

DAY OF PENTECOST

John 20:19–23

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Theological Perspective

Today’s Gospel lection is a postresurrection passage from the Gospel of John that represents the Johannine community’s alternative understanding of the Lukan description of the Pentecost commissioning of the church and the first gift of the Spirit. The homiletical location of this lection, Pentecost Sunday, suggests theological foci on mission, commission, and the Holy Spirit, but this pericope also rewards reflection on the risen Christ and on the Christology of the Johannine community.

Previously in John 20, the fast-running Peter and the Beloved Disciple have gone to confirm that Jesus’ tomb is empty, and Mary Magdalene has encountered the risen Jesus in the garden. As we enter this lection, the disciples are gathered together later on that first Easter Sunday behind locked doors when Jesus appears to them, proclaiming—or invoking—*shalom*, and showing them his body, unmistakably scarred by the manner of his death, but now resurrected. Jesus then again proclaims *shalom*, a repetition that begins to suggest an eschatological dimension of fulfillment, and commissions the gathered disciples to continue the work he has begun, the Father’s work. Finally, he breathes on the gathered followers and bids them receive the Holy Spirit, which grants them the power to forgive.

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Behind the barricaded wooden door, the room was silent as a tomb. The disciples huddled together in mute misery, no one daring to speak aloud of Mary’s wild account of a Jesus-sighting earlier that day. The very idea of it spooked them down to their bones, because anxiety over persecution by the religious authorities (v. 19) paled in comparison to something they feared even more: Jesus, back from the dead with a score to settle. If he caught up with them, what would Jesus do? Shame draped over the room like a shroud. But then, suddenly into this miasma a presence of electrifying substance materialized in their midst. Jesus! Fear ratcheted up to pure terror; but when Christ spoke, their roiling thoughts of doom were suddenly stilled. His voice was richly lyrical, like bells pealing on a hillside. “*Peace be with you*,” he said, his face radiating an irrefutable, irrepressible . . . love.

It is a stunning scene. Despite its familiarity and joyful tone, a close consideration of this text can trigger some discomfiting questions. Do the disciples deserve this surprising reception from Christ? Is it fair that they get off without any kind of reproach, despite the fact that only one among them joined the women in bearing witness to the horror at the foot of the cross? Is there no retribution for utter abandonment of the Messiah? What kind of

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What a surprise Jesus' disciples experienced when they saw him once again, yet not fully without anticipation. John 20:19–23 is the second of several postresurrection accounts where Jesus appears to his followers. This narrative, which can be viewed as the pneumatological climax to John's Gospel, can be divided into two units: verses 19–20, the appearance of the risen Jesus, and verses 21–23, the commissioning of the disciples by the risen Jesus.

In the first part of the narrative, verse 19 establishes the setting for the disciples' surprise event. The time is evening of the first day of the week, the same day when Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene early in the morning when it was still dark outside (John 20:1). The narrative implies that Mary has announced to Jesus' disciples that he is risen (vv. 17–18). The same time frame provides continuity between Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene (vv. 1–18) and his appearance to the disciples (vv. 19–23). This first day of the week would have been Saturday evening after the close of the Sabbath, around 6:00 p.m., when the Jews who normally observed the Sabbath would meet in homes to break bread (Acts 2:46), thus prolonging the Sabbath. The doors to the house where the disciples have gathered are locked because, according to the evangelist, the disciples feared "the Jews,"

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The first decision a preacher must make is whether to preach about one or more of the appointed lessons or to preach more generally about Pentecost, the festival. The story of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, as told by John, offers a number of homiletic themes.

The narrative opens with the renewal of creation, which begins with the evening of a new day, the first day of the week. So the first theme available to a preacher is that of beginnings and new beginnings. Just as the Holy Spirit moved over the waters in the beginning of creation, so the Holy Spirit is poured out as the very breath of God in the beginning of a new mighty and creative act of God. The homilist can make much of what is involved in any creative act, the relationship between a work of art and those who experience it. The creative act both demands and reveals something of the creator, intended or not. Those who experience a work of art bring to it all kinds of interpretation, imposition of meaning, and, frequently, distorted vision. The gift of the Holy Spirit both initiates the work of the renewal of creation and guides and shapes its interpretation among those who respond.

A second homiletic emphasis can be found in consideration of the disciples' meeting in a house with locked doors "for fear of the Jews."

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Jesus delivers a clear message to the disciples: He wants them to continue his own mission—a mission he himself was given by the Father. But what exactly is the mission upon which he sends them? Unlike the Synoptics, the Gospel of John centers less on ethical teaching and more on teaching the person of Jesus as witness to God's power and presence. Unlike, for example, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20), which commands the disciples to go into the world, teaching Jesus' message of the kingdom and making new disciples, the Johannine commission is not centered on ethical teaching but on love and life in the faithful community as fidelity to Christ.

The Johannine community understood this "new commandment" Jesus gives (John 13:34–35) to be the commandment to love each other as Jesus had loved them. In John's Gospel, the practice of love, rather than adherence to ethical teachings, will identify followers of Jesus to each other and to the world. Thus, in this pericope it might be said that Jesus first commissions his disciples to continue his mission of divine love and then gives them the spiritual power to carry out that mission in community. In a symbolic reenactment of the priestly creation myth in Genesis, Jesus breathes (*emphysaō*, in its one use in the Christian Testament) on the disciples and gives them the Spirit (*pneuma*, also translatable as "breath" or "wind") in order that members of the community may have the ability to forgive each other.

This is the one reference to forgiveness in the Gospel of John, and coming here near the end of the Gospel and following the resurrection, it takes on even greater magnitude. Unlike proof-texting interpretations that seize on this single verse to explain the Christian's God-given prerogative to forgive or judge, the context indicates that the receipt of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness are intimately linked. For the community to live out Jesus' Johannine commission of love, divine assistance may be necessary; a community cannot continue together in love without being able to forgive each other, and love (as Paul concludes in the First Letter to the Corinthians) is the most important gift of the Spirit. The forgiveness or retention of sins is thus an action taken within the community and for the benefit of the community, not in order that individuals may render judgment on outsiders or on their own recognizance.

This commissioning of the church—the mission of the church, carried out by Jesus and then given

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religion throws behavioral accountability out the window?

Given the many times the disciples were rebuked over the years, it is indeed interesting to note Jesus' total lack of reproach in this high-stakes reunion. Jesus seems impatient to get on with things, to push forward into the future. He issues traveling instructions: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21). What are the disciples being sent to do? Preach great sermons? Create vibrant church programming? Actually, Jesus offers a very particular foundational mandate instead: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (v. 23).

This little grenade of a sentence is perhaps the most evocative of the text. Although long used as a foundation for the establishment of the priestly power of absolution (see also Matt. 16:19), today's preacher might explore this verse more expansively. Aside from hermeneutical questions regarding the verse's odd grammatical structure, one might also wonder about theology. If Jesus is conferring the power of pardoning sin to his followers, does this imply that an intentional harboring of unforgiveness is acceptable? It seems contradictory for Jesus to appoint humans to judge others, since Christ's policy on forgiveness was so crystal clear. Forgiveness? Yes, all the time.

Many commentators suggest that verse 23 is more appropriately interpreted as the risen Christ's urging his disciples foremost to teach and model *shalom*, ushering in a breathtaking new vision of community built upon mutual forgiveness. As a pastor friend of mine says, "This directive puts the ball back in our court. We humans now have a responsibility to forgive, which means it is no longer all on God's shoulders."

Forgiveness is ridiculously hard for us. We are incensed by all that is done to us, ready to litigate at the drop of a hat. Outrage is all the rage, dominating talk radio and the evening news. How did we come to regard personal happiness as an inalienable right? Wisely, our Johannine pericope reminds us that if forgiveness is something we choose to retain (the Greek word used is *krateō*, "to hold"), we will be eaten up inside by a corrosive bitterness. A spiritual director once told me: "In John 20, we see that Jesus gave humanity serious power. If we forgive, then forgiveness is released. If we don't, pain and anger fester inside. Forgiveness is a serious business." The writer Anne Lamott echoes this: "Not forgiving is

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that is, religious authorities with whom they were in conflict.

Jesus not only appears before his disciples but also talks to them: “Peace be with you” (v. 19). In Hebrew, this greeting was a standard one (e.g., 1 Sam. 25:6; Dan. 10:19). In John’s Gospel, the greeting may be a standard one as well, but in the context of the Gospel and Jewish tradition as a whole, the greeting has many rich implications and connotations. First, peace is the hope for all of Israel. Peace is the fruit of justice, righteousness, and loving-kindness, toward which Jewish life is oriented. Second, peace is a characteristic of the new covenant God will make with Israel (Ezek. 34:25). Third, peace is messianic. The prophets described the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6), whose authority and reign will usher in endless peace (Isa. 9:7; see also Mic. 5:1–5). Finally, peace is what the psalmist hopes will be within the walls of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:7) and within the city itself (Ps. 122:8).

In John’s Gospel, peace is the gift Jesus gives to his disciples before his passion and death (John 14:27). Later on in the Gospel, Jesus reassures the disciples that he is not alone, because the Father is with him, and therefore, the disciples should be at peace (16:33). Jesus’ simple greeting is a further sign that Jesus is indeed the hope of all people. He embodies the new covenant into which he welcomes all people. As Messiah, he is the new Jerusalem, into which his disciples and all peoples are being built, formed, and fashioned to become a dwelling place for God (see Eph. 2:11–22).

After Jesus greets his disciples, he shows them his hands and his side (v. 20a). This gesture is revelatory for the disciples and serves as evidence that the one standing before them is the crucified Jesus, now risen from the dead, which is cause for joy. The gift of peace that he extended to them prior to his crucifixion is realized anew in his presence. Jesus had told them earlier that they would see him and that their sorrow would be turned into joy (John 16:16–24), and his prediction has come to pass. Furthermore, with the fulfillment of Jesus’ word, the Gospel writer situates Jesus in the rich prophetic tradition of his ancestors.

The second part of the narrative, verses 21–23, features Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples. (The phrase “Peace be with you” in v. 21 echoes v. 19 and links the two parts of the narrative.) The second greeting introduces a new dimension into the disciples’ lives: mission. Jesus commissions the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”

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The preacher who takes this path will need to say something about the role of “the Jews” in this Gospel. John uses this term to refer to the people who were at odds with the followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish too. Many commentators and pastors substitute “the Judaizing party” or “the Jewish authorities” or some other such phrase to avoid an anti-Semitic interpretation.

The depiction of the disciples hiding in fear behind locked doors offers the opportunity to describe the gift of the remarkable presence of God in the resurrected Jesus and in the giving of the Holy Spirit that has the effect of unbinding that which is bound, overcoming that which is locked away, and, in the end, casting out anxiety and fear. We are bound in any number of ways. We close doors and build locks for any number of reasons. Some people in any congregation will remember somewhat wistfully a time or a place where it was not necessary to lock doors, when people lived without so much fear. Many will also have had the experience of visiting a church on a weekday, only to find that the doors are locked. We can usually find fear and anxiety at the root of this need to secure property.

The casting out of anxiety and fear can be a fruitful theme for a preacher at Pentecost. The unveiling of the evil that stems from such fear is part and parcel of the gospel, opening to us a new way of living that does not rely on the creation of enemies, scapegoats, and victims. The same anxiety that gets us into all kinds of trouble and leads us to all kinds of broken relationships is the very fear that led to the death of Jesus. Anxiety will often lead us to triangulate others in order to manage our anxiety or lead us to make others play the role of a scapegoat. A couple with anxiety in their relationship will frequently focus on one or more of their children, sometimes with the effect that the child or children become the symptom-bearers for the anxiety of the parents.

It has often been observed that the identification of a common enemy can forge a great sense of unity or shared purpose over against that “other.” The fall of the Berlin Wall has meant that fear of “the evil empire” no longer has the power to galvanize us against our cold-war enemies. “Terrorists” and radical Islam have emerged to fill that space formerly occupied by the Soviet Union and allowed us to recover a sense of solidarity that puts us on the side of the good, the right, and the true, over and against what we perceive as evil and false. The sad history of anti-Semitism shows how frequently Jews have

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to the disciples to continue—is a commission to love as Jesus loved, sacrificially, so that others may see and know God through this self-giving love. This lection thus differs theologically from the traditional Pentecost text from Acts 2, in which the pentecostal gift of tongues within the faithful community is followed by Peter’s preaching repentance of sins (and then offering the Holy Spirit) to those outside the community. In John’s Gospel, it is not repentance of sins, but the love and forgiveness that Jesus offers and the Spirit seals, that will provide redemption. The Johannine redemption message will draw others into the worship of the risen Christ (and the life of the Spirit). As Stanley Hauerwas notes, “Being a Christian is an expression of our obedience to, and in, a community based on Jesus’ messiahship.”¹ The ability of the Christ-following community to live and love together in self-sacrificing forgiveness will be, in and of itself, a powerful proof that Jesus is Lord.

The Gospel of John also offers the intriguing theological paradox of its Christology, particularly apparent in this passage. John boasts the highest Christology of any of the canonical Gospels, with Jesus described as being one with the Father and present since before the creation of the earth. In this pericope, moreover, he offers his followers the Spirit of God and grants them *shalom*. At the same time, however, the writer of John presents us with the most human figure of the risen Christ in its depiction of his postresurrection appearances. No other Gospel demonstrates this level of concern for the holes in the hands of a risen body or for the gaping hole made in a human side (which the missing Thomas will later be invited to examine). This risen Lord is clearly in a human body, yet he is powerfully supernatural, appearing among them despite the locked doors that protect them from the people they fear. When his disciples see Jesus and he shows them his wounds, they rejoice. This is indeed the Jesus they knew and loved, returned in a physical body, tangible proof that the claims he had made for and of himself are true.

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like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”¹

With so much at stake, we need to practice forgiveness. The Protestant confessional unit (prayer of confession, assurance of pardon, passing of the peace) remains an ideal opportunity to exercise the spiritual practice of forgiveness, especially if John 20:19–23 is used to amplify it as the very ground of personal and community wholeness. Beyond sinners pleading for mercy from an angry God, we might want to enlarge the circle of the confessional moment of liturgy. Poignantly, a friend of mine once told me, after hearing a condemning sermon on some modern human pox, “I don’t need to come to church to hear what a bad person I am. I do a fine job of that on my own.” There are so many wounded souls in our pews. We are burned by the scorching heat of self-criticism. We have hurt and have been hurt by others, including God, through either unreconciled personal tragedy or from feeling condemned by religious judgment. How might our liturgy be enriched if we more often perceived the confessional prayer as a time not only to offer repentance toward God, but as a time of releasing forgiveness to our neighbors and ourselves? As we exercise Jesus’ mandate of forgiveness, we receive the Holy Spirit, generating mercy and love as we greet each other with the ancient words: *Peace be with you*.

In many ways, the confessional moment of liturgy seems to contain the entirety of the gospel message in just a couple of minutes of clock time.

This spiritual practice prepares us for what comes next. Tellingly, the drama of the upper room encounter does not end with Christ pronouncing forgiveness to the disciples, because the Christian story does not end on Easter. As Christ was sent, and as the disciples were sent, we are sent. The winds of Pentecost propel us to “pay it forward,” breathing out forgiveness to each other by the grace of the Spirit, transforming our world into communities of *shalom*.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON BOSSERT

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 49.

1. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 134.

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(v. 21b). The disciples are now welcomed into the fullness of Jesus' mission and ministry, which entails living a life of love, preaching, teaching, healing, evangelizing, and proclaiming the reign of God and God's love for all people (cf. John 10:16).

Following the words of commission, John tells his audience that Jesus "breathed" on the disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 22). Like Moses and Jeremiah, who were also commissioned by God and given the gifts they needed for the mission (see Exod. 3:1–12; 4:14; Jer. 1:4–10), so also the disciples are given the gift they need—the Spirit. The fact that Jesus "breathed" on them suggests transference and sharing of power. Just as Jesus received the Spirit, as testified by John the Baptist in John 1:32, so now the disciples receive the same Spirit through Jesus' breathing upon them. Thus the disciples have received a new baptism (see John 1:33). This is the Spirit of God, the same Spirit that was breathed into humankind at the time of creation (Gen. 2:7), but this time the Spirit is also the Spirit of Jesus, the two being the same Spirit (John 4:24). This Spirit that the disciples receive is prophetic (Num. 24:2; Mic. 3:8; Isa. 61:1), is associated with leadership (1 Sam. 16:13), is wise (Deut. 34:9), renews the face of the earth (Ps. 104:30), and is a sign of the unfolding reign of God (Joel 2:28–29; cf. Acts 2:17–18). Jesus now fulfills his promise to the disciples that he would send an "Advocate," the "Spirit of Truth" (John 14:15–18).

The narrative closes with the disciples receiving the power to forgive sins. Earlier in the Gospel, only Jesus, with the power of God, could forgive sins. Now he has given this power to the disciples, in order that they may further the divine mission of reconciling people to the One who remains reconciled to all (cf. Col. 1:19–20).

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been chosen to play the role of scapegoat, even unto death.

Jesus himself is the preeminent example of this mechanism of evil at work. The Pharisees and Sadducees could put aside their differences to unite in the common goal of restoring equilibrium to the system that Jesus' messianic claims disrupted, and the Romans could single out certain people for crucifixion as a demonstration of their power to maintain order. The whole story of Jesus uncovers how this mechanism, by which we deal with our anxiety by finding someone to blame, works to make us feel better, and how readily we all participate in it at the expense of others.

A third homiletic theme in this passage is forgiveness. If part of the work of the Holy Spirit is the unveiling of mechanisms of evil by which many of God's creatures are marginalized, then a further work is making possible a new way of living in this new creation. One means to this new way of life, revealed in John's story of Pentecost, is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is part of the gift and consequence of Pentecost. It has been observed that forgiveness changes very little about the past but changes everything about the future. For some people in any congregation, forgiveness is a topic of major concern and major difficulty, especially when the offense is ongoing. This is particularly true in situations of abuse, but by no means limited to those. A preacher will need to decide how best to approach forgiveness as gift and consequence of new creation in a particular congregation. It may be that looking at all the lections of coming weeks through the lens of John's story of Pentecost would make for a compelling preaching series.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

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1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

³No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

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Spiritual gifts are the gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good and for the edification of the body of Christ, but to the church in Corinth—as perhaps to Christians today—they remain mysterious, and their diversity makes one curious. Within this rich set of possibilities, how can we be certain what behaviors are from the Spirit? How can we know who truly speaks for God? Given the homiletical situation of Pentecost, this lection suggests theological focus on the results of the coming of the Holy Spirit: the number and purpose of spiritual gifts, their importance for life in community, and some consideration of whether Paul’s description of the Spirit suggests a truly Trinitarian theology.

Paul’s response to the Corinthian church’s implied question—who speaks for God?—comes quickly. While we do not know what his specific response might concern (were there some in the community who might, in an excess of enthusiasm, have been saying nonsensical things such as “Let Jesus be cursed?”), Paul’s theology is clear: those who confess Christ crucified are the only ones who can be assumed to speak for God. (A similar understanding may be found in John 14:15–16, in which all who love Jesus and keep his commandments receive the Spirit.) Those who reject Jesus in their words and actions cannot be speaking

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During a massive paradigm shift of the first century CE, the Holy Spirit went viral, even in places like Corinth, the Roman Empire port awash with Greek intellectuals, brash entrepreneurs, and cosmopolitan sensualists. Among the temple ruins of Aphrodite, Apollo, and Poseidon, heterogeneous Christian home churches multiplied rapidly through an outbreak of divine energy. The fervor was disinclined toward orderliness; particular discord arose within the community concerning the appearance of potent *charismata* or “spiritual gifts” among the believers. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul mitigates an ugly, egocentric comparative valuation of gifts among individuals by explicating his sublime “unity amid diversity” theological vision.

Spiritual gifts remain a hot topic today, with many mainline churches exploring a renewed interest in individual “spiritual gifts” for ministry. However, despite a likely familiarity with this text, many listeners may regard the exotic-sounding lay activities of Corinth as mere anthropological artifacts. Speaking in tongues? The gift of healing? What do such things have to do with us today? Some might even ruefully wish for “problems” like overexuberant laity creating a riot of miraculous signs, but the threat of unruly metaphysical brushfires these days is low. More often we are frozen into a worldview that precludes even

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

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Sustained and nurtured by God and evangelized by Paul, the early Christian community has been richly blessed and graced. In 1 Corinthians 12:3b–13 Paul enumerates the many gifts that have been given to God's people. His focus is on the Christian community living in Corinth, which, for whatever reason, has become competitive with respect to the spiritual gifts it has received. Some Corinthian Christians seem to be claiming that certain gifts of the Spirit are better than others. Paul's response to this situation informs the Jewish Christians that the gifts of the Spirit are varied, and that this variety does not presuppose one gift to be better than another. Each gift is meant to contribute to the common good.

Paul begins this part of his letter to the Corinthians by making a claim, namely, that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (v. 3b). Thus only those graced by God's Spirit are able to make such a confession. The phrase "Jesus is Lord" is a traditional acclamation and echoes Romans 10:9. This affirmation also appears at the end of the pre-Pauline hymn to Christ in Philippians 2:11.

The remainder of the passage focuses on the theme of diversity and unity in relation to the blessings that the Christian community has received from God. Paul states that a variety of gifts, services,

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The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is one of the most enigmatic doctrines in Christian theology. Exactly who the third person of the Trinity is and how this entity works remains mysterious to most Christian believers. The charismatic renewal movement of the late twentieth century reintroduced the Spirit into the language of faith used by some Christians in describing their everyday religious experiences, but for most church members, the Spirit is little understood and rarely invoked. Pentecost Sunday provides the preacher with a rare and important opportunity to address the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and point to ways in which the Spirit continues to enable the work and witness of the church and guide the lives of individual believers.

This text from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians continues a series of instructions to the young church at Corinth. Having addressed a number of issues that arose as the community of faith struggled to understand what it means to be a church—issues such as divisions within the community, the personal conduct of Christians, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper—Paul turns his attention to the work of the Holy Spirit and its manifestation in the "gifts" given to believers (12:1). The three chapters that follow explain the nature and purpose of spiritual gifts within the context of

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by the Spirit of God, while those who proclaim the lordship of Jesus cannot help but speak through the empowerment of the Spirit. This is a simple litmus test as to who bears God's authority.

The Corinthian church, at least as we encounter it in the letters of Paul, bears similarities to many modern American Christian communities. The church at Corinth seems to be full of individuals looking out for their own spiritual welfare and sharply divided in how they understand and live out their call to be followers of Jesus. Paul's exasperation with these first-century Christians covers sexual sins, their failure truly to experience the Eucharist as a fellowship feast, and their focus on individual spiritual gifts. Mostly, though, it seems that he is upset at their inability to form a community. Stanley Hauerwas has observed that a community should be judged by the type of people it forms, and so far, despite some prodigious individual gifts, this gathering of Corinthians is having a hard time producing people capable of living in true Christian community.¹

In the section immediately preceding this passage, Paul has taken the Corinthian community to task for their practice of the Eucharist, noting that the individual members of the body do not wait on each other, that they do not share a common meal (that is, presumably, some enjoy finer food and drink than others), and some become drunk. This individual satisfaction of hunger, he says, displays "contempt for the church of God and humiliate[s] those who have nothing" (1 Cor. 11:22). Paul's desire is to see the Corinthians show the proper respect for the body of Christ and for each other, and it carries over into his promise to speak on the question of spiritual gifts, which he does in this lection.

While there are varieties of gifts, they are all given by the same Spirit. (Paul goes on in verses 5 and 6 to suggest varieties of service to the same Lord and activities activated by the same God, which is read by some theologians as an early Trinitarian statement, although Raymond Brown suggests that Paul does not here indicate that the Spirit is a person of God. That pneumatology, he says, is a fourth-century development.²) So although Paul goes on to provide a catalog of gifts that may have been present in the Corinthian church, he prefaces all these gifts with their uniting principle: they are given for the common good. Diversity of gifts is not about

1. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 2.

2. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 569.

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the possibility of supernatural sparks. We go it alone. We default into cessationism, sure that the bling of supernatural gift signs died with the apostolic age. "Not for us," we shrug when regarding Holy Spirit boldness. Could such binary thinking undercut God's power, prerogative, and possibility?

Reading Corinthians as a bygone era risks missing a treasure trove of pertinent touchstones for today. Ironically, the negative preponderance of individualism in Corinth might just remain as one of our chief problems with spiritual gifts as well. That is to say, a plethora of current resources exhort us to "unwrap our spiritual gifts" so that we might pledge skills to our churches, a natural impulse amid American Protestantism's current decline in volunteerism. Yet nominating committees can easily and unknowingly misuse the spiritual-gifts concept as just another way to fill slots for institutional maintenance. Tapping into what people are "good at" as a recruiting phenomenon drifts far afield from the picture we glean of giftedness from Corinth, primarily because we have lost Paul's emphasis on an active Holy Spirit.

Theologian James A. Fowler asserts that the very translation of the word *charismata* as "gifts" is a misnomer, leading to an overemphasis on the individual. Fowler points to verse 7 as the key: "The *pneumatika* that Paul refers to are 'spiritual manifestations' or 'spiritual-expressions' rather than gifts per se. . . . The 'manifestation of the Spirit' should not be construed as a particular 'gift' that belongs to or is possessed by an individual Christian, as this tends to postulate a separate gift distinct from the action of the Giver."¹ In other words, we must remain cognizant that we are conduits of a conscious Spirit who yearns to be expressive through us. Natural endowments or interests are an added plus, but resolutely not the source or starting point of ministry.

Shifting away from an individualistic focus is also Paul's teaching that people are divinely gifted for a specific reason: the common good, the building up of the community (12:7). Since God wills flourishing for the church at all times and places, should we not expect that the Holy Spirit remains poised to gift us, even us, in contextually appropriate ways as well?

Interpreting new "contextually appropriate" manifestations of gifts is possible even while staying true to the original Pauline vision, if we consider Paul's careful framing of the Corinthian situation. In verses 4–6, Paul talks about varieties of "gifts"

1. James A. Fowler, "Charismata: Rethinking the So-Called 'Spiritual Gifts,'" 1999; www.christinyou.net/pages/chrmata.html, p. 3.

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

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and activities exists, but the same Spirit (vv. 4–5) and the same God activate all of them in everyone (v. 6). Therefore, no one gift, service, or activity is better than another, all have the same divine origin, and no one should be in competition with another with respect to the blessings and graces God has bestowed upon the community as a whole.

In verse 7, Paul makes clear that each person in the community is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Here “manifestation” is synonymous with “gift.” None of the gifts of the Spirit has been given to glorify or edify any one person in particular; hence, none of the gifts is meant to be self-serving. Paul’s emphasis is on the common good. For Paul, every person within the community is gifted; all participate in the manifestation of the Spirit, and although the gifts may vary and differ, no one person is to be found lacking in the manifestation of the Spirit.

In verses 8–10 Paul lists some of the gifts that are to be found within the community and emphasizes the fact that the same Spirit is at the heart of each of the variety of gifts. To one is given the utterance of wisdom through the Spirit (v. 8a). Wisdom is essentially a practical instruction on how to live properly and successfully (see, e.g., Prov. 1:1–6; Jas. 3:1–4:17). Wisdom includes knowledge and understanding gained from life experience, as well as knowledge and understanding about God and God’s ways. The source of wisdom is God (Prov. 2:6).

Another gift given to various members within the community is the utterance of knowledge (v. 8b). Like wisdom, knowledge is given through the Spirit. Knowledge includes knowing God’s ordinances (Ps. 147:19, 20), God’s ways (Ps. 25:4), and even God (Jer. 31:34). Knowledge also includes knowing that only one true God exists (1 Cor. 8:1).

A third gift, faith, is also given by the same Spirit (v. 9a). Faith centers on the belief in God’s reliability and is also identified with accepting Jesus as coming from God. For Paul, faith is central to salvation, and faith is the means by which we are incorporated into the body of Christ. The object of faith is God.

Healing as a gift given by the Spirit (v. 9b) can assume many expressions. Healing is the process of restoring meaning to life and can occur on physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels of a person’s being. Healing was central to Jesus’ mission and ministry (Matt. 4:23–25; 9:35) and was part of the apostolic tradition (Acts 4:14, 22; 5:16; 8:7; 28:8). As attested by Jesus in the Gospels, healing flows from the proclamation of the reign of God.

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Christian community, with today’s text serving as a preamble establishing the origin and egalitarian distribution of those gifts.

Two particular angles of vision on this text seem especially appropriate for a Pentecost Sunday homiletical interpretation. One angle of vision is the acknowledgment that the Spirit is the source of our Christian identity. Paul makes it clear that our faith in Jesus Christ and our ability to do the work of the Lord and his church are rooted in the Holy Spirit, who is present in our midst. Today’s text opens with the declaration that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (v. 3b). We can give intellectual assent to the truth of Jesus Christ apart from the work of the Spirit, but a deep and abiding faith is not possible by human effort alone. Paul’s declaration echoes other New Testament references to the fact that it is God—by the power of the Spirit, as this verse would add—who claims us as God’s own and calls us to faith. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit” (John 15:16). Jesus’ message is clear: we respond in faith and gratitude to God’s call in Jesus Christ, but the initiative is God’s, not ours. In a similar way, the First Letter of John reminds us that we are able to love others because of God’s prior love for us: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:10, 19). Paul is saying essentially the same thing in this text. It is the Spirit who enables a genuine confession of faith. In preaching this text, one might note the baptismal reference in the concluding verse: our identity in the Spirit comes by way of our common experience of baptism. In baptism we are ultimately claimed by God, empowered by the Spirit with gifts to do God’s work, and united to other believers in one body.

Another homiletical angle of vision on this text is the recognition of the Spirit as the source of our gifts to do the work of the church. The ordination service for clergy and lay leaders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opens with words based on this text: “There are varieties of gifts, but it is the same Spirit who gives them. There are different ways of serving God, but it is the same Lord who is served.” This opening statement appropriately establishes the context for the questions and commitments of ordination that follow. Those who serve the church in particular ways are reminded of the source of all calls to ministry and of the abilities to carry out

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

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individuation, Paul says, nor is one gift superior to another; the diversity is important because all of these gifts are necessary for the body of Christ to be complete.

This continued metaphor of the body has theological implications worthy of consideration. First, although Paul discusses the body and its individual members, it is important to distinguish the members of the metaphorical body from the enrolled members of an *ecclesia* or faith community. Paul is referring to the distinctive and necessary parts of the human body, rather than referring to church membership, as contemporary readers and hearers sometimes automatically assume.

Second, it is also worth noting that the metaphor is a reappropriation of a common Roman metaphor, the body politic. In the Roman political metaphor, each member of the body knew his or her place, and those who were clearly at the bottom of the hierarchy were nonetheless enjoined to continue carrying out their tasks, however menial they might be, for the greater glory of the empire. Paul, however, is noting that, in contrast to the empire, within the body of Christ no one is more important, nor are anyone's gifts more important. All are equal in the eyes of God—Jews and Gentiles, slaves and citizens. It is a radical statement of democracy and equality that flies in the face of the powers of the Roman world; in God's kingdom, all are equal, all are loved, and wealth and power do not elevate one—or should not.

Paul does suggest, immediately following this pericope, that despite the diversity of gifts and the importance of all of them, there is a more excellent way to think of spiritual gifts and roles within the body. Love, he will assert, is the most important spiritual gift, thus putting the gifts of the Corinthians into a larger context. These gifts are part of the work of the community, and to share them with each other equally—just as to share the holy meal fairly and in common, and to understand that spiritual gifts are given to all individually for the common good—will be a sign of this love to which they are called.

GREG GARRETT

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and “service” and “activities” as a sharply concise container for the explosion of activity in the Corinthian church. The Greek words for these three streams are:

charismata, or grace effects

diakonia, from whose root we get “deacon,”

meaning ministrations or service

energēma, a word seen also in 1 Cor 12:10:

energēmata dynameōn, which is traditionally rendered “the working of miracles” but is more akin to “deeds of great power” (*dynamis*), from which we get the word “dynamite”

Fowler points out that this frame is purposefully triune in nature, and that all three modalities are different expressions of God's nature, akin to the metaphorical idea of “electricity, appliances, and productivity.” Instead of a gift given to an individual, Fowler prefers this rendering of 12:7 as “to one is given a particular *expression* of God, to another a differing *expression*.”² The question is not what we might add to ministry as individuals, but what God is seeking to add through us. Instead of “gift inventories” processes for naming innate abilities or interests, perhaps we could better invest time into reinforcing spiritual practices that equip us to be discerning disciples, open to God's movements.

What might those movements look like today? It is thrilling to imagine how *charismata* might manifest. Instead of leper healers or miraculous multilingualists, what if we saw an emergence of gifted new visionaries and seers able to steer Christianity through the whitewater changes of the twenty-first century? What if we saw the gospel communicated through compelling new forms by magnetic poets, storytellers, and artists? How comforting it would be if the *diakonia* stream bubbled up through a new generation of spiritual practitioners, “panini generation” caregivers (caring for children and aged parents), ecumenical healers, and urban missionaries working the outposts of grit and need in neighborhoods near and far. Would we not again witness “deeds of great power” if God's *energēmata dynameōn* surged through revitalized activists and peacemakers, collaborative influencers, and powerful social-media evangelists?

Perhaps the modern lesson from this lection is less “unity amid diversity” than it is “energy amid exhaustion.” When we reclaim God as the true source of vital and powerful spiritual gifts, our faith communities will be transformed beyond what we think is humanly possible. As in Corinth, we would see the Holy Spirit go viral.

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2. Ibid.

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The ability to work miracles is another gift given by the same Spirit to various people (v. 10a). In the NT, the word “miracles” is understood as “mighty deeds,” “signs,” “deeds of power” and is associated with the activity of God (Deut. 3:24). In the Gospels and early Christianity, mighty deeds included healings, exorcisms, and instances involving control over the forces of nature, such as calming the winds and storms or increasing food or beverage supplies. Both Jesus and his disciples perform mighty deeds (e.g., Luke 8:22–25; 9:37–43; 10:17–20).

Prophecy, another gift given by the same Spirit (v. 10b), enjoys a rich tradition. Within the biblical tradition, beginning with Abraham, the prophetic spirit has been active. Throughout Israel’s history, prophets have been proclaiming words of woe and hope while putting forth a vision of a new world order and a new understanding of leadership. The prophet Joel foretold the outpouring of God’s Spirit that would result in widespread prophecy. This message was reiterated by Peter and came to fruition in Acts 2:14–18. Prophecy became the gift of not only a few people whom God raised up but also the gift of the community at large.

Three last gifts that Paul mentions are discernment of spirits (v. 10c), tongues (v. 10d), and interpretation of tongues (v. 10e). Discernment of spirits involved being able to distinguish what is of God and what is not. The gift of tongues is a spontaneous stream of articulate phonemes. This gift is central to Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul would like all of the Corinthians to speak in tongues (1 Cor. 14:5). For Paul, this gift functions to convince unbelievers of the Spirit’s presence (1 Cor. 14:22). Paul emphasizes the need for the gift of interpretation of tongues so that the one praying can be guided by the Spirit.

Paul closes this lection with a simile that emphasizes the unity of all people, drawn together by the Spirit, who is given to all and who has baptized all into one body (vv. 12–13). For Paul, a church that is both diverse and unified embodies metaphorically the body of Christ and the vision of God.

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those ministries. Whatever the form or venue of service, we find our common identity as those called to ministry by the “same God who activates all of [the gifts] in everyone” (v. 6).

The Corinthian church obviously found itself embroiled in conflict over a false hierarchy of spiritual gifts. The naturally competitive quality of human nature eclipsed the realization that the gifts of the Spirit are given not for personal aggrandizement but “for the common good” (v. 7). Any preacher can point to twenty-first-century disputes that threaten the unity of the church, including disputes over the perceived value of particular kinds of work and witness within the church. The sad reality of the church today, however, is that members are less likely to be arguing over spiritual gifts than they are to be unaware of the presence of such gifts in the first place. Preachers can use this text as an opportunity to remind listeners that spiritual gifts continue to be operative among believers and to help them discern and employ those gifts. Churchwide educational events and conversations might be organized to enable members to discover their own spiritual gifts and how they might support the ministries of particular congregations and communities.

Perhaps more than ever, the Christian church and individual believers need to be reminded of the power of Pentecost that is ours each day by means of the work of the Holy Spirit, whose presence was promised at our baptisms in Christ. At this critical time in the life of the church, as it faces the loss of members and influence, any places and ways the preacher can point to where we see signs of the Spirit at work among us can only offer encouragement and hope for believers today.

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PROPER 8 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 26 AND JULY 2 INCLUSIVE)

Genesis 22:1–14

¹After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ²He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the

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Called the *Akedah* or “the binding of Isaac” in the Jewish tradition, Genesis 22:1–14, the story of Abraham’s call to sacrifice Isaac, raises several profound theological questions. Four main theological points emerge from this story: (1) the testing motif, (2) child sacrifice, (3) obedience, and (4) faith.

The story opens with a comment by the narrator, through whom the biblical writer introduces the testing motif: “After these things God tested Abraham” (v. 1a). The test motif is a popular one in both ancient and contemporary literature. In stories that employ this motif, the sequence of events is arranged in such a way that the protagonist’s identity and ability are “tested” to determine strength of character and, in the case of biblical stories, strength of faith. The one administering the test is God. Abraham, an aged man, is commanded by God to sacrifice the child of his old age. Isaac, whom Abraham loves, also represents Abraham’s and all of Israel’s future. Isaac is the child of the covenant and heir to a whole host of divine promises (see Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–14, 21) that involve the entire Israelite community as a people.

At first, the story presents a most disturbing picture of God, who seems to put those promises in jeopardy and who, as creator and sustainer of

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The story of God’s telling Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac is one of the most terrifying texts in the Bible. It shows us a face of God that we would rather keep out of our consciousness, a demanding God who will not be reduced to a warm fuzzy thing, filled with sentimental love. At some point in our lives, we become aware of this difficult truth: we belong to God, but God does not belong to us.

This passage also captures the fear that all of us experience as very small children, often beginning between the ages of one and two years old: the growing and horrible awareness that our parents are separate from us, that we are almost totally dependent upon them for our welfare, but with no guarantee that we can get what we need or want from them. We can hear this apprehension in the voice of the boy Isaac as he asks his father, “Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Though it is doubtful that any of us consciously remembers this major transition in our awareness of ourselves, our existential separation, many of us spend most of our lives trying to overcome this fundamental distance and to reestablish trust in others and the universe and its life processes.

Those of us who write from the pastoral perspective in this series have a distinct advantage in encountering this awe-ful and primal story. In one

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lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

⁹When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹²He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

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This enigmatic, troubling passage has proven disturbing to contemporary readers. Many have interpreted God's demand of Abraham as reinforcing the distorted understanding that the Old Testament presents a judgmental, unloving deity. Within the narrative, God's demand seems cruel and unreasonable. Yet this stark narrative offers much material for reflection on the understanding of God, human obedience and freedom, and even the psychological dimensions of parent-child relationships. This uncomfortable narrative requires careful analysis.

The opening line belongs to the narrator of the story, and in many ways it sets the tone for the whole tale. The narrator's information that what follows is a test defines the whole narrative, but because the narrator does not tell the reader everything, the opening line sets the agenda on a literary level. The storyteller conceals as much as he reveals, obscures as much as he illumines. Although the narrator tells the reader that the events about to unfold constitute a test, he does not tell us why God wants to test Abraham, or whether the test is for God's sake or for Abraham's sake. Ironically, at the very beginning, the reader knows more than Abraham knows, but as the story progresses, Abraham knows more than the reader. The

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A few years ago an article appeared in *Newsweek* describing a new style of backpacking.¹ For a price, you can hire an outfitting company to carry the equipment (including the backpacks), set up camp, and do all the cooking. This service eliminates the inconveniences and hazards of backpacking, so that you can really enjoy the outdoors. It's called "Back Country Lite."

Some churches produce a type of "Christianity Lite" that takes all the pesky inconveniences and demands out of Christianity. You can participate in a few activities here and there, but there is no need to do anything uncomfortable, certainly nothing life changing. Genesis 22 offers a powerful, if controversial, message to this form of contemporary religion.

Some interpreters have said that God is testing Abraham to discover if he has given up the pagan practice of human sacrifice. This interpretation misses the story's central message. The story already assumes that animal sacrifice is the norm (vv. 7, 13). The Deuteronomic writer was well aware that child sacrifice was forbidden in Israel (Lev. 18:21; 20:2; Deut. 18:10).

The theological message in this story is about what true sacrifice involves. Isaac embodies God's promise to Abraham. God has called Abraham to

1. "Great View, Less Sweat," *Newsweek*, June 28, 2004, 57.

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all, asks for the sacrifice of a child. Verses 11–13, however, depict a change of events: at the last minute, Isaac is spared, and a ram is sacrificed in his place. The question lingers, though: What kind of a God would ask for child sacrifice?

Genesis 22:1–14 is a story that reflects the culture of the day. Outside of Israel, child sacrifice was part of various ancient Near East religious rituals, and the Israelites no doubt knew of this practice. In Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2–5, Israel is specifically warned by God not to offer child sacrifice to the god Molech. If such offering were to take place, the ones offering such a sacrifice would be cut off from the Israelite community, and God's face would be set against them. Molech was a Canaanite deity, also called "the abomination of the Ammonites" (1 Kgs. 11:7), who was perhaps a god of the underworld. In the cultural setting and context of the OT, the story of Abraham and Isaac serves as a polemic against the child sacrifice practiced by the worshipers of other gods.

In early Christian tradition, however, the church fathers saw Isaac as a prefiguration of Jesus. Clement of Alexandria viewed Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac as a prefiguration of Jesus' death on the cross.¹ Clement says that Jesus is God's only Son, just as Isaac was Abraham's "only son" (v. 2); this is curious, because Abraham had another son, Ishmael, who was blessed by God and who lives under God's promise (Gen. 17:20).² For Clement, the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's son, was not consummated, but in the case of Jesus, God's Son, the sacrifice was consummated; according to Clement, both individuals carried the wood for their own sacrifice, Isaac the wood for the fire, and Jesus the cross.³ From a hermeneutical perspective, Clement has allegorized the story of Abraham and Isaac. By associating it with the death of Jesus, Clement spiritualizes the crucifixion and bypasses the historical context of Jesus' execution, which was the result of his mission and ministry. Not God, but the people of Jesus' day, demanded that Jesus be put to death. As we can see by the story of Abraham and Isaac, what God wills is life, and hence, the gospel tradition records the event of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

A third theological point is Abraham's obedience. When God, as portrayed by the biblical writer, calls Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Abraham is ready to do so without question or hesitation

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form or another, we encounter it almost daily in our pastoral work, as our members and friends grapple with the basic questions of meaning and hope in their lives. One of the great privileges of being a pastor is that we are invited into the most intimate spaces of people's lives, where they (and we) wonder and wrestle with who we are, who God is, and what the meaning and purpose of our lives is.

Caught in the middle of this struggle between the central and powerful force of life called God and the tentative, anxious life of each of us who seek to be soothed, is Father Abraham. I must say that as a man, I see this as a male story. I do not perceive the God in this passage as feminine, as a mother demanding that a particular child be sacrificed. Whether we are male or female, however, this story speaks to those deepest places in our hearts where we experience separation, alienation, the threat of annihilation, and the longing for home and safety and affirmation.

Abraham stands in the middle of this frightening story, forced to make a terrible decision. He is asked to give up the child of promise: Isaac, who was born to Sarah and Abraham in their old age. Abraham has already made a terrible decision to send his firstborn son, Ishmael, and Ishmael's mother, Hagar, into the wilderness; and now another terrible decision looms. Can he trust the God who called him into existence, who has called him and Sarah into a new land, and who now calls him to give up that promised future? Though it is a terrible and terrifying dilemma, this story points us toward a fundamental truth in our lives and in our journey with God. In many stages and in many ways, we will be asked by God to choose between what we believe will secure our future and God's call into a new world.

Sometimes that choice will be obvious. Whether we are able to make the decision or not, it will still hover over us as something that we could do if only we had enough faith. Yet sometimes that choice will not seem obvious at all—choices about vocation, choices about justice, choices about compassion, choices about courage. Sometimes that choice will rock our world. It will involve an illness or accident that strikes a loved one or us. Sometimes that choice will threaten to take us into a new world where boundaries of race or gender or nation or sexual orientation are threatened. In all of these situations and in many others, God asks us to listen for God's voice, whether we find ourselves identifying with the apprehensive boy tied to a woodpile, or with the fearful, sweating father who must make the most difficult decision of his life.

1. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, book 1, chap. I.

2. A rabbinic midrash on Gen. 22, quoted below, deals with this discrepancy.

3. Tertullian also makes this analogy in *Against Marcion*, book 3, chap. 18.

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narrator carefully conceals Abraham's thoughts and intentions.

Following the shocking instructions from God, the narrator describes Abraham's actions in a rather matter-of-fact way. With each action of apparent obedience on Abraham's part, the suspense builds. Abraham's words to the servants and Isaac's achingly naive, trusting question to his father raise the reader's curiosity almost to the breaking point. The terrible suspense breaks only when the angel stops Abraham at the last second. Artists have portrayed this scene with great drama. The familiarity of the story denies most contemporary readers the intensity of the initial reading.

Although the Abraham cycle contains a blend of sources, each of which might portray the patriarch differently, Abraham's response in this narrative is eerily unique. In Genesis 15:8 he responds to a divine promise with protest. At 17:17 he falls on his face in laughter. But at 22:3, after God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the narrator tells the reader nothing of Abraham's internal workings. Abraham makes no reply at all to God. However intensely the reader wishes to know what Abraham thinks or feels, the narrator shows only the patriarch's actions, completely ignoring what one might assume was a sleepless night beforehand. In at least two other places in the story, the reader might expect to know Abraham's internal reaction or intentions. What goes on inside Abraham when, after three days' journey, he sees the place where the sacrifice will take place? How does Abraham intend his words to the young men in verse 5, and to Isaac himself in verse 8? Does Abraham truly believe that "we" will return from the mountain and that God will provide another animal for sacrifice, or does he simply deceive in both cases?

The lack of detail demonstrates the skill of the narrator. Within the narrative world of Genesis, God is like a character who knows and sees only what the reader knows and sees. God watches the action unfold, but the story implies that God does not know the result of the test. The angel, speaking on behalf of God, informs both Abraham and the reader that God knows Abraham's intentions only at the moment when Abraham begins the action to plunge the knife into his son. On a literary level, the absence of detail heightens the suspense. When the reader knows only Abraham's actions and cryptic words, the reader does not know until the end how the story will turn out. Will Abraham actually carry out the command? Will the son of promise survive? On a theological

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sacrifice his past by leaving his homeland, with the promise that God will make a great nation of Abraham's descendants (Gen. 12:1–3). Now God is calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's promised future. Everything Abraham has is wrapped up in Isaac! God wants to know if Abraham is willing to surrender that promise and allow God to fulfill it in God's own way and time.

This story, therefore, is about a *human's sacrifice* rather than *human sacrifice*. What God wants from Abraham is not Isaac's death but Abraham's heart. When Abraham surrenders this most precious gift by giving it back to the Lord, the Lord provides the necessary sacrifice. As a result, God discovers Abraham's faith and announces, "Now I know that you fear God" (v. 12).

God has always tested God's people in order to know the level of trust they have in God (Jas. 1:2–4). God wants our hearts first, before our sacrifices (1 Sam. 15:22–23; Ps. 51:18–19; Mic. 6:6–8). God wants to know if we understand divine gifts as pure gifts, not as possessions or entitlements. We so easily turn these gifts into idols. God gives us possessions, and we idolize them. God gives us work, and we worship it. In this story, we see that God calls us to let go of our most cherished gifts and trust him to provide.

The message of Genesis 22 is shocking, but not because of its allusion to child sacrifice. It is shocking because of the demands it places on us. God is not only a giving God but also a demanding God. In order to evoke sole allegiance and generate trust, God tests us (Deut. 8:16; Prov. 17:3). No person, no possession, no dream, no career can stand between us and God. Somewhere along life's journey God will test each of us to see what stands in the way of our relationship. Our prayer is that God will be able to say of us, "Now I know that you fear God" (v. 12).

The demands God placed on Abraham on this occasion are, in essence, the same demands Jesus places on his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:34–35). God demands that we let go of what we hold most precious. This call to deny self, to take up the cross and follow Jesus, is a call to total surrender.

The church has developed a generic brand of "undisciplined disciples."² In this brand of discipleship, giving becomes a mathematical equation rather than

2. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines—Reissue: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 259.

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(see Gen. 12:1–9). He simply responds, “Here I am,” which is a stock phrase in many OT and NT stories, call narratives in particular (e.g., Gen. 27:1; 31:11; Exod. 3:4; 1 Sam. 3:5, 6, 8, 16; Isa. 6:8; Acts 9:10). God commands and Abraham follows. No attempt at discernment or dialogue takes place. Isaac’s obedience mirrors Abraham’s obedience. Isaac allows himself to be bound on the wood and altar, without any question whatsoever. Abraham’s obedience is a kind of “blind obedience” and represents the patriarchal, hierarchical mind-set of Abraham’s time and culture.

As the biblical story and tradition develop, obedience begins to include personal discernment and dialogue with God, as in the case of Moses (Exod. 3:11–12; 6:10–13), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4–10), and Jesus (Mark 14:32–36). Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus did God’s will. They acted in obedience to God’s command, but the Bible shows us that they did so not blindly, but through a process of dialogue with God. Abraham’s unflinching obedience, while admirable, represents only one understanding of a proper response to God. Indeed, later rabbinic tradition includes a midrash on Genesis 22 that portrays Abraham questioning God. When God told Abraham to sacrifice his “only son,” Abraham asked God, “Which one?” God answered, “The one you love,” and Abraham replied, “I love them both; are there limits to one’s emotions?” (*Midrash Rabbah-Genesis* 39:9).

One of the last theological points in Genesis 22:1–14 is faith. Abraham is able to comply with God’s command because he has faith in God. For Abraham, God is the God of blessing and promise, who has already fulfilled some of those promises. Abraham has not only the promised son but also another son (Gen. 16; 18; 21:1–7). While the command to sacrifice his son is totally incomprehensible and hard to bear for Abraham, the story tells us that he is willing to do so because he trusts his God. God, in turn, responds to Abraham’s trust. Through allegory, Abraham became a model for the early Christian church that struggled with fidelity in the face of persecution and affliction (Heb. 11:9–22).

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

Pastoral Perspective

This story represents the difficult choices that all of us must make in our journey with God. In this journey, and in this story, we must not overlook the faithfulness of Abraham and the providence of God. Abraham decides to turn his future (and Isaac’s too) over to God, not in an easy and sentimental way, but in a harsh and dreadful way. Wherever the dread and the repulsion of this story touch our own stories, we must always recall that Abraham does not kill Isaac. One dreadful part of this story is that Abraham seems willing to sacrifice his son. The gracious part of this story is that Abraham does not, in the end, have to sacrifice his son. God does provide. God does secure the future for Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca and Esau and Jacob—and for us. That promise of a future seems on shaky ground when Isaac’s life is on the verge of being lost, but God does provide. In a world with many voices from the false gods that promise us a secure future, this stark story reminds us that God is in our midst, often forcing us to a mountain in Moriah where choices have to be made.

The stunning good news is that even here, in this place of killing and fear, God’s grace and love provide and prevail. Abraham’s and Isaac’s future and our futures are not lost. When our time comes in the land of Moriah, may our reservoir of faith be as deep as Abraham’s, and may we, like Abraham, experience and trust God’s grace and providence.

