So do adults, because it is a story for all ages, but carries a lesson that can be very hard to learn. While experience, skill, practice, and understanding in such endeavors as gardening, parenting, healing, and soul mentoring are essential, there is only so much that a farmer, a teacher, physician, therapist, community builder, parent, spouse, friend, or preacher can do to produce growth. “Produce” is a misnomer. All that any of these can do is help to prepare the possibilities for growth, to nurture and foster that growth as (or if) it happens. Such nurture and support can often consist in efforts that are “hands off”—granting, providing, and protecting the necessary growing space.

All this is in play, I think, in the parable Mark’s Jesus tells. His listeners may well be anxious, apprehensive, deeply concerned over what appears to be “lack of progress” with respect to the coming to fruition of the commonwealth of God. There is, however, only so much that is theirs (or ours) to do. God’s greening work is a mystery; it comes, the farmer “knows not how.” Serious damage to the crop can come from trying to “make it happen” on our own.

Forces from three directions converge to exacerbate a sense of impatience among faith community members, forces that impinge from their inevitable immersion in a wider culture. (1) Omnipresent media-driven strategies of

1. Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad Together* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1971), 29.

consumerism conspire to create widespread cravings for instant gratification: “Anything worth having is worth having *now*; you can charge it instantly and pay later.” (2) The political ideals of one tribe are often perceived only as obstacles to be summarily eradicated by an opposing tribe: “If we just defeat them in the next election, we can turn the nation around.” (3) The long-endured effects of justice delayed and justice denied that so many have suffered create an understandable sense of urgency: “How many more must suffer the effects of discrimination while we continue to discuss the issue?”

The itch for immediacy, in other words, is not limited to little children. There is a Toad in all of us that keeps on urging: “We cannot just sit around and wait, we have to *do* something; God’s reign may be promised, but as participants, we must not be passive.” The issue here is more than just “be patient, things take time.” It is that the commonwealth of God into which we are called is not under our control. Its coming is not commensurate with our felt sense of achievement. What we deem as failure does not doom God’s power or intent.

Yet it is well to note that, in the parable, the farmer, while he does not know how growth takes place as he awaits its coming, is anything but passive. Sleep he may, night and day, but he does so, as it were, with one eye open. When the time is right, he is right on it. He goes in with the sickle at once.

One thing that all the growth supporters cited earlier must learn (usually by trial and error, and often different in each distinctive situation) is a sense of timing. Growth spurts and insight/awareness harvesting happen most often at teachable moments, wherein it is incumbent that just the right kind of intervention be undertaken at once—but not before. One thinks, for instance, of the movie *Good Will Hunting*, where the psychologist (played by Robin Williams) attentively awaits the dawning self-awareness of his patient (played by Matt Damon). He employs, over time, a full range of strategically introduced therapeutic techniques that challenge and evoke responses from his patient; but he does not pronounce the liberating *It’s not your fault!* until the moment when the young man is able to receive it.

In working for the promised reign of God—no less than in many other growth-participation endeavors—there *are* actions to be undertaken in support of the process. Rather than exclaiming, “Look what we are doing—*isn’t that great?*” Christians do well to be asking instead, “What does God seem to be growing, and how can we help?”

One growing parable prompts another: God’s reign is like a . . . *mustard bush*? Not a cedar of Lebanon, or a giant sequoia, but an invasive plant often regarded as a weed? Perhaps the metaphor serves as a further check on strategies for church growth consciously or unconsciously charged with visions of human grandeur. Perhaps the plan of God has to do with purposes unconnected to or at cross purposes with our own. Mustard bushes proliferate in scruffy, seemingly disorderly array—and they provide resting places for flocks of birds! It can be unsettling when our designated ecclesial places and our carefully created programs produce results we were not expecting, perhaps not even wanting.

It sounds like the control issues implicitly addressed in the previous parable may present themselves in another but related form through this one. This prompts the question “Whose garden is this anyway? And what might we be unconsciously implying when we speak of ‘the fruits of our labors?’”

Some questions, then, for preachers on this passage: (1) What congruence or discontinuity might there be between the energy our congregations may be investing in services, programs, projects, and causes, and that which God might be cultivating among us? (2) How can we discern, and articulate into communal awareness, the appropriate dynamic between patient sleeping and waking, and properly productive reaping and harvesting in God’s garden? (3) How do we go about distinguishing *our* vision for growth from what God’s might be?

“Be patient! Do not wring your hands! Do use your eyes!” Mark’s Jesus seems to say. “Work with discerning diligence, as best you can, in tandem with the process of God’s often unexpected, but continually unfolding commonwealth-growing givens.”

DAVID J. SCHLAFER

Proper 7 (Sunday between June 19 and June 25)

Job 38:1–11 and 1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4–11, 19–23) 32–49 2 Corinthians 6:1–13
Mark 4:35–41
Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32 and
Psalm 9:9–20

Job 38:1–11

¹Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
²“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
³Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
⁶On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
⁷when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
⁸“Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
⁹when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
¹⁰and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
¹¹and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped?’”

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4–11, 19–23) 32–49

¹Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. . . . ⁴And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. ⁵He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver’s beam, and his spear’s head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. ⁸He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. ⁹If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.” ¹⁰And the Philistine said, “Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.” ¹¹When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid. . . .

¹⁹Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. ²⁰David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. ²¹Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. ²²David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. ²³As he talked with them, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him. . . .

³²David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." ³³Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." ³⁴But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." ³⁷David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you!"

³⁸Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them. ⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

⁴¹The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴²When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." ⁴⁵But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand."

⁴⁸When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The story of David and Goliath is well known. Far less well known are all the textual and historical problems related to the story, some of which have important implications for how we read these traditions. There will be plenty of opportunities in these texts for sermons emphasizing the dangers of “popular reputations” that surround famous figures, but such popular ideas often hide serious questions.

First, why does Saul not know *who David is* in this story? David was introduced to Saul in the previous chapter, and even worked for Saul! (1 Sam. 16:21–23). Second, in the wider biblical narrative, it is not at all clear *who actually killed Goliath*. In our famous story, Goliath is identified as a giant who carries a spear the size of a “weaver’s beam” (17:7). However, 2 Samuel 21:19 says Goliath (“weaver’s beam” and all) was killed by a certain Elhanan. Later biblical writers spotted the problem and tried to resolve it by introducing a new character in 1 Chronicles 20:5: “Lahmi,” Goliath’s *brother*. Was the slaying of Goliath later added among the “legendary exploits” of David? If so, why?

One reason this famous story pits young David against a Philistine champion *from Gath* becomes clear when we note David’s political and military collaboration with Philistines *from Gath* (1 Sam. 27–29). Our story may well have been intended to undercut suspicions about David’s potentially treasonous collaboration with an enemy of the early Israelites—a collaboration that is portrayed as *enthusiastically undertaken* by David at the time (28:2). David’s story, in short, seems to engage in political spin.

Subsequent interpretive history raises other serious matters. The story clearly wants to emphasize that David had no reasonable chance of survival against Goliath. David acknowledges this when he declares that God “does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD’s and he will give you into our hand” (17:47). Thus, victory resulted from the miraculous assistance of God (a theme consistent with the stories of the fall of Jericho and of Gideon defeating the Midianites with a mere three hundred incompetent soldiers). This means that the

key to David’s conquest was *not* David’s prowess with weapons.

Why, then, do readers from time immemorial want to discuss David’s “experience” as a shepherd, and therefore his (supposed) keen abilities with a sling, and therefore (contrary to the message of the story itself) want to emphasize the importance of proper military training? We so want to say that David was “the man for the job” *because of his abilities*, and not because of his trust in a power beyond his own. The story, in short, is frequently *remilitarized* in interpretation.

I have raised suspicions that this was also a pro-David spin to distract from his previous associations with Philistines in Gath; but one could make the argument that the story is a clever *criticism* of David. For example, references to *Gath*—the very town where David collaborated with Philistines—might require a wink from the original storyteller, suggesting we are intended to remember that “the great military leader” was really successful only when trusting God’s *intervening* power, rather than trusting weapons like those belonging to Goliath himself. When we take the story to be “pro-David,” we may be missing an ironic gesture.

This (not very) subtle criticism of David is strengthened when the story is read in combination with the famous story of Job—and particularly the striking passage from Job on display here, which raises even more uncomfortable questions. In Job, the long-suffering main character continues to protest his innocence before God and to insist that God explain Job’s innocent suffering. Job’s friends, the infamous “comforters,” are appalled that Job claims innocence. The book places the reader in the uncomfortable position of knowing that Job is, in fact, correct: he is not suffering through any fault of his own. Job’s constant demands for an explanation are quite reasonable.

Then the unexpected happens. God *responds*. Indeed, God’s response is often considered to be among the most striking and unsettling divine discourses in the Hebrew Bible. It must be remembered that Job is never reprimanded

The Wise and Good Creator

Who is the father of the rain? And who hath begotten the drops of dew? Who condensed the air into clouds, and bade them carry the waters of the rain, now bringing golden-tinted clouds from the north, now changing these into one uniform appearance, and again transforming them into manifold circles and other shapes? Who can number the clouds in wisdom? Whereof in Job it saith, And He knoweth the separations of the clouds, and hath bent down the heaven to the earth: and, He who numbereth the clouds in wisdom: and, the cloud is not rent under Him. For so many measures of waters lie upon the clouds, yet they are not rent: but come down with all good order upon the earth. Who bringeth the winds out of their treasures? And who, as we said before, is he that hath begotten the drops of dew? And out of whose womb cometh the ice? For its substance is like water, and its strength like stone. And at one time the water becomes snow like wool, at another it ministers to Him who scattereth the mist like ashes, and at another it is changed into a stony substance; since He governs the waters as He will. Its nature is uniform, and its action manifold in force. Water becomes in vines wine that maketh glad the heart of man: and in olives oil that maketh man's face to shine: and is transformed also into bread that strengtheneth man's heart, and into fruits of all kinds which He hath created. . . .

These points my discourse has now treated at large, having left out many, yea, ten thousand other things, and especially things incorporeal and invisible, that thou mayest abhor those who blaspheme the wise and good Artificer, and from what is spoken and read, and whatever thou canst thyself discover or conceive, *from the greatness and beauty of the creatures mayest proportionably see the maker of them*, and bending the knee with godly reverence to the Maker of the worlds, the worlds, I mean, of sense and thought, both visible and invisible, thou mayest with a grateful and holy tongue, with unwearied lips and heart, praise God and say, *How wonderful are Thy works, O Lord; in wisdom hast Thou made them all. For to Thee belongeth honour, and glory, and majesty, both now and throughout all ages. Amen.*

Cyril of Jerusalem, *The Catechetical Lectures*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1895), 53–55.

for *asking questions* of God! Nor is Job accused of insolence or disrespect for demanding an answer to his questions about his unjust suffering. To the contrary, God takes the questions seriously. The answer begins with, “Are you ready to hear the answer?” “Gird up your loins” is a classic phrase that means “prepare for battle!” Thus, God initiates an intellectual “battle,” a debate, but God’s *opening* point is arguably God’s *only* point: you are not able to understand all this. Essentially, God asks in many different ways, “If you think you are ready to know about such mysteries, then can you show me that you know the basics of creation?”

At no point does God indicate Job should never have asked his questions. Nevertheless, God makes clear that Job is in error to think he is capable of fully engaging in debate with the Creator. It is not a call from God to “know your place.” It is more, “Are you in a place to know?”

The knowledge is not beyond Job’s *station*, it is beyond Job’s ability. Far too many readers mistake the reason for God’s speech by concluding that humans do not “deserve” to know. That is never in question. Neither does God say, “Do not ask.” God’s answer is rather, “You are not ready, or able, to know what you ask.”

Are we offended in the modern world when we acknowledge that sophisticated computers can know more than humans are capable of knowing? Are we offended by our finitude? Offended not to know as God knows? Hopefully not. Just so, we should not take offense at God’s answer to Job. Reflecting on Job 38, preachers might wonder whether we humans will ever be ready for such information. Perhaps one sign that we are making progress is when the secrets of creation are not immediately used to perfect our powers of destruction. Modern Goliaths—those who believe in their own

weapons—are not yet ready for more secrets of the universe.

What God chooses in the story of David and Goliath is not to make a human being a super weapon. Goliath was the super weapon, the image of human military prowess. Yet how limited is our ability to understand! The story of David and Goliath—besides being propaganda for King David’s legacy (if not also a very clever joke at David’s expense!)—is surely also a story revealing human foolishness at thinking we understand the success of David to be found in his honed skills.

That is not the story. Knowing what all creation is about and all its constituent details is still beyond us. We continue to search, and we

are not blamed by the writer of Job for asking and trying. Rather, we are arguably blamed only when we believe we finally have it all figured out. Will we ever know all things? We must not answer too quickly. The book of Job does not condemn our frantic search for answers—only the *premature* conviction that we have “all we need to know,” and the even more dangerous conviction that our knowledge is best represented by our ability to make weapons as big as a weaver’s beam—rather than in our quest for understanding how we might raise each other up and build balanced, global fruitfulness, peace, and prosperity—precisely the imagery God uses to illustrate God’s power in Job.

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

God’s response to Job is not the explanation most readers want, need, or expect. The questions raised by Job’s tragic experience are insistent and inescapable: How is it possible for the righteous to experience such evil? Where is divine justice? Is personal goodness predicated on a life of blessing? Described as one “blameless and upright” (Job 1:8), Job demands an explanation from God. Finally, God has heard enough and speaks out of the whirlwind—a whirlwind that could have easily been Job’s own life. God simply ignores Job’s question, posing different questions altogether.

In a series of rhetorical questions emphasizing the immeasurable distance between human knowledge and divine creation, God answers: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (38:4). God reminds Job that God is creator of all that is: measurer and planter of the earth’s foundations, maker of the songs of the morning stars, the clouds, the oceans. Recalling the majesty and power of creation, God reframes the human predicament and undercuts, at least for a moment, the outrage for personal explanation. God plays the awe card. Job’s question remains unanswered.

So how might a preacher make sense of this divine speech in the context of Job’s experience, or in the context of our experience, where death,

loss, and meaningless tragedy invade our world, our lives, and our congregations?

One possibility is to explore the assumptions readers bring to the text concerning the nature of divine justice and motivations that guide human choices to live faithful, moral lives. Like Job, most of us desire God to be a moral accountant, a judge who maintains justice and distributes judgment fairly. Some are motivated to live moral lives out of fear, feeling that loss and tragedy are the result of a lack of goodness or faithfulness. Perhaps more subtly, we assume that prosperity and material blessings are the results of our own moral choices. With the God revealed in these verses there is no support for these assumptions—only the reality that God is far bigger, far broader, far more mysterious than humanity’s capacity to know or understand.

In her review of Mark Larrimore’s book *The Book of Job: A Biography*, Joan Acocella concludes her critical essay with these words:

God’s speech slaughters the moral, the what-should-be, nature of the rest of the Book of Job. It is the knife flash, the leap, the teeth. And despite, or because of, its remorselessness, it is electrifying. It is like an action movie, or a horror movie. Of course, Job is important in the story, but today he

seems the pretext, the one who is like us, and makes the argument that we would make. As for God, he makes the argument that, at least as far as nature is concerned, is true.¹

Transitioning from a passage that leaves most more baffled than satisfied, we encounter in 1 Samuel a story familiar and morally compelling, so much so that we run the danger of overlooking details and misreading the text. How do we hear anew a text so iconic, so rehearsed in our memories?

David's improbable victory over the Philistine giant Goliath stands as a prototype of those rare but satisfying occasions when an underdog surprises everyone and takes down the more formidable, established, and highly favored opponent. The challenge for the preacher is to recast the story's obvious, well-worn truths: mustering courage in the face of insurmountable obstacles, or winning with well-honed skills and sheer determination rather than by experience, or the discovery of the power in knowing oneself and engaging in life's struggles on one's own terms. These are all lessons from the story to be sure. How have other writers and artists recast the story?

Malcolm Gladwell, in his bestselling book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*,² challenges interpretations of David as the underdog and Goliath as the insurmountable obstacle. For Gladwell, the Philistines used Goliath as a ploy to intimidate the enemy and to facilitate surrender, avoiding battle altogether. According to Gladwell, at the mere sight of Goliath, "hearts failed because of him" (inferred from 1 Sam. 17:32 RSV). Saul fell for the ploy because he understood power in the form of might, strength, and intimidation.

Gladwell posits that Goliath's size resulted from a debilitating medical condition, and when heavy armor was added to his massive frame, it made him slow and sluggish. His summons to David to come to him (v. 44) was due to his immobility and bad eyesight. Goliath had to be led to the field by an attendant (v. 41), and he mistook David's weapon as a few sticks (v. 43).

David's quickness and his skill with the sling, sharpened over time in his daily work as a shepherd, eventually proved to be more powerful. For Gladwell, David began as the favorite, not the underdog. Yet for those observing from the sidelines of battle, the attribute that seemed to be the giant's source of strength turned out to be his greatest weakness. Giants are, according to Gladwell, never as strong or powerful as they seem.

Centuries earlier, David's victory over Goliath captivated the early-seventeenth-century Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. With remarkable attention to physical and emotional realism, Caravaggio painted two contrasting portraits of a victorious David holding the grotesque, decapitated head of Goliath. The first version depicts David bending over the torso of the giant, his youthful face hidden in the shadows, the light highlighting his muscular arms as he holds the sling in one hand and the bloodied head of Goliath in the other. Goliath's enormity is captured in his lifeless hand, which rests next to David's smaller foot. Caravaggio downplays any expression or personality, and instead focuses the observer's eye on muscles and sling.

A decade later, he would paint the scene with important differences. David is standing, a sword in one hand and the head of Goliath in the other. This time the light reveals David's face, expressing not celebration, but disgust, and even regret, and also the gory head of the giant, eyes and mouth wide open with a look of surprise.

What accounts for Caravaggio's interpretation? Biographers point out that the painter was often in trouble, at odds with the law. Late in his life he was on the run, accused of murder. Art historians suggest that Caravaggio painted himself in the later painting (1610), not as the hero, but as the villain. In effect, using his image as Goliath serves as a plea of guilt. As Simon Schama comments, "By offering his head in the painting, he can save himself in real life."³

Caravaggio, like all great artists, provokes interpreters to rethink this familiar story through the use of light, shadows, angle of vision, and

1. Joan Acocella, "Misery: Is There Justice in the Book of Job?" *New Yorker*, December 16, 2013.

2. Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2013).

3. Simon Schama et al., "Simon Schama's Power of Art," London: BBC Video, 2007.

composition. When he superimposes his story onto the story of David and Goliath, he subverts our conventional interpretation and unveils our unexamined assumptions. Forced to wrestle with the full range of humanity, we discover that

the contrast between hero and villain, victor and vanquished, vulnerability and strength, often fades in the shadows. The familiar is always more than it seems.

J. SCOTT HUDGINS

Proper 7 (Sunday between June 19 and June 25)

Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32

- ¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- ²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
- ³and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.
-
- ²³Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
- ²⁴they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.
- ²⁵For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
- ²⁶They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
- ²⁷they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.
- ²⁸Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
- ²⁹he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
- ³⁰Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.
- ³¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
- ³²Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Psalm 9:9–20

- ⁹The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
- ¹⁰And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
- ¹¹Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion.
Declare his deeds among the peoples.
- ¹²For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;
he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.
- ¹³Be gracious to me, O LORD.
See what I suffer from those who hate me;
you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death,

¹⁴so that I may recount all your praises,
and, in the gates of daughter Zion,
rejoice in your deliverance.

¹⁵The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;
in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

¹⁶The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment;
the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. *Higgaion. Selah*

¹⁷The wicked shall depart to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God.

¹⁸For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor perish forever.

¹⁹Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail;
let the nations be judged before you.

²⁰Put them in fear, O LORD;
let the nations know that they are only human. *Selah*

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32. Psalm 107 is a hymn of national thanksgiving, inviting the Israelites to return from all around the world to give thanks to God. It recites God’s salvific work for them throughout their national history. Although the date of its composition is unclear, the reference to the return of Israel from the four directions of the earth (Ps. 107:3) and doing commerce in the seas (vv. 23–32) implies that the poem was originally sung during the Persian or early Hellenistic period.¹

Psalm 107 consists of three parts: a prologue (vv. 1–3) that invites the Israelites to praise God with thanksgiving for the Lord’s steadfast love; four stanzas (vv. 4–9, 10–16, 17–22, 23–32) that describe God’s redeeming works for Israel; and a closing hymn (vv. 33–43) colored by Wisdom literature. The four stanzas are skillfully divided by the refrain, “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind” (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). Each stanza deals with a distinct reason for gratitude, and the last stanza (vv. 23–32), which is included in the day’s lectionary reading, praises God who saved those in trouble from the mighty waters of the sea.

The conventional reading of this stanza is from the contrasting view of God’s salvific power and nature’s destructive force, and it is customary to interpret it as saying that the God who is more powerful than the sea triumphs over it. However, the first reading, Job 38:1–11, provides a different understanding of the relationship between God and nature. It primarily emphasizes that God created nature and cares for it, as well as controls it. In particular, verses 8–11 depict the sea as a newborn infant that God cares for, rather than as God’s opponent or rival, and stresses that God is the creator of the universe. As the response to Job 38:1–11, Psalm 107:23–32 is read as a reminder of God’s sovereign power as the creator.

The relationship between God and nature is also described in the Gospel reading, Mark 4:35–41, in which Jesus’ disciples are amazed when they witness him stilling the windstorm. Like the disciples, as well as the Israelites in Psalm 107, we are reminded of the way God created us as part of God’s creation and rejoice in God’s saving works for us as the creator of the universe who controls and cares for God’s creatures.

1. W. Stewart McCullough et al., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Psalms; Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), 4:572.

Psalm 107 is a beautiful litany of thanksgiving that can be read by worshipers. The refrain after each stanza in the poem also suggests that the poem can be sung antiphonally as the response to the first reading or to the sermon.

Psalm 9:9–20. According to textual and literary criticism, Psalm 9 was originally paired with Psalm 10 in an acrostic form. The paired poems move from thanksgiving (Ps. 9) to lament (Ps. 10), and reading both poems as one makes more sense in appreciating Psalm 9. Although there are few grounds for guessing the original historical situation of Psalm 9, its literary form provides a hint that it might have been sung in liturgical ceremonies at the Jerusalem temple. The poem begins in the tone of a hymn of thanksgiving, of gladness and praise, based on the psalmist's confidence in God's righteous judgement over the nations (9:1–8), but ends in a somber and reflective tone (vv. 16–20). The two Hebrew words *Higgaion* (v. 16) and *Selah* (vv. 16, 20) are difficult to translate, but biblical scholars understand them as a call for silent reflection, accompanying musical sounds.²

Since Psalm 9 is a royal hymn, attributed to King David, the psalmist is assumed to be a king, and a unique representative of God's people.³ Even though he speaks of the enemies as "my enemies" (v. 3), they are not his individual foes, but all the wicked nations (v. 17) imposing hardships on his people, identified as "the oppressed" in verse 9, the "afflicted" in verse 12, and the "needy" and "poor" in verse 18. The king testifies and rejoices that God judges his enemies and delivers his people. In this manner, the psalmist's personal salvation (v. 13) is inseparably woven into the national concern (v. 14).

Verses 9–12 recite three reasons for praise: God is "a stronghold for the oppressed" (v. 9); God has "not forsaken those who seek" him (v. 10); and God does "not forget the cry of the afflicted" (v. 12). Verses 13–14 make an urgent plea with God for the deliverance of his people from "the gates of death" (v. 13) to "the gates of daughter Zion" (v. 14). These contrasting images

of gates imply a critical situation for his people, and the present perfect tense in verses 15–16 expresses confidence in God who has meted out justice to the wicked nations. In verses 17–18, the poem turns to prophetic mode by declaring that the godless nations shall fall into ruin, while the needy and poor will be remembered by God. Verses 19–20 appeal for divine action against the wicked nations that are too arrogant to fear the Lord.

The Old Testament reading, 1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4–11, 19–23) 32–43, is a story that illustrates how God saved Israel from a wicked nation. As a powerless nation, Israel was under attack from the powerful Philistines. While King Saul and all his soldiers were deadly afraid of them, the little shepherd boy David was courageous enough to fight the giant warrior Goliath, confident that God would save him and his people from the Philistine and give him victory with his sling and pebble. The psalmist responds to this story with confidence that the God of Israel will deliver his people from powerful nations in the midst of a national crisis, just as God did with the Philistines.

The Gospel reading of Mark 4:35–41 tells another story of God's intervention in the crisis of the people of God. Jesus and his disciples were crossing the water by boat, and a great windstorm with strong waves hit while he was asleep. The disciples were so afraid as the boat was being swamped that they woke up Jesus to ask him to help. As soon as Jesus commanded the sea to be still, it immediately calmed down. This well-known passage has often been preached with an eye to individual crisis or personal fear. Yet Psalm 9 and the first reading offer a communal lens for this passage. The windstorm is like a powerful and arrogant nation's blow to people who are weak and helpless. At their urgent request, Jesus immediately delivers them from a destructive power.

For us as American Christians, especially middle- and upper-middle-class white believers, Psalm 9 may not sound like good news. It is about a God who stands for the oppressed,

2. Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Psalms," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 438–39.

3. John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 137.

afflicted, poor, and needy of a powerless nation, and we are the citizens of the most powerful nation in the world. This situation raises some homiletical questions: Who are the listeners? What would be good news for the people of a

powerful and oppressive nation? Psalm 9 is a good reminder that national security and safety come from God, not from oppressing the poor and the afflicted.

EUNJOO MARY KIM

Proper 7 (Sunday between June 19 and June 25)

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

¹As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

¹¹We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.

¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In no passage in any of Paul’s letters does his vulnerability, his emotional tenuousness, his pastoral sensitivity, or his missional ambition come to the fore as in today’s passage. One wonders why 2 Corinthians is not called a “pastoral” epistle. Working with others in the direction of mutual conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29) is an emotional and psychological endeavor. At times one’s emotions boil to the surface, while at other times a sheerly intellectual grasp of theology may come to the fore. In our passage, Paul’s emotions are on display, and this section belongs to those passages (like 2 Cor. 1:12–2:13 and 7:2–16) where Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to be reconciled with God and himself.

Insofar as Paul’s mission is pastoral theology and not abstract systematics, this part of the letter may be seen as climactic: his overarching mission in this letter is reconciliation, reconciliation among the Corinthians, with himself, and with God. Reconciliation with God entails reconciliation with Christ and reconciliation with

Christ entails reconciliation with one another. Those in Christ are reconciled through Christ to God and therefore with one another. The vertical and the horizontal operate in tandem. All of 2 Corinthians 6:1–13 flows from Paul’s appeal to reconciliation in 5:16–21.

Paul pleads with the Corinthians, who have fought Paul from the onset of his church work in Achaia (as one sees in 1 Cor. 1–4 and in 2 Cor. 10–13), not to “accept the grace of God in vain” (2 Cor. 6:1). This is a not-so-subtle way of saying, “Be reconciled to God by being reconciled with the gospel mission” (5:20–21). Paul contends that “now is the acceptable time” (6:2) and lists in detail how his ministry commends himself to their acceptance (the details extend from 6:3 to 6:10)! Then he admits his open vulnerability and pleads with them to become vulnerable to him (6:11–13).

One of Paul’s favorite terms for his ministry companions is “coworkers” (*synergoi*; Rom. 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 8:23). The verb form of

that term opens up 2 Corinthians 6, but here, he is not speaking in relation to his ministry companions or to the Corinthians. Here, Paul associates himself with God's work of reconciliation (5:16–21).¹ Paul's fear, even though he is confident (4:1, 15; 5:6, 8), is that the Corinthians, intoxicated as they are with the Roman way of life, with power mongering and displays of one's social status, might have accepted God's grace in Christ "in vain" (6:1). One is reminded of the strong appeal of Galatians 3:1–5 and even Romans 13–14. Paul knows that not affirming the resurrection renders vain one's preaching and faith (1 Cor. 15:14, 58).

So, Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8, a chapter bathed in Israel-remnant-servant imagery as a loving, faithful covenant God works to bring the exiles back home to Jerusalem. Paul sees his own mission to the Corinthians as (hopefully) accomplishing that same salvific purpose of God as he announces redemption in Christ! This appeal to Isaiah 49 is a pastorally creative and apocalyptic reading of the Bible backwards.² The mission of reconciliation has been fulfilled in Christ. Hence, "now is the acceptable time/day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). The "now," then, is both eschatological and pastorally connected to this very moment in Paul's mission.

The apostle chooses to commend himself by turning the categories of Rome upside down in 6:4–10, which is a list of the hardships of ministry reframed by the gospel. Paul's listing breaks into at least four parts: verses 4–5, 6–7a, 7b–8a, and 8b–10. Murray Harris breaks these into outward circumstances, qualities of character, spiritual equipment, and the vicissitudes of ministry.³ The first is about the hardships and sufferings of Paul's mission to announce to the nations the grace of God in Christ.

One has to wonder what Paul looked like after some two decades of gospel mission that had drawn forth opposition and physical violence. Broken bones and scars surely bore witness to the physical price of his mission work. Noticeably, Paul appeals to his own witness to the gospel

as evidence for the gospel and as reasons for the Corinthians to respond favorably to the gospel mission. Weakness is a form of gospel power, as is made clear in 12:9–10 (the list in chapter 6 needs to be compared with the list in 11:23–33).

Paul's hardships are matched by his devotion to a life dedicated to being like Christ in purity, kindness, and love, and in truthful speech attended by God's power. Paul's approach to ministry, then, is not to claim power or to use violence against others. When Paul speaks of "weapons of righteousness," he means the power of a life conformed to the will of God revealed in Christ, the power of a life conformed to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

For Paul, this kind of life meant both "honor" (or "glory") and "dishonor," two terms that for the Corinthians described climbing the Roman path to glory (*cursus honorum*). That path was shaped by one's family, by one's wealth, by one's success in the military and sport and public eloquence. Paul rejects the *cursus honorum* because his life is shaped by the cross of Jesus. That will mean honor in relation to what is godly and dishonor in the view of his contemporaries. Paul is cutting against the Corinthians' ambitions. They want reputation and honor and fame. Paul strives for faithfulness thus he is dismissed as "impostor," "unknown," "dying," and "punished"! What matters to the Corinthians is social status; what matters to Paul is the gospel. What they see as negation, Paul sees as affirmation. What they see as bad news, Paul sees in the light of the glory of the cross. Thus, he can rejoice in sorrow, see himself as rich in the midst of poverty, and consider himself as possessing everything though he has nothing!

Second Corinthians 6:4–10 is all rhetorical criticism aimed by Paul at the Corinthians, for the world has overwhelmed their sense of gospel. This theme can be preached from every pulpit in America. We, too, are blinded by worldly ambition—by power, by reputation, by social status, and by wealth.

1. Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible 32A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 341.

2. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

3. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 466–67.

A final expression of vulnerability emerges in two forms in 6:11–13: his mouth is open (“we have spoken frankly”) and his heart is widened (“our heart is wide open to you”). To “open one’s mouth,” a common idiom in Judaism, means to “speak from the depths of one’s heart.” To “open one’s heart,” also a common idiom, refers to Paul’s desire to hear the truth from them—and he wants that truth to be their acceptance of his proclamation of the grace

of God (those engaged in spiritual direction will know the reality of this proclamation as love). Paul believes the problem lies in a hard-heartedness fueled by their worldly ambitions, so his appeal is to vulnerability, for them to be as vulnerable to him as he is to them (6:13; an appeal he reiterates at 7:2). The apostle knows that Christian fellowship is formed on the basis of mutual vulnerability.

SCOT MCKNIGHT

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Today’s lection turns upon integrity. Integrity essentially involves such qualities as trustworthiness, honor, dependability, strength of character, honesty, nobility, courage of convictions, virtue, sincerity, consistency. These are the same qualities and characteristics we expect of faithful disciples and stewards.

Today we live in a culture where suspicion and mistrust are so prevalent that many people question whether integrity even exists anymore. In surveys and interviews in which people are asked to name those they believe have integrity, they call to mind historic figures of almost mythic stature—Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Franklin Roosevelt (people who were often criticized for their failings and lack of integrity when they were alive). In fact, discussions about integrity often devolve quickly into conversations about the *lack* of integrity. Sweeping generalization of those who lack integrity—business leaders, politicians, media personalities, celebrities, journalists—rouse much stronger emotional responses than lists of those we believe embody integrity. Suspicion in our contemporary context is so deep and pervasive that if a person appears too good to be true, they must have some deep, dark, despicable side hidden underneath their bright exterior.

Apparently, such suspicions were raised about Paul and the early apostolic leaders of the Christian movement. To be treated as impostors for sharing a message of grace and acceptance; to be dishonored as fakes and frauds for proclaiming forgiveness and love; to be castigated as liars and tricksters for offering salvation—these must

have been difficult and trying times for people attempting to live their faith with integrity. It was challenging for early audiences to accept the gospel as a true gift freely given. Why would the apostles and evangelists endure such hardships, make such sacrifices, deny themselves comforts, and risk torment and imprisonment with no benefit or reward? The wisdom of God often appears as foolishness to humankind.

It is all too human to think the worst of others, to question their motives, second-guess their actions, and make negative assumptions about their values. Why is this so common? Central to Paul’s message to the church at Corinth is that what seems impossible to mere mortals can be achieved through faith in Jesus Christ. Where ordinary people might avoid hardship and affliction, Christians are empowered by God to rise above such limitations. The heart transformed by God’s grace fosters great endurance, a holiness of spirit, and a genuine love for others. It is also by God’s guidance that we are able to stop believing the worst about others and find the capacity to believe only the best.

One compelling illustration of the power of faith to transform a meek and gentle soul into a champion of faith is depicted in the movie *Romero*, a film about the life and martyrdom of Archbishop Óscar Romero. Romero became a beacon and symbol of hope for the oppressed peoples of El Salvador. In one scene Father Romero attempts to enter a church under occupation by the military. They turn him away, even firing a machine gun at him as he picks up pieces of the host scattered by destruction of the altar.

Sweating and afraid, Romero leaves the church, passing by the desperate and despairing faces of the villagers. His automobile disappears in a cloud of dust. Moments later it reappears and returns to the church. The archbishop dons his robes and his stole and, with head held high, he leads the people in to reclaim the church. The soldiers stand by, bowing their heads in shame. There is no explanation for his transformation beyond the empowerment of a Holy Spirit dedicated to humble and selfless service. His witness is transforming and inspirational to friends and enemies alike.

Mother Teresa inspired millions of people and dedicated her life to serving the poor in Calcutta. Her lifetime of sacrificial service was a true incarnation of the gospel. Journalist Christopher Hitchens attempted to discredit Mother Teresa in his exposé, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*.⁴ The essence of Hitchens's argument is simple: Mother Teresa must have had ulterior motives for her service—fame, popularity, power, or money—because no one could give so much to so many without hope of personal gain. The book was highly criticized for its flawed central premise that there is no such thing as a selfless act. Christopher Hitchens was not alone in his skepticism. Many people find it difficult to believe that some give openly and freely to others.

Suspicion is easy, especially in a day when facts are fluid and truth is subjective. From unsubstantiated information on Wikipedia to “fake news” and Facebook pages passing as the real deal to scary scam phone calls supposedly from the IRS or one's bank, people are almost forced to be skeptical and cynical if they want to avoid being the victim of some con. Twenty-four-hour news outlets that align with particular political parties, corporate sponsors, and celebrity pundits infuse information with subtle (and not so subtle) biases, postures, and positions. Many people tune in to find confirmation for current beliefs and understanding rather than to find real information and to learn or have perspectives challenged. It becomes ever more difficult to “know what we do not know,” because it is so easy to hear only what we want to hear.

Paul and the early apostles definitely brought a new message that challenged long-standing and widely held core beliefs and values. It is little wonder that they encountered the kind of resistance they discovered. Just the concept of having nothing, yet possessing everything, would have been threatening to many. While cultures and generations differ greatly in many respects, the values of money, power, and fame transcend time and place. Historically, individuals who challenge the status quo have been viewed as threats. To offer blessing to the poor and extend woe to the rich defies common sense and is about as countercultural a message as one can preach. Honoring gentleness and meekness over power, humility and contentment over fame, and simplicity and poverty over wealth seem ridiculous in cultures structured around achievement, popularity, and success, but this is the foundation upon which our Christian faith is built.

Some may resist the idea that we should be judged on the merit of our actions. Others may question why Christians should be held to a different, higher standard for our conduct. Yet this is central to our identity as followers of Jesus the Christ. “Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:20).

To teach unconditional love and unmerited grace, to offer forgiveness and open acceptance, and to live a life of kindness, compassion, mercy, and justice are almost certain to cause raised eyebrows and suspicious stares. Who in their right mind would voluntarily subject themselves to inconvenience, hunger, deprivation, discomfort, risk, sacrifice, and criticism, just to help another person? Perhaps that is the point. No one in their right mind would do so, but this is precisely what we are called to do as faithful Christian disciples. For those filled by God's grace and Spirit, right now is the day of salvation, and right now is the most acceptable time to put faith into action and to live a life worthy of the gospel to which we have been called. The world may continue to operate by values that praise power, wealth, and fame, but for the children of God there are things of much greater value.

DAN R. DICK

4. See Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (New York: Verso, 1995).

Proper 7 (Sunday between June 19 and June 25)

Mark 4:35–41

³⁵On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” ³⁹He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” ⁴¹And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

“Let us go to the other side” (Mark 4:35) names Jesus’ move from Capernaum to Gentile cities, signaling the inclusive *koinōnia* he envisions.¹ This mirrors the inclusiveness of Jesus’ parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31–46). Who proved to be a neighbor? The one who helped, a Samaritan. What distinguishes the sheep? Not kinship relation, nationality, or religious tradition, but the one who fed, visited, clothed, and gave comfort. Also, consider Mark 3:31–35. Who are true kin of Jesus? “Whoever does the will of God.”

As the unjust realities of life kick us in the face, the idea that God protects the faithful from harm is exposed as naive. Many who think they are rejecting faith are actually rejecting this pseudofaith. A lucky few can affirm this faith and believe the calming of the sea in another of today’s lections, where the Lord stills a storm (Ps. 107:29; cf. Mark 6:45–52). In Jesus’ day, there were many miracle workers. Special power did not settle the question of identity. Jesus’ opponents do not question his power but its *source*, calling him an agent of Beelzebub (Mark 3:20–22).

This applies also to the disciples’ question, “Who then is this?” (4:41). Most baffling

vis-à-vis Jesus is what is the identity of one who can calm angry seas but ends up dead on a Roman cross? Mark’s audience lives in the shadow and the light of the cross. In Mark, upon Jesus’ death a Roman centurion, of all people, becomes the first human to say what demons say from the beginning (1:24; 1:34): “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39).² The mystery of faith is evident when we wonder, “What did the Roman have eyes to see—not in the wake of power over storms, casting out of demons, or healings—but in Jesus’ crucifixion?”

Mark says demons recognize Jesus as “the Holy One of God” (1:24) and says Jesus tells them not to tell (1:25; 3:11–12). Jesus also tells people healed not to tell (1:34; 1:43–45; 3:12; 5:43; 8:30; 9:9). This all names an important theme in Mark: miracles do not produce faith. Faith produces miracles. Accordingly, to the woman with a hemorrhage: “Daughter, your faith has made you well” (5:34; cf. healing of man with paralysis at 2:5: “When Jesus saw their faith . . .”). Mark tells us about Jesus’ authority and power, but Mark also works to ensure we have the faith of that woman, faith that precedes and brings healing. Mark nowhere forthrightly defines faith. As with the woman, we are everywhere left to infer. From her we

1. John Donahue, “Mark,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 990.

2. Donahue, “Mark,” 985.

may conclude faith brings persistence, daring, confidence, and a sense of self-worth.

We too easily find a moral in Jesus' calming of the storm. If you have enough faith, you will have God's favor. We hard-heartedly chalk up others' misfortune to their lack of faith. Some who suffer or are persecuted may affirm this faith and, tragically, blame themselves for not having enough faith (e.g., the prosperity gospel). In these cases, we are dealing with people who have listened but not understood. The idea that "if only you have enough faith, all will be well," is naive, and crediting one's own or others' suffering to a lack of faith is confused, harmful, and tragic. Mark's audience was unlikely to make such mistakes.

Mark is written to a Jewish Christian community in imperial Rome in the tumultuous early 70s. Paul has long since been martyred. Peter has just been martyred along with many others in the persecutions of Nero (Mark is mentioned as a companion to Peter [1 Pet. 5:13]). In response to insurrection, Rome is violently crushing the Jewish state.³ The Markan community is literally caught in a deadly storm. The disciples' question, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (4:38), gives voice to the question of so many in Mark's community and throughout history who are suffering or persecuted and cry out, "Where are you, God? Do you not care?"

Now, within the Gospel, after baptizing Jesus, John the Baptist is arrested and disappears at Mark 1:14 (the Baptist's martyrdom is described in Matt. 14:1–12). The shadow of the cross looms from the earliest chapters of Mark (see esp. 3:6). In addition, again, Mark's audience knows that many faithful people, including John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul, have been persecuted and murdered. Obviously, any supposed connection between true faith and worldly security is confused. So, when Jesus says, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" *the faith his followers lack is not the pseudofaith that Jesus will save them from the storm.*

In Mark, the power of Jesus and of God is not in question, but as the fate of Jesus, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, and so many other heroes of the

faith makes clear, faith and God's power do not ensure worldly security. This confusion reaches its zenith in Mark in the so-called triumphal entry, where the crowds shout out their hope that Jesus will throw off Roman occupation, renew the political kingdom, and take up the mantle of David (11:10). This is an understandable hope, and Jesus certainly demonstrates and urges concrete concern for the oppressed, but nonetheless this is a vision of triumph—one to which Judas evidently remained captive (14:10–11, 43–45)—that is very different from the triumph the centurion has eyes to see on the cross.

This chapter begins with the sower. The disciples' faithless terror in the boat numbers them among those who hear the word, only to have it choked out by the cares of the world (4:18–19). Jesus sleeps—a vision of the peace delivered by faith even amid the storms of life. What if the boat is swamped and all drown? Is such a fate to be met with equanimity? No. For, as is clear throughout the Gospel, Jesus actively resists and encourages struggle against oppressive forces (he is such a concrete threat that the establishment plots to have him killed). Is such a fate to be met with faith that endures even unto death? Yes. For as Mark's readers know, true faith leads Jesus to the cross and others on that boat to martyrdom. True faith, then, is not only stronger than a most fearsome foe. It is most clearly manifest precisely as it triumphs over fear of death.

However, what of Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul, Peter, those slain by Nero, and the rest of that martyred multitude "of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:38)? The fundamental question concerns the ultimate character of reality. Resurrection of some sort becomes decisive (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20). If Jesus triumphs in fidelity but is dead, period, then the universe is ultimately tragic; what is good and loving and just is real but not ultimate. Jesus' fidelity unto death *and* resurrection, by contrast, tells a more complex but ultimately hopeful tale. Jesus' stilling of the waters testifies to the ultimate power of love (anticipating resurrection). The renewed power of the faith that flagged in the storm is not faith that God will protect us in this life, but a faith that triumphs

3. Donahue, "Mark," 983–84.

even unto death on a cross, a faith secure in the knowledge that “neither death . . . nor rulers . . . nor powers, nor height, nor depth . . . will

be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39).

WILLIAM GREENWAY

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Sermons on the miracle stories of Jesus can challenge the spiritual imaginations of congregants. How might the boundaries of those imaginations need to be expanded? First, to imaginations framed within a secular scientific mind-set, miracle-story sermons can easily be dismissed as idle tales. (“That’s just another version of an ancient storm god myth.”) Second, to imaginations imbued with sentimental piety, miracle-story sermons can sound like a reinforcement of long-cherished religious feelings. (“Life’s storms often seem overwhelming, but I must have faith that Jesus will calm them.”) Third, to imaginations haunted by a sense of personal spiritual failure or a feeling of having been failed by a God in whom trust has seemed misplaced, miracle-story sermons might provoke anger, frustration, or resentment. (“Jesus did not save *my* boat; Jesus was not even *in* my boat!”) Fourth, to imaginations prewired to anticipate a standard narrative trope—from “once upon a time” to “happily ever after”—miracle-story sermons can be heard as entertaining but ultimately predictable. (“After an uneventful departure, the boaters found themselves in serious trouble; but, just in time, on *that* day, Jesus woke up and saved the day; and he will do the same on *this*.”)

Some listeners’ imaginations may include elements from all these. Moreover, this story Mark tells of Jesus calming the sea is so familiar, listeners may think they already have a good idea just what it means. It is a challenge for preachers to make this text a challenge.

Fortunately (though dauntingly), the way Mark tells the story does not lend itself to a standard narrative trajectory moving from conflict to resolution. The fears of the disciples are not calmed by the calming of the storm. They are intensified. The Jesus in Mark’s Gospel to this point has functioned as the quintessential

storm chaser in his dealings with everyone he encounters.

Then, in his calming of this sea squall, Jesus creates for his disciples a storm far greater. In their journey with Jesus thus far, they have been privileged, safe observers of his healings, exorcisms, teachings, and controversies. Now they are in the thick of it, swamped up to their necks. While Jesus calms the elements with one sharp word, he names the internal, spiritual storm raging in his followers with another—a confrontational, “Why are you afraid?” Not a rhetorical question, or one that masks a condemnation, but an invitation to discernment: “Let’s talk.”

So, rather than getting tangled in (1) defending the scientific status of the miracle, (2) reinforcing (or undermining) anyone’s religious piety, (3) trying to apologize for faith in what has been perceived as a hoax, or (4) laboring under the parameters of a standard narrative sermon structure—what if we pick up on the question Jesus poses to his disciples who, standing amid still waters, are still shaking in their sandals? What if the preacher tries to help listeners reflect upon the nature and status of their faith, to consider how that faith may be lacking, and why that is the case?

Preachers might begin by leading their listeners in specific storm naming. What are the raging waters tossing us this way and that, threatening to overwhelm us in personal relationships, jobs, our faith community, our living locality—the ecological, economic, social, and political disorders in which we are immersed? Maybe harder yet to face and name, what resentments do we experience at being left seemingly helpless in them? (“Don’t you even *care*, Jesus?”) Not inconceivably, and harder still, we might ask, What terrors do we not dare bring to Jesus because the very alleviating of them might render us even more terrified? (“Thank God I did not lose my

job; but what am I supposed to be doing about the gnawing lack of meaning in my life?” “Her physical recovery seems miraculous—but what about our broken relationship?”)

What counterfeit “fear-fixing” claims might we and our congregants be subjected to and easily seduced by? What propositions offer simplistic or agenda-driven promises of “peace, peace, when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14)? (“If we just close our borders, we will keep out criminals who threaten our security and workers who take our jobs!”)

Jesus seems to suggest, in Mark’s telling of this story, that faith and fear are mutually incompatible. Is that necessarily or always so? If “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,” might there be some wisdom in the possibility of other expressions of faithful fearing? Might that lead productively to explorations as to what “faith” is anyway? Is the “trust” we have in God an unshakable presumption that God sees the world just as we do, and thus that we need take no risks of which we cannot reasonably control the outcomes?⁴ Might fear as cowardice be something very different from fear as humility and awe? Might Jesus be challenging the disciples to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy fear?

This is the first of two “sea crossing” stories that Mark tells (the other is in Mark 6:45–52). Both are voyages to and from “the other side.” What is Mark prompting listeners to consider in these goings back and forth? One group of scholars offers this response:

The wind and waves in Mark’s story, as cosmic forces of opposition (see Psalm 104:7), symbolize everything that impedes Jesus’ attempted “boundary crossing.” The enmity between Jew and Gentile was seen by most of Mark’s contemporaries as the prototype of all human hostility. The separation between them was considered part of

the “natural order.” Mark’s harrowing sea stories suggest that the task of social reconciliation was not only difficult but virtually inconceivable.⁵

As we preachers seek to shape a challenge both grounded in this text and connected with our world, we might reflect on current tasks of social reconciliation that seem analogously inconceivable. There are storms of immigrants at national borders and stormy debates about immigration policy. Income inequality is a gathering storm. Claims of racial and sexual discrimination—and their denial—are stark indications of social upheaval. Civility is being supplanted by savagery in political and social discourse. (Consider, for instance, the mutual discounting of and increasing disdain between “coastal elites” and residents of “flyover” Middle America.) What some partisans claim as “facts,” opponents dismiss as “fake news.” There are few if any shared points of reference—and no neutral umpires recognized by competing player-advocates all bent on “winning.” All these stress points leave us in storm-tossed social equilibrium.

How much safer to remain on our own side of the shore! Who wants to be ordered by Jesus into seas that quickly turn tumultuous? If “he is with us in the boat,” why does he seem to be asleep in it? Does he not care that we, his followers, could die out here? What if the best way *out* of the storm were to stand both *with* and *for* Jesus *in* it? What might that entail in different settings?

What if storms that rage outside the boat are exacerbated by fear-storms raging inside us? What if shutdowns on the surface of the sea remove a distraction from facing those fears? How can we find faith in a salvation that is not just an idealistic version of the artist rendering of a still life (e.g., responding to angry threats with quiet clarity)? What might it mean, as Jesus does, to listen to our fears and speak into them?

DAVID J. SCHLAFER

4. I explore this theme in *The Shattering Sound of Amazing Grace: Disquieting Tales from Saint John’s Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2006).

5. Ched Myers, Marie Dennis, Joseph Nangle, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, and Stuart Taylor, “*Say to This Mountain: Mark’s Story of Discipleship*” (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 57.

Proper 8 (Sunday between June 26 and July 2)

Lamentations 3:22–33 and
2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27
Psalm 30 and Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 8:7–15
Mark 5:21–43

Lamentations 3:22–33

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;

²³they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”

²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

²⁷It is good for one to bear
the yoke in youth,

²⁸to sit alone in silence
when the Lord has imposed it,

²⁹to put one’s mouth to the dust
(there may yet be hope),

³⁰to give one’s cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.

³¹For the Lord will not
reject forever.

³²Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;

³³for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone.

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

¹After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. . . .

¹⁷David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. ¹⁸(He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said:

¹⁹Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!

²⁰Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,
the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

²¹You mountains of Gilboa,
 let there be no dew or rain upon you,
 nor bounteous fields!
 For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
 the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

²²From the blood of the slain,
 from the fat of the mighty,
 the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
 nor the sword of Saul return empty.

²³Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
 In life and in death they were not divided;
 they were swifter than eagles,
 they were stronger than lions.

²⁴O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
 who clothed you with crimson, in luxury,
 who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

²⁵How the mighty have fallen
 in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

²⁶I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
 greatly beloved were you to me;
 your love to me was wonderful,
 passing the love of women.

²⁷How the mighty have fallen,
 and the weapons of war perished!

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The little book called Lamentations is a collection of poems grieving the loss of Jerusalem, its institutions, and many of its inhabitants, during the sixth century BCE. The poetic segment in 3:22–33 is in the center of the central poem of the book, which may highlight its significance. It is difficult to understand the complex poem in Lamentations 3 as the product of a single voice. It appears to be a dialogue or even a debate. The verses that precede 3:22–33 express despair. The speaker of these verses believes that God has inflicted pain and suffering upon him, and he has lost all hope. These kinds of expressions are typically omitted from lectionary readings, as they have been this week, while focus is placed upon the happier verses around them. The voice that responds to the despairing character seeks to change the attitude of that speaker, and

suggests waiting patiently for a divine shift away from punishment toward comfort. At first, this response sound callous and naive, failing to acknowledge the suffering of the first speaker.

Readers who sense an even greater degree of interruption in verses 22–24 than in the larger section may be recognizing a source of some discontinuity in the history of transmission of this text. These verses are not present in some Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament. They were likely omitted because of the similarity of the phrases at the ends of verse 21 and verse 24. The language of verses 22–24 may sound familiar, because it is laden with what sound like biblical clichés.

A look at where some of these appear in the Bible may be useful. The phrase in verse 24, “The LORD is my portion,” appears in similar

forms several times in Psalms (Pss. 16:5; 73:26; 119:57; 142:5). The claim that “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases” is reminiscent of the frequent refrain, “the steadfast love of the LORD endures forever” (Pss. 100, 106, 107, and 118; 1 Chr. 16; 2 Chr. 5 and 7). These clichés in verses 22–24 connect to the phrase, “the LORD is good,” in verse 25, which also appears in many other texts, some included in the lists above.

Religious clichés are a double-edged sword. They become familiar because people have found them reliable and helpful, particularly at times when life’s challenges have shut down more creative ways of thinking about faith. They are like a reflex, but like reflexes they can be difficult to control and may yield unwanted results. By saying them we may be dodging our own discomfort, while doing little or nothing for the person to whom we say them.

The suffering of the earlier speaker finally finds acknowledgment in verses 29–30, and once again there is some disruption in the history of how this text has been transmitted. All or part of verse 29 is missing from some Greek manuscripts. Nobody knows exactly what it means “to put one’s mouth to the dust,” or how this is related to the line about hope that follows it. The puzzling nature of the verse may have led to its alteration or omission. The speaker counsels the sufferer to accept this affliction. It may be that the one hearing this advice is powerless to do anything else, but given the agony that surrounds this section of Lamentations, it sounds empty.

The name of this book comes from a word that means to cry out in pain, so how does encouraging silence fit into such a book? There is considerable tension in the little stanza of verses 31–33. The lines are difficult to translate, and the core issue seems to be whether Israel’s God chooses to afflict the human(s) addressed in this part of the poem. The ambiguous answer is reminiscent of the puzzling statement about God’s judgment and forgiveness in Exodus 34:6–7, which is repeated in whole or in part at many places in the Bible. The easy and callous comments often uttered to those who are suffering ignore the difference between observing that something good may come out of suffering and claiming that the benefit is the purpose of suffering and acts as adequate compensation for it.

The poem in 2 Samuel 1:17–27, which the text calls “The Song of the Bow” functions in the narrative as a lament for King Saul. David, one of Saul’s potential successors, leads the people in this song, which demands attention to its political dimensions. The second half of the book called 1 Samuel presents the long conflict between Saul and David, two figures whose relationship is complex and confusing. First Samuel 31 tells the story of a wounded Saul, having lost a battle to the Philistines, taking his own life on Mount Gilboa. Second Samuel 1 opens with a messenger who has run from the battle, claiming to have killed the wounded Saul at the king’s request. David orders the man executed before leading the people of Judah in the song of mourning.

It is important to see that David has a lot to gain if others choose to join him in the singing. David’s chief rival for the throne is Saul’s own son, Ishbaal. Note that the text gives attention to David’s grief and not that of Saul’s son. Clearly, David is making a play for the throne by avenging the dead king and claiming the leadership role in public mourning. This realization should send us back to the Lamentations 3 passage to ask what the speaker of verses 22–33 has to gain if the speaker of verses 1–21 accepts the invitation to join in a more hopeful song, or be silent. When the crisis of destruction and loss was over, did religious orthodoxy begin to reassert itself in order to facilitate the rebuilding of religious institutions?

Such a movement is apparent in other parts of the Old Testament. One of the most obvious is the ending of the book of Ecclesiastes. Following eleven chapters of ruminations by the character the book calls Qoheleth, often expressing the futility of life and doubts about the virtues of faithfulness, a different voice appears in 12:1–8 that reaffirms a more traditional understanding of Israelite religion, and even pretends that this is what the Qoheleth character has been saying all along. The final ten verses of the book of Job also appear to return to a simple equation of reward for faithfulness, after the long dialogue that precedes them raises painful questions about the adequacy of such a framework.