NIBS STROUPE

Genesis 22:1–14

Exegetical Perspective

level, the absence of detail and the suspense reveal the narrator's purpose for the story. This disturbing narrative makes a profound statement about the freedom God allows people to decide and to act. God does not control human actions, obedience, or response. God has called Abraham for a mission, but Abraham's participation is Abraham's choice. Abraham cannot initiate the mission, but he can choose to take part in what God has begun.

Subsequent theological reflection has raised questions the text does not answer. How much of the future does God know? Even if God allows people to choose, does God know what choice they will make? The story does not give enough information to resolve such debates. The contemporary reader should not interpret the passage to insist that God cannot read our thoughts, even though within the narrative world of the text, God did not know how Abraham would respond. The narrative proclaims in dramatic fashion the liberating word that God allows people freely to participate in God's work of redemption, restoration, and blessing.

The aspects of the story that repulse readers actually serve to further the storyteller's purpose. By setting up a tale of a father about to sacrifice his son and leaving the reader to wonder breathlessly what will happen, the storyteller has created an unforgettable and compelling narrative to communicate both the trustworthiness of God and the willingness of God to allow people freedom of choice. Although the modern reader wonders how the overall experience might have affected Isaac, the narrative never addresses that issue. Nevertheless, the story opens the possibility for readers to discuss the effects of parental actions.

Although preachers cannot re-create the suspense of the original reading or hearing of this narrative, the preacher can highlight the literary skill of the narrator. By expertly concealing the very things the reader yearns to know, the narrator reveals the significance of human choice in responding to God's call. This interplay between divine initiative and human choice carries much theological and ethical power. The suspense of the story has been lost, but suspense about how the contemporary community of faith will respond remains. How much can the church and synagogue accomplish if they respond in obedience? No person knows. Does even God know?

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

a heartfelt offering. Prayer becomes an issue of time management instead of a spiritual quest to know God. Serving others is an opportunity to put another notch on the spiritual belt, rather than a deeply embedded desire to serve God. We have developed a Christianity without discipleship.

A number of years ago Millard Fuller spoke to a group of college students at Duke University. He told them about how he and his wife prayerfully decided to sell everything they had, leave a successful law practice, move to a poor neighborhood in Americus, Georgia, and serve the poor in that community. They started building houses for poor people, and Habitat for Humanity was born. After Fuller spoke on that occasion, several people in the audience inquired about the Fullers' children: how old were they when they moved to Georgia, and how did the move affect them? Did the Fullers really consider their children's needs when they made this decision? Behind the questions was this concern: it is fine if people want to make a sacrifice for a religious commitment, but it's not fine to drag their children along, uproot their lives, and sacrifice them for the sake of their parents' values. Here's the irony: don't all parents, by the way they live, sacrifice their children to their own values?³

The story of Abraham's sacrifice is an extremely difficult story to hear because it stands at odds with contemporary spirituality that emphasizes what God can *do for* you. This story is about what God *demand*s of you. Paul sums up the message of Genesis 22: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

DAVE BLAND

3. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *The Truth about God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 38.

PROPER 8 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 26 AND JULY 2 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 13

- ¹How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- ²How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
- ³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
⁴and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
- ⁵But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
- ⁶I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Theological Perspective

Filled with anguish and desperate to be heard and answered, the psalmist cries out, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (v. 1). Anguish turns to plea (vv. 3–4), and plea turns to confidence (vv. 5–6). This psalm captures the range of emotions of one who is suffering. Psalm 13 belongs to the group of psalms known as the Psalms of David. Specifically, the psalm is a prayer psalm that consists of three units: verses 1–2, a lament; verses 3–4, a plea; and verses 5–6, a statement of confidence.

Five rhetorical questions (vv. 1–2) capture the pain and suffering of the one crying out to God. The fourfold use of the question "how long?" adds to the heart-wrenching, soul-searching questioning of God. The one suffering feels completely forgotten and brushed aside by God (v. 1). The anguished one fails to remember, however, that God never forgets a person and remains forever faithful, no matter what the circumstances may be (Isa. 49:15). Yet the one in pain cannot feel or sense God's presence, which causes even more pain (vv. 1b–2).

The motif of God hiding God's face in verse 1b is used frequently throughout the OT. The gesture connotes a general sense of divine aloofness (e.g., Job 13:24; Pss. 104:29; 143:7). God hides God's face from sinners (Deut. 31:17–18; 32:20; Isa. 1:15;

Pastoral Perspective

I was diagnosed with a chronic disease fifteen years ago, and it hit me hard. It was the first voice of my mortality to permeate my consciousness. My anxiety often rose to debilitating levels, as I struggled to cope with my changing view of myself, of life, and of God. When the anxiety seemed to be getting out of control, I turned to meditative prayer to calm my anxiety. The first few times that I tried it were unsuccessful, as I could not clear my mind and let God roam freely. Then one day, it clicked, and I was profoundly grateful that the process indeed worked, and that I could be free for a bit.

When I returned to meditation the next day, I found it easier to slip the bonds of all the cares and concerns of this world, especially those centered on myself. As I exhaled and drifted into freedom, suddenly a loud voice spoke out to me: "Ha! You'll never do this. You aren't capable of doing it, and it won't make any difference anyway." I opened my eyes to see who was in the room with me, and of course, there was no one in the room except me. The voice that mocked me came from the enemy, by whatever name one calls the enemy: anxiety and alienation, Satan, the threat of death, the devil, the threat of meaninglessness. It shook me. I had never experienced the voice of the enemy in such a direct and provocative way before.

Psalms 13

Exegetical Perspective

The appeal of this psalm derives from its honesty and its concluding triumphant affirmation. Its brevity and simple structure invite study and reflection. Scholars often consider this poem a classic expression of the lament or complaint genre. The experiences it recounts find universal resonance, from the ancient Near Eastern context where it arose to twenty-first-century readers.

In the first four verses, the poet seethes with exasperation at the Deity. The first two verses consist of plaintive questions, with the repeated query of, how long must the psalmist endure his suffering? In verse 3, the tone switches to imperative, as the psalmist insists on God's attention and intervention. A substantial shift occurs in verse 5, as the psalmist affirms God's salvation.

The psalmist gives only hints about the situation behind his lament. The power of poetry derives from its evocative nature, not its precision, but one can concoct a plausible scenario. His lament about the sorrow in his heart suggests grief. His fear of the "sleep of death" may indicate a life-threatening illness. He mentions an "enemy" but does not specify that he fights in a literal war or battle. He describes his emotion as sorrow, not fear, suggesting that some grief-producing event has already occurred. He seems to fear death, suggesting

Homiletical Perspective

"What goes up must come down." A reference to Newton's law of gravity? A down-to-earth proverb? A variation on karma? These words could refer to the myriad ups and downs that are this ride we call life, including the life of faith. When things are going right, we feel happy, "upbeat." When sadness or loss sets in, we are "down in the dumps." We often think of up as good and down as bad. But it is not always that simple.

Wherever we look, the ups and downs of life confront and rock us. If we are lucky enough to own stocks and houses, our outlook may change along with the Dow Jones average or real-estate values. For those in more precarious straits, a surfeit of violence is bad, a scarcity of food is bad, a rise in rent is bad. In our congregations, declining membership and increasing age are downers. The ups and downs of life are ever present and often beyond our control.

Psalms 13 might bear the epithet "What goes down must come up," for it speaks of the real power of God's steadfast love to turn things to the good. The psalmist cries out impatiently to an absent God, "How long, O LORD? Will you hide your face forever?" This lament, "How long?" is sung four times in the opening verses. The psalmist, in the depths of despair, provides a voice of solidarity to anyone who is down, whether simply down in the dumps or down and out altogether.

Psalm 13

Theological Perspective

59:2; 64:7; Jer. 33:5; Mic. 3:4). The hiding of the divine face is also associated with a petitioner's cry for succor (Pss. 27:9; 44:24; 69:17; 88:14; 102:2). Oftentimes the motif reflects someone's feeling of forsakenness, even though God is always near. The tone of verse 1 is similar to Psalm 22, especially verses 1–2.

The anguish that the psalmist feels is deep and seems to be neverending. Pain fills the soul and sorrow fills the heart (v. 2a). Here "soul" is synonymous with "heart." In the OT, the heart often refers figuratively to a person's inner life. The heart represents the deepest and most intimate secrets and thoughts (Judg. 16:17; 1 Sam. 9:19). Only God can see the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), and only God can change the heart (Ezek. 36:26). From the heart come all of a person's emotions: joy (Deut. 28:47; Job 29:13; Zech. 10:7); sadness (Neh. 2:2); discouragement (Num. 32:7); grief (Jer. 4:19; Isa. 65:14); courage (Ps. 27:14); and fear (Deut. 20:3). The heart is also the center of one's relationship with God (Deut. 30:14; Pss. 27:7; 28:7).

The psalmist is in agony, not only because of the seeming distance from God, but also because of a certain "enemy" who exalts over the psalmist (v. 2b). This enemy is typically someone who is full of hate (Pss. 25:19; 69:4), who insults (Ps. 55:12), pursues and overtakes (Ps. 7:5), threatens to take a life (Ps. 64:1), brings on social shame (Pss. 31:11; 69:19), and leads others to despair (Ps. 143:3). The enemy is nameless. The enemy might be not only a person but also sin, the effects of sin, or even God, who has become perceived as an enemy because of God's seeming distance from the one suffering.

From a theological perspective, the enemy most likely is sin. In the ancient world, sin and suffering went hand in hand. If someone were suffering, people believed that the suffering resulted from that person's having sinned and that he or she was reaping divine repercussions. Sin causes a breach in right relationship with God, with one's self, and with God. For John Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers, sin is associated with the feeling of being forgotten by God.¹

Anguish turns to a desperate plea. Here the psalmist uses three imperatives, "consider and answer me" and "give light to my eyes" (v. 3), in an attempt to find God in a life situation characterized by suffering. If God does not respond, then the psalmist fears that death will pave the way for

1. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1973), 244–45.

Pastoral Perspective

I thought of this incident as I encountered the author of this psalm and her deep struggle with God and with the enemy.¹ She utters a persistent cry of lament in Israel's history with God and in her own individual history with God. We do not know the particular cause of her distress and her agony. This is a loud lament from the psalmist. She is not merely having a bad day; she has experienced relentless assault from the enemy, with no answer from God. This is lament at its simplest and most profound level. The psalmist does not name the cause of the lament, with the result that each of us and all of us can have access to it as our own lament. If the cause were named, we would be tempted to protect ourselves from its threat by dismissing it. We would say something like, "Well, at least I don't have that problem—I don't have to go there with God."

Going there with God—this is what the psalmist asks of us: to go to the place in our own hearts and in the life of the world where the threat of meaninglessness is deep and powerful. Just as the psalmist does not name the cause of her lament, neither does she name the enemy who is exalting over her. We do not know if the enemy is an actual opponent in war, business, despair, or love (how many of us remember angst over unrequited love?). While those threats are real, this psalm takes us to that place in all of our souls where God's very existence is questioned, where the threat of alienation and meaninglessness seems dangerously true. If the psalmist could just hear God's voice, the threat of the mocking voice of the enemy—the taunt that nothing matters—would not be so strong.

Fortunately the psalmist does not leave us in despair, though the biblical witness is not afraid to leave us there (e.g., Ps. 88 and Judg. 11). The psalmist is not repudiating God; she is crying out to God to rescue her. She is staying with God because she has received God's gifts of love and grace in the past, and she is now depending on that same living stream, even though those waters seem to have dried up and turned to dust. Because water has flowed there before, she still holds out hope that God will answer her lament. In this psalm we see both fragility and strength. The psalmist's situation of distress has revealed to her how fragile her life is, but her experience of God in her life causes her to count on God and to cry out to God, even in this valley of the dry bones, where the enemy seems to have

1. Even though the Psalms traditionally are attributed to David, we do not know the actual gender of the psalmist. I imagine this cry of lament in a female voice.

Psalm 13

Exegetical Perspective

that a decisive battle may lie in the future. Can the reader speculate that he already has lost friends, comrades, or loved ones in battle, and that he faces further conflict, leading to his anguish over the sleep of death? The poem gives too few clues for exact determination, but the psalmist feels raw emotions and dreads the gloating of some unnamed enemy. The uncertainty over the duration of his situation exacerbates his frustration and leads him to lamentation, to the accusation that the Deity has forgotten him and does nothing to help his circumstances.

The prayers in the Psalter often express the unreflecting impulses of the psalmists (e.g., Ps. 137:9). The reader may learn more about the psalmist's emotional state and level of spiritual maturity than about the reality and nature of God. The poet of Psalm 13 seems to assume that his circumstances indicate the indifference, the "forgetting," of the Deity. Careful reflection on God's nature does not permit one to say that God forgets the sufferer, but those who suffer often feel forgotten. The value of the psalm lies in its window into the emotions of alienation, fear, and sorrow. Readers from almost any time or place can identify with the subjective state of the psalmist, even if they cannot affirm his assumptions about God.

The psalm takes a noticeable shift after verse 4. As with much of the rest of the psalm, the reader can only speculate about the cause of the shift. Was the psalm written in one sitting, or were verses 5-6 added later, when the poor man was in a better frame of mind? Some scholars have suggested that the psalm constituted part of a ritual, and that a priest offered a word of grace after the lament, between verses 4 and 5. The affirmation was then a response to the word of the priest. No real evidence of such a ritual exists. Does the poet write the affirmation with the same honesty and genuineness with which he writes the laments, or does he affirm God's goodness merely as a way to bolster his sagging faith?

One who turns to this psalm for insight or comfort can affirm that the experience of despair and alienation can culminate in faith, even a faith that one must talk oneself into. At certain points in the psalm, the poet sounds somewhat petulant, accusing the Deity of indifference or even intentional neglect. A contemporary reader might find solace in a time of suffering and sagging spiritual resources. The insistence that God attend to him or her sounds somewhat demanding and impatient, suggesting an impertinent attitude toward the Deity, an

Homiletical Perspective

Walter Brueggemann speaks of psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.¹ Reorientation is not exactly the same as orientation; distress has a transforming effect. This movement down and up, if you will, is a movement from exile to restoration, from despair to hope, from death to life. This is a psalm of disorientation that begins to move toward a new orientation in verse 5, as the psalmist remembers the steadfast love of God.

We sometimes speak of "rock bottom" as the place where recovery can begin for an addict, a grief-stricken widow, or an unemployed father who is too proud to ask for help. The rock-solid bottom of this psalm is *hesed*, the steadfast love of God that is there in the deep darkness as well as the bright mornings. The memory of *hesed* begins to change the outlook of the suffering psalmist.

Images of death and resurrection, of darkness and light, illustrate this turnaround, the return from the depths. Springtime melting, dark green shoots, slow unfolding colors—these too describe the turn upward. Loss or grief can be a dark tunnel, seemingly endless, a deep cavern, lightless. New orientation can also be seen in the clearing of a mighty storm or heard as a dissonant chord resolves in a more hopeful key.

Devotees of *The West Wing* may remember a parable, first told by Leo to Josh. Josh had recovered from a serious gunshot wound, and a therapist treated him for trauma. Leo, a recovering alcoholic, met Josh in his turnaround moment. The story Leo tells goes something like this:

You're in a hole, see. A doctor walks by. You cry for help. The doctor throws a prescription down into the hole. A priest walks by. You cry for help. The priest mumbles a prayer into the darkness. A friend walks by. You cry, "*Help me!*" The friend jumps into the hole. "Now we're both stuck!" you cry. "Yes, but I've been here before and I know the way out."²

God may be the friend we find waiting for us at the bottom of the pit. Christ may be the friend who jumps in after us. The Spirit may be the friend who shows us the way up and out. Some listeners may hear an invitation to befriend someone crying, "How long?"

Many preachers will not want to go there, will resist recalling their own downs, hesitant to evoke a downer for souls who have come to church to

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984). Psalm 13 is discussed on pp. 58–60. See also his *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

2. Paraphrased from episode titled "Noel," *The West Wing*, season 2, written by Peter Parnell, directed by Thomas Schlamme, original airdates Dec. 20, 2000.

Psalm 13

Theological Perspective

the enemies and foes to rejoice because the one crying out to God has been shaken to the core. The psalmist has lost peace and lives life in dread. Most likely, the psalmist is referring to a spiritual death here, not necessarily a physical death. The irony, however, is that if God did forget a person even for a split second, that person would indeed die. Theodoret of Cyr, another early church father, suggests that if God did not respond, then the psalmist's distress would become stronger than his resolve, and the result would be death.² Surprisingly, even though the psalmist feels forsaken by God, the psalmist still relates to God in a deeply personal way in his address to God: "O LORD my God!" (v. 3).

The desperate plea uttered to a distant God now moves to a heartfelt expression of confidence (vv. 5–6). Despite all desperate feelings and all unsettling experiences, the psalmist never has stopped trusting in God's steadfast love, which reaches out to embrace saints and sinners alike. For the psalmist, peace comes in knowing that God's steadfast love endures forever (Ps. 136), even in the midst of sinfulness. The psalmist regains confidence, knowing that God is ultimately the one who saves. The heart once filled with sorrow (v. 2) is now filled with joy (v. 5), which leads to praise. The psalmist, overwhelmed by God's love, can do nothing less than sing to the Lord who has dealt bountifully with the psalmist (v. 6). The God to whom the psalmist called out has responded, not with silence or wrath, but with compassion, treading all iniquities underfoot and casting all sins to the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19). Israel's God is the one who hears the cry of the poor and, in this case, the one who has sinned but who has never lost faith in the God of salvation, the hope of life for all ages.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

Pastoral Perspective

complete control. She does believe that she will see God in the land of the living, but she would rather it be sooner than later.

For all its lament, this psalm is also a source of hope for us. In the times of my life where I have been deeply threatened by the enemy, I have received comfort (sometimes strange comfort) from the fact that God is embedded in my soul and in my consciousness. I cannot get rid of God in my soul, and the source of that attachment is not my will. It is the gift and the legacy of the tradition, of my own experience, and (I am bold to say) of God's own movement in my life and in the life of the world.

This psalm records one human being's journey with God and with the enemy, and it takes us to a place where the struggle between them in our own souls is real, where the outcome is unclear when we enter the portal. It is at once both specific and universal. It reminds us that even in those places where the encounter with the enemy and with the fragility of our own lives threaten to overwhelm us, God is present, and God's grace and power will make themselves known. We hope that God's revelation will be sooner, not later! We are encouraged to cry out our lament and our longings, with the edgy promise expressed in a gospel song about this kind of wrestling with God: "He may not come when we want Him, but He'll be there right on time."²

NIBS STROUPE

2. Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on the Psalms* 1–72, in Robert C. Hill, trans., *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 101 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1947–), 105.

2. Dottie Peoples, "He's an On-Time God," from *On-Time God* album (Air Gospel label, 2004).

Psalm 13

Exegetical Perspective

assumption that the Deity owes him attention and intervention. In these ways, the psalm offers not a model prayer in a theological sense but an authentic prayer reflecting the measure of his need. A contemporary reader in similar circumstances can draw comfort from the candor and vulnerability of the psalmist.

Just as the psalmist does not specify his exact complaint, he does not specify the exact way he expects God to intervene. Does the mention of “salvation” indicate that the psalmist expects victory in battle or healing of disease? Whatever his expectations, the psalm indicates that the psalmist experiences renewed trust in God. The earlier sense of alienation has given way to a restored relationship. The poet expects that his currently sorrowful heart will soon rejoice.

In preaching this psalm, the emphasis can lie on the recognition that we often begin our search for God’s presence in uncomfortable circumstances, and may initially approach God from the depths of anger, frustration, or despair. We may not know the exact details of the psalmist’s situation, but we can identify with his form of expression as we confront our own difficulties.

Grief, fear, and anxiety often result in a sense of alienation from God. Experience and research teach that the trajectory of grief often includes irrational thoughts and primitive feelings. Psalm 13 invites the reader to explore prayer as verbalization of even our basest impulses. Our attempts to express our emotions may not sound as “proper” as we would like, but God hears even our immature, insistent, “whiny” attempts at prayer. We should not pretend to feel something other than what we feel. The psalm provides a model of prayer as ventilation of deeply felt anguish.

Whatever occurs between verses 4 and 5, the poet perseveres in his quest to connect with God and rebuild his tattered faith. The way out of the depths of despair involves persistent, unfiltered conversation with God. The psalmist shows us that an honest dialogue with God should not end with our raw emotions, but with affirmation, expectation, and cathartic healing.

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

be uplifted. A sermon on a psalm of lament is dangerous business, and denial is a strong force. On a Sunday when the world, the nation, or the community has experienced some deep trauma, Psalm 13 would be a way to get into that dark hole with friends and to help them find their way out by remembering the steadfast love of God.

Church members may not face real enemies, as on a battlefield, but they will wrestle with guilt, shame, a hard-nosed boss, a bitter ex-spouse. The faithful will suffer bereavement and wonder whether the mourning will ever turn to joy. Job loss or loss of health will leave doubters *and* believers shaken to the core. An honest, heartfelt sermon that touches that upheaval, that offers to share it rather than fix it, may be a gift of grace. The psalm asks some hard questions, repeatedly; resisting the urge to answer them quickly or neatly may open hearts to divine *hesed*.

The psalm itself gives us a pattern, a shape for the sermon. It is a cry from the depths; so the sermon must move down before it moves up. Christians (and preachers) often want to jump to the happy ending, to the promised land without the exodus, to Easter without Good Friday. A sermon on this psalm needs to descend into the disorientation before it preaches hope and grace. Who was it who said we have to hear the bad news before we can hear the good news? Good news is here to be preached. Dwell in the moment of turning, the part of the poem that begins to dream of trust and gratitude, of rejoicing and singing.

REBECCA BUTTON PRICHARD

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**PROPER 9 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 3
AND JULY 9 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67

³⁴So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant. ³⁵The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. ³⁶And Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. ³⁷My master made me swear, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; ³⁸but you shall go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.’ . . .

⁴²“I came today to the spring, and said, ‘O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! ⁴³I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, “Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,” ⁴⁴and who will say to me, “Drink, and I will draw for your camels also”—let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master’s son.’

⁴⁵“Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, ‘Please let me drink.’ ⁴⁶She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’ So I drank, and she also watered the camels. ⁴⁷Then I asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ She said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor’s son, whom Milcah bore to him.’ So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. ⁴⁸Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who

Theological Perspective

The whole of chapter 24 tells of providence, of history intersected by God’s love and gracious ordering. Viewed through the two focal characters, Abraham’s servant—in essence his chief steward—and Rebekah, we may sense how providence appears “from the inside,” within moments of encounter and response. The chapter ends with a marriage. Is it then also a love story? Or is it about a negotiation, and an opportunity shrewdly recognized? Does providence work in such ways?

Rhetoric and Power. Some readers may be troubled, not just by the accoutrements of cultural patriarchy in the story but also by an impression of heteronomy, of God overpowering the characters. Laban and Bethuel reply to the steward, “The thing comes from the Lord; we cannot speak to you anything bad or good” (v. 50). They may sound disempowered; but is it not possible that Genesis puts heteronomy and freedom into a dialectical pattern, the pattern of God’s gift of agency, with all the ambiguities coming with such a gift? We can explore this by looking first at the steward’s

Pastoral Perspective

Abraham is dying. The future is at risk, since his son Isaac has no wife and Abraham has much to pass on from one generation to another. When they carry him outside, Abraham sees his flocks and his herdsmen covering the hills to the horizon. His slaves, men and women, busy themselves about him, as he turns the gold bracelet around his thin, brown wrist. The grumbling of his many camels is music. All this is far too much, far too thick with promise, to come to a dead end. So he sends his servant back to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac and the hope of generations. Now the girl has been found, and the servant presents his story and his request to Laban, brother to the intended wife. All is agreed and the passage concludes with Rebekah’s journey to Canaan and Isaac’s embrace.

Everything proceeds smoothly in this story. There are no crises or conflicts; events fall with an easy ripeness. Laban even says, “The thing comes from the LORD,” in effect, “What is there to discuss?” When he sees her by the spring, Abraham’s servant is caught by Rebekah’s beauty. She is very desirable. When speaking to Laban, though, he tactfully keeps

Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67

had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. ⁴⁹Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left." . . .

⁵⁸And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." ⁵⁹So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. ⁶⁰And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes."

⁶¹Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

⁶²Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb.

⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

Exegetical Perspective

This story from the Abraham cycle of Genesis narrates in stately detail the negotiations of Abraham's trusted servant, acting as proxy, as he seeks a bride for his employer's son Isaac. This is by no means the only way Scripture portrays courtship; in fact, the couple's own initiative is seen more frequently, as in the stories of Jacob and Esau that follow (Gen. 26:34–35; 29:18). Though foreign to American culture, the practice of arranged marriages continues in traditional Asian and Middle Eastern families, though usually, as in this story, it includes the consent and cooperation of potential spouses.

The relatively long and leisurely story begins in Genesis 24:1 with Abraham's instructions to his servant to travel to his ancestral home in Aram-naharaim, northeast of Canaan, to find a wife for Isaac. The lectionary passage picks up much further into the story, when the servant himself recounts to Rebekah's father Bethuel, Abraham's nephew, and the rest of the family the events leading him to their home, events readers have already witnessed.

The servant summarizes in two verses all relevant history in Canaan: God has blessed his master with

Homiletical Perspective

It is overly simple, but not altogether foolish, to say that the New Testament is the story of interruptions and the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible is the story of continuities. In the first part of our Gospel lesson for today Jesus points out that both John the Baptist and Jesus himself are surprising players in God's history, hard to categorize and hard to accept. Scholars like J. Louis Martyn and Christiaan Beker have claimed that Paul writes to tell the story of God's astonishing invasion of human history in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

However, our passage from Genesis is a story of continuities. Our story tells how the covenant with Abraham is passed on to Isaac and points us ahead to the next chapter, when that same covenant, in however tricky and complicated a way, will be passed on to Jacob as well. Closely related to the affirmation of the continuity of covenant is the affirmation of the continuity of family.

The last verse of our passage, where Isaac takes his bride into his mother's tent and "was comforted after his mother's death" would provide enough material to keep a Freudian interpreter happy for

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Theological Perspective

rhetoric and then at how Rebekah and her family respond.

Language, we know, can be used as an instrument of power; the steward in this respect is quite skilled. He will need such skill, because the commission (sealed by an intimate oath to Abraham, 24:3–9), to find a wife for his son Isaac, makes him anxious. *What if she refuses?* Abraham's answer preserves his steward's agency: *Then you'll be free; but whatever you do, do not seek a wife for Isaac among the Canaanites* (v. 37). So our steward sets out, but he is still anxious lest the promise to Abraham go unfulfilled.

When the steward approaches, he bargains with God—*Please let it happen just this way*—then encounters Rebekah. He tells her of his commission, stressing its miraculous aspects—*It was just this way!*—and embellishes the charge he received to “go,” not just to Abraham's country and kindred (v. 4) but to his “father's house.”¹ The steward gives her fine jewelry, and later repeats the story to Laban and Bethuel. He adds that Abraham promised God would make his way “successful.” The repetitions, embellishments, gifts, and how he tells his story create a persuasive aura. So too do his ten camel-riding servants. Do they imply a threat? Perhaps not, but they add to his impressiveness. However, even as he employs a rhetoric of inevitability—*Things are happening in a miraculous way, so you better join the miracle!*—he is careful to preserve Laban and Bethuel's choices. When they speak in resignation—*Just take her and go!* (v. 51)—he displays more gifts, which, while manipulative, may allow them to recover their own sense of agency. They propose, “Let her remain with us a while . . . after that, she may go” (v. 55).

Freedom, Providence, and Compassion. Especially after the World Wars, divine providence was a doctrine to which many, even in churches and synagogues, could no longer give credence. Langdon Gilkey observed that providence was the main target of the “God is dead” theologians, whose impact was being felt in seminaries and pulpits. So Gilkey asked how a sense of God's “whirlwind” (Job 38) might be recovered in the midst of secular experience.² He was exploring how traces of divine ultimacy may be discerned indirectly, “out of the corner of the eye,” as when witnessing death or birth, or experiencing

1. Meier Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 134.

2. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

Pastoral Perspective

this to himself. Laban too acknowledges the will of Abraham's God, but he is hardly unmoved by Abraham's wealth, though he is quiet about the camels and the flocks, and the gold rings Rebekah brought home from the spring.

Abraham, the servant, Laban, Rebekah, the unnamed men and women—all act wholly within the terms of convention; their culture speaks in what they do. Everything is enacted properly and without innovation. The servant has the gifts that document Abraham's substance, and Laban takes up his brotherly right to negotiate his sister's marriage. The parties fulfill the terms of the “sistership contract,” a form of marriage practice in Haran, including the requirement that Rebekah give her consent.¹ Rebekah is sent off with a blessing, that she may be the mother of generations, descendants strong in battle and feared by their enemies. Then, as is expected, she veils herself before meeting Isaac. Everything proceeds as it should.

The story appears to belong almost seamlessly to the world of human dealings, plans, and hopes: a successful mission, untroubled negotiations, evident benefits to both sides, a confident maiden of queenly dignity, and, in the end, a happy embracing. God is hardly absent, and the writer reminds us that Abraham's wealth is God's blessing, and the servant's success too is part of God's kindly provision.

The story begins, as well, in an act of fidelity. Abraham refuses a daughter-in-law from Canaan, but he will not have Isaac return to Haran in person. That would be to reverse the arrow of God's promise, to return to the home from which God has called them. In turn, then, marriage to Rebekah is God's gift to Isaac, the continuation of God's faithfulness to Abraham. God's blessing in this story issues as manifest and unambiguous happiness—happiness of security in the birth of sons, a happiness of prosperity, beauty, and intimate joys. Here God's providence works along the grain of life, taking up our regular ways and granting our hopes and desires. It is not always so. We should be fools were we to read this passage to promise prosperity as the reward of faithfulness.

Human affairs go well in this tale. God delights in the happiness of Rebekah and Isaac, as God's good and ungrudging gift, but it is not an isolated happiness. It issues forth in the generations of Israel, the wrestling of Jacob, Rebekah's favorite son, the

1. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 1st ed., Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), 184–85.

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Exegetical Perspective

wealth that will pass to the son for whom he seeks a wife. More verses concern Abraham's instructions to the servant. In a portion omitted from the lectionary (vv. 39–41), he recounts the brief discussion of what he will do if the chosen bride should refuse his offer. Then he describes the events of that day, beginning with his stationing himself at the village's water source. Both Jacob and Moses will likewise encounter their own future mates at wells. Distinctive here is not only that a servant rather than the bridegroom visits the well, and that he chooses it intentionally as a place to meet eligible women, but also that it is not the servant who comes to the woman's aid, as Jacob and Moses will later do, but she who comes to his.

He tells them of his prayer that Isaac's intended be revealed by a very specific response to his request for a drink, a response of exceeding generosity, an offer to slake not only his own thirst but also that of his ten camels. (We learn later of other servants in the entourage, but they do not enter into the story at this point.) Thirsty camels can drink up to thirty gallons in ten minutes. One would hope that this good and faithful servant has not allowed them to become completely dehydrated, and that he does not simply stand unhelpfully while the teenage girl hauls some 100 or 200 gallons of water. Especially if she only had one jug, and if she had to wait as others were collecting water from the well, the whole enterprise could have taken considerable time. Emphasis here is not on mechanics, however, but on the enormity of her spontaneous generosity.

The story itself has by this point been fully laid out twice in nearly identical language, first by the narrator and then by the servant, establishing his reliability and forcing readers to linger over the details. Like the story, the servant also moves by slow, deliberate steps. In the encounter with Rebekah, he had inquired about her identity and about lodging, and the girl's well-bred grace continued to unfold in response, inspiring him to give thanks to God for leading him to his master's kin. Now he recounts all those details again, finally adding to them his marriage proposal.

The lectionary omits verses 50–57, in which Rebekah's father and brother agree to the marriage and all family members receive further precious gifts; but they begin to balk when the servant insists on leaving immediately. In the end they allow Rebekah to decide—not, as the lectionary reading implies, whether she will marry Isaac, but rather whether she will leave immediately with the servant or delay for

Homiletical Perspective

weeks. Beyond that, however, these concluding verses underline the importance of continuity: fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, husbands, wives—part of a web of relationship and significance that is passed on from generation to generation.

In our time, when there is a lively argument about the return to biblical family values, we can at least assert that for the Bible family is a value. The relationship between a man and a woman, the birth of children, the dying of mothers and the taking of wives—all this is part of the way in which God ensures that God's creation continues and that God's story is told, generation to generation.

There is every good reason for the preacher to stress the value of marriage and children. When we rejoice in a spouse or in our offspring, we rejoice in them partly because they are God's gift, part of God's unfolding bounty. We rejoice partly because they are themselves, uniquely different, uniquely related. Christian preaching should claim that.

There is every good reason for the preacher to stress the value of continuity, of sharing faith and practices from one generation to the next, of working that the faith of our fathers and mothers might in fact be living still.

There is also good reason for the preacher to exercise caution when praising the gift of families. Family may be part of God's plan for humankind, but there are families that inflict more harm than blessing. Isaac and Rebekah, looking forward to the gift of children, could probably not imagine what a complicated gift Jacob and Esau would turn out to be.

Furthermore, marriage is not only a matter of providing progeny but also a matter of providing companionship. Genesis begins with Adam and Eve, who were made for each other, not simply for the sake of generations to come. All of us will have in our congregations couples who have chosen not to have children or who have been unable to have children or who have married after the years of childbearing. They too are part of God's delightful gift of companionship; their marriages are not less valuable because children are not an immediate part of their family.

Our churches will be full of single people too and of people whose deepest commitments are to another person of the same gender. Our preaching will need to be open to the varieties of the ways in which God can provide companionship.

Especially, because we read the New Testament too, we will remember a particular discontinuity that stands over against the continuity of the story

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Theological Perspective

creativity and discovery, or when some encounter presses upon us an ethical imperative. Such indirect experiences also require indirect forms of expression (symbols, metaphors, or literary narratives) that may interrupt settled ways of perceiving and speaking.

Gilkey also described how for Augustine, Calvin, and Whitehead providence does not deny human agency but *works through it*. Human will would be a principal medium of divine agency. Thus it is especially in our awareness of freedom and its limits that providence is discerned. The way Genesis modulates between the steward's agency and Rebekah's is suggestive of a limit God imposes not only on creatures but even on God's own involvement with creation. We are *not free not to be* free and responsible.

When the steward wants to take Rebekah to Isaac immediately, Laban and Bethuel propose to let her decide. While her choice may seem inevitable, it is consistent with the story's subtle emphasis on Rebekah's initiative. At the spring, as the steward prayed aloud, even "before he had finished speaking" (v. 15), she already was there, getting him water, and then watering his camels. Was this God's doing only, or was she shrewdly seizing a propitious opportunity? It is significant that upon their departure, her own servants accompany her on camels. Their combined camel train, approaching Isaac, would be even more impressive than the steward's original cohort. Then, does the statement that Isaac "loved" Rebekah imply the mutuality of their love—or not? Years later, Rebekah helps Jacob trick his father Isaac into giving him his brother Esau's birthright. While Genesis may not confirm the mutuality of their passion, it certainly confirms her agency.

Providence, effective within the ambiguities of freedom and history, defines an *arc of expansive love* appearing in different ways in Scripture. In Genesis, Isaac's wife must come from his kindred, for Abraham to be a nation. In Ruth, the embrace of God's promise reaches beyond Abraham's kindred. Still, the arc is in play here, as the steward realizes that what is at stake is the promise of "steadfast love" (v. 12). When told that Isaac was "comforted after his mother's death" (v. 67), do we sense steadfast love in Abraham's motive for finding him a wife? Did Abraham, in compassionate grief, observe his son's grief? Awareness of providence, in moments where God's care intersects historical or personal passage, often comes with stories of solitude, trauma, grief, and love.

LARRY D. BOUCHARD

Pastoral Perspective

dreams of Joseph, servitude and exodus, and far on through prophets and kings to Jesus. This tale should inspire gratitude, not calculation of God's terms for a hassle-free, comfortable life. We are grateful that God's providence includes good things, even good things as we understand them. We should give thanks when our lives go well, rejoice that earthly joys are not beneath God's interest, that God grants us ordinary happiness and that there is room in God's purpose for even our worldly successes.

It will not always be like that. Why should we expect it to be? As Christians, we continually are being formed in the image of God, as Jesus taught. Given the world's woes, how could we imagine that God will not ask us to follow Jesus' path? That God does so is fearful, but it is also the privilege of following his Son. God's providence, God's care for us, does not cease when troubles come to us, even when our hopes shipwreck and life becomes unbearably dark.

The story of Rebecca, and of the servant's triumphant journey, is important. The story is one of many that reminds us how God's first word is blessing, the "very good" of creation, and that God's last word is also blessing: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'" (Rev. 22:17). The opportunities that surprise us, sustained comforts, plans that flow together, loving that comes easily, gifts unsought: all this milk and honey is ground for wonder, not something to which we are entitled or that we have earned. If, when God grants worldly hopes and happiness, we cultivate thanksgiving and wonder, then we shall not take such joys for granted, and we shall also live more hopefully. Thus we may be ready, with less bitterness and more courage, for more difficult eventualities.

ALAN GREGORY

Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67

Exegetical Perspective

at least ten days. She is willing to go, and she has a nurse and several maids who accompany her.

Characters in this story are more wooden than developed, though Rebekah and her brother Laban will each emerge vividly later on. Yet what little is shown about them remains consistent with what follows. A portion excluded from the lectionary is Laban's first response to the servant, when he runs out, hears the news, and "as soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms . . . he said, 'Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?'" (vv. 30–31), foreshadowing his taste for material gain, which will lead ultimately to his alienation from his nephew Jacob and both his daughters. Rebekah's industry and alertness, shown not only in her interactions with the servant but also in her quick actions the moment she sees Isaac, will in the next generation grow to a powerful force as she plots her favorite son's fortunes. Isaac's passive role in this story continues to grow in later episodes as he fatalistically awaits death twenty years before his time, fails to tell one son from the other, and takes no initiative to cancel or ameliorate the misbegotten blessing that changes both his sons' lives forever.

Most of the surrounding stories, including the episode concerning Isaac's near destruction in Genesis 22—the immediately previous lectionary reading—are characterized by gripping plot complications occasioned by divine choices and human foibles. Genesis 24's plot, by contrast, is fantastically serendipitous. Though the plot elements border on hyperbole (ten camels, exacting prayers, relentless repetition, immediate departures), the story's emphasis is not on these elements. The contrast with the terror in Genesis 22 could not be more stark, suggesting that just as life sometimes breaks our heart to pieces, at other times our heart's desire falls into place as inevitably as a clock ticks forward. The wrenching twists and turns of Abraham's story subside; here, for once, blessings proceed straightforwardly, if slowly, from hope to fulfillment.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

of Isaac and Rebekah. For Jesus as for Paul, the family that counts the most is the family of faith, and that family sometimes stands in stark contrast to the biological family. That faith family requires neither wedding certificate nor birth certificate. It is the family of those whom God has adopted through Jesus Christ to be sons and daughters, brothers and sisters to one another.

That family has its own continuity: Not one gene pool but one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

The preacher will also want to acknowledge two tricky features of our text. The first is the emphasis on marriage within the tribe or nation. The second is the kind of instrumental prayer that puts God in charge of finding our spouse or our next job or some other immediate demand that God is supposed, somewhat magically, to fulfill.

Abraham is clearly concerned that his son marry one of his own kin, in our terms, one of his own kind. There are legitimate concerns about the stresses and possibilities that come with interfaith marriage, but all of us can testify to strong and lasting marriages across religious lines where God continues to do God's work across generations.

There are lingering anxieties about interracial marriage, and texts like this can be used in an attempt to legitimize what is finally a form of fear. The barriers that Paul wanted to break down in Galatians 3 and that God wanted Peter to break down in Acts 10 in our time include the anxious barrier against marrying folk from different backgrounds, nations, or ethnicities.

The second tricky feature of our text is the way in which the servant wants to make God an instrument of the servant's devices. I need a bride for Isaac; send me the right one right now, and I'll take her. It is only a slightly elevated version of the prayer "Send me a parking place" or "Let the next lottery ticket I buy yield a fortune."

There is no doubt that God is at work in all the complexities of human life, including love and marriage. There is considerable doubt that God is in charge of a cosmic Matchmaker.com, just waiting for us to fill out our profile and push the "send" button.

DAVID L. BARTLETT

PROPER 9 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 3 AND JULY 9 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 45:10–17

¹⁰Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father's house,
¹¹and the king will desire your beauty.
Since he is your lord, bow to him;
¹²the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts,
the richest of the people ¹³with all kinds of wealth.

The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;
¹⁴in many-colored robes she is led to the king;
behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.
¹⁵With joy and gladness they are led along
as they enter the palace of the king.

¹⁶In the place of ancestors you, O king, shall have sons;
you will make them princes in all the earth.
¹⁷I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations;
therefore the peoples will praise you forever and ever.

Theological Perspective

The second half of Psalm 45 resists theological comment. Placed beside Genesis 24, the theme of divine promise, realized across generations, makes a plausible connection. However, this “love song” is not principally addressed to God, and what it promises is the king’s fame, “to be celebrated in all generations” (v. 17). Some Christian commentators have read the beautiful woman in verses 10–15 as an allegory of the church, the bride of Christ; but nothing suggests the woman has been given ecclesial virtues or tasks—nothing, other than her being enjoined (somewhat like the disciples) to “forget” her family and people in deference to the king. In the last two verses, it is she who seems forgotten.

Things become only a little more promising theologically, if we interpret the whole psalm. It celebrates a royal wedding and expresses a religious system—one not ordinarily psalmic—of kingship and enthronement. The king’s beauty, glory, and throne are correlated with God’s; the ruler may even be addressed as divine; he is exhorted to govern justly, armed mightily against his enemies; as an “anointed” king, he is literally a messiah, and his aromatic robes provide a material correlative to the grace poured upon him. This implicit theology is not distinctively Abrahamic, for many cultures have

Pastoral Perspective

Here we have a royal psalm, celebrating a royal wedding. The song begins by addressing the king, urging him to righteousness. As the ruler God has blessed, he shall be a defense against enemies, a protector of goodness, and a scourge of the unrighteous. In verse 10, however, the singer turns to the bride, exhorting her to obedience, describing the richness of the bridal robes and rejoicing in the gladness of the bridal procession. The penultimate verse promises sons for the king. Psalm 45 anticipates glory in ages to come, though it is unclear as to whether the singer is referring to the effects of his song or is speaking in God’s name of the royal reputation, or whether the king himself is now addressing God, committing his rule to the cause of God’s praise through the generations.

In the past, preachers have tended to rush to an allegorical reading of this passage and others like it. Today, we are more likely to avoid allegory altogether, lest we ignore the historical particularities of Israelite kingship. This is unnecessary, though; we should not rush to allegorize but instead allow various levels of the text to speak, including the allegorical.

The coming of a king’s bride involves politics. Her royalty answers to his. Her corresponding worth is seen and touched in “gold-woven robes” and

Psalm 45:10–17

Exegetical Perspective

Neither of the two alternative readings accompanying Genesis 24, Song of Solomon 2:8–13 and Psalm 45, actually praises God or even addresses God, as we would expect the psalm for the day to do. Both involve sexual coupling, and this in a general way extends the theme introduced by Genesis 24. Yet these two passages could hardly be more distant from each other in tone and ideology. The Song of Solomon conveys the voice of a young shepherd woman deeply in love, her senses vibrantly tuned to every aspect of her beloved and of her natural surroundings. Psalm 45 is evidently tailored for a royal wedding.

Though called a “love song” in the superscription, this poem speaks in the voice of a third party, a master of ceremonies, first addressing the king, who is praised as most handsome, well spoken, and blessed (vv. 1–9). He is armed, victorious, and virtuous, both enduring and just. He rightly enjoys the luxuries of smell and sound. Last to be named among the king’s assets is the queen standing by his side, adorned with precious Ophir gold.

While the king’s attributes stand independent of his mate, and she enters the picture only in the last half of verse 9, the words addressed to her are all about the king. Like Rebekah in Genesis 24, she must forsake all that she knows, all that gave her identity and security, her “people” and her “father’s

Homiletical Perspective

The exegetical essay on this psalm will undoubtedly help us understand the psalm’s original context, as a wedding song for a king and his bride. This is one of those cases where an understanding of historical context helps us historically more than it helps us homiletically.

Like two other Old Testament/Hebrew Bible passages for today, Genesis 24 and Song of Solomon 2, our passage acknowledges the relationship between a man and a woman. In Genesis 24 the emphasis is on the family continuity that marriage provides. In Song of Solomon the emphasis is on the delight of the erotic relationship itself. In Psalm 45, however lovely the imagery, the emphasis is on the woman as the property of the man.

Artur Weiser notes that the first images of the psalm portray the “overwhelming impression which the splendor surrounding the king makes on the senses. . . . All this splendor . . . reaches its climax with the king’s bride.”¹ So there she is along with the myrrh-scented robes, the ivory palaces, and the splendid lutes—the perfect possession for a powerful monarch.

Of course her primary responsibility is clear: “Since he is your lord, bow to him” (v. 11b). Does

1. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 363–64.

Psalm 45:10–17

Theological Perspective

so endowed their rulers.¹ And who is the “queen in gold of Ophir” standing beside him in verse 9? Most probably she is the “daughter” addressed in verse 10. Could she be another? If so, would an older consort in verse 9 be present at the ceremony in verse 10, in which a new bride enters the royal coterie? We may decide that Psalm 45, at least the latter half, is at best more of cultural fascination than theological concern. At worst, it may be an example of patriarchal ideology in the bad sense.

But if the worst were so, would that not itself have theological import? How would we determine that import? With the rabbis, we could juxtapose the verses with other passages, a literary-hermeneutical strategy that, while arbitrary to some, has much to commend it. The Bible was not arranged to be read piecemeal and noncontextually, whatever its treatment by lectionary traditions on one hand and source criticism on the other. To bring together its diverse valences and ironies we could apply a covenantal criterion or, with Augustine, charity. He taught that when the literal meaning of Scripture does not comport with the love command, then the literal meaning cannot be the point.² This principle does not demand making problem passages into allegories of covenant, redemption, or *agapē*. The negative judgment that these verses *do not* so comport themselves is itself an application of scriptural criteria.

Do we need, then, a doctrine of scriptural *errancy*? This idea is not as absurd as it sounds. If we identify with those who, in faith, reject scriptural *inerrancy*, the implication is that in some ways *Scripture can err*. If so, how would we know? A doctrine of errancy might start from the fact that the Bible reflects finite and ethically ambiguous histories and cultures, and then elaborate on how revelation cannot be reduced to such histories and cultures. Such a view of revelation might well entail the criteria of covenantal promise, redemption, and love.

But some passages may confront us with a more difficult challenge. At least insofar as *I*, one interpreter to be sure, can make sense of Psalm 45:10–17, these verses seem to have no value *as Scripture*. It is much as when Martin Luther called the Letter of James an “epistle of straw” (because he thought its singular point was works righteousness, not justifying grace). Erroneous Scripture might be Scripture not serving as Scripture—except negatively. It would be Scripture to be resisted in

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in the gifts brought by the “richest of the people” (v. 12). The king’s glory is enlarged and, indeed, in the promise of sons, completed by his bride, as she gives herself to him. Whether she is a princess from Tyre, or the gift givers are Tyrians, or even, as one translator proposes, she has received a much-coveted Tyrian robe as a gift, the crucial plea is that she forget her “people and her father’s house.” There must be unity in the king’s house, a loving harmony that looks forward, and no secret reserve, nothing hoarded resentfully against the new. Her heart must not be absent in longings for home. This is so important because the king’s well-being holds the nation’s peace like a seed. Strife in the palace, rival factions, bitterness of conjugal spirit, the lack of legitimate heirs, these things make a kingdom tremble, a prey to enemies. A royal wedding is a very public business, with very public implications.

The song is poised at the moment of joy and hope, on the promise of a blessed reign, a secure future, a just order, and a peaceable kingdom. At first blush, all this may seem fearfully distant from a modern liberal democracy. Yet, if the millions who watch English royal weddings are any indication, this happy prospect has deep connections in our historical imagination. In the marriage of kings, there is compressed a hope, a yearning that is revived generation after generation, for a godly order, peaceful and steady, where violence has ceased, plenty is enjoyed, and the poor do not go away empty.

It would be somewhat dull of us if we failed to respond to this psalm simply as a love song; it is not just about the joining of important personages but of any couple. We acknowledge, of course, the asymmetry of gender relationships in this ancient wedding song, but we can still catch the delight in fruitfulness, in the hope of generations, in the venture of love that calls this woman “to forget her father’s house.” In all we know about unhappy families, the difficulties and tragedies of love, we must not forget God’s blessing upon marriage: man and woman joined together in the promise of flourishing.

Through the centuries, Christians have read Psalm 45 allegorically. Thus this king becomes Christ, and the royal bride is his church. This imagery, which can be found in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:31–32), has been beloved by Christian mystics and is remembered at the opening of most marriage liturgies. Since it is so familiar, the typology may lose force for us, and it is

1. See *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1372.
2. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* III.10.16.

Psalm 45:10–17

Exegetical Perspective

house,” to win her bridegroom’s desire. As with Rebekah, only even more singularly, it is her physical beauty that sets her apart. As in the narrative, the bride is constructed entirely from an external point of view, from the desires, needs, and hopes of the male members of the family, particularly the husband’s family. Here the patriarchal order is explicit: “Since he is your lord, bow to him” (v. 11b). Gifts of gold appear once again, though in this political order, the gifts are not simply between families but between nations. Finally, like Rebekah, she enters the home of her new husband—not a tent, but a palace of ivory.

The above parallels with the Genesis story suggest reasons for this psalm’s selection for the lectionary, but close examination shows that the contrasts are more striking than the similarities. While Rebekah’s hospitable deeds initiated the courtship, and her assent to leave with the strangers sealed the marriage, the princess bride in the psalm is a silent, passive figure, whose only personal attribute is physical rather than behavioral. Like many royal brides throughout history, hers may be a marriage of political alliance, founded not on the aptness of the match itself but on the needs of state for stability and progeny. Whereas in Genesis 24:60 Rebekah’s family blessed her with the expectation of multitudes of successful descendants, in the psalm’s conclusion, it is the king who is greeted with the hope of offspring who will become renowned princes. As for the bride, if she plays her role convincingly, with at least the outward appearance of submission, and especially if she produces sons, she has every reason to believe she will receive tenure and security in the king’s harem, if not fame and power by his side.

It is not difficult to see why this poem was included among the psalms of Judah, many of which were addressed to the interests of the monarchy. It is much more difficult to exegete the intentions of the lectionary committee, and even more painful to attempt to bend this psalm to suit the setting of worship. If we try to allegorize this bride as the church and the king as God, we are left with a deity whose interest in us is superficial and political, who will love us, conditionally, if we forsake all our prior relationships. Even more alarmingly, equating the male king with God invites the construal that all men are somehow more godlike than women, and that women’s only access to God is through bowing to the male. (Hebrews 1:8–9, incidentally, refers the description of the king in Ps. 45:6–7 to Jesus Christ, but does not delve into the marriage analogy.)

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it help that the bride is a queen and the groom not only her husband but her king, or does that just add the problems of autocracy to the problem of patriarchal marriage?

Of course these concerns of ours may seem anachronistic and, perish the thought, politically correct. Yet it would be a very odd hermeneutic indeed that assumed that the model for contemporary politics is the Judean monarchy or the models for contemporary marriages are the politically motivated marital alliances of Near Eastern (or Middle European) kings.

The stories of the life and wives of Henry VIII or even of King David give some sense of the downside of choosing a wife because she adorns your court and enhances your alliances, the downside for the wife of having to acknowledge her husband as sovereign with power of life and death.

Some dangerous stuff happens among Christians, even in our own time, when the husband is regarded as ruler of the household and the wife as the most obedient servant. Friends who make serious studies of the role of clergy in stories of domestic abuse remind us that too often we send the wife home while counseling this sort of obedience, which is finally a kind of slavery.

There are many examples in Scripture that counter any sense of male sovereignty in marriage and that are not only politically more correct but closer to the heart of the gospel. When Jesus talks about marriage and divorce in Mark 10:10–12, it is clear that he has the same—rigorous—standards in marriage for husbands and wives alike. Likewise the supposedly stuffy apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:3 makes clear the mutuality of marriage: “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.” One reason the Song of Solomon has delighted believers through the ages is its frank acknowledgment of the mutuality and equality of erotic pleasure in the relationship between two lovers.

Even from the political side, the claims of the social gospel in the early twentieth century and of liberation theology later on have been that God’s justice and mercy are not unrelated to questions of politics and economics. On the whole, monarchy and all forms of authoritarianism have a bad track record on issues of majority decisions and minority protections. One does not have to be a chauvinistic North American liberal to claim that there is more at stake here than political preferences; that God’s preferences, God’s preferential options, also enter in.

Psalm 45:10–17

Theological Perspective

preaching and prayer. *To be resisted*—that would be its gift. However, is it not merely clever to speak of Scripture that is not serving as Scripture?³

One answer is that a canon is a finite given. It is not the only thing scriptural communities interpret in light of faith—we can also engage Homer, Hegel, and quantum physics—but it is something we *must* interpret in light of faith. Scripture addresses our ultimate meaning and defining hope, yet even critical, negative interpretations that broach the possibility that certain, given texts are not serving as Scripture are still interpretations of Scripture. Let us test this with Psalm 45, particularly verse 10b: “forget your people and your father’s house.” Is the exhortation *to forget* not in error? Insofar as I can explore its meaning, in any scriptural or theological context that I can fit, this statement is pretty much useless. Making it an allegory of Jesus calling the disciples, or hearing echoes of Ruth leaving her clan for Boaz, is too much of a stretch. *It is Scripture*, and I must interpret it; yet I am unable interpret it positively *as Scripture*.

Perhaps another can. Someone now or in future generations, who will not endorse its patriarchy or merely reduce it to its cultural horizon, may show how to read it anew, in theologically compelling ways. Rather than *forget*, I will *wait* for others—who might arrive next week, or next century, who *may* discover meanings proceeding from this errant love song that I need for my nurture, but that I cannot now imagine. As far as I know, its exhortation here, to forget one’s family and people, is erroneous. So I will (1) resist it critically, (2) await new understandings that may or may not come, and (3) never forget it. In the meantime, I might go meditate on James (*pace* Luther).

LARRY D. BOUCHARD

Pastoral Perspective

easy to render it as a bloodless cliché. The vigorous, concrete imagery of Psalm 45, though, invites us to grasp the typology in equally three-dimensional terms. The church as bride, invited to incline her ear, to forget her homeland, and assured that Christ will find her beautiful and desire her, is not an idealized, perfect, heavenly church.

Rather, the familiar, ambiguous, half-hearted, timid, doubtful, and lazy church makes ready for Christ’s eternal embrace. She is beautiful in his sight, and he shall make her fruitful, despite all obstacles the church puts in his way, despite any self-destructiveness. The suffering church is honored here as well, her broken and torn limbs, her persecuted and rejected witnesses. The church hated by the world and wearied in keeping the faith, shall be led with joy and gladness into the bridal chamber. That joy and gladness is heard now in the church, in anticipation of its final bliss. Behind the church, there is the darkness from which Christ has freed her and that she strives to leave in the oblivion of dying to the world. Before the church is “the palace of the king,” the gold of her robes glinting, though largely unseen by herself, as she makes her journey. She lives too, this bride whose beauty is all in the bridegroom’s making, as relief to the world and as a promise for the world. She is followed by those whom she has comforted, fed, clothed, fought for, and defended. The radiance Christ makes shine in her is not for herself alone, but a promise to the nations, that the glorious mercy of God shall fill the earth, “as the waters cover the sea.”

ALAN GREGORY

3. Phrase inspired by Robert P. Scharlemann, “The Being of God When God Is Not Being God,” in *Inscriptions and Reflections: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989).

Psalm 45:10–17

Exegetical Perspective

Yet one of the most remarkable hermeneutics the lectionary has, perhaps unwittingly, set up for our gaze is that of the stark contrast between this psalm and the passage from the Song of Solomon. Here we gain a window into royal ceremony with all its turgid pretense, its praise of the land's most powerful male, its demands for an outward show of submission, its utilitarian realities, its absolutely silent bride, its ignorance of her interior. Is she exultant on her wedding day, or does she want to weep for family and lost youth? Is she attracted or repulsed by the storybook ending, the regal ceremony, the adornment of clothing and gold, the expectation of being bedded by the king and bearing his sons?

In contrast, the picture in Song of Solomon is painted with words by the young woman herself, vibrant, filled with love and adoration for an ardent mate, a young stag, a lover whose eye is not on power and ritual but on the flowers, the turtledoves, the figs. He does not need to be told of the beauty of his love, because he chose her and can see it for himself. It is no coincidence that when ancient interpreters sought an analogy for the love between God and humans, they turned not to Psalm 45 but to the Song of Solomon. If our devotion to God is political, if it is superficial, if it is forced, if it is submissive, if it is silent, if it responds to external demands alone, it will not enliven either us or God; but if it is boundless, free, sensually alive, and appreciative of the wonders of the natural world, which are given for delight, it will bring life.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

If one wants to preach on this wedding poem, there is some good practical advice herein. “Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty” (Ps. 45:10–11) needs to be balanced with the Genesis 2:24 reminder to the husband: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” (In our time it need hardly be added that these somewhat bracing exhortations often fall apart around the annual negotiation about whose parents to visit for Christmas.)

James Luther Mays suggests that this psalm has sometimes been used allegorically to portray the relationship between Christ and the church.² For most of us, allegory is a hard genre to preach, and if one wants to allegorize Christ as the bridegroom and the church has his bride, both Ephesians 5 and Song of Solomon provide more fruitful sources. Mays also nicely argues, however, that if we read the text allegorically, it can point precisely away from the monarchical enthusiasms that make contemporary preachers nervous: “This interpretation is also a safeguard against attributing the divine right of rule to any other save Christ, in whose hands it is utterly safe.”³

There is an honorable tradition of beginning a sermon by preaching “against” the text—noting from the beginning what seems problematic about the Scripture the congregation has just heard. Two features, however, usually qualify such preaching. First, the text is sufficiently central to contemporary Christian practice or traditional Christian theology that it needs to be dealt with. Second, at least most often, the preacher finds some way of insisting that the text is more helpful than it first appeared. In both these ways this preacher, at least, finds the present text especially difficult.

This is not a text or a theme (royal weddings) so central to our faith or practice that we ignore it at our peril. This is not a text that easily brings forth a word that is especially edifying, much less redemptive, for our time. Therefore, somewhat hesitantly and uncharacteristically, given the wide variety of other possibilities that the Revised Common Lectionary provides for Proper 9, this author provides the following homiletical advice: Preach another text.

DAVID L. BARTLETT

2. James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation commentary series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 182.

3. *Ibid.*

**PROPER 9 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 3
AND JULY 9 INCLUSIVE)**

Song of Solomon 2:8–13

⁸The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

⁹My beloved is like a gazelle
or a young stag.

Look, there he stands
behind our wall,
gazing in at the windows,
looking through the lattice.

¹⁰My beloved speaks and says to me:

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

Theological Perspective

That the Song of Solomon (also known as the Song of Songs or Cantic of Canticles) can serve as Scripture is not in serious question; but *why* these erotic poems should be canonical has long been disputed. They have inspired allegorical readings: the lady is the people Israel pursued by and pursuing God, or is the church as the bride of Christ, or is the soul seeking God. Historians would, in a sense, also interpret it allegorically when tracing its meanings to fertility cults not expressly mentioned in the Song.

Literary scholarship has tended to frown on allegory. When defined as a code in which objects, actions, or characters stand for some virtue or idea, allegory would lose its purpose once decoded. It would thus be inferior to symbolism, metaphor, parable, or myth, forms valued for generating an abundance of meaning. Secondly, allegories are arbitrary: why should goats stand for the damned and sheep the saved, when goats make better pets? Third, there is a tendency to impose allegorical interpretations on works never composed as allegories. Finally, such interpretations were often employed to reinterpret material that might be offensive, such as some of the erotic moments in the Cantic.

Allegory, however, has made a comeback. Its beauty is newly appreciated. Dante claimed to have

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In this brief passage, the woman is speaking, recounting her lover's words as he urges her into the springtime. The opening verses are a superbly crafted drama. The lover's voice attracts the woman's attention; then she sees him, first from a distance and then, suddenly, very close, close enough now to call her with tender intimacy. The movement of the lover, bounding over the mountains, contrasts with his standing and gazing in the following verse. Implicitly, however, the energy of his running continues as he looks through the windows. His eagerness is irrepressible, and his gazellelike leaping portrays not only strength and vigor, but sexual energy, the thrill of self-forgetful, driving desire. That desire now inhabits his eyes, his gaze thrusting through the lattice into the house. The wall of the building has brought him to a halt; now he must persuade and entice.

The power has shifted to the woman; she must decide to come out, into the blooming, fertile world. Perhaps behind this image is the practice, found elsewhere in the ancient Near East, of keeping the bridegroom waiting while the bride perfects her beauty and apparel.¹ This waiting is important, because it shifts the balance between the lovers,

1. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 392.

Song of Solomon 2:8–13

- ¹¹for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
¹²The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.
¹³The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.

Exegetical Perspective

The two alternative poetic readings that accompany Genesis 24, Psalm 45 and this one, are unusual. Though both function as the psalm for the day, neither actually praises God, nor even addresses God. Rather, both involve sexual relationships, and thus in a general way carry on the theme introduced by Genesis 24; but resemblance among the three passages stops here. In fact, two passages could hardly be more distinct from each other than this one and the psalm. The Song of Solomon conveys the voice of a young shepherd woman deeply in love, or at least in lust, whose senses are vibrantly tuned to every aspect of her beloved and of her natural surroundings, and who reports a lengthy and sensual poem of longing that her beloved has conveyed to her. In the psalm, which is evidently tailored for a royal wedding, the poet speaks to a silent woman, constructing a highly stylized and patriarchal role for a beautiful, privileged bride who must nevertheless bow to her mate.

Song of Solomon, whose vocabulary indicates that it is most likely not Solomon's but was written several centuries after his time, consists of a series of pastoral love poems. It is thought to owe its canonization to interpreters' perception that the poetry portrays love between Israel and God. Thus tradition, both Jewish and Christian, reads

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In the traditional Jewish understanding, the Song is a *religious allegory* recounting God's love for Israel and the history of their relationship. For Christians, it is an allegory of Christ's love for the church. These allegorical interpretations enabled the Song to become sacred scripture. . . . The[se] . . . approaches do not necessarily deny that the Song depicts an erotic, non-cultic love, but they regard this level of meaning as superficial or incomplete. There are, however, no signs that the author intended to depict any sort of experience other than human, sexual love."¹

Of course we know by now that the "original" meaning of a text is not the only meaning of a text, but our best guess about original meaning is usually the best place to start, for preachers as well as for biblical scholars. So the first question the preacher asks is: "How do I preach this explicit, erotic passage from a biblical book full of scriptural erotic passages?" The commentaries help us to interpret the imagery and to make more literal sense of the metaphors. The overall shape of the drama is clear enough: a woman envisions the arrival of the man she loves and imagines what he will say when he arrives. In *West Side Story*, Tony and Maria, lovers as

1. Michael V. Fox, in *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1000.

Song of Solomon 2:8–13

Theological Perspective

patterned his *Comedia* on a traditional scheme of four scriptural senses: the literal or straightforward, the allegorical proper or redemptive sense, the moral, and the eschatological.¹ The arbitrariness of such patterns may be a source of their beauty. Moreover, if arbitrariness is inherent to language and thought, that may lead us to soften the distinction between composed and imposed allegory. Thinkers as rigorous as Charles Peirce, as appreciative of tradition as Hans-Georg Gadamer, and as postmodern as Jacques Derrida insist that connections among signs, referents, and interpreters are ever fluid. Signs are relations, standing for other relations, on behalf of others, which in turn stand for more relations, ad infinitum. All discourse is like layers of onion skin—of allegory, analogy, metaphor, and other figures. In this view, allegorical signs are secured neither by authorial intentions nor by precise codes; they exfoliate ceaselessly.

The most unexpected signs, recurring throughout the Canticle, are extravagant similes and metaphors: swift animals, enticing aromas, and other beautiful objects or creatures. In our selection, the woman hears her lover approaching like a mountain-leaping gazelle, and elsewhere (1:9) she likens him to a *mare* distracting Pharaoh's horses! Each lover views the other's body as a garden or landscape.² So we could say that allegory is aligning *love* with what today we generalize as *nature*. There is more.

The marvelous stag gazes in the window: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." Is he asking her to leave country, city, or family to establish a lineage or fulfill a promise? Is he expecting subordination? Those frameworks are available in Scripture. What he actually says is, "for now the winter is past, the rain is over," and his explanation continues through verse 13 and beyond. He is inviting her to join in an unthreatening, flowering, singing landscape fruitfully fit for love. Often in the Canticle, she asks the same of him and pursues him effectively (3:4). Their songs can be heard without strain as an allegory of the *mutuality of love*. Why allegory, and why mutuality?

When Isaac "loved" Rebekah (Gen. 24:67), the text does not tell us that she loved him. There is no indication in Psalm 45 that the bride shared the king's desire; the scene seems more political than loving. Romantic love has a history, so too

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underscored here by her telling us the man's words. Moreover, his reduction to eager looking, to standing outside, intensifies the worth of his beloved. Waiting honors love.

He invites her to join him outside, now that the rain has stopped and the clouds have thinned to shreds, and life is rising from its wintry defeats. She belongs here, in all this busily fecund countryside; for him, she crowns it with her beauty and, in embracing him, makes him a home with turtledoves and flowers in the fruitful earth. These lines speak to a long-standing and ruinous alienation in our own culture. We have a tendency to configure nature as a world apart from the human and, at worst, as material to be overcome, to master for human benefit: usable, not lovable. This passage suggests our necessary, joyful, and good belonging in the nonhuman world, that we share in its liveliness, in its pathways of life and death, its sheltering and nurture. Our recognition of God's unique call upon humanity is not at odds with this joyful inclusion in the natural world. On the contrary, we are the creatures able to voice, on its behalf, the praise of creation for the Creator.

After the heavy rains of early spring, the Palestinian fields are thick with flowers, commanding the ground with color, opening with a suddenness that the poet has previously associated with the lover and his rush across the hills. "The vines are in blossom, they give forth fragrance" (v. 13a). The poet appeals repeatedly to the senses, shifting from hearing to sight, as the lover is heard, then looked for, to hearing again, when the lover pleads with the woman, and then back to sight and hearing together in the flowers' opening and in the singing of birds. Perhaps taste, even texture, is suggested by way of the figs and vines, and the enticement of fragrance ends the lover's evocation of spring. He concludes repeating his plea, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" (v. 13).

The sensuality of all this is worth our attention and can help us break out of some confining imaginations. The body mediates communication; it places us in the midst of life, as receiving and giving, permeated by the world, or, as we significantly put it, "in touch" with others. It is very odd, though also very modern, that we so often think of objects as being "outside" us, in an "external" world. As the language of the Song of Solomon suggests, though, our conversation with the world is much more intimate, much more a being alongside, among—a within rather than an "outside." Today, an alertness

1. Peter Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 38. See also Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 54–74; and Sarah Coakley, ed., *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).
2. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 185–203.

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the poetry theologically, though contemporary readers are more inclined to resist this reading. One recent commentator suggests a both/and approach, viewing the ecstasy between the man and woman in the setting of the natural world as reversing the alienation among the first couple, their God, and their garden the earth.¹

Indeed, love language inhabits the Song of Solomon most generously. The book employs the verb *ahav*, “love,” seven times in only two chapters (1:3, 4, 7; 3:1, 2, 3, 4), the noun *ahavah* (“love”) eleven more times, and the synonym *dod* (“love,” “beloved”) forty times, including three times within this passage (vv. 8, 9, 10). However, except for one fleeting mention in 3:11 of Solomon’s wedding day, words delineating any formal arrangement, such as “wife,” “husband,” and “marriage,” are entirely absent.

A striking feature of this passage is the unmediated female voice, which conceivably reflects that of a female poet. The voice speaking out to us from the page without quotation marks is clearly that of a woman. This is so rare in Scripture that its few instances catch readers by surprise and may be overlooked. Similarly, though employing maternal rather than sexual language, Psalm 131 compares the writer’s experience of calm and quiet trust in God with the quiet trust of her own small child who is with her.

Here the woman not only conveys her own perceptions of her beloved, who comes to her window gracefully, powerfully, leaping as a gazelle. She also mediates his speech, as he beckons her outdoors with lush descriptions of spring’s awakening. The lectionary offers us only part of his speech, quoted in hers: his words extend to verse 15, and hers return in verses 16 and 17 to the image of her beloved as a gazelle or stag, the image with which she began.

The imagery conveys the quickening of the earth and of the heart, following winter’s dormancy: the earthy smells that arise as the soil warms, vegetation shoots up and blossoms, and the birds once again find a day worth singing over. All the earth does what it was made by its Creator to do: turtledoves coo, fig trees fruit, vines flower fragrantly, and humans love and delight. In this garden, unlike Eden so long ago, the natural world including its human population responds harmoniously to the promptings of the season, as we were all made to do.

1. Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 232–34. See also Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 144–65.

Homiletical Perspective

young and sentimental as the lovers in our passage, sing: “Tonight, tonight, I’ll see my love tonight.” That is not a bad gloss on our text.

We preach that erotic love is part of God’s good creation. Of course that does not mean that anything goes or that all the appropriate virtues of commitment, exclusiveness, and stability are not important, but here, quite apart from issues of procreation, sexual love is celebrated for itself, for the goodly companionship that it provides.

It also means that there is a kind of countervoice to the reading, or misreading, of New Testament texts like the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), where marriage seems to be just one more necessary social responsibility—like paying taxes and praying for the emperor—not much fun but good for the common order. Here erotic relationships are full of joy—cherished not for their usefulness but for the relationship itself.

The assumption in the popular press is that Christians are all “Puritans” (though the real Puritans probably had more fun than their reputation allows; there were lots of little Puritans). The Song of Solomon suggests that the fullness of created life includes the gifts of sharing, giving, and receiving in physical love.

Of course it may be, as Fox suggests, that the Song got into the canon on false pretenses, but there it is, and the preacher can claim it for the gift it is. Of course, as with any sermon on marriage or sexual love or family, the preacher will be sensitive to those in the congregation who are celibate by choice or by circumstance and not assume that erotic love is some kind of prerequisite for the full and faithful life.

Perhaps we can push the interpretation further too. The claim that our text can be an allegory (an elaborate analogy) for God’s love for Israel and Israel’s love for God is after all not that far afield from Old Testament texts that do use erotic language to name God’s fierce love for God’s people. Isaiah compares God’s love for Israel to a lover growing a vineyard for the beloved:

Let me sing for my beloved,
My love-song concerning his vineyard.
(Isa. 5:1)

In Hosea the terrible woe of the prophet over his wife’s infidelity reflects the terrible woe of God at the desertion of Israel, and the longing and the anger and the jealousy are inescapably erotic. Hosea 2:7 is the lament of a cuckolded husband, the reflection of a cuckolded God, raging at betrayal of the marriage bed.

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Theological Perspective

mutuality. To impose ideas of mutuality can seem anachronistic, but histories of mutuality have beginnings, and do we not find a beginning here, in the *Canticle*? If we want to believe that Rebekah returned Isaac's love, or that the bride desired the king as he desired her, it may be because ideas of love generate a sense of mutuality that becomes part of the logic of love.

Love so desires its return that love almost *is* this desire; and when it forgoes this desire—when it cares and delights in the other, forgetting anything in return—it seems to transcend itself. The ultimate logic of love is self-surpassing, which is part of what it means to allegorize God as love. The *Canticle* says nothing about God, but it does explore love becoming extravagant toward another. So when readers associate it with God's love for Israel or the church or the soul, are they so far off? The logic of self-surpassing love has a beginning in these songs of mutual, erotic, friendly, familial, aesthetic, and appetitive desire: "Come to my garden, my sister, my bride. . . . Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love" (5:1).

Where is this garden and whence arises the logic of love? Literally, the lovers enjoy their bodies as gardens, in sex and friendship. Ethically, they beckon each other into a garden of mutuality, where they will gaze, listen, and grow without subordination. Theologically, they go into the garden of creation—suggested by the fecundity around them—where divine love is creating the logic of love. Eschatologically, are they not singing that "love is strong as death" (8:6),³ leaping along a biblical arc of meaning, where love has the last word and the first?

LARRY D. BOUCHARD

Pastoral Perspective

to this, and caution toward more distorting ways of conceiving, is desperately needed.

Christians have long distinguished between the literal and the spiritual meaning of Scripture. In medieval exegesis, though this has its roots earlier, the spiritual meaning was further divided into the allegorical, which dealt with doctrine; the tropological, which showed us how to live; and the anagogical, which revealed our final home. The anagogical, then, interpreted Scripture in terms of the "last things" and, in particular, opened up visions of heaven, our eternal home in God. Song of Solomon 2:8–13 invites such an anagogical reading. Christ runs toward us, with the eagerness of God, as passionate for his church as the father who runs to greet his wretched son, as urgent as a lover, long parted by darkness and hard rain. Christ invites us—he does not command us, he does not seize us, he entices us by loving persuasion. He shall raise us into God's new creation, which is brimming over with life, budding, growing, singing, and chattering ridiculously. Jesus declares the peace of God and everything is fruitful. Within this glory, he calls us, as if we were fair and unblemished, because in his mercy, we are just that, and lifts us into an eternal fragrance, a joyous offering to the Father. All is fertile again and shall be always, in this spring without a winter.

To interpret this passage anagogically might seem to betray its sensuality, its evocation of bodies and sexual love. Does this not spiritualize that away? On the contrary, to read this passage as presaging heaven is the most resounding celebration of created nature, of bodies, and senses, and sexual intimacy. They are in themselves, when known in the renewing grace of the Spirit, the present touch and taste of glory, groaning still in frustration, as Paul writes (Rom. 8:22), but still glinting with hope. Whatever heaven is like, it will not be less than the sensual wonder of this song, nor will it simply be different: it will be that wonder, only flowing over, unconstrained, fulfilled in the excess of infinite love.

ALAN GREGORY

3. The Song's theme, as identified by Marvin Pope in the Anchor Bible, vol. 7c (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).

Song of Solomon 2:8–13

Exegetical Perspective

As in the story of Genesis 24, though in poetic rather than narrative form, nothing is amiss, nothing is skewed, all things work together for good, and all are blessed together. Young love awakens fertile and ripe and expectant, as perfectly tuned to its surroundings as bees to the nectar they seek, filled with possibility and delight.

Marvin Pope's commentary on the Song of Solomon is filled brimful with rabbinic and patristic commentary on this passage as well as the rest of the book, commentary that allegorizes the love poetry as loving communion between Israel (or the church) and God.² At the very least, the presence of this poetry in Scripture reminds readers that sexual love with its delights is not a secular event but an expression of the divine love and longing that brought all that we know into being, a reflection of the harmony God seeks with us and for us. While much of Christian theology and preaching is themed in terms of tasks, calling, and even arduous suffering, such are not ends in themselves. The greatest gift of all is the gift of Sabbath, in which Israel was commanded to rest and savor all the delights of divine bounty, including the gifts of food, of family, and of sexual love.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

In the book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom comes to woo faithful followers with language that is inescapably romantic; the whole poem reflects the frustration of desertion:

Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice. . . .
Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, . . .
I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you.

(Prov. 1:20, 24, 26)

In our appropriate concern to avoid remaking God in our own image, we sometimes remove any sense of the erotic from our claims about Israel's God. We have been persuaded that God must always love dispassionately, without longing, and therefore without joy and without jealousy and without the terrifying fear of loss. The stories often do not sound that way.

Perhaps in relation to our Gospel text for this morning we can push the issue even farther. We have become so passionately attached to *agapē* as the appropriate kind of Christian love that we tend to privilege pictures of Jesus that portray him as entirely disinterested and pictures of believers that leave us very much in favor of God but not terribly involved. The Jesus who weeps over Jerusalem has an erotic attachment to his people; that is, he not only wishes to do them well, he longs for them. The Jesus who cries out at God's abandonment on the cross has all the rage of one betrayed by the beloved.

When Jesus calls out in Matthew 11 for folk to come to him, he is of course the wise teacher and thoughtful Messiah we respect so much; but he is also a reflection of Lady Wisdom standing on the street corner calling out with longing, looking for love. Maybe he is even a reflection of the lover so longed for by the woman in today's Song:

The voice of my beloved!
Look, he comes,
leaping upon the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

(Song 2:8, 10)

Jesus, my beloved, speaks to me and says:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are
carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest."

(Matt. 11:28)

DAVID L. BARTLETT

2. Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).

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**PROPER 10 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 10
AND JULY 16 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 25:19–34

¹⁹These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²²The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³And the LORD said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."

²⁴When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.

Theological Perspective

Before you do anything else with this text, pause. Stand in awe of it. No matter how frenzied you are at the moment, no matter how warm your calling to ministry is at present, or how cold and ashen. This text astounds. It reverberates throughout the Bible and the whole history of Judaism and of the church. Yet what does it mean exactly? Two brothers, one chosen, the other not, one a conniver, the other forthright. That congregation awaits your word on Sunday. How precisely are you to wring truth from these parents who split their loves, from these twins—the red one with his red stew, the charlatan and his usurped birthright—and from the God who chooses to save the world through such people?

Walter Brueggemann interprets the entire passage through the lens of 1 Corinthians 1:27: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."¹ There is a reason this passage resonates so deeply throughout the rest of the biblical tradition (Gen. 25–50; Mal. 1:2–5; Rom. 9:9–15). It is all of salvation in a nutshell. God has elected Abraham and his

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation commentary series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982).

Pastoral Perspective

Esau is on the short list for biblical figures who get terrible press: Judas, Jephthah, Esau. If Esau ever had a publicist, he should fire him. The others make sense: Judas, betrayal; Jephthah, the sacrifice of a loving daughter. Esau, well? Thoughtless and hairy?

Over and again Esau is depicted as something like the redheaded Yeti of the Old Testament, a bogeyman to scare the children, uncouth, unfeeling, unable to delay gratification, unable to place the right fork at dinner parties, insulting the hosts by clamoring for more of that red stuff. Perhaps readers make this move to protect their own interests—as a tradition founded upon Jacob's malfeasance churns the stomach and is ethically underwhelming. A tradition in which Jacob secures the promise of God by usurping it from his uncaring brother—that is more palatable.

However, what if we pause for a moment and ask, What if Esau isn't subhuman? What if he is merely thoughtless? Or careless? What if he is simply the sort never to miss an opportunity, the sort who makes catastrophic mistakes while mad with hunger? The question intrigues me because it

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²⁶Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) ³¹Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³²Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Exegetical Perspective

The entire patriarchal cycle (the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is structured around the theme of the continuation of God's covenant with Abraham and Abraham's rightful heirs (Gen. 17:4–8). A companion motif is conflict, which marks both progress and regress throughout the entire narrative (Gen. 12–50). But conflict is precisely the context in which, here and in other parts of the Scriptures, YHWH acts as the God who participates in human history, achieving God's mission in spite of the failures and limitations of the human characters.

This is definitively the case of Genesis 25:19–34. In this text, characters are moved beyond the limits of individuality, especially Jacob and Esau. Jacob becomes the people of Israel, and Esau the people of Edom. Verse 23 says, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided." The story, then, is not simply about the life of two individuals, but about how YHWH deals with history and directs it in a way that God's salvation is achieved (see Rom. 9:10–13).

The text opens as the story of Isaac, save for the fact that in this particular pericope the figure of Isaac

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In this narrative, God chooses Jacob over Esau (v. 23) and, by implication, Israel over other nations (12:1–3). Why? The expected choice is the firstborn, Esau, because primogeniture was the custom of the day. We might speculate that God set aside this custom because of Esau's obvious character flaws. The text describes Esau as impulsive, willing to sacrifice his future rights as the firstborn for the sake of satisfying the physical desires of the moment. Later Esau marries "outside the family" (Gen. 26:34). Esau makes foolish decisions. Clearly he is not the worthy son, even though he is the firstborn.

However, Jacob does not win any awards for moral integrity either. Jacob exploits his brother's vulnerability in order to gain the birthright. Later Jacob connives with his mother, Rebekah, to trick his father into giving him Esau's blessing (Gen. 27). Jacob is a schemer, a finagler, and a cheat. In truth, Jacob's character is no less flawed than his brother's. Why, then, would God choose Jacob over Esau?

The text is clear. God did not choose Jacob because he was a man of integrity. God chose Jacob before he was born (25:23), before he could display

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descendants for blessing. Yet that election, here and throughout Scripture, is a call to difficulty and struggle. Isaac prays for his barren wife Rebekah and she miraculously conceives. Hallelujah! Yet when most mothers feel the butterfly-like tickle of a child in utero, Rebekah feels strife as twins spar within her. Election brings strife, not ease, for the electing God has chosen the younger. With this God, the first are last, and the last are first.

Rebekah prays the prayer of many of the elect: “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” (v. 22). Patristic interpreters read this rumble in the womb in a variety of ways.² For some it suggests the mixed nature of the church. There are always wicked and good people in the church, and the maddening thing is that it is difficult to tell which is which. All we experience is the wrestling in the dark. “How many evil people there are in the church!” Augustine marvels. “And one womb carries them until they are separated in the end.” For others, the rumble is the struggle for virtue in each of our hearts. Either way, fidelity means difficulty; cross bearing.

Augustine is quite clear elsewhere that we do not know who the elect and the nonelect are. And the reason he insists on the inscrutable nature of the mystery of God’s electing purposes is none other than this very passage. “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger” (v. 23). Historians can tell us much about this passage: how it flies in the face of the economics and social structure of primogeniture, in which the elder gets the lion’s share and the rest get the leftovers. Yet they cannot tell us *why* this should be so with Israel. Because no one can. Why does God choose the heel-grabber, the tent-dweller, the bargainer for birthright—Jacob, not Esau? Genesis does not say. God does not say. It is simply announced as so.

We *can* say this: God chooses with an eye to peace. God divides on the way to uniting. Jacob and Esau spend years at each other’s throats, no doubt, as the peoples represented in this story, Israel and Edom, would for generations. Such bickering is reflected in other biblical traditions that portray Esau as simply hated by God (Mal. 1:2–5 and Rom. 9:9–15 especially). Notice that in Genesis, Jacob and Esau do not end up like Cain and Abel. They fall on each other’s necks not with daggers but with an embrace.

2. See the options presented in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 12–50*, ed. Mark Sheridan, gen. ed. Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 143–52.

Pastoral Perspective

recreates Esau as a figure that might resonate with the thousands of people in our pews who have made brainless decisions they have come to regret deeply. If you prefer the connection to Edom, Esau is a figure who might resonate with thousands of people in our pews who suffer because of the stereotypes that persist concerning their race, their gender, their stage in life, or their orientation. (“You know those Edomites: terribly hairy; never take a bath; they smell something unrighteous, I tell you; they cannot plan for the future, but you cannot blame them as they are practically animals: violent, warlike, always having children, never thinking about the ramifications of having them so young, a burden on our system, you know; *if they could just control their appetites!*”)

Back to the man himself, though, a man with cultural claims to a future that God has designated for someone else, a man who is passed over because he is not suited to that position, a man who will have to play a part in the coming fiasco, and a man who ultimately will have to wrestle his own demons (and there’s Jacob getting to wrestle angels!) for the part he plays in his own disinheritance, for refusing to see how a birthright has shaped him until its shaping influences evaporated, until the family dynamic becomes a dynamic that estranges him. Esau is a type for those of us who separate ourselves from those who love us for any number of fill-in-the-blank reasons: alcohol, drugs, work, a fear of intimacy and the internal struggles it evokes (a closed life seeming preferable until we learn the true desolations of loneliness), a self-reliance that discounts the blessing of a family or the power of mentors, those who will welcome a thoughtless prodigal home.

Whatever the case, Esau despises his birthright and the family it signifies—as multitudes have done ever since. Because pastors favor families and because pastors are troubled by those who have a strained relationship with God, we villainize Esau and make an example of him.

Here’s why he needs a new publicist: he overcomes. The corrosive power of regret does not destroy him or remand him to an existence as a caricature of disappointment. He does not dwell upon his misfortune or persist in planning schemes of revenge. Instead, after the supplanter absconds with his blessing, Esau overcomes his grief, those dire lines he cries out that cut the heart, “Bless me, me also, father! Have you only one blessing?” (Gen. 27:34, 38). After all of this has come to pass,

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is overshadowed by his wife Rebekah and their sons Jacob and Esau. Isaac plays an important role in the beginning of the story: he “prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren” (v. 21). Without this action, what follows would not have happened. The only other thing the text says about Isaac is that “Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game” (v. 28). In contrast to Isaac, Rebekah chooses to love Jacob (v. 28). Her petition to God was more than a prayer (*tr* = “to plead,” “to supplicate”). Rather, she “inquired” (*drš*), she made a request for an oracle from God, a well attested action in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is interesting to consider that the main role played here by both parents is praying, and the content of the prayers and the response from God were in no way banal! It is also important to note that Rebekah’s “love” for Jacob could be explained by the fact that she knew beforehand that Jacob—the *younger*—was the one chosen to become the heir of God’s promise to Abraham (v. 23). So she did not hesitate to bet all her tokens on Jacob. In any case, the parents who pray regarding their children have taken sides and complicate the development of the story. The story moves from conflict to conflict, and in its midst God takes control of the development of history.

YHWH’s oracle states what happens in real life. Although Esau is the firstborn, baby Jacob hints at the future development of the story by holding on to his brother’s heel. (The name Jacob comes from the Hebrew word *qab*, which means “heel.”) The personal traits of each sibling also play an important role in the progress of the story and suggest the way they will lead their lives. Physical traits are stressed in Esau’s case (v. 25, 27a); for him, the material, the tangible were the most important characteristics. Jacob was the opposite. Mental attitude, willpower, and cunning marked his personality; he was born grasping Esau’s heel (v. 26). In verse 27b he is described as “a quiet man” or “meditative” (the Hebrew word *tam* has the basic meaning of “perfect” or “blameless”; the ambiguity of meaning gives the reader more than one option to think about).

Whatever one thinks about the two brothers, the rest of the pericope (vv. 29–34) makes it clear that Jacob is the main character of the story. He is the one mentioned in the oracle (v. 23) as *the younger* who will be the stronger, who will be served by the elder brother. The storyteller uses irony and humor to round out the story. The storyteller has prepared the way with his description of the two

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any good or bad behavior. True, human conniving helps along the oracle that God gives Rebekah (v. 23), but in the end the story illustrates the statement Joseph will make to his brothers at the end of Genesis: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” (50:20).

Did God choose Jacob precisely because he was *not* the firstborn, because he was the weaker of the two brothers? The Bible offers many examples of God’s favoring the weak. (The apostle Paul explains that this is because human weakness more clearly displays God’s power: 1 Cor. 1:26–29; 2 Cor. 12:9.)

Ultimately God’s choice is inscrutable. God chooses Jacob not because of who Jacob is but because of who God is. Throughout Scripture, God shows mercy to whom God chooses to show mercy. As Terence Fretheim observes, “Jacob stands with qualities negative and positive, clear and ambiguous, simple and complex. Take him or leave him. The most astounding claim of the story is that God takes him.”¹

God chose Jacob, who becomes “Israel,” not because of Jacob’s or Israel’s moral character (Deut. 9:5). God chose to love Israel (Deut. 7:7–8). The whole story of Jacob and Esau revolves around a divine decision to elect one person, who represents one people, to carry on the blessing. The oracle that God shares with Rebekah (v. 23) is all about grace and embodies the statement in Exodus 33:19, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (cf. Rom. 9:15). God does not choose Israel merely for privilege. God chooses Israel for a responsibility. In the beginning God chose Abraham not for privilege but for the responsibility of being a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–3) and teaching future generations the ways of the Lord (Gen. 18:19). God chose Israel to be a light to the nations (Isa. 41:6; 49:6). God’s election of Israel and, in time, of the church that is engrafted onto Israel (Rom. 11:17–24) is not for the purpose of self-serving elitism but for the purpose of mission.

Compare these examples of difference in attitude and behavior toward election in American history. The seventeenth-century Puritans understood chosenness as a part of their covenant with God, due entirely to God’s will and initiative. John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, reminded the early settlers in 1630 that to be chosen meant “chosen for the good of the neighbor.”² Sadly,

1. Terence Fretheim, “Genesis,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 516.

2. Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 110.

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They weep: “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10). So it is when brothers-turned-enemies reconcile (see here the entire Bible).

In the final scene, Esau, the red guy, comes in from the field desperate for some of the red stuff. Jacob offers to sell it to him for the staggering price of everything-that-Esau-is. Unlike in the later confrontation over fatherly blessing (Gen. 27:38), here Esau makes no protest. Here he despises his birthright, eats his lentils, and heads out on his merry way.

There are obvious moralistic directions this story could lead us in (so goes Heb. 12:16–17). For what mess of pottage do we sell our birthright? I think here of the pastor with every gift in the world who turns over a thriving ministry for an affair with a stranger or Internet porn, or the Christian who deeply loves the gospel of grace yet betrays it to walk over people on the way up what seems to her to be the ladder of success. They, Esau-like, have only hurt themselves. Yet the gospel is rarely simply moralistic. As Luther famously put it, the immoralities of the patriarchs are more encouraging than stories of their virtues. Here is the family of God in all its gory detail: prayer and miraculous conception, yes; but also brothers who fight from conception, parents who divide their loves, a supplanter from birth who offers his own brother a sort of anti-Eucharist, a meal that sunders and grasps for the self at the other’s expense.

It is precisely here, among these people, where God works to save the world.

The preacher might meditate especially on two mysteries displayed here. One is Rebekah’s preference for Jacob. As with God’s election of Israel, we are not told why she loves this son more than his elder brother. He hardly seems lovable. What people or nation tells founding stories about itself like Israel’s? One would expect Esau to be father to a heroic people, slayer of game, firstborn, red and handsome. No, Jacob the tent-dweller and snake-oil salesman takes her heart. If she is an image of the church, as the Fathers suggest, she is a glorious one. She loves the cheat. Maybe just so there is hope for the rest of us.

You might meditate as well on Esau, the hairy man, sweeping up from his stool, wiping lentils from his beard, belly full but birthright empty. He has given up everything for this meal. Maybe just so, he is an image for us, too. Unlike the heel-grabber, clutching for what is not his, we might hold our prerogatives lightly and give them up for a meal, not of lentils but of bread and wine, broken and poured out for each of us and all of us.

JASON BYASSEE

Pastoral Perspective

Esau will overcome the desires Rebekah so tersely phrased, “Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you” (Gen. 27:42). The outcome is shockingly real. Jacob certainly doesn’t expect it.

When he returns after his time at Laban’s home, Jacob expects to be met with anger, and he divides his possessions as a way to mollify his brother and protect himself from Esau’s wrath; he places himself at the back, the spot of safety. Even the night before, while wrestling with the angel, Jacob’s first fear must have been that this attack was not a divine intervention but an old-fashioned case of retaliation. Jacob expects the worst of Esau. Instead he is met with grace by a man who has overcome at least part of his past, a man impossible to characterize as an unsophisticated brute. “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (Gen. 33:4).

Esau is a man who has come to embrace those he once pushed away, a man who has overcome his regret, overcome his desire for vengeance. Not only is he delighted to see his brother; he follows their embrace with overwhelming evidence of his changed life. “What do you mean by all this company that I met? I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself” (Gen. 33:8–9). Keep what you have. Another moment of shock: keep the blessing, keep the birthright. I am at peace. Not only at peace, but seeking reconciliation, ““Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you” (Gen. 33:12). His brother, not yet at peace with his wrestling, objects, “Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me” (Gen. 33:15). Jacob, who skitters away to Succoth, is the brother who has not done the work required to be able to reconcile.

The story of Esau provides the preacher with the possibility of engaging people who have deeply regretted some careless decision. This is a narrative of a man who overcame his regret and anger to claim not only peace with himself but also reclaim some portion of his life that had been lost.

CASEY THOMPSON

Genesis 25:19–34

Exegetical Perspective

baby brothers (vv. 25–26), especially Esau. Esau’s two main physical features, his redness and “all his body like a hairy mantle,” mark his destiny. For “red stuff” (lentil stew) Esau will sell and despise his birthright. Esau sees only a bowl of pottage, and nothing else; notice the sequence of the five verbs (v. 34) that mark his urgency and narrow focus: “He *ate* and *drank*, and *rose* and *went* his way. Thus Esau *despised* his birthright.” That explains why—according to the writer—when asking for the “red stuff,” he was just babbling his own name, Edom (“Red”) (v. 30). Some commentators give, as part of the definition of the word *edom*, the meaning “being a fool” (see Heb. 12:16–17). Later on, in Genesis 27, Jacob will exploit Esau’s second trait, his hairiness, when he comes before Isaac, wearing Esau’s clothes and with his neck and arms covered with the skin of young goats, to obtain his father’s blessing as the heir of the birthright.

Jacob, the “meditative” or “perfect” one (v. 27), acts according to a plan, carefully thought through with cunning and shrewdness. He, of course, has the “help” of both God and his well-informed mother. So the story of the trickster—performed by Jacob—joins the motif of “God favoring the younger son” that recurs in various parts of Genesis (4:4–5; 21:12; 37:3) and serves the purpose of achieving God’s universal mission (Gen. 12:1–3).

EDESIO SÁNCHEZ

Homiletical Perspective

in time, Americans changed this to mean that God chose the American people for special privileges in the world. During the nineteenth century “manifest destiny” was the dominant philosophy that determined American policies and outlook. It seemed self-evident that God had chosen America to be God’s people and to take possession of all the land between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, in order to fulfill what they considered their God-given destiny. The sense of responsibility to others had given way to privilege and the assumption of divine right.³

It is easy to understand why a nation would come to associate election with privilege. After all, God’s oracle to Rebekah announces that “the elder shall serve the younger” (v. 23). That sounds as if God is promising special privileges to Jacob. One must understand this oracle in the larger context of the Jacob and Esau saga (25:19–36:43). Jacob has to experience a series of struggles before God’s promise becomes true. Jacob’s transformation reaches a climax when he comes into the presence of God and acknowledges, “I am not worthy” (32:10). After wrestling with God through the night (32:22–32), Jacob is a different person when he faces Esau the next day (chap. 33). With astonishment we see Jacob bow to Esau (33:3) and hear him acknowledge to his brother as his lord, “I am your servant” (33:5, 8, 13, 14, 15)! “Accept my gift, . . . because God has dealt graciously with me” (33:11). Only when Jacob becomes a humble servant before his older brother does God’s promise come true: the older shall serve the younger. God’s people are elected to service, not to privilege. In an allusion to this older/younger oracle, Jesus said, “The greatest among you must become like the youngest” (Luke 22:26).

The church continues to wrestle with the temptation of privilege. God’s choice of the church, however, says much more about the goodness of God than the goodness of the church. There are no grounds for boasting. Election from the very beginning is never intended to be an election to privilege but an election to responsibility. Peter announces, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, *in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness*” (1 Pet. 2:9).

DAVE BLAND

3. Ibid.

PROPER 10 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 10 AND JULY 16 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 119:105–112

¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
¹⁰⁶I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.
¹⁰⁷I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O LORD, according to your word.
¹⁰⁸Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD,
and teach me your ordinances.
¹⁰⁹I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget your law.
¹¹⁰The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your precepts.
¹¹¹Your decrees are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.
¹¹²I incline my heart to perform your statutes
forever, to the end.

Theological Perspective

How did you learn to love the Scriptures? Not just to love them in the sense that we love literary classics like Dante or Shakespeare, but to love them in an I'll-preach-daily-and-give-my-life-for-this-book sort of way? This is a sort of love that is either subrational or suprarational—I'm not sure which. For me and millions of my generation, hearing Amy Grant belt out, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path," was an ingredient in forming that love. For a generation reared on an older tradition, the *Book of Common Prayer*, with its heavy repetition of Scripture, wrapping the Bible around the hours of the day and days of the year and years of life, planted that love in believers' hearts.

I think of the monks at every monastery inspired by Benedict, who not only pray psalms for a living, but who pray a bit of Psalm 119 every day of their lives. Their use of this psalm is not only a reflection on its length, though of course it is that (how can you pray through the whole Psalter in a year unless you take a bite of this one daily?). Benedictines also use this psalm because of the way it directs our attention to the nature of the Scriptures themselves. They are our light. We will not turn aside. It is the message of the entire Psalter, of the whole Bible really, in a few short verses. No wonder all Jews and Christians sing them.

Pastoral Perspective

The twin call to be in the world but not of the world is difficult to manage, especially when one hour of the week is set aside for the hearing and appropriating of God's language and three to four (or more) hours each day are set aside for the cultural liturgy of sitcoms and infomercials and pop-culture blogs. Even worse, the corporate litanies:

Boss: The software project needs to ship on Friday.
Worker: Prioritizing, sir. May I have the assistance of Carol in Logistics?
Boss: Carol has been downsized. Um, she was having trouble maximizing her productivity. You'll have to do more with less.
Worker: Let it be with me according to your word.

I am no different when it comes to straddling the line between worlds. I have a secret conceit as a pastor: I want to be *relevant*. In desperate moments, I will settle for *effective*.

The strange lot of pastors, though, is that we are called to create things that fall apart. It is hard to consider yourself effective, much less relevant, when your best work is ephemeral. We do not build solid goods. We do not piece together quilts that our grandchildren will nestle under when they go to sleep. We do not establish schools or lay bricks or paint canvases. It is true that some of us create

Psalm 119:105–112

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 119 has had, throughout its long history, both fervent admirers and fuming detractors. These extremes miss the point. In my opinion, Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives us a balanced view on this psalm:

Psalm 119 becomes especially difficult for us, perhaps, because of its length and monotony. In this case a rather slow, quiet, patient advance from word to word, from sentence to sentence, is helpful. Then we recognize that the apparent repetitions are always new variations on one theme, namely the love of God's word. As this love can never cease, so also the words which confess it can never cease. They want to accompany us through all of life, and they become in their simplicity the prayer of a child, of the young man, and of the old man.¹

Before considering the specific exegetical points of our text (vv. 105–112), several general facts about the whole psalm should be taken into account: (1) The acrostic and alphabetical structural elements of Psalm 119 communicate the idea of completeness and totality (“from A to Z”). (2) God's word, Torah (“guidance”), is the supreme good, and its value exceeds that of both silver and gold (v. 72). The

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), 32–33.

Homiletical Perspective

Given the choice of the story of Jacob and Esau, the parable of the Sower, and Paul on flesh and the Spirit, a few verses from Psalm 119 may not emerge as a preacher's choice for a primary text this Sunday. Users of the lectionary have encountered this unique psalm earlier in Year A (see *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1, pp. 344–49 and 368–73) and in Year C. At 176 verses, it is the longest of the psalms, written as an alphabetical acrostic. Each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet has an eight-verse section. (Those readings earlier this year were vv. 1–8, *aleph*, and vv. 33–40, *he*; the readings in Year C are vv. 97–104, *mem*, and vv. 137–44, *tsadhe*; see Year C, Vol. 4, pp. 176–81 and 248–53.) This Sunday offers verses 105–12, corresponding to the fourteenth Hebrew letter, *nun*. In all, the Sunday lectionary presents only forty of the psalm's 176 verses, which represents five letters out of twenty-two, and for most preachers even that spells “enough.” The psalm is not only lengthy, but repetitive. The original acrostic structure is lost in translation, and so to the non-Hebrew eye and ear the content jumps from thought to thought and runs on and on, at best a very, very long string of variegated pearls.

Verses 105–112 are a prayer for help. The supplicant prays, “Give me life, O LORD, accept my

Psalm 119:105–112

Theological Perspective

It is hard to find a place where Augustine is *not* enthusiastic about an allegorical reading of Scripture; but this is one of those places: “How are we to understand *your word*? Does it mean the Word who was God-with-God in the beginning, the Word through whom all things were made?”¹ This feels like a softball pitch floated to a home-run hitter. Augustine finds Jesus on every page of the Psalter. The entire book is Israel’s wellspring of praise. The crown of Israel’s praise is God’s Son. Augustine delights in finding Jesus in the pages of the psalms and delights in delighting his hearers with what delights him. For such delight inches all of them closer to God—and that is the point of preaching, after all.

The softball pitch turns out to be a change-up that falls off the table. “No, that cannot be right.” Those who say allegory has no rules, that it is arbitrary, that one can find whatever one wants in the Scriptures this way, are shown up in this one bit of interpretation. Augustine explains, “For the Word is a light, not a lamp. A lamp is something created, not the creator.” Archaeologists can show us that this is quite physically so. The small oil lamps with which ancient Israelites lit their homes gave off just enough light to see right in front of one’s face—enough to illumine the next step, but no farther. Some comparison to the light of all the world (Rev. 21:23). To what does this light refer then? “It is not the Word who is Christ, but Christ’s word” (see also here 2 Pet. 1:19). The Scriptures are the bread we must eat three times a day, they are the word we must sing seven times a day (like monks, directed by the Psalter), they are the air we must breathe every moment to live. For God’s Word is a lamp for our feet, with which we can see far enough for only one more step.

The psalmist’s trust is not hindered by her being “severely afflicted” (v. 107). Over against the common view of God in our age as a sort of superaspirin, Psalm 119 prescribes faith precisely as it draws us *into* suffering, not because it draws us out of it. Augustine notes the passive voice in the text. In his translation, “I have been humbled exceedingly,” because the psalmist has “endured fierce persecution.”² Faith here is no pabulum to distract us from present discomfort with promises of future bliss. It is a rock-hard, iron determination not to shift to the left or the right despite the strains that come from walking this

Pastoral Perspective

beautiful buildings, but often a new building is just the death knell of a congregation, the locus where our work is supposed to take place.

Instead, we lavish hours on words that, at worst, dissipate into air and, at best, reside briefly in the heart before fading, leaving there a residue of grace. We spend our time visiting people, an activity that would get us fired in any right-thinking company. Of course, we spend time in prayer. What would happen at your job if you spent an hour every Tuesday talking to God about it? Is that a billable hour?

At the end of the week, I sometimes look back and wonder what I have *done*. It is a dangerous question because it leads me to those hidden desires of mine: *relevance, effectiveness*. It leads me to answer the purpose of my life with the question of production. I have been faithful, you see, if I have produced enough or if enough people found some relevance in my sermon. You can see how this is bad news if God has called you to a different purpose: the right word said at the right time, the sermon delivered for a solitary person while three hundred others twiddle their thumbs, the class about tithing that is forgotten by Wednesday, the lunch with a widower on the anniversary of his wife’s death.

I have continually to remind myself that the task of any Christian is not to be effective or relevant but simply to be faithful. I have to remind myself that God might ask me to do something thoroughly irrational and unproductive, simply to break the stranglehold that the idea of production has on my mind. Try selling that to your session: “The reason I preached that sermon completely in pig latin is that I thought it would be remarkably ineffective and that’s what God wanted me to be.”