The Gospel text for this week includes a sequence of events in the life of Jesus in which religious language offers challenge, comfort, and temptation. When Jesus says things like “Your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34), or “Do

not fear, only believe” (5:36), it is easy to pull such pithy sayings out of a complex story, strip them of their rough edges, and plug them into another story, assuming they will fit naturally. When we respond to the pain or struggles of another person with tired, detached sayings like “God is in control” or “Everything happens for a reason,” there is some chance it will speak to that person’s need, but it may be ill fit for their

situation. The reflexive repetition of platitudes shows no sign that we have listened and given careful thought to the lives into which we speak them. Seizing control of religious conversation and seeking to tame unusual or uncomfortable expression in order to replace it with the easy or the familiar is a move that should make communities of faith wary.

MARK MCENTIRE

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Lament. The word itself feels heavy. To lament means to mourn, to grieve, to wail in response to loss. It is often a public expression of the raw, inner pain a person feels when faced with death, destruction, dashed hopes, and devastation; lament can be an appropriate, certainly understandable, and perhaps necessary response.

One of the texts for today is from the book aptly named *Lamentations*, a record of the prophet Jeremiah’s despair over the losses he witnessed: the ruin of a city; the dire straits this devastation caused for its inhabitants; the depths to which people went simply to survive; and the totality of this destruction with very little hope on the horizon. *Lamentations* leaves us with a picture of a zombie-like existence, visualized in popular films such as *Night of the Living Dead* or *The Book of Eli* and a postapocalyptic world of survival of the fittest, clips that can be used as illustrations in sermons. *Lamentations* evokes scenes such as these, with persons walking around the hollowed-out streets and buildings of their city in total shock, perhaps crying out, “Why?”

The second text is another story of lament, David’s lament at the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam. 31). Here, too, David’s grief comes from the deep loss he experienced, “intoned” in a song. This, too, is a public expression of grief coupled with anger at the means by which Saul and Jonathan were killed. Both of these texts narrate the multiple causes of destruction and loss; the various responses that humans have, such as paralyzing grief, deep anger, resentment, and fear; and certainly the theological and moral questions raised, leaving persons to ask, “Why?”

These texts can take preachers and congregations in many directions as they hear these Scriptures read and a sermon preached that connects to the very real experience of lament and grief.

A first connection might actually be a connection to avoid: the temptation to answer the “why?” of lament. In 2 Samuel 1:19–21, David does not answer the “why” but describes what happened. Saul and Jonathan were killed in war, with Saul “falling on his sword” when he was wounded in battle (1 Sam. 31:4–6). David does not ascribe reasons to God or some abstract and unknown references to God’s purposes. Even if he did, nothing would change or ameliorate his loss. He is grieving *and* angry at the means by which Saul and Jonathan died, and is giving voice to this experience, as congregants do in lamenting the loss of persons killed in the brutality of wars.

Theological reflection and interpretation on scriptural texts are influenced by cultural contexts in which we live. Those of us in contexts shaped by the hopes of scientific inquiry, and the belief that every effect has a cause that can be identified, are often pressed to find answers to the causes of lament and human suffering. The education we have received, and even the pastoral training we have undergone, pushes us in the direction of finding answers to questions and then giving these answers to others, as if this solves the existential nature of suffering.

Answers elude us but one answer to lament is lament itself, that is, allowing people to actually lament.¹ Preachers can give permission for congregants to do this as they relate the stories

1. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

of loss in these texts to the losses that members of their congregations have experienced. Loss of friends and family members, loss of homes and jobs, loss of health, among many other losses, elicit normal responses of lament.

A second connection for preaching is noting that there is no “one size fits all” form to lament. David’s song of lament mourns the loss of Saul and Jonathan. However, one wonders if this might have created some inner conflict for David, knowing the troubled relationship he had with Saul, the one who was jealous of him and tried to have him killed. The way in which David lamented Saul’s death is different from his more personal response to Jonathan’s. David calls Israel to “weep over Saul” (2 Sam. 1:24), a more general invitation to lament. Yet his grief over Jonathan’s death is more personal: “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me” (v. 26). David lamented differently in different circumstances, as we do.

It would be important to acknowledge this in sermons, as well as in eulogies for funerals and memorial services. Often eulogies at funerals leave persons wondering, “Is this the same person *I* knew?” Congregants may still lament for people they did not particularly like without feeling they are hypocritical. Noting the different ways in which David laments these losses will connect with the different ways in which congregants lament the deaths of others without feeling guilty, when they might not be able to say, “Greatly beloved were you to me.”

The third connection can be found in the prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations. The prophet is the one who experienced lament (after all, this was his city and his friends) and the one who helped others in their lament by providing a voice of hope. It is significant that these words of hope in 3:22–33 do not come at the end of the book. They come in the middle of the poems and prayers of lament expressed by Jeremiah. Jeremiah also is “bowed down” but can call to mind that the “steadfast love of the LORD never ceases” (Lam. 3:22). Jeremiah makes no

promises that “time will heal” the wounds of loss but does acknowledge God’s presence *in* time.

This “new every morning” promise of God’s faithfulness and steadfast love is every morning of every day followed by the cycles of night. This is the ground of hope for Jeremiah, not a false optimism that tomorrow will be better, but that every morning God will be faithfully present, even as we lament. These words of hope do not make lament go away. Hope is not a tidy ending that provides “closure” to our lamenting. Hope comes in the midst of lament where it might be most needed.

A final connection is the recognition that lament is called for and necessary as a prophetic and pastoral act. Lament is a legitimate response. In other words, we *should* lament, and preachers must call congregants to do so. Walter Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination* notes prophetic lament as a critique of a culture—and yes, even a church culture—that prefers unresponsiveness and becomes indifferent and apathetic. Lament is hard and painful as it names what is wrong, and even our own complicities in these wrongs, calling us to repent from our own preferred numbness and thoughtlessness.

Jeremiah is a model for this kind of prophetic lament and, for Brueggemann, is also a model for preachers. Like Jeremiah, preachers can make public lament in sermons, speaking about the realities of our world, penetrating the numbness in which we hide. Speaking truthfully about “what is” is important, yet sermons offer “an alternative perception of reality” by “letting people see their own history in light of God’s freedom and his will for justice.”² Sermons can allow persons to lament, and even call on us to do so. For all those killed in the brutalities and scorched earth of war? Lament. For racial, gender, and economic injustice? Lament. For the loss of hope and vision for a future? Lament. Even in lament, there is hope as the prophet reminds us, but perhaps only understood when we fully grasp the necessity of lament.

WYNDY CORBIN REUSCHLING

2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 110.

Proper 8 (Sunday between June 26 and July 2)

Psalm 30

¹I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
²O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
³O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

⁴Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
⁵For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

⁶As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”
⁷By your favor, O LORD,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

⁸To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:
⁹“What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?
¹⁰Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!”

¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
¹²so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
²Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
⁴But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
⁶my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.
⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
⁸It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 30. The alternate reading for the day is Lamentations 3:22–33, words of assurance about God’s steadfast love that punctuate the lament and anguish surrounding the passage. The author knows unthinkable suffering, described in the first twenty verses of Lamentations 3, *and* the author knows the love of God. Similar to Psalm 130, with its tension between hope and lament, the Lamentations passage speaks assurances of grace into a context of the deepest desperation. The theme of the passage is hope: hope in God’s mercy and love coexisting with the experience of great suffering and pain.

The reading from Lamentations 3 is forward looking: the poet (Lamentations’ “strong man”) is in the midst of great suffering, looking with hope for a day when the suffering will cease, “for the Lord will not reject forever” (Lam. 3:31).¹ When Psalm 30 is read in response to Lamentations 3, it offers an alternate perspective: the words of a poet who has survived suffering, looking back rather than forward. The psalmist bears witness to a relief that the author of Lamentations has not experienced, and the prayerful emotions of the two passages may be heard more clearly when read in conversation with one another. In verses 9–10, the psalmist remembers the prayers offered during great suffering, prayers that sound and feel like the words of Lamentations.

Psalm 30 bears a superscription associating it with the Feast of Dedication, a celebration

marking the people of Israel’s return to proper worship under the rule of the Maccabees (165 BCE) after the temple destruction. While the words of the psalm have certainly been used to celebrate Hanukkah since as early as the second century BCE, the psalm itself appears to be a much older individual song of thanksgiving.² The psalm is concerned primarily with praise, praise for God’s deliverance. The psalmist “will extol” God (Ps. 30:1a); the Hebrew for extol (*rum*) literally means “lift up.” The psalmist will lift up God’s name, for God has lifted the psalmist out of great suffering (v. 1b). The psalmist takes care, however, to say that God’s praise will not come only in times of prosperity. The psalmist will praise God “forever” (v. 12), and in remembering God’s mercy, the psalmist says in hope, “I shall never be moved” (v. 6).

In 2015, the people of Emmanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina, experienced unimaginable suffering when a young white man, whom they welcomed into their church for Bible study, murdered nine people in an attempt to start a race war. Thousands of eyes were glued to television sets and computer screens to watch the powerful funeral for Emmanuel’s pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney. In a powerful eulogy, Bishop John Richard Bryant repeated Psalm 30 in call-and-response style. “Weeping may endure for the night,” he said, and the crowd responded, “but joy comes in the morning.” Like

1. Kathleen M. O’Connor, “The Book of Lamentations,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 6:1204.
2. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 4:795–96.

the author of Lamentations, Bishop Bryant had not yet experienced relief from his great suffering, but he offered comfort to himself and the world by leaning on the words of the psalm. If a preacher is tempted to trivialize the words of Psalm 30, to compare the assurances of the psalmist to trite phrases of shallow comfort, she/he/they would do well to remember the raw emotion and deep faith of Bishop Bryant's words.

Psalm 30 can offer language for the suffering and faith of a whole community. Adapted lines of the psalm read well as a responsive affirmation of faith after the first reading. After hearing and proclaiming the suffering and faith of the Lamentations passage, the congregation can affirm their hope together using the poetic words of the psalm:

Reader One: We will extol you, O Lord,
 Reader Two: for you have drawn us up.
 Reader One: O Lord our God, we cried to you
 for help,
 Reader Two: and you have healed us.
 Reader One: Weeping may linger for the night,
 Reader Two: but joy comes with the morning.
 Reader One: God will turn our mourning into
 dancing
 Reader Two: and clothe us with joy.
 Reader One: O Lord our God,
 Reader Two: we will give thanks to you forever.

Psalm 130. In the reading from 2 Samuel appointed for this day, readers find King David just after the battle with the Amalekites. Israel has defeated its enemy, but victory comes at the highest cost. Saul and Jonathan have been killed, and the lectionary passage reports David's lament. He rips his clothes in a sign of grief and cries out from the depth of despair. Though Israel has "won" the battle, the anguish

Waiting for God

I am convinced that much of the rebellion against Christianity is due to the overt or veiled claim of Christians to possess God, and therefore, also, to the loss of this element of waiting so decisive for the prophets and the apostles. Let us not be deluded into thinking that, because they speak of waiting, they waited merely for the end, the judgment and fulfillment of all things, and not for God Who was to bring that end. They did not possess God; they waited for Him. For how can God be possessed? Is God a thing that can be grasped and known among others? Is God less than a human person? We always have to wait for a human being. Even in the most intimate communion among human beings, there is an element of *not* having and *not* knowing, and of waiting. Therefore, since God is infinitely hidden, free, and incalculable, we must wait for Him in the most absolute and radical way. He is God for us just in so far as we do *not* possess Him. The psalmist says that his whole being waits for the Lord, indicating that waiting for God is not merely a part of our relation to God, but rather the condition of that relation as a whole. We have God through *not* having Him.

Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1948; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 150–51.

in David's words make it clear that, in war, no one really wins.

Psalm 130 comes in response to the 2 Samuel reading, and the colorful phrasing leads the hearer to imagine King David himself crying in anguish from the pages. The prayer of the psalm rises "out of the depths," though the psalmist's deep distress seems to be concerning personal sinfulness (Ps. 130:3–4) rather than David's depths of grief and sorrow. In the 2 Samuel passage, David directs his grief to the people Israel ("Your glory, O Israel, is slain in high places!" 2 Sam. 1:19a) and to the land itself ("You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you," v. 21a). In the psalm, the poet directs the anguish to the Lord directly: "Lord, hear my voice!" (Ps. 130:1b).

Psalm 130 is the eleventh of the Songs of Ascents, short psalms likely memorized by pilgrims and/or used in religious celebrations in Jerusalem.³ The eight short verses of this psalm

3. McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1204.

are filled with rich liturgical language, and they can be woven throughout a worship service. The opening and closing lines read well as a call to worship:

Reader One: Out of the depths we cry to you!
 Reader Two: O Lord, hear our voice.
 Reader One: With the Lord there is great steadfast love,
 Reader Two: and with God great power to redeem.

Verses 3–4 beg to serve as an assurance of pardon, whether spoken by the liturgist or read responsively:

Reader One: If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
 Reader Two: But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

The psalm is full of rich language for the intercessory prayer. On any given Sunday, it is safe to assume that the people in the pews have been “in the depths,” if they are not currently there, and the psalm can carry the weight of

their prayers. The opening line can be used as a spoken refrain after each intercession: (Out of the depths we cry to you. *O Lord, hear our voice!*) There are also many musical settings of the psalm, which can be woven into the prayers themselves. A choir or soloist may sing the psalm before and/or after the prayer, with humming or instrumental music played softly during the prayer itself. The sensory effect of prayers spoken over musical offerings, popular in many African American traditions, can add depth to a prayer and create space for the emotions of worshipers.

The psalm ends with a word of assurance, and the prayers should do so as well. The psalmist’s audience shifts from God to Israel: “O Israel, hope in the LORD!” (Ps. 130:7a). In the midst of grief, the psalmist finds hope. In the midst of lament, the psalm praises God’s power. The psalmist lives in the tension between lament and hope, and the most faithful thing a preacher or liturgist can do is invite the people of God to live there, as well.

ANNA GEORGE TRAYNHAM

Proper 8 (Sunday between June 26 and July 2)

2 Corinthians 8:7–15

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written,

“The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The immediate context of our lectionary reading is found in verse 6: Titus (2 Cor. 8:23) had been sent by Paul to the church in Corinth to follow up on the collection of an offering for “the poor among the saints” in Jerusalem (v. 10; Rom. 15:26). Reasons abound for this request: a severe famine (Acts 11:27–30), the persecution of Christian Jews at the hand of King Herod and from non-Christian Jews (Acts 8:1–3; 12:1–4). Eager to respond (Gal. 2:9–10), Paul instructed the churches to follow a systematic pattern of collection throughout the year (1 Cor. 16:1–4).

It appears, however, that the controversies that have developed (2 Cor. 1:12–7:16; 10–13) since Paul’s last visit to Corinth have tempered their enthusiasm for the collection (8:11). This would explain why he seems compelled to argue for their support. There is little that gets believers to lean in more than “testimony time”—a concrete and passionate witness of the grace of God in daily life. “We want you to know, brothers and sisters,” he begins, “about the grace of God” (v. 1)! With great exuberance he testifies

how God’s grace stirred the otherwise severely afflicted (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14) and extremely poor Macedonian churches to beg to share in the privilege (“grace,” *charis*) of “ministry to the saints” in Jerusalem, giving “voluntarily” with overflowing “wealth of generosity” (2 Cor. 8:2–4). Paul’s use of antithesis achieves its purpose; only God’s grace could move a community suffused in their own pain and struggle for survival to give with “abundant joy . . . even beyond their means.”

Having shared the testimony, Paul gets to the point. He is testing the “genuineness of your [the Corinthian church’s] love” against the “earnestness” (*spoudē* in Gk. also means “to haste,” “to move with zealous diligence”) of others (i.e., the Macedonian churches, v. 8). Was Paul shaming the well-to-do Corinthian church by praising the joyful outpouring of the “poor” and “afflicted” Macedonians? Yet in his visit to the Macedonian churches (9:1–2) Paul testifies to the zeal of the Achaean churches (Corinth fell within that region). Thus, it may be more to

the point that Paul is garnering enthusiasm by extolling a unified resolve of *all* the churches to take part in this act of grace. The contest here is really against their own hesitation to cross the finish line and complete what they started. How? When they entrust themselves to the Lord, God will embolden them toward the kind of genuine fellowship (*koinōnia*¹) that bound them to the other (Gal. 3:28) through the ministry of grace-filled service (2 Cor. 8:5).

Paul's emphasis on Jesus' "generous act [grace]" points beyond the cross and the resurrection—major Pauline theological staples—to consider the status of Christ *before* and *at* the incarnation. If the Corinthians are "rich," that is, if they have experienced the grace of God's love, it is because Christ, who "was rich," for their sake "became poor" (v. 9). The meaning of "became poor" is perhaps best explained by the creed (or hymn) in Philippians 2:6–8 wherein Christ, though equal with God, chose to "strip" (or "empty," *kenōsis*) himself of his divine form (*morphē*) to take the form (*morphē*) of a slave—the lowest in the social strata—and suffer a death intended for the lowest of criminals, the cross.

Paul thus prompted the Corinthians not only to remember but to honor the grace personally and generously lavished on them by Christ (2 Cor. 8:9). Grace is love in action. It is "the gift of God for the people of God"—it has a sacramental countenance—Christ imaged in and through the people of God for the common good (2 Cor. 4:15; Phil. 2:4).

This brings us back to 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul's list of gifts in which the Corinthians supposedly excelled at and in which they took pride (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Was Paul hinting at his earlier letter, wherein he taught that speech, knowledge, and faith without love are nothing (1 Cor. 13:1–3)? Was this a not too subtle reminder that their zeal for spiritual gifts should be guided only by an eagerness to excel in them for the "building up [of] the church" (1 Cor. 14:12)? Does not the building up of the church include excelling in this "generous undertaking [grace]"? It is doubtful that Paul's reference to excelling in these gifts would have been lost on

the Corinthians, who had previously received his exhortation to strive for the greatest gift—love—without which they are, and can gain, nothing.

Empathy usually requires humanization of suffering. Places of privilege often require a myriad of graphic pictures of children and of women and men running for their lives in order to quicken sensitivities. Paul would not need to do this, however. NT Christians experienced this reality all too well in their own lives and in the lives of loved ones. For those unfamiliar with such kinds of political, social, religious, emotional, or economic afflictions, the OT and NT lections allow us to fathom what the voices of anguish and dejection may feel, look, and sound like. "I am distressed," cries David over the death of his beloved Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:26). Later, the psalmist's despondency becomes palpable as we imagine him lifting his countenance and throwing up his hands toward the heavens calling out to God for the redemption of his people: "Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD, hear . . . my supplications!" (Ps. 130:1–2). The cries of a distinguished leader of the notorious Sanhedrin begging for the healing of his daughter, and the pain and humiliation suffered by the unclean, hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:21–43) will be familiar reminders. The readings also help us hear what hope and overwhelming gratitude sound like (Lam. 3:32; Ps. 30:5, 11) when those in need dare to await a divine response, often through the service of the body of Christ, God's people (Phil. 4:10–20).

An important word should be said about how Paul handles the matter of the collection. The needy are not a problem to address. Not responding to the need in the spirit of *koinōnia*, however, is. Moreover, it is not a matter of giving beyond anyone's means (v. 13); it is about everyone having enough.

Paul's reference to "fair balance" challenges conformity to status quo. Underlying this challenge is a call to live out of that new and radical eschatological dimension begun by Christ, called the kingdom of God. Saints around the world, in all times and all places, express their

1. Justo L. González, *Faith & Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 79–86.

citizenship in this reign through the gifts of time, talents, money, and possessions until Christ's return. In Isaiah 1:17, we hear God's admonition to "learn to do good" and in the parable of the Nations, God invites those who live out this good into God's reign (Matt. 25:31–40).

Scholars point to a variation between Paul's report—"they [the apostles] asked only one thing"—and Luke's account (Acts 15:28–29). Was the request for financial succor in *addition* to the "essentials" mentioned in Luke? Did Paul

exclude those essentials in order to emphasize the oneness of the body of Christ? How would inclusion of Jewish kosher laws have helped to demonstrate the depth of the apostles' understanding of God's all-embracing grace to Jew and Gentile alike (see Acts 10:44–46 and 11:17–18)? What does it mean to be "one" church? What should "one" church look and feel like? Responses can open up varied theological avenues for preaching.

ZAIDA MALDONADO PÉREZ

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

In 1910 in Edinburgh, 1,215 delegates representing Protestant denominations and mission agencies from all over the world met to discuss ecumenical relations, evangelism, and the promotion of Christian unity. Despite its aspirations to embody the growing confessional and geographic diversity of the global church, the World Missionary Conference was comprised mainly of Western delegates from mainstream Protestant denominations. Only nineteen delegates, eighteen from Asia and one from Africa, were from outside the West. This gathering nonetheless marked a significant moment that ushered in a new era of modern ecumenism at the cusp of changing demographics in world Christianity. When these delegates met in Scotland, more than 80 percent of the world's Christians resided in the global North. In 2010, more than 60 percent of the world's Christians resided in the global South.

One consistently challenging topic in modern ecumenism has been developing equitable cross-cultural partnerships between Christians in the global North and the global South. Although Christianity is growing in dynamic and expansive ways throughout the global South, the bulk of financial resources remains among Christians in the global North. At the World Missionary Conference in 1910, Kajinosuke Ibuka, a Japanese delegate working with US Presbyterian denominations in Japan, broached the thorny issue of how funds are managed in the mission

field. He proposed a revision to the existing system, in which Western mission groups controlled the funds they raised from back home. He developed a more inclusive method of decision making that incorporated indigenous perspectives from local church leaders.²

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul engages these topics of partnership and stewardship. Paul also treads carefully when addressing financial matters publicly. Paul's gentle tone reflects how it has never been easy for Christian leaders, from the first century to the present, to talk about money with their congregations. In this passage, when making his appeal to the Corinthians, Paul moves back and forth from general theological principles on stewardship to particularities about the collection for the Christian community in Jerusalem. In 8:7, Paul teaches that faithful discipleship encompasses piety, speech, knowledge, attitude, love, and material offering. In 8:8, Paul narrows his focus to the collaborative effort to raise funds for the church in Jerusalem.

He observes the collection is not a "command" with the same Greek word, *epitagē*, that appears in 1 Corinthians 7:6 in Paul's instructions for sexual relations within marriages and in 1 Timothy 1:1 on Paul's apostolic authority deriving from "the command of God." Though the collection does not rise to the mandate of a moral absolute, Paul clearly believes it possesses profound ecumenical and eschatological weight.

2. Jonathan S. Barnes, *Power and Partnership: A History of the Protestant Mission Movement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 111.

At one level, Paul seeks to create a network of mutuality and unity among all the churches such that they support one another in times of crisis and need. At another level, Paul connects the relationship between the churches in Jerusalem and Corinth to his larger theological vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ for Jews and Gentiles. In Romans 15:25–27, Paul articulates how the collection for “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” demonstrates a reciprocity in which Jews share their “spiritual blessings” with the Gentiles and the Gentiles share their “material things” with the Jews.

In 8:9–15, Paul first grounds his stewardship appeal in a theology of grace and the generosity of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 8:9). The following five verses comprise specific advice for the Corinthians to give in proportion to their means and fulfill their pledges (vv. 10–12) and frank assessment of the differences between the Christian communities in Jerusalem and Corinth (vv. 13–14). After explaining the goal of the collection is to produce a fair balance in which one church’s abundance meets the other church’s needs, Paul reinforces his point in 8:15 with a reference to God’s provision of manna in Exodus 16 such that every Israelite had neither too much nor too little to eat.

A strong undercurrent throughout Paul’s instruction on partnership and stewardship is the complexity of first-century politics in the Greco-Roman world. Paul understood the cross-cultural tensions between a predominantly impoverished Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem and a diverse Christian community in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth facing their own divisions across differences in race, class, and gender. Paul understood the church in Corinth included members from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, the affluent and the poor, and persons of all genders who held a plurality of beliefs and practices regarding human sexuality. Paul had to navigate the uncomfortable implications of presenting one church (Jerusalem) as holding abundant spiritual resources but lacking in material goods and the other church (Corinth) as maintaining material wealth yet needing spiritual support.

Paul’s pastoral sensibilities throughout this passage illustrate his acute awareness of the complicated social and political realities within and among his congregations. Nevertheless, he does not flinch from speaking the truth in love. Paul provides the Corinthians with both general theological insights on stewardship and specific contextual applications on the importance of partnership with Jerusalem. One connection between the lectionary text and our contemporary context is the persistence of cultural, economic, political, racial, and social tensions.

We live in a world—not unlike that of the first century—fraught with sharp divisions, cultural conflicts, and competing ideologies. One of the most urgent challenges in the United States is a persistent racial wealth gap. “In 2016, white families had the highest level of both median and mean family wealth: \$171,000 and \$933,700, respectively. . . . Black families’ median and mean net worth is less than 15 percent that of white families, at \$17,600 and \$138,200, respectively. Hispanic families’ median and mean net worth was \$20,700 and \$191,200, respectively.”³

A related obstacle in the United States is the ongoing achievement gaps in education, revealing daunting disparities in academic performance between groups of students differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, and race. Our preaching, like that of Paul, must blend theological instruction and practical application such that the gospel of Jesus Christ provides the foundation for precise discernment that produces concrete engagement, in the forms of our time, energy, and money, to alleviate the most pressing problems in our congregations, our neighborhoods, and our world.

During the World Missionary Conference in 1910, Vedanayagam Samuel Azariah, an Indian delegate, tackled another difficult topic, race relations. Azariah believed the problems of racial discrimination against people of color impaired Christian witness and hampered ecumenical partnerships. From his experiences with the Anglican Church in India, where in 1912 he would become the first Indian to serve as a

3. <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/recent-trends-in-wealth-holding-by-race-and-ethnicity-evidence-from-the-survey-of-consumer-finances-20170927.htm>.

bishop, Azariah criticized the superficial relationships between European mission workers and Indian Christians because of the Europeans' supercilious attitudes toward the Indians. He specifically detailed how the Europeans treated the Indians as their converts and their students, but never as their friends and their partners in ministry.

Azariah contended true cooperation would be possible only with honest communication and fair collaboration: "The exceeding riches of the glory of Christ can be fully realized not by the Englishman, the American, and the

Continental alone, nor by the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Indians by themselves—but by all working together, worshipping together, and learning together the Perfect Image of our Lord and Christ."⁴ Like Paul in 2 Corinthians 8, Azariah directly connected a compelling vision of Christian reciprocity and mutuality with a frank assessment of the problems and tensions in his context. In our preaching, we must also encourage our congregations toward faithful discipleship that directly connects the gifts of the church with the needs in the world.

WILLIAM YOO

4. V. S. Azariah, "The Problem of Co-Operation Between Foreign and Native Workers," in *World Missionary Conference, 1910* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1910), 306–15.

Proper 8 (Sunday between June 26 and July 2)

Mark 5:21–43

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” ²⁴So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” ³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” ³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

When Jesus heals a woman by the power within him and brings a girl back to life, a series of scenes recounting his amazing deeds comes to a pinnacle. These two actions, which the narrative connects together in numerous ways, might be seen as more impressive than anything else Jesus has done throughout Mark 1–5. They stand out from other events in Mark insofar as words and intention are not required; Jesus’ mere presence

restores a woman’s wholeness and dignity. Not even death presents a fixed barrier to him; he has the power to pull someone back from the dreaded end that eventually claims all people as its victims. In previous settings, unclean spirits and violent weather proved no match for him. Now a supposedly incurable medical condition and death itself yield to his authority. Does anything or anyone reside beyond his influence?

Whatever assails humanity's well-being—all of it appears powerless when faced with the arrival of the reign of God.