What illuminates the way of faith? Scripture, of course. It is true for our congregants just as it was true for the psalmist: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v. 105). Our congregations live in a world where “production” is a word with gospellike authority: finish your homework; write that paper; study for your test to produce the right answers. Crunch the numbers; write that report; close the deal to produce the right outcome for the bottom line. Pack the lunches; write that excused-absence note; clean the house; boil the pasta; read the newest parenting book to produce the right sort of kids.

The lists might as well read: gather the straw, make that brick, deliver the product to Pharaoh. Those among that set who are cursed with insight will see their need for something different to orient

1. Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, vol. 5, ed. Maria Boulding, OSB, in *Works of St. Augustine*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 450.

2. *Ibid.*, 452.

Psalm 119:105–112

Exegetical Perspective

Torah is reliable and endures forever (v. 142). These ideas are confirmed by the psalmist's repeated use of the word *torah* (twenty-five times) and strengthened by the seven synonyms for *torah* present throughout the psalm: "word," "ordinance," "precepts," "promises," "statute," "commandments," and "decrees." (3) The psalm includes allusions to the entire Hebrew Bible, known as the TaNaKh (which stands for *Torah*, "law" or "guidance," *Navi'im*, "prophets," and *Ketuvim*, "writings," including the Psalms, Proverbs, and other Wisdom literature).

In Psalm 119:105–112, the psalmist gives a general statement about what God's Word means for his or her life, and then makes a commitment to keep it (vv. 105–106). Even though the psalmist lives in the midst of hardships and humiliation and is surrounded by enemies, God's Word is still "light to my path" (vv. 107–110). The unit finishes with the assurance that regardless of what is going on in the life of the psalmist, the Word of God is a source of joy, a long-lasting heritage, and worthy of life commitment. It is worth noting that the verbs in verses 105–106 tell about the firm commitment the psalmist has for the Torah; that is why the psalmist pledges an oath and reiterates a firm decision to live by the principles of God's Word (v. 112). In verses 107–110, the psalmist names the afflictions against which he or she struggles and makes firm statements indicating that the mishaps of life will not bend the psalmist's will of iron.

The main theme of Psalm 119:105–112 is, of course, God's Word (Torah) and, with it, God's presence. Besides the two quotations of the name YHWH (vv. 107, 108), each time a synonym of the Torah appears (eight times), it has as part of the Hebrew word the possessive pronoun in singular (*ka*, "your"). In other words, it does not matter what the psalmist says or experiences; YHWH and God's Torah are forever present.

A second theme in this unit is that of affliction, suffering, and constant persecution (vv. 107, 109–110), a topic that recurs many times throughout the psalm (see vv. 22–23, 28, 42, 50–51, 61, 69, 71, 75, 84–87, 92, 95, 107, 110, 121, 134, 141, 150, 153, 157, 161). This explains why some exegetes consider this psalm a lament poem.

A third important topic in verses 105–112 is that of "light" ("lamp," "lantern"), imagery that conveys the idea that God's Word provides guidance and is a source of life and light. Several biblical texts point toward the same idea (Prov. 6:23; 2 Pet. 1:19; cf. Prov. 13:9). Verse 104—with the idea of a "false

Homiletical Perspective

offerings, teach me your ordinances," but almost overwhelming the requests directed to God is the predicament of the one praying. The pray-er defines himself or herself: "I am severely afflicted" and in danger (v. 110a); and the pray-er defends himself or herself: "I have sworn an oath and confirmed it. . . . I do not forget your law. . . . I do not stray from your precepts." This prayer may fall on the ear as self-righteousness positioning for divine favor and self-centeredness masquerading as faithfulness, but it continues the first-person voice and focus that characterizes the entire psalm. The form of supplication throughout the psalm is personal petition; the psalmist is asking God for something for himself or herself — reminding God that the request is well deserved!

So how can we weave Psalm 119:105–112 into the fabric of the worship service today, especially if the sermon text is from Genesis or Romans or Matthew? The Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* favors the singing of the day's appointed psalm "following the first reading, where it serves as a congregational meditation and response to the reading. It is not intended as another reading."¹ The "singing" option falters, however. The 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* sings only the first sixteen verses of this psalm, and the imagery of verse 105 is faintly reflected in William Walsham How's "O Word of God Incarnate," where the word is a "lantern to our footsteps" shining through the ages. The musically gifted homiletician may choose to embrace the challenge of setting text to tune; failing that, the psalm might be read responsively or in unison. Following the first reading, the Genesis story of Jacob's deception regarding the birthright, the psalm verses echo its vindictive "snare" (v. 110) and undeserved plight. Might this be heard as a prayer of Esau? In hearing the two texts together, the prayer for help is given a situational context that invites the contemporary hearer to offer his or her own supplications.

John Calvin, for whom prayer was "the chief exercise of faith," further described prayer as "an intimate conversation" of the believer with God. Homiletics too is a conversation; in fact, the very word is etymologically rooted in converse and instruction. The preacher of the Word rightly undertakes to be a teacher of prayer. Just as early disciples implored, "Teach us to pray," contemporary disciples frequently confess that they are at a loss for words when it comes to prayer.

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 57.

Psalm 119:105–112

Theological Perspective

narrow way with a cross on our backs, only one step at a time lightened in front of us.

Now it can be maudlin or even perverse to compare our sufferings in ministry to those of Christians persecuted in the early church or around the world now. In North America, as of this writing, Christian ministry can still make for a fairly comfortable middle-class existence. We may have to travel outside our context—both to sisters and brothers around the world now or to sisters and brothers at rest in church history—to come to understand faith that causes severe affliction. Yet preaching this word, extolling this Light of the world, will make for a rockier road than other options we might have chosen. As our soft foot hits hard rock, we should look up: not only is another step alighted, but a Light walks before us, cross on his back, who has been this way before. The reward for walking this way is lasting. Augustine's words are trenchant for our celebrity-crazed age: "The glory of the martyrs is not like the transient celebrity of people who chase vain things."³

We preachers are not the source of our own light, as Augustine is right to insist. We are not "God from God, light from light, true God from true God," as the creed has it. Only One is that, and we cannot even claim to understand God, let alone to be God. Yet we do possess our own, derivative light, and we are warned sternly not to hide it under a bushel (Matt. 5:15). Ours is a strange light, lighting the way for one more step, taking the shape of a cross, not a spotlight of fame, but a flicker bright enough to show us the next step is secure. Beyond that, who knows? We do not, except this: there will be one who walks with us, and he will never leave nor forsake us.

So we sing: "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."

JASON BYASSEE

Pastoral Perspective

their lives, a need to cry out to God (just as the Israelites did during their slavery), "I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word" (v. 107).

The psalmist offers an alternative to the seductive promise of production. The psalmist offers a life of faith oriented by the Word of God. The rhetoric is repetitive, a litany of desire, expressed perhaps by a psalmist with access to an ancient thesaurus but with a singular desire: teach me your ordinances (v. 108), your righteous ordinances (v. 106), your word (v. 107), your law (v. 109), your precepts (v. 110), your decrees (v. 111), your statutes (v. 112).

This is a servant of God who has recognized the bankrupt nature of his former life and seeks something other than production, or relevance, or effectiveness. This psalmist seeks to be *faithful*.

Of course, few are allowed to be faithful without being productive. Our culture abhors the thought. So what does Scripture offer as a means of being in the world while not being consumed by its priorities? Perhaps Psalm 119 could be paired with Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps striving *first* for the kingdom of God can reorder the other influences on our lives:

"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? . . . But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matt. 6:24–26, 33)

Let it be with us according to God's word.

CASEY THOMPSON

3. Ibid., 454.

Psalm 119:105–112

Exegetical Perspective

way” —helps to highlight the idea that the “light” of the Word of God illuminates the path of truth and justice.

Points to consider when preparing this text for preaching:

1. The whole of Psalm 119 was composed as a long doxology about the Word of God; thus it not only has as its center the Torah as a theme, but also other parts of the Hebrew Bible, as an anthology. When we read this part of the psalm, several texts in the Hebrew Bible come to mind: the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, and Deuteronomy.
2. By using, in each verse, one of the eight synonyms of Torah, the psalmist conveys the idea that all corners of human life are touched by the Word of God. This idea permeates the entire psalm.
3. It is worth noting the presence of different parts of a human being in this unit: “feet” (v. 105), “mouth” (v. 108), “soul” and “hand” (v. 109), “heart” (vv. 111–112). The whole of the person is surrounded by God’s Word.
4. Regarding the Word of God and light metaphors, a preacher can make the connection between Psalm 119 and a New Testament metaphor for Jesus by turning to the Gospel of John, where Jesus is “the Word” and the “life” and “the light of all people” (John 1:1–4, 9), who is called “the light of the world” (John 8:12; see also 9:4–5). In John, as in Psalm 119, light is associated with finding God’s path: “Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:21; see also 11:9–10).

EDESIO SÁNCHEZ

Homiletical Perspective

Good intentions and deep desires for prayer are thwarted by feelings of inadequacy and a deficit of “how to,” and the chief exercise of faith is exercised with discomfort and difficulty.

Psalm 119:105–112 presents the preacher with an opportunity to teach the congregation some ABCs of prayer. In your worship or education setting, with children and adults, try an exercise in teaching prayer by imitating the acrostic form of this text. Write a prayer for help in eight lines, beginning each line with the letter N (which is also the fourteenth letter of the English alphabet). Pour out feelings and cares, as Calvin would urge; resist the inclination to mouth words that are familiar but not meaningful. Search the heart and find the words that candidly express personal needs, fears, and hopes; intimately and trustingly engage God’s help. The acrostic form will help to structure the prayer, evoke words, and perhaps make prayer less intimidating. Here’s an example:

Now, O LORD, I turn to you;
look into the soul of your faithful servant.
No other gods have I desired,
no other word have I held in my heart.
Nations come to you, seeking peace;
why do we not hear your word and live it?
Nature flows from you, creating life;
why do we not receive your gift and give it?
Night reveals your silent birthing,
help me day by day to grow in your truth.
Number my years in your grace,
and multiply the faithfulness of your people.
Near and far, be my presence and strength,
my hope in distress and my comfort in fear.
Never leave me to my own devices;
never cease to work your purposes in and in spite
of us. Amen.

Next, challenge the congregation to create an acrostic psalm of its own. There are twenty-five letters to go. O Lord, teach us to pray!

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

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**PROPER 11 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 17
AND JULY 23 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 28:10–19a

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” ¹⁸So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ^{19a}He called that place Bethel.

Theological Perspective

There are times in church history when our mothers and fathers in faith read a passage allegorically because they were embarrassed by it. Think of patriarchs fibbing about who they are married to just to save their skin, or psalmists celebrating bashed baby brains. It is hard to blame anyone for wanting to read contrary to the letter.

The Jacob’s ladder story is not one of those embarrassing passages. This story is so awesome (in the older English sense of awful, “full of awe”), so resplendent with the glory of the Lord, that the Christian tradition cannot help but see Jesus in every line. Jesus himself refers to this passage when he tells Nathanael, the true Israelite without guile, that he will “see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1:51).

Jacob actually got to see what Nathanael was promised. First, he took a rock for his pillow. Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that “the rock was Christ.” This may seem beyond the interpretive pale, except that Jacob awakes and actually *anoints* the rock (Gen. 28:18). The church fathers and

Pastoral Perspective

Let me make a confession as a pastor: sometimes—for the briefest moments—I forget how faithful our people are. I forget that when we read a passage like this one from the pulpit, they sigh, thinking, “How wonderful it would be if God got my attention that way,” because they really do want to encounter God; they really want God to provide them some direction.

So they start daydreaming through our sermon: “If only when I went to sleep, if only my dreams would draw back like a curtain and something bled through, a vision, with a voice, deep like a subway rumble, and I would hear that God is with me and know what God wants me to do. If only. Perhaps I should try a stone as a pillow tonight.”

Then snap, God is gone and they are awake—the covers caught beneath their legs, the nightstand vibrating from the alarm clock’s buzz. Of course, it is absurd. It is absurd to think that God comes to us this way—so immediately, so personally. The whole thing is absurd, really—from the stone pillow to self-serving Jacob becoming the promise carrier for God.

The greatest absurdity, though, is what we tend to do with stories like these: we domesticate them

Genesis 28:10–19a

Exegetical Perspective

This text is an outcome of what happened in Genesis 25:19–34 (see also Gen. 27). Now, Jacob finds himself alone—the first time in the whole story (Gen. 25:19–28:5) in which Jacob appears with no human companions at all: he has no relatives to welcome him or foreigners to offer him hospitality. Now he is in a solitary place; he has been fleeing from his brother Esau who wants to kill him (Gen. 27:41–45). So, as happens over and over again throughout the whole patriarchal cycle (Gen. 12–50), conflict appears at the beginning of the story, because according to God’s overall plan, it is in the midst of human vulnerability that humans receive divine grace (2 Cor. 12:9).

The unit is structured around the concept of “place.” The word “place” appears six times; “earth” and “land” five times, “stone” three times. There are a number of different places in this story: cities, a ladder, heaven, father’s house. These places move from the ordinary (a stone in an isolated place) to the extraordinary (a holy place that has been transformed by God’s divine presence [theophany]). Jacob names this transformed place “House of

Homiletical Perspective

The journey continues! The lectionary maps nine weeks through Genesis, a summer journey that travels from Beer-sheba to Egypt, spanning Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers. It is not too late for a preacher to get on the Old Testament track and guide the congregation through these revealing narratives. The homiletical landscape is lush. In the preceding week, twins Jacob and Esau have joined the company, introducing a sibling rivalry that will complicate the story and fascinate its hearers with deception and sexual intrigue. Jacob acquires his brother’s birthright and then cheats his brother out of their father’s blessing. In Genesis 28:10–19a, we meet Jacob as he is fleeing for his life, only to encounter God. Interpretation will go in three directions: to person, place, and promise.

The Person. If the congregation is meeting Jacob for the first time, the preacher will want to spend some time on an introduction. The name given him at birth, describing the natal circumstances, means “he takes by the heel” or “he supplants.” Jacob is a “heel,” a grabby, despicable, and unscrupulous cheat. He

Genesis 28:10–19a

Theological Perspective

mothers tend to take the alternate reading of verse 13, in which the Lord God is standing *above* the ladder. Combined with Jesus' words in John 1:51, this means the Lord is both at the top and at the bottom of the ladder. Jacob's sleep, like all human sleep, hints at death; but the ladder, unlike human ladders, held upright toward heaven, hints at the cross on which Christ will be lifted up. Theophanies, or manifestations of God, are particular things, not abstract, generalizable religious experiences. Christians will see the Trinity. How could we not? For us, it is Jesus who is Jacob, who holds the ladder to heaven for us and also meets us at the top.

Yet the particularities of the vision defy easy interpretation. How could it be otherwise, when the mystery of God's triune nature is so far beyond our comprehension? A dream, a ladder, angels, God above, God below, God so magnificently present in a place where Jacob is surprised to find him. This scene has inspired artists, both religious and not religious, for millennia. Think of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" (did God get a 10 percent cut for that?). Think of the medieval icon depicting believers on different rungs of the ladder, doing their best to ascend, while demons bite at their ankles, doing their best to bring about their descent. I have seen a contemporary image in which the angels are represented by butterfly wings, whispering up and down, lighter than a feather. Visual imagination of the scene is inescapable. So perhaps we should change up the visual particulars, lest hearers think they have grasped God, whom no one can grasp. Augustine does this by imagining the "angels" as preachers (do not get conceited now).¹ He means the word "angels" etymologically: "messengers." Those who ascend preach profound truths for the advanced in faith ("in the beginning was the Word"—who can imagine such a beginning?). Those who descend preach more easily digestible truths for catechumens, babes in faith ("the Word became flesh"). All preachers should climb to all parts of the ladder, depending on where their congregation is at the time, and we should beware: those demons bite at preacher ankles too.

It is good to remember the moral nature of the one having this dream. Jacob is the sort of man who has you checking to be sure your wallet is still there after he passes by. He swindles his brother,

1. Augustine, *Tractates on John*, quoted in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Genesis 12–50*, ed. Mark Sheridan, gen. ed. Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 188. Other patristic references made in passing also refer to the texts gathered here.

Pastoral Perspective

and make them safe. Whether it is Jacob and his ladder or Moses and his burning bush or Jesus and his incarnation (where God has come to us, so immediately, so personally), we dial down the terror in the story so that our congregation will not be frightened, as Jacob was (v. 17). But these stories are a look into a God so close, so wondrous, that we are compelled to marvel and cower at the same time.

I wonder if we try to protect our congregations because we love them. Because many of us have had an experience like the one Jacob has here. Though ours are usually of a weaker variety, they still knocked us head over teakettle. When we get a look this close, we know that our former life is over. We are no longer the scoundrel Jacob but a man on his way to becoming Israel. We are no longer a second-grade teacher but an inner-city prophet. We are no longer a middle manager but a nonprofit director. We are no longer a nurse but a medical missionary. How can we be the same?

We are now the carriers of God's promises—just as Jacob has become—and all that we get to sustain us is the promise God makes to Jacob. Maybe that is why we protect them. Because all we ever get as disciples is that promise: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" (v. 15). The promise that has resounded throughout the Bible to all people whom God has called: to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant . . . to be God to you" (Gen. 17:7); to Moses, "I will be with you" (Exod. 3:12); to Jeremiah, "for I am with you to deliver you" (Jer. 1:8); to the disciples, "and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Usually this type of promise comes with a direction as well: go and make disciples of all nations; pluck up and pull down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant; deliver my people from the bondage of slavery. Most of our congregants have the same overwhelming need to respond that Jacob did when they encounter this awesome God. They know their life is not the same anymore, so they begin to wonder how they can build an altar to God's presence, how their lives can become a living altar: "Does God really want me to tutor kids at an inner-city school?"

It is our job as preachers to remind them:

"Thus saith the Lord, Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

"But I can't go there. I don't really do well with kids. It would be better for the kids, you know, if I did something else."

Genesis 28:10–19a

Exegetical Perspective

God” and “Gate of heaven.” The storyteller’s use of the word “place” makes evident that movement from ordinary to sacred: the first three times the word occurs (v. 11), it refers to Jacob’s need to rest; he needs to find a common place for an ordinary action. The second three times the word is used (vv. 16, 17, 19) have to do with the awesome, terrifying presence of God.

Regarding the theophany, it is important to consider the fact that the “word” (vv. 13b–15) is far more important than “seeing” (vv. 12–13a). The ladder (more exactly, a ziggurat) and the angels ascending and descending give visual affirmation of the divine manifestation; their presence assures that earth is not abandoned, but “connected” to heaven. The author does not give any other reason for the angels’ presence in the theophany. Attention shifts to God’s word: when Jacob beholds God, he does not see the magnificent or breathtaking presence of the Deity, but hears God speaking to him.

Three elements are present in the promise God makes to Jacob:

1. *The Deity’s self-identification.* The expression “I am the LORD” is already present in Genesis 15:7, but here, when it is used with the formula “the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac,” we find together two key elements of tradition: the “I am YHWH” of the exodus (prospectively considered) and the “God of the patriarchs” (before the encounter with Moses in Exod. 3:1–15). In other words, the God in whose hands Jacob is held is no other than the God who had made a covenant with his ancestors and YHWH, the God who will, in the future, lead Jacob’s descendants out of slavery.

2. *God’s confirmation to Jacob of the covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 17).* Before this particular experience, Jacob, the younger son, had already obtained from Isaac the birthright and the special blessing belonging to the firstborn; both acts had made him the rightful heir of the covenant. However, so far, only human beings have participated on Jacob’s behalf. Now it is God’s turn to confirm that Jacob is the rightful heir, and, for a reason beyond our full comprehension, God chooses this place and moment to make covenant with Jacob, placing Jacob’s name in the formula: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,” which appears throughout the Scriptures.

3. *God’s promise to be with Jacob, right here and right now.* The promises of the covenant belong to the future, but Jacob has an urgent need to be protected and sustained in his present situation; and that is exactly what God promises him. Verse 15

Homiletical Perspective

exploits his brother’s hunger, conspires to defraud his brother of his rightful inheritance, and shamelessly deceives their father to do so. He supplants familial love and duty with greed. Our interest in the place we meet him is more situational than geographical. The context gives some certainty; he is in a “bad place,” a fugitive from his own injustice and the vengeful fury of his own twin. The text here gives no indication of a troubled conscience, although later, in another place, when asked his name, the response will be confessional: “Jacob,” a.k.a. “The Cheater” (Gen. 32:27). Jacob will be redeemed by an eventual reconciliation with Esau, but not just yet. Here the homiletical task is to portray Jacob in all his corrupted humanity, and the homiletical art is to hold up a mirror to our own corrupted humanity. What is God doing with a person like this?

The Place. Readers and hearers of this text will notice that the word “place” is used repeatedly (six times!), to the point of awkward redundancy. The homiletician cannot ignore the intended emphasis. God is in this place! God is everywhere, of course; but we mark the spots where we know it in powerful and convincing ways. Ancient and contemporary consciousness share common ground in acknowledging the power of place to locate meaning and evoke memory. The congregation hearing this text is hearing it in a specific physical place, most likely a space designed for worship. Whatever its name, it is a “Beth-el,” a house of God, where despite our insistence that God is not beholden to our designated places, we gather in the hopeful conviction that God will meet us there. We form deep attachments to our places of worship; even a secular culture continues to value sacred space, going to great lengths to preserve it and going great distances to visit it. The theme of place will be resonant at multiple levels, physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual.

The homiletical conversation in these texts from the Hebrew Bible will be enriched by including Jewish resources. A rabbinic conversation partner shared that one of the names of God in that tradition is “Rock of Israel” (*Tzur Yishrael*). A Torah commentary yields the insight that “in post-biblical usage ‘the place’ was a name for God, so that ‘He came upon a certain place’ could be read ‘He came upon God.’ Is God then a place? In a way, say the Rabbis, in that (God) encompasses the whole world.”¹ If the worship design for this day

1. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 194.

Genesis 28:10–19a

Theological Perspective

and abetted by his mother, he tricks his father. Now he is running for his life. This vision comes to him while he is at the Motel 6 on the edge of town, a fugitive who is doing his best to settle in, having had no time even to pack a pillow. The vertical and the horizontal intersect here in the thick of a life, unedited.

The God of promises does not wait around for people sufficiently squeaky clean to bless. No, the biblical God reaches down into the soul of a swindler, to be with him and keep him wherever he goes. It is through Jacob that the land will be given, “to you and to your offspring.” The church has seen the fulfillment of this and other promises in its own worldwide membership: “Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth” (v. 14).

Both Jews and Christians and all our neighbors do well to imitate Jacob’s response to this dream: awe, astonishment, worship, both vocal and visceral. He pours oil, renames the place, stammers his astonishment as best he can. Not everyone gets to have an experience like this; yet we can all approach the house of the Lord, built as it is on visions like Jacob’s, and try and blurt out the sort of baby talk to which we are all reduced in the presence of holy God, the kind of babble that takes place between lovers. We would not be showing up on holy days at all if *someone* had not had a vision of God, in all its splendor and terror, after which she or he erected a house of God, a pillar, an anointed stone, having changed the name of the place to “House of God.”

Jacob’s response is to offer 10 percent of his wealth to God. Jesus often received similar reactions to his healing or parables or gestures of grace: people would up and promise to give away all, or half, or whatever they had stolen. Jacob promises one tenth. Perhaps that amount was easier for him; “his” birthright and blessing were not his to begin with. Of course, neither are ours. Perhaps the way to preach this is to tell those who have had an encounter with the living God to remember it. Anoint it. Change the name of the place and stammer out words of awe. Then give generously. A tenth is the least we can do.

JASON BYASSEE

Pastoral Perspective

“Thus saith the Lord: I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Of course, it may be something else:

“Do mission in Guatemala? I don’t even speak the language and there’s so much poverty and I’m not sure I can handle seeing that.”

“Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”

Do not forget the quiet spaces where we are called to be disciples as well:

“Go, take your child to college. Trust them to be an adult.”

“Go tell your mother that if she keeps drinking, she will destroy herself and probably you, too.”

“Put your children in the public school. The city needs your care and resources.”

And behind all of these calls, these encounters with God, is the promise made to Jacob: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. . . . for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Like Jacob, we consecrate all of these places—not because we are holy, but because God has walked with us and his presence has changed them. Not only are these calls possible, but they become the places where we see God most clearly, because God is standing next to us. We slap our heads and echo the wonderful words of Jacob, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (Gen 28:16). Because they are the words of Jacob, they are more wonderful still. Jacob, the usurper, the thief, the scoundrel, is also the carrier of the promise of God. Surely those of us who are disciples (and usurpers and thieves and scoundrels as well) can carry it too. I think our congregants recognize that. That is why they return week after week, perchance to encounter God.

It is my job as a pastor to remember how deeply faithful these people are, how much they wish for the holy encounter with God, and how I frustrate my own call when I stand in the way.

CASEY THOMPSON

Genesis 28:10–19a

Exegetical Perspective

enlists the five elements of the promise: (a) *I am with you*, God's presence; (b) *I will keep you*, God's protection; (c) *I will bring you back*, God's ability to transform persons, situations; (d) *I will not leave you*, God's constant help; (e) *I have promised it to you*, God's unfailing word and promise.

All five elements point to YHWH's solidarity, an essential trait of God's being. On this issue, it is important to highlight the sequence of expressions related to God's essential being and the glorious name YHWH: "I am YHWH. . . I am with you. . . God will be with me. . . YHWH shall be my God" (vv. 13, 15, 20, 21). What is emphasized here is the theological meaning of the name YHWH, that of presence, of "being" (see Exod. 3:12, 14). YHWH "becomes" God to a people by being with and for a community. The name we find in Isaiah 7:14 is Immanuel, "God is with us" (echoed in Matthew). Therefore, even before the divine name was revealed to Moses for the first time (Exod. 3:15), it already was present with Abraham (Gen. 22:22), with Isaac (Gen. 26:3, 24, 28), with Jacob (Gen. 28:15; 31:3), with Joseph (Gen. 39:2–4, 21, 23); and would continue to be with Joshua (Deut. 31:23; Josh. 1:5; 3:7), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:19), and David (1 Sam. 18:12–14; 2 Sam. 5:10; 7:3, 9).

The last part of the text (Gen. 28:16–19a) tells about Jacob's response to what he has just experienced. Everything has changed dramatically. The ordinary place and the ordinary stone are transformed to a sacred place and a sacred symbol, and an ordinary and common man has become a new one, with a new understanding of who YHWH is, a new understanding of himself, and a new decision to revere YHWH as his God. Readers are invited to join with Jacob in a great liturgical act: to arrive at a holy place, experience God's unique presence, then make a ritual response, a vow, a petition, and a promise to give one-tenth of everything received from God.

EDESIO SÁNCHEZ

Homiletical Perspective

also includes Psalm 139, sung or read, it will echo this encompassing presence of God: "If I make my bed in Sheol . . ." (Ps. 139:8b). In the middle of his nightmare, Jacob falls asleep. The unexpected turn in the story is that a stone pillow produces a dream! The Torah commentary suggests that it is "not surprising that . . . at this stage of his life," before his encounter with God, Jacob held the common ancient belief "that gods lived in stones."² The preacher may want to explore the common childhood question, "Where does God live?" but care must be given to avoid any sense that the God revealed in these Old Testament stories is lesser, undeveloped, "primitive."

The Promise. Jacob sleeps like a rock and is rocked by a dream. A focus on Jacob's "ladder" will miss both the exegete's corrective translation (more accurately and less tunelessly, "ramp") and the storyteller's interest in conveying the covenantal promise, "Know that I am with you." The dream is a serious and established medium of divine revelation in the Bible, even to those neither seeking nor expecting a religious experience. This text is read in the Matthew lectionary cycle, in the context of a genealogy that begins with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and flows from the patriarchs and matriarchs to another Jacob, "the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born" (Matt. 1:1–16). The content of the promise is also the continuity of the promise. God is self-revealing in places and persons. The better Gospel companion here may well be Matthew 1:18–25.

The contemporary congregation will hear in the content of this promise the biblical roots of the promise of the land that is a continuing source of conflict in this region today. Current events in Israel-Palestine when this text is preached should be given consideration, and this may be a timely occasion to extend the homiletical conversation from Scripture and sermon to study and discussion.

Finally, the homiletical conversation with this text will be greatly enhanced for the hearers when the story is read well. Worship leaders are advised that the public reading of Scripture "should be clear, audible, and attentive to the meanings of the text, and should be entrusted to those prepared for such reading."³ Given expressive and interpretive voice, these Genesis stories will leap off the page!

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

2. Ibid., 194.

3. Directory for Worship, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2009), W-2.2006.

PROPER 11 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 17 AND JULY 23 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 139:1–12, 23–24

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.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

Theological Perspective

This lection is the opening to one of the best-known and most powerful hymns to God's knowledge, presence, and power in the Hebrew Scriptures, a tour de force of testimony to faith in the one God of Israel. This psalm, indeed, gathers up many of the lessons of other psalms in a powerful and succinct fashion; so today's passage represents a treasure trove of Hebrew theological reflection on who God is and how God moves in our lives. The themes of God's omniscience, God's steadfast love, and God's shaping power are apparent from the opening verses of this psalm "of David."

Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop find Psalm 139 "magnificent," if difficult to classify in any of the usual schemes of ordering the psalms; they choose to classify it as an individual lament, although they note that it also has affinities to the Wisdom psalms. However one categorizes it, they note the psalm's overarching theme: the "inescapability of God."¹ This God who searches and knows us, who knows our movements and our thoughts, who knows our words before we speak them, knows us intimately—more intimately, even, than we know ourselves (vv. 1–4). God knows all, and in comparison,

Pastoral Perspective

It is clear that the author of Psalm 139 believes that God knows all about him. God has looked deeply into the psalmist and knows him. God knows the very thoughts of the psalmist: "Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely" (v. 4). We grow up as children hearing that Santa Claus is watching us year round; he knows if we've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake! I recently received an e-mail from my nineteen-year-old daughter. It was addressed to Santa, and it extolled how good she had been this past year. Attached was a long list of Christmas wishes. Perhaps in our contemporary Christian minds, we do compare God's omniscience with Santa Claus's crystal ball. Like a child writing to Santa, "Dear Santa, I've been very, very good this year," the psalmist is saying to God, "Look, you know that I am really, really good."

Human beings want to believe that God is aware of our good deeds. We want to be rewarded for acts of charity and lives of faithfulness. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky writes a wonderful fable about an evil peasant woman who dies and goes to hell. As she writhes in the lake of fire, her guardian angel ponders if the old woman did any good deeds in her long life. The angel tells God that one time, the old woman gave a hungry beggar an onion out

1. Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 91–92.

Psalm 139:1–12, 23–24

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
⁹If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
¹²even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
.....
²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
²⁴See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 139 is a carefully structured hymn praising God for the incomparable knowledge and presence of the Divine. Though not all the verses of this psalm are assigned in the reading, the psalm hangs together in a manner that makes it difficult to dismiss any part of it. The opening verses (vv. 1–2) are echoed in the closing verses (vv. 23–24). They celebrate the marvelous and most intimate way that the Lord God has of knowing and relating to the one declaring the wonder of God.

There are three major divisions in the psalm. The first section (vv. 1–12) uses a series of images to emphasize the comprehensiveness of divine knowledge and the total extent of God's presence. God knows everything there is to know about the worshiper and is present everywhere the worshiper can imagine. The second section (vv. 13–18) reflects on the mystery of God's involvement in the formation of the psalmist. From the very beginning God has been an active agent in the creation of this particular human, and by implication, of every human being. The third section (vv. 19–22, 23–24) calls for God to slay the psalmist's enemies, who are also God's foes. This is somewhat unexpected and will receive more attention below. The conclusion of this section and of the psalm (vv. 23–24), however, is a reaffirmation of the wondrous praise with which the psalm began.

Homiletical Perspective

The early parts of Psalm 139 are so sonorous and existentially gripping that the preacher may be tempted to overlook the fact that this text presents a theological challenge. The challenge comes from an aspect of the psalmist's underlying theological perspective. The safety of the psalmist is threatened by unnamed forces. Without giving further detail, the psalmist indicates only that these enemies are wicked (vv. 19–20). The enemies speak maliciously and are bloodthirsty.

By contrast, the psalmist claims to be innocent of wrongdoing. God is aware of the psalmist's innocence because God knows everything about the psalmist (vv. 7–12). The psalmist is committed to God's ways (vv. 1–6) and assumes that God will prevent harm from coming to the faithful psalmist. Though not stated in this text, an implication is that if the psalmist is unfaithful, then God would allow the enemies to carry out their threats. Our theological question is whether these equations are true: faithfulness = protection from harm; unfaithfulness = possibility of harm.

The text raises two related theological challenges. Does God seek to preserve only the faithful (while allowing the unfaithful to be overrun)? Does God make faithfulness a criterion for whether to help a person or community?

Psalms 139:1–12, 23–24

Theological Perspective

perhaps we are little more than animals: “my lying down” (v. 3) translates the Hebrew *rov’a*, which refers to where an animal lies down (a lair, perhaps).

Certainly, as today’s passage suggests, one cannot escape God’s vision and presence. One cannot flee to the heavens or to the land of the dead; one cannot escape by running from dawn to dusk; even the darkness is not darkness to an all-seeing, all-knowing God (vv. 7–12). This psalm reflects an understanding that this God truly is God of all the universe, not simply of a single tribe or locality, and this God not only sees but searches in an attempt to know each individual. The power differential may intimidate us (why else does the psalmist even contemplate trying to flee God’s vision?), but is part of a traditional theological understanding of who and what God is. According to Anselm and others, God is that which is so high above us that we cannot readily comprehend it, that which sees us and knows us in ways we cannot even know ourselves. Verse 6 (“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it”) might be an early version of these early and later Christian understandings of God the Father, and surely shaped them.

Rather than being intimidated or feeling trapped by this power differential between ourselves and the God of the universe, however, this lection suggests that we might instead choose to be comforted by it. While the NRSV translates verse 5 “You hem me in, behind and before,” Robert Alter’s rendering of the verse considers the later mention (in vv. 13–16) of being formed in the womb. He reads the laying of God’s hands upon us not as a threatening or constraining act, but as the gesture of the potter, lovingly sculpting in clay: “From behind and in front You shaped me.”² This interpretation militates against a contemporary cultural reading that evokes God as Big Brother, hemming us in, watching from the sky so that we do not stray beyond some arbitrary bounds God has set for us. Instead, it reminds us that to be in relationship with the ineffable and omniscient God of the universe is to be protected, loved, and transformed.

Relationship, is, in fact, integral to an understanding of the lection, for it is an “I-Thou” relationship that is envisaged in line after line. We are seen and known by a God whom we have the freedom to address and praise; we are in relationship, however unequal the relative position of God and ourselves. We are given status, in fact,

2. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 480.

Pastoral Perspective

of her garden. God tells the angel to take the onion, fly down to the lake, and let the woman grab hold of the onion to be guided out of the lake of fire. The angel does what God suggests. The old woman grabs hold of the onion and is slowly eased out of the fire. Other poor sinners realize that she is being pulled free, so they grab hold of her legs, hoping to be saved as well. The old woman does not want to share her chance at salvation, so she violently kicks the sinners away. But in the violence of her kicking, she loses hold of the onion and falls back into the lake of fire. In Dostoyevsky’s fable, God is aware of even the smallest act of kindness on our part, and even the smallest act of charity is enough to save us.

For the righteous, God’s intimate knowledge of our inner thoughts and deeds is a good thing. The psalmist’s words are soothing, comforting: “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (vv. 9–10). There is no place on earth or in the sky that hides us from God’s knowing eye. It is nice to think that when we give a five-spot to a homeless man or drop extra food at the mission or agree to serve on a presbytery committee or take Communion to a shut-in or give money to the Christian Children’s Fund or give up a parking place to an elderly woman, God is watching. According to the psalmist, God is not merely watching these good deeds; God knows our thoughts before we act. God knows our desire to live as faithful Christians, to love one another. God knows that we want to be generous with our time and money, that we try to think of others before ourselves, that we do not worship idols or put our secular concerns before our commitment to our Creator.

On the other hand, some of us may be getting a little nervous. Perhaps we do not feel as righteous as the psalmist. Perhaps we are not ready to say to God, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vv. 23–24). It is likely that even if we participate in many kind acts of charity, we feel that we do not do enough. It is very hard to live and breathe faithfully all the time; it is difficult to live lives as holy as we are called to live. We may vote in ways that protect our children and our retirement, but not in ways that protect the poor and disenfranchised. We may find ourselves judging our neighbors because they seem lazy or they drink too much or they spend too much time at work. We may deny the reality of global warming because it is too overwhelming to think of

Psalms 139:1–12, 23–24

Exegetical Perspective

The Hebrew text of the psalm is basically in good shape. There are difficulties in verses 3 and 11, however. It is not clear how we should translate the first words of verse 3. The NRSV translates, “You search out my path and my lying down,” while the NJPS suggests, “You observe my walking and reclining.” At verse 11 the NRSV reads “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’” whereas the NJPS says, “If I say, ‘Surely darkness will conceal me, night will provide me with cover.’” There is no great difference in meaning so far as the psalm as a whole is concerned, but these differences do indicate that the text is unclear at these points. The different translations are derived from options provided by ancient Greek and Aramaic translations.

There is nothing in the psalm to suggest the particular historical context from which it arose. The fact that it is located in Book V of the Psalter (Pss. 107–150) and has language and themes found in the Wisdom writings might suggest a later historical context, but there is no way to be certain. It has clearly taken on a somewhat “timeless” or “ahistorical” character across the centuries. As when it was crafted, it is used by those searching for assurance of divine care.

While each section of the psalm is interesting and important (and will receive brief comment below), the first twelve and last two verses are the focus of the appointed lesson. These verses can be subdivided into subsets. The first subset (vv. 1–6) concentrates on the incredible knowledge that God has of the psalmist. The verb *yd'* (“know”) and its cognate *da'at* (“knowledge”) occur four times in the first six verses. In verse 23 *yd'* appears twice, as well. In the opening verses the statements are declarative; in the closing verses God is implored in the imperative to “know” the psalmist once again. This “knowing” on God’s part is not exclusively an intellectual activity. It is based on personal, intimate contact and relationship with the one “known.”

The emphasis in the first six verses on the depth of God’s knowledge of the human subject is reinforced by a constellation of verbs: *hqr* (“examine, search”) in verses 1 and 23; *byn* (“observe, discern”) in verse 2; *zrh* (“sift, observe, search”) in verse 3; and *skn* (“know intimately, be acquainted with, be familiar with”) in verse 3. Verse 23 adds one more verb, *bhn* (“examine, scrutinize, test”). The combination of all these verbs leads to the recognition that God “knows” the human subject thoroughly. A careful, thoughtful consideration

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The preacher could use this psalm as an occasion for wrestling with these matters. With respect to the major issue, many Jewish and Christian people over the centuries have accepted the assumption behind the psalm. However, the book of Job objected to this simplification. Over the centuries many others have observed that life is not as clear-cut as the psalm depicts it. The preacher could help the congregation name innocent, faithful people who have suffered at the hands of enemies. The preacher could also help the congregation name wicked people who prosper.

Moreover, if God seeks to protect only the faithful, then God’s love is not unconditional but, rather, is limited and exclusive. If our faithfulness is a condition for God to act benevolently toward us, then our faithfulness becomes a work whereby we earn God’s providence. The preacher who takes this tack needs not only to criticize theologically the psalm’s underlying perspective but to offer a constructive theological alternative. As the next paragraphs indicate, I believe that these themes from Psalm 139 intersect with other leading theological motifs in the psalm, to offer a credible theological way forward.

The preacher’s opportunity is to offer the omnipresence of God, the main theme of verses 1–12, as an affirmation that can sustain us in all circumstances. If God is ever present, and if God’s love is truly unconditional, as many Christians believe, then God would not make faithfulness a criterion for acting benevolently toward us. Unconditional means unconditional. God’s love is ever present and at work for our good.

A related issue is divine power. If God has the power to prevent evil things from happening to us and does not use that power, then God’s love is not unconditional and God is not just. I agree with Jews and Christians who belong to the process school of theology, who believe that while God has more power than any other entity in the universe, God does not have unlimited power. God does not have the power either singularly to prevent evil from happening or singularly to cause suffering. God may not be omnipotent, but God is omnipresent. God operates in the world not through brute force but by attempting to lure human beings and nature itself toward the possibilities in life that offer the optimum blessing available in the circumstances of the moment.

The core of the psalm assures us that God is with us every moment of every day. There is no place in the universe (or beyond) where we can escape God (vv. 7–12). God’s omnipresence means that God knows us completely (vv. 1–6). God’s unconditional

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by God's love and desire to be in relationship; it is the condition celebrated by the book of Hebrews in recalling its unnamed but presumably Hebrew testimony:

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a little while lower than
the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet.”

(Heb. 2:6–8a)

God's regard for us is testimony to God's love for us; given that power differential between us, God can need nothing we can provide. God's willingness to enter into relationship is sure proof of the Hebrew concept *hesed*, what other psalms call God's steadfast love, and what we, given the suggestion of Anderson and Bishop, might also call God's inescapable love.

The results of this relationship are also proof of God's love: we are shaped by it into the people God wishes us to be. Just as we know our own worth because of God's attention to us, we also understand our own ability to love, perceiving God's unselfish love toward us, which guides us into relationship and knowing of others. This psalm encourages us to enter sacrificially into relationships with others, including those who have no particular offering to make to us. God's love for us encourages us to have compassion for those figures in Hebrew life considered to be on the margins and yet important: the widow, the orphan, the alien. Love for any of these would have no tangible reward (just as God's love for us has no tangible reward), but God's love for us models the compassion God seeks from us toward others. We are given the power to love through God's love.

Finally, if we consider this lection as part of a theological summing up of the Psalms, we might infer an imperative toward praise. While this lection does not directly call, as do other psalms, for new hymns of praise, what other response is appropriate in response to this God who seeks us out, who knows us more completely than we know ourselves, and who loves us with a steadfast love?

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all that must change in our world in order to save the planet. These are things that may give us pause, things we try and hide in the dark and hope they do not stand out when God sees through the darkness.

The psalmist is really not so different from us. He had his temptations, his imperfections. If, as tradition says, the psalmist was King David, we *know* he had places in his heart that he was ashamed to lay bare before God. Yet he writes these beautiful words. He knows that all is visible to God, all is known to God, and still God remains loving and trustworthy. It is because all is laid bare before God that God loves completely and forgives totally.

A discussion was held recently in a youth Sunday school class about the death penalty. The youth talked about God's capacity to know all the little and big things that happened in a criminal's life that led that person to the moment of horror. We may not be able to forgive a murderer, but God can. It is *because* God knows us intimately, knows our righteous acts of charity, as well as our pain and misdeeds, that God loves us and leads us. We, like the psalmist, can trust that God will “lead us in the way everlasting” (v. 24).

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Psalms 139:1–12, 23–24

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is the basis of God's knowledge; this is no snap judgment! For this, God is praised and prized by the psalmist.

While the first six verses stress that God knows totally whatever the psalmist may think or do, the next six verses (vv. 7–12) declare that there is no place where one can be beyond God's presence. Though there is nothing in the psalm to suggest that the psalmist desires to flee from God, the hypothetical question is posed (v. 7): is there anywhere that one could go to escape God's Spirit or remove oneself from God's presence? The response is clear: no. Whether in the highest heavens or in the underworld ("Sheol"), whether in the east ("morning") or west ("sea"), God is there and will hold fast the psalmist (vv. 8–10; but see Pss. 6:6; 16:10). Darkness may provide a hiding place for humans, but God's light shines even there (vv. 11–12). Because of God's all-pervasive presence the psalmist is assured of God's all-sufficient, beneficent care.

A brief word is necessary with regard to verses 19–22, even though they are not part of the assigned reading. Apparently there are people—"wicked," "bloodthirsty" people—threatening the psalmist and "maliciously" defaming God (vv. 19–20). The psalmist prays that God will kill them (v. 19). This dramatic request is somewhat surprising in light of the tone of the rest of the psalm. What it seems to reflect is the psalmist's desire to be disassociated totally with those who live contrary to divine purpose. The response of hating and loathing (vv. 21–22), however, should not be understood as primarily emotional. In Hebrew those terms express profound opposition, mental as well as emotional, to the expressed object.

The psalmist concludes in full confidence with another request to God: "search me," "test me," "see if there is any wicked way in me" (vv. 23–24). In light of the opening verses, there is no doubt or fear that the psalmist will be found lacking. Should there be yet a need, the psalmist prays for God to lead the supplicant in "the way everlasting" (v. 24).

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love is ever present to help us experience and manifest as much love as possible within each circumstance. God does not have the power to directly change our circumstances, but God can help us live through them. When circumstances themselves do not change—in particular, when we continue to suffer—God is fully present as a companion so that we do not suffer alone.

The preacher might think of people and groups in the congregation (and beyond) who are in situations similar to that of the psalmist: feeling insecure and threatened. The sermon can then assure the congregation that God is fully present with unconditional love that can sustain the community even when under threat.

The psalm focuses on a situation in which the psalmist is faced with the threat of forces outside the self. The preacher might identify situations in which members of the congregation feel threatened because of their witness. The preacher can extend this insight to other situations in life in which other external forces (such as racism or sexism) as well as internal ones (such as illness or psychological struggles) cause members of the congregation to feel overwhelmed and insecure. The person seeking to lead the congregation in welcoming lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, and asexual (LGBTQA) people, the couple dealing with terminal cancer, the middle-school (junior high) student struggling with self-identity—all need to know that "even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (v. 10).

In the context of Psalm 139, the affirmation that God completely knows each individual is a powerful affirmation for those who need support when destructive forces are at the gate. However, the same theme—God knows us completely—can also be unsettling for those who are unfaithful and have violated God's purposes. God knows everything we do, including our disobedience. In congregational settings in which members are being unfaithful, the preacher could use this dimension of the psalm as a pastoral warning. God knows what you did last summer, but God offers you the opportunity to repent and take restorative action.

Selections from Psalm 139 appear three additional times in the Revised Common Lectionary. The preacher who seeks other perspectives on this passage can read the interpreters' remarks on Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B; Proper 4 (9), Year B; and Proper 18 (23), Year C.

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**PROPER 12 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 24
AND JULY 30 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 29:15–28

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” ¹⁹Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” ²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.)

²⁵When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?”

²⁶Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

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This lection from Genesis appears within a larger section of the book of Genesis concerned with Jacob’s journey away from his family and home, a story understood in slightly different ways by the Yahwist writer (who imagines Jacob fleeing from the threat of his hoodwinked brother, Esau) and the Priestly writer (who sees Jacob traveling at his father Isaac’s behest). In either case, however, this pericope encompasses a pivotal moment in the life of Jacob, when he encounters, for the first time, an equally wily opponent, his uncle Laban, and meets the women who eventually will give birth to the tribes of Israel.

This passage presents the very real possibilities of human treachery and the failure of human plans. At the same time, however, in the midst of disappointment and uncertainty, it reinforces the idea of God’s providence and continuing care for his faithful. While events in this narrative do not play out as Jacob anticipates, they are nonetheless a part of God’s larger plan and an affirmation of the divine message Jacob experienced at Bethel in the chapter prior to this passage: “Know that I am with

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When we read Genesis 29:15–28, we may be reminded of the old adage “What goes around, comes around.” Jacob is no stranger to the wily ways of a trickster. After all, with his mother’s help, he is able to trick his father and obtain his brother Esau’s birthright. As Jacob’s story continues, we learn that he meets and falls in love with his uncle’s second-born daughter, Rachel. Laban agrees to this arrangement. Of course Laban does not do this out of the goodness of his heart. Jacob promises Laban seven years of labor in return for Rachel’s hand in marriage. After the seven years has been served, Jacob marries a veiled woman, and in darkness he consummates the union. When day dawns, Jacob is horrified to discover that it is not his beloved Rachel that is his wife but, rather, the eldest daughter, Leah.

Conveniently forgetting his own history of chicanery, Jacob confronts Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (v. 25). The reader can just imagine the innocent face Laban puts on as he tells Jacob that in *his* country, one simply does not marry a younger daughter when the

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Exegetical Perspective

The story of Jacob's marriage to the daughters of Laban is situated very near the beginning of the Jacob cycle (28:10–35:29). It is part of a novella recounting Jacob's twenty years in Haran: his marriages and service to Laban, the birth of eleven of his sons (all but Benjamin), and finally his maneuvering to return to Canaan (29:1–31:55). The intent of the Jacob cycle as a whole was to report the passing of the promises to Abraham and Isaac to the succeeding generation through Jacob (35:9–12). The subject of the assigned reading concerns the securing of an appropriate wife for Jacob (see 27:46–28:5). To better reflect the Hebrew text and the development of the passage, the assigned reading should be amended to 29:14b–30. There are no significant textual issues in this very straightforward, prose narrative.

There is little to indicate the historical situation of the passage. Critical scholarship has considered most of this passage to be from the Yahwist (or Yahwist/Elohist) source that probably was compiled during the tenth–ninth centuries BCE. Some consider verses 24 and 29 to be from the Priestly source assembled

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The challenge to any preacher choosing to tackle this lection is that of conveying to modern sensibilities the deeply strange but providential outcome, the ancient marriage customs, the humor in the story, and the overall meaning of the text. In meeting that challenge, the preacher has within the text a number of homiletical options or themes on which to draw: providence, God's undermining of human institutions when they are oppressive, human actions and divine intentions, the power of love to overcome adversity.

The story of Jacob being tricked into marrying Leah before Rachel and giving at least fourteen years of servitude serves a number of purposes, including seeing a cheat being cheated. There was no requirement for kin to undergo indentured servitude or slavery, but Jacob is willing to make an offer that Laban cannot refuse for his love of Rachel. No price is too high for him to be in her household with the promise of marriage to come. When the day arrives for Laban to make good on his promise, he calls for a wedding feast. On the night of the wedding the bride might well have been brought to her groom's

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you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Gen. 28:15). Thus this passage deals theologically with the omnipotence of God, with faithful service of that God even in the face of reversals of fortune, and with the power of human love to help reveal God’s own love for us.

Jacob is presented in the book of Genesis both as one of the patriarchs with whom God makes covenant and as a trickster character who schemes his way toward the things he desires. After tricking his older brother Esau out of his family birthright, Jacob incurs his enmity and is either sent or flees to live with his uncle Laban, an Aramean who is wealthy in livestock and the father of two marriageable daughters. When Laban sees that his nephew has come bearing rich gifts, he seems to see the benefit of welcoming him graciously, and when Jacob offers to serve as his employee for seven years to gain the hand of his younger daughter, Rachel, Laban accepts.

This offer of seven years of service is pure extravagance; commentators suggest that it is well beyond what would have been expected for a woman’s hand. Jacob himself is a person of some substance, as well as a relative. This offer, however, illustrates the value Jacob places upon Rachel. Human love is one of the theological issues considered in this passage, particularly in contrast to the perfection of divine love. Laban, for example, should love his nephew Jacob, rather than tricking him, and in a perfect world Jacob would treat his unasked-for wife Leah with love and value her gift of sons. Jacob’s life with his beloved Rachel, who cannot conceive for most of their marriage, is cut short by her death in childbirth, and Jacob continues to wrestle with his uncle Laban until Jacob’s eventual leave-taking. In none of these relationships—even Jacob’s idealized and romantic love for Rachel—does love achieve what we hope love will attain.