Mark is fond of intercalation, a narrative technique of connecting two stories by describing one as an interruption or a hiatus that breaks apart the description of the other (e.g., Mark 3:19a–35; 6:6b–30; 11:12–24). Intercalation invites readers to consider two stories in light of each other, to discover more through comparison and contrast than if the stories were told entirely separately. In this particular passage, the pairing of two stories offers a rich characterization of Jesus' healing ministry and the multifaceted salvation he brings. No one is out of reach.

The narrative forges connections through a collection of differences and similarities. Readers learn Jairus's name, but the woman suffering from chronic hemorrhaging remains anonymous. As a synagogue leader Jairus probably enjoys some local status and influence, while the woman has lost all her money in failed attempts to treat her condition. Assuming her hemorrhaging renders her infertile, perhaps because of a menstrual disorder or injury suffered from a previous pregnancy, the woman might find herself the object of scorn or pity from neighbors and family. In any case, her decision to approach Jesus furtively—while Jairus falls at his feet in front of a large or growing crowd—implies that she lives with some degree of shame, inflicted by others or herself. She has lived with this for twelve years, the same amount of time Jairus's daughter has been alive.

When Jesus halts his journey to Jairus's house to identify the woman who tapped into his power, their conversation has potential to restore her public dignity. Not only does her ailment disappear. Jesus makes it known that he and not some hidden sorcery caused her healing. By calling her "daughter" he openly declares his solidarity and relationship with her. To be "saved" or "made well" (*sōzō*) involves more than bodily health; in the context of the narrative it suggests a holistic sense of well-being and restoration. Of course, during the delay created when Jesus interacts with the woman in the presence of a crowd excited about witnessing what he will do for Jairus's girl, that other "daughter" succumbs to death. It looks as if he gave away her chance.

Jesus, though, makes it clear that this is no zero-sum game in which only one woman can receive a blessing from him. Both stories will end in healing, just as both stories share the question of how faith in Jesus manifests itself. Jesus identifies the woman's confident desperation as "faith" (5:34), and he urges Jairus to "continue to have faith" (v. 36, my trans.). Like other people of "faith" in Mark, these two characters need to surmount obstacles that might derail them from getting Jesus' attention (cf. 2:2–4; 9:24; 10:48).

Even though the anonymous woman and Jairus face the prospect of "fear" (5:33, 36), they must not let that become something that will eclipse their faith. Mark does not suggest that faith and fear are opposites; both of them represent ways that people might respond to dangerous circumstances or conditions that exceed humanity's ability to control (see also 4:40–41; 5:15; 6:50; 9:23, 32; 16:8). Therefore, Jesus urges Jairus not to let his fear overwhelm his belief. For "faith" or "belief" in this narrative is not about confessing correct statements about Jesus and his identity. Nor is it obedience to commands or following a pattern. It is, rather, the expression of radical trust in Jesus. It is a resolute determination born from one's sense of deep need. It is the conviction that Jesus can and will help; it refuses to take "no" for an answer.

The differences between the two connected stories expose the inadequacy of attempts to describe Jesus' ministry in one-dimensional terms. When Jesus tells people to keep the news about Jairus's daughter to themselves, an almost absurd command in light of the fact that mourners previously lamented her death in public, the story resembles other parts of Mark in which Jesus tries to keep his deeds unknown (e.g., 1:34, 44; 7:36; 8:26, 30).

On the other hand, Jesus is solely responsible for directing a crowd's attention to the woman's otherwise unseen efforts to be healed. Not every deed of power in Mark is accompanied by an injunction to secrecy (see 4:21–22; 5:19; 16:7). There is no clear pattern to what is to be concealed and what is revealed. In this scene, however, Jesus' desire to engage the woman face to face, in public scrutiny (5:30–34), ensures that everyone knows the woman is the beneficiary of Jesus' power and that she has not stolen a

healing she did not deserve. The open, observed conversation between the two pulls her from the edges into the center. Without that dialogue, which serves as a kind of declaration from Jesus, she might be left in shadow, delivered from an ailment but not fully restored to wholeness.

Those who interpret this passage need to be careful not to make connections that have no basis in the passage or in other accounts of Jesus' ministry. The most important example of such an unwarranted connection has to do with matters of purity and defilement. No one, not even the Gospel's narrator, shows concern that the woman touches Jesus and that he willingly takes the hand of the recently deceased daughter. Nothing in the narrative indicates that Levitical laws about menstrual bleeding (Lev. 15:25–27) would apply among ordinary Galilean Jews in a situation like this, when the woman initiates contact with Jesus. Jesus does not break the

law, nor does he risk rendering himself ritually impure by responding to those who seek him for help. These intercalated stories are not about Jesus showing disdain for Jewish religious practices that were common, for there is no evidence that such rigorous interpretations of purity laws *were commonly practiced*.¹

Instead, these are two stories about Jesus extending wholeness and blessing to individuals who would have been considered by others to have moved out of reach of such things—past the possibility of restoration and health. Because they are those kinds of stories, they are stories that make readers consider the possibility that nothing can keep God's holiness contained.² No wonder Jesus is so magnetic in this Gospel, attracting people who live in desperation and yet still venture to him with a faith that insists they are not beyond his healing words and touch.

MATTHEW L. SKINNER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

There is so much to *explain* about this passage: how it functions as an individual literary unit with interesting narrative features and sociohistorical backdrop, how it functions within Mark's larger narrative context, and how it paints Jesus' continuing development as the border-crossing, authoritative agent of God's realm who teaches and performs miracles at every turn. Almost everyone who has preached this text before has been faced with the temptation to *explain* the text. Why not? The world behind the text and the world of the text unlock new understandings each time we come back to it.

This is particularly tempting, given the place this text is situated within the Revised Common Lectionary and the church year: the season after Pentecost. Here is the church's season for growth in discipleship. Green paraments signal our pursuit of renewed Easter-faith Pentecost living. There is hardly a better time to use our hard-won exegetical knowledge to explain one of many people's favorite Markan passages.

Listeners should *understand* the rich depth of this passage!

However, there is something that does not ring quite true with preaching this passage as explanation. That stems from the fact that Mark does not necessarily write to explain Jesus. If Mark did so, he would not have written a narrative. Rather, Mark seems to want those who engage the text to *encounter* and *behold* this Jesus—more precisely in Markan parlance, to be *amazed* by this Jesus (Mark 5:42 and elsewhere). Yes, some of the literary and sociohistorical features of the text give us insight into what Mark is doing. Here, though, is a place where we might be propelled to consider when we as individuals and as church have been amazed by our personal encounters with Jesus. Not many of us will have had such dramatic encounters as Jairus and his daughter or the woman suffering hemorrhages. Still, most of us will be able to recount a moment when we encountered Jesus the Christ or when God's power became

1. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 173–77.
2. Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 37–53.

manifest to us as individuals or as families, communities, or church.

Here is an opportunity for preachers to move beyond explaining the text to naming, sharing, and celebrating our own encounters with the restorative agent of God's inbreaking realm that Mark shows us. It might even be an opportunity for preachers or teachers to relinquish the microphone so that others can name their life-giving, restorative encounters. The preaching moment might give way to some other kind of liturgical action in which people recount these stories. Preachers and other worship leaders might follow Mark's lead: inviting others to stand, watch, and listen with amazement at God's power to act in the midst of hopelessness and despair.

However, motionless amazement can last only so long for those who follow Jesus, as we will see in the following chapter of Mark's Gospel. Those who follow Jesus will be compelled to act, assessing their own ministries in light of their restorative encounters with God's agent. A personal encounter with Jesus is incomplete without discipleship, according to Mark's Gospel. This presents an ecclesial challenge, perhaps timed well for the summer months, when some congregational ministries slow down or lie dormant, waiting for the beginning of the program year in late summer or (for those who do the work of congregational budgeting through a July-June fiscal year) early fall. The passage can present listeners with an opportunity for reflection on a congregation's ministries over the past year.

Too often our criteria for evaluating the church's ministries are formed out of budget numbers or numerical benchmarks of attendance or participation. There are standards in this passage by which we might consider our ministries to be participating effectively in Jesus' ongoing ministry to the world. First, Jesus crosses borders (5:21), not just geographical but physical and social. We do well to avoid thinking about our border crossing in a colonialist sense, but the church's ministries imitate Jesus' ministry when they carry God's healing, restorative work beyond accepted confines.

Second, Jesus confronts disease and death, that is, the deep forces that marginalize and hold people in despair. Sermons might invite reflection on how the church's ministries reach out to those who are sick, those close to death, those who are dealt death, and those who stand on the margins of society.

Third, Jesus extends the boundaries of relationality in the household of faith. Jesus recognizes the woman he heals as "daughter," like the young girl he is about to heal. In a world of fractured polarity, one of the measures of the church's mission might be how we see and relate to one another in light of the gospel. NPR highlighted a story about the 1967 "hippie anthem" entitled "Get Together" by The Youngbloods. The famous song was used in promotional materials for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and "an early review of the song asked why it is not sung in church."³ Like the song, this text gives us pause to think about how we see ourselves in relation to others and how our congregational and denominational ministries help us live into Jesus' enlarged vision of relationality.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from recounting stories of encounter with Jesus, the question of the emissaries of Jairus's house to Jairus in verse 35 may strike us as completely arresting: "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" Beyond a shadow of a doubt, many people come to congregational worship feeling as though their backs are against the wall. Countless human and communal scenarios present feelings of finality, unending grief, and hopelessness. As much as we might remind ourselves of God's powerful work, sometimes that seems like a dream too distant, a fantasy entirely too fantastic, to become reality. If that is the case, "Why trouble the teacher any further?" That this question remains in the text is no small gift, pastorally speaking.

Here is an opportunity for preachers and teachers not to lecture people about the necessity of faith to effect or procure change, for bootstraps are not always an option, as much as that cultural narrative persists and plagues us. Rather, in the preaching of this text there lies an

3. "Get Together' Plays On, Long After San Francisco's Summer of Love: NPR"; <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/10/711545679/get-together-youngbloods-summer-of-love-american-anthem>.

opportunity for pastoral permission giving, to invite people to cry out, naming the limits that impinge upon life, and inviting listeners to live with what Joni Sancken calls “reasonable hope.” This kind of hope holds room for doubt and despair and at the same time “offer[s] incremental steps toward a future.”⁴

So congregational leaders might consider using this text as the opportunity to offer a worship service of healing and wholeness, either within regular congregational worship or in a service beyond it. Most denominational worship books now have liturgies for these services,

and they can serve as an opportunity to encourage the people under our care to name their despair and hopelessness: an opportunity for them to “trouble the teacher” with the burdens too great to bear. This kind of service calls on the power of healing through restorative touch that we see in Jesus. The church’s practices of laying on of hands and anointing with oil are vital. To come full circle, in these liturgical practices we go beyond information and explanation about Jesus and reach toward imitation of the healing encounter with Jesus that we see in this text.

RICHARD W. VOELZ

4. Joni S. Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 14–15.

Proper 9 (Sunday between July 3 and July 9)

Ezekiel 2:1–5 and
2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10
Psalm 123 and Psalm 48

2 Corinthians 12:2–10
Mark 6:1–13

Ezekiel 2:1–5

¹He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. ²And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. ³He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD.” ⁵Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

¹Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. ²For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” ³So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. ⁵At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

... ⁹David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward. ¹⁰And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In the story of Israel as the books of Samuel tell it, 2 Samuel 5:1–5 involves a great consolidation. The disparate nature of the text and of the Israel it depicts up to this point begin to converge, and it is the power and charisma of David that drives the convergence. A casual reading of the story can lead to the conclusion that the “united monarchy” of ancient Israel was the norm, the way Israel was supposed to be. However, even such a surface-level reading

points toward only one century of this political entity, and there are reasons to think that it never existed at all.

This is one of three stories about David being anointed king (the other two are in 1 Sam. 16:1–13 and 2 Sam. 2:1–7). In similar fashion, there are three different stories about Saul becoming king of Israel (1 Sam. 8:1–9:2 + 10:17–26; 9:3–10:16; and 11:1–15 + 10:27). These stories happen in different places, in the presence

of different groups of people, and at different stages in the lives of Saul and David. If there is a convergence here, then there were many versions of that story, and it creates a diagram more like an hourglass than a triangle. The unity does not last long and may be a literary mirage.

Because the lectionary has skipped 2 Samuel 4, it is easy to forget that all of this apparent peace and order, portrayed as a process of covenant making, was made possible by successfully executed acts of violence. The lectionary tells us to read 2 Samuel like 1 Chronicles. The latter has omitted these internal, Israelite acts of violence. In Chronicles and in the lectionary snippets of Samuel, the only violent act necessary to make David king is the defeat and death of Saul at the hand of the Philistines. In the full story told by 2 Samuel, however, Hebron is littered with body parts as David and the elders of Israel make their covenant there. Rechab and Baanah have assassinated David's rival Ishbaal and brought his head to David. David has responded by cutting off the hands and feet of Rechab and Baanah and putting their mutilated bodies on public display.

Like the three differing accounts of Saul being anointed king and David being anointed king, there are also three accounts of David and Saul meeting for the first time, and one of these meetings (1 Sam. 17:55–58) is facilitated by the severed head of Goliath. The juxtaposition of a story of constructing a nation with stories of tearing apart human bodies can be jarring, and it is not difficult to see why a selective presentation of texts, ancient or modern, would seek to avoid such images. Nevertheless, a more honest reckoning with the fullness of this story that we have made part of our own faith requires a full view of the scene. If there is a consolidation of institutions, then who benefits and who pays the cost?

Ezekiel 2:1–5 offers a puzzling pairing with the text from 2 Samuel. In Ezekiel 1 the prophet sees his great *merkaba* vision, the dazzling chariot of YHWH in the sky. The grand vision in Ezekiel 1–2 takes on even greater significance because Ezekiel sees it in Babylon, not in the Jerusalem temple, where such a divine encounter, like the vision in Isaiah 6, belonged. He appropriately falls on his face. When God

speaks to Ezekiel, he commands him to get up, but a spirit also enters Ezekiel and stands him up, perhaps acknowledging that the force that put him on the ground is too strong for sheer human will to overcome.

Even for modern readers the multifaced beasts and wheels within wheels can be so mesmerizing that few look away toward the other parts of the book, except for the very different vision of the valley of bones in Ezekiel 37. The story of Ezekiel here is a story of a beginning and an ending, like the story of David's anointing. The way the divine character relates to Israel changed when it became a unified nation ruled by a single king who was a divine representative. At the moment when YHWH is speaking to Ezekiel, there is no longer a king, and Jerusalem is no longer the location of the divine glory (*kabod*), which has visited Ezekiel in Babylon.

These two texts form bookends around the story of Jerusalem as ancient Israel's political and religious center and the abode of its God. In 2 Samuel 5, David stands before YHWH in Hebron, and in Ezekiel 2 the prophet stands before YHWH by the river Chebar. Between these two moments, encounters with the divine presence take place in Jerusalem. The vision in Ezekiel 1–2 is closely connected to the visions in Ezekiel 8–10 and 40–48. It is in chapters 8–10 that Ezekiel sees the divine glory rise up out of the temple in Jerusalem and fly eastward, toward those who are in exile in Babylon. YHWH must vacate the temple before it is destroyed by the Babylonian army. Ezekiel 40–48 is the prophet's vision of the new temple in a restored Jerusalem, including the return of the divine glory. The vision in Ezekiel 1–2 would seem to fit chronologically between these two, but instead it forms the dramatic opening of the book. Before showing the reader a Jerusalem with no divine presence in it, the book of Ezekiel chooses to show Babylon with a divine presence.

More recent understandings of the nature of Israel in the sixth century demand greater attention to those who were not in exile in Babylon. While the Bible might lead us to believe that the experience of exile and return was the norm for citizens of Judah in the sixth century, the historical evidence points to a different reality. The

majority of the citizens of Judah would have remained in the land, but without the structure and institutions that had been at the center of their national religious life.

It is difficult to know what might have replaced the rituals of Solomon's temple during this interim. One avenue of speculation has been that the poems in the book of Lamentations may have been performed by survivors, in or near the temple ruins. If this, or something like it, was the case, then the book of Ezekiel claims that Israel's God was not present in Jerusalem to hear these painful prayers. If the exiles in Babylon possessed the traditions of Israel's religion and claimed and enjoyed the divine presence there, then of what value was the experience of those left behind? The shape of the biblical canon and the ways we choose to read

it cause certain voices to be louder and cause others to be more difficult to hear. In the competition of stories, the story of exile and return won out over a story of remaining in a defeated land, just as the story of a powerful king muffled the stories of those destroyed by the process.

The stories of Jesus and his disciples in Mark 6:1–13 also raise questions about dislocation. The response of the people in Nazareth pushes Jesus away from his hometown, and he counsels his disciples about how to respond to rejection. Displays of divine power generate conflict among those who desire the benefits. In Israel's past, efforts to become the broker of divine presence and power have not led to unity or harmony. The plot in the Gospel of Mark moves in a similar direction.

MARK MCENTIRE

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The two texts in the lectionary readings may appear disconnected from each other, yet when we read Ezekiel in light of the passage from 2 Samuel 5 that describes David's anointing as king of Israel, we will see a number of connections that are pertinent for preaching and for connecting these readings to the worlds of parishioners.

We enter the story of David's rise to kingship in the political and social turmoil described in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. Competing political leaders, including Saul, Jonathan, and David, have jockeyed for power through a variety of violent means. We know of the storied history of the personal conflict between Saul and David, due to jealousy, fear, and threat. After Saul's death (1 Sam. 31), David is anointed king of Judah (2 Sam. 2:1–7). David's rise to kingship was the next step in his ascendancy to power as king over the tribe of Judah, the tribe of his lineage. It is important to note that David's reign was limited at this point to Judah. Yes, David was powerful, but his monarchy was not yet total over all of the tribes of Israel.

After the violence, chaos, and palace intrigue continued and took their toll on the stability and well-being of the nation, "all the tribes of Israel

came to David," affirming a desire that David become king over all of the tribes of Israel, based on their understanding God's promise (2 Sam. 5:1–3). One could read this request theologically, in that a messiah, a deliverer, an anointed one, would eventually come in the person of Jesus from this Davidic lineage. One can also read this text politically and see connections with how political leaders gain power in times of turmoil, uncertainty, and fear. The tribes needed a leader who could unify them and deliver them from their surrounding enemies—a leader who had been strong in battle, who had divine favor, and whose success was believed to be guaranteed because of this divine favor.

Preachers should read this text for its many layers of interpretation. No matter how this text is read, the narrator of 2 Samuel takes us to the apex of David's power. David united the tribes into one nation, moved to Jerusalem, set it up as the seat of power, naming it "the city of David," and "became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him" (v. 10).

Now read Ezekiel, this tormented prophet and visionary seeing all sorts of strange things during exile after the unified kingdom of David had been split into two, with the southern

portion of kingdom exiled to Babylon, from where Ezekiel was likely prophesying. Ezekiel received his commission as a prophet to go and tell, and the message was a disturbing one: to remind the people that had been assured of God's favor through the kingship of David of their waywardness and rebellion. Ezekiel received a scroll, an unmistakable means of divine communication, and on it were the "words of lamentation and mourning and woe" (Ezek. 2:10).

Preachers will want to explore how the connections between these texts might provide connections for hearers' observations and experiences in our world. A first connection might be exploring how religion is used to justify current political arrangements and regimes by making appeals to "covenant" or "scrolls." Sociologists of religion note that religion can provide a "sacred canopy" that attempts to provide divine legitimation to a social order.¹ Appeals to a divine source, such as a covenant in David's case, or a sense of manifest destiny provide overarching legitimacy that discourages (and perhaps even punishes) challenges to regimes as though they are equivalent to challenges of divine authority.

However, others note that religion can also be "disruptive."² By making appeals to divine sources, such as the scroll in Ezekiel, religion also challenges the social order as transgressive and rebellious against God's purposes for human communities. Sermons can probe congregants to think of the ways they use religion and religious language when thinking about social order and political systems. Does belief in God provide justification of these systems, regardless of actions or policies, or does belief in God provide the means by which we prophetically speak about the transgressions we see?

Sermons could explore historical examples where leaders emerged in times of chaos and turmoil with messianic claims for deliverance. Certainly one of the most evil in recent memory is Hitler and his promises to restore Germany to Aryan superiority and cultural supremacy after losses in World War I. He made appeals

to Christian leaders and churches and, indeed, found significant support. What a contrast to Nelson Mandela, a leader who, in the injustice and violence of apartheid in South Africa, called on people to draw on the resources of their faith to unite them around higher values of belonging, solidarity, justice, and mercy.

Sermons can explore examples of social movements and leaders that drew on the sources of faith to bring about changes reflective of God's justice and liberation, as opposed to those with their messianic, exclusive, and narcissistic aspirations. Some examples of social movements from which to gain inspiration are the early abolitionist and women's suffrage movements, the civil rights movement in the United States, the International Justice Mission, and the sanctuary movement, to name just a few. Sermons can connect persons to local initiatives in their communities that are attempting to disrupt the status quo in favor of God's commitments to justice and the well-being of all persons. Persons can be invited to share these ministries from the pulpit and invite congregants to participate.

Another connection might be found in the contrast between David and Ezekiel, the triumphant king and a mortal prophet. They provide two contrasting images of religious figures, one who had ultimate power and claims as the "LORD's anointed" (e.g., 2 Sam. 1:14, of Saul), and another with a clear sense of his own humanness, yet still a prophet. They represent what Brueggemann contrasts as the "royal consciousness" and the prophetic "pathos."³ Preachers can help congregations reflect on the dangerous language of triumphalism, thinking there is a special calling from God that the church should be in charge and privileged above all other religious communities. The prophetic faith of Ezekiel was one that mourned for what had happened and now had a hard message of speaking truth to power.

Preachers might challenge the language of a "church triumphant" and other military metaphors used to describe the church's mission. Are we concerned about winning? Do churches feel

1. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

2. Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 21–58.

as if they need to be “in charge” in order to be effective? Are we instead willing to take the risk embodied by the mortal prophet Ezekiel, one anointed by the Spirit, who was faithful to the message God gave him, with little guarantee of effectiveness? Preachers can mine the sources of church history for examples such as Perpetua and Polycarp, who did not seek to be martyrs, but whose faithfulness challenged the “royal consciousness” of imperial Rome. Modern-day

examples can also be helpful, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero and the religious women killed in El Salvador, Maura Clark, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan. Prophetic ministry à la Ezekiel, Perpetua, Polycarp, and others, is not a form of masochism. Instead, it is a calling that is taken on with soberness and sadness, knowing faithfulness to the message of God will come with risks.

WYNDY CORBIN REUSCHLING

Proper 9 (Sunday between July 3 and July 9)

Psalm 123

¹To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
²As the eyes of servants
look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid
to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
until he has mercy upon us.
³Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
⁴Our soul has had more than its fill
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

Psalm 48

¹Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God.
His holy mountain, ²beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
³Within its citadels God
has shown himself a sure defense.
⁴Then the kings assembled,
they came on together.
⁵As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic, they took to flight;
⁶trembling took hold of them there,
pains as of a woman in labor,
⁷as when an east wind shatters
the ships of Tarshish.
⁸As we have heard, so have we seen
in the city of the LORD of hosts,
in the city of our God,
which God establishes forever.
⁹We ponder your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.
¹⁰Your name, O God, like your praise,
reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with victory.
¹¹Let Mount Zion be glad,

let the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments.

¹²Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,

¹³consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation

¹⁴that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will be our guide forever.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 123. The first reading is Ezekiel 2:1–5. The Lord fills the mortal with a spirit and tells him that he will be sent to the people of Israel, people who have turned against their God. The text is full of descriptors of Israel’s sin: they have rebelled and transgressed (Ezek. 2:3). They are impudent and stubborn (v. 4). They “refuse to hear” and are “a rebellious house” (v. 5). The passage ends with assurance that, whether or not Israel is willing/able to hear the words of God’s servant Ezekiel, “they shall know that there has been a prophet among them” (v. 5).

When read as a response to Ezekiel 2:1–5, Psalm 123 offers a prayer from the lips of Israel, the rebellious people to whom the prophet Ezekiel is sent. Whereas the people of Israel in Ezekiel 2 seem decidedly unaware of their sin, however, the speaker of Psalm 123 is conscious of a level of rebellion or suffering and prays for God’s mercy. The speaker leans on God, not only for forgiveness but for life itself. Psalm 123 is one of the Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120–134). As in other Songs of Ascents, the psalmist shifts from first person singular to plural, suggesting both individual lament and the collective lament of a group. It is likely that the Songs of Ascents were sung by pilgrims on a journey to Jerusalem for a festal celebration.¹ The object of the people’s complaint in the psalm comes in verse 4: “the scorn of those who are at ease [and] the contempt of the proud.” The specific

lament suggests the psalm comes from a postexilic context.²

When the reading of the lament psalm begins, most hearers will be expecting the structure of more familiar lament psalms, such as Psalm 42: the speaker addresses God, offers a complaint, and ends with an assurance of hope in God. Psalm 123, however, has no such assurance; the song ends with the complaint of the people, as if the psalmist begins with eyes “lift[ed] up” to God and ends with eyes cast down on the reality of the people’s suffering. The psalmist does not tie up the prayer with a ribbon of hope, instead leaving the hearer with the frayed ends of heartfelt lament. The psalmist sits in the complaint of the people without rushing to assurance, and the preacher should consider doing the same. The psalm is a healthy and welcome reminder that our sovereign God is with us in our suffering and our sin, even if we cannot yet see the way out.

With the mass of patriarchal language that drips from much of the Old and New Testaments, the preacher or liturgist should not miss an opportunity to “lift up” the alternate images for God found in the rich liturgical language of the psalms. Verse 2 offers parallel gender images for God: God is imagined as both master and mistress, with the people of God as servants and maids. The liturgist could choose to continue that parallel language in the prayers of

1. James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994), 119–20.

2. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 4:1187.

intercession, alternating images for God traditionally considered masculine, ones traditionally considered feminine, and/or images that describe God beyond the framework of gender. Gender language aside, the master/servant and mistress/maid pairings clearly emphasize the sovereignty of God and the humble position of God's people.

Psalm 123 is filled with language for liturgical use, and its phrases are especially suited for a prayer of confession. The liturgist could begin the prayer with verse 1 and then offer specific prayers of confession. After each specific prayer, the people may borrow verse 3 as a corporate refrain: "Have mercy upon us, O Lord. Have mercy upon us." The language and imagery of verse 2 can be adapted and employed as an assurance of pardon:

As the eyes of the servants look to the hand
of their master,
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her
mistress,
so our eyes look to the Lord our God, who
has mercy upon us.

Psalm 48. Second Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10 brings us the anointing of David as king of Israel. God has made a king of the ruddy little shepherd boy, the youngest son of Jesse, and through him God will continue to guide and bless the people Israel. The text makes it clear that David's anointing as king is significant, not because of any personal attribute of the former shepherd boy himself, but because of the power of God, who is with him. King David is far from perfect, as the next chapters will make clear, but God is with him nonetheless.

At the end of the reading from 2 Samuel, the hearer is left with a celebratory feeling, a tone that is carried through and amplified in the response of Psalm 48. The psalm rings with praise as if it were a song sung at David's anointing, except that David was anointed at Hebron and the psalmist is seated at Mount Zion. The psalm is a song of Zion (see also Pss. 76, 84, 87, 122), a part of the Korahite and Elohistic collections of psalms.³

Psalm 48 imagines Zion as the center of the universe, the center of God's praise, and the center of God's people. In our global, pluralistic culture, that image can be problematic and may tempt the preacher to take a trail that ought not be traveled. The good news of this psalm is not that any physical place is the center of God's love. The good news is that the steadfast love of God is the center of life itself. The psalmist certainly praises God for gifts specific to Zion: the land itself, the strong military defenses, the victory in battle. It is important to notice, though, that the psalmist also praises God's steadfast love (*hesed*) and judgment. The psalmist's view of God's blessing is much more expansive than it might first appear. Jerusalem has become a physical representation of the universal reign of God: "the city of the great King" (Ps. 48:2), who reigns over all the earth. Much like the newly anointed King David, who is blessed, not because of any personal characteristic but because of God's presence with him, Zion is great, not because of the beauty of its mountain or the strength of its fortresses but because the Holy One of Israel has made it so.