Despite these limitations and failures of human love, divine love is clearly present in these imperfect human relationships and working toward a greater good. The unwanted Leah becomes the mother of many of the tribes of Israel and is blessed by future generations. The mistreated Jacob thrives during his time serving Laban and grows in power and influence, becoming the worthy father of the future Israel despite his uncle’s selfish plots against him. In this pericope, it is the unloved and the alien who are blessed and revealed to be at the heart of God’s

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elder daughter is available. Laban offers a solution: “complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years” (v. 27). Wow, one has to admire Laban’s genius. He gets fourteen years of service out of Jacob *and* marries off his two daughters.

Unlike Rebekah (in the lection from Gen. 24 two weeks ago), the women in this story do not seem to have much say in their destinies. How terrible it must be for Rachel to watch her sister marry the man promised to her. Perhaps it is even worse for Leah, who is forced to marry a man who doesn’t want her. Many interpreters have noted that the patriarchal system of that time period limited women’s options. While men were also subject to arranged marriages and certain family obligations, women did not have as much choice or as much power as men. Both men and women were expected to be obedient to their fathers, but women also had to be obedient to their husbands.

It is interesting that God does not interfere with the power structures of the day. God does not blow in and introduce democracy or equal rights or matriarchy. However, throughout Genesis, we do see God acting on behalf of women. God protects Hagar in the desert and sees that her life and line are saved. God protects Sarah and gives her a son. God gives unloved Leah children and an opportunity for social standing in the household. We may want and even expect God’s justice to be big and dramatic, but these stories show that the reality of God’s intercession often is mundane, found in unexpected places. These stories give us eyes to see where the Divine can be sought and where we participate in that sweet union.

In our twenty-first-century lives, we need not look for God’s intervention in the chambers and hallways of those in power. Rather, we can see what God is doing in history when we look to those who are cast aside. Look to Leah’s story to see where God is active. Who in our world is most set aside, most despised? It is in those lonely, dark cells and spaces that we will see God at work. It is through the sweet gift of relationship and compassion that we may participate in God’s activity in our world.

The recent spate of gay teen suicides is a frightening reminder of who may be the most outcast in American society. In the space of three weeks last October, five young boys took their lives by shooting themselves, hanging themselves, or leaping to their death. In all the cases, the reason given was that they could no longer bear the teasing

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in the sixth century BCE. It is noteworthy that the prohibition of a man marrying sisters while both are alive (see Lev. 18:18) seems to be unknown, suggesting that this story about Jacob was fashioned earlier than the formation of the Torah in its final form.

The reading begins with Jacob already living in Laban's household. He had arrived a month earlier (29:14b) and had been received by his uncle with an embrace and kiss (v. 13). Whether this was a genuine gesture on Laban's part is uncertain. Previously, Laban had received Abraham's messenger, who had come seeking a wife for Isaac and had received fabulous gifts (24:28–53). Did he hope for this to happen again? If he did, he was quickly disabused of such an idea, for Jacob arrived with little or nothing.

Immediately, in a passage filled with irony, Laban asked a loaded question. Jacob had been living "on the house" for a month, doing nothing to contribute to the expenses of the family. Laban asked, "Because you are my kinsman [*ah*; literally "brother"], should you serve me for nothing?" (29:15). Instead of telling Jacob to get out and go to work, the shifty Laban made it sound as if he was honoring his nephew by being willing to pay him a wage. The term "serve" (*ʿbd*) occurs seven times in this passage (vv. 15, 18, 20, 25, 27 [two times], 30). It is the same word sometimes translated "slave" and even "worshiper." It was not uncommon at that time to have "slaves" serving in the household, but they were usually people from outside clan and country, and they were not paid. Jacob is neither. He is rightly described as "kinsman." To "employ" him with a "wage" (v. 15) was unusual, perhaps even degrading. There is great irony in that his father Isaac, in his blessing of Jacob, had explicitly announced something quite different: "Let peoples *serve* you, and nations bow down to you" (27:29).

The question may not have been totally unexpected, because Jacob had an immediate reply ready: "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel" (29:18). To offer a "bride price" to the family of the woman was common practice in the Semitic world (e.g., 24:53; 34:11–12), but seven years of indenture is a high price. Perhaps Jacob wanted to make Laban an offer that he could turn down. As a point of explanation, the narrator comments twice that Jacob "loved" (*ʾhb*) Rachel (29:18, 20). This is one of only a few allusions to romantic love in the Bible (others include reference to Isaac's love for Rebekah at Gen. 24:67 and Song of Solomon). It should also be noted that the crafty

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bed heavily veiled, allowing for Jacob to awaken to a surprise. Laban substitutes his older daughter, Leah, for Jacob's beloved.

The irony of Laban's explanation for his treachery is not lost on us. The firstborn has rights and privileges, and Jacob's own trickery is reversed. This would have made for a good story for Laban to tell his friends, most of whom would have applauded his cleverness, roared with laughter and slapped him on the back. Even those who listen to our preaching might laugh at the trickster being tricked. One week later Jacob is also given Rachel, in exchange for a further seven years of servitude, and the story is set up for the generation of the twelve tribes of Israel (even though this pair of marriages would be explicitly outlawed in Leviticus: "You shall not take a woman as a rival wife to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive" [Lev. 18:18]).

This need to set up the history of Israel also explains the strange interjection that Laban gave Leah his maid Zilpah, who was a childbearing concubine, as was Rachel's maid, Bilhah. God uses this exceptionally strange and unusual set of circumstances to bring about and establish the twelve tribes. Gerhard von Rad has even suggested that there is some historical memory in the names of the sisters. Leah, he proposes, means something like "cow," and many of her children gave names to tribes known for their wealth in the form of cattle (including Reuben, Simeon, and Judah.) The name Rachel means "ewe," and the tribes of her children, including Ephraim and Manasseh, were later associated with the tending of sheep.¹ This allows a preacher to consider to what degree we are free, in respect to our roots and origins, and the difference between providence and fate.

The preacher who chooses to focus on this story will need to decide whether and how to address the question of providence. Specifically this will mean addressing the question as to whether or not YHWH manipulates events in human history according to some kind of purpose or plan. This question will raise both theological and pastoral challenges for a homilist.

It might be a better decision to leave that question for another occasion and focus on the relationship between God's purposes and what the world deems worthy, moral, righteous, and so on. This story of treachery and deceit is well within the traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures of God using human

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 291.

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plans. This suggests, in fact, that the marginal are always in God's heart, since it is the unloved and the downtrodden who will continue to be central in the prophetic utterances that will emerge from the future nation of which Leah and Jacob are progenitors.

God's love is extended to all, but, as the Hebrew prophets argue, God's heart is particularly with the poor, the unloved, and the unwanted. As Desmond Tutu noted when speaking on Israel's history, "This God did not just talk—He acted. He showed himself to be a doing God. Perhaps we might add another point about God—He takes sides. He is not a neutral God. He took the side of the slaves, the oppressed, the victims. He is still the same today, He sides with the poor, the hungry, the oppressed and the victims of injustice."¹ So he does in this story.

God is moving even in human imperfection, and God's love can overcome even human failure to love. Given this truth, then, human faithfulness to God's plan is a prime theological component explored in this passage. So is the corollary belief that God has a plan for the salvation of the cosmos in which we are allowed faithfully to participate. Out of the tangled chaos of human life—out of deception, unloving marriages, sibling rivalries, and family arguments—God is able to bring order—more importantly, God's intended order. Thus it is that God can be true to the promises God has made to Abram—and now, to Jacob—that God will be present with them and that these messy humans will nonetheless be part of the salvific movement God intends for the world.

Finally, as imperfect as human love is within this passage, Jacob's love for Rachel offers a vision of the divine love at work. Jacob's sacrifice, made out of love, is, as we noted, extravagant, well beyond any logical offer. Jacob counts Rachel as worth attaining, whatever the sacrifice might be. His human love might thus represent God's own love for humanity and prefigure Jesus' later proffer of sacrificial love as part of another of God's plans for reconciliation.

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and taunts for being gay, whether they were in fact gay or not. If we want to see the Divine at work in our world, we may be wise to look here. A few weeks after these tragic deaths, an openly gay high school student stood up before his all-male classmates and quietly asked them to wear purple the next day to honor those who had died and to shine a light on teenage suicide. The next day a freshman, lowest rung on the social ladder, showed up in homeroom wearing a deep purple polo. One of his classmates leaned over and sneered, "Hey, are you gay?!" The young man looked into the eyes of this youth and replied, "I am shining the light on teenage suicide." The other young man said, "You mean GAY suicide." Our brave freshman replied, "Aren't gays still teens?" The boy who had been looking for a fight backed down, and the freshman boy heard the other boys say, "Wow, you got schooled."

It took great courage for this fourteen-year-old boy to put on a purple shirt that morning. It took greater courage to stand up to a voice representing the majority. It was an example of God at work in the world. It is the Holy Spirit that blows through us and helps difficult words form on our lips. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us courage to speak them. It is the sweet gift of love for one another that moves us to seek justice for the disenfranchised, for the Leahs of the world, for the gay teens of the world.

Jacob and Laban have a story to tell. They are powerful men who gather riches and create ancestral dynasties. However, if you want to see God at work, look to the least and the unloved; remember and celebrate Leah.

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1. Desmond Tutu, *Hope and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 51.

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Laban did not actually promise Rachel to Jacob. He dodged the issue and said it would be better to give her to Jacob rather than to some other man (29:19).

Rachel and Leah, of course, are the two sisters who become Jacob's wives. Rachel, whose name means "ewe," was the younger and is described as "graceful and beautiful" (v. 17). Leah, whose name means "cow," was the older and is described as having eyes that were *rakkoth*. This term has been interpreted in two different ways: "lovely" (NRSV) and "weak" (NIV). Attempts have been made to reconcile such differences, but finally what mattered was that Jacob "loved" Rachel and was willing to serve, eventually, for fourteen years for the right to have her in marriage (vv. 18, 27).

The height of deception—and of irony—in this passage is reached when Jacob asked Laban to give Rachel to him at the end of his years of service (v. 21). Laban prepared a great wedding feast, a *mishteh* (lit. "drinking party"), a practice quite common in the Semitic world even to this day (v. 22). All the people of the community came. After hours of revelry, the bride was brought to the groom. Though the text does not spell this out, it was (and is) common for the woman to be heavily veiled. Added to this was the fact that Jacob probably had participated fully in the feasting/drinking. In the darkness Laban brought Leah, his older daughter, to Jacob, and thinking her to be Rachel, Jacob consummated the marriage (v. 23).

In the morning light—and perhaps when he had sobered up—he realized that Laban had tricked him. "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" (v. 25). Then comes the most ironic statement in the passage. Laban explained simply that in his country it was against custom to give the younger before the older (v. 26)! Jacob had been able to get away with such a trick in his country when he, with the help of his mother Rebekah, had gained his father's blessing from his elder brother Esau (27:29); but now, irony of ironies, the "trickster" Jacob was the victim. He did complete his week of wedding obligations for Leah, and then he was given Rachel (29:28, 30).

W. EUGENE MARCH

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cravenness, crassness, and sin in order to bring about some greater purpose. A favorite son, Joseph, would in time provide a summary of this whole story:

"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Gen. 50:20). In the particular incidence of this story, it is not so much the rights of the firstborn being undermined as it is the combinations of institutions and traditions that make up the male hegemony of the ancient world. In general, we regard prohibitions against incest and polygamy as moral advances for civilization, but the preacher might consider taking up this theme with a critical eye, questioning whether the notion of moral development bears any relation either to human capacity for sin or to righteousness or "right relation" being entirely a gift of God.

A further homiletical possibility can be found in Jacob's love for Rachel, without doing injustice to the darkness of the story. He labored in order to honor the promises he made to his dishonorable father-in-law, and Laban and his household prospered by virtue of Jacob's cunning. Jacob's rage (v. 25) did not lead him to a spirit of revenge, but rather to resignation in the face of the greater good and greater vision of life with Rachel. This single-mindedness provides a contrast to the single-mindedness of Laban, whose concern for his family led him to use his own nephew for selfish ends. A preacher can make much of the virtues of true love and right relationship over against the trends in our society that would make some notion of "family" into an idol, placing upon the institution a weight that it cannot bear. As Jacob's love for Rachel makes time fly, as the story suggests, so God's love for God's people can find a way to triumph through all kinds of sin.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

PROPER 12 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 24 AND JULY 30 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 105:1–11, 45b

- ¹O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
²Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
³Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
⁴Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

Theological Perspective

Although this lection begins with a call to praise that suggests such psalms as 100 and 150, Psalm 105 may be considered a historical psalm that reviews in poetic summary the marvelous works of God as reflected in events that are described in the books of Genesis and Exodus: the story of the patriarchal covenant, the exile in Egypt and the exodus, and the return to Canaan (covered in perfunctory fashion in the psalm's final verses). In this respect, the psalm covers similar theological ground to Psalms 78, 106, and 136, which also narrate God's mighty works in the history of the people of Israel. Psalm 105 is also clearly paired with Psalm 106, which takes God's people to task for their failure to recognize and live up to all that God has done for them. In that sense, today's pericope has a bookend that inspires further reflection.

The theological themes to be examined in this passage all revolve around God's wondrous works in connection with the covenant made with Abram and his eventual descendants. What does the covenant mean to those on both sides of it? What has God done on behalf of those people God has chosen? What response are the chosen to make to God because of their chosen status? This psalm brings together theological elements from across the Hebrew Bible for consideration. God is revealed as the power behind all history, the

Pastoral Perspective

The author of Psalm 105 is a happy person. Things are going well in his neck of the woods. When times are good, we raise our eyes to heaven and say, "Thank you! God is good!" At our Thanksgiving tables, we give thanks for the blessings of family and friends, the blessings of jobs and financial security. We praise God's generous spirit and remember the many ways in which our lives are sanctified. In this moment of joy, the psalmist gives thanks to God and outlines God's wonderful works throughout history. The psalmist reminisces about the covenant God made with Abraham, with Jacob; the psalmist writes, "He [God] is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations" (v. 8). The psalmist continues, describing God as saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance" (v. 11).

As we read these words today, we might think twice about some of the promises. After all, are the covenants completely reliable? The chosen people are promised the land of Canaan forever, and yet the Assyrians and Babylonians, and eventually the Romans, take it from them. All that is left of the sacred temple today is the western wall, and they don't call it the "Wailing Wall" for nothing. Perhaps we are invited to dig a little deeper into the meaning of the psalm, explore an even deeper sense of praise.

Psalm 105:1–11, 45b

⁷He is the LORD our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.
⁸He is mindful of his covenant forever,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
⁹the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
¹⁰which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
¹¹saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion for an inheritance."
.....
^{45b}Praise the LORD!

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 105 has been characterized as a "historical psalm" (see also Pss. 78, 106, and 136). This is because it uses a recital of Israel's tradition to articulate the wonder of God's saving work. In form, it is a psalm of praise, opening with the admonition in the plural: "give thanks to the LORD" (v. 1) and concluding (v. 45b) with the charge to the community to "praise the LORD!" The reasons for praise comprise the bulk of the psalm (vv. 12–44). The emphasis is upon celebrating God's gracious care epitomized by the covenant God made with Abraham (vv. 6, 8–10).

The psalm has three unequal sections: the first (vv. 1–6) consists of a call to the community to remember God's wondrous deeds; the second (vv. 7–11) recalls God's commitment to the covenant made with Abraham; the third (vv. 12–44) selectively rehearses Israel's history from patriarchal times to the reception of the land of Canaan. This last section is not part of the assigned reading, but it is interesting in many ways, particularly for what it leaves out. There is no description of the crossing of the Red Sea, no mention of Sinai or the covenant with Moses, as one might expect. In addition, other parts of the patriarchal story and the wilderness wanderings are abbreviated or rearranged.

There is nothing specific within the psalm to indicate its historical setting, but there are some

Homiletical Perspective

The author(s) of Psalm 105 wrote either during the exile or shortly thereafter. The defeat of Judah by the Babylonian army and the subsequent exile of Judah's leaders created a profound existential and theological crisis for Judah. The people raised difficult questions. "Why did these events occur?" While Psalm 106 responds in a direct way (the people's unfaithfulness brought about the collapse of the nation and the exile), Psalm 105 takes up a related set of issues. "God promised us a land, but we were sent into exile. On what can we depend from God now? What is our future?"

Similar questions are at work today. At the international and national level, we often feel chaos hovering. In households, unemployment, divorce, and abuse prompt many people to feel as if they are individually in exile. Many congregations in the historic denominations (such as the Disciples, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ churches) have a sense of being in exile as membership gets smaller and witness is more and more difficult to sustain. The sermon could sketch situations in which people feel in exile today so that the congregation can both feel the world of the psalm and move toward correlating it with exilic contexts in our world.

The purpose of Psalm 105 was to engender confidence in God by recounting a series of key

Psalms 105:1–11, 45b

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omnipotent God of the universe; God is revealed through chosen relationship with the patriarchs and their descendants; and God has given to those descendants a legacy and a land as part of God's ongoing covenant with the people he has chosen.

This covenant is at the heart of the Hebrew Bible's understanding of God and of how the people of Israel were to respond to God; in Genesis 12, God calls a specific human being, Abram, into relationship and offers him continued relationship if he will be faithful to that call:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

(Gen. 12:1–3)

In verses 8–11 of our psalm today, God is presented in the strongest possible terms as having established this everlasting and unbreakable covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in succession, and also with their descendants. God's promise, as reflected in the parallel lines of Hebrew poetry in verse 8, is "forever," "for a thousand generations." The covenant is affirmed as "everlasting" in verse 10, and the implications of that agreement between God and Abraham's descendants are spelled out in God's speech, the only words attributed to God in the entire psalm: "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance" (v. 11).

The Hebrew word *berit*, translated here as "covenant," is the same word used to mark agreements and treaties between humans elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, so we have some sense of how a covenant is supposed to work. However, covenant is also a metaphor for God's approach to humankind in the Hebrew Bible and later in the Christian Testament, two covenants reflecting two understandings of God's relationship with humankind. As George Mendenhall and Gary Herion note, "covenant is the instrument constituting the rule (or kingdom) of God, and therefore it is a valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical ideal of religious community."¹ By close attention to

1. George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, electronic edition.

Pastoral Perspective

In the midst of the praise and reminiscences, the psalmist pauses and says, "Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually" (v. 4). The Spirit of God blows continuously. What is true one generation may not be true in the next generation. If we are too rigid in our understanding of God's promises, we may miss what is unfolding in our time. We could make the mistake of feeling abandoned by God. If God promised us the land of Canaan, why am I serving a Babylonian king? If the covenant with Israel is everlasting, why am I so persecuted?

Difficult times tend to give rise to bad theology. Think about Job's friends, who looked at Job's suffering and believed that Job must have sinned; they thought that prosperity is a sign of righteousness and catastrophe is a sign of unrighteousness. In Jesus' time this kind of thinking was also in vogue: "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?'" (John 9:1–2). Even in contemporary times, we continue to hear a similar sentiment: how many pulpits preached that the AIDS virus was visited upon homosexuals because of their sinful lives? I even know a certain preacher who thanks God for convenient parking spaces and believes they are a result of clean living. Surely she is kidding! So it seems to be in our DNA, psalmist and Christian alike, to praise God for the good promises in our lives and to experience suffering as some kind of punishment from an angry God.

However, if we look closely at the story of Israel, we may find something else. We actually find a powerful witness. The people of Israel do not stop praising God when they are in exile; they do not stop praising God when their temple is destroyed; they do not stop praising God even in the dark shadow of the Holocaust. They do not give up looking for God's actions in history, even though the covenant seems to have been broken. The beautiful mystery of God's covenants is not that they are magic gifts of land or ancestry; rather, they are gifts of relationship. God is in relationship with the people through Abraham and Sarah, through Jacob and his offspring, through Moses and Miriam, through Isaiah and Jeremiah. God is in relationship with Christian brothers and sisters through Peter and Paul, through Lydia and Phoebe, through Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene.

"Seek the LORD and his strength, seek his presence continually" (v. 4). The Reformers understood the importance of being open to the

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Exegetical Perspective

clues. The covenant with Abraham became of special importance during the exilic and postexilic period (e.g., Isa. 41:8; 51:1–2; 63:16; Neh. 9:7). Further, Psalm 105 is part of Book IV of the Psalter (Pss. 90–106), which seems to have been concerned to address the sense of loss and uncertainty experienced at the time of the Babylonian exile in 587 BCE. In 1 Chronicles, a postexilic recitation of Israel's story, Psalm 105:1–15 is quoted, with a few variations, and associated with David's bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chr. 16:8–22). Psalm 96:1–13a is also quoted in this same chapter and context (1 Chr. 16:23–35), as is Psalm 106:47–48 (1 Chr. 16:35–36).

At least one other clue suggesting a postexilic setting for the use (and quite possibly the writing) of this psalm is its relationship with Psalm 106, which is clearly exilic/postexilic (see 106:47). Psalm 105 underscores divine grace, and Psalm 106 reminds of the human waywardness that creates a gulf between humans and God. Psalm 106 concludes the way Psalm 105:1 begins, with a charge to all to say, "Amen. Hallelujah!" (106:48).

There are two textual concerns to mention. In verse 6 the Hebrew text has "offspring of his servant Abraham" in parallel with "children of Jacob, his chosen ones." In Chronicles and in some ancient manuscripts, "Israel" is read in place of "Abraham," which is certainly a better parallel (1 Chr. 16:13). The second issue concerns 1 Chronicles 13:19, where the reading is, "When *you* were few in number . . .," rather than "When *they* were few in number . . .," as in Psalm 105:12. While this verse is not part of the assigned reading, this slight difference does suggest the intent of enabling a later community to understand themselves as addressed directly by the psalm (see Deut. 26:5ff.).

The opening six verses constitute an extended call to the community, the "offspring of Abraham" and the "descendants of Jacob" (v. 6), to praise God. They are to do so by recounting God's "deeds" (v. 1) and "wondrous acts" (v. 2). These terms refer to the numerous gracious actions recorded in the Torah and recited later in this psalm (e.g., vv. 16–23: Joseph in Egypt; vv. 24–38: God's freeing the people from Egypt; vv. 39–44: God's leading in the wilderness bringing the people to Canaan). The people are instructed to "seek the LORD" (v. 4, Heb. *drsh*) and to "seek his presence constantly" (v. 4, Heb. *bqsh*). These two verbs are regularly associated with pilgrimage to sanctuaries for the purpose of worship (e.g., Pss. 24:6; 27:8; Isa. 55:6; 58:2; 65:10),

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events in Israel's history that assert God's intent for the people of Israel to enjoy a secure and blessed life, and that demonstrate God's power to bring about the conditions for a secure and blessed life. The psalm is intended to give the people hope in exile and power to rebuild the shattered land to which they would return.

One possible sermon could sketch situations in which people today feel exile. The preacher could then use the psalm to encourage the congregation to recognize that God's promises can sustain them in their seasons of exile. In the sermon itself, the preacher might interview people in such situations either live or by means of a PowerPoint presentation. The preacher could invite the congregation to correlate God's specific deeds in the past (as recited in the psalm) with the congregation's specific situations of exile in the present.

In verses 7–11, the psalm invites confidence in God's power to enable the community to endure the present and to hope in the future. Indeed, God made an everlasting covenant with Israel. The exile did not obviate God's promise. According to the Priestly theologians who composed Psalm 105, the purpose of the covenant is not simply to provide for Israel, but so that God's purpose for Israel can succeed: Israel is to be a light to the nations (see Isa. 42:1–7). God's faithfulness to Israel is a sign of God's faithfulness to all peoples.

The psalm emphasizes that the covenant with Israel includes the land. This aspect of the promise invokes two significant theological and ethical issues for today's preacher, either of which might generate a sermon.

The phrase "the land of Canaan" (v. 11) signals one issue. A generation ago, Native American scholar Robert Allen Warrior urged Christians to hear the story of Israel's conquest of the promised land from the perspective of the Canaanites, which is similar to the perspective of Native Americans, whose lands were stolen by people of Eurocentric origin. A similar perspective applies to other colonized peoples. To the Canaanites, God and the Israelites were thieves and murderers who stole the land from its longtime inhabitants, killed many Canaanites in the process, and engaged in other atrocities. Moreover, later generations (especially those of European origins) used the conquest of Canaan as part of their justification for displacing many additional Native peoples.

The other important matter is that the existence and security of the modern nation of Israel is an issue among many groups today. This issue

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covenant and behavior, we discover what God does and what God asks of us in return.

Each side of a covenant commits itself to the agreement; each side promises to behave in a certain fashion. God has promised everlasting fidelity, and has proven God's faithfulness through wonderful works, miracles, and judgments on behalf of the offspring of the patriarchs, "his chosen ones" (vv. 5–6). These wonderful works are then recounted in the passages following today's pericope, the marvelous salvation history of Israel to be found in verses 12 and following. God's side of the covenant is marked by relationship, by work on behalf of God's chosen, and by the promise of continued love and fidelity. What, in response, do the chosen offer?

Psalm 105 suggests several possibilities. First is remembrance. Robert Alter is one of several commentators who imagine the use of Psalm 105 (perhaps paired with Ps. 106) in ancient liturgy recalling the mighty works of God. Alter notes that the literal meaning of the Hebrew in verse 5 is "His wonders that he did"; the emphasis does not permit us to indulge any fantasies that these wonders had any possible source but God).² In considering Psalm 106, the bookend to today's lection, we are reminded of Israel's unfaithfulness to this covenant; this too is remembered, and lamented. The final verses of Psalm 105, at the conclusion of the great salvation history, speak of how God gave all this to his chosen ones "that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws" (vv. 44–45a). A faithful recounting of the covenant calls for remembrance that God has kept God's side of the bargain; any shortcoming has been on the human end of the agreement.

Human beings—even if they have fallen away from faithfulness to the covenant—may return to it, as the opening lines of today's lection remind us. They may offer God praise, singing of and extolling God's miraculous work so that all nations hear. They may call on God's name. They may glory in that holy name and may seek God's presence at all times. God offers relationship to imperfect human beings, but they may turn, "seek the LORD and his strength" (v. 4), and return to faithfulness to the covenant.

GREG GARRETT

Pastoral Perspective

movement of the Holy Spirit. Luther did not give up on God because he was disappointed in the operations of the church. He opened himself up to a new understanding of Scripture, a fresh reading of tradition. Luther praised God and remembered his "deeds among the peoples" (v. 1), but he allowed God to speak to him in the moment. The strength of the Lord is in the moment when you call upon God and open yourself to the gift of God's presence.

Protestants say the Bible is the *living* Word. The psalmist praised God for the actions in history, but his joy was also in the moment. We can praise God today, not only because we are grateful for the wisdom of the prophets and salvation in Jesus Christ, but because God continues to act graciously in our lives (although probably not by giving us good parking places!). The covenant that is never forgotten, the promise that is never rescinded, is God's desire to be in relationship with God's people. Whether we are banging a tambourine in joyful praise because we have safely crossed the Red Sea or standing in the shadow of the cross, weeping tears of despair at the death of our teacher; whether we are jumping up and down because Stewardship Sunday was a success and the church doors will remain open or quietly holding the hand of our spouse as they slip out of our world and into paradise, God is with us. God is in the moment. God's presence is assured. We can trust that God has acted in history in covenants and promises and that God will continue to be present as the Spirit blows afresh in our time and place. Praise the Lord!

AMY C. HOWE

2. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 369–70.

*Psalm 105:1–11, 45b***Exegetical Perspective**

but they also can be understood in a more general sense of the basic desire to find and serve God. The people are to “glory” (NRSV) or “exult” (Tanakh) in God’s “holy name,” God’s very character and person (v. 3). Further, they are to “remember” (*zkr*) all that God has done (v. 5). By this seeking God’s presence and reciting all the wondrous deeds wrought by God, the people will offer appropriate thanks and praise.

The psalmist next turns to the primary basis for confidence in the Lord (vv. 7–11). With the emphatic pronoun *hu’* (“he”), a strong covenantal affirmation marks the beginning of this section: “*He* is the LORD our God” (v. 7). God’s deeds proclaim God’s power, and God’s “judgments,” God’s acts of justice, extend “throughout the earth” (v. 7). For Israel this is made sure because God remembers his *berit* (“covenant”), the *dabar* (“word,” NRSV or “promise,” Tanakh), that God made for a “thousand generations” (v. 8). The covenant of concern is that made with Abraham, sworn to Isaac, and confirmed to Jacob as an “eternal” or “everlasting covenant” (v. 9; see Gen. 15:3–6, 18–20; 17:7–8; 28:13–14).

During the exilic/postexilic period, the Abrahamic covenant took precedence over the Mosaic covenant. The covenant fashioned at Sinai carried stipulations, commandments, that the people in exile knew had been broken repeatedly. The covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, was strictly a divinely declared promise. God would give the people “the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance” (v. 11). God alone was responsible for carrying it out. Thus, for the community who had experienced judgment in the form of exile and the loss of their land, the gracious promise to Abraham and his offspring was of great comfort. It is this covenant that the psalmist celebrates and calls the community to remember. While it was not a requirement, God’s desire was that the people would show their gratitude and praise by keeping God’s “statutes” and “laws” or “teachings” (v. 45). Hallelujah, indeed; praise the LORD! (v. 45b).

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

is systemically intertwined with the long-term prospects for an effective Palestinian nation and peace among nations in the Middle East. Today’s preacher might point out that the core purpose of the promise of the land was to reinforce Israel’s confidence in the power of God to provide the community with a secure and blessed life. The text inspires confidence in the God of Israel by showing that God is more powerful than the gods of the Canaanites. Those latter gods could not prevent Israel’s entry into the promised land (nor could the gods of the Babylonians prevent Cyrus the Persian from liberating Israel from exile).

However, today’s congregation can believe that God seeks to provide the community with security and blessing without believing that God authorizes theft and murder to do so. Indeed, the preacher can suggest that the path to security and blessing today is less through conquest (as of Canaan) and more through dialogue, mutual respect, and searching for ways that peoples can support one another while maintaining their own cultural integrity. Such an approach honors the fundamental intent of the text (to assure the community of security and blessing), while avoiding the theological and ethical difficulties associated with murder and theft.

The larger world community, through the fact that United Nations established the modern state of Israel, has decreed that Israel has a right to exist. The path to real security for Israel, the Palestinians, and the other nations of the area ultimately lies in the growth of mutual understanding and respect, cooperation, and economic interdependence.

Such movement is difficult in the present highly politicized, rhetorically charged atmosphere around Israel, the Palestinians, and the larger world of the Middle East. The preacher can at least urge the congregation to recognize that God is not simply “pro-Palestinian” or “pro-Israeli,” but is pro-peace-with-security-and-abundance-for-all, and that all parties will need to give up certain things in order to achieve a greater common good.

While such an outcome may seem unlikely to today’s listener, Judah’s survival seemed unlikely to its leaders in exile in Babylonia. According to the Priestly theologians who composed Psalm 105, Israel’s purpose is to be a light to the nations (see Isa. 42:1–7). God’s faithfulness to Israel is a representation of God’s faithfulness to the whole human family. As God has been faithful to Israel, so God seeks to be faithful to all.

RONALD J. ALLEN

PROPER 12 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 24 AND JULY 30 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 128

¹Happy is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways.

²You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

Theological Perspective

This psalm is a classic example of Wisdom literature. As such, the dominant theological issue is one that relates to all Wisdom literature (most prominently, the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job): how does wisdom relate to the rest of the Old Testament?

Unlike the Pentateuch and the historical books that follow it, Wisdom literature shows no sign of interest in Israel's particular story. In the wisdom books we find "a form of faith that is open to the world, that eschews authoritarianism, that has no interest in guilt, but that believes that life in God's world is a way of faith to be celebrated."¹ It often begins with a focus on creation and reaches to a horizon that includes the whole of humanity. Agricultural themes relating to the earth's fruitfulness are common, as are domestic scenes relating to parents and children. There are few signs of Israel's covenant tradition; the literature more often finds parallels in other ancient Near Eastern literature.

The agrarian and domestic themes are linked in this psalm: the production of food (vv. 1–2) and the joys of family life (vv. 3–4) are both aspects of fruitfulness, the happy outcome of *fearing the Lord* (v. 1). As with the early chapters of Proverbs, the "fear of the Lord" echoes other wisdom psalms

1. Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 385.

Pastoral Perspective

"Happy" is the first word in the Psalter. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked . . . but their delight is in the law of the LORD" (Ps. 1:1–2). In the Gospel of Matthew, those who follow Jesus are happy or blessed (5:3–11). Augustine used the word "happiness" to define the goal of life. Sages throughout the ages have generally agreed that happiness is a byproduct of living for something greater than ourselves.

In Psalm 128, for instance, happiness is promised to the one "who fears the LORD [and] who walks in his ways" (v. 1). We are not told in this psalm the specifics of what it means to "fear" the Lord or even "walk in his ways." It is enough to know that the teachings of YHWH in the Torah provide the center of gravity for faithful living. Here, in Psalms 1, 19, and 119, happiness and blessing are the result of obediently living before God.

While Scriptures are somewhat vague about what we must do to be happy beyond obeying the Torah or "walking with the Lord," Psalm 128 (as well as Ps. 127) is quite specific about the marks of happiness: (1) "You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands," (2) "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine," and (3) "Your children will be like olive shoots." Moreover, the hope is that Jerusalem will prosper all your days, and you will live long enough to see your grandchildren.

Psalm 128

⁴Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

⁵The LORD bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

⁶May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!

Exegetical Perspective

This psalm sounds like an advertisement for the great American dream. Here is the perfect family, with ample disposable household income, just the right number of children, and, of course, the prospect of grandchildren climbing into the laps of smiling grandparents. Small wonder that this man is pronounced blessed.

There seems to be something too formulaic, too Deuteronomic, about this psalm. This man is blessed because he is on the right side of the Deuteronomic formula: the righteous are blessed with a long, abundant life, while the unjust die early and unhappy. Where is the acknowledgment of grief? Where is the harsh underbelly of human existence? This psalm seems to espouse a worn-out formula that welcomes the righteous man—yes, a *man* with a fertile wife—to worship on Mount Zion because he has the perfect life, an adoring wife, plenty of money, and lots of grandchildren in the offing.

Even the form of the psalm is traditional. It opens with a classic blessing from the heart of the wisdom tradition: “Happy is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways.” Then, just about two-thirds of the way through, the psalm is punctuated by another wisdom blessing: “Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD” (v. 4). The form of these blessings takes the reader back to the opening

Homiletical Perspective

Last week's psalm in the thematic series of readings for Ordinary Time was an individual lament (Ps. 86). In it the psalmist prays to God for rescue from oppression but also praises God for having *already* provided salvation. My discussion (pp. 249–53) named the kinds of questions the lament raises about the nature of God's providential care and how one might preach on such questions in relation to Psalm 86. This week's psalm raises similar questions, but the tone of the prayer is radically different. Instead of the psalmist's speaking out of the context of suffering, Psalm 128 speaks out of the context of blessing. Still, the preacher is led to ask, Why does God rescue or bless some and not others?

The combination of themes and borrowed, hymnic language in Psalm 86 invite a sermon that answers this question in terms of God's formative, steadfast love, over against our human desire to have our immediate needs met. Such a theological move is not as easy to make on the basis of Psalm 128. Congregations would be well served by pastors who preach on God's providence one week by drawing from the theology implicit in Psalm 86 and the following week preach on the same theological topos by challenging the worldview of Psalm 128, that is, if the pastor can demonstrate an accessible hermeneutic to help them deal with theologically troubling biblical texts.

Psalm 128

Theological Perspective

(most obviously Pss. 1, 112, and 128), tying these everyday human concerns to a specific Israelite context. The very name for God, YHWH, draws on Israel's exodus story of deliverance. When Moses stood before the burning bush and boldly asked, "What is your name?" YHWH was the answer that came back, a derivative in Hebrew of the verb "to be" (Exod. 3:14–15).

Fearing involves recognizing the sovereignty of God and acting on the basis of it. Fearing YHWH must involve an association with the God who is revealed to Israel through exodus deliverance and Sinai covenant. If Sinai is the defining context for understanding YHWH, then the account of Abraham and Isaac is the key text for exploring what it means to *fear*. The narrative begins by setting a test for Abraham and pivots on the assurance "for now I know that you fear God" (Gen. 22:12). The contemporary use of "fear" is confusing: the Old Testament notion has more to do with the New Testament articulation of faith and works, that is, believing and doing, than with being terrified.

While the psalmist encourages readers/hearers to "fear the LORD" (vv. 1, 4), the psalm is not directive or insistent. The rewards are self-evident, and the invitation is to anyone and *each* one (contrary to the NRSV, the Hebrew uses the singular form). Who can resist happiness and blessing? Verses 1–2 are a beatitude, using the same form of words that Jesus uses in Matthew 6 and Luke 6. A beatitude points to and commends the conduct or character that enjoys God's blessing.

Verses 3–4 take the form of a benediction, that is, a direct invocation of God's blessing. Following Hebrew convention, the beatitude begins with *'ashre* ("blessed" or "happy") while the benediction uses the term *baruk* ("blessed"). Both terms direct us to the benevolence and abundance that lie with God. This benevolence and abundance take both material and nonmaterial form. God's blessings include food and offspring, joy and prosperity. Verses 1–4 cover two basic areas of life: work and family. In both, it is God who brings fulfillment. In both, there is no limit; there is no scarcity with God.

This makes the whole notion of God's blessing a hard theme to grasp. We live in a quantitative age that measures resources economically and functions on the basis of their limitedness. The normal logic is that if I have more of something, then you will have less, and how much we have matters a great deal. Our world assumes scarcity, and thus encourages competition.

Pastoral Perspective

The intensely patriarchal nature of the psalmist's picture of happiness is difficult to accept for those who have worked hard to overcome the negative consequences of male domination. The unemployed or those whose labor does not provide enough to eat are not in this picture of happiness. Neither are childless couples or children whose growth is stunted by poverty or neglect. Although these marks of happiness may exclude more than they include, they remind us again that the source of happiness is outside ourselves. We may seek happiness, but it comes from doing something else. For the psalmist, "walking in the ways of God" (v. 1) is the something else we must do if we wish to be happy.

True happiness, artists and poets have told us over and over again, begins by engaging in some absorbing task or compelling challenge that transcends the self and keeps us focused outside ourselves. In this sense, happiness is not something we achieve or accomplish but something we discover. Happiness is found neither in a warm puppy nor in the accumulation of things. Furthermore, happiness is not something we possess. Those whose lives are shaped by the purpose of God will discover an enduring joy that transcends the seductive promise that happiness is found in what a credit card can buy. It is from God and is given to those who walk with God. If we live nourished by the extravagant goodness of God and contribute to the flourishing of creation, we will be happy.

The impediments to happiness are many and readily available to those whose lives are colored by the rich hues of success. The more choices we have in living, the easier it is to be trapped by second-guessing our decisions. More options make us less happy, because our expectations are elevated and there are more occasions for disappointment. If we expect life to be without setbacks or crabgrass or signs of decay and death, we are likely to be chronically unhappy because perfection and the absence of pain elude us.

Whenever we feel as if our life does not turn out as we expect, the sadness we experience makes it difficult to find happiness in the wonder of ordinary things: the song of a bird as morning dawns, the lover's glance that takes our breath away, the smell of freshly cut grass, the sound of Grandma's laughter. We are more likely to discover happiness when we delight in the ordinary oddity of things.

There is a saying from Zimbabwe that describes why it is difficult to be happy in a world where there is so much violence: "I am well if you are well." One

Psalm 128

Exegetical Perspective

line of the opening psalm: “Blessed is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers” (Ps. 1:1). The blessed man of Psalm 128, with whom “it shall go well” (v. 2), is like the blessed person of Psalm 1, who is like a tree planted by streams of water, prospering in all that he or she does.

At the heart of those blessings lies a traditional conception of faith: the fear of the Lord. Fear, which entails respect and reverence—not just being scared—lies at the heart of the very traditional wisdom tradition: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). Even the source of this knowledge is traditional, located in the home: “Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching” (Prov. 1:8). Such wisdom is not about asking the hard questions or challenging authority when it reeks of the status quo. On the contrary, this sort of knowledge passes on parental teaching and brandishes it proudly like a garland and a necklace (Prov. 1:9).

This looks, therefore, like a psalm that unblinkingly champions the status quo and the pursuit of material blessings. Actually the psalm espouses nothing of the sort, for it belies a more basic existence and blessings of a far simpler sort.

The blessed man experiences five qualities of life—and five qualities only. First, he is able to keep what he produces: “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands” (v. 2). He is not a slave, the fruit of whose labor is set upon another’s table. He is not in exile, where work serves the citizens of another nation. He is not one of the poor, who must glean the field of another to garner his own meager pickings.

Second, his wife is healthy enough to bear him many children: “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine . . . your children will be like olive shoots” (v. 3). She does not, like so many, die in childbirth. She is not so hungry as to be unable to sustain a pregnancy. The father and husband in this psalm is blessed because he has something basic: a living spouse.

Third, this man’s children are healthy. The simile of olive shoots suggests unlikely tenacity, improbable thriving on rocky mountainsides and in the sweltering heat of summer. His children have survived and gather, against all odds, around his table.

Fourth, this man has a house. His wife lives “within your house,” and his children gather “around your table” (v. 3). How big a house, we do not know. How lavish a meal, we cannot tell. It is enough that his wife and children gather around his table.

Homiletical Perspective

Ronald J. Allen offers such a hermeneutic in relation to preaching on individual passages that are problematic when viewed in relation to one’s understanding of the whole of Scripture. He draws on Clark Williamson in offering three criteria: appropriateness to the gospel, intelligibility, and moral plausibility. In other words, does the text fit with our understanding of the core of God’s good news; are the claims of the text believable when considered by today’s theological, rational standards; and does the text call for a posture toward others that is ethically defensible?¹

Psalm 128 does not pass Allen’s test very well. On the surface the text is pleasant enough, naming God as a God who blesses us and recognizing that in some sense we reap what we sow. If, however, we stay with the psalm’s language for very long, we meet a God who is manipulated by our work. On the one hand, God is presented as a just God, one who responds to humans in a way that is fair—if we are faithful, God is good to us. This idea certainly repeats itself often in the Bible and in the church. On the other hand, God is not far from being reduced to a blessing machine: if we do A, God will respond with B.

Granted this is liturgical, poetic language. We need not look far, however, to find puritanical views of good works and prosperity evolving into the gospel of success proclaimed by televangelists who tell the down and out that if they reach down into their pockets and pull out their last nickel (and mail it into their ministry), God will bless them tenfold. We need not look far to see the poor being judged as unfaithful and their needs dismissed, because, had they been faithful, God would have blessed them. How will those who have labored faithfully and been laid off from work, not because of poor work but bad management by others, hear verse 2?

Add to these elements the fact that the prayer not only views blessing in materialistic terms but through a patriarchal lens—verse 3 speaks of wives and children as possessions and determines women’s worth only in terms of their childbearing—and we need not look far to find a man feeling blessed by God in managing his family the way he manages property, and a woman feeling punished by God because she is unable to have children.

In sum, the psalm is problematic for any congregation that has had reason to lament due to

1. Allen refers to these criteria in many of his writings; see Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching Is Believing: The Sermon as Theological Reflection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 55–58.

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With God, however, there is abundance, not scarcity. There is no limit to the number of people who may follow the beatitude and find blessing—so long as blessing is not also defined by the economics of our age. (The Bible would call that greed.) God's blessing is both material and nonmaterial. Thus "the fruit of the labor of your hands" (v. 2) that is shared "around your table" (v. 3) is a matter not purely of quantity but also of one's attitude. The loaves may multiply as they are shared, and table fellowship is part of staving off hunger. Genuine prosperity (another much abused term in our age) is determined by a state of being, rather than a statement from the bank: it recognizes the sovereignty and munificence of God. Indeed, prosperity means *fearing the Lord*.

The domestic imagery does not end with the nuclear family, but with the family of God, whose "house" and "table" (v. 3) are found in Zion (v. 5). Jerusalem is the beginning and end of blessing, a theme that is especially prominent in the Psalms of Ascent (Pss. 120–134). These were likely the songs of pilgrims as they traveled to and from the city where God was understood to dwell, to reign, to bless, to secure, to judge, to gather, to restore, and to complete (see, e.g., Pss. 122:3; 126:1; 132:15; 133:3; 134:3).

"As they come to receive the blessing of the LORD, the pilgrims are not independent autonomous individuals. Their lives are bound into Zion, and their hope for blessing is bound up with the good of Jerusalem. . . . In a similar way, the lives of Christians are bound up with Christ, through whom God bestows spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3)."² Like the kingdom of God, Jerusalem is an eschatological dream that is already partially present. Those who fear YHWH are those who recognize this reality in their midst.

JO BAILEY WELLS

Pastoral Perspective

paraphrase would be "I am happy if you are happy." How shall we find happiness when there is so much irrational suffering in the world? Is happiness possible, even for those who are safe, when so many people live in fear of harm? Can those who have more than they need be happy as long as millions of people in the world have so little? For the psalmist, blessings flow from Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God on earth, to all the earth for all generations (vv. 5–6). As long as there places like Jerusalem of old where peace and happiness occur, anyone anywhere knows happiness is possible.

When people ask me if I am happy, I do not know what to say. Happiness is not a category I commonly use to evaluate my life. Even when I am flooded with gratitude, and a sense of well-being, for work to do and food to eat and books to read and children to talk with, I seldom use "happiness" to describe my emotional state. Being happy seems much too self-serving to be the reward of faithful obedience. If our lives benefit the created world and if we seek to embody the goodness of God in our neighbor love, the happiness we experience for a life of faithful obedience endures because it is from God and for the world.

Gratitude is a window to happiness. Because all of life is grace, we live each day with an enduring awareness we have our life as a gift. Living gratefully for the gift of life is the heart of Christian practice. Gratitude also alerts to the reality that happiness is something we receive rather than achieve. Happiness cannot be earned or bought or bargained for. This is a gracious word in a culture of merit. The psalmist's word about happiness and the gospel promise of grace invite us to see the gifts of God in life with eyes of wonder and awe. Our delight in daily wonders is the beginning of thankful joy and happiness that endures.

HERBERT ANDERSON

2. James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 403.

Psalm 128

Exegetical Perspective

Finally, this man may live long enough to see his grandchildren: “May you see your children’s children” (v. 6). This is no vacuous hope. It is framed by a realistic political situation. Before this prayer comes one about Jerusalem: “May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life” (v. 5). Then it comes the final line of the psalm: “Peace be upon Israel” (v. 6). Only if his grandchildren are not taken captive by a conquering empire will he enjoy them. Only if his grandchildren are not sold as debt slaves to countrymen and -women will he hold them. Only if he continues to possess his home can his grandchildren, like his own children, gather around his table. None of this is certain. All of it hinges upon wider political realities. All of it hangs upon the fate of Jerusalem and the peace of Israel.

This psalm, then, is not about the accrual of wealth. It is not about affording children the best opportunities and the most prestigious educations. It is about those basic qualities of a blessed life: a living spouse; a home filled with healthy children; a table with food upon it; and the hope of surviving to see one’s grandchildren. If this is a poem rooted in the Deuteronomic vision, in which the righteous are blessed and the wicked cursed, it is the Deuteronomic vision writ small. This poem is edged by exile and uncertainty. It ends, after all, not with the certain promise that this man will be prosperous all his days and see his grandchildren, but with the *hope* that he will. It ends, not with the certainty that Jerusalem will survive and Israel thrive, but with the *hope* that they will. If this psalm, then, expresses the status quo, it is a simple status quo, a life that recognizes basic blessings, not opulent ones, and embraces a simple, straightforward faith.

JOHN R. LEVISON

Homiletical Perspective

their own suffering and in solidarity with others who suffer. “Counting our many blessings” in ways that distort God’s character and create damaging ethical worldviews can hardly be considered good news.

We usually think of biblical preaching as offering a word from the ancient text for today’s world, as preaching that lifts from the text an answer to some theological, spiritual, social, ethical, or existential question. However, biblical preaching that views the Bible as a conversation partner in forming a people loyal to and shaped by the good news of God’s mercy and justice can also approach a text for preaching as raising a question instead of providing an answer. In other words, preachers often begin a sermon by raising a question that they believe is compelling for their congregation and then diving into the text for an answer. Perhaps, though, the best way to preach Psalm 128 is to view it as the diving board instead of the pool of good news.

A preacher who wants to do this could structure the sermon into three main movements. First, name the psalm’s presentation of blessing as problematic. Second, explain the problems in terms of ancient worldviews we no longer hold. Then, third, drawing on the church’s tradition and contemporary theology, help the congregation reenvision what God’s blessing looks like. Like the move suggested in the homiletical essay on Psalm 86, this final movement may draw on verse 1 in a way that hints at the idea that fear of the Lord, walking in God’s ways, is the blessing itself, instead of a test that, once we pass, results in God’s rewarding us. This is certainly important for today’s churches to hear. How often do our members view the Christian life as a test for eternal rewards, instead of recognizing that the Christian life is a gift of participating in God’s eternal being?

O. WESLEY ALLEN JR.

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**PROPER 13 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 31
AND AUGUST 6 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 32:22–31

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Theological Perspective

This complex text is theologically dense, with forgiveness and rehabilitation of Jacob during the crossing of a challenging river, the related renaming of person and place, the nature of blessing at the dawn of a new day, and the mark of God being weakness in the world.

The Jabbok, modern Zarqa, is a tributary of the Jordan that would have flowed through a deep gorge at the time of Jacob. Fording this river with two women (presumably Leah and Rachel of Gen. 29), eleven children, and everything Jacob possessed was itself a daunting task, and this provides emphasis to the story of Jacob wrestling all night with an unidentified man.

Jacob had wrestled with his twin brother Esau in the womb and tricked his brother out of that birthright and received his father's blessing in place of his brother (Gen. 25:27–34). Now Jacob is making his way to Haran and is filled with fear at the thought of his impending meeting with Esau, whom he had cheated (32:7) and whom he was hoping to win over with a display of generosity (32:13–21).

Pastoral Perspective

Alone at the ford of Jabbok, Jacob ends the night and begins the new day wrestling with a "being." What is the nature of human struggle? We all approach this question from the unique vantage point of our own histories, education, and training. The psychologist might argue that Jacob is having an internal or emotional struggle. The warring between his ego, superego, and id has now given rise to a full-blown panic. Jacob is having an anxiety attack brought on by the reality that he is about to meet his brother Esau for the first time since he tricked him out of his birthright. The struggle is in Jacob's mind. He is wrestling within himself.

Speaking of Esau, the family dynamics expert and social worker could assert that Esau has been lurking, carefully watching Jacob's every move, waiting for the opportune time. Perhaps wanting to avoid a full-fledged frontal attack, Esau waits until "Jacob was left alone" (v. 24). Under the cover of night, it is Esau who attacks Jacob and exacts the long-awaited revenge for stealing the birthright.

The criminologist might assert that this particular geographic location in ancient Palestine, the ford of

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Exegetical Perspective

This account of Jacob's night wrestling seems to interrupt the story of the impending encounter with his long-estranged brother Esau, yet it proves essential for their reconciliation. Suspecting that the carefully orchestrated parade of presents he has just sent out that evening (Gen. 32:13–21) will not be enough to appease his brother, Jacob gets up "the same night" (v. 22) and sends his wives, children, and "everything he had" across the ford of the Jabbok River. Jacob is left alone, with nothing, just as he was when he first fled Esau's anger over his stolen birthright and blessing (27:42–43; 28:5). God and Esau's anger bracket both Jacob's departure from the promised land (at Bethel, 28:10–17) and his return to it here at the Jabbok (a tributary east of the Jordan River). Apparently Esau's anger (27:41) has not abated after twenty years; Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men (32:6).