It is appropriate to read or sing all of Psalm 48 in response to the 2 Samuel reading. The psalm is longer than some, but it would be a shame to lose any of the rich theological language by truncating the text.

Verses 9–10 make a powerful call to worship:

Reader One: We ponder your steadfast love, O
God, in the midst of your temple.
Reader Two: Your name, O God, like your
praise, reaches to the ends of the
earth.

The preacher or liturgist may find that verses 12–14 provide a creative framework for a charge and benediction: a chance to charge the congregation to walk about the world God has created, count the blessings, consider well the joy, go through the waters, that they may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.

ANNA GEORGE TRAYNHAM

3. McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 871.

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

²I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— ⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Paul’s passionate defense of his ministry and authority climaxes in this intimately revealing chapter, full of pathos and gospel truth. Moved by “divine jealousy” for the Corinthian church he has established and loved (2 Cor. 11:2), he chides them for falling prey to the teachings peddled by “super apostles” proclaiming a “different gospel,” boasting of apostolic authority above Paul’s, destroying the unity of the church, and inciting a spirit of competition through their open derision of him (2 Cor. 2:17; 10:12; 11:13–14, 19–20; 12:20). These “false apostles” accuse Paul of being weak, “untrained in speech,” a slanderer, and an impostor (2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6; Rom. 3:8).

Troubled by the lack of support from the Corinthian church, Paul unwillingly builds on the long list of things that should have proven his calling (2 Cor. 11:21b–30) by appealing to his experience of “revelations” in years past (12:1). His reticence to boast about his credentials explains his awkward reference to himself in the third person (“I know a person in Christ,” 12:2). Paul seems to differentiate between the grace of God that allowed him such revelations and his

own humanity. There is no boasting where the fount of blessing is divine grace. His repetition of being in or out of the body (vv. 2, 3) when “caught up” to the “third heaven” (understood as God’s abode) and “paradise” (a place or state of conscious rest in God after death and before the Parousia) may suggest an experience of transformation or heightened spiritual self. It may simply hint at prior queries by Christians about the relation of his embodied or disembodied experience in paradise to what one might experience in the afterlife (1 Cor. 15:35).

Paul’s double emphases—that only “God knows”—make the query a moot point. Any insistence is met with his inability (*exon*, 2 Cor. 12:4, “unlawful, not permitted”) to express the content of the revelations. While the question of our nature after death may be something of a conundrum, the matter of our state—one of blessedness with God—is not. Already Paul has taught that in death, Christ’s followers will eternally enjoy God’s presence (1 Cor. 15:50–54; Rom. 8). His vision preaches to an eschatology of hope in, and through, the crucified but risen Christ.

Divine Poverty

O man, give up your resources! Divine poverty is enough for you. Put off the packs of your riches; a burdened man cannot make his way along the narrow road all the way to the work of the Lord's harvest. Come unencumbered, come free to the tasks, before you get stripped and robbed, and arrested for punishment as a worker unfaithful to all. For, as it is written: "Riches do not go along with a dying man."

Let your conscience be your wallet, let your life be your bread, in order that the true bread in your life can be Christ, who said: "I am the bread." Regard your heavenly reward as your salary. For, if in order to follow Christ a man has dispossessed himself of everything and faithfully scorned and despised what he had, he can ask a reward from Christ without any anxiety.

Peter Chrysologus, "Christ, Our Example in Manifold Ways; The Vocation of the Apostles; The Counsel of Poverty," in *Saint Peter Chrysologus Selected Sermons and Saint Valerian Homilies*, trans. George E. Ganss, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 17 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1953), 282.

Paul's "elation" (2 Cor. 12:7, *hyperairō*, "to be conceited, arrogant, cocky") over the "exceptional character" of his revelations was mitigated by a "thorn in the flesh" (*kolaphizō*, "a strike with a fist, a buffeting, a stake") that tormented him. Perhaps more perplexing than the identity of the painful and persistent thorn—scholars do not agree on whether this was a physical or psychological ailment—is Paul's reference to its source: a messenger from Satan. Whether or not one believes in a real Satan, his statement raises questions about the power of evil to afflict Christians. If God did not send this suffering, was God allowing it? While a theologically weighty question, Paul does not address this here. Neither does he question or blame God for his ills. Rather, he turns to the Lord in prayer.

Paul's prayer is significant for what it does and does not illustrate. One cannot ignore, for instance, that Paul begins his testimony concerning his very personal matter with the specific number of times he prayed for release: three (v. 8). Was he intending to bring to mind Jesus' own three appeals in Gethsemane and God's response (Mark 14:32–41; Matt. 26:39, 42–44)?¹ Jesus asked for the possibility of "this

cup" to pass from him, adding, "Yet not what I want but what you want." Was this Paul's prayer as well? God dignified Paul with an answer ("but he said to me," 2 Cor. 12:9). The common use of the conjunction "but" instead of "and" for the Greek *kai* in verse 9 may cast an unintended negative connotation over God's response: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Did Paul receive what he needed, empowering grace, but not what he wanted, healing? If Paul, like Jesus, prayed for God's will to be done in his life (Rom. 8:26, 27), it is not wrong to assume that Paul received what he needed *and* what he wanted.

How should we react to God's response when, like Jesus, we pray, "Your will be done" (Matt. 6:10)? For Paul, God's response intended "to keep [him] from being too elated" (repeated twice). That God's grace is to be sufficient in suffering is not something to bemoan. Paul's attitude of gladness confirms this (2 Cor. 12:9, 10; Rom. 8:6, 18, 31). God's grace is God's mercy (Ps. 123:2). Writing to the Romans from Corinth, Paul admonishes them to "know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). If God's purpose for us is to "be conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (v. 29), it undoubtedly entails learning to surrender our will so that God's purpose for us may be fulfilled.

Human understanding of power is turned on its head. Reliance on God is our strength and our confidence (2 Cor. 2:3, 4; 12:10). "We have this treasure," says Paul, "in clay jars . . . this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (4:7). If God's power is not something we possess, who are we to boast about it?! The crucified Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24; 2 Cor. 4:5; 13:4). The divine paradox is that to be

1. Recollection of Jesus' appeal would have been transmitted orally to Paul and the communities, since the Gospels were not yet written.

strong in Christ we must give up self-reliance and seem weak to the world. To be wise, we must become fools who forsake human “craftiness” and rely on “the message of the cross,” the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18–31; 3:18; 2 Cor. 4:2; Ps. 9:11; Job 5:13). Therein lie power and authority and why Paul could boast about being “afflicted but not crushed” (2 Cor. 4:8).

Paul sets parameters for distinguishing between true and false apostles. True apostles, followers of Christ, do not commend themselves; it is the Lord that calls and commends them (2 Cor. 10:12–17; 12:12); they are merely servants working together according to God’s grace (Rom. 3:5, 7–9; 2 Cor. 4:1; 5); their competence comes from God (2 Cor. 3:4–6); through their submission to God, they are continually being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; 7); they do not come to take or tear down but to build (12:14, 19); they pursue and speak the truth in love and know that “nothing is to be gained by [boasting]”

(12:1; 1 Cor. 13:1–14:1; 16:13). The lections remind us, however, that none of this exempts God’s servants from contempt, even from the unexpected. The prophet Ezekiel, for instance, was met by a “rebellious house,” and Jesus himself was amazed at the unbelief from those of his very hometown (Ezek. 2:1–5; Mark 6:1–13).

Although pithy, this passage preaches at many levels. Besides what has already been pointed out, one could consider the following: How might cultural norms or market-driven industries cloud our judgment concerning true servants? What does it mean to be called? What is the role of prayer? How do we understand grace when it does not look or sound like what we expect? What should be our response to God’s grace? What does it mean to be strong in Christ, even though we seem weak to the world around us? How might this define our personal and corporate lives, goals, perspective, and mission in Christ?

ZAIDA MALDONADO PÉREZ

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

This week in our liturgical calendar coincides with Independence Day, a federal holiday in the United States commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. In addition to festive civic events marking the founding of the nation, many people celebrate the holiday at barbecues and picnics with their families and friends. After a day of good food, hearty conversation, and infectious laughter, people assemble at nightfall to watch wondrous displays of fireworks together in small towns and big cities across the country.

We also note that not all find joy on this holiday. Throughout US history, oppressed and vulnerable communities have experienced deep pain and frustration because of the juxtaposition of the public commemorations of national independence and their unmet demands for freedom and civil rights. On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass delivered a speech to an assembly of

several hundred abolitionists in Rochester, New York, highlighting how the holiday presented an opportunity for collective repentance rather than celebration. Douglass remarked, “What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”² He also criticized religious hymns, prayers, and sermons that honored Independence Day but ignored the great sin and shame of slavery as hypocritical and immoral. Douglass refused to celebrate the Fourth of July until all enslaved African Americans were emancipated. Many historians contend this address was one of the greatest anti-slavery speeches in the United States.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul testifies to a powerful vision in which he encountered God in heaven and heard sacred words that could not be expressed among humans on earth (2 Cor.

2. Frederick Douglass, *In the Words of Frederick Douglass: Quotations from Liberty’s Champion*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Heather L. Kaufman (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 103.

12:4). Paul also receives a thorn in his flesh to prevent him “from being too elated,” which is translated from the Greek verb *hyperairō* in 12:7 and appears in other English translations as “exalted above measure” (NKJV) and “becoming conceited” (NIV). Paul prays three times to ask God to remove the thorn, but God answers with a provision of grace and a lesson that God’s power is manifest in weakness (vv. 8–9).

In its immediate context, 2 Corinthians 12:2–10 contains Paul’s response to religious rivals in Corinth who are challenging him with their own competing claims based on their spiritual experiences and professed knowledge of special heavenly revelations. Thus, Paul first establishes his own authority through a recounting of his incomparable vision. He then rebukes his rivals through a boasting of his weakness, not his strength, to reinforce the message that God’s power is most clearly revealed in Jesus’ death and the weakness of the cross. Rather than celebrating his accomplishments, Paul chooses to elevate the insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities that accompany his ministry.

In our contemporary context, we must discern how to utilize this passage in ways that instill humility and inspire justice. Certainly we, too, are prone to exalt ourselves above measure and become conceited when we fail to acknowledge God’s grace or flail about in self-absorbed petty competitions with others. In the 1987 film *Wall Street*, the character Gordon Gekko, a cutthroat financier, illustrates the lure of self-exaltation in his declarations that greed is good for the ways it motivates people like himself to accomplish great things. *Wall Street* constructs the fictional character of Gekko as an archetype to capture the illegal, unethical, and ruthless world of finance and stock trading.

Our faith commitments do not cohere with Gekko’s narcissistic pursuit of wealth by any means necessary, but we have experienced the temptation to indulge in self-exaltation and the turmoil that accompanies feelings of weakness. We grow frustrated when our pursuits of goodness and righteousness—ranging from securing employment to provide for one’s family to

seeking more inclusive ministries to addressing changing neighborhood patterns—do not find success. Like Paul we ask God to remove the “thorns,” such as physical ailments, difficult family members, frustrating colleagues, and character flaws we believe are preventing us from thriving. In these instances, it is appropriate to remind Christians to surrender our weaknesses to God and trust God’s power will strengthen us.

At the same time, we must avoid conflating individual application and structural analysis in our preaching from this passage. Paul’s vision should not be distorted to instruct oppressed persons and communities to accept discriminatory laws and unfair conditions as necessary “thorns” with divine purposes. Rather, Paul’s proclamation of God’s power being made perfect in weakness challenges us to enter the places of brokenness in our congregations and neighborhoods. For those of us with power and privilege, Paul’s admonition on boasting is pertinent when engaging vulnerable persons and marginalized communities. In our efforts to strengthen the weak, we ought to be careful about subtly assuming postures of superiority, like the “super-apostles” Paul rebukes in 2 Corinthians 12:11, and always remember all God’s children are equal recipients of God’s grace.

Katie Geneva Cannon, a womanist theologian and ethicist, constructs an understanding of God’s grace, grounded in the African American experience, that illumines the interpretative nuance required to preach from this passage. Cannon offers two definitions of grace that constantly and generatively interact with another. First, “grace is a divine gift of redeeming love that empowers African Americans to confront shocking, absurd, death-dealing disjunctions in life, so that when we look at our outer struggles and inner strength we see interpretive possibilities for creative change.” Second, “grace is the indwelling of God’s spirit that enables Christians of African descent to live conscious lives of thanksgiving, by deepening our knowledge of forgiveness given in Christ, so that even in situations of oppression we celebrate our status as beloved creatures made in God’s image.”³ As

3. Katie Geneva Cannon, “Transformative Grace,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY, and London: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 143–44.

Cannon looks back at the rich history of African American Christians, she makes an important connection between expressing gratitude for God's grace and enacting resistance against oppressive forces with God's power as interrelated rather than oppositional practices.

Several English versions of the Bible translate the Greek verb *teleō* in 2 Corinthians 12:9 as "made perfect," to delineate how God's power operates in human weakness. The preamble to the US Constitution also employs the idea of establishing justice and securing freedom in the pursuit of "a more perfect union." Yet the nation's history, as Douglass poignantly and painfully illustrated in 1852, reveals the many shortcomings and moral failings of a nation that has denied equal rights to many persons. As Christians in the United States, we are careful

to respect the differences between our religious confessions and national identities. We also find connections between our Christian conviction that God's power is made perfect in weakness and our civic commitment to participating in a more perfect union.

With the presence of Independence Day during this particular week in the life of the church, preachers may ask their congregations what the Fourth of July means to them, with the recognition that answers may vary based on life experiences and social contexts. The universal message that God's grace is sufficient for all simultaneously cultivates in us a spirit of humility and challenges us to confront the evils of injustice that are harming children, communities, and creation today.

WILLIAM YOO

Proper 9 (Sunday between July 3 and July 9)

Mark 6:1–13

¹He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Mark is a story of disruption. Beginning with the arrival of the Holy Spirit through the shredded heavens in 1:10 and ending with a tomb that used to contain a corpse, the Gospel describes the arrival of something new. Although many people in Mark fail to perceive the contours of this new thing, still it effects transformation—through altered boundary lines, transgressed norms, conflicts about authority, and the arrival of new realities that are part of what Jesus calls the reign of God.

The juxtaposition of a story about Jesus’ rejection at home (Mark 6:1–6a) and one about the effects of his ministry multiplying through his followers (Mark 6:6b–13) calls attention to the transformational aspects of the good news. The message Jesus proclaims has an expansive character. It will always encounter opposition and confusion, sometimes from people who

have close connections to Jesus, but it will also find hospitable welcome in places where it brings healing and wholeness.

After recording a series of astounding deeds—calming a stormy sea, destroying a legion of demons, unintentionally healing a long-suffering woman, and bringing a dead girl back to life—the narrative follows Jesus to his hometown. There the story proceeds differently. Although those who hear him teach express amazement at his wisdom and power, as others have done previously, the distinguishing features of this scene are offense and the absence of faith.¹ Either the initial amazement expressed in 6:2 quickly fades, or it is fueled by incredulity instead of respect, because by 6:3 it is clear: “they took offense at him.” The verb *skandalizō* (“to stumble, to take offense”), given its usage also in 4:17; 14:27, 29, implies a rejection, not just disappointment or

1. The verb for “astounded” (*ekplēssō*) appears also in Mark 1:22; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18. Mark uses different but synonymous terms in 5:20; 6:6; 12:17; 15:5, 44 (*[ek]thaumazō*); 1:27; 10:32 (*thambeō*); 2:12; 5:42; 6:51 (*existēmi*); and 5:42; 16:8 (*ekstasis*).

dishonor. Who cares what he says and does? He cannot be worth respecting or following. His family and the scribes from Jerusalem arrive at similar conclusions in 3:21–22, although their specific assessments of him differed.

Apparently, the people in Nazareth see things or know things that other audiences do not, or they find Jesus too dangerous or destructive. When they call him “the son of Mary” and refer to his siblings, they recall the statement from 3:21, saying that Jesus’ family had concluded he had lost his sanity, and the scene in 3:31–35, in which his family was unable to seize him.² The residents of Nazareth, a village of fewer than a thousand residents, side with his family, perhaps because his kin have suffered on account of his absence. When the crowd refers to him without referring to his father, they may be emphasizing that this grown son has left a widowed mother and siblings to fend for themselves while he travels around Galilee leading a movement.

Jesus offers a mixed response to the rejection. On one hand, he is amazed by the lack of faith, even though he has experienced similar shortcomings from his own followers in 4:40. On the other hand, he describes the chilly reception in Nazareth as inevitable. He likens it to the hostility that biblical prophets received before him, as seen in passages such as Ezekiel 2:1–5.³ Similar claims that true prophets encounter opposition appear also in Matthew 5:12; 13:57; 23:37; Luke 4:24; 6:23; 13:33–34; John 4:44; Acts 7:52; 1 Thessalonians 2:15. In Mark, Jesus speaks specifically of rejection from “kin” and “house.” Mark will not refer to Jesus’ family again, but will indicate that Jesus’ followers constitute a new kinship group (Mark 10:29–30).

The comment about Jesus’ inability to perform a “deed of power” in Nazareth, except for a few healings, is peculiar (cf. the rewording in Matt. 13:58) and amusing. Nazareth may not receive all the blessings it might have received from Jesus, but that still does not stop him from manifesting the reign of God’s arrival, albeit on a smaller scale! In this story of inbreaking and

opposition, the latter cannot finally halt the former.

By pairing the story of Jesus’ rejection in Nazareth with the sending of the apostles, the lectionary invites comparisons. Jesus returns home; the apostles journey outward. The Nazarenes accuse Jesus of neglecting his responsibilities and relatives who need him; the apostles enter homes of strangers and bring good news.

The Bible includes several stories of charismatic leaders who seek to expand or perpetuate their influence through their helpers and successors. Moses appointed judges (Exod. 18:13–27), and God equipped many of Moses’ associates to prophesy (Num. 11:16–30). Elisha received a double share of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kgs. 2:1–15). Earlier in Mark, Jesus chose twelve of his followers to “be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14–15). In the current passage, he equips the Twelve with “authority” and offers instructions about receiving hospitality and dealing with rejection.

Jesus’ instructions reveal characteristics of the apostles’ ministry. By working in pairs, their words carry greater weight (see Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Cor. 13:1), and their partnership calls attention to a wider community to which they belong. In traveling simply, they contribute to their message’s credibility and declare their confidence that God will provide for them (cf. Matt. 6:25–34). By not moving from house to house in a single village, they make it clear that they are not chasing greater comforts. When they shake an inhospitable town’s dust from their feet, they completely dissociate themselves from that place’s arrogance or ignorance. Just as Jesus will not be constrained by the opposition he experiences in Nazareth, likewise they should be ready to move on when necessary.

In short, the apostles’ ministry is a spoken and enacted demonstration of authority, an authority they receive from Jesus Christ. Yet this transformative authority expresses itself in powerlessness, dependency, and relationships.

2. Although the NRSV renders Mark 3:21 differently, the Greek text indicates that it is Jesus’ family and not unidentified “people” who decide he has “gone out of his mind.”

3. Similar proverbs about truth-tellers appear in other literary settings. Note, for example, from the moral philosopher Plutarch: “The most sensible and wisest people are little cared for in their own hometowns” (*De Exilio* 604D; quoted in Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 376).

That is a familiar theme in the New Testament, especially in Paul's descriptions of both his ministry (1 Thess. 2:3–12; 1 Cor. 9:3–15) and the upside-down character of Jesus' crucifixion, in which divine power manifests itself in weakness (1 Cor. 1:18–25; see also 2 Cor. 12:8–10; 13:4; Phil. 2:1–8). The same paradoxical dynamic appears when Jesus characterizes the life of discipleship: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever

wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42–45). If anyone thinks that vision of self-giving is attractive or an obvious virtue, they should ask Nazareth's residents about it. Jesus' former neighbors can report how difficult it is to embrace such a vision because it does not align with conventional expectations or values.

MATTHEW L. SKINNER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Following Jesus' great deeds over long-term illness, social boundaries, and death itself in the previous narrative section (Mark 5:21–43), Mark shows us a different side of Jesus' ministry in 6:1–6a as he comes back to his hometown with disciples in tow.

At a very surface reading, the turn in the narrative might mirror the reality of highs and lows in the life of the church and in our ministries. This is a theme worthy of preaching, especially in the summer season when many congregations experience a "summer slump" in attendance, and congregational energy tends to lag. There are seasons in which we find ourselves riding high in ministry, when it seems that our ministries are strong and effective, when our witness to the community and the world seemingly has the capacity to change the world. Then there are Jesus-in-Nazareth seasons: times when every faithful act seems to be thwarted by circumstance or by people—people we know and love!—who seem opposed to divine power for healing and liberation. We dare not read and preach the previous narrative (5:21–43) without this one close behind, lest we get caught in one extreme or the other. It is just as dangerous to believe the hype about our own successes as it is to focus only on the obstacles and failures that come in the path of ministry.

Let us face it: Jesus does all the right things. In fact, in Nazareth he does the things that he has done elsewhere that have been wildly successful. Those of us who engage in ministry

and assess our effectiveness are quick to analyze our ministry methods and wonder if a change is warranted when success does not come. In doing so, we are tempted to dizzy ourselves with the latest fads and programming. That is not to say that we should be stuck in outdated, ineffective models of ministry. Nevertheless, perhaps in preaching this text we could take the opportunity to remind our congregations (and ourselves) about the realities of ministry, based on the shocking scene of what Jesus experiences.

Corporate myths of unending growth and ever-increasing success are not reality for the church's ministries. Sometimes we face obstacles, even when we are faithful. Sometimes our ministries encounter resistance, even when we do the right things. A sermon might point out that it is not Jesus' method in ministry that has changed, but the context and the people who are gathered. We need not vilify these people in doing so, or any other contemporary analogy to them. They are faithful people gathered for worship, seeking to live into the will of God. So even if we were Jesus, our success in ministry is never guaranteed. In an era of church decline, that seems worthy of saying from the pulpit.

Here is where the other half of the text comes in. Immediately after the somewhat failed Nazareth mission, Jesus goes back out teaching in the villages. This short transition out of Nazareth is quickly followed by Jesus' commissioning of the disciples. Do we catch that? On the heels of Jesus' first failure, he sends out disciples to

proclaim the same message, to anoint, and to cure. If ever there was a tenuous, doubt-filled situation for Mark's perpetually troubled disciples, this would be it. "You want us to go and do what you do, when you have just been challenged?" Mark matter-of-factly tells us that they go according to Jesus' instructions, casting out demons and curing the sick as they go. The message for us seems simple, but no less challenging: in the face of failure, do not be swayed. When obstacles come, carry out Jesus' ministry regardless, even without a safety net (or endowment).

This passage might not only suggest *how* we are to minister in the face of challenge but also challenge us to consider *who* carries out God's work in the world. First, of course, we consider Jesus. In Nazareth, we get a mixed message about Jesus. On the one hand, the hometown crowd recognizes Jesus' "wisdom" and "deeds of power" (6:2), but they are scandalized by him (v. 3), and he can perform "no deed of power there" (v. 5). One of the powers of this narrative is that their reaction ruffles our feathers. This is good narrative design and a possible homiletical setup. As readers we relish in the hometown crowd's foolish misstep. We can take the high ground here! Whether the attribution of his parentage as "the son of Mary" is intended to be slanderous or not, there is a clear frame for Jesus by the crowd gathered in the synagogue. The reality of who Jesus is has exceeded communal expectations. Jesus' teaching and healing ministries have exposed their assumptions about him: he could not and should not be more than what they have known. As a result, their lack of faith leads to no deed of power, except for a few people being cured.

While the way Mark frames their reaction might be designed to ruffle our own feathers (he is Jesus, after all, and they should know better!), there is a double edge to this sword. The problem of the hometown gathering is not that these people misrecognize Jesus. They do not mistake him for someone else. Quite the contrary. They know who he is. The problem is that the way that they see him is too limited.

So, a sermon might use this as an opportunity to bring our congregational Christology

into focus. Who is Jesus, and what picture of him emerges in our congregational ministries? How is it that we see Jesus and name him, not just in personal confession but to the world through what we do as congregations? What picture of Jesus does our community see in and through us? A sermon could serve as an interesting launching pad for conversations that focus church boards/sessions/consistories or mission councils and discussion. It might also serve as a good frame for a family conversation as well.

In our current contentious landscape, we should also consider who can be commissioned to carry on the ministry of Jesus, and what happens when we "take offense" (v. 3) at those God has commissioned to be God's agents. Notice that the Nazareth crowd's lack of faith did not have an effect just on their personal, self-interested lives. Their lack of faith blocked the path for the "deeds of power" Jesus might have performed on behalf of the entire community. Knowing Mark's narratives thus far, our imagination might run wild with possibilities for what he could have done in his hometown. He probably knew their deepest needs, and we might imagine how Jesus knew the needs of the community from early childhood, linking them to the needs in our own community.

Our individual and communal healing might be limited because of the limits we place on whom we see as fit to lead in God's mission. Our lack of faith or limited faith concerning those who would lead might make us our own worst enemies. We might stand in the way of our own healing or the healing of others because our vision for who can serve and minister is too small.

A sermon might invite listeners to consider the historical and present-day limitations we place on others to accomplish God's purposes. We might consider how individuals, congregations, and church polity have looked upon women, racial and ethnic minorities, children/youth, LGBTQ+ persons, and others who have sensed God's call to ministry. It is entirely possible that our limited view of others as viable agents of God's healing and reconciling ministry might be limiting God's healing work in the world.

RICHARD W. VOELZ

Proper 10 (Sunday between July 10 and July 16)

Amos 7:7–15 and

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

Psalms 85:8–13 and Psalm 24

Ephesians 1:3–14

Mark 6:14–29

Amos 7:7–15

⁷This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,

“See, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;
⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said,

‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.’”

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

¹David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ²David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. ³They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. ⁵David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. . . .

^{12b}So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fattling. ¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So David and all

the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

¹⁷They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. ¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, ¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Establishing Jerusalem as the center of Israel's story is a long process in the Bible. The city first appears by name in Joshua 10, and two chapters later, it is in a long list of cities Joshua has defeated during his invasion of Canaan, where there is nothing distinctive about it. The status of the city continues to be in flux throughout the story of settlement in Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel. Only as David comes into power does the city so closely tied to him in tradition come into focus.

Second Samuel 6 describes the transport of the mysterious ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark has been missing from the story of Israel for some time. In 1 Samuel 4, the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, had brought the ark to the site of the Israelites' loss in battle against the Philistines, between Aphek and Ebenezer. A subsequent loss led to the capture of the ark by the Philistine army. First Samuel 5–7 continues the strange story of the ark, which brings so much trouble to the Philistines that they return it to the Israelites. Some Israelites welcome the return and some do not, and the disagreement leads to a slaughter, so the ark brings suffering again. In light of this uncertainty, the ark is hidden away in a house in Kiriath-jearim. Perhaps it is no surprise that a bandit-king like David, wishing to consolidate and maximize his political power, might look to the ark again, despite the risks it holds. So Kiriath-jearim is where the new story begins, some twenty years later.

The missing piece from the lectionary reading should cause suspicion, and a glance at

2 Samuel 6:6–11 quickly reveals why. Beneath the calm surface of any story, there is always a price to be paid for the appearance of order. The lectionary, along with the version of Israel's story in Chronicles, conspires to hide the cost that the book of Samuel struggles to acknowledge. Perhaps worse, the name of the one who most directly absorbs the disorder, taking the deadly divine anger into his own body, Uzzah, is erased from memory. What might give rise to such an odd tradition? Is there a need to explain why David's initial effort to move the ark to Jerusalem fails?