The river he must cross to reenter the promised land symbolizes Jacob's transitional situation: he finds himself in "a liminal (in between, neither here nor there) space, poised on the threshold of new possibilities in terms of his self-understanding, his

Homiletical Perspective

No less a scholar than Gerhard von Rad warned preachers about the "false expectations of a hasty search for 'the' meaning of this story."¹ No straightforward message presents itself to be preached. This story—like so much of our lives—is fraught with uncertainty and confusion. The sermon is the story; the sermon is in the wrestling.

In the dark we cannot see clearly; we cannot tell who is who in the struggle. This wrestling match—this *agōn*—goes on all night. The Greek word for a wrestling match is *agōn*, from which we get our words "agony," meaning "great pain" or "great struggle"; "agonistic," meaning "contesting, combative"; and "antagonist," the one with whom we struggle. If we take this story seriously, we understand that God sometimes appears as our antagonist, the one with whom we must struggle—not necessarily an enemy, but one whom we must wrestle nonetheless.

All night long they wrestle in the darkness until Jacob's opponent, recognizing the match is a draw, dislocates Jacob's hip. Still Jacob holds on. Jacob was

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 314.

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Theological Perspective

Even as Jacob made the decision to seek to repair his relationship with his brother and made the difficult crossing of the Jabbok at night, now he had to wrestle with the mysterious “man,” the representative of God, often depicted in art and tradition as an angel. In the wrestling he was wounded, but he persevered throughout the night, in search of a blessing. The word “forgiveness” never occurs, but forgiveness is part of the blessing for Jacob. The younger son, the cheat and the thief, is blessed by being given a new name, Israel, which means “one who has striven with God and prevailed.”

This is all well and good, but for the theological tradition that interprets “the man” with whom Jacob wrestles as YHWH. If the man is YHWH, then YHWH responds and even capitulates to Jacob’s violence. This interpretation is not necessary if we read Jacob’s wrestling as his persistence in his desire to draw near to God, for once he has had the conversation about their respective names, it is clear to Jacob with whom he is dealing. The wrestling becomes more akin to seeking to slake a thirst, and YHWH gratuitously responds to Jacob’s compelling need. The blessing, made manifest in the bestowal of a new name, bears within it forgiveness and restoration to the community of faithful people. So it came to pass, as Esau, like the father in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal (Luke 15:11–32), came running toward Jacob and embraced him, weeping (33:4).

This divine gift of grace granted to Jacob is akin to the Roman Catholic “baptism of desire.” Jacob was blessed because of his persistent desire for blessing when he recognized the presence of God. He had crossed over the waters, sought divine blessing, and was reconciled to those whom he had wronged.

Names convey something of the essential character of the one named. “Jacob” is associated with deceit, and Jacob’s renaming as “Israel” represented a gift of divine recognition and forgiveness. In response, Jacob named the place Peniel (or Penuel), for he had seen God “face to face,” and yet, contrary to all expectation, had lived to tell the tale.

Jacob received God’s blessing. While the blessing implied forgiveness in this story, it generally indicates God’s approval, favor, or gift. Like some names, a blessing can contain within it a sense of promise for the future. The blessing given to Jacob through the name Israel at the dawn of a new day foreshadowed the idea that while forgiveness changes little or nothing about the past, it potentially

Pastoral Perspective

Jabbok, was a frequent place of ambush for travelers. Thieves would often lie in wait for rich travelers to come by. This day, however, they are disappointed; the accomplished Jacob has already sent all the possible pilfer ahead. The raiders will mete out their frustration by wrestling with him.

The mystic and/or religiously oriented person will argue that Jacob wrestles with an angel. This interpretation of the text perhaps exposes an unstated discomfort with the detail of the fight. The text implies that Jacob has the better hand in the fight. While one can imagine a human being wrestling with an angel, one may not be quite ready to imagine that Jacob is indeed wrestling with God, particularly if it appears that God is losing.

The writer conveys to us a poignant idea in the midst of experts and specialists who can see only through their narrow discipline. Any one of these perspectives, when considered alone, is incomplete and shortsighted. Any understanding of human struggle that does not take into account the theological aspects of that struggle is insufficient. On the other hand, one does not have to choose theological reflection as an alternative to these other valid insights to struggle. Each of these theories takes us away from the truth that Jacob himself is screaming from the text: Jacob names the place of his struggle “Peniel,” for he has seen God face to face, and his life has been spared. His new name, Israel (do angels have the power to name?!), supports this idea, for he has struggled with God (and humanity) and has prevailed.

Perhaps a closer examination of the word “wrestle” would be helpful. In Hebrew the word carries with it the nuance of making God dirty, not in the sense of profaning, but in the sense of getting all mixed up and intertwined in fallible human affairs and conditions. The textual dialogue conveys this messiness. The reader has to follow very carefully to be sure who is doing what to whom during this struggle.

There are some traditions that say Jacob was in fact a superhuman with superior powers. How else can we explain that it is Jacob who has the hold on the being, who appears to be begging for mercy: “Let me go, for the day is breaking” (v. 26). The plea sounds as if it comes from the script of a B-rated horror film à la Bela Lugosi (Dracula) or Lon Chaney (the werewolf). Is God some monster whose power is diminished at the break of day? Any conclusion that Jacob can in fact overpower and triumph over this being, however, is thwarted by the

Genesis 32:22–31

Exegetical Perspective

relationship with his brother Esau, and his future with God.”¹ Exposed and vulnerable, stripped of the possessions that had defined him up to this point, Jacob can no longer position his animals, messengers, and family between him and his angry brother (32:13–21). No longer can he escape the wrong he has done to Esau.

Word plays abound—Jacob (*ya’akob*), Jabbok (*yabboq*), and wrestle (*‘abaq*, v. 25)—to tie actor, place, and action together. The identity of the mysterious “man” (*‘ish*, v. 24) with whom Jacob wrestles invites speculation. Some suggest that his opponent is Esau, sneaking up for a rematch of their wrestling in the womb (25:22). Traditional Jewish commentators argue that Jacob wrestles with an angel, since angels appear in human form (e.g., the three men who appear to Abraham in Gen. 18:1–8, or the angel, *mal’ak*, who appears to Hagar in Gen. 16:7–14; cf. Hos. 12:3–4). The Talmud suggests that he may have been Jacob’s guardian angel (*Gen.R.* 77:3), sent to warn Israel’s future enemies about attacking Jacob, whom even an angel could not defeat. Other interpreters hear echoes of an old night-demon (cf. Dracula) or river-demon legend lurking in the man’s demand: “Let me go, for the day is breaking” (v. 26a). However, Jacob identifies his opponent as God when he names the place Peniel, which means “the face of God” (v. 30; see the alternate spelling, Penuel, in v. 31): “for I have seen God [*‘elohim*] face to face.” The “man” does not demand release because his power will be diminished by the sun, but because of the danger to Jacob: “No one shall see me and live” (Exod. 33:20).

Others believe that Jacob wrestled with himself, his conscience, or the divine within. Thus Waskow asks why God uses the plural “men” when God gives Jacob a new name, Israel, in verse 28: “for you have struggled with God and with men [NRSV: “humans”], and prevailed.” He suggests that the “men” were Esau, since seeing Esau was like seeing God’s face (Gen. 33:10), and Jacob himself, who wrestled with his own fear and hatred of Esau.² Yet the wrestling cannot be limited to the psychological realm. Jacob’s limp (vv. 25, 31) offers a physical reminder to Jacob’s descendants that Jacob/Israel must struggle with God for blessing, rather than simply demand it: “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (v. 26). Jacob has spent his life up to this

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born holding on to his brother’s heel. He will hold this angel, or whatever this midnight marauder might be, and will not let go. “I will not let you go, unless you bless me,” groans Jacob, his voice rough with hours of struggle (v. 26). Jacob has duped his brother for a blessing and tricked his father for a blessing. At the break of day Jacob has wrestled all night, but he will not release his grip without a blessing.

“What is your name?” the antagonist asks (v. 27). When blind old father Isaac asked that question, “What is your name?” Jacob lied, “I am Esau your firstborn” (27:18–19). Now, as dark of night gives way to the day, he answers, “Jacob.”

The antagonist announces: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (32:28).

Jacob asks his opponent to return the favor—who are you?—“Please tell me your name” (v. 29).

In the dark before dawn, before faces can clearly be recognized, the antagonist asks, “Why is it that you ask my name?” No answer, no name, just another question. And the storyteller adds, “And there be blessed him” (v. 29).

Holding on to that blessing, Jacob named the place Peniel, which means “the face of God”; Jacob explains, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (v. 30).

The storyteller tells us it was a man, an *ish*, Jacob wrestled. Biblical scholars wonder about river spirits rising out of the Jabbok. Western art imagines an angel. Jacob says, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The antagonist’s announcement would seem to confirm this: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God” (v. 28). Jacob and his antagonist are unanimous in judgment: Jacob wrestled God.

If you watch television wrestling, you watch the WWE, World Wrestling Entertainment. When you come to worship, when you pray, when you teach children faith, you sign on with the WWF—the World Wrestling of the Faithful, those who wrestle God.

In the book of Job, Job and God go forty-two rounds, complete with ringside commentary from Job’s three friends, and at the end we are no more sure who won and who lost than we are when the sun comes up on Jacob and his assailant. Jeremiah would like to get God off his back, but God’s word is like a fire in his bones (Jer. 20:9). Jesus prays in Gethsemane, his own *agōn*, where Luke says he sweated blood wrestling with God (Luke 22:44).

When Jacob’s antagonist renames Jacob as “Israel” because he has “striven with God,” we are all given

1. Denise Dombkowski Hopkins and Michael S. Koppel, *Grounded in the Living Word: The Old Testament and Pastoral Care Practices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 41.

2. Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 7.

Genesis 32:22–31

Theological Perspective

changes everything about the future. So it was to be for Israel, redeemed for the great purposes of God.

Finally there is the matter of Jacob's injury, which carries significance in two ways. First, the fact of Jacob's hip being put out of joint was a test or trial that had to be overcome by the depth of Jacob's desire for blessing. Second, Jacob was left with a limp, so that the sign of his blessing would be considered weakness in the world. Theological reflection could lead to questions about whether YHWH was cruel, playing games with Jacob's affections and leaving him wounded. At the same time we could read these actions as reminders that whatever the challenges of our lives, God is faithful and that what the world counts as weakness, God counts as strength.

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fact that the being merely touches Jacob's hip and throws it out of socket. This could be an indication that the being could very easily overtake Jacob with minimal effort but perhaps chooses a different way. The point is not that God fears disclosure of the divine identity at daybreak, but that Jacob could and would see himself differently in the dawning of this new day. Is this plea, in fact, the sign of a God so strong that God is willing to become weak in order to change us?

Jacob's understanding of blessing is changed as a result of this entanglement. Throughout his life, he has understood blessing as something that had to be seized, taken from someone else. To be blessed, he would have to use his cunning and trickery to supplant and weasel the blessing from others. It happened with his brother Esau over a bowl of red bean soup. It happened again with his vision-impaired father, Isaac, with the aid of goatskins tied to his arms. It happened yet again with his uncle Laban from whom he engineered his livestock with the assistance of streaked, speckled, and spotted rods. He has, in fact spent his life as a supplanter. Jacob's insistent words, "I will not let you go until you bless me," ought not to be too quickly spiritualized. His statement is perhaps a result of his lifetime of conniving, trickery, and treachery. Given his history, it may be better interpreted as yet another grasp for material possession. "Now that I have you, I will not let you go until you give me more stuff."

The "being" does not give Jacob more stuff, but something much more valuable, a new perspective and paradigm, by asking a question: "What is your name?" This is the question Jacob has had problems answering all his life. Before his father, Isaac, he lied.

At the Jabbok, the Being gives being. Jacob is not blessed because of what he has or what he receives. He is blessed because of, and certainly in spite of, who he is and of who he will become as a result of this struggle.

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Genesis 32:22–31

Exegetical Perspective

point demanding blessings, from his dying father Isaac (Gen. 27) and his uncle Laban (Gen. 30:30). He has cheated both for his blessing; now he must earn it. Jacob's new name, Israel, serves as an eponym for his descendants.

"Israel" can also mean "God strives." God initiates the wrestling, and Jacob must respond. This suggests the idea of a test (cf. Abraham's test in Gen. 22). Both the wrestling match and the new name, which affirms Jacob's toughness, prepare Jacob for meeting his brother Esau in the next chapter. Jacob receives a new name, Israel, but it does not obliterate his past or prompt a complete character transformation. Before the new name is given, God asks Jacob to identify his old self: "What is your name?" (v. 27). He responds: "Jacob" (*ya'akob*), which means "the one who takes by the heel," the "one who supplants," from a word play on "heel" (*'akeb*). Instead of lying, "I am Esau," as he did in answer to Isaac's question, "Who are you, my son?" (Gen. 27:18–19), Jacob owns his past. Both names, Jacob and Israel, are used after the wrestling. The old Jacob has not disappeared; he promises to meet Esau in Seir (33:14) but never shows up. God works even through a trickster like Jacob to remain faithful to divine promises.

The centrality of names links Jacob to Moses, who asks what God's name is as an objection to his call to lead the people out of Egypt (Exod. 3:13); Moses also sees God face to face and lives (Exod. 33:17–23). The word "face" in Genesis 32–33 ties the two chapters together and makes a point about Jacob's transformation into the eponymous ancestor of Israel. In Genesis 32:20, Jacob wears a mask of shame and deceit as he attempts to bribe Esau with gifts, thinking, "Afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." In 32:30, he sees God face to face. Finally, in 33:10 he tells Esau: "For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God." Jacob moves from persona, to presence, to possibility.³

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a new identity and named as those who wrestle with God. We are children of Abraham and Sarah through their descendant Jacob, who wrestles in the dark.

In our World Wrestling Federation of the Faithful we have our own champions. Among twentieth-century titleholders is Elie Wiesel, the Jewish writer who won the Nobel Peace Prize. Those who read the history of the Holocaust, or Shoah, as it is more properly called, frequently put down the books shaking their head and wondering how anyone can believe in God after that. Elie Wiesel lived the Holocaust and wrote about it. He watched his father die. His mother and sister disappeared into its murderous machinery. After the war Wiesel came to the United States and met Menahem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher rabbi whose followers found him so wise and saintly they wondered if he were not Mosiach, the promised Messiah. Wiesel's first conversation with the rabbi lasted for hours. Finally he mustered whatever it took for a pious Jewish boy transformed by the tortures of history to ask: "Rabbi, how can you believe in the Name of the Lord after the Holocaust?" The rabbi looked at Wiesel and said sadly, "And how can you not believe in the Name of the Lord after the Holocaust?"² One question does not answer the other; one question does not cancel the other; one question does not resolve the other. Rather the two questions, "How can you believe?" and "How can you not believe?" mark off the arena where we wrestle with God.

Our wrestling with God seems almost incomprehensible to those who are not members of the WWF, the World Wrestling of the Faithful, but we know what it is like, wrestling with God, protesting against God in the name of God. We know. We know the darkness of the night and the aloneness. We know the limping too, because no one emerges from such a wrestling match unwounded, unbloodied, untorn.

We know also the blessing. In the dark, in the wrestling, we hear our true name spoken; in the dark, in the *agōn*, a new identity is wrenched from us; and before dawn breaks we are given an incomparable blessing.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

3. Dombkowski Hopkins and Koppel, *Grounded*, 48.

2. Elie Wiesel, "A Simple Dialogue," in Irving Abrahamson, ed., *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, vol. 3 (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 63.

PROPER 13 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 31 AND AUGUST 6 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 17:1–7, 15

¹Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

²From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right.

³If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.

⁴As for what others do, by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.

Theological Perspective

The Seventeenth Psalm serves as a response to many of the theological themes that are to be found in the lection from Genesis 32, also assigned for this Sunday. In that reading, Jacob, whose name means “deceit,” is vindicated through receiving God’s blessing after wrestling with God through the night. Our selection from Psalm 17 echoes the testing and trial “by night” (v. 3) and asks God to heed prayer “from lips free of deceit” (v. 1). But in addition to the theme of vindication through testing, there are other distinct theological themes here: the avoidance of violence through God’s word (v. 4); perseverance on the paths laid out by God (v. 5); an appeal to be heard by God in prayer (v. 6); acknowledgment that God is savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries (v. 7); and the promise of beholding the face of God in the future (v. 15).

The psalm falls into the category of individual lament, with its protestations of fidelity and innocence and affirmation of the ultimate fidelity of God. The prayer that asks God to test or prove us is a dangerous prayer, for God’s testing can be painful as it was for Jacob; he wrestled with the angel, was injured in his hip bone, and continued on his way with a limp. Jesus taught his followers to pray that they not be led into temptation or testing, that they be spared the “time of trial” (Matt. 6:13; Luke 11:4).

Pastoral Perspective

One cannot help but read this psalm with a bit of skepticism. Not easily persuaded by the profound innocence proclaimed by the protagonist, suspicion is the reader’s first reaction to the psalm’s beginning.

Persecution is a strong word. It is also a tough word. Across the centuries its translation becomes all the more muddled. Across cultures and contexts, it could be relative. The young suburban child in the well-heeled American home looks at her parents and cries, “I am starving!” She does not really know true hunger, because the family can afford to feed her. The next meal is coming. She just wants something to eat at that precise moment, or perhaps she wants to eat something different from what has been prepared. That “hunger” about which she complains is not developing-country, swollen-bellied, disease-ridden, water-contaminated, globally invisible starvation.

Even in the context of our relative wealth and security, nevertheless, at some point in life, we all consider ourselves to be persecuted. In most instances, we believe the persecution to be unwarranted. To be honest, some of what we call persecution is consequential. We behave in ways that result in protracted trouble, but then pray to God to offer us immediate rescue and relief.

I am reminded of an exchange in *The Shawshank Redemption*, a film set in a prison. A lifer asks a new

Psalm 17:1–7, 15

⁵My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.

⁶I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.

⁷Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O savior of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.

.....

¹⁵As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary parameters for Psalm 17 suggest how uncomfortable the church is with using laments liturgically. The three-part structure of this cry for help is tightly interwoven, but the lectionary leaves out its center, which is focused on the psalmist's enemies. The psalmist's description of them is rooted in the prevalent biblical theme of act/consequence, or "you get what you deserve," a theme found in Deuteronomy, the prophets, the Wisdom literature, and also in the New Testament (e.g., Gal. 6:7–10; Matt. 7:13–14). The psalmist justifies her plea by contrasting her righteous behavior with the vicious acts of the wicked; the contrast provides the impetus for God to intervene. The "scissors-and-paste method of liturgical psalms use"¹ in the psalm blunts this contrast, as well as the urgency and pain of the psalmist's situation.

Three petitions divide the psalm into three parts. Like most laments, Psalm 17 does not simply complain, but seeks change in the situation by means of petition. In verses 1–2, the psalmist asks God to hear her cry, and she asserts her innocence (vv. 3–5). In verses 6–8, the psalmist asks God to hear and protect, and offers a description of the enemies (vv. 9–12). In verses 13–14, the psalmist,

1. Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Journey through the Psalms*, rev. and expanded ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 5.

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"Hear," the psalmist pleads, "listen!" We need to "hear," because merely reading the Seventeenth Psalm from the page allows distance that may cool down the song. The poetry is so shrill, so desperate, so insistent, that we back away. The preacher needs to *hear* in the same way the pastor *listens* to someone who comes to the study to speak of pain or loss, loneliness and hopelessness. The wrenching rhetoric of the psalm may leave the preacher unsure how to deal with it, but the pastor has heard this before. The situation is familiar.

The psalmist prays to God, "Hear a just cause," and tries to make the legal argument. Patrick D. Miller explains that this "is indeed a prayer in which a case is set before God for God's assessment."¹ The psalmist pleads innocent, and there is nothing in the psalm to cause us to suspect otherwise. The psalm pleads for God to examine the evidence: "if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me." The preacher who thinks otherwise brings suspicion to the text. No shadow of hypocrisy falls across the psalm. The singer suffers for no just reason.

In 1990 the Tony Award for the Featured Actor in a Play was tightly contested: four men were nominated, and any one of the fine actors might

1. Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 39.

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Theological Perspective

On the whole, life will present plenty of tests to our fidelity and our trust in God. The theological question that is raised by these trials, however, is whether or not God is responsible for them. If it is not always the case that God is responsible, can we identify those times when God is responsible for our trials? While it has frequently been the instinct of human beings to ascribe to God such dominion that all things may be attributed to God as first cause, such ascription leads us into the problem of whether God causes bad things to happen. It is clear from the whole swath of Scripture that God certainly desires to use all things for good (Rom. 8:28; cf. Gen. 50:20). There are certainly occasions when challenges leave us stronger than we were before; in this regard, it is not wrong to say that God proves our fidelity by trying our hearts. We do not therefore need to ascribe bad things to God in order to acknowledge the reality of the experience of our capacity to trust God while being tested or tried.

The psalmist proclaims that violence is avoided by the word of God's lips, and so recognizes that violence is not part of the revealed ways of God. In a world where violence is considered a last resort in human conflict and in which we have voluminous literature proposing theories of "just war," it is worth reiterating that even if we come to believe that a violent path is the least bad option for resolving human conflict or resisting tyranny, it still amounts to participation in a sinful and broken world. Repentance and confession are in order. The question of whether and how "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28) is raised once again by the reality of violence and the difficulties we have in renouncing it. In the Word-made-flesh, we are given the story of one whose life and death reveal the mechanisms of violence by which we manage anxiety in this world and are offered an alternative path through recognizing and renouncing our tendency to create enemies, scapegoats, and outsiders. The Word not only reveals God's antipathy to violence but also, as the psalmist prays, makes possible our choosing another path.

A further theological theme is brought before us in the idea of God's path being something we can both know and follow. There are many Christians whose functional theology suggests that God has laid out a clear path for human lives and that all they have to do is find out what that path is and then follow it all the way to paradise. This functional theology is usually found in language about God's "plan," often bound up with uncritical

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inmate what he is serving time for. The new inmate asserts that he is innocent of the double murder for which he was charged. The lifer tells him he's going to fit right in: "You know that everybody in here is innocent?"¹

To be sure, this is a mean world, filled with deception and deceitful people, but they are not alone. Whether we admit it or not, we are oftentimes a part of the trouble. It is not always so clean for us. This makes the psalmist's word even more difficult to believe:

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress. (v. 3)

"No wickedness in me"?! "My mouth does not transgress"?! Who is this person? The writer of this psalm is in many ways foreign to most of us. There is some of that wickedness and transgression in all of us. As if navigating icy streets in the winter, we gingerly and cautiously walk, but even the most cautious, the most tentative, eventually slip and fall.

This is a psalm that we must read and reread in order to comprehend it. In fact, to truly understand it, the reader may even have to turn it upside down. After all, the writer's determination and focus are indeed impressive and inspirational for any who will hear these words—if only we were able to embody some of this kind of devotion.

When thinking about persecution, we consider our plight and the God from whom we seek rescue, but primarily our energy and focus is on why our enemies are so driven to destroy us. Verses 9–14 provide quite a dossier for the enemy's atrocious behavior and disposition. The lectionary committee's careful selection of verses 1–7 and 15 for our scrutiny may save the preacher from getting lost in describing what is wrong with the other. Perhaps we spend too much time in our present-day culture identifying too readily what is wrong with our enemies. The struggle and toil, as well as their resolution, are found in examining the protagonist more closely. The first five verses take on new meaning after reading verse 15:

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your
likeness.

1. *The Shawshank Redemption*, dir. Frank Darabont (Castlerock Entertainment, 1994), based on Stephen King, *Different Seasons* (Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, 1982).

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tying parts one and two together, asks God to rise up to deliver her and overthrow the enemies. The psalmist appears to be keeping a night vigil, perhaps at a local sanctuary or the temple. Tested “by night” (v. 3), she asserts that she will behold God’s face in the morning, that is, “when I awake” (v. 15). Lamenting is a process that cannot be rushed if it is to allow the honest and full expression of our experience before God.

Psalm 17 opens with a threefold petition in verse 1, expressing urgency and the depth of the psalmist’s pain: “hear,” “pay attention” (“attend” NRSV), and “give ear.” Body parts abound in this psalm: ears/hear (vv. 1, 6), lips (vv. 1, 4), mouth (vv. 3, 10), feet (vv. 5, 11), eyes/see (vv. 2, 8, 11, 15), face (vv. 2, 15), heart (vv. 3, 10), hand (vv. 7, 14), and belly (v. 14). These metaphors serve to tie the psalm together, underscore the intimacy and personal relationship the psalmist desires with God, and make vivid the enemies’ personal assaults on the psalmist. She petitions God, not only to hear and see what she is experiencing at the hands of the wicked, but also to ask God to “rise up” (v. 13) with a sword in the divine hand, as a powerful warrior taking action on the psalmist’s behalf. “Refuge is hand-delivered”² (vv. 7, 13–14). The emotional intensity of this psalm is visceral.

The psalmist in verse 3 reports that God has conducted a three-part examination of her: “you have tested [*bakhan*] my heart, you have visited me [*paqad*] by night, you have refined [*tsaraf*] me” (my trans.). The psalmist echoes this tripartite process by declaring her innocence with the use of the negative *bal* three times: “you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress, . . . my feet have not slipped” (vv. 3bc, 5b). This protestation of innocence is meant to motivate God to act on the psalmist’s behalf. Many interpreters criticize the supposed self-righteousness or arrogance of such a protestation, but it appears often in psalms of lament (e.g., Pss. 7:3–5; 26:1–7; 35:7, 11–14; 44:17–22). Unfortunately, Christians seem much more comfortable with confession of sin, such as is found in penitential Psalm 51. The directness of the psalmist’s *chutpah* in her protestation of innocence is a common feature in the Bible (cf. Abraham arguing over the fate of Sodom in Gen. 18:25, and Jesus’ parable about insistent prayer in Luke 18:1–8). *Chutpah* is boldness toward God for the sake of community and justice. Verses 1 and 15 frame the psalm with the use of the word “righteous” or “just”

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have won. Finally Charles Durning was named the winner, for his role as Big Daddy in a revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In his acceptance speech, after thanking all the appropriate people, he quoted the comedian Jack Benny, “I do not deserve this award, but I have arthritis, and I don’t deserve that, either.”²

The Seventeenth Psalm understands that. It is the prayer of an innocent person experiencing undeserved suffering. Pastors have heard this before: “I don’t deserve lung cancer, I never smoked”; “I didn’t deserve to be laid off, I’ve worked hard every day of my life”; “I don’t deserve a gay son/a lesbian daughter, I always took him to baseball practice/her to ballet class and taught him how to be a man/her how to be a woman, and I know I’m not supposed to think about this that way, but it doesn’t seem fair.” Of course it is not fair. “I don’t deserve AIDS,” because no one deserves AIDS; “I don’t deserve arthritis,” because no one deserves arthritis; “I don’t deserve to be alone,” because no one deserves to be alone. The psalmist introduces into the sanctuary a pastoral problem more often heard in the pastor’s study or a hospital room.

For so many sufferers, the anguish is multiplied by anxiety that God is the one who has unjustly caused their suffering. The psalmist’s confidence in God provides opportunity for the preacher to set that matter straight. The plea of innocence compels not only God’s mercy but also God’s passion for justice in the world. God is not the adversary in this struggle; rather God will be one who stands with the sufferer against the antagonist.

Struggling in the throes of innocent suffering, we suddenly recognize new resonances to the nasty, exaggerated imprecatory rhetoric in the psalms. “The wicked who despoil me, my deadly enemies who surround me,” who “close their hearts to pity” (vv. 9–10): who can these be but cancer, depression, isolation? The blanks can be filled by those listening in the pew as well as the one speaking from the pulpit. The important thing to note in the extravagant rhetoric about the enemy is that the psalmist knows that God will hear it all, because God is the sufferer’s ally. The Lord stands with the petitioner in much the same location as the promised Paraclete of the Gospel of John (14:26). *Parakletos* is a Greek term for someone who literally stands alongside another person as an advocate, to provide encouragement. The reality of the sufferer’s struggle is more than matched by the power of this holy ally.

2. William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 178.

2. Source of quote unknown.

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ideas of predestination, which is akin to fate in this functional theology. To speak of God's paths is neither to speak of a predetermined future in which we have no real choices, nor to offer something like a set of rails that, once we are on them, will lead us to some assurance of salvation.

A mechanistic understanding of God can also creep in when we consider the psalmist's confidence that God will hear this prayer and respond by showing steadfast love (vv. 6–7). All too often we imagine that intercession and petition are somehow a matter of cause and effect. We put in a request to God who may or may not accede to it and grant us whatever it is that we think we desire. This understanding leaves us with the problem of a capricious God who responds or withholds response with no discernible rhyme or reason. Some try and explain this by saying that prayers get answered in God's time, rather than ours. Others suggest that God always grants what we need, rather than what we want, and we must discern how it is that God is answering our prayers.

None of these machinations is required by the psalmist's confidence in God's response to this lament. Intercession and petition become much more like throwing a stone into a pond in the economy and ecology of God, by which the ripples bring about change over time, even in the furthest reaches of the environment. Once in a while this may seem as though our prayer brings about immediate and desired effect, but those instances are rare and not a good basis for a theology of prayer.

A sound theology of prayer is the basis for the psalmist's confidence that God is savior of those who need protection from adversaries. The psalmist trusts in the blessing of being in the nearer presence of God, beholding God's likeness.

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Pastoral Perspective

Despite the realities of cruel enemies, the writer is compelled to examine interior motivations. In the last verse, the writer is resolved to behold the face of God in righteousness. This righteousness is the writer's way of seeking God's face. The writer also declares satisfaction is in God's likeness. God's likeness is sufficiently satisfying.

With all of the interpretive difficulties present throughout this psalm, there is still room to ponder the nature and function of the worshiping community within this reality. The worshiping community, perhaps each congregation, is a gathering of the persecuted, the troubled, the broken. Our commitment to gathering together presses us "from memory to hope."² Some scholars have argued that this text has allusions to the liberation of the Hebrew people from Egypt in the book of Exodus.³ The implication is evident for the individual who faces persecution. If God can rescue and liberate the community, God assuredly can deliver the individual. As a worshiping people, we are called to remember the struggle through which God has already brought us. The testimonies of the delivered and their presence in the house of God are demonstration of what God can do, has done, and will do again. This final verse is curiously resonant with the single-minded focus of Psalm 27:

One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple. . . .

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

(Ps. 27:4, 8)

The writer here is determined to seek the righteousness of God. It is all that truly matters. It is the true reason we are called to worship together.

GARY V. SIMPSON

2. Thomas G. Long, *From Memory to Hope* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

3. See discussion on Psalm 17 in Peter C. Craigie, *Psalm 1–50*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word Press, 1983).

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(*tsedeq*), suggesting that God the righteous judge ought to deliver the righteous psalmist. In a sense, God's reputation is on the line. God's justice must be made manifest in the life of the psalmist.

Two of the most frequent metaphors in the Psalter, pathway and refuge, appear in Psalm 17. The use of "feet" in verse 5b, along with "steps" and "paths" in verse 5a, suggests the pathway of right living that the psalmist has been following. In contrast, enemies lurk in ambush (v. 12) along that path, waiting like a lion to tear the psalmist apart. Wild animals, such as bulls, lions, and mad dogs, are often used in the psalm laments to describe the enemies. Because psalm language is highly metaphorical, it is usually impossible to tell exactly who these enemies are. The juxtaposition of verses 1 and 10, however, hints that the enemies may be false accusers in a legal proceeding: "With their mouths they speak arrogantly" (v. 10) contrasts with the psalmist who cries out to God with "lips free of deceit" (v. 1; cf. "my mouth does not transgress" in v. 3). The psalmist petitions God in verse 2 for "vindication" (*mishpat*); the word "judge" comes from the same root.

Because the psalmist believes he is innocent, he persists in petitioning God in verse 7: "wondrously show your covenant loyalty [*khesed*, my trans.], O savior of those who seek refuge [*khosim*]." Though the psalmist's pathway is surrounded by enemies, he believes that he shall find refuge in God. He will "behold God's face" (v. 15), almost a technical term in the psalms for worship, not an indication of resurrection, as some argue. The word "face" (*panim*) brackets the psalm: in verse 2: "from your face let my vindication come," and in verse 15. The wonderful metaphor in verse 8, which the lectionary omits, suggests God's face as well: "guard me as the apple of your eye," that is, the pupil. What an intimate metaphor for the psalmist's relationship with God!

DENISE DOMBKOWSKI HOPKINS

Homiletical Perspective

The central petition of the sufferer's prayer is verses 6–9. Although biblical scholars may disagree about the specifics of the poetic strophes, they are unanimous that verses 7–8 belong together, in spite of the lectionary's editing. Verse 8 may be familiar to us from its use in the liturgy, but the imagery of "hide me in the shadow of your wings" is quite remarkable in the Scriptures and deserves careful attention (see also Matt. 23:37). Protecting chicks under the cover of wings is the behavior of the *mother* bird. In *A Guide to Bird Behavior* Donald W. Stokes notes: "The female remains in the nest . . . covering the young with her wings to protect them from intruders and extreme cold or warmth."³ Both male and female birds may protect the nest when threatened by enemies, but the female alone adopts this posture of shadowing a brood under her wings. For some preachers, that image alone will transform the reading of the psalmist's prayer.

The psalmist's confidence rises to the dazzling conclusion that "when I awake"—at the end of the night, at the end of the struggle, perhaps even after the end of life itself—"I shall behold your face" (v. 15). The Hebrew Bible is of two minds about seeing the face of the Lord. The Lord announces to Moses, "You cannot see my face . . . and live" (Exod. 33:20), yet Moses indeed speaks with God "face to face" (Exod. 33:11, Num. 12:8). This psalmist has no fear of facing God. Perhaps all the suffering and struggles have brought in their wake a grace-filled audacity. Perhaps, like Job, the psalmist has lost everything there is to lose except God: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last . . . I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job 19:25–27). The psalmist points us beyond suffering, beyond enemies, and beyond the struggle, to a promised place of peace before the face of God.

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3. Donald W. Stokes, *A Guide to Bird Behavior, III* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1989), 168.

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**PROPER 14 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 7
AND AUGUST 13 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28

¹Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. . . .

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." ¹⁴So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after

Theological Perspective

With this reading we continue the story of patriarchal history and the origins of Israel in the "land of Canaan," with the early years of Joseph's life. While the text shows signs of at least two collections of material and so some logical inconsistencies, the purpose of the story as prehistory is clear, setting up the story of those who are favored wandering in the wilderness and finding that their destination is not an easy place to be.

The overriding theological themes of this lection are the reality and consequences of envy and the multigenerational reality of sin. The roots of the envy of Joseph's brothers are twofold. In this lection we learn that their hatred comes from the fact that their father loved Joseph more than all of them (v. 4). Though Joseph was only seventeen years old, he was old enough to work and was shepherding flocks. Yet his father has given him a "long robe with sleeves" (v. 3). This robe, the kind of coat that princes and others who did not have to work might enjoy, is a visible sign of Joseph's favored status. The second reason given for the brothers' envy is found in the verses omitted from our reading. Joseph told

Pastoral Perspective

No wonder social scientists and service providers are so curious about families of origin. This particular passage is ripe with avenues of exploration and filled with several layers of familial dysfunction. The living patriarch, Jacob, settles in the land where his father was an alien, two generations now removed from the wandering Abram, whose journey would also change his name. No more wandering. The setting describes a settling in. It seems as if this ought to be the premise for good news to follow. The clan has now established roots in Canaan. Significant time has passed, and the stranger has become familiar. The alien is now resident. The unique challenges of "getting to" and "not yet there" are apparently over. The promises are fulfilled with a harvest of faithfulness, but the story takes a foreboding turn.

"Now Israel loved Joseph more than his brothers . . ." (v. 3).

The writer gives only one explanation: Joseph was the child of his old age. Is that a satisfying or sufficient rationale? Is there ever a reason to differentiate the love a parent has among his or her children? The subsequent tension, hatred, warring,

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his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” ²²Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. ²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Exegetical Perspective

Unlike the individual stories in Genesis 12–36, which are woven together by genealogies, Genesis 37–50 forms a novella, a single, continuous story with a central character, Joseph, and a sustained dramatic plot. Linking the matriarchs and patriarchs to Moses, Genesis 37–50 explains how Israel came to be enslaved in Egypt. Saturated with irony and family conflict, the Joseph novella ends with Joseph and Jacob’s household “settled” (*yashab*) in Egypt (50:22). The focus of the story shifts from family to nation and anticipates Israel’s reverse movement out of Egypt (exodus) back into the promised land of Canaan.

Joseph is thrust into the spotlight in verse 2 as heir to God’s promises: “these are the generations of Jacob: Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers” (my trans.). Contrary to the NRSV, there is no paragraph break in the Hebrew between the words “Jacob” and “Joseph.” No expected list of twelve sons, beginning with the eldest, Reuben, follows the opening genealogical formula (cf. the list of Esau’s descendants in Gen. 36; also Gen. 35:23–26). Though he is the firstborn son of Jacob’s favorite

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The enduring popularity of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” should certify the appeal of Genesis’s Joseph saga, but these stories are seldom preached. Perhaps there is just too much in Genesis 37–50 (though one could envision a sermon series). The lectionary modestly offers the beginning and climax of Joseph’s story, which starts when he is 17 and ends with his death at 110 years old.

The story itself provides a reliable structure and movement for preaching. Claus Westermann instructs preachers: “We have nothing more to do than to lead our hearers into the events which it contains.” He continues, “The purpose of the . . . story of Joseph is not to provide us with either universal truths or handy applications of the same. The purpose is rather to allow that which happened here to speak for itself . . . to speak in their own narrative power.”¹ The wise interpreter stays close to the story but must decide whether the story will be continued next week with Proper 15’s offering of

1. Claus Westermann, *Joseph* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 18–19.

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of two dreams he had in which his brothers were bowing down to the ground before him (vv. 5–11).

Envy (also invidiousness or covetousness) is classically one of the seven deadly sins and the source of much misery. Cain murdered his brother Abel because “the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard” (Gen. 4:4–5). The consequence for murdering Abel is that Cain is to be a “fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (4:14). Envy is prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:17), for like most sins, it will eventually lead to violence. Envy is the name given to either that desire we have for some possession or quality or talent that belongs to someone else, or the desire that the other not enjoy some possession, quality, or talent. Joseph’s brothers had plenty to dislike about Joseph, not least his favored position and his belief that in the end he would lord it over them.

Envy can stem from the belief that there is not enough favor to go around, from a sense that life is fundamentally unfair, or possibly from simple greed. Any of these causes for envy are in direct opposition to the revealed purposes of God for the world, and so envy gives rise to rebellion against the Lord of the universe. In God’s economy, there is no limit on love and well-being, regardless of material circumstance. In God’s economy, material circumstance is the source neither of happiness nor of salvation.

Israel sends Joseph to check on his envious and hateful brothers, sending him alone for a journey of some days from the Valley of Shechem to Hebron and then on to Dothan. Joseph is “wandering in the fields” and receives the assistance of an unnamed man (v. 15), reminiscent of the “man” that had wrestled with his father at Peniel (32:24). This man asks an existential question, “What are you seeking?” similar to the question Jesus poses to Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51). From Bartimaeus, Jesus receives an answer that is both practical and obvious, “Let me see again,” while at the same time it implies a fuller answer. Joseph seeks his brothers’ location, but also, perhaps, something more, a restored relationship.

When he finds his brothers, they conspire to kill him. At least two stories seem to have been put together here. In one version, Joseph’s brothers sell him to Ishmaelites (37:27–28), and in the other, to Midianites (37:28, 36). The oldest brother, Reuben, pleads for Joseph’s life and plans to secretly come back and rescue him and restore him to his father.

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and willful destruction are the result. Israel’s preference for Joseph appears to be accepted as public knowledge. The other sons know it. It makes them hate Joseph and sets into motion constant bickering and consternation.

The main character of this chapter of family history is Joseph. Although he would eventually become the clan’s savior from death during famine, perhaps the residual resentment of his self-lauding prevented the family from ever giving him rank with the preceding patriarchs. He does not make it into the collective historical memory of this people as one of the patriarchs. YHWH is the God of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Joseph is now seventeen. He is doing his part in the family chores and responsibilities. He is also a source of great division in the family. Not only is he wearing that special coat from his father; he is broadcasting outlandish dreams to his brothers. We will discover later that Joseph becomes well known as an interpreter of dreams. This text is the first expression of his gift, and he has an immature understanding of it. In this text, there is no mention of God, and this arrogance only increases the brothers’ hatred for him. Later Joseph will come to know that it is God who interprets dreams. Even when someone is gifted by God, it takes a person time to understand the power and responsibility that comes with being gifted. When one does not fully understand such gifts, it is best not to make the kind of thoughtless and premature declarations and revelations that Joseph does. Even though what Joseph says is true, his own ego or impulsiveness or naiveté circumvents everything.

Self-expression and self-discovery are healthy parts of human development, but they teeter on the brink of the dangerous inclinations toward self-absorption and self-promotion. Joseph dares to tell his brothers of his dreams that they (and their father, Israel) will one day bow down to him. This is as much as they could take. They plot to rid themselves of Joseph once and for all.

It is not lost on the careful reader of this story that Joseph is manifesting a gift that was evident in his father, Jacob. Jacob dreamed. This may explain the difference in his ultimate response to Joseph’s braggadocio. “His father kept the matter in mind” (v. 11).

The brothers, on the other hand, rife with hatred, are now boiling to the point of plotting Joseph’s demise. They continue with their familial responsibilities, but the resentment they feel toward

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wife, Rachel (Gen. 30:22–24), Joseph serves as a shepherd's helper to his least important brothers, the sons of Jacob's slave women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Thus, verse 2 anticipates a reversal of Joseph's status later in the story. In the end, however, all of the brothers will share in the promises of God.

At first glance, Joseph appears to be an annoying tattletale; he brings "a bad report" of his brothers to their father (v. 2c). The narrator tells us that "Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children" (v. 3). Jacob seems to have learned little from his own experience with Esau about the destructive effects of favoritism within families (Gen. 25:28). Jacob flaunts his favoritism by giving Joseph an expensive "ornamented tunic" (NJPS) or a "long robe with sleeves" (NRSV), perhaps a sign of royalty (2 Sam. 13:18). The "coat of many colors" comes from the LXX (Gk.) translation. It is not surprising that the narrative repeats three times that his brothers "hated him" (vv. 4, 5, 8).

The building intensity of the brothers' hatred is blunted by the omission from the lectionary of Joseph's two dreams in verses 5–11. That Joseph tells his dreams of domination to his brothers and father without interpretation suggests his arrogance and immaturity. Joseph is a "youth" (*na'ar*, v. 2) who "behaves with the narcissism of youth, with a dangerous unawareness of the inner worlds of others."¹ Ironically, Jacob sends Joseph to Shechem to "see if it is well with [lit. "see the *shalom* of"] your brothers" (v. 14), who are shepherding there, knowing (v. 11b) that they "could not speak peaceably [lit. "say *shalom*"] to him" (v. 4b). Perhaps hoping to prompt a reconciliation such as he had experienced with Esau (Gen. 33:4–11), Jacob sends Joseph on a doubly dangerous mission. Jacob's sister, Dinah, was raped in Shechem (Gen. 34), and his brothers slaughtered the men of the town to avenge her.

The rabbis (*Bereshit Rabbah* 84:13) argue that Jacob feels remorse when Joseph responds to his request with "Here I am" (*hineini*, v. 13; cf. Gen. 22:1, 7; 27:18), because he knows how risky Joseph's task will be. Joseph reciprocates Jacob's love with his response. "Joseph's *hineini* shows a readiness to respond to a task whose implications and impact cannot be foreseen."² He does not know that his journey will set in motion Israel's journey from slavery to freedom. God repeatedly works behind

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Genesis 45:1–15, or whether the happy ending needs to be at least whispered as the eventual outcome of Joseph's being taken to Egypt.

The narrator hints in chapter 37 what will become more significant as the narrative, and Joseph, mature through the years. The motif of Joseph as a dreamer—and later, as an interpreter of dreams—is crucial to the story of Joseph's success in Egypt. The lectionary's excision of verses 5–11 succeeds in further detheologizing a story in which the Lord does not receive mention. In chapter 37 we do not know, even as Joseph himself does not yet know, that "interpretations belong to God" (40:8), and God is the one who gives the dreams. At seventeen years of age Joseph is so full of himself that he bubbles with excitement following his dreams of sheaves and stars "bowing down to me." He imagines the dreams are all about his elevation and exaltation above his brothers, and indeed, above his whole family. Later (chaps. 41–42) we will recognize the dreams are about the Lord's provision for the people and Joseph's role as servant to the community. We may think the story is about Joseph, and Joseph certainly thinks it is all about him, but the narrator tells us, "This is the story of the family of Jacob" (v. 2), and that story is told within God's goodness and mercy. We will learn that Joseph not only survives but succeeds "because the LORD was with him" (39:21–23), but here in chapter 37 the Lord is content to work anonymously, planting seeds in grandiose dreams.

Joseph's family is unlike any family we know, so the preacher's recollections of sibling rivalries from home and borrowings from Alfred Adler's theories regarding birth order will probably not be helpful. Jacob has two wives, Leah and Rachel, and each wife has a woman servant. Jacob fathers sons by all four women. When opponents of same-sex marriage speak of biblical definitions of marriage, this is not what they have in mind.

Aging Jacob complicates matters further by his partiality to the elder son of his favorite wife. He outfits the boy with a wardrobe that might not be "TechnicolorTM" but must be "amazing" to his brothers. It is not clothing for work. Joseph appears here as one who criticizes the work of others (v. 2) and who is sent to inquire after the welfare (*shalom*) of brothers who are working (v. 14).

Were his wardrobe not offensive enough, Joseph sounds like an insufferable brat reporting his dreams of brothers and parents "bowing down to me!" It is those dreams, not his sport coat, that finally stir the motive for violence among the brothers.

1. Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 253.

2. Norman J. Cohen, *Hineini in Our Lives* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), 58.

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But when Reuben discovers that Joseph is missing, his concern seems to be a calculation born of his fear of bloodguilt, rather than any genuine compassion for Joseph or for Israel their father.

Edwin Friedman, building on the work of Murray Bowen, recognized the multigenerational nature of emotional or family systems.¹ The theory is that patterns of relationship get played out and repeated from generation to generation, unless or until someone seeks to change those patterns, largely through self-differentiation and a willingness to resist succumbing to anxiety while the family system resists this change and seeks to return to its status quo. We are seeing something of that sort shown in this lection. Just as Jacob stole his brother's birthright and deceived his father, so now he is deceived by his own children, who have sought to destroy his favorite child. Our reading began with the announcement that "this is the story of the family of Jacob" (v. 2), with the word for "family" having the force of "succession of generations" or "family history," suggesting that what is really intended here is not so much a story about individuals, but the continuing story of the origins of the people Israel.

Just as envy led to murder in the ancient stories of the first family, so it was also critical in the origins of the tribe who were eventually to be led out of slavery in Egypt and formed into a people while they wandered in the wilderness. They were to seek the land of promise where they could enjoy right relationship with God and each other, along with a sufficiency (of milk and honey) that obliterated or obviated any possibility of envy.

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Pastoral Perspective

the arrogance they perceive in Joseph has festered. All the way to Shechem and Dothan they resolve to kill him. Joseph's dreams and their father's favor haunt them.

The reader can appreciate the brothers' emotional evolution when they later decide, "We do not have to kill him. Let's just get rid of him." They dump Joseph into a pit with no food or water. He will inevitably die there, if they do nothing more, and it will look like an accident. In time, the brothers notice a nomadic band of traders in caravan headed toward Egypt. The Ishmaelites. How ironic. Could these be the very descendants of their banished and distanced uncle, Ishmael, who was expelled by Abraham and Sarah when Isaac was born? Although the text is ambiguous and imprecise about who actually sells or carries Joseph into Egypt (is it the Ishmaelites or the Midianites?), the mentioning of the Ishmaelites here allows the reader to see yet another layer of the complexity within this family. Noting these nuances and ironies can be instructive to all families.

After selling Joseph, the brothers decide to concoct the story that he was killed. They manufacture evidence with the aid of goat's blood, to be poured over Joseph's distinctive long-sleeved coat. Familial dysfunction coalesces and conspires with social systems of oppression to create tragic circumstances. The hatred of the brothers is here coupled with the economic need for slaves. Family dysfunction can find treacherous opportunities within oppressive institutions to exploit the lives of the disenfranchised. In this instance, and at this time, the victim happens to be Joseph.

Before it is over, the eldest brother, Reuben, recognizes his unique risk if the plot to kill Joseph is carried out. He devises a subplot that will not only absolve him of blame but make him the hero. Everyone in this story is looking out for himself. Although connected by blood, they demonstrate no awareness that their relationship to each other matters. Will it ever stop?

Can family strife and dysfunction be overcome? Is there hope for resolution, or at least peace, with and within the dysfunctional family? Later in this narrative, Joseph will give his brothers a short yet poignant instruction: "Do not quarrel along the way" (45:24). It is time for them to truly belong to each other.

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1. Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

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the scenes in the Joseph novella, as expressed in the chance encounter Joseph has with “a man” (v. 15) who finds him wandering in the fields in search of his brothers. This mystery man steers Joseph to Dothan, about thirteen miles northwest of Shechem, where violence awaits him at his brothers’ hands.

No longer under the watchful eye of their father (v. 11), his brothers conspire to kill (v. 20) “this dreamer” (v. 19). Their sarcastic reference points back to Joseph’s dreams. Just as Cain had conspired to kill Abel (Gen. 4), their actions are also premeditated. Both texts use the verb “to kill” (*harag*; cf. also Esau and Jacob in Gen. 27:41). Ironically, the brothers think that killing Joseph will put an end to his dreams (v. 20), but their actions actually make Joseph’s dreams a reality. Joseph is sold into slavery and taken to Egypt, just as Israel will become enslaved in Egypt later on. He is sold either to the Ishmaelites (vv. 27–28) or the Midianites (vv. 28, 36). The text’s confusion may be the result of combining two different traditions, or a reflection of Joseph’s being sold twice. Later, his brothers will bow down before the now-powerful Joseph when they come to Egypt in search of food (42:6). In the ancient Near East, dreams are recognized as coming from God. The Joseph novella shows that God’s intentions cannot be thwarted by human actions.

As the brothers plot to kill Joseph, both Judah and Reuben intervene on his behalf. Reuben as firstborn would be responsible for Joseph’s safety, so he suggests that they throw Joseph into an empty pit. Also, Reuben had slept with Jacob’s concubine in a political move to take over leadership of the family after Rachel’s death and needed to redeem himself (Gen. 35:22; cf. Absalom and David in 2 Sam. 16:20–22). The brothers strip Joseph of the hated tunic, symbol of his status as their father’s favorite (cf. Jacob also stripped of all the possessions that had defined him in Gen. 32:22–24). Judah suggests that they sell Joseph and make money on the deal, since killing him would “profit” them nothing (vv. 26–27). They later lie to their father about Joseph (vv. 31–33), just as Jacob lied to his father, Isaac (27:18–23). What goes around, comes around.

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Homiletical Perspective

At the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, worship begins with the opening sentences: “Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him . . . and we shall see what will become of his dreams” (vv. 19–20 KJV). The effect is chilling.

Reuben, the eldest brother, dissuades the others from harming Joseph, and the narrator tells us Reuben planned to “rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father” (v. 22). The brothers strip Joseph of his offending robe, toss him into a pit, and then, of all the things that might happen next, “they sat down to eat” (v. 25). Their hunger is undisturbed by their enmity and violence. This moment in the story provides unexpected resonance when it is contemplated around the Lord’s Table. Joseph was sent for the well-being (*shalom*) of his brothers, but the brothers have rough-hewn a homemade peace (*shalom*) in their family by removing Joseph from their company and disposing of him in a pit. Such *shalom* by subtraction is not the *shalom* the Lord seeks.

Like so many stories fueled by hate and surreptitious violence, the narrative becomes puzzling: What did Reuben intend? What did Judah do? Whose idea was this anyway? What do we do with the brother down in the pit? The confusion is resolved by an Ishmaelite caravan passing by and a profit to be made. The brothers sell Joseph at a slave’s market value (Lev. 27:5), and the caravan hauls Joseph to Egypt. The text may end there, but hearing it in worship, the people of God cannot imagine the story ends there. We sense that hate, violence, and evil will not finally be the way the story ends.

Writing in war-torn Germany at Christmas of 1942, Dietrich Bonhoeffer confessed, “I believe that God can and will let good come out of everything, even the greatest evil. . . . I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are not in vain and that it is no more difficult for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds.”²

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2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 46.

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Psalms 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

¹O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
²Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
³Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
⁴Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.
.....
¹⁶When he summoned famine against the land,
and broke every staff of bread,

Theological Perspective

The “angel of history” in Walter Benjamin’s writing moves forward to the future while looking back at the debris of history. In this way, it moves ahead by ways of being aware of the past, since it is the past that sets forth the continuum of the future, the flow and shape of what comes next, giving hints and hopes, awareness and signs of caution regarding what is yet to come.

In this psalm, the psalmist is somewhat like Benjamin’s angel. He is calling the people of Israel to look back and see what God has done in history. To look back and see gives people a proper measure of the God they serve. To look back and see is to remember the mighty acts of God, in order to move forward. In order to press forward, one should not be so naive as to go into the unknown without any awareness of the past. What the psalmist is doing is to recall, reenact, or refigure the past as seeds to construct, figure, and shape the unfigurable future.

The first part of the psalm is a liturgical act and serves as a call to worship. When we say the name of God, we are always responding to God’s love. As we respond to God’s love, our first liturgical gesture, the first words uttered by our mouths, should be of thanksgiving. The psalmist starts by calling people first and foremost to give thanks. He knows the God he serves and is aware of God’s acts of love and care

Pastoral Perspective

Psalms 105 is a long poem that was used in a great worship festivity in ancient Jerusalem, celebrating the installation of the ark of the covenant in the temple (1 Chr. 16:8–22). The psalm itself is a lengthy recitation of historical events. How could a history lesson that was a history lesson so long ago in history be encouraging or healing to people today?

The very length of this psalm may be instructive. The nineteenth-century pulpit giant Charles Haddon Spurgeon advised that the varying lengths of the psalms are an indication that we should not have expectations of “brevity or prolixity in either prayer or praise.” Spurgeon grants that short prayers and verses are often best; however, “There are seasons when a whole night of wrestling or an entire day of psalm singing will be none too long. . . . The wind bloweth as it listeth, and at one time rushes in short and rapid sweep, while at another it continues to refresh the earth hour after hour with its reviving breath.”¹ That Israel’s prayers were both long and short, that the investment in seeking God can be instantaneous or extended over a lifetime, may open us up to patiently waiting on God.

History is always what got us where we are today. We have personal histories, and our personal

1. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 5 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 41.

Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

¹⁷he had sent a man ahead of them,
Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
¹⁸His feet were hurt with fetters,
his neck was put in a collar of iron;
¹⁹until what he had said came to pass,
the word of the LORD kept testing him.
²⁰The king sent and released him;
the ruler of the peoples set him free.
²¹He made him lord of his house,
and ruler of all his possessions,
²²to instruct his officials at his pleasure,
and to teach his elders wisdom.
.....
^{45b}Praise the LORD!

Exegetical Perspective

With a spirit of joy the psalmist invites all to give thanks to God for all God's marvelous deeds and beckons the offspring of Abraham—the children of Jacob, the chosen ones—to remember everything God has done for them. This psalm is a historical psalm presented in the style of a cultic hymn. Verses 1–6 are a call to praise; verses 16–22 are a historical recollection that summarizes key events in the Joseph story (Gen. 37–50); verse 45b is a statement of praise.

In verses 1–6, the first unit, the psalmist uses a series of ten imperative phrases to capture his robust delight: “O give thanks to the LORD,” “call on his name,” “make known his deeds among the peoples” (v. 1); “sing to him,” “sing praises to him,” “tell of all his wonderful works” (v. 2); “glory in his holy name” (v. 3); “seek the LORD and his strength,” “seek his presence continually” (v. 4); and “remember the wonderful works he has done” (v. 5). This festival gathering of God's covenant community is invited to celebrate their shared history as a people. This people are not only descendants of Abraham and Jacob but also the bearers and heirs of the many promises and blessings that God has made with and given to the Israelite community down through the ages.

In verse 1a the psalmist invites the people to give thanks to the Lord and to call on the Lord's name.

Homiletical Perspective

The lectionary assigns the excerpts from Psalm 105 listed above for today because they reveal the principal purposes of this psalm (vv. 1–6, 45b) and because verses 16–22 recall the story of Joseph, thus coordinating this reading with the other semicontinuous reading for Proper 14 (Gen. 45:1–15) with its emphasis on Joseph. Since I focus on Joseph in connection with Genesis 45:1–15, the present discussion ranges more broadly on preaching from Psalm 105.

A number of scholars think the Priestly theologians gave Psalm 105 its present form during the exile or shortly thereafter. Psalm 105 summarizes several pivotal events from the story of Israel: God promised the land to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants (vv. 7–11); God preserved the ancestors of Israel on the journey to the promised land (vv. 12–15); God saved the people from starvation when Joseph fed them in Egypt (vv. 16–22); God sustained the community in Egypt (vv. 23–25); God liberated Israel from slavery (vv. 26–36), God provided for the people in the wilderness (vv. 37–42).

Psalm 105 rehearses these incidents to encourage Israel during its seasons of discouragement in the exile itself or when the people had returned home and found themselves in conflict with some of the people who had stayed behind, the cities in ruins,

Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

Theological Perspective

in history. Thus, in order to prepare what is coming, he starts with thanksgiving: O give thanks to God!

Following the psalm, as we verbalize our faith, a stream of actions in our adoration is marked by the following: we *give* thanksgiving, we *call* on God's name, we *make known* God's deeds, we *sing* praises, we *tell* God's wonderful works, we *glorify* God's holy name, we *let* our hearts rejoice, we *seek* God and God's strength and presence continually, we *remember* God's works, miracles, and judgments and where we come from.

There is much work to be done here: the moving of our hearts, the gesturing of our bodies, the focusing of our minds, the figuring out of good theological thoughts, the liturgical gestures of our lips. All of that can create the effect to get our hearts to a certain place where we are able to listen to God's word.

Then the psalmist goes to a certain place in history, to remind the people of Israel of the God they adore. There was a time, says the psalmist, when people were starving, no bread could be found, and life itself was at risk. During that time, God sent Joseph, a man who had to follow a long and painful trajectory to serve his people. This man was betrayed by his own family and became a slave. "His feet were hurt with fetters, and his neck was put in a collar of iron" (v. 18). He was put in jail. Time and time again God kept testing him, and he kept being faithful to God—until God made the king of that day set him free. This king made Joseph powerful in his kingdom, second in command. Not only was he given the keys to the king's possessions; he was asked to bring his knowledge and rule to his kingdom.

Imagine that! A foreigner receiving the highest and the most prestigious position in a country that was not his own. An immigrant was brought up to the center of the political and powerful place and made the second most powerful man in somebody else's kingdom. That meant a change of loyalty, of relations, of acceptance, of conditions of living. Would the future of this kingdom not be in danger? Image that this stranger would be the lord of the king's house, the ruler of the king's possessions, the instructor of the king's officials, and teacher of the elders of the kingdom using his own and foreign wisdom.

Who would ever offer such a position to a stranger, somebody who could not perhaps even master the language of this new kingdom? However, instead of being a threat, this man was recognized as key for the possibilities for this kingdom to survive, to expand, to muster strength to continue and to

Pastoral Perspective

histories are lived out on the stage of world history. To understand what has transpired, and to ruminate over history in the presence of God, is our only hope for the reformation of the soul. Clint McCann suggests that the twin psalms, 105 and 106, were addressed to Israel during their darkest, most desperate days of Babylonian exile, in essence answering questions like "How did we get into the mess we are in?" and "Can we ever trust God again?" We can trust God, because God has a résumé longer than this long psalm. God has acted, repeatedly, generously, graciously, doggedly intervening on Israel's behalf.

Not that we will ever be able to nail down God so that all will be sunny tomorrow. Psalm 105:3–4 uses the verb "seek" three times, as if to underline that God is to be "sought." The psalm does not say "find" the Lord, but "seek" the Lord. In the Beatitudes, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6)—not, "Blessed are those who are righteous." We seek God; God is not to be possessed. We never quite grasp. We long for God, we reach out for God. If we get a question answered, we discover new questions. The pleasure is in the not quite having tied God down, as this God is as elusive as the events of history. We seek.

We seek this God, and not some other divinity, because of the past; we seek this God, instead of relying only on our own initiative and energy, because of the past. This is hope: to stand in the river of time and to be swept forward on the waters that have been flowing toward us for quite some time.

Psalm 105 is far from a dry history lesson. Countless moods are evoked. The people are not memorizing facts, names, and dates for a quiz. They hear the story, and they wish to "make music," to "speak proudly," to "rejoice"—moods that might be a tad unfamiliar to us. God's great actions in the past are called "signs." Signs point to something beyond themselves. The Gospel of John thinks of Jesus' miracles as signs. They exist not for themselves, but so that we will be drawn to what is higher and more personal than a mere dazzling, inexplicable wonder. We are pointed to the very heart of God, the one who is the Lord of history, who wants an intimate relationship with the people, each one and all of them together, right now and tomorrow.

Memory is the key to healing. Memories need to be healed, but memory can also heal. There is a retreat model that involves individuals taking long stretches of time to think and reflect on a single request: "Remember what God has done in your

Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

Exegetical Perspective

The common name for God in Semitic languages is El or Elohim. Other names attributed to God in the OT are El Shaddai, “the One of the Mountain”; Adonai, “my Lord”; El Elyon, “God Most High”; and El Olam, “God Eternal,” among others. The psalmist then calls the community to make known God’s deeds among the peoples (v. 1b). God’s deeds are the motivation for giving thanks to the Lord.

In verse 2 the psalmist reiterates the sentiments expressed in verse 1, but this time the community is called upon to “sing” praises to God for all God’s wonderful works. The picture shifts in verse 3a. Instead of thanking and praising God, the psalmist calls everyone to “glory” in God’s holy name, to bask in God’s goodness.

Verses 3b–4 are linked together by the word “seek.” In verse 3b the psalmist calls upon those who seek God to rejoice, for indeed the God who is sought has been made manifest through glorious deeds and wonderful works. Verse 4, an exhortation, is a general call to the community at large to seek God and God’s strength and presence continually. For the psalmist, God’s people are to be deeply centered and rooted in their God, who is the one who sustains all life.

Verse 5, another exhortation, calls the community to “remember” God’s works, miracles, and judgments. To “remember” is to be “mindful of.” God is forever “remembering” the people: saving them (Gen. 8:1), blessing them (Gen. 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:11, 19–20), renewing them (Judg. 16:28–30), forgiving them (Isa. 43:25–26; Jer. 31:34), and keeping covenant with them (Exod. 2:23–25; Ezek. 16:60; 1 Chr. 16:15). Israel’s God has pledged to a people deeply loved that they will not be forgotten (Isa. 44:1). Israel, however, has not always “remembered” God (Isa. 51:13; Jer. 2:32; 3:21; 13:25; 18:15). Thus, in calling the people to “remember” God’s deeds, the psalmist also invites the people to a deeper and renewed relationship with their God.

Verse 6 closes the psalm’s first unit and identifies the psalmist’s primary audience. The people are reminded that they are not only the offspring of God’s servant Abraham and children of Jacob, but also God’s chosen ones.

The second unit, verses 16–22, touches upon the Joseph traditions. Verse 16 attests to God’s power over creation and a people’s history. The verse alludes to Genesis 41:53–57, which refers to the great famine that struck many lands in the time of Joseph. This famine lasted seven years. Joseph had been sold by his brothers to a group of Midianite traders, who

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the land depleted, and a great lethargy. Psalm 105 leads the community to remember the faithfulness of God in the past as a way of getting the community to recognize the continuing faithfulness of God in the present. As God was faithful in the past, so God is faithful amid exile and return.

The preacher might create a sermon whose function and form are similar to those of the psalm. Many congregations today are discouraged. A preacher might begin the sermon by recalling Israel’s situation and comparing it with that of the congregation. The psalm does not simply assert God’s faithfulness but calls out specific incidents that illustrate that faithfulness in action. A sermon might extend this pattern by retelling the incidents mentioned in the psalm, and then continuing that format into the present by rehearsing key incidents in the history of the church and world that bespeak God’s faithfulness. The sermon could be especially meaningful if the preacher recalls important moments in the life of the congregation when God’s sustenance was evident and points to signs of God’s faithfulness in the present.

The authors of Psalm 105 want the community to live confidently and faithfully through the exile and/or to invest themselves fully in rebuilding. Moreover, the point of the psalm—revealed in verse 45—is to bring about obedience, that is, to call the members of the community to live in covenant with one another and with God. The exile occurred because the people violated the covenant by practicing exploitation, injustice, and idolatry. The psalm wants the community to prevent another exile by living in mutual support, by practicing justice, and by worshiping God. What actions—in specific—does today’s congregation need to take in order to be obedient and to live in covenant?

A disciplined preacher could follow the lead of several scholars in calling attention to the intertwining of Psalms 105 and 106. Reversing the theme of God’s faithfulness in Psalm 105, Psalm 106 tells stories of Israel’s unfaithfulness and its consequences: rebelling against Moses (106:6–12), forgetting what God did for them at the Red Sea (106:13–15), being jealous of Moses and Aaron (106:16–18), making the golden calf (106:19–23), despising the land (106:24–27), worshiping Baal and eating sacrifices offered to the dead (106:28–31), angering God at Meribah (106:32–33), becoming idolatrous in the promised land and ritually killing their children (106:34–39). In each case, the people suffered consequences from their unfaithfulness—

Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

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move ahead. A stranger was the key for the success of this kingdom. Imagine that!

When the psalmist tells this story, perhaps he has in mind a few things:

1. God is aware of God's people's situation and listens to their cries.
2. God has provided for God's people through a very difficult and complicated story of a man.
3. God's work for God's people is always for the sake of the community, not for an individual only.
4. God is reminding people again that in Joseph, they were once foreigners in a strange land and were welcomed into a new land.
5. God's intention was not to have Joseph rule over that kingdom but rather, work together with them for the sake of everyone. The reign of God is for all.

Then, the psalmist ends his psalm with praise. This story is so powerful that he cannot do anything else but praise God for what God has done in history. From the time he begins his psalm to the time he ends, a song of praise and thanksgiving is in his heart. This is the measure of his heart, the theological thoughts of his mind, the liturgical actions of his body.

In this post-Pentecost season, we are called to start and end our days with thanksgiving and praise. Between our daily mornings and evenings, we *give* thanksgiving, we *call* on God's name, we *make known* God's deeds, we *sing* praises, we *tell* God's wonderful works, we *glorify* God's holy name, we *let* our hearts rejoice, we *seek* God and God's strength and presence continually, we *remember* God's works, miracles, and judgments and where we come from.

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life." We remember not merely what God has done for me; we remember what God has done for the people, for Israel, for the body of Christ, for all of humanity. Finding my place in that larger picture is itself a healing balm, for a narrowing of focus constricts the heart and soul.

The lectionary selects portions of the longer psalm, and after the initial admonition to praise and seek the Lord, we turn to verses 16–22, which consider the stories of Joseph and his brothers that we know from Genesis 37–50. Jacob's sons, in a fit of jealous rage, sold their father's favored one into slavery and broke their father's heart; Israelites always knew themselves to be the heirs of an embarrassingly dysfunctional family!

Then a famine came along. The psalm implies that the Lord caused the famine. We can think our way around the idea that God inflicts natural disasters on humanity; but for Israel, they were so hinged to God that they could not conceive of anything happening without God's having some involvement in it. God's involvement in this case was not to let Joseph's unjust slavery go to waste. The psalm recalls the way Joseph dreamed, and could understand dreams, and how that supernatural ability landed him in the halls of power in Egypt. Psalm 105 glosses over the tension with the brothers, and their beautiful reconciliation reported in Genesis 45! Pastorally we will not want to miss this most hopeful highlight of the story. The psalm does seem in sync with the theology of Romans 8:28, that God causes things to work together, that God brings good out of evil.

The psalmist's goal in this long recital of God's great deeds is tucked away in that little half verse the lectionary oddly prescribes at the end, verse 45b. Actually, in addition to inviting the people to "praise the LORD," verse 45 clarifies history's holy purpose: "so they should keep his statutes." Praise implies an imperative; history has its imperatives too, and even the simpler history of God's work in each of our lives contains an urging that we respond, that we live in a way that is fitting. God is gracious, but how we live matters. Obedience is really nothing more (or less) than gratitude.

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Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b

Exegetical Perspective

in turn sold him to the Ishmaelites. The Ishmaelites then brought Joseph to Egypt, where he was then bought by Potiphar, the captain of the Egyptian guard (Gen. 39:1). Verse 17 of Psalm 105 alludes to these events in Joseph's life. The famine that struck the land is what brought Joseph's brothers down to Egypt, where they sought food, and the famine is what eventually reunited and reconciled Joseph with his brothers and Jacob, their father.

Verse 18 describes how Joseph was imprisoned and alludes to Genesis 39:20–40:13. Joseph had been falsely accused of trying to seduce Potiphar's wife. Joseph remained in prison until Pharaoh realized that Joseph could interpret dreams (Gen. 40:1–41:36). Joseph interpreted the dreams of the chief cupbearer and chief baker, who were imprisoned with him (Gen. 40). Joseph's interpretations came to pass (Gen. 41:12, 13), which, in turn, gave Joseph's word credibility in Pharaoh's eyes. Then Pharaoh released Joseph from the dungeon (Gen. 41:14). Joseph then interpreted Pharaoh's dreams at Pharaoh's request. Pharaoh's dreams foreshadowed the great famine, and when the famine did come to pass, Joseph's skill and word proved to be true and trustworthy. The Pharaoh then made Joseph head over his house and the land of Egypt (Gen. 41:37–45). The psalmist synthesizes all these events in verses 19–22. Verse 22 also serves as a reminder and an instruction to the Israelite community: Joseph at the age of thirty had the wisdom and capacity to do what the wise men of Egypt were not able to do, namely, take over the wise government of the land (Gen. 41:37–41). Indeed, Joseph did teach his elders wisdom (v. 22b). He taught them that wisdom is not necessarily a characteristic of age. Instead, wisdom is a gift from God, freely given regardless of age (see Gen. 41:38).

The psalmist closes his poem with the simple phrase "Praise the LORD!" (v. 45b). Israel's God is Lord of creation and Lord of history, deserving of praise, not only for wondrous deeds, but also for raising up great people like Joseph, who bring God's favor to all God's people and not just to God's chosen ones.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

Homiletical Perspective

consequences ranging from disease and exile to death.

A focused preacher could summarize the main themes and incidents of Psalms 105 and 106 and could bring their motifs into the present (as suggested above in connection with Psalm 105) and thus present the congregation with a choice. Which psalm would the congregation like to continue today—the praise and faithfulness of Psalm 105 or the unfaithfulness and destruction of Psalm 106?

Preachers who use PowerPoint in the sermon have a natural point of entry, whether the sermon focuses on Psalm 105 alone or on Psalms 105 and 106. Since the psalms focus on several events from the story of Israel, the preacher could find visual representations of those events. A representation (painting, drawing, etc.) of a specific event could be projected on the screen while the preacher talks about that event.

Psalm 105 could prompt a sermon on the purposes of worship. A number of biblical scholars think that the chroniclers—Priestly theologians—gave Psalm 105 its present shape. In fact, themes from Psalm 105:1–15 recur in 1 Chronicles 16:8–22 in the worship of the congregation. Indeed, Psalm 105:1–6 has the character of a call to worship. For the Priestly theologians, worship was the central identity-forming act of the community's life. The preacher could use this text as an opportunity to help the congregation recognize how worship today can be identity forming. The ways we worship contribute mightily to who we understand ourselves to be and to how we act.

At the same time, the Priestly theologians used their role in temple worship to reinforce their own social power and their own place in society. Indeed, Psalm 105, with its Priestly call to worship (vv. 1–6), presumes that the Priestly approach to worship is normative. The hermeneutic of suspicion urges us to consider the degree to which (1) preachers today may use worship to reinforce their own social power in the congregation, (2) the congregation may use worship to reinforce its own social power as a community, and (3) these uses of worship are consistent with God's deepest purposes or might be self-serving and even unfaithful.

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**PROPER 15 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 14
AND AUGUST 20 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 45:1–15

¹Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here,

Theological Perspective

How moving this story is. A family story made of betrayal, surprise, forgiveness, tears, insecurity, shame, and an open future. Once Leonardo Boff said that people from Latin American do not believe in God, they *feel* God. Following that assertion, I think that this story is to be felt more than anything else. How many families are going through tough times, living under broken ties, unforgettable mistakes, unspeakable truths, untold sorrows, and unattended feelings? The theological element of this text is the strong feeling of Joseph that runs through the whole story.

It has been such a long time since they have seen each other. The last time was marked by a betrayal, a brother being sold as slave by his jealous older brothers. Their father fainted when he believed he had lost his son forever, but now, after a long while, all of the brothers are together again. Who would ever guess? Their jealousy birthed anger and fear and made them capable of evil things. What are we to do when we are the target of jealousy? How are we to respond? With anger? This story shows a different kind of response.

Pastoral Perspective

How is it that the most theologically profound and emotionally moving moment in all of Scripture is not in the New Testament but in the Old? Perhaps its location means that it is a story to be shared, and that the reconciliation between the brothers might just happen once more. Genesis 45 marks the climax of this unrivalled (in the Bible or any place else!) saga of the sons of Jacob. Enraged that their father favors Joseph, they sell the lad into slavery and break their father’s heart. Against all odds, guided by God’s intervention, Joseph ultimately ascends to the zenith of power in Egypt. Famine paralyzes the entire Middle East, and the brothers are forced to go to Egypt seeking food. By some crazy quirk of fate, it is Joseph whom they must ask for food. They do not recognize him. Was this due to the passing of the years, or the sheer impossibility of such an encounter? Joseph, however, knows them; after toying with them a while, he can restrain himself no longer and reveals his true identity. Many tears are shed, tears that may be the sorrow of lost years, the mingling of memory and love, or the release of pent-up emotions that may be love but may be rage.

Genesis 45:1–15

but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Exegetical Perspective

The Joseph story, one of the most beloved stories of the Torah, has inspired many stage and screen writers. It describes how a favored younger son, despised by his older brothers, grows up to be a trusted ruler in the house of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Joseph, tossed into a pit by his brothers and then sold to a group of Midianite traders, who in turn sell him to an Egyptian official, Potiphar, becomes a source of hope and life for his brothers and his father Jacob, all of whom fall prey to a famine in Canaan that leaves the family fearing for its life. Living in a land of plenty, Joseph comes to the rescue of his family, all by chance, when his brothers journey to Egypt in search of grain. Joseph recognizes them immediately, but they do not recognize Joseph, whom they have treated badly earlier in time. Genesis 45:1–15 is one episode in the Joseph cycle of stories that captures the heartfelt reunion of all the brothers and the gift of forgiveness that Joseph extends to those who once treated him unkindly.

The first part of the story describes Joseph's initial response at seeing all of his brothers, who have come down from Canaan. Joseph, who loves his brothers,

Homiletical Perspective

Three possible sermons come to mind from this climactic story from the saga of Joseph. All presume the entire story of Joseph, told in Genesis 37–45. Even if the preacher has been following the semicontinuous readings from Genesis over the last few weeks, some members of the congregation will not have been present each week. Consequently, the preacher should summarize the Joseph saga as a teaching moment prior to the reading of today's Scripture lesson or in the sermon itself.

A preacher who uses PowerPoint could project maps showing the movement of Joseph and his family from Canaan to Egypt that led to the encounter in Genesis 45. The preacher might also show photographs of archeological material depicting life in Pharaoh's court. Such material could give the congregation a historically reliable picture of the setting of the text.

A first sermon possibility derives from a primary function of the passage from the perspective of the Priestly theologians who gave final shape to the books of Genesis through Numbers. These theologians wrote about the time of the exile in Babylon, when

Genesis 45:1–15

Theological Perspective

The saying goes like this: what goes around, comes around. In this case however, what went around did not come back the same way. Instead of anger and fear, the brothers and their whole family received forgiveness. Instead of death or jail for their acts, they received welcoming words and the promise of a new life together provided with sustenance for the rest of the time of famine. Instead of a heavy hand and eyes filled with hatred, they received hugs and kisses and tears of joy.

This is the way in which God acts, by twisting the saying and bringing around what has not gone around. The law of God is not an eye for an eye, but healing for the weary eye. The pattern of God's love is not retribution by what is due but, rather, an overwhelming, untamed, and illogical burst of forgiveness topped with promises of life. Joseph's brothers could not respond, because, first, they could not believe their brother was alive and, second, they could not believe they were welcomed back with love.

The strangeness of Joseph's feeling puts everybody in disarray. He cried out loud, he could not tame himself, so that even the house of Pharaoh heard his cries. He could not care less. What was important for him was the presence of his family before him. The joy of their lives in front of him was bigger than his thirst for vengeance. The surprise of seeing Benjamin in front of him made him cry tears of joy, and nothing else was more important than seeing his little brother. When he saw his family, not only did his family receive healing, but he also found solace at last. By offering healing and promise of providence, he was also providing healing and a lighter life for himself.

In the text, Joseph offered a new interpretation of his own story to his brothers. With that, possibilities of life started to appear. He said, "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (v. 5).

Interpretations matter. The interpretation of the Bible, as well as the interpretation of our life's condition, of our relations and social connections matter deeply, because with them we are also establishing ways of considering life, values to be fostered, and possibilities for life to happen. When Joseph reinterpreted his situation and the situation of the world at that time, he was offering to his family new windows to look into it, new gracious patterns under which they could move, new manifestations of life that could happen. Under this

Pastoral Perspective

The brothers tremble in fear, expecting the harshest reprimand, probably even execution, from this powerful brother they have so mistreated.

Joseph looks at everything, not from a petty, "fair," human perspective, but from God's perspective. He is able to forgive, to work out reconciliation with his brothers. Notice that he does not give the brothers a second chance. He does not say, "Try again; see if you can do better in the future." Rather, he looks back on their sin and dares to suggest that God actually used what they did for good. God did not force them to do evil, just as God does not cause evil in our world, but God can use it, God can manage it, for good. The Bible's God brings good out of evil, and this is our great hope!

A miracle is attested in Genesis 45, but the people involved are not at all passive spectators. Forgiveness is not some divine fiat that is pronounced, and then we are done. Forgiveness is not a vapid "Oh, forget about it, it doesn't matter." Forgiveness requires the hard labor of emotion, new habits of mind and heart, and a determination to see what God sees. Joseph may never understand or sympathize with the brothers' actions, but he can love. The brothers could grovel in guilt forever, but the reconciling grace of Joseph's mercy enables them to stand up, and to love and live. It is not merely that they make peace; they see the divine purpose in it all. God did not force the brothers to sin, just as God does not force Joseph to reconcile. Rather, God uses the bone-headedness, God brings beauty out of hatred—and it is the glimpse into this holy purpose that gives us hope.

Genesis does not leap from the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites to this stunning reconciliation. Years pass, everyone ages, and there is a harrowing of each person's soul. Daily the brothers witness the numb misery of their father. Since Joseph dreams, it may be that the brothers dream, but of the nightmarish variety, plagued by guilt. The intervening chapters tell us that the brothers have changed; they are humble, purer in soul. Reuben and Judah even dare to sacrifice themselves so the new favored brother Benjamin may be saved. Time can embitter; but time can be the hospital in which the pained soul is rehabilitated. Dark days and years may be getting us ready for new life.

Jesus, quite astonishingly, says, "Love your enemies." You get the idea he means for us actually to do so, and to join in his crusade of reconciliation. His whole life is about the reconciliation of those who are at odds with one another; Christ has reconciled us to himself, made peace with us who

Genesis 45:1–15

Exegetical Perspective

is completely overcome with emotion, to the point that he can hardly control himself (v. 1). Alone with his brothers, Joseph weeps for joy in their presence. In a previous meeting with his brothers, he was able to control himself (43:31), but this time is different, because Benjamin is with them, the one brother to whom Joseph is closest. Joseph and Benjamin are both the sons of Jacob and Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved the most. On two previous occasions, Joseph wept (42:24 and 43:30), but that did not compare to this time, when he weeps so loudly that not only the Egyptians but also the whole household of Pharaoh heard him. The depth of Joseph's love for his brothers, in spite of what they did to him in his younger years, is expressed through his heartfelt tears.

Following his initial outburst of emotion, Joseph now has to bridge the gap that exists between his brothers and himself. He performs this action masterfully in verses 3–8, an address to his brothers, in which he discloses his true identity to them twice. The first time he states who he is and immediately inquires about his father (v. 3a–b). His brothers are completely dumbfounded by his presence (v. 3c). Joseph then addresses his brothers a second time, imploring them to come nearer to him. He discloses his identity again, with greater detail. Immediately after this second disclosure, Joseph begins the process of reconciliation between himself and his brothers. First, he offers them a word of consolation, aimed at quelling their own guilt and anger. This in turn paves the way for them to be able to forgive themselves for having treated Joseph unjustly (v. 5a). Joseph then tells the brothers how his horrid situation was used by God for their sakes (vv. 5b–8). Joseph lets them know that he holds no animosity toward them. By focusing on how God has used his situation, Joseph eases any tension that his brothers might feel in his presence. Joseph makes clear to his brothers that he has indeed prospered and is now able to offer them a share of the bounty in their time of need (vv. 7–8).

Having reestablished himself with his brothers, Joseph then bids them return to Canaan so that they may bring their father Jacob and the rest of the family down to Egypt (vv. 9–13). Joseph's instructions to his brothers are framed by a sense of urgency expressed by the word "hurry" in verses 9 and 13.

Joseph intends for his family to settle near him in the land of Goshen. Goshen, most likely a Semitic, not Egyptian, name, was a district on the eastern edge of the Nile delta that, in ancient records, is also known as Wadi Tumilat. Known for its lush pastures

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Israel was fraught with questions. Some of the exiled people were discouraged. What was God's purpose? Did God plan to deliver them from exile? Did God have the power to do so? Other people were accommodating to Babylonian culture, to the extent that they were in danger of compromising their Israelite identity and mission. The Priestly writers tell the saga of Joseph as a way of both reassuring the discouraged exiles that God would act in their behalf, and urging the hyperadapting exiles not to sell out to Babylonian culture.

The ancient writers wanted the congregation to identify with Joseph's family: the situation of Israel in exile was similar to that of Joseph's family in the face of starvation. Yet, even within famine, God was already at work in behalf of the people, by raising up Joseph as an instrument of divine providence within Pharaoh's court. According to the Priestly theologians, the awesome God who created the world (Gen. 1:1–2:4) is so powerful that God can even use Pharaoh and Egypt to bless Israel. The exiles need neither yield to despondency nor consider Babylon as their lasting home, because their God is at work in their circumstance to sustain them and to bring them home in ways that are no more obvious than Joseph rising to power in Pharaoh's court.

Many congregations today are discouraged. Many congregations today are in danger of so accommodating to culture as to lose their identity and mission. The preacher can point out how God is at work today in ways analogous to God's working through Joseph. Where do we see individuals, social movements, or social forces as signs that God is present in our exiles and is with us to empower faithful community and witness?

A second sermon possibility is for the preacher and congregation to identify with Joseph and the themes of alienation and reconciliation in this story. From Genesis 37:12 through 44:34, Joseph is alienated from his siblings because they sold him into slavery. However, today's text uses Joseph's deep desire for reunion as a dramatic statement that God made us for community. We cannot be fully blessed—and our groups cannot be fully blessed—until we are together in mutually supportive community.

The figure of Joseph is a model: we can take the lead in reconciliation, as Joseph does in our text. Many Christians today are alienated from individuals and groups that are important to blessing. Many congregations are in internal conflict. Many racial ethnic communities are alienated. The message could help the congregation respond

Genesis 45:1–15

Theological Perspective

new understanding of life events, all of them gained the means of living life together. None of that would have been possible if Joseph had not loved them dearly and deeply. His feeling, more than a righteous thought, changed his future and the future of his family. Instead of hatred and desire for vengeance, feelings of joy and gratitude. He could not do anything else but let his heart rejoice and embrace and kiss his family.

I remember a scene in the movie *Seven* when the main actor is accused of embodying the sin of hatred. He can redeem himself by not killing a person who by all means deserves to be killed. He is presented with the choice of letting this man go and moving away from his hatred, or doing the justified act of hatred and killing this man. What will he do?

Joseph decided not to kill his family but, instead, to welcome them all and to offer his house. Almost an impossible gesture, but one based on God's offering of life in the midst of death, forgiveness instead of justified hatred, kisses and hugs instead of strangling somebody. What feelings form and shape your theology? Better said, how do your feelings help you connect with God and interpret theologically your life, the life of your people, and the world? What are the values that sustain your interpretations? How far do your feelings take you? As long as we can feel the love for somebody else, we will be able to offer new interpretations and, along with that, hugs and kisses to our brothers and sisters. Instead of moving away from them, we will cry tears of joy on their neck. Instead of pushing them away from us, we will kiss each other.

The feeling of the realm of God is made of interpretations that pull us together, not push us apart.

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were estranged from him; therefore we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation among each other (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Society teaches us to be “right,” or to strike fifty-fifty deals, or simply to win and seize what we can. We wonder if Paul has Joseph in mind: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). Peace is not avoiding the prickly person or the silent treatment. Find the one who is angry with you, or who gets on your nerves, or with whom there has been a wound or an explosion, and make peace. “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9).

Joseph, once he hears of the famine back home, could simply mail them an anonymous package of food, but Joseph wants a relationship even more than he wants his family to get fed. God, we can be sure, blesses us with good things; but God would rather that we stay, talk, express emotion, draw close, and love. The brothers have to be glad, for if Joseph had sent bread, they would only have bread; but this way they have gained a brother.

Perhaps this can inform the way we do mission work. John Wesley said that it is better to deliver aid than to send it. Certainly we can see that God does not enjoy being treated like Santa Claus—the one we never see but who brings us stuff and then goes home. God wants to live with us, to be the gift we desire, and receive, and then share.

Touchingly, Joseph asks if his father is still alive, and they have a tearful, joyful reunion. When Jacob dies, the brothers are fearful once more, thinking, “Now Joseph will dispose of us.” However, Joseph reiterates his startling theological viewpoint: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many should be kept alive. . . . So do not fear” (Gen. 50:20–21 RSV). This is precisely what happens with the cross of Christ. The crucifixion of Jesus was evil, sinful—but God used it, managed it, for the ultimate good of us all, so many can be kept alive.

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Genesis 45:1–15

Exegetical Perspective

(47:4–6), this area was a favorable site for the herdsmen of Sinai. This site that Joseph has chosen for his family will need to be confirmed by Pharaoh (47:6), who will respond affirmatively. Joseph's comment "and now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you" (v. 12) anticipates verse 14, where the two brothers—Joseph and Benjamin—weep upon each other's necks.

The beneficence of Joseph is expressed in verses 10–11. Joseph invites into Egypt not only his immediate family but also his extended family and their animals: "you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have" (v. 10). Joseph promises to provide for everyone throughout the duration of the famine, which will last for five more years. He does not want to see his family live or die in poverty (v. 11).

In addition to Joseph wanting his family to be spared of famine and poverty, he also wants his father to see his exalted status and his position in Egypt (v. 13a). All that has transpired in Joseph's life fulfills the divine dreams he experienced earlier in his life (see Gen. 37:1–12). Upon hearing Joseph tell about his second dream that described his family bowing down to him, Jacob rebuked his son (37:10). Thus, Joseph intends to establish his own credibility and the credibility of his dreams, which are now cause for celebration.

The story closes with Joseph and Benjamin weeping on each other's neck (v. 14), and Joseph kissing and weeping upon all his other brothers, at which point the brothers are then able to talk with Joseph (v. 15). A family once divided is now reunited physically and emotionally, and because Joseph is able to let go of past hurts and see his experience in a new light, right relationship within the family has been restored.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

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to the question, How can we, like Joseph, lead in attempting reconciliation?

The preacher who takes this approach should avoid two things. (1) The preacher does not want to play amateur psychologist. (2) The brothers abused the young Joseph. The preacher does not want to leave the impression that the effects of abuse can be casually wiped away.

A permutation of this second possibility is for the preacher to present the sermon as a first-person dramatic monologue tracing Joseph's journey from alienation to reconciliation. I hesitate to mention this possibility because it so easily drifts into melodrama and historically unwarranted speculation regarding the biblical character's thoughts and feelings. However, in careful hands, it could be a credible approach.

A third possibility for preaching focuses on our perceptions of Pharaoh and Egypt. The mere mention of Pharaoh in Christian discourse typically evokes in me a negative response, because of the repressive role of Pharaoh in Exodus. My immediate associations with Egypt are much the same. Biblical authors often (though not universally) depict Pharaoh and Egypt negatively.

As noted above, however, the Priestly theologians believed that God could use any person, community, or entity. In the saga of Joseph, God uses Pharaoh to preserve and bless Joseph and the community of Israel. Indeed, according to the psalm for today, God infused divine wisdom into Pharaoh's court through Joseph (Ps. 105:21–22).

In the way that this text prompts me to reconsider my immediate associations with Egypt, the sermon could invite the congregation to take a second look at groups for whom the congregation has negative associations, but through whom we can see God's purposes. As I write, for instance, many Christian communities have negative associations with Islam. The appearance of today's text could become an occasion for the sermon to encourage the congregation to consider ways that God can work through Islam to serve God's intention to bless all. Of course, the preacher would not want to make an uncritical endorsement of Islam, any more than the preacher would want to give an uncritical endorsement of the church and its history (so rife with such things as anti-Semitism, complicity with the Holocaust, burning people at the stake, sponsoring the Crusades and their bloodshed, endorsing slavery, and the Ku Klux Klan). The preacher can help the congregation recognize similar dynamics at work in other communities.

RONALD J. ALLEN

PROPER 15 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 14 AND AUGUST 20 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 133

¹How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

²It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

³It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Theological Perspective

This small psalm is a Song of Ascents, which means a song to go up to high places (like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem). In this prayer, the psalmist is eager to look for unity. As he ascends, he is looking down to Israel, hoping that his people will live in harmony and unity. They were kindred, and they should live together in unity. In order to accomplish that, he draws on imagery, places and names that were common to all and that could foster connectivity and a strong sense of togetherness.

First, we have the image of oil overflowing. The oil is poured out on the head of Aaron. Oil was used for cleansing, anointing, and healing. In many ways the use of oil was fundamental to the daily life of people. Through its healing properties it was also a symbol of hope, bringing forth possibilities of new life. Oil was also used to anoint a king or priest, to indicate his special role in service to God and Israel. Aaron had his head anointed with oil by Moses (Lev. 8:12). The generosity of the oil poured out on Aaron's head and beard and collar is also a metaphor of God's generosity and the generosity of unity, of living together. Anointing with oil created spaces for people to live together.

The second metaphor is water, the "dew of Hermon." The snow and water from Mount Hermon goes down to the Jordan Valley and flows

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"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head"? "running down upon the beard . . . of Aaron"? "over the collar of his robes"? Israelites sighed wistfully at these words, but we are totally puzzled—and not only because we cannot imagine the emotionally riveting moment when the priest was anointed with oil for the fulfillment of his holy duties on behalf of the people. Even stranger to us might be the possibility of "kindred living together in unity."

First, the oil. What seems a bit unseemly—oil dripping over one's head, beard, and body—was a sensuous image to the psalmist. Robert Alter explains: "In the Israelite world, as in ancient Greece, rubbing the hair and body with aromatic olive oil was one of the palpable physical pleasures of the good life."¹ Since it is the beard of Aaron that is mentioned, we need to think also of the high priest, the mediator between the people and God, the one who was privileged to step into the Holy of Holies on behalf of the people. The priest was anointed with oil, and that anointing was a moment of immense gravity and joy.

Then there is the stranger image of kindred living together in unity. We prize rugged individualism—

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 462, n. 2.

Psalm 133

Exegetical Perspective

One of the tiniest psalms, a mere three verses comprising four sentences, Psalm 133 has supplied generations of Jews and Christians with striking images of abundance, community, and eternity. A moving account of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's final hours appears in the Zohar. A disciple tells how fire surrounded the house as the beloved sage sang out in his last audible words: "There G-d commanded the blessing, eternal life (Ps. 133:3)."¹ The psalm is sung to this day in synagogues around the world to celebrate joyous fellowship. It is sung in monasteries too. Augustine writes, "So sweet is that sound that, even they who know not the Psalter sing that verse."² Indeed, he credits Psalm 133 with giving birth to communal monasticism itself!

The psalm probably began as a celebration of shared festival company. It is the fourteenth of the fifteen Songs of Ascents (Pss. 120–134), which are traditionally traced to the practices of pilgrimage—of ascending to Jerusalem. Some students imagine faithful pilgrims singing them on the way up to

1. Zohar is the foundational text for the ancient practice of Kabbalah mysticism. This story may be accessed as "Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's Last Day On This Earth" at www.arachimusa.org/Index.asp?ArticleID=208&CategoryID=132&Page=1.

2. Augustine, "Saint Augustine: Exposition on the Book of Psalms, translated, with notes and indices," in *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, first series, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 622.

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 133 is one of several Songs of Ascents in the Psalter. Pilgrims going to Jerusalem (Zion) for religious festivals sang these psalms as they ascended to Jerusalem. Festival pilgrimages to Jerusalem gave the people an opportunity to gain perspective on life. Similarly, a sermon of ascent on Psalm 133 might help the congregation ascend to a theological high point from which to reflect on the family in the purposes of God.

Psalm 133 is a Wisdom psalm intended to help the community recognize the wisdom that God implanted in the world to lead individuals, households, and larger social units to the good life. According to wisdom theology, human beings can discover wisdom by reflecting on what we learn from experience. This psalm invites the community to consider an important aspect of kindred life and then to reflect on the implications of that unity when applied to the broader community.

Many earlier scholars viewed Psalm 133 as a reverie on the unity of the family ("kindred"). This interpretation is supported by verse 1: "Behold how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" By "kindred" the psalm refers to the extended family or tribe, not simply the nuclear family, as in contemporary cultures of European origin. "Kindred" also may refer to all Israel, as the children of Abraham.

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to all of the far places. On its way, it waters dry land. Through the generosity and life-giving power of the waters of Mount Hermon the psalmist issues a call to the people to worship God and to live together. The water is what makes everybody's life possible. Later on, Christians will use the waters of baptism to call each other on issues of unity and togetherness.

Thus, in this text the two metaphors, oil and water, both provide for life and for common belonging. Both oil and water are used by the psalmist to issue a call for a social practice: worship of God that results in the unity of God's people. This call entails a movement of the body toward God. People were called to ascend, to move, to make a conscious act, to walk and sing to God. They had common elements in their history, namely, the promise of God's blessing and healing in the oil poured throughout Aaron's beard and body; and common elements in their environment, namely, the dew of Mount Hermon to provide sustenance. These elements were good enough reasons for people to trust in God's provision that they could live together in unity.

Thus, unity in this psalm is related to 1) a liturgical movement: going to the top of the mountain by way of singing; (2) the worship of God; (3) their own history of God's healing and honoring people through oil; (4) paying attention to environmental resources, such as water, as *common* resources and not private possessions. At this place, filled with oil and dew, God lives and ordains God's blessings. At this place, when unity perseveres and wins, life happens for everybody. Where unity fails, life perishes and God's blessings cease as well.

Like the psalmist we should look for the highest place and see how our brothers and sisters are divided. Our task today is to ask: Who are my kindred? What kind of unity can we foster? My kindred are not only those who are related to me by blood. Under God's love, we all become kindred people. Like the psalmist we must call our people to live together in the *oikos*, the household of God. How can we provide for each other? What are the elements in our history that we can tell each other about God's provision to us all? How are we to provide God's healing for people? How are we to honor each other with the oil of God's love?

We are to call those who are different from us—from other cultures, from other religious understanding and faith practices—to live together. That call surpasses people's country of origin, color of skin, and beliefs. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others: all are to live under

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but at what cost? We are taught: *It is up to me, Look out for number one, I'm free*. Other people are reduced to instruments to help us. No wonder we are a lonely people—and an angry people. We have forgotten how to disagree; we are a bit insecure with our pet thoughts, and are unsure how to handle difference, or clashes; rancor rules; “forgiveness” feels like weakness. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

Humanity has never earned an A+ in unity. Cain and Abel, the first brothers, fought (Gen. 4), and while Jesus was determined to get us connected with God, he was just as concerned with urging us to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Who is this neighbor? Not just the one you think is fun or who agrees with you, but the stranger, the one who annoys you, the one who's just plain wrong (Luke 10:29–37). Jesus' best story is about the possibility of reconciliation between a father and his two sons (Luke 15:11–32). Jesus' most revolutionary—and yet most hopeful—words were “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44). Sometimes the enemy is not out there; sometimes the enemy is the brother, the sister, the sibling, the one we live with who eludes us.

We may find ourselves baffled by a brother or mortified by a sister; but unity is still possible. Toward the end of the film *A River Runs through It*, the father, who has lost one of his sons, talks about what it is like to see a loved one in need but to be unable to help: “We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them—we can love completely without complete understanding.”²

The oil on the beard image is paired with another: the dew of Hermon. In a dry, barren land, where water was scarce and precious, the dew on Mount Hermon far in the north issued in the river Jordan, which watered the land far to the south. Something small, virtually invisible, the dew, becomes a stream that gives life. Love, subtle and barely visible, is like that.

Sadly, religious people probably rank as the worst when it comes to unity. The pious ones rage at those who do not please them, and congregations and denominations fume and then divide when they

2. *A River Runs through It*, dir. Robert Redford (Allied Filmmakers/Columbia Pictures, 1992), based on the book by Norman McLean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

Psalm 133

Exegetical Perspective

Jerusalem and then during the three pilgrim festivals: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Weeks), and Sukkot (Tents or Booths). Others picture priests singing them on their ascent up the stairs to serve in the temple.

The content of Psalm 133 fits a pilgrimage setting well. The first sentence celebrates fellowship shared: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” The NRSV’s translation “kindred” is at least one remove from the more literal “brothers,” which appears in most other translations (RSV, ESV, NIV, etc.). The latter captures the intimacy felt by the worshippers—not as the encounter with a little-known great-aunt, but as the coming together of brothers and sisters. Adding to this, the Hebrew behind “live together” may be better translated “sit together.” James Mays pictures “people who were kin through the Lord’s covenant, sitting together at festival meals and dwelling together during a festival. . . . The Festival transformed the pilgrims into a family that for a holy time ate and dwelt together. The covenant bound them together, and the Presence brought them together.”³

At a loss to describe this rich experience of fellowship, our psalmist reaches for similes and returns with two vivid ones. The first pictures oil dripping down Aaron’s head and face to his beard and then down to his sacred vestments. This extravagant imagery recalls the custom of anointing from Exodus 30. There YHWH commands Moses to blend liquid myrrh, sweet-smelling cinnamon (that is, aromatic cane), and cassia, and a hint of olive oil, and “make of these a sacred anointing-oil blended as by the perfumer (Exod. 30:23–25).” With this rich mix God commands Moses to anoint the holy implements of the tabernacle (the ark of the covenant, the lampstands, etc.) and then, last of all, Aaron.

God has not ordered a mere thimbleful. Preacher and congregation will better appreciate the image in Psalm 133 knowing the proportions of this “recipe.” Moses stirs between 125 and 250 ounces of each spice into six liters of olive oil (one *hin*) and ends up with nearly two gallons of oil. A sprinkle to anoint each piece of tabernacle hardware would leave plenty to spill down Aaron so luxuriously. To tell the riches of pilgrim fellowship, the psalmist imagines just this sacred abundance.

The dew of Hermon offers a second image of abundance that will sing out the glories of unity. North even of Galilee, 9,000 feet tall, and a part of Israel’s poetic imagination (Pss. 42:6 and 89:12;

3. James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation commentary series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 413.

Homiletical Perspective

Commentators point out that the phrase “when kindred live together in unity” occurs in Deuteronomy 25:5, where it calls attention to the importance of all members of an extended household working together in mutual support.¹ Indeed, the word “good” (*tov*) recalls God’s hope for the world in Genesis 1: “And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). God created the world to be an arena of generativity, in which all elements work together in mutual support. Dynamics among kindred should be the same.

The preceding perspective could lead to a sermon on God’s purpose among kindred today. This purpose includes not only those who immediately live together, but also all within the kindred network. Indeed, the psalm can apply not only to those who are together because of biology or commitment, but to all who live in relationship.

We often idealize families—especially the immediate nuclear family. However, increasingly we know that things can happen in households that damage individuals and family systems. The sermon could remind the congregation that God empowers us to live together in patterns that make possible real unity, that is, mutual support through common life.

Some scholars interpret the psalm more broadly to refer to the Israelite community as a whole. The reference to Aaron in verse 2 and to Mount Hermon in verse 3 extend the focus to the temple (Aaron) and to the northern part of the land of Israel (Mount Hermon). Indeed, occasional scholars see the psalm as hoping for the reunification of the divided nation.

This point of view could lure the preacher toward a message that cautions the congregation not to make an idol of the nuclear family (Mom, Dad, children, dog, minivan, and soccer), as do many voices in the current emphasis on “family values.” Psalm 133 reminds us that the individual family (even the extended family) is part of the larger community, and that the vitality of one’s own kindred is tied to the vitality of the larger world and vice versa. Psalm 133 implies that the mission of every household includes contributing to the good (*tov*) of the created world. The sermon could help families—nuclear and extended—name ways that they can work for the common good. The preacher can further point out that issues in the larger society directly affect kindred units. Working to improve

1. “When brothers reside together” (Deut. 25:5) and “When kindred live together” (Ps. 133:1) are translations of the same expression in Hebrew (*shevet achim gam yachad*).

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this call as kindred people. As Martin Luther King Jr. said: “It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence.”¹ Instead of violence and hatred, let us seek God’s gifts of anointing oil and life-giving water, common elements that sustain us all.

This psalm is even more important as we see the ways in which the United States is increasingly becoming politically divided. In a recent article, Paul Krugman says the following:

By all means, let’s listen to each other more carefully; but what we’ll discover, I fear, is how far apart we are. For the great divide in our politics isn’t really about pragmatic issues, about which policies work best; it’s about differences in . . . moral imaginations . . . about divergent beliefs over what constitutes justice. And the real challenge we face is not how to resolve our differences—something that won’t happen any time soon—but how to keep the expression of those differences within bounds.²

Here is a huge challenge for us Christians. We are called to use our theological imagination to respond to this divide. We are the ones to issue a call of unity and move toward each other. The psalmist wants too much, and he will not settle for less than unity of all his kindred people. He hopes, he believes, and he finds theological, historical, and natural reasons for this unity. He believes in the flow of God’s blessing, starting with the oil on Aaron’s beard, which flows to his whole body; starting with the dew at Mount Hermon, the water that flows through dry lands. So let us find God’s love, healing, and honoring each other in our congregations, and let this stream overflow through this country and through the world. Let us not settle for anything less than a kindred life together. May our congregations be places where God will ordain God’s blessing for all, life for evermore.