The behavior of David is baffling throughout the story. He assembles an enormous cast of personnel, provides a new cart to transport the ark, and leads the people ("all the house of Israel") in an elaborate performance of song and dance as the ark makes its journey. The death of Uzzah, amid all this chaos, halts the project and makes David afraid to take the ark into his city. The most elaborate ceremony surrounding the ark up to this point in the biblical story is at the battle of Jericho in Joshua 6. In that text, the ark appears to be part of the war equipment. It is the throne upon which Israel's God sits, overseeing the battle. This seems likely to be what lies behind the decision to bring the ark to the battle in 1 Samuel 4, after a difficult loss. The ark is supposed to bring divine power, leading to victory in battle, but it failed on that occasion.

If the question the reappearance of the ark asks is whether this new king can control and

utilize its power, then the answer is negative. It is perhaps David's first moment of pause in a sequence of events that has appeared so sure and confident. David is not just afraid of YHWH, but also angry at his divine sponsor. Again, the ark takes up temporary residence in a private house, where its power can be tested and measured. When the ark passes this test of safety and control after three months, the transport process resumes, this time with elaborate sacrificial rituals to accompany the procession.

Another person who pays a price in this story is the daughter of Saul and wife of David named Michal. The prior story in 2 Samuel 3 provides reason for Michal to despise David before the day of the ark's arrival, but the isolated verse in Chronicles is more likely to lead readers to conclude that the events of that day are the cause of her contempt. The story in 2 Samuel 6:20–23 provides a final interaction between David and Michal, in which she criticizes the spectacle he has created around the ark, particularly his interaction with other women. There has been much speculation about the cause of her disgust, most of which has sexist foundations. Was she jealous of the attention David received from the women in the procession? When he was dancing in the procession, had he exposed himself? The full story of Michal in 1–2 Samuel reveals that David killed members of her family and benefited from the suspicious deaths of others. One hardly needs to look for petty motives like jealousy or prudishness to find a reason for Michal to despise David.

The text in Amos 7:7–15 may be most famous for an image, a “plumb line,” first produced by the King James Version, that is unlikely to be a reasonable translation. The man in 7:7 is holding something in his hand, but it seems to be merely a piece of whatever material has been used to construct the wall. The word appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, and the Greek text

renders it as “adamantine.” Whatever this object or substance is, 7:8–9 says clearly enough that the placement of it within the midst of Israel will have a destructive effect. The vision resembles two that precede it in 7:1–6, and one that comes after it in 8:1–3.

All of these visions point toward destruction. In the final one Amos sees a basket of fruit, and because this particular word for fruit sounds like the Hebrew word for “end,” the vision is interpreted as a sign of the coming end of Israel. There is a similar vision based on a wordplay in Jeremiah 1:11–12. It is possible that Amos's vision of the man on the wall is also based on a wordplay that is lost to us because the word is too obscure.

Between the third and fourth visions of Amos, the prophet comes into conflict with a priest from Bethel named Amaziah. Bethel is a place with a long history for Israel. It is the second place to which Abraham goes in Canaan and the first place where he builds an altar (Gen. 12:8). Jacob names Bethel in Genesis 29 because it is the site of his famous dream in which he sees a ladder or ramp used by angels to ascend to and descend from heaven. It becomes one of the two sites where Jereboam son of Nebat places golden bulls in 1 Kings 12. Jerusalem and Bethel are both divine abodes, but such a designation proves to bring blessing and curse. Their holy designation is volatile, like the ark's.

Eventually, the destiny of Jerusalem becomes a symbol for the fate of all Israel. The measurement of the city's obedience (Isa. 5 and Jer. 31:37), God's punishment (Isa. 65:7 and Jer. 10:24), and the reconstruction of the city (Ezek. 40–48 and Zech. 2:2) form a common theme in the prophetic literature. The careful attention to Jerusalem provides texture for its use in the New Testament as the scene for the climax of the gospel story.

MARK MCENTIRE

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The lectionary texts for this Sunday again provide us with two texts that on first glance might not seem at all related. It is important to explore

connections between these texts that will help congregants connect these readings to the world as they listen to the sermon. One text continues

the story of David after his rise to power as the king of all of the tribes of Israel, telling of the entrance of the ark into Jerusalem. The second text comes to us from the prophet Amos, who foretold of the exile of the two kingdoms, Judah and Israel. While the story of David takes place in Jerusalem, the “city of David,” Amos prophesies from his hometown of Tekoa, a small village south of Jerusalem. While David was a king, Amos was a shepherd, “no prophet, nor a prophet’s son” (Amos 7:14). David had all of the accoutrements for religious celebration at his disposal: “songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals” (2 Sam. 6:5), all that was necessary for burnt offerings, and lots for food for the “multitude of Israel” (vv. 18–19). A grand city and a smaller town. A mighty king and a herder. What might be the connections between these contrasts?

A first connection might explore the significance of place. Perhaps your congregation is located in a rural area, or an area that seems distant from the grand lights of the city. Some may hold the unfortunate stereotype, reflective of our culture’s attraction to power, big buildings, well-known names, and influence, that parishes and churches in small towns and rural areas are irrelevant and backwater. Yet churches in rural areas and small towns remain significant places of stability, hope, and vibrant faith, and are now receiving attention as vital places of ministry through such movements as the Rural Church Network, Rural Matters Institute, and the Small Town Churches Network.¹ Like Amos, a shepherd from the outskirts of Jerusalem called by God to prophesy a hard message to the powers that surrounded his community, churches that feel on the outskirts are called by God and remain places where God’s Word is spoken and lived. Reminding congregations that their place is important, that God speaks, that God calls, that God invites them into God’s work, no matter where they are, is important. Like Amos, churches that might feel that “we are only . . .” have important words from the Lord for our world today.

Second, reflecting on the richness of worship elements as David brings the ark into

Jerusalem, and the danger in the absence of justice, is a concern in Amos. Second Samuel 6 provides us a picture of the majestic elements of worship, all of which add to our imaginations and sensations. There are instruments to celebrate God’s presence among this people, often used in Israel’s worship (cf. Ps. 150). There is dancing, this physical expression of great joy and gladness, with our bodies giving expression to the indescribable delight in being in the presence of God. Yet the narrator of 2 Samuel interrupts this celebration with a stark image: the picture of Michal, identified as the daughter of Saul, looking out a window, watching “King David leaping and dancing before the LORD” and despising “him in her heart” (2 Sam. 6:16).

While the narrator identifies Michal as Saul’s daughter, reflective of how female identity and worth were shaped by male belonging, it is important to remember that Michal was one of David’s wives, treated like a pawn in the conflict between Saul and David. She was given by Saul in marriage to David, and we are told “she loved David” (1 Sam. 18:20). She protected David when Saul attempted to kill him, lying to her father (1 Sam. 19:11–17), and perhaps as punishment, again Michal’s father gives her away, this time to Palti (1 Sam. 25:44). However, this abusive treatment of Michal is not over, when David demands her return as a spoil of war. The scene is wrenching: she was taken from her husband Palti, one who truly loved her, who “went with her, weeping as he walked behind her all the way” until he was commanded, like a dog, to go home (2 Sam. 3:15–16).

While the narrator explains that Michal’s disdain was due to David’s shameful display (2 Sam. 6:20), preachers could also probe why this narrative interruption comes in the middle of the worship festivities. Was Michal’s response appropriate and understandable, given the relationship between justice and worship in covenant faith?² She had been treated unjustly. The God to whom worship was given in this most visual way as the ark was brought into Jerusalem is the same God who expected justice,

1. For more about these organizations, see www.ruralchurchnetwork.org/; www.bgcruralmatters.com/; www.smalltownchurches.org/.

2. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

something that was denied to Michal by David, a leader of the worship procession.

While verse 16 might seem a disruption in this story of worship, it is one that preachers can note for possible connections. Perhaps we could interrupt worship services with visual reminders of who might be looking in on us as we worship, even putting in the windows pictures of persons who have been neglected and abused by our faith communities. Who is neglected in the lavishness of our worship practices? Are there persons whose resentment is merited because of the ways in which they have been treated? Have we justified unjust treatment by appealing to “more important” things like our worship accessories and processions? How have our own lavish worship experiences neglected God’s call for justice as part of our worship?

These questions about worship and justice help preachers draw further connections with the text from Amos, this prophet who spoke the words, “Thus says the LORD,” numerous times, with words directed against the lavish and unjust practices of God’s people that would result in their exile. It should come as no surprise that Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (the house of God!), took issue with Amos’s prophecy and sought to shut him down (Amos 7:10–12).

Perhaps by exploring the typologies of “priest” and “prophet” in Max Weber’s work, we can see the tensions between this priest and this prophet and make connections with

tensions churches experience today over change, renewal, mission, inclusion, and belonging.³ In Weber’s analysis, priests and prophets are often in conflict; priests desire the status quo, while prophets call communities back to covenant faith. As a corrective to these divides between priest and prophet, preachers can introduce congregants to Archbishop Oscar Romero, a prophetic priest in El Salvador, an example of how priests fulfill their prophetic function in liturgy, preaching, and social action. Archbishop Romero was murdered while presiding over the Eucharist, because of his advocacy for the poor and his criticisms of oppression and social injustice. Contra Weber’s typology, Romero used his priestly office to serve a prophetic function, which preachers can do as well, as they are preaching on these texts.

Finally, we are given the image of a plumb line (vv. 7–9), which preachers can use in worship. A plumb line is a measuring device, with a weight, used to ensure that a structure is vertical and level, true to its foundation. In the context of Amos, this plumb line was measuring the commitments to justice, a foundation of covenant faith, which were found lacking in God’s people. Placing a plumb at the front of a sanctuary or altar would give a visual reminder of a church’s commitment to stay true to its foundation and mission in the world. What would a plumb line reveal about your house of God?

WYNDY CORBIN REUSCHLING

3. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

Proper 10 (Sunday between July 10 and July 16)

Psalm 85:8–13

- ⁸Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
- ⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- ¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- ¹²The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- ¹³Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Psalm 24

- ¹The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
- ²for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
- ³Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
- ⁴Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
- ⁵They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.
- ⁶Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.
- ⁷Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
- ⁸Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.
- ⁹Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
- ¹⁰Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 85:8–13. The first reading, Amos 7:7–15, tells a story of God’s judgment: with the vision of the plumb line, God says to Amos that desolation is coming to the people of Israel. The text ends with what may be the defining quote for the biblical hero Amos: “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14). Like so many other Old Testament heroes, God has called the ordinary person Amos to extraordinary service among God’s people. In Amos’s case, his message is a universally unpopular one: Israel has forgotten their God, and God will not look upon them with favor.

Psalm 85:8–13 comes in response to the Amos story, and there is significant tension between the tone of the Amos passage and the selected verses of the psalm. Verses 1–7 of the psalm voice a corporate prayer for help: reflections on God’s faithfulness in the past and pleas for God to restore Israel to salvation and favor in the present. By the beginning of the passage prescribed by the lectionary, in verse 8, the psalmist has moved from plea to assurance. A singular voice expresses confidence that God will indeed “speak peace” to the people once more. The preacher should note the difference between Amos’s tone and that of the speaker in Psalm 85:8–13. The psalmist is expressing a confidence in God’s mercy that the people of Israel do not yet have in Amos 7.

The verses selected in the lectionary can be a starting place for sermonizing. Are we so uncomfortable with the idea of God’s judgment that we dare not read the first seven verses of Psalm 85? The preacher may be surprised to find that many in the pews will identify with the prayer of the psalmist in verses 1–7, and it is worth considering expanding the boundaries of the text if addressing it in a sermon.

Concerns about the text’s boundaries aside, Psalm 85:8–13 is a powerful affirmation of faith in God’s compassion. The psalm does not stop with praying for God’s mercy; the psalmist goes on to state the return of God’s favor as fact. God “will speak peace [*shalom*]” (v. 8), “salvation *is* at

hand” (v. 9), “faithfulness *will* spring up” (v. 11), and so on. The semantics of the passage provide a foundation for preaching the psalm or using it in liturgy; even in a time of desperation, the psalmist shows unwavering faith in the mercy of God, sitting in the tension between confidence in God’s help and awareness of present suffering. The salvation the psalmist imagines is more concrete than abstract: when God acts, the fullness of life will be restored through steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace (v. 10), and even the land will thrive in the light of God’s compassion. The psalm is “part of the liturgy of the saved community who must live in awareness that its salvation is not yet consummated.”¹

To engage the hearer in the text of the psalm, the words can be sung using a metrical or responsive setting, or read responsively. Verse 8a makes an excellent call to worship, a brief but powerful sentence that can set the tone for worship:

Reader One: Let me hear what God the Lord
will speak,
Reader Two: for God will speak peace to God’s
people.

Just as the psalmist speaks assurances of God’s salvation while simultaneously praying for deliverance, the modern liturgist can lean on the words of the psalm to praise God for great blessings and pray for God’s help by weaving the assurances of verses 10–13 throughout the prayers of intercession.

Psalm 24. In the reading from 2 Samuel 6, worshipers hear the story of the entrance to the temple, with David’s army carrying the ark of God to Jerusalem on a new cart. After all the twists and turns thus far in David’s story, he has finally gotten the ark of God to the city of God, and celebration ensues. The people are not merely dancing. They are “dancing before the LORD with all their might” (v. 5)! Psalm 24 comes in response: a joyful song for a joyful day.

Psalm 24 does not simply celebrate Israel’s victory. The psalmist takes care to say that the scope of God’s power is much wider than the

1. James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994), 277.

kingdom of David (Ps. 24:1). The shape of the psalm carries as much meaning as the words themselves. Verses 1–2 praise God’s sovereignty and God’s ownership of the world God created.² Verses 3–6 describe the righteousness of God’s servant, the one to “ascend the hill of the LORD” as David has, whether literal entry to the temple of God or more general relatedness to God.³ Verses 7–10 turn to the adoration of God, “strong and mighty,” the “King of glory.” Individually, each of those pieces carries theological meaning, but the order in which they are placed shines a special light on the faith and belief of the writer. First comes the sovereignty of God, which requires of the servant faithfulness, which then leads to the adoration of God. The shape of the psalm may be the shape of faith itself.

Psalm 24 bears a superscription: “Of David. A psalm.” Regardless of its authorship, this psalm clearly has its origins in early liturgy, possibly liturgy for entrance to the temple gates. The refrain in verses 7–10 sings even without a musical setting. The psalm is a wealth of liturgical language, and the ten verses can be woven throughout a service of worship. Verses 1–2 make a beautiful responsive call to worship:

Reader One: The earth is the Lord’s and all that
is in it,
Reader Two: the world, and those who live in it;
Reader One: for God has founded it on the
seas,
Reader Two: and established it on the rivers.

Verses 3–6, with their focus on the faithfulness of the servant, offer language which can be easily adapted for a responsive call to confession:

Reader One: Who shall ascend the hill of the
Lord? and who shall stand in
God’s holy place?
Reader Two: Those who have clean hands and
pure hearts, who do not lift up
their souls to what is false.
Reader One: They will receive blessing from the
Lord, and vindication from the
God of their salvation.
Reader Two: Such is the company of those who
seek the Lord, who seek the face
of the God of Jacob.

Verses 7–10 make a powerful congregational affirmation after the reading of the Old Testament text or after a sermon. Since the passage divides easily between three parts, the liturgist may choose to divide the passage between the right and left side of the worship space.

Right: Lift up your heads, O gates! and be
lifted up, O ancient doors! that the
King of glory may come in.
Liturgist: Who is the King of glory?
Left: The Lord, strong and mighty; the
Lord, mighty in battle.
Right: Lift up your heads, O gates! and be
lifted up, O ancient doors! that the
King of glory may come in.
Liturgist: Who is this King of glory?
Left: The Lord of hosts is the King of
glory!

Psalm 24 carries a powerful message for the people of God. Whether resources seem scarce or abundant, the church will always need the reminder of the psalmist: the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.

ANNA GEORGE TRAYNHAM

2. Mays, *Psalms*, 119–20.

3. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 4:773.

Ephesians 1:3–14

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The contrast between last week's lectionary reading and this week's is refreshing. The thematic content moves from a posture of defense against those who challenge Paul's authority in the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 12:2–12) to exuberance over the significance of the grace of God in Christ for Jews and Gentiles alike. With the eyes of their hearts enlightened, Gentiles are invited to know "what is the hope" and "the riches of his glorious inheritance" (Eph. 1:17–19).

Although there is no scholarly consensus on the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, we know that the intended audience was mainly Gentile Christians (2:11–13)—if not in Ephesus, then in its environs (some ancient manuscripts lack 1:1). It is obvious from the contents that the writer was a Christian Jew. This is important to the overall message and purpose of Ephesians: that in and through Christ, God has unified Jewish and Gentile believers in the power of the Spirit. We have a call as members of the one body, to each other and to the world. This impartial, universal grace is for the praise of God's glory (1:6, 12, 14). The significance of

this message becomes more lucid if we understand the "we" in 1:12 to be referring to Jewish Christians, and the "you also" in 1:13 to Gentile Christians who are now equally "God's own people"—also to the "praise of his glory" (1:12, 14; 2:11–14; Rom. 3:2; Acts 2:5; 26:6; et al.).

This message, while simple, had ramifications as profound, and even scandalous, then as it does now. In Christ, there is but one new humanity; there is no "us" and "them" (Eph. 2:15–19; 4:4; Col. 1:12; Gal. 3:26–29; 1 Cor. 12:27). Those united in the one body of Christ, grounded and nourished by the "word of truth, the gospel," and sealed by the Holy Spirit, cannot be edged out!

The caring tone of the letter makes for an amenable hearing. There are no personal or hot issues that stand out in this community, as was the case for the Galatian and Corinthian churches, for instance. This is not about Judaizers, a blatant accommodation of the sinful in the church, disparaging practices, or divisions, to name a few of the issues elsewhere. The author speaks tenderly, revealing a sprightly

cadence that celebrates, even as he instructs and guides the believers.

This same tone of elation and acclamation should guide the preacher's own cadence in helping to evoke, if not rekindle, the hearer's own delectation and gratitude for what can easily become old, even blasé: the grace of our new status in Christ. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," the writer exclaims, "who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3)! Through faith in Christ (2:8) believers have been "blessed" (1:3); "chosen" by him "to be holy and blameless before him in love" (v. 4); adopted as God's children (v. 5); redeemed and forgiven (v. 7); given an inheritance in Christ; and, because of Christ, marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit (v. 13). Christ, then, is not only the believer's "hope," he is God's "very good pleasure" for her!

This praise-full cadence, however, does not bely an urgent call for the faithful to be strengthened and equipped against the wiles of the devil (4:1, 14; 6:11–17), lest they be lured away from Christ to past lives (4:17–24). This costly grace—"through [Christ's] blood"—is not to be taken lightly (1:7); it is not entitlement, an attitude to which we might easily fall prey through ideologies of culture, class, ethnicity, or theology. "Remember," he enjoins twice, that "you Gentiles" were derided as "the uncircumcision" (or "the foreskin" ones!; *acrobystia* refers to the prepuce or foreskin),¹ "aliens," and "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God" (2:11–12)! This grace, then, is the antithesis of an abject status before God; it is the reason for the new *familial* appellations in 1:3–14. Gentiles need to remember this in order to respond with gratitude.

Should perceptions of partiality linger, the writer adds that "all of us"—Jews and Gentiles, circumcised or not—were by nature "children of wrath" (2:3; Rom. 3:23–24) brought "near" through the same grace to be, and work toward, the unity of the body, God's dwelling place (Eph. 2:17, 21–22; 3:6; 4:1–6). (Note: the notion of God dwelling in *all* saints would have been foreign to Gentiles used to seeing their gods dwell in pantheons.)

The eight references to Christ in such a short section (1:3–14) may obfuscate a Trinitarian depiction of the work of redemption. The theological and liturgical ramifications of this should not be ignored. God's grace is "lavished" on us through Christ and through the Holy Spirit, who has sealed us toward redemption (note that we "have redemption" yet also move "toward" it; 1:7, 14). Thus, praise is always Trinitarian, and knowledge of who and how we are to live as the one body of Christ has the simple, yet profound *mysterium tremendum*—the revelation of the God who is three, yet in all things acts as one—as model.

Believers are not the only ones called to benefit from this grace. Through Christ, God reveals the "mystery" of the Divine: "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (1:10). Consequently, "knit together" and "working properly" through its gifts, the body of Christ is called to grow in Christ *and* to witness to God's redeeming grace (3:10; 4:16). If considered in light of creation's own anticipation of redemption in Colossians 1:16–20 and Romans 8:20–22, the reference to "all things," at the very least, should invoke our responsibility to care for the increasingly endangered environment on which we all depend (Gen. 1:8–31). Hence, although pithy, Ephesians 1:10 insinuates ecological and moral implications that bear upon God's call to "Love God. . . and your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–33; Matt. 22:37–39).

The accompanying lectionary readings in 2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19 and Psalms 24 and 85:8–13 share a tone of exhilaration and gratitude that may help shape dispositions. Having taken Jerusalem, David decided to bring the ark of the covenant there (cf. Heb. 9:4–5). Brimming with gratitude for God's presence and power among them in the ark, David erupted in joyful dancing and shouting before God with all the people. If the symbol of the presence of God in the ark elicited such praise, how much more grateful ought *we* be who are "built into a dwelling place for God," the "King of glory"!

David and the people knew that God's sovereign power and steadfast love for the faithful included blessing the land and its yield (Pss.

1. <https://www.studylight.org/lexicons/greek/203.html>.

24:4; 85:8, 12). This, too, connects back to our call to care for creation.

The call to faithfulness rooted in love is a theme that runs through the Scriptures. Faithfulness is rewarded not as a work but as active reliance on God. The “great cloud of witnesses,” which goes back to Abel, persevered in faith and it was counted as “righteousness” (Gen. 22:1–18; Heb. 11; 12:1). Indeed, “steadfast love and

faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10). The exhortation to perseverance in Ephesians evokes the seer’s appeal in Revelation 2:2–4 for the church to return to the love they had at first. It may be that this is just what the Holy Spirit ordered as it concerns the praise-full, thankful tone in today’s reading.

ZAIDA MALDONADO PÉREZ

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

In Greek, this text is one long sentence with several clauses and an array of vivid metaphors that elucidate the attributes of our triune God and the blessings we have received through redemption in Jesus Christ. Two prominent metaphors are “family” and “economics.” The image of adoption as God’s children (*huiothesia*, Eph. 1:5) is employed to illustrate our inclusion as members of God’s family. Words commonly associated with financial matters are utilized in 1:11 (“inheritance”) and 1:14 (“pledge”) to explain what God has given to us. In its immediate context, the Greek word for “pledge” (*arrabōn*) can be found in commercial documents referring to the deposit paid by a customer to a merchant for a scheduled delivery of goods.

These two metaphors are linked in another word: *oikonomia* (1:10). The word appears as “plan” in several English translations (ESV, NLT, NRSV) and as “administration” in other English translations (NASB, Holman Christian Standard Bible), but *oikonomia* was most commonly used in the first century to denote the management of a domestic household.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz, a Cuban American theologian and ethicist, spent much of her career interrogating the ways Christian used metaphors to describe God, the church, and the world. As one of the pioneers of *mujerista* theology, Isasi-Díaz found that the idea of *familia* (family) aptly captured how Latinas in the United States exhibited their leadership and expressed their faith. Because the *familia* served

as one of the core anchors for Latinx American immigrant communities in the United States, Isasi-Díaz articulates how a Christian theology centered in the idea of participating in the *familia de Dios* (God’s family) could affirm, animate, and unite Latinas in their daily struggles against the forces of systemic marginalization and oppression in their congregations and larger society.

Isasi-Díaz extends her theology of the *familia de Dios* to revise a longstanding metaphor in the Christian tradition, the kingdom of God. She traces the history of the kingdom of God from its Jewish origins as a concept derived from the Egyptian and Babylonian kingships that enslaved and ruled over them to the early Christian emphasis on the transcendent eschatological promises of God’s reign after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

After the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313 CE, Christians increasingly understood the church as “the only access to the kingdom of God in the world to come and its most powerful symbol in this world.” Isasi-Díaz replaces “kingdom” with “kin-dom” to move away from the political overtones of the former and magnify the interpersonal connections that lie at the heart of the latter. She contends the kin-dom of God “is a much more relevant and effective metaphor today to communicate what Jesus lived and died for,” because it provides an inclusive and expansive picture of God’s family that extends

to all God's children who share a common inheritance through Christ's redemption.²

Despite the faithful promise of an inheritance for all in God's family, some congregations in the United States today lament their declining membership numbers and diminishing social relevance. Although Christ has provided to us the "riches of his grace" (1:7), there exists a culture of scarcity in a growing number of congregations as conversations revolve around what they are lacking.

Scholars of US religion have studied membership decline across several predominantly white mainline Protestant denominations and offered prescriptions for future sustainability. Diana Butler Bass summarizes this wide-ranging analysis in three competing visions. One approach, which she calls the neo-orthodox vision, entails congregations' retreat from direct political involvement to focus upon the spiritual formation of faithful individuals toward distinctively Christian discipleship. Another approach, the panentheist vision, encourages congregations to engage in social and political movements through partnerships with all kinds of agencies, including interfaith and secular organizations, to do good work outside of one's church. The third approach, the liberationist vision, seeks to infuse the everyday experience of worship and fellowship in congregations with explicit social-justice commitments to unashamedly reclaim the religiously motivated activism of twentieth-century pioneers like Jane Addams, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Walter Rauschenbusch.³ The preacher might want to ask the congregation which (if any) of these models applies to them.

This lection encourages congregations to begin with gratitude and remember our identity as God's children. The metaphor of family and household can be challenging in our day and age. With the rise of the "gig economy" through digital platforms, we are witnessing a plethora of independent workers who seek to meet

specific yet temporary consumer needs. While potentially offering workers more flexibility and freedom, the gig economy also highlights the ongoing challenge of individualism in our capitalistic society. It can be difficult for Christians today to connect the powerful images of sharing an abundant inheritance in Christ and joining together to "live for the praise of his glory" (1:11–12) when so much of our identity is tied to our individual labor and the work each person can produce for consumers.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Protestants in the United States encountered oft-contentious divides between conservatives and progressives over matters of biblical interpretation, cultural engagement, and social witness. Amid the many disagreements and schisms, Rick Ostrander observed how different practices of prayer emerged among conservatives and progressives. Conservatives understood prayer as a means to leave the distractions and troubles of the world and receive an infusion of spiritual energy for reentry into the world. Progressives believed prayer encompassed both quiet contemplation and attention to how God was present in the world.

Ostrander provides a pair of vignettes to illustrate this contrast. In 1917, a small group of conservative women awaiting a train to return home from Cedar Lake Bible Conference in Indiana held an impromptu prayer meeting and ended up missing their train. Their pastor, E. Y. Woolley, arranged for a bus to pick them up and they arrived at their destination before the train. Woolley shared how the group was "so absorbed in their prayers that shouts, laughter and train whistles failed to move them."

William Adams Brown, a progressive theologian at Union Seminary in New York City, presented a different view of prayer in 1927. Brown recounted the example of a Christian commuting to work on a New York City train who prayed by gazing into the faces of the other passengers to see the divine image in each

2. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Identificate con Nosotros: A Mujerista Christological Understanding," in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 41–44.

3. Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 215.

human being. Brown commended this believer for seeking after God in “a world of wonderful and ennobling things.”⁴ As we look back into the past and consider our present, we acknowledge Christ has given us a generous inheritance, which is evident in the rich diversity of gifts and the different ways we pray and worship within

God’s family. These differences within and beyond our local congregations are neither to be feared nor erased. Instead, they expand our vision of what it means to be the household of God and increase our gratitude for the inheritance we have received in Christ.

WILLIAM YOO

4. Rick Ostrander, “The Practice of Prayer in a Modern Age,” in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 194–95.

Proper 10 (Sunday between July 10 and July 16)

Mark 6:14–29

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹⁷For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." ²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." ²⁵Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

This passage breaks the continuity of Mark's plot, describing action in which Jesus does not participate and letting anticipation linger concerning the outcome of the apostles' efforts at proclamation, exorcism, and healing (Mark 6:7–13, 30). Even though it interrupts, the account of John the Baptizer's morbid murder does not create a digression from the Gospel's main story. Despite any success the apostles might experience, the story of John's demise declares that the inbreaking of God's reign continues to provoke defensive and dismissive responses. Struggle, opposition, and violence answer back to those who announce God's word. Even as Amos's declarations about King Jeroboam II elicited hostility from Amaziah (Amos 7:10–13) and

John calls out Herod Antipas's sin and suffers wrath from Herodias and pathetic neglect from her husband, so will Jesus speak the truth about himself to the high priest, the priestly council, and Pilate and find himself executed as a matter of political expediency. John's death illustrates starkly what can happen to those who take up their cross and follow Jesus in the way he travels (Mark 8:34).

Although Jesus is rejected in his hometown (6:1–6a), his popularity elsewhere continues to swell. It draws attention away from the man Mark calls "King Herod," who was Herod Antipas, a son of the more famous and notorious Herod the Great. Beginning soon after his father died in 4 BCE and lasting through

The Countenance Divinely Human

God is at once infinitely remote from us and perfectly familiar to us. He is remote by what he is, he is familiar in what he does, for he identifies his thought with the thing he makes and moulds his care for it on its existence. So the mind of God becomes all things and is directly presented by what anything truly is. "He is not far from any of us, for by him we live and move and have our being" not only as souls or persons, but as animals and even as parcels of physical stuff. His will is in the drawing of our breath and in the pulses of our heart; how much more in the movement of our affection or the aspiration of our hope! Above all, he takes the form of our action when he inspires us, when we let our will be the instrument of his. To realise a union with our Creator we need not scale heaven or strip the veil from ultimate mystery; for God descends into his creature and acts humanly in mankind. He has made it our calling that we should have fellowship with himself; and so now by faith, but in heaven by sight, we are to look into the countenance divinely human and humanly divine of Christ the Lord.

Austin Farrer, *God Is Not Dead* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1966), 127.

Jesus' lifetime, Herod Antipas ruled Galilee as a Roman client. Although this Herod appears nowhere else in Mark, he plays a larger role in Luke (Luke 13:31–33; 23:6–12). Never, in any setting, does a Gospel author depict Herod Antipas's curiosity toward Jesus in a positive or well-intentioned light.

In a narrative flashback meant to explain why Herod might think Jesus was John returned to life, Mark portrays the ruler as weak and reckless, quite unfit to hold power. The story of John the Baptizer's execution characterizes Herod in that way through his fear, his arrogance and rash vow, and his inability to do what he knows is right. Even before all of that occurs, Mark reports that John labeled him as willfully disobedient to God's law. For Herod had married a woman, Herodias, who had divorced one of Herod's half brothers (whom Mark 6:17 calls Philip). John condemns this relationship, most likely in view of Leviticus 18:16; 20:21.

Herod and Herodias respond by silencing the meddlesome prophet.

For Herodias, John's incarceration does not go far enough. When she sees an opportunity to force Herod's hand and have the prisoner executed, in about as grisly a manner as one might invent, she takes it; but she is hardly the only one to blame. The scene is macabre in every way. It intimates that the whole family—plus the rest of the nobility present, by extension—participates in villainy.

Herodias manipulates her husband and her daughter (whom other sources identify as Salome and not Herodias as in 6:22). The narrative refrains from commenting on why Herod's stepdaughter (or daughter) dances to entertain a

room of powerful officials, probably mostly men. Such an act would appear beneath a prominent member of the aristocracy. The daughter's dance becomes even more potentially degrading if her performance "please[s]" Herod and his guests in erotic ways, but Mark remains very subtle about that possibility. Less morally ambiguous is what happens next, when Herodias asks her daughter to request John's severed head, and she becomes the means of transporting the bloody trophy on a serving plate to her mother.

Nothing suggests that Herod escapes blame because of Herodias's schemes and her daughter's dancing skills, whether or not one detects sexualized overtones in the scene.¹ Blaming the women for a man's lack of self-control is an all too familiar and destructive trope, but Mark steers away from that by laying chief emphasis on Herod's outright foolishness. His pledge to the daughter—offering up to half of a kingdom that is not even his to grant—is an arrogant

1. What one sees in the scene and how one characterizes the daughter often reveal much about interpreters and their gendered biases. See Janice Capel Anderson, "Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter," in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 111–43.

boast, meant to impress the other elites in attendance. Such irresponsible use of power becomes his undoing, for the preservation of his honor prevents him from breaking the promise, and killing John reveals him as a thug who eliminates God's prophet even though he knew John to be "a righteous and holy man" (v. 20). Herod exposes himself as a man with no control over himself, his words, his power, his household, and his kingdom. This scene could come across as satire if the consequences for John were not so severe and if the scene's function of foreshadowing Jesus' own death were not so tragic.

The first-century historian Flavius Josephus also mentions John's execution by Herod Antipas, although he identifies Herod's motive as concern that John's popularity could incite a political uprising.² Navigating among Josephus's and Mark's different accounts is historians' work, but those interpreting Mark as Scripture can see from the contrast between the two ancient accounts that Mark has no interest in assessing any political gains in Herod's deed.

Mark tells a morality tale, not about obvious topics such as the virtue of a prophet's candor or the sketchy ethics of intermarriages within the machinating Herodian family, but about an elite culture that plays by its own twisted, pernicious rules. Rome chose a pompous leader to govern Galilee, and he represents a culture fueled by power and privilege that will do anything to extend its capacity to pursue its own desires, hold onto power, trumpet its own self-importance, eliminate criticism, and resist the justice and peace that God longs to bring to fruition. John does what he has been doing since the beginning of Mark: calling for

repentance (1:4; cf. 6:12). This scene illustrates what it looks like when corruption and pride make repentance impossible. Then innocent people die.

Other passages in Mark warn against taking John's death as an isolated incident. In Mark 13:9–11 Jesus tells his followers that they too will find themselves at the mercy of "councils . . . governors and kings" because of their fidelity to him. Mark includes no politically influential characters who give disciples reason to presume those officials will be sympathetic.³ Moreover, the Herodian family's moral corruption might not be so unique. In 7:20–23 Jesus warns that people should not understand defilement as a foreign thing against which to protect themselves. Rather, defilement comes from within; "evil intentions" proceed "from the human heart." Instead of treating Herod as a unique villain, perhaps Mark urges audiences to see him as representative of the kind of moral bankruptcy that festers inside human societies, corporations, families, and institutions.

This final story about John's life casts new light on Jesus' instructions to the apostles in 6:7–11, as he prepares them for ministry. Because of John's death, their mission now looks more dangerous. In calling people to repent they may be walking on dangerous ground. A prophet's work has always been like that. Speaking truth to power requires more than one voice. It needs to be a collective effort, involving a community. John had disciples, and they care for his corpse (v. 29). With him gone, one of them will need a source of courage to speak up the next time, when the time is right.

MATTHEW L. SKINNER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

This passage occurs in summertime, when box office competition soars. Summer blockbuster movies clamor for our attention: action, adventure, thrillers, superheroes, and animated movies for children of all ages. In these movies, the

clash between good and evil makes its way onto the big screen each and every summer. Many of us have a habit of being drawn into the intrigue and drama of the big screen during this time of year. So, this passage does not stray far from

2. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.2.

3. Joseph of Arimathea may be the lone exception (Mark 15:43).

our cinematic and narrative sensibilities, the preacher might point out. Mark, here, narrates an essential chapter in the Gospel narrative that is itself a story of intrigue, shocking violence, and the struggle between good and evil.

Mark's account of the conflict between Herod's household and John the Baptist comes as an interlude between the sending of the Twelve (Mark 6:1–13) and their regathering at the feeding of the five thousand (vv. 30–44). So the narrative is a pause in the Jesus narrative, but Mark tells the story in an awkward flashback style.

Mark's narrative style notwithstanding, we do indeed get a picture of the level of disruption John's ministry had on the reigning powers. Here we see the perennial clash between imperial power that seeks personal gain through exploitation (v. 14), and the powers to restore, to heal, and to proclaim the gospel of repentance (1:1–8). Mark's references to Elijah and "the prophets of old" (6:15) could not be clearer: there is conflict between the ways of God's realm and the ways of imperial power. John and Jesus come in the line of the Hebrew prophets so obviously that they are mistaken for the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. Upsetting that kind of power comes with consequences that to most of us are only the stuff of cinema: John is beheaded, foreshadowing Jesus' death. So, the bottom line is clear as far as Herod is concerned: the ways of the realm of God stand in opposition to the ways of power-hungry rulers who will do anything to preserve power and prestige. When those ways come into opposition, God's agents might suffer death. Neither John nor Jesus shirks the message and responsibility of the realm of God, even unto death. The gospel *is* political, much to the chagrin of those who protest otherwise.

If there is a modern-day soundtrack to John's public call to repentance, we might hear it in theomusicologist Yara Allen's anthem "Somebody's Hurting My Brother."⁴ This song has been sung by the thousands all over the United States in the past few years in gatherings of the Poor People's Campaign: National Call for

Moral Revival. The song protests the damage done to marginalized communities and to the environment through public policy failures, expresses solidarity, and vocalizes the intent to work for change. It indicates that the pain, the hurt, the killing, the injustice have gone on for "far too long" and calls for an end to the silence.

On June 23, 2018, people gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC, for the Poor People's Campaign mass rally and direct nonviolent action. The gathering and ensuing march to the US Capitol building included this song, calling on elected officials to renewed action for those who suffer by policy. This event serves as a kind of modern imitation of John's refusal to be silent, when he called Herod to account for his unlawful marriage to Herodias (6:18).

Of course, all of this was safe, relatively speaking. Within the United States, we do not expect to suffer to the degree John the Baptist did. Nevertheless, the clash of powers in the biblical narrative indicates that engaging in conflict by way of prophetic words and actions is a crucial part of the church's ministry. John called Herod, a representative of Roman power, to live in right relationship. He did so quite publicly. Even if not on the same stage or around the same particular issues, such encounters are part of our ministries as well. In word and deed, the church courageously calls the powerful to live into the shape of God's realm. This is precarious and complex work, especially for those who preach in "purple" congregations or for those whose political and ethical beliefs might not necessarily be welcome in a congregation. John shows that the mantle of carrying the message of God's reign can weigh heavy. Silence about the wrong we see at even the highest levels of human institutions might be more convenient, and silence might even preserve one's life, but silence will not do in the call to proclaim God's reign.

In another direction, an even bolder sermon could consider how we might read an unfortunate seam in the way Mark develops these characters. Herod takes relatively little blame here, coming off as somewhat of a hapless character, caught up in the pressure to please his spouse

4. Yara Allen, "Somebody's Hurting My Brother," at <https://soundcloud.com/user-909500790/somebodys-hurting-my-brother-by-yara-allen> (beginning at 4:52).

and, eventually, to fulfill the grandiose banquet promise to his daughter. Herodias, both wife and daughter, are the first women to be directly named in Mark's narrative. We have seen other narrative depictions of women previously in Mark and more will come. Jesus is referred to as the "son of Mary" in 6:3, but she is not present. Mark clearly has an interest in women and how they relate to God's reign.

While the actions of mother and daughter are certainly not worthy of praise, since they do not exhibit faithfulness to God's realm or God's agent John the Baptist, Mark develops these women characters as villains. Jean Delorme goes as far as to say that the mother "becomes John's perfect antithesis . . . she wants his head to be severed as if that would suffice to put an end to the word, as if the mouth were the word's source instead of its momentary organ."⁵ This narrative rendering might be unfair. At the very least, it lets Herod off the hook. Regardless of the women's motivation (whether shame or fear of vulnerability and powerlessness), we want to be careful not to psychologize them. The truth is, these women receive the lion's share of blame

over Herod, the one who holds the most power in this scenario. Mark paints Herod as "deeply grieved," while both women are attributed with acting on a bloodthirsty grudge to squash God's word in the world.

As the United States continues to struggle around issues of women's rights in significant ways, a sermon could use this text as an opportunity to lift up the ways in which women are vilified in cultural narratives, especially in ways that absolve men of their responsibility in harm. The preacher need not look far for instances of these narratives. They seem to keep repeating themselves and, in many ways, to build in intensity. Male clergy who are determined to break abusive cycles might have a particular role to play in bringing to bear Mark's theme of repentance, thinking of ways to connect the sermon to liturgies in which men, especially, confess the sin of misogyny. The sermon and liturgy could move to celebrate the roles women have played in cultural and congregational life, inviting people of all genders to live in liberative, life-giving ways both in their personal lives and communally.

RICHARD W. VOELZ

5. Jean Delorme, "John the Baptist's Head—The Word Perverted: A Reading of a Narrative (Mark 6:14–29)," *Semeia* 81 (1998): 123–24.

Proper 11 (Sunday between July 17 and July 23)

Jeremiah 23:1–6 and

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

Psalms 23 and Psalm 89:20–37

Ephesians 2:11–22

Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Jeremiah 23:1–6

¹Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. ²Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

¹Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” ³Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”

⁴But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Many scholars would argue that 2 Samuel 7:1–14a represents one of the key texts in the Bible. We find two of the most important theological trends present in the Old Testament here in this reading: name theology and Zion theology. The preacher will do well to pay attention to the tension between the idealistic tendencies from the desert tradition running into the realpolitik of an urban capital of a kingdom. Jeremiah models this tension for us as he struggles with Zion theology. Jeremiah is famously one of our most challenging prophets. We even have a rarely used word in the English language taken from his name: “jeremiad,” a complaint or a list of woes. Jeremiah stays true to the reputation this word implies here, as this oracle of woe opens with a blistering attack on false shepherds.

The challenge of a prophet is moving back and forth between oracles of woe and oracles of salvation. The nucleus of the book of Jeremiah is well represented by the woe of the first two verses of this oracle. The prophet Jeremiah challenges the religious orthodoxies of his time. The religious and civil leadership viewed Jerusalem as a specially blessed citadel protected by God, but Jeremiah keeps on referencing how Shiloh, which lies in ruins, was once also considered specially blessed. Now that Jerusalem has been destroyed, we see Jeremiah moving from an oracle of woe to an oracle of hope. God will still bless the scattered flock. God will restore it.

Jeremiah stands for the redemption of suffering. In the ancient world, suffering was often considered a curse from God. In Jesus’ time, he was asked if the curse of disability was a result of the sin of the disabled one or their parent (John 9:2). The book of Jeremiah puts the lie to that type of thinking; suffering is not the consequence of sin or evidence of divine justice. Suffering can be a sign of faithful service to God. This still remains a challenge to the church today. It is all too easy to find the prosperity gospel being preached on TV, and examples of ministers and priests richly rewarded in this world by their congregations. Jeremiah offers the counterexample: faithfulness marked not by prosperity, but by suffering.

Much of the material before Jeremiah 23:1–6 consists of a series of personal confessions or

laments in which the prophet describes the coming catastrophe on both a personal and communal level (Jer. 11–20). Verses 3–4 begin Jeremiah’s hopeful response to this disaster. As much doubt as Jeremiah has cast on the supremacy of Jerusalem, he remains fiercely loyal to the city. He expresses God’s communal concerns. A great desire exists to bring scattered Israel back to Jerusalem. Jeremiah will ultimately give comfort to those forced to establish new lives abroad, but here he holds out hope for the restoration of Jerusalem.

The connections of 2 Samuel 7:1–14a with the rest of the chapter should not be overlooked. Zion theology partially emanates from this chapter, because of the unconditional nature of the covenant between God and David. The key word in this chapter is “forever” (*olam*). While the word comes up repeatedly here, the only other chapter in the Bible where it appears as frequently is 1 Chronicles 17, which also describes the Davidic covenant. In relation to this, the preacher would do well to focus on the unconditional love of God. God’s love is freely given; we do not have to earn it, and we do not merit it. God makes this abundantly clear to David in verse 8b: “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel.” This selection by God is not something David earned or was entitled to. It was pure gift.

The prophet Nathan is an important part of this chapter. He dialogues with David at the beginning of our lection, and then is the mouthpiece for God, who promises David in 2 Samuel 7:16, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” Nathan witnesses this moment of great privilege, but he will also be there to chastise David in 2 Samuel 12, when he confronts David with the false sense of entitlement that leads him into his greatest sin. Great blessing can lead to presumption of God’s forgiveness when one forgets the blessing is purely a gift. We live in a time when religious figures seem to be constantly in the news because of their sins; the dangers of entitlement and presumption are all too evident. God’s loyalty to us never goes

The Joy of Entire Surrender

A shepherd and a king seem widely separated in rank, and yet, if we but understand it, their duties are the same, and their responsibilities are alike. Each is bound to care for, and protect, and bless to the utmost limit of his ability, those who are under his control; and no man is fit to be a king who is not a shepherd as well. Christians are accustomed to looking so exclusively on their side of the question, their duties and their responsibilities, that they lose sight almost altogether of God's side, and thus miss a vast amount of comfort. The responsibilities of an owner, and much more of a Creator, are greater than can be expressed. Parents feel something of this, and by a universal instinct, which is inalienable in our natures, all parents are held responsible within certain limitations, to their own consciences and to their fellow-men, for the well doing and prosperity of their children. In the same way owners of animals, or owners of property, or owners of anything, are bound to care for, and protect, and watch over that which they own, and are held responsible to repair if possible the damages which come to their possessions. Even children feel this sense of responsibility, and will go, perhaps reluctantly, to feed a bird because it is theirs, and rejoice in being released from that duty, because their property has been transferred to another owner. The position of authority and ownership, therefore, brings responsibility, and a king is bound to care for his subjects. Surely the subjects may take the comfort of this, and may rest their souls, in a glad deliverance from every anxiety, when under the care of a wise and loving Ruler. To my own mind there is immense comfort to be found in this thought. Our King is also our Owner. For, says the apostle, "Ye are not your own, but ye are bought with a price." Therefore we may safely leave the care and management of everything that concerns us, to Him, who has Himself enunciated as an inexorable law that "if any man provide not for his own, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel." I feel sure, therefore, that it was not without significance that the Lord took David "from the sheepfolds, and brought him to feed His people and Israel His inheritance." He surely meant, I doubt not, to make him a type of that future King, whose control is and can be nothing but blessing to His people, because He is also their Shepherd and "careth for His sheep." I would that every one could realize the blessedness of this thought. For I feel sure that if they did, there would be no longer any delay in their surrender to this glorious Shepherd King; but like it was in Israel's case as related in I Chron. xii., there would come to our David "day by day to help Him," until there would be "a great host, like the host of God," saying, "Thine are we, David, and on thy side, thou son of Jesse." And there would be then indeed among us, as among them of old, "joy in Israel." For there are but few joys like the joy of entire surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ. The soul that has tried it knows this, and to the soul that has not, I can only say that the control of unselfish love is always lovely, even when that love is earthly, because in the nature of things love *can* choose only the best for its beloved one, and *must* pour out itself to the last drop to help and to bless that one; and that therefore the control of God, who is love; who is not merely loving, but is Love itself, must be and can be nothing but infinite and fathomless blessing.

Hannah Whitall Smith, *Old Testament Types and Teachings* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1878), 189–91.

away, but the danger remains that we may give up on God if we become too entitled. Congregations need to hear of the challenge of being in relationship with God as well as the consolation and hope that derives from God's promise "forever."

Second Samuel 7:9, 13 focuses on the name of God. God's name and reputation will be

furthered by God's relationship with King David. Name theology can be closely related to the importance of temple complexes and other concrete signs of Israel's religious practice. The importance of name connects Israel to the other Semitic and Afro-Asiatic cultures that surround it. God's reputation will be bolstered by

the success of Israel. God has created a special place for God's people, where they will be disturbed no more (v. 10). Israel has not captured the promised land; it is God who has done this thing. Special allegiance is due to God.

The preacher can challenge the congregation here to consider just how dependent they feel on God. Do we really understand that we are not responsible for our successes just as David was not responsible for his successes? We all live in a promised land. We have all inherited a life full of blessings and opportunities provided by God rather than by our own hard work. This lection is pushing us in the direction of thanksgiving rather than entitlement. God defeats our foes, God gives us good health, God provides for us. Name theology is concerned with God's reputation, which is ultimately built up or harmed by the moral lives of God's people.

Another key word in 2 Samuel 7 is *hesed*, which is translated in the NRSV as "steadfast love" (2 Sam. 7:15). This word has many meanings, and no single one of them can quite capture its meaning. There is an important sense of

mercy and compassion in this word. A strong sense of relationality permeates *hesed*. We could also translate it as "solidarity." There is a feeling in this word of a God who is choosing to be with us, which is exactly what we see in Mark 6:53–56. People recognize the compassion of God in Jesus. God's compassion permeates Jesus; we hear, for example, that he is moved with compassion for the people in Mark 6:34.

In the face of massive suffering, compassion now resonates from Jeremiah's message as it switches from an oracle of woe to an oracle of salvation. This is a clear connection with Mark's Gospel for this Sunday, where we see Jesus focused on compassion in the face of many pressures (Mark 6:30). Jesus recognizes that the people were "like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34). The second half of this Sunday's Gospel reiterates how the people recognized Jesus as the compassion of God. The model of the book of Jeremiah, with a story of the prophet's suffering and rejection, may be the closest we come in the Old Testament to a story like that of Jesus.

GARRETT GALVIN

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Jeremiah 23:1–6. Times of tremendous political division go hand in hand with demands for leaders who are willing to "cross the aisle" and compromise with their counterparts. People get exhausted with infighting and scandal; if they cannot find an enemy to unite *against*, they hope for a unifying leader to stand *behind*. When Jeremiah preaches his sermon about Israel's hoped-for, postexilic future, he calls to task the rulers who held (or still hold) them captive. God is not happy with shepherds who scatter the flock, and God will deal with them for their divisive ways.

The preacher may expand the connection to our cultural affinity for division. In my community, it is not unusual to see hedges, fences, and other structures that divide what is "mine" from what is "yours." In many parts of the world, homeowners cement shards of glass to the tops of their perimeter walls to dissuade burglars. Many of the patterns we see in the Western

world today come from colonizers who "made order out of chaos" by clear-cutting forests, drawing lines, and creating physical boundaries.

They wanted everyone to be clear about who owned what.

We still orient our lives around ownership, and those that have much spend much more of their time worrying about how to keep it. We worry about the safety of our possessions as much as we do about ourselves. We install panic buttons, locks, security systems that we can monitor from our cellular phones. We alienate ourselves from those who are the least bit different from ourselves, and our communities become fragmented. We build walls, literal and figurative, thinking they will save us.

They will not. Our "us versus them" cultural tribes do not protect us nearly as well as we think they do. For instance, when citizens of the United States, or any country, force out or keep out immigrants, we lose out on the

technological, economic, and cultural benefits they bring with them.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” God is displeased with the division in the world, but we should keep in mind that God’s interest in unity in this passage is always tied to the accomplishing of justice. Justice supplants unity, and unity is possible only when everyone has their basic needs met. The preacher may want to explore ways that local needs are not being met, in order to rally the congregation to pray for and work toward a just society.

This speaks to the ways in which Christians engage in civic life, but there is also a reminder for how faith communities engage in ministry. Navigating the sacred cows of parish life can be tricky. Pieces of furniture, bulletin formats, service times . . . all sorts of things elicit the common reply, “We have always done it this way.” Making small changes in a church is easy compared to the effort it takes to help a small group realize that their supposedly inclusive community has such a narrow focus that they may be leaving out entire segments of their surrounding neighborhood. Even our liturgies sometimes challenge us to divert from our normal routines: confessing sins both individual and communal, exchanging a sign of peace deliberately and out loud, sharing a meal from one loaf and one cup, to name a few. Even our congregational singing eases us into harmonious community in a way that is rarely experienced otherwise (aside from patriotic hymns during sporting events).

Jeremiah’s homiletical approach hardly eases any community into harmony, and issuing “woes” is not likely to be the preferred homiletical approach for many modern preachers. However, by guiding the congregation to acknowledge who is missing from their regular worship or their social or formation events, a preacher may also guide a congregation into sharing in God’s grief for the ways we are scattered. An effective sermon on this passage may energize a congregation to connect the routine aspects of the liturgy to ways they can pursue justice for all of God’s children in some out-of-the-box ways: admitting complicity to societal sin, waging peace in times of angry debate and division, and breaking bread with members of

the community who are tough to be around. Our liturgies teach us how to live our lives.

Our liturgies also teach us to hope. Many listeners will hear Jeremiah’s words as God’s promise of a particular king—Jesus, most likely. We need to avoid misappropriating Jeremiah’s sermon as if it were meant for a Christian audience, yet we can point to ways that Jesus focused on unity by calling all people in (instead of calling many out). Jesus befriended tax collectors as well as fishers, he spoke with people of every gender, with Jews and Samaritans, and so on. We can remember that Jesus reminded his followers of people who lived on the outskirts of their communities by actually going to those people. We can highlight that whoever Jesus encountered saw in him a compassionate healer and selfless friend.

Followers of Jesus can be those healers and friends, continuing his work in the world as his living presence, and the preacher can inspire this in a congregation.

2 Samuel 7:1–14a. God tells the prophet Nathan to ask David if *he* is the one to build God a house to live in, pointing out that from Egypt, through the wilderness, to where they are now, God has been just fine. God wants David to do the work of discerning why exactly he wants to build a temple. Is it out of guilt? Is it out of pride?

Given God’s role in bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt and toward the promised land, providing for them everything they needed to survive, it seems ridiculous that God would suddenly need a physical temple made by human hands. Throughout the Torah and into the other Hebrew Scriptures, the temple where God has been at work is within human bodies.

The preacher may want to explore the different projects in which the church engages that seem to seek to make God seem more tangible and controllable—ministry programs, buildings, and various traditions. Sometimes we create these things and then hold onto them so tightly that they become too much of the focus. Even though these projects are grounded in our participation in faith communities, they can quickly tempt us to delve into the waters of idolatry.

We need people like Nathan who raise questions about the motivations behind our ministries and programs. When a parish's primary goal becomes its own preservation, we cease to effectively serve our neighbors and lose sight of our deeper desire to reconcile our world to God. We also may forget that the house of the Lord is the one that God makes within us.

The preacher may mention the two times this year when this reading appears—Ordinary Time and Advent. In Advent, we anticipate Christ's coming into the world. During Advent, it is difficult to consider anything more than our holiday

agendas. Summer months, on the other hand, offer preachers and their congregations time to rest, reflect, and have "Nathan moments" of their own—times of perspective building when self-absorbed agendas may be put aside in exchange for periods of discerning what kind of faith God may be calling us into. Ordinary Time might be an extraordinary time to plan for the coming year with a renewed focus on using the worshiping community's power to make itself busy not with institution-focused agendas but rather with ones that are focused on the mission of God.

CURTIS FARR

Proper 11 (Sunday between July 17 and July 23)

Psalm 23

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Psalm 89:20–37

²⁰"I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;

²¹my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.

²²The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.

²³I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.

²⁴My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

²⁵I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.

²⁶He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'

²⁷I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.

²⁸Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.

²⁹I will establish his line forever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

³⁰If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,

³¹if they violate my statutes
 and do not keep my commandments,
³²then I will punish their transgression with the rod
 and their iniquity with scourges;
³³but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
 or be false to my faithfulness.
³⁴I will not violate my covenant,
 or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
³⁵Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
 I will not lie to David.
³⁶His line shall continue forever,
 and his throne endure before me like the sun.
³⁷It shall be established forever like the moon,
 an enduring witness in the skies.”