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both try to understand God’s way. There are always those who prefer being right to the unity of the body of Christ. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” We may (and will!) disagree; we are different; the other person may be so very terribly wrong! . . . *But we can always love.* Unity trumps being right. “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend,”³ Martin Luther King Jr. said.

It was love that ignited the spread of Christianity; and it is the lack of love that may prove to be the undoing of Christianity, and of all of us. Psalm 133 is an echo of Proverbs 16:7: “When the ways of people please the LORD, he causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.” Many believe they please the Lord with their judgmental rancor, but the Prince of Peace longs for love and unity.

Consider James, the brother of our Lord. Did James and Jesus ever talk of Psalm 133 while they were growing up? Did they have unity? Certainly after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension they enjoyed a spiritual oneness, and it was James who urged all of us to be not just hearers but also doers of the word.

In fact, Psalm 133 is one of the Psalms of Ascents, which would have been sung on the temple steps just before the people entered for worship. The great feast days would have been a great reunion of brothers and sisters, some of whom lived together, while others did not often see one another. Was worship not for them a joyful celebration of their unity before God?

JAMES C. HOWELL

1. Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” Commencement Address at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, June 1965.

2. Paul Krugman, “A Tale of Two Moralities,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/14/opinion/14krugman.html?_r=1%2526ref=opinion&reason=2.

3. Martin Luther King Jr., *Quotations of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2004), 15.

Psalm 133

Exegetical Perspective

Song 4:8), Mount Hermon here symbolizes cool refreshment to a hot and parched Zion. Three of the four streams that feed the Jordan River originate on Hermon. The poet imagines the dew covering the mountainside as cooling, soothing refreshment descending on Jerusalem.

The last line of Psalm 133 completes the “simile sandwich” by returning to a direct statement. Here the psalmist reflects a moment longer on the newly dew-refreshed Zion, where “the LORD ordained his blessing, life for evermore.” For the soul-full worshipers, this means at least that the glories of this present fellowship, so oil-like and dewlike, will never end.

The song features a lovely play on ascending and descending imagery that must have thrilled these pilgrims. From many different places, sometimes across great distance, and surely with some exertion, they have all traveled up. They sing along the way and then, finally in Zion, they sing of how Aaron’s oil, Hermon’s dew, and God’s blessing all flow down into their fellowship. Through one another, united by their worship, they experience the overflowing hospitality of God.

On the way to Jerusalem, we can imagine many paths flowing together like so many tributaries to a great river. We can imagine families turning into clans turning into crowds, with the words of the song swelling as the voices multiply. We can imagine the reunion of long-parted friends, the expectancy of worshipers ascending in company, a feast shared to fortify the weary, and voices emboldened by the sheer size of the crowd rising. The blessed words ring out in Hebrew: “*Hinei mah tov umah nayim, shevet achim gam yachad.*”

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Amid strife between nations and communities and churches and families, such spectacular joining sings to our souls. How very good and pleasant, indeed!

ALLEN HILTON

Homiletical Perspective

the general welfare is working to improve the environment in which kindred can thrive.

I include a personal word. While I sympathize with the commonplace admonition not to idealize and idolize the traditional nuclear family, as a parent in such a family, I want to say clearly that the pressures on such families are incredible today. I would welcome an encouraging word from the pulpit that reminds me of God’s presence and purposes for the immediate household, while placing those purposes in the larger frameworks of extended family and human community.

From another point of view, a preacher might use this psalm as an occasion for a sermon on theological method, that is, on how a congregation comes to an adequate understanding of God’s purpose for today. The wisdom tradition regards experience as a source of theological insight, both as source of positive guidance (perspectives and actions that lead to blessing) and as source of negative guidance (perspectives and actions to avoid because they lead to destruction). It is fashionable in some theological circles today to berate experience as a source of theological insight, but this fashion overlooks the fact that the wisdom tradition in the Bible itself honors experience as such a resource.

To be sure, the Wisdom literature offers its particular understandings of God’s purposes discovered through observation of experience. Yet the theological method at the core of the wisdom tradition extends further than the particular wisdom theology in the Bible. For the methodology of wisdom implies that today’s community should continually reflect and rereflect upon experience to determine whether such rereflection might alert us to fresh possibilities for understanding God’s presence and purposes.

The preacher might use a wisdom methodology, illustrated by Psalm 133, to explore a contemporary issue. How does reflection upon actual experience prompt the congregation to understand God’s purposes? For example, in many previous generations, the church has generally frowned on sexual relationships other than male-female. However, the experience of many persons involved in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, and asexual circumstances is that such relationships can be a source of blessing. Listening to such voices from experience is prompting many Christians to think that God can work through (LGBTQA) relationships for blessing.

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**PROPER 16 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 21
AND AUGUST 27 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 1:8–2:10

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” ²⁰So God dealt well with the

Theological Perspective

As the opening act of the exodus, this passage provides potent portents of what is to come for Israel as a people chosen for a special relationship with God. The seven preceding verses have retold the passing of Joseph and his generation from the end of Genesis. Whereas Genesis told the story of God’s relationship with the family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the Exodus narrative shifts to the story of how Israel becomes a nation. It begins with a vivid picture of a nation growing rapidly, indicating God’s favor toward Israel by blessing it with fecundity. Israel’s fruitfulness becomes even clearer in the story of the two God-fearing women, Shiphrah and Puah, and their clever way of saving the lives of the Hebrews’ infant sons. Their success stands in stark contrast to the later story of the pagan Egyptians’ devastation by plague, brought to a brutal climax with the death of their sons. Finally, in a further demonstration of Israel’s ingenuity, the baby Moses floats his way into the heart of the Pharaoh’s daughter, preserving his life in order that through him one day Israel will be set free.

Pastoral Perspective

This text invites pastor and congregation into conversation about, and consideration of, the journey we share. In the text there are crises, questions, concerns, celebrations, insights, and accomplishments. These elements are part and parcel of the life we experience. They are common components of the journey we share.

The story begins with the declaration, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (1:8). In an instant, our lives can change dramatically. With a shift in leadership, stability may be lost. With one phone call, one e-mail, one conversation, our well-being can be threatened. Kings die. Pharaohs follow pharaohs. Behind the often-bland descriptions of historical events there are people and communities being thrown into turmoil. Behind the relentless march of history there are human stories, stories of crisis, change, and challenge. It seems such a simple sentence—“Now a new king arose”—yet this simple announcement signals a profound change. A congregation is likely to know something about simple announcements

Exodus 1:8–2:10

midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

^{2:1}Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother.

⁹Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

Exegetical Perspective

The story of Joseph in Genesis follows an arrogant child through familial and international intrigue until he grows into a mature and sensitive adult with exceptional powers. Not Egyptian by birth, Joseph was adopted by Pharaoh to serve as his secretary of state. As long as Joseph enjoyed the favor of the ruling Pharaoh, his people enjoyed the economic prosperity of Egypt. In fact, in the verse that immediately precedes our text, readers are left with a sense of “happily ever after” for Jacob’s family as immigrants living in hospitable Egypt: “The Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (1:7).

Few short sentences in literature are more ominous than the opening verse of our text: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (v. 8). As Terence Fretheim notes, “The king of Egypt does not know; God knows. *This difference in knowing has a profound effect on doing* (see Jer. 22:16). Not-knowing leads to oppression; knowing leads to salvation. Who knows and who

Homiletical Perspective

In the story of the enslavement of the Hebrew people by the Egyptians that tells how Moses, who was fully Hebrew, became a trusted member of the Egyptian royal household, there are at least two major homiletical themes. The first involves addressing the dynamics of oppression and God’s concern for those who are in bondage. The second, related theme is the dynamic of identity and “otherness.”

When a new king came to power in Egypt, he set about introducing his own policies and pursuing his own priorities. A change in leadership is usually anxiety provoking, both for the leader and for the people that he or she is given to lead. Among the insights of Murray Bowen’s systems theory, applied to church and synagogue by Edwin Friedman,¹ are the tendency of a system to resist change and our tendency to manage anxiety by focusing on a third party as a way of managing that anxiety. René Girard famously developed the theory of a “scapegoat mechanism,” by which we create “outsiders” who

1. Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988).

Exodus 1:8–2:10

Theological Perspective

The Israelite population is growing rapidly and therefore poses a threat to the new king, who is introduced in verse 8. This king does not acknowledge or possibly does not care to know Joseph, which is a surprising attitude toward someone with close ties to Egypt and its previous Pharaoh. Joseph saved Egypt from famine (Gen. 47:17). Pharaoh acknowledged Joseph as a bearer of the spirit of God (Gen. 41:38), granting him land (Gen. 47:20) and status over Egypt second only to Pharaoh himself (Gen. 41:41). From the Hebrew perspective, the king's unawareness of Joseph's significance reflects his weakness, as a king unacquainted with his own people's history. Israel's strength lies in their intimate knowledge and frequent retelling of their heritage. Furthermore, in refusing to acknowledge Joseph as someone to be dealt with on an equal footing, the king rejects Joseph's God. For the Israelites, these failings predict an unavoidable trouncing for Egypt by Israel and its God.

Even in his willful ignorance, the king adds to Exodus's emphasis on the rapidly expanding nation of Israel. While in the king's eyes Joseph and his family are forgotten, the people of Israel as a community have become a major focus of his attention. In verses 1–7, the author states that the entire population of Israelites living in Egypt are the descendants of Jacob, then makes the rather surprising claim that the Israelites now outnumber the Egyptians. By putting the claim on the lips of the king in verse 9, the writer makes it clear that this was the common Egyptian perception of the Hebrews, if not the reality. It is difficult to argue with what one's enemies claim, since they have no reason to praise and many reasons to slander. By painting a vivid picture of the king's panic (vv. 9–10) and of the Egyptians' dread (v. 12) about Israel's potential threat and capacity to thrive under duress, the author proves that Israel is a force to be reckoned with before they leave Egypt, and are thought of as such by those in the highest stations of society.

Another party that receives personal attention from the king are the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Nowhere in these passages does the king send a messenger or issue a decree for the midwives to follow. He always speaks directly to them. During their initial conversation, it becomes clear that the midwives serve Egyptians as well as Hebrews during labor. The king specifies that they are only to kill the male children "when you act as midwives to the Hebrew women" (v. 16), that is, not when they act as midwives to the Egyptians. This face-to-face conversation with the king, in addition to the fact

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and the profound changes they can bring. This simple announcement reminds us that there is much that we cannot control.

The new king is threatened by the Hebrew people and begins to scapegoat them, saying that they are a threat to security, claiming that they are an internal menace. What seems to have been a beneficial partnership, a partnership that, according to the book of Genesis, resulted in the physical survival of many Egyptians as well as many Hebrews, becomes an adversarial relationship.

In the scapegoating we find another point of contact between the text and our lives, for the people of our congregations often know what it is to be scapegoated. They know what is to be unfairly blamed for a problem or incident. Many of us will also be forced to admit that in the face of tension and turmoil we have scapegoated others, that we have ascribed blame to those with less power and prestige than ourselves, rather than doing the hard work of reflection, confession, and repentance. To read the story of the blame heaped on the Hebrews is to be given the opportunity to ask, "When has this happened to us?" and "When have we done this to others?" It is to be given the opportunity to consider the ways in which a host of leaders—Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos, John, and Jesus among them—related to the scapegoats of their time.

After having sounded the alarm about the full extent of the "Hebrew problem," and having taken steps to drive the Hebrews to the edge of exhaustion and to the fringes of society, the unnamed king of Egypt speaks to two midwives to the Hebrews, instructing them to kill the boys that they deliver but to let the girls live. The midwives are named Shiphrah and Puah. As pastor and congregation read this section of the text, they encounter several significant questions:

1. In this text the king is unnamed, but the midwives who subvert his will in the name of God are named. Does history do a better job of remembering ruthless dictators or faithful dissenters? To what extent is it important whom history remembers? To what extent are the members of a congregation, and the congregation itself, right to be concerned about their own legacy?
2. In this section the midwives act in ways that clearly contradict the orders of the king. When asked to explain their actions, they make up a story about the babies being delivered before they arrive. When is it acceptable, if not mandatory, for individuals and congregations to disobey and

Exodus 1:8–2:10

Exegetical Perspective

does not (yet) know will be a recurrent theme in Exodus.”¹

The joy of a fruitful and prosperous people reflected in verse 7 feeds a new sovereign’s paranoia in verses 8–14, a sovereign “who did not know Joseph.” With one pregnant sentence, readers feel the cold chill of a dark foreshadowing, when royal memories will fail, security will slip away, and the shackle of bondage will become a nightmarish reality for the once-happy immigrants. In just a few words, readers are led to fear that the years of plenty for Israelites living as welcome guests of Egypt are about to turn into years of slavery at the hands of “anti-immigrant” harsh taskmasters.

While the new king busies himself in creating a huge labor pool of forced labor by converting Israelites from guests to slaves, readers meet another element of foreshadowing in verse 12: “But the more they [the Israelites] were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.” Unnamed in this narrative is another Sovereign who is at work, a Sovereign far more powerful than the reigning Pharaoh of Egypt.

In verses 15–22, the paranoia of the unnamed king moves from oppression to genocide. The king will not be mocked, and he will see to it that the Israelites do not “multiply and spread.” As Walter Brueggemann notes, “It is of peculiar importance that in this entire unit, ‘the Israelites’ are not at all mentioned (unlike 1:9, 13). Now it is all ‘Hebrews.’ This term, with its cognates known all over the ancient Near East, refers to any group of marginal people who have no social standing, own no land, and who endlessly disrupt ordered society. . . . They are the ‘low-class folks’ who are feared, excluded, and despised.”²

The king’s attempted genocide is spoiled by the disobedience of women, midwives who concoct a story that any idiot could unweave. Throughout this narrative, we never learn the name of the powerful king, but we do learn the names of the even more powerful midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who in this story become synonymous with those who are seemingly powerless but are powerful enough to resist the machinations of the king. Despite the official policy of genocide, readers learn that another Sovereign is at work through the most unlikely people and despite the most evil intent.

If Egyptian midwives will not carry out his genocide, the king expands his killing force and

Homiletical Perspective

bear the consequence of the conflicts that arise in our relationships.²

These mechanisms are in play in this reading. The new king, probably Rameses II, as a first order of business, sets about demonizing the Hebrews. The name “Hebrews” most likely refers the ‘*apiru*, a stateless underclass, who were a relatively easy target for a new king who might be seeking to create national solidarity among his people by finding a scapegoat for any perceived problems. A preacher might note how the Soviet Union, who used to play that role for many Western societies, has been replaced by various forms of Islam, or how the Jews have served this purpose through centuries. Closer to home, the preacher might note how sometimes a couple attempts to manage the tension in their relationship by focusing on one or more of their children, often at great cost to their marriage.

In the end such mechanisms, whether chosen consciously or not, generate resistance. In our story this takes two forms. First, the feared and oppressed population proves particularly hardy and has a growing birth rate (1:12), as is often the case today among the poor in relation to richer and more formally educated populations. Second, the king’s actions generate specific and chosen resistance on the part of Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives whom Pharaoh had interviewed in person and ordered to participate in his murderous scheme (1:15). They find ways to avoid carrying out their orders while avoiding a measure of culpability. For this, we are told, God rewards them with their own families (1:21). In ways that are chosen, and in ways that are more systemic, the effect of resistance is to sabotage the leader’s goals, and in this particular story, happily so.

The preacher who takes up this theme will need to decide at this point whether to continue with the particular story of the origins of Moses, or to move more broadly into a consideration of how we might choose confidence over anxiety in the face of whatever we experience as sabotage, how we might avoid being caught in an everlasting cycle of creating scapegoats, and how we might bring an end to believing that violence is the only way to bring about our vision for our lives. We might consider how these mechanisms are unveiled in the story of Jesus and so potentially denuded of their power in our lives, becoming part and parcel of what we mean by salvation.

1. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 27.

2. Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 695.

2. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

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Theological Perspective

that they serve the ruling class as well as the slaves, indicates that the midwives have an important role. The king could easily have prohibited them from being midwives, but these midwives are much in demand. In an additional form of esteem for the midwives, the author states that they worship the Israelite God (v. 17). With God's help Shiphrah and Puah are the bringers of life for the entire community, the oppressors as well as the oppressed. Their success is another portent of Israel's future role as deliverer of the world.

When the Israelites continue to give birth to boys, the king summons the midwives to learn why. He respects the work of the midwives enough to let them explain what is happening without immediately condemning them for disobeying him. With great aplomb they manage to deceive him. Their success shows that Israel is a threat to Egypt not only in numbers and might but in intelligence and cunning as well. The Pharaoh accepts the testimony of the midwives, does not punish them, and instead turns to the Egyptian people for assistance in destroying the Hebrew boys, leaving the midwives to continue in their important role of birthing new life.

In the midst of this astounding story comes the birth of Israel's deliverer, Moses. His dramatic entrance into the world reinforces the idea of Israel's being a people set apart. By using clever, well-planned tactics the mother and sister gain the baby boy's admission into the royal household, guaranteeing Moses a place well connected to the Pharaoh, which will serve him well in Egypt's future defeat. Precisely at a point where male children are sent to their deaths to avoid an uprising by the Israelites and their departure from Egypt, the very person who will lead the uprising and departure is the one who escapes that fate and is placed in safety at the Pharaoh's side. God's plan to rescue the Israelites does not happen in spite of the Pharaoh's best efforts but in direct contradiction to them. The harder the Pharaoh works to destroy them, the more brilliantly they subvert and defy his intentions, with God's help.

REBECCA BLAIR YOUNG

Pastoral Perspective

disregard the rules and laws of the land? When it is acceptable, if not mandatory, to decide that there are more urgent concerns, higher values, than telling the truth?

3. The midwives, while not part of the religious leadership or spiritual aristocracy of the time, are clearly in touch with both the needs of the people and the will of God. In what ways have the members of the congregation heard God speaking to them from the margins of society? What message have they heard?

When Moses is born, his mother fashions a small basket for him, a basket that will keep him safe and dry, a basket that can be hidden among the reeds on the bank of the river. His mother enlists his sister to keep watch over the hidden basket. Again, the story yields questions. Who has watched over us when we were unable to care for ourselves? Who watches over our children for us? Some interpreters of the exodus story wonder if Miriam gets enough credit for her role in helping her brother Moses, for her role in leading the people out of captivity and into freedom. In our society there are certainly wise and responsible "sisters" who help their "brothers," who look out for them when they are most vulnerable. These sisters are often woefully underappreciated. A congregation does well to consider the "watching and watchful sisters" in its community.

Pharaoh's daughter takes Moses from the water. Moses' sister makes the best of this unexpected crisis. She arranges for their mother to earn some money caring for Moses until he is ready to begin his Egyptian education. When he begins his education, Pharaoh's daughter takes him as her son and gives him the name Moses, meaning "I drew him out of the water." Much of the story of the exodus lies ahead, but from a very fragile beginning Moses has reached a point of relative security. He is in the care of Pharaoh's daughter. He is being raised as a prince of Egypt. Pastors and congregations know stories like this, of people who knew only instability finding stability. They have their own stories of being "drawn from the water." They have testimonies of God working to save and to bless when the forces arrayed against them seem impressive, invulnerable, and immovable. This text offers the occasion for bringing these stories to the fore.

H. JAMES HOPKINS

Exodus 1:8–2:10

Exegetical Perspective

issues an order to every Egyptian that every male Hebrew child must be killed. In a way this decree is nonsensical, since these male slave children would grow into the very labor needed to build the imperial buildings; but the king is not interested in wise policy here. The king has been mocked, and the king will not be mocked! What the king does not yet realize is that his power is far more provisional than that of the Hebrew slaves.

In almost any narrative, readers would celebrate with the Levite man and woman at the opening of the second chapter, when a son is born and the mother declares that he is “good” (*tov*), echoing the refrain of the first creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:4a; but this is no normal narrative. This story turns dark, quickly sweeping readers up in the intrigue, subterfuge, and horror of a mother, father, and sister setting a newborn male child adrift in a watertight basket (an ark in chaotic waters, recalling the early Genesis flood narrative), rather than risk the ruthless edict of the king.

The rescue of the child foreshadows a much greater rescue from slavery under the leadership of the same Hebrew. With consummate Hebrew irony, the male child is adopted by the “Pharaoh’s daughter.” With even greater irony, it is the child’s mother who is selected to nurse this child. Once again, the narrative suggests that there is power at work in this devastating situation far more impressive than that of the king/Pharaoh.

The hidden actor throughout the first chapters of Exodus is the God who, through the agency of an Egyptian princess, “draws out” the child from the dangers of his watery transport. As the narrative continues, God will reveal God’s self to this “drawn out” one in the form of a fiery bush and will use this rescued child to deliver all the children of Israel from their forced bondage. By the end of 2:10, readers have been prepared for the story that follows, of a God who hears the cries of oppressed slaves, rescues them from chaotic waters, and sends them out on the path of freedom.

GARY W. CHARLES

Homiletical Perspective

Those who choose to continue with the story will be led into consideration of our second major theme: how we come to be and know who “we” are, and how we set about relating to anyone who appears to us as “other.” It is important to the story that Moses’ provenance is the house of Levi (2:1), that he is one of the enslaved people, that he is healthy and strong enough to survive at three months (2:2), but that he is raised in the household of Pharaoh (2:10) while being nursed by his own birth mother (2:9). There is a sense in which Moses, who is to lead the people out of their bondage in Egypt and into the land of promise, is in the world but not of it, not unlike his successor, generations later, who was to lead all people from bondage to sin into everlasting life.

Most of us learn who we are and what it means to be a member of a particular family, people, or nation very early, through the rituals, customs, and traditions to which we are introduced by those who shape our lives. A preacher can help those who listen connect with this reality fairly easily by pointing to some of the early challenges in a young relationship. (“What do you mean ‘we always open our presents on Christmas Eve?’” “Surely you know that the milk always goes in the door of the refrigerator.”)

It is this very gift of knowing who we are that makes us aware of difference and the strangeness of “the other.” Moses was to grow up a favored member of Pharaoh’s household, in a place of great privilege. The preacher who addresses this theme might want to make it the central theme of a sermon and explore issues of class, privilege, and both the challenges and possibilities of relating to those who differ from us.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

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**PROPER 17 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 28
AND SEPTEMBER 3 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 3:1–15

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land

Theological Perspective

The miracle of Israel's exodus from Egypt finds a succinct summary in the verse immediately preceding today's lectionary passage, Exodus 3:1–15. In Exodus 2:25, the author states, "God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." The first two chapters of Exodus have described what God saw when looking upon the Israelites: their oppression and suffering. Beginning in this third chapter, the author tells how God played an active role in their liberation. The first words of Exodus 3:1 indicate the overlap of God's observation of Israel and God's action on their behalf. The Hebrew construction in Exodus 3:1 indicates that Moses is performing an action simultaneously with the previously described event,¹ so that the two opening words, "Moses was," should be prefaced by the word "Meanwhile." While the Israelites were still groaning under slavery, God was already taking action. When the oppressed are crying out to God, God is already at work to set them free.

1. *HarperCollins Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Meeks (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 87.

Pastoral Perspective

Brevard S. Childs writes, "What began as just another day doing the same old thing, turned out to be an absolutely new experience for Moses. The old life of shepherding was ended; the new life of deliverer was beginning. The transformation is recorded in the interaction of God with Moses. The initiative is shifted from Moses to God. The ordinary experiences emerge as extraordinary. The old has been transformed into the new."¹

In this short description of Moses' encounter with God on the far side of the wilderness, we find several themes and questions that are worthy of inclusion in the ongoing conversation between pastor and people. Those themes and questions are:

1. Moses learned that it was time to let go of his life as a shepherd and embrace a new role as the deliverer of the Hebrew people. What *old* ways of being have we been asked to let go of? What *current* ways of being are we being asked to let go of? What *new* ways of being are we being asked to claim? Absent the appearance of a burning bush,

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 72.

Exodus 3:1–15

flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary text for today starts at 3:1, and for legitimate reasons. However, to begin consideration of 3:1–15 at 3:1 is to miss a critical historical note and key theological affirmation stated in the immediately preceding verses: “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (2:23–25).

Governed by this historical and theological context, the third chapter of Exodus explores a theme that will dominate this book and inform Israel’s ongoing self-identity for generations to come. As the third chapter opens, readers enter the calm, pastoral setting of Midian. Serenity is short lived as God’s revelatory fire burns and a local shepherd is claimed for anything but a serene mission. “The LORD’s messenger” appears to Moses in the flame, but the messenger does not speak. It is the voice of God that will capture Moses’ attention.

Homiletical Perspective

Since last week’s story of the birth of Moses and his being taken into the household of Pharaoh, much has happened that we need to know in order to make homiletical sense of this lection. Moses, grown up, saw an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew, “one of his kinsfolk” (Exod. 2:11). Moses quickly looked around, presumably to make sure that no one was watching, and then killed the Egyptian, hiding him in the sand (2:12). The next day he saw two Hebrew men fighting and decided to intervene. His intervention was not welcome, and one of the men made it clear that he, Moses, was no prince over the Hebrew people, whatever his exalted status in Pharaoh’s household. What is more, he made it clear that Moses’ murder of the Egyptian was no secret. Even Pharaoh heard of the crime and sought to kill Moses (2:15). So Moses fled to Midian, entered the house of the priest of Midian, a man called Reuel, married his daughter Zipporah, and named his own firstborn son Gershom (*ger* means “stranger”), because he had been “a stranger in a strange land” (2:22 KJV). So it was that a member of Pharaoh’s household and a man under Pharaoh’s

Exodus 3:1–15

Theological Perspective

While Israel was groaning, God was providing Moses with experience as a shepherd; meanwhile, Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law (v. 1). In the context of Israelite history, the role of shepherd had multiple meanings. Shepherd was a metaphor for leader, as with the shepherd David. A shepherd was also an antiestablishment figure because of its negative connotations in Egypt. According to Genesis 46:34, “all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.” For the child raised in Pharaoh’s household to enter into that despicable occupation was the beginning of an unfolding rebellion against Pharaoh, Pharaoh’s household, and Pharaoh’s nation. Moses, as a shepherd of Israel, employing nothing more than his shepherd’s staff, guides the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and successfully defeats Pharaoh’s army, an overt slap in the face to Egyptian constructs of power.

Moses is no ordinary shepherd. In 3:1, Moses leads his flock to a remote part of the desert in search of the mountain of God. The NRSV translates: “he led his flock beyond (*achar*) the wilderness,” but the word *achar* actually means “in the hinder part.” Moses already displays a tendency to take wide-ranging routes through the wilderness. Nevertheless, his wandering with his flocks always has a definite purpose. Moses goes to Horeb on a pilgrimage, possibly wanting a sign about whether he is still under pursuit for murder (see Exod. 2:15). Moses’ pilgrimage with his flock presents him simultaneously as a seeker and a leader, shepherding his followers while he seeks divine guidance.

Arriving at Horeb with his flock, Moses encounters a burning bush, an angel, and the call of God, to which Moses replies, “Here I am” (v. 4). The dialogue presented here is nearly identical to that in Genesis 22:1, when God calls Abraham to a holy mountain for an encounter involving fire and sheep. The dialogue is repeated in 1 Samuel 3:4 when the Lord calls Samuel, repeating his name, as with Moses, and receiving the same response. In Luke 1:38 a similar conversation occurs between the angel Gabriel and Mary. When she is told of the amazing thing God is about to do, Mary states, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Mary then bursts into a song that incorporates the words of Hannah and of several psalms celebrating God’s plan for the exodus of the oppressed from their suffering (Luke 1:46–55; cf. 1 Sam. 2:1–10). Throughout the Scriptures, whenever faithful servants respond to God’s call in humble obedience, they become intricately involved in God’s saving acts for the people of God.

Pastoral Perspective

how do we know when it is time to let go of the old and take hold of the new?

2. At its core, this text is about a conversation between God and Moses. Moses is open to this conversation, but it is clearly God who initiates it. What does this say about subsequent interactions between the human and the Divine? Can we find God on our own, or must we wait for God to find us? If God must initiate contact with us, is the human search for God a futile search? What evidence is there that God is still searching for us? If God is searching for us, *why* is God searching for us? Is there a sense in which God needed Moses and still needs us?
3. As this pericope ends, it is clear that in many ways the old has become new. Moses has a new identity. God is known in new ways. A new destiny awaits the Hebrew people. At the core of the newness is God, God’s name, God’s identity. What kind of name is “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE”? What does it tell us about God, about ourselves, about God’s intent for us? At the very least, the name is mysterious. Is the mystery intended to encourage interest in God, reverence for God, humility in light of the difficulty we have in understanding God, or all of the above? Is the mystery intended to invite us into deeper relationship with the Divine or to keep us at arm’s length?

Though questions and debate, discussion and dialogue, figure prominently in Moses’ interaction with God, the text ends, not with a question, but with clear instruction. God tells Moses to tell the people that the God who has been with them in the past is sending Moses as a sign that the same God will be with them in the days to come. Childs writes, “Revelation is not information about God and his nature, but an invitation to trust in the one whose self-disclosure is a foretaste of the promised inheritance. The future for the community of faith is not an unknown leap into the dark, because the Coming One accompanies the faithful toward that end.”² The questions this story evokes are more than speculative; they are evidence of a presence that accompanies us toward hope.

Thus, in a profound way, the questions we continue to ask about God and Moses, about God and ourselves, about where this all is leading, matter. They are expressions of relationship, respect, authenticity, and hope.

2. Ibid., 89.

Exodus 3:1–15

Exegetical Perspective

The first disclosure of God in this theophany involves footwear. God instructs Moses to remove his sandals in recognition that this ordinary mountain is actually holy ground. The second disclosure of God is the first of two reminders in this text about who is calling to Moses from the bush that is not consumed: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (v. 6). This is no mystical deity; this is the God who long ago laid claim on Abraham and Sarah and the descendants to follow. At this disclosure, Moses hides his face, fearing that he will come face to face with God.

The last disclosure of God is ripe with foreshadowing verbs: *seen, heard, know, come down*. The first three verbs echo the end of Exodus 2 and set the theological theme in motion. The God who calls out to Moses is not distant and immune to injustice and cries for mercy. God has *seen* the suffering of Israel, has *heard* their cries, *knows* the depths of their pain, and has *come down* to Horeb to bring out those who are enslaved into a land of freedom, a land of “milk and honey.” Walter Brueggemann offers this compelling observation about the fourth verb (to “come down”): “The verb articulates decisively what is crucial for Israel’s understanding of God, which for Christians culminates in the incarnation—God has ‘come down’ into human history in bodily form.”¹

God’s words may sound like music to the ears of Moses. Finally, God is going to intervene on behalf of his enslaved kin. The music, though, begins to sound a bit shrill when it is revealed *how* God intends to intervene. God has come down not to effect change by divine fiat, but through an unlikely shepherd who is on the Most Wanted list in Egypt and has no burning desire to return.

So Moses responds to God’s call to “go” with unqualified reluctance, asking: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (v. 11). God immediately corrects the implicit assumption in this sentence that Moses will accomplish this act of deliverance. Moses will return to Egypt, but he will not go alone. He will lead his people out of Egypt, but he will not do so alone. Moses will lead his people to a celebratory worship service on Mount Horeb, but he will not do so alone. Moses has a critical role to play in this divine initiative, but it is God who will bring out (*ya-sa*) the people of Israel from captivity.

1. Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 712.

Homiletical Perspective

protection came to be a foreigner in Midian, tending his father-in-law’s flock (3:1).

The story of Moses’ call from the midst of the burning bush and the declaration of the Divine is thick with parallels from Moses’ earlier days, suggesting something about both God’s fidelity and God’s power to transform and use human characteristics for divine purpose. The preacher who chooses to focus on this passage will need to make some basic decisions about whether and to what extent to spend time discussing how it could be that God would speak to Moses from a “bush that was blazing, yet it was not consumed” (v. 2). Some listeners will benefit from a sentence or two reminding them that story *reveals* truth.

The impetuous young Moses has matured with his time in Reuel’s house, with marriage, and with the birth of his son. He recognizes that something important is happening and announces a choice rather than a reaction. The ability to respond as a matter of choice, rather than to react like one ball hitting another on a pool table, is what constitutes responsibility. Moses has developed some capacity for this gift. He decides to explore why the bush is not destroyed (v. 3). It appears to be on the basis of this choice that God calls out to Moses and tells him to remove his sandals, because he is on holy ground (v. 5). The origin of the custom of approaching divinity barefoot is lost to many of us today, though this practice is still observed among many adherents of Islam. Preachers will readily find other examples of responding to divinity in ways that do not necessarily make immediate sense, such as fasting or being quiet in church.

YHWH, as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will become known, announces that he is in continuity with generations past, going back to Abraham, and is part of the more immediate history of Moses, as the God of his father (v. 6a). This is the same God who has been present and faithful all along. Moses hides his face, aware that however attractive this burning bush, God is worthy of fear. He is “afraid to look at God” (v. 6b). A preacher might want to expand on what it is that makes being close to God an apparent occasion of danger, what inspires our awe.

Then YHWH refers to the instinct for justice in the face of misery (v. 7) that led young Moses to commit murder. YHWH promises deliverance from the Egyptians and a place in a broad land, already the home of many peoples (v. 8). YHWH has chosen Moses to provide leadership to the people, and this

Exodus 3:1–15

Theological Perspective

However, this is clearly not the response that Moses expects. He is instantly intimidated and seeks ways to escape the assignment. In verse 6, he shudders to look directly at God. By verse 11, he makes the first of several attempts to convince God that he is not the right person for the task. Moses predicts that the Israelites will be unimpressed by him and will want to know who sent him.

God's response is threefold. First comes the enigmatic phrase in verse 14a, "I AM WHO I AM." The verb "to be" (*hayah*) has appeared previously in this passage. At the beginning, Moses is (*hayah*) shepherding his flock (vv. 1–3). Moses is present for them, caring for them and leading them. The next time the verb occurs is in verse 14a, when God states, "I AM WHO I AM" (*hayah asher hayah*). Use of a verb instead of a given name emphasizes how God is actively present for God's people, caring for them and leading them, even in the most remote wilderness. God's open-ended "I AM" is indicative that God is present for God's people, not only as shepherd, but in an infinite number of salvific ways.

God's second answer comes in verse 14b, when God commands Moses to tell the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you." The God Who Is now sends Moses to be present for the Israelites. In verse 15, God provides a third response, saying the God of Moses' ancestors is sending him. The three answers are quite different and reflect different aspects of the way God chooses to reveal Godself. The first does not include a name but represents Godself as an inestimable existence, beyond naming. God's second answer to Moses begins with the word *Ehyeh*, which is the Hebrew Scriptures' only use of that verb as a proper noun and as God's self-proclaimed name. In the third answer God uses the name, *YHWH Elohim*, the Hebrew expression for Lord God, in reference to God's relationship with Israel's ancestors. In the context of human relationship, God graciously identifies Godself in familiar and familial terms. This three-step progression—from God's identification of Godself as Supreme Being, then as Supreme Being who acts in human history by sending shepherds, and finally as the God in relationship with Israel—is God's way of acknowledging and responding to Moses and to Israel, joining in the common refrain, "Here I am."

REBECCA BLAIR YOUNG

Pastoral Perspective

It is ironic that while the Bible often portrays the life of faith as a dialogue, and even a debate, with God, contemporary pastors and congregations are often very uncomfortable with this portrayal of dialogue and debate. The prevailing tendency is to understand faith as the acceptance of a set of theological propositions; deviating from these propositions, or questioning them, is understood as an attack on faith.

When this mind-set starts to predominate, we do well to reread texts like Exodus 3:1–15 and ask questions like these: "Where is the preestablished orthodoxy in this text?" "Is there any sense that there are questions that it would be off limits for Moses to ask?" "Is there any sense that God is put off by, or threatened by, Moses' questions?"

The sense of delightful exploration and exuberant search for understanding calls to mind the outlook of the Baptist founder Roger Williams. Charles Randall Paul and John W. Morehead write,

Williams abhorred religious persecution in New and Old England, but enjoyed a vigorous persuasive fight over religious truth. He unabashedly proclaimed his religion true, but advocated for his religious opponents' freedom of conscience to resist his arguments. He listened respectfully and carefully to his adversaries trying to elicit a similar response from them. If we are wise, Williams will become the hero of millions of twenty-first century religious and secular persuaders, both in the U.S. and worldwide.³

Williams, the authors assert, pushed beyond both the prohibition of dissent and the resentful tolerance of difference of opinion, toward a robust and relationship-building debate.

If Moses could speak to us across the centuries, he would likely tell us that Roger Williams was right. He would likely urge us to respect God while engaging God, to hear God while letting God hear us, to trust God while moving forward together with eyes, ears, and minds open to what we have yet to discern, perceive, understand, and experience. He would likely remind us that the questions who, what, why, where, when, and how are the basis of a strong faith, a robust relationship, and an enduring hope.

H. JAMES HOPKINS

3. Roger Williams, quoted in Charles Randall Paul and John W. Morehead, *Religious Dispatches: I Believe You're Wrong: The Trouble with Tolerance* (http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/3310/i_believe_you%E2%80%99re_wrong%3A_the_trouble_with_tolerance/).

Exodus 3:1–15

Exegetical Perspective

Refusing to settle for the creedal calling card, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” Moses wrestles God for a specific name to bring with him to Egypt to establish his credibility. God responds with the enigmatic *ehyehasherehyeh*. Scholars have spent centuries debating the grammar and significance of this puzzling pronouncement to Moses, rendering the Hebrew anywhere from “I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be” to “I AM WHO I AM.” J. Gerald Janzen says this about the mysterious *ehyehasherehyeh*, “Many interpreters take the statement . . . as a way of withholding the divine name, to protect the divine mystery from human manipulation and control. . . . This name, however, identifies God as that ultimate mystery who is free to be whoever and whatever God chooses to be, in whatever situation or circumstance.”²

Early into our text, readers encounter a fiery bush that will not be consumed, but they soon encounter a fiery debate between the authoritative voice calling out from the bush and a reluctant prophet. The text never even infers that Moses has been given a job offer. Moses has been called to participate in God’s redemptive work, and his choice in the matter is not what is at issue in this text. God’s choice is the centerpiece of this text. Moses has been called. Moses will go. Let the readers have no doubt.

God gives Moses a seemingly insurmountable task to accomplish, but God will not allow Moses to assume that he will engage the powers of Egypt alone. Moses assumes he needs more authoritative information, but the voice from the burning bush reminds Moses that he knows more than enough: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations” (v. 15).

GARY W. CHARLES

Homiletical Perspective

aspect of the story could lead to a sermon all by itself. Moses asks why he should be the one, as if he did not already know at some level that it is because he has already been granted the necessary passion for justice that can overcome adversity. YHWH promises proof or a sign of the genuine nature of Moses’ call; but it will come later. The people will worship “on this mountain,” Horeb, sometimes called Sinai (v. 12) after Moses has led them out of Egypt. As is often the case, the positive recognition of grace will be a matter of hindsight.

Moses still wants to know the name, the essential character, of this God; he believes he needs to know this in order to be convincing to his people. He understands that this is the God of his ancestors, but seeks something more specific. So YHWH gives the mysterious name that has, according to most commentators, the force of creator, progenitor of life, and God of history. I AM can mean “I am what I am,” “I am becoming what I will be,” “I am what I am becoming,” and other constructions of the verb “to be.”

The import of this name is that YHWH cannot be reduced to a characteristic any more than captured in a definition. The preacher must be careful here to make sure that an interesting theological concept comes home for congregants. It might be worth pointing out that however comfortable we may be with ambiguity as an intellectual matter, most of us, at the level of practical theology, want everything sorted out, logical, definitive, and clear. YHWH will fill out the content of the character implied in the divine name as the promised constancy and fidelity unfolds in history. In Exodus 20:2 YHWH will offer content to the name: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

2. J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 34.

PROPER 17 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 28 AND SEPTEMBER 3 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b

¹O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
²Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
³Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
⁴Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

.....

Theological Perspective

As a hymn of praise Psalm 105 originally began and ended with the word “Hallelujah.” Within that framework of exultant praise are both an explanation of how to praise and an extensive list of reasons to praise. The psalm initially calls the people of Israel to worship, remembrance, and proclamation, then offers a glorious depiction of the deeds God has done in response to the divine covenant with them. Its counterpart is found in the adjacent Psalm 106, which describes Israel’s response to the covenant in brutally honest terms, detailing Israel’s failures in the face of God’s unceasing love and care. Both psalms appear in 1 Chronicles 8 as part of the liturgy for David’s first major worship service in Jerusalem. Because Psalm 105 focuses on central themes of land, family, and coming home in the context of God’s fulfillment of the covenant with Israel, it was directly relevant to David’s joyous dancing at the homecoming of the ark of the covenant to the sacred tent in Jerusalem.

Psalm 105 is divided, albeit unevenly, into two sections. The second section, the longer one (vv. 7–45b), is referred to by one commentator as the “*Cliff Notes* of the Torah.”¹ The first section, including verses 1–6 and the third section of the

1. Marty E. Stevens, “Between Text and Sermon,” *Interpretation* 57 (2008): 187.

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 105 is to be sung with confidence and joy. It expresses a feeling of security. It brings us to the edge of exuberance. Without any hint of doubt or reservation, this psalm proclaims that God makes Godself known in wonderful works and mighty deeds. It declares that God’s people have ample reason to bow their heads in gratitude, to lift their voices in praise, to perceive the mighty acts of God in wonder. In the epic stories of Israel’s past, God’s presence is readily discerned. To retell Israel’s history is to encounter God’s abundant provision for God’s people and to recognize God’s defeat of the enemies of Israel. The psalm ends where it begins, with accolades and acclamation for the God who gets things done.

Pastors are likely to recognize several concerns in regard to the usage of this psalm. The first concern is that we, and our congregations, can get stuck in our alleluias. It is so pleasant to sing God’s praise, so gratifying to gather with God’s people in the acknowledgment of God’s blessings, that we do not want to go anywhere else. I recognize this tendency in myself. Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. I look forward to its arrival. I savor its sounds. I resonate with its themes. I am a little sad to see it end. If only every day could be Thanksgiving! I know that is not reasonable or realistic. Life is more complicated than that.

Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b

²³Then Israel came to Egypt;
 Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham.
²⁴And the LORD made his people very fruitful,
 and made them stronger than their foes,
²⁵whose hearts he then turned to hate his people,
 to deal craftily with his servants.

²⁶He sent his servant Moses,
 and Aaron whom he had chosen.
.....
^{45b}Praise the LORD!

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 105 is an evocative retelling of the covenant-making God that readers meet in narrative detail in Genesis and Exodus. The psalm's poetry has a particular focus that is not on the multiple occasions when Israel abused God's covenant trust (that focus will be found in its partner psalm, Ps. 106). Psalm 105, instead, focuses on the Lord God who is sovereign over all of life and who chooses people to live as faithful servants, keeping covenant and obeying God's laws and statutes. Readers of this psalm learn of the tenacious memory and mighty acts of God, which the psalmist trusts will lead to acts of obedience and praise.

Of this psalm, Clint McCann wisely observes,

By focusing exclusively on God's activity, including God's choice of a people (vv. 6, 26, 43) and the establishment of a covenant with them . . . Psalm 105 articulates the priority of God's grace. God does call for obedience, but only *after* God's choice of the people and the performance of "wonderful works." . . . God's choice precedes all human choices. Not only is grace the first word, but . . . is the final word as well.¹

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1106.

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 105 came to expression either during the exile of the Jewish leaders in Babylon or soon after their return to Judah. In both cases, the people were in a time of disappointment. In exile, the community was cut off, not only from the world with which they were familiar, but from the temple and other primary symbols of God's faithfulness. When the people returned to Israel after the exile, they found the land in ruins. The community was lethargic in rebuilding. By rehearsing important events that demonstrate God's power and trustworthiness, today's psalm is intended to motivate the community to be faithful and hopeful during the exile or to take up the task of rebuilding.

In ancient Israel, remembering the past was designed to create energy fields of faithfulness in the present: as God acted in the past, so God would act again. Today's excerpt from Psalm 105 invites the congregation to remember how God provided for the family of Jacob when famine overwhelmed them in their own land, and they went down into Egypt (v. 23). God worked through Moses to liberate them after they had become slaves.

I imagine three sermons emerging from this psalm. The preacher who uses PowerPoint might project a map showing the relationship of the Holy Land and Egypt and the journey of Israel into Egypt.

Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b

Theological Perspective

last verse (v. 45c), is a series of exhortations to the people to recall God's works, to glorify God, and to share the good news with the world. These exhortations call on Israel to remember God and to act on God's behalf, in a manner similar to (but inevitably more diminutive than) that in which God has remembered Israel and acted on Israel's behalf. God called on Israel and their prophets, rejoiced in their good deeds, and sought their presence continually. In grateful response, Israel should do likewise, rather than resort to a repeat of the follies exposed in Psalm 106.

By spreading the good news and worshiping God as these verses advise, the people will continue to enjoy the blessings of God. The concern is clearly for the welfare of the people, stressing how praise and remembrance are an enriching practice. Verses 1–2 share a similar pattern, in which the first half of the verse calls the worshiping community to praise, while the second half is an admonition for how the worshiping community should share the news of God's goodness. Verse 3 speaks of how the people should be joyful and happy in the midst of seeking God and calling on God's name, while verse 4 encourages them to rely on divine strength and presence.

Verses 5–6 are a summary of all that has been done by God, both in mercy and in judgment, lifted up as ongoing blessing in the here and now for the descendants of Israel as the chosen people. The emphasis is on simultaneously rejoicing and sharing the good news as a way to worship God and to enjoy God's benefits. In the past, God has cared for Israel by mighty deeds so that Israel might flourish. In the present, Israel is invited to flourish by recalling the gracious gifts of God, by engaging in worship and song to give thanks for those gifts, and by proclaiming what God has done.

Verses 23–26 describes Israel's sojourn in the foreign land of Egypt and how Moses and Aaron received a divine calling there. Like the psalm as a whole, the description makes no reference to God as creator or to the wonders of the world or to God's goodness to humankind in general. It focuses exclusively on the good that God has done for the people of Israel. The terms are more familial, as seen in verse 6, where "the offspring of . . . Abraham" and "the children of Jacob" signify the chosen ones. God has embraced and expanded Israel as a family when the world was actively rejecting them. Jacob lived in a foreign land as an alien. In the midst of that alienation, God embraced the family of Israel,

Pastoral Perspective

The second concern is likely the more difficult. The concern is this. We feel a little reluctant to celebrate God's goodness, because we are well aware that not everyone in our community has everything they need. We are hesitant to enumerate God's blessings, because grief, brokenness, heartbreak, failure, injustice, and inhumanity abound. For every person who speaks of God leading them to the mountaintop, there is another who wonders if God knows that they are slipping over the cliff. We are fair and sensitive people. We do not want to celebrate in the face of another's sorrow, we do not want to proclaim God's goodness when others are questioning the reality of God's presence, we do not want to impose our songs of grateful praise on those who are wracked by pain, and we do not want to be part of a joyous chorus in the midst of a congregation that is gripped by desperation.

The best way to address the first concern is by addressing it directly, by refusing to let praise become a cul de sac or dead-end street. We address this concern by refusing to let praise be the only tone in the songs we sing, the only spiritual muscle we ever use.

The second concern requires a more nuanced approach. It is a very serious concern. Caution is needed. Exuberant praise is not the only true act of faith and worship, but the knowledge that everyone does not experience a sense of well-being, everywhere and all the time, should not mean that we can no longer exclaim, "God is good." We need to be mindful, aware and sensitive to others. We need not pummel or demean them with our unfettered joy. Still, honest expressions of gratitude and glad recounting of the mighty acts of God should not be put on hold until perfection is ours, until the reign of God is known in full.

Historian Karen Armstrong is helpful as we wrestle with the what-to-do-about-praise dilemma. She helps us reclaim the "apophatic" tradition in Christian theology. This tradition emphasizes the inherent brokenness of all human descriptions of God. It recognizes that while it is important to talk about God and sing about God, there is a time and place to fall silent. Of the spiritual practices of this tradition she writes, "Gradually, we become aware that even the most exalted things we say about God are bound to be misleading."¹

Armstrong lifts up the influence of Denys the Areopagite (also known as Pseudo-Dionysius), a

1. Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 124.

Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b

Exegetical Perspective

Our lectionary text explores some of the dominant themes of Psalm 105, mainly with respect to how they are in conversation with the Exodus text of the day. In verses 1–6, the major themes for the psalm are established. Whether written for the exilic or the postexilic community, the first six verses of this psalm establish a theological memory sufficient to instruct and inspire the people of God in any era. Thanksgiving is in order for the community of faith as a response to a God who established a covenant with Abraham and Abraham's seed and who does not ignore covenant promises. Not only is such a gracious act of God deserving of thanksgiving, but it is cause to "sing" and to "glory" in God.

In the opening six verses, the psalmist refutes any exilic or postexilic notion that the God of the covenant with Abraham has been usurped or rendered impotent by foreign gods. Setting up an apparent paradox between seeking strength and being a servant, the psalmist calls the people to "remember." Poor memory leads to poor theology, argues the psalmist, whereas remembering the faithful and miraculous works of God results in strong servants who understand that their strength is not a personal attribute, but a divine gift given by the gracious, covenant-making God.

The psalmist insists that by embracing the identity of "servant," the people of God will be enabled to embrace their vocation as "chosen ones" of God. Jim Mays argues, "The pairing of servant and chosen means that the ancestors and their descendants came into such a relation to the LORD by the LORD's sovereign initiative. . . . It was not separate individuals that God chose in the election of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob but a people through its generations. The choice was not an episode; it was the opening of an epic that would run through all of time."²

Our lectionary text next zooms in from the initial theological thrust of verses 1–6 to this psalm's unique remembering of prewilderness life in Egypt. Echoing the recurring insistence in the early chapters of Exodus, the psalmist reinforces that the mighty acts of God, rather than Pharaoh's paranoia, were what prompted the enslavement of Joseph's kin in Egypt. Moving beyond the written witness of the Exodus narrative, the psalmist recites just what Pharaoh feared: "And the LORD made his people very fruitful, and made them stronger than their foes" (v. 24).

2. James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation commentary series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 338.

Homiletical Perspective

The presentation might include photographs and drawings of artifacts and other things pertaining to Egypt, such as grain storage (from which the people received food during the famine).

One sermon would focus on Israel in the land of Egypt before Pharaoh enslaved the Hebrew people (vv. 23–24). Preachers often think of Egypt as a place of slavery, a negative symbol par excellence. But in verses 23–24, Egypt plays a more positive role. Through the ministry of Jacob's son Joseph, who had risen to a high position in the Egyptian government, God made Egypt a source of rescue. God fed Jacob's family from Egyptian granaries. By analogy, the preacher could help the congregation recognize communities outside the church walls that may have resources through which God can provide for the congregation and the world, or how the congregation can play the role of Egypt in providing for others in need. Can the preacher point to individuals or groups that function as Egypt does?

In a related theme with a contemporary feel, the psalm notes that Jacob dwelled in Egypt ("the land of Ham") as an alien, that is, as a community of non-Egyptians who lived in Egypt for a long time. If the congregation is in a situation similar to the exilic or postexilic setting of the psalm, a second sermon would result. For example, a once-thriving congregation diminishes and is barely able to survive, leaving many people feeling that they are in exile. Individuals too can be in exile. One of my colleagues commented, "My denomination has changed in ways that I cannot support. The church I serve is no longer the church I agreed to serve." A minister