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 23. The six short verses of Psalm 23 may be the best-known and most frequently recited verses of the entire Psalter. They are often recited by individuals who are in any kind of difficulty; widely used in both Jewish and Christian orders of worship for funerals to comfort the grieving; and appointed in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* for the ritual for Ministration to the Sick when anointing is to be included as part of the rite. Psalm 23 shows up in the Revised Common Lectionary every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, when the Gospel readings for each year liken Jesus to a good shepherd; on the Fourth Sunday in Lent in Year A, as a response to 1 Samuel 16:1–13, in which David is chosen over all of his brothers to be anointed as the next king; on Proper 23 of Year A, as a comment on a reading from Isaiah 25:1–9, in which the prophet assures the people that God will make a feast of all the peoples of earth, swallow up death forever, and wipe away the tears from all faces; and here, on Proper 11 of year B, where it is paired with Jeremiah 23:1–6, in which God vows to punish the false shepherds who do not take care of the people, but rather scatter and destroy the sheep of God’s pasture. Even many who do not regularly attend any religious services at all can recite at least parts of the King James version from memory, so deeply embedded is it in the collective knowledge of the English-speaking world.

While the ubiquity and familiarity of this psalm make it difficult to say anything new about it, it is worthwhile to pay attention to how it speaks when read in a specific context. In today’s reading from Jeremiah, God promises not only to punish the leaders who mistreat the people, but also to someday raise up as king a righteous branch of David who will bring justice and righteousness to the land. Since Psalm 23 is named as a psalm or song of David (*mizmor l’david*) in the Masoretic Hebrew text from which most current English translations derive, it is this explicit reference to David that connects the psalm to the prophecy. David, of course, was far from perfect, as many of the particulars of his life make clear, but as a dispenser of justice and defender of the ordinary people, he was remembered as a king after God’s own heart.

This juxtaposition of Jeremiah’s prophecy and the psalmist’s profound trust in God’s goodness speaks to every generation that feels itself oppressed by unjust rulers and tyrants. Whether the oppressors are politicians who favor the rich and powerful over those who have little, unfair bosses who live in ostentatious comfort while their employees work long hours for meager pay, or everyday domestic abusers and neighborhood bullies, God’s promise to bring justice at some time in the future can sometimes feel empty.

Praying words of gratitude found in the psalm for the simple pleasures of green fields,

quiet streams, and a table set with food and drink can be the antidote to fear, even when one is surrounded by enemies. The psalm is a reminder that goodness is more powerful than evil, that comfort exists even in the midst of suffering, and that God's loving-kindness does not diminish, even when everything seems headed for disaster. That does not mean that God will immediately make everything right, but rather that God is present even in the worst of times.

Psalm 89:20–37. The eighteen verses selected from Psalm 89 are a little more than a third of a much longer poem that seems to have been written directly in response to 2 Samuel 7:1–14a. This passage in the Hebrew Scriptures is presented as a historical record of David's desire to build a permanent, wooden building to house the ark in which God's presence was thought to reside. Until then, the ark had been kept in a tent, ever since its construction by the artisans Bezalel and Oholiab soon after the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt. Now that David has conquered his enemies, consolidated his kingdom, and had a house made of cedar built for himself and his court, he feels a little guilty that God does not also have a house to live in. However, when the prophet Nathan tells David to go ahead with his plan, God lets him know that both of them have misunderstood God's intention. In a play on words, God says, "The LORD will make you a house," referring not to a structure, but to David's heirs who "shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:11, 13).

The psalm reflects this story. The first eighteen verses rehearse the greatness of God as creator and protector, the one who establishes and defines righteousness and justice. The verses appointed for this week reiterate that David has been anointed to rule over the people, with the assurance in verse 28 that God's steadfast love and covenant with him will stand firm forever. However, the psalmist warns, if future generations break the covenant, they will be punished severely. Even so, God promises, David's lineage "shall continue forever, and his throne endure

before me like the sun. It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies" (Ps. 89:36–37).

The psalm, then, is an echo of the first reading. A superscript says it was written by Ethan the Ezrahite, who is described in 1 Kings 4:31 as particularly wise. Ethan may have been a member of the court under David, Solomon, or both, and the inclusion of this psalm attributed to him attests to his importance to the Davidic line. Like Nathan, he serves as a guide and conscience for the current king and all his descendants, reminding them of their responsibilities toward God and toward the people in their care. Here, he warns them against hubris, against thinking that God's assurances of faithfulness and steadfast love are a license to do whatever they please. Rather, they are to rule with justice and mercy, to offer the people in their care the same faithfulness and steadfast love that they receive from God.

While this story and its accompanying psalm may seem to be about the anointed kings of ancient Israel, it also speaks to anyone who is in any kind of authority over others. It is easy to forget that authority and power are not absolute, but rather come with responsibility toward those over whom that authority and power are exercised. Whether one is a parent, an employer, a teacher, a summer camp counselor, or a president, it is necessary to be mindful of God's example of faithfulness and steadfast love, of justice and kindness. While many people today do not like to think about God punishing anyone for anything, the psalmist is careful to distinguish between legitimately holding those in authority to account for their actions and the withdrawal of divine love. The God pictured here is not some arbitrarily wrathful and jealous deity, but rather the protector of the powerless, the last resort of people whose lives are controlled by those who are given authority and position. This God never withdraws the divine steadfast love from anyone, this psalm seems to say, but does call people to account for how they treat one another.

DEBORAH SOKOLOVE

Ephesians 2:11–22

¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

An overarching theme in the Letter to the Ephesians is the contrast between the believer’s pre-Christian past and their Christian present. The author constantly contrasts the lived reality of the Christian prior to and then after their new spiritual positioning in Christ as established in the opening verses. It is as if the writer seeks to take the reader on a voyage of self-discovery by juxtaposing the new life in Christ with their former life without God. Having already located their richly blessed position in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3–14), prayed for their continued spiritual enlightenment and growth (1:15–23), and identified with their spiritual passage from death to life (2:1–10), the author now turns to explain the filial relationship between Gentiles and Jews seeking reconciliation (2:11–22).

Moving from the more generic spiritual experience of every believer, this passage is filled with ethnic and social tensions, which now threaten the unity of the church. What had been an insider vs. outsider debate between Jews and

Gentiles has now become an in-house point of contention within the newly reconstituted people of God. In other words, it is no longer an “us vs. them” argument, but an issue of co-belonging and reconciliation, which has its roots in Genesis and points to the eschatological promises of the coming kingdom.

According to covenantal standards established by the Mosaic Law, the circumcised and the uncircumcised were physically different and therefore alienated one from the other. Literally, Gentiles were born Gentiles “in the flesh” (2:11), but Jews were made Jews through the physical act of circumcision in obedience to God’s Law. Put bluntly, the uncircumcised (Gentiles) had “no hope and [were] without God in the world” (v. 12). In this scenario, the alienation of Jews and Gentiles was chalked up to divine decree.

The phrase “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” (v. 12) denotes citizenship for the covenant people and alienation for those outside it. It is as if circumcision provided the proper

documentation for belonging to God's people (Israel), whereas not having this identity badge marked one as a stranger or foreigner to God's covenant relationship. However, our text announces, the situation has changed. A new covenant has been established; a new relationship between former strangers can now be forged.

The phrase "but now in Christ" (v. 13) marks a definite transition from that which was before to a new reality that one enters through the new covenant in Jesus' blood. Whereas the old covenant created distinctions and separated the chosen people from the rest, the new covenant sought to erase divisions and break down walls. The operative factor bringing people near to God is no longer a physical act performed by human hands (i.e., circumcision), but a divine act enacted in the flesh of Jesus Christ (v. 14). Thus, the new covenant does not just primarily deal with the vertical alienation between God and humanity. It also fixes the horizontal estrangement between people.

Verse 14 clearly demarcates the cultural existence of two groups, which stood in stark opposition due to religious principles. However, now things can and should be different, because the "dividing wall" has been demolished and hostility can no longer be embraced, because the Prince of Peace has come! This is an obvious allusion to the rending of the veil in the Holy of Holies, which signaled a new beginning (Matt. 27:51). Moreover, the creation of a new humanity begins with the abolishment of the Law. It might be helpful to understand the strong language of demolishing the Law as referring to its secondary effects and not its intrinsic value. The problem was not the Law itself, but rather the religious divisions caused by the two groups it created, and the moral lines of separation between them.

Just as important, the text points to the place of reconciliation, "in his flesh" (Eph. 2:14). The two groups are made to reconcile, which they were unable to do for themselves. Rather, they are made one in the God-man Jesus Christ. Dialectically, what the Law-abiding group (Israel) and the non-Law-following group (Gentiles) were each incapable of accomplishing through

obedience to the Law or any other morally ethical means, Christ accomplished in his body. On the cross, he who fulfilled all of "the law with its commandments and ordinances" (v. 15) nullified its negative effects, thus ending Israel's bondage to the Law and the alienation of those far from it. Whatever hostility resulted from the attempt or disinterest to abide by the Law was rendered null by the death of Jesus on the cross (v. 16)

The holistic image of reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles alike is beautifully portrayed in verses 17–18 as the proclamation of peace to both. John R. W. Stott summarizes this as "publishing abroad the good news of the peace he had made through the cross."¹ In the one act of the cross, those who were far off and those who were near were reconciled unto God. No special shortcut treatment for the chosen nation and no back-of-the-line stiff-arm status for Gentiles. Harkening to the Trinitarian blessings of God in the first chapter of the letter, access to God takes on Trinitarian form: the Son provides the means and the Spirit the avenue for reconciliation with the Father (v. 18).

The rest of this passage provides helpful images for understanding the horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. If Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled with God, drawing near to God draws the two groups closer to each other. As in an equilateral triangle, despite the distance between the two groups, the nearer they each become to the Father, the closer together they are to each other. This image of togetherness and unity is further fortified by construction metaphors.

The phrases "citizens with the saints" and "members of the household of God" point to the strong bond of God's one people. No longer are we to think of Jews and Gentiles, for the two have become one. Furthermore, just as the Lord as shepherd pastored his people Israel (Ps. 23), the sheep without a shepherd would also be pastored (Mark 6:34).

The imagery of a house and a temple is significant here, for it alludes to the word of the Lord spoken to David by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 7:1–14a). The temple was not only a house where God dwelt, but the place God met God's people. The Gentiles, of course, were

1. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 103.

allowed only in an outer court of the temple of Jerusalem, but now God's people together had become his temple (v. 21), the place where God dwells (v. 22).

Figuratively, verse 20 establishes the foundation of the new and improved temple as having the foundation of the apostles (read Jesus' disciples) and the prophets (read Old Testament authors). Significantly, Christ Jesus (the anointed/Messiah Jesus) is established as the cornerstone of the temple. As Messiah, all of the writings of

the old covenant have their fulfillment in him and all of the new covenant understanding flows from him.

The architectural imagery here conveys the oneness of the structure of the newly refurbished temple. The old construction has not been laid aside completely in order to build a completely new temple. Instead, the whole structure is in the process of being built spiritually into the dwelling place of God: the church.

SAMMY G. ALFARO

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

I live in a town north of Washington, DC. Frederick, founded in 1745, is known for its “clustered spires.” On Church Street, aptly named, there are All Saints’ Episcopal Church, Evangelical and Reformed United Church of Christ, Trinity Chapel, and Evangelical Lutheran Church. One block north you will find four more churches of various flavors. Their various spires punctuate the skyline and give the city its identity. They would seem to belie the testimony of the hymn “We Are One in the Spirit.” The reality of our churches is too often disunity. No wonder that same hymn ends with prayers that unity be “restored.”²

The author writing to the Christian community in Ephesus realized how divided were the members of that community. He saw the church in Ephesus was made up of a “we” and a “they.” The *we*, it would seem, were the followers of Christ who had begun their journey as Jews, the circumcised (if one is male), those who came from Israel. The *they* would be those born as Gentiles, the uncircumcised. The *they* are described as those who were aliens, strangers, far off. To be a *they* was to be one without hope, to be on the outside—orphans, if you will, for the *they* had not been part of the household. The writer clearly wants the *we* and the *they* to come together.

The author reminds us that through the cross, through the blood of Jesus, the *we* and the *they* have been brought together; nevertheless it would seem that there is still a great deal

of disunity. A pastor might ask their congregation: Who, in the life of our community today, do we consider the *we*, and who are the *they*? We do not always like to admit to our divisions. Name some of the many ways we are divided. Not only do we experience the us/them divide in our own church and among churches, a pastor could point out. We also experience it in our local communities, our nation, and our world. Do you reach out to other Christians? a pastor might ask. Do you reach out to your Jewish and Muslim neighbors? What about Hindu and Buddhist sisters and brothers? Do you reach out to the “Nones”?

One of the challenges of writing a commentary is that it is frozen in time. While I may be reflecting on particular issues and conflicts, those will be different if you come to this in the future. With that in mind, I will use as an example the subject of walls. As I write this commentary, the citizens of the United States are divided not by, but over the issue of, a wall. There are some who feel that, without a tall, impenetrable, continuous wall along our southern border with Mexico, American citizens cannot be kept safe. They understand walls as a way to keep the *they* away from the *we*.

Perhaps the most famous of walls is the Great Wall of China. Thirteen thousand miles long, it took more than a thousand years to build. It is certainly an amazing wall, visible from space, and portions of it remain today. It continues as

2. Peter Scholtes, “We Are One in the Spirit,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 300.

a powerful symbol of identity for the people of China. However, while built to keep out invaders from the north, in the end it proved unsuccessful.

Other walls are built to keep people in. In 1961 the German Democratic Republic quickly constructed a wall that would separate the two Germanies. Yes, it was in part to keep out the West. Even more importantly, it was to keep the people of the GDR in. As the people realized what was happening, more and more tried to escape to the West. The news reports were filled with horrifying images of people throwing children out of windows beside the wall. Hundreds were successful in fleeing to a new life in the West, but many were killed.

Walls can provide security, but the author sees that a wall of hostility, mistrust, and enmity was dividing the Christians in Ephesus. He reminds that Christ Jesus “is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall” (Eph. 2:14). There are many images for understanding what it is like to be one in Christ. Jesus used the image of a vineyard, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5). When we are one in Christ, we are able to flourish and produce “much fruit.”

In the First Letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul uses the metaphor of the body. Even though the church has many members, “we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). He then goes on to remind the community that although they are different—hands, eyes, feet, noses—they are still one body.

The author reminds the Ephesian community that, through the death of Jesus, they are made “one body.” It is an architectural metaphor that is woven throughout the letter. He writes about dividing walls. More importantly he writes that the Jewish “we” and the Gentile “they” have been brought together and empowered by Christ to be built “into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:22). He writes of structures, of foundations that are the apostles and prophets, and of the cornerstone, which is Christ.

The image of cornerstone was, for the Jewish members of the community, a messianic term. The prophet Isaiah told the people, “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation” (Isa. 28:16). Jesus reminded us, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes?’” (Matt. 21:42).

Does your church have a literal cornerstone? Those cornerstones can be a wonderful reminder of the community that built the church. I think, though, that the writer of the letter is challenging us to think not about the actual stones that are the foundation of the buildings in which we worship. Rather, he is challenging us to remember that, in Christ who is our cornerstone, we are no longer strangers and aliens who are divided by hostility. We have been made one, and in our oneness, our loving unity, we are able to reach out and break down the walls of hostility that divide our world.

Christian Führer was the pastor of Nikolai Kirche in Leipzig. In the German Democratic Republic, worship and religious activities were firmly constrained. In September 1982 he began to hold peace prayers on Monday evenings. They were not really formal services. Rather, people gathered and offered their own prayers and reflections on what it meant to live in the repressive regime. Führer was surprised how quickly the attendance grew. By early 1989 the secret police began to block the roads to the church, but the prayers continued. On the ninth of October, seventy thousand people gathered outside the church to protest for peace. Führer asked everyone to carry candles. He felt that, if they had candles, they would not throw stones at the army and police. Over the next month huge gatherings were held all over the GDR. On the ninth of November the wall fell. Christ “is our peace . . . he has broken down the dividing wall, . . . the hostility between us” (Eph. 2:14).

LUCY LIND HOGAN

Proper 11 (Sunday between July 17 and July 23)

Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. . . .

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Ministry is both exhilarating and exhausting. In Mark 6:7–12, Jesus *sent out* (*apostellein*) the Twelve two by two to preach the gospel, drive out demons, and heal those who were sick. In verse 30, these same *apostles* (*apostoloi*), or “sent-out ones,” gather around Jesus to give a report of their mission. They tell Jesus “everything, as much as they did and as much as they taught” (my trans.). Nothing was left out of their report. The reader can sense the excitement of the Twelve in telling Jesus about every sermon they preached, every home they visited, every exorcism they performed, and every miracle they beheld.

The real test of discipleship, however, comes now. In verses 31–32, Jesus perceives the exhaustion of the Twelve and their need to recuperate after their mission, since they had not yet eaten. He invites them to a “deserted place” where they can rest. By “deserted place,” Jesus likely has in mind an unpopulated area outside of the rural villages. His intent is to travel by boat on the Sea of Galilee and land in one of the coves scattered along the western shoreline between Bethsaida (Luke 9:10) and Tiberias (John 6:22–23). From there they can walk to a remote area away from the pressing crowds.

However, the popularity of Jesus as a teacher and miracle worker had already spread throughout the region (Mark 1:28) and to such a degree that people from every town ran by foot ahead of the boat to meet Jesus as he landed on shore (6:33). What happens next brings a resolution to the short story of the Twelve’s failed attempt to retreat with Jesus and also introduces the following story of the feeding of the five thousand (vv. 35–44). Verse 34 functions as a hinge text between the two stories. In verse 34, when the boat lands, Jesus sees the crowds and “is moved with a deep compassion” (my trans.) for them. The affection that Jesus has for the people is a gut-wrenching sympathy (*esplanchnisthē*). He is burdened by the sight of desperate people. Jesus gives up on the retreat, and instead “he begins to teach them many things,” as he has regularly done throughout his ministry (1:21; 2:13; 4:1; 6:2). Jesus feeds the crowds spiritually through his teaching (6:34) and will soon feed them materially with real bread (v. 42).

The reader may wonder what Jesus saw in the faces of people that drew such a strong emotional reaction from within him. Perhaps it was the sight of abject poverty that characterized first-century-CE Galilee that provoked Jesus.

First-century Galilee was mainly an agricultural economy with a minor fishing industry. Most lived on a humble vegetable diet, with dairy supplements, and occasionally poultry, lamb, and other meats. About 90 percent of Galilee's residents lived at the subsistence level or below it. In the ancient world, there was no middle class. The working class (*penēs*) who struggled to live at the subsistence level were often counted among Galilee's poor (*ptōchos*). They included farm families, fishermen, skilled and unskilled laborers, artisans, most merchants and traders, small shop owners and freed persons (62 percent of the population). Many farming families suffered land loss due to a poor harvest, natural calamity, and extreme taxation (Roman taxes were 20–40 percent) and consequently joined those who lived below the subsistence level among the day laborers, widows, orphans, beggars, prostitutes, bandits, and the disabled (28 percent of the population).¹ As a carpenter from Nazareth (6:3), Jesus understood the daily struggle for subsistence.

The reader is also given an Old Testament allusion to explain the source of Jesus' compassion. The multitudes in Mark's narrative are tied to an enduring Old Testament image of Israel as "sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34). The phrase evokes the long history of faithless kings and priests who neglected to lead Israel with justice and teach them to obey God's decrees with covenant fidelity (Num. 27:17; 1 Kgs. 22:17; 2 Chr. 18:16; Isa. 13:14; Ezek. 34:2–5; Zech. 10:2). Israel's leaders had failed to care for God's people spiritually and materially, and the resultant conditions of spiritual and material poverty elicited Jesus' passionate response.

In contrast to the succession of faithless rulers, there have been two leaders who stand out as faithful shepherds in Israel's history. They are the only two figures in the Old Testament who changed vocations from their previous role as literal shepherds of livestock to metaphorical shepherds of God's people: David (Ps. 78:70–72) and Moses (Isa. 63:11). Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as both the Davidic Shepherd-King and as the new Moses throughout this passage (vv. 31–34) and the subsequent episodes (i.e.,

the feeding of the five thousand in vv. 35–44 and Jesus' walking on water in vv. 45–52).

The Old Testament lections trace the prophetic promise that God would eventually send a messiah from the house of David (2 Sam 7:1–14a; Ps. 89:20–37) to shepherd God's people in a way that their past leaders did not (Jer. 23:1–3). The righteous Branch of David will reign wisely, execute justice in the land, and shepherd the people so they no longer live in fear (Jer. 23:4–5). Mark's Gospel highlights Jesus' compassion for the crowds to signal that their deplorable state as "sheep without a shepherd" has come to an end. God's Messiah has arrived. Jesus is the true Shepherd who restores and leads God's people (Ps. 23:1–6; cf. John 10:11–16; Rev. 7:17).

The Mark 6 lection takes a narrative jump from verses 31–34 to verses 53–56. It is important, however, to trace how the image of Jesus as Israel's true shepherd unfolds in the intervening episodes. In answer to the prophetic charge that the past shepherds of Israel cared only for themselves (Ezek. 34:18–19), Jesus as the Davidic shepherd-king feeds the flock of five thousand hungry people with five loaves and two fish until they are satisfied (Mark 6:42). Like Moses who fed manna to Israel in the desert, Jesus, as a new Moses, feeds bread to the crowds in a deserted place (vv. 35, 41).

The reader is then introduced to a different christological image when Jesus walks on water (vv. 45–52). Jesus' walk across the Sea of Galilee recapitulates Moses' parting of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21–15:19) and alludes to a new, greater exodus for God's people. In this new exodus, Jesus delivers God's people not from slavery under an imperial power like Egypt or Rome (John 18:36–37), but from the forces of evil, suffering, and death (1 Cor. 15:50–57).

In verses 53–56 the same theme of the crowds who pursue Jesus is rehearsed but with greater intensity. Jesus is recognized "at once" (Mark 6:54), and the villagers "rush" toward him (v. 55). They "beg" to touch even the cloak of Jesus for healing (v. 56). The demands of crowds appear to increase. Yet in the face of human need, Jesus continues to feed people

1. Sakari Häkkinen, "Poverty in the First-Century Galilee," *Hervormde theologiese studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 1–9.

spiritually and materially. While Jesus understands the importance of a strategic withdrawal from work and the need to create a sacred space for a Sabbath rest, he also remains available and flexible to the pastoral care of God's people. He models for the disciples what they themselves will have to learn as those "sent" by God and as

future shepherds of God's flock. There is never a convenient time for ministry. We should expect random interruptions. Whether as ordained clergy or lay leaders, we are called to suspend our immediate plans in order to care for those in need.

MAX J. LEE

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

You cannot begin to consider these incidents apart from what immediately precedes. John the Baptist, a distant relative of Jesus, his literal forerunner, perhaps dear friend, has been brutally executed by the faux king, Herod. In prison as a result of speaking truth to power, John's terrible death was precipitated by a frivolous promise made to a dancing girl at a royal banquet. The news must have shaken Jesus to his core. Whatever Jesus believed about his own future, John's death surely must have reminded him of harsh reality. Challenging autocratic power can be deadly.

Jesus had sent his disciples out, two by two, on their first mission venture. He gave them specific instruction on what to do, to take nothing along but sandals and one tunic, no bread, no money. They would be on their own. He assured them that they had authority to do the job. The mission was hugely successful: they had cast out demons as he instructed and healed the sick and now they had returned. They were exhausted but energized by the prospect of reporting their success to Jesus and to one another, swapping stories about what they had seen and done and experienced. Now, with his heavy burden of grief and perhaps anxiety about what lay ahead for himself and his followers, Jesus proposes a Sabbath. "Come away to a quiet place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Mark adds a delightfully suggestive anecdote: "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." Busy modern families understand exactly.

Sabbath is deep in Hebrew tradition, a fundamental biblical idea. God works for six days in the creation story and on the seventh day God rests. God's rest is part of the magnificent

mystery of creation. Creation itself requires rest to be completed. God knows when to stop and rest. God knows how to step back, take a deep breath, and enjoy what God has created. The work of creation includes the cessation, the enjoyment. Observing Sabbath has not only disappeared from modern life; it has been replaced by incessant, nonstop work. Computers and cell phones have enabled working hours to expand to twenty-four per day. You can receive and send emails and text messages and calls, do a video conference wherever you are all day and all night. Technology allows work to follow you even on vacation anywhere in the world.

The Sabbath Jesus and his disciples need never happens. Crowds have been gathering wherever he goes. The little band has climbed into a boat and made for a quiet place along the lake shore. They have already begun to relax. Blessed rest at last—but the world, as it so often does, intercedes. A crowd of people watched them leaving. The word spreads and now the crowd is moving and by the time the boat arrives at its destination, it is not a quiet place at all. The crowd is already there to greet them, and now it is larger.

When he sees what is happening, Jesus abruptly changes the agenda. Stepping out of the boat and seeing the crowd, he suddenly feels compassion. The gathered people seem to him "like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34). It is another rich Jewish and Hebrew biblical image: men and women, lost, wandering aimlessly, without plan or purpose, hungry for food but also for meaning and purpose. He greets them, welcomes them, speaks with them, listens to them.

My favorite part of this episode is the disciples' reaction to the sudden disappearance of the lovely promise of a quiet place, a dinner, and

a good night's sleep. I understand. They do what many of us would do, what we do every day, what I do every day as I walk past the homeless man on the corner asking for money for a sandwich or a room to spend the cold night. The disciples ask Jesus to send the crowd away, so that they can return to the rest they so desperately want and need. Instead, he does the most remarkable, compassionate thing. He feeds the crowd in an act so central to who he is that it is in each of the four Gospels.

Then, instead of resting, it is back in the boat crossing the lake to Gennesaret. People rushing from the entire region are there again, this time bringing their elderly and sick dear ones, this time urgent, desperate, hungry not only for food but for healing, wholeness. Mark observes that wherever he goes now—villages, cities, farms, marketplaces—desperate people want to be close to him, to touch his robe, to be healed.

There is a built-in tension, for women and men who aspire to follow Jesus, between giving life away for others and the necessity of responsible self-care. The tension is there for everyone, but it is particularly intense for those who have answered Christ's call and who work daily for the church or other religious institutions. There are simply no built-in limits to the needs of the people we serve, not to mention institutional administrative and management responsibilities. Work is never done. Looming always is Jesus' invitation to find your life by losing it and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."²

So this episode becomes a commentary on what it means to be a Christian and to give your life away striving to obey and follow Jesus. It happens in a thousand and one decisions, small and large, every single day, about what takes commanding precedence in life. At the

same time, it does raise the important question, When does self-sacrifice become unhealthy to oneself and one's family and loved ones?

Many who live out their faith by working in the church, laity and clergy, come to the unhappy realization that the never-ending demands of work result in missed one-time events in the lives of their children: recitals, basketball games, concerts. We are not the only ones sacrificing for our commitments. Families and spouses sacrifice as well. There is another commitment necessary to health and to life-giving relationships: acknowledging vocational responsibilities but also personal, family, and social responsibilities. It is possible to work hard and give life away and at the same time give life to dear ones. It can be a helpful model for others. It is okay and, in fact, responsible to miss a committee meeting to attend a daughter's volleyball game or piano recital.

Elaine Pagels observes, "Many people in antiquity spent enormous amounts of time and energy searching for ways to 'heal the heart' as countless people are doing today, expanding an enormously increasing range of clinical medications, therapeutic techniques, exercises, support groups, meditation, yoga."³

Not only the crowds that followed Jesus need his healing touch. Modern men, women, young people, and children also hunger for healing and wholeness. It is a good tension between giving life away to serve others and acknowledging and attending to one's own needs. This incident reminds us that the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ is for everyone: for the world and also for the women and men who have promised to give their lives to communicating and living out the gospel. It is good news for us too. The fringe of his healing cloak is available, thanks be to God, to all of us.

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2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 79.

3. Elaine Pagels, *Why Religion, A Personal Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 207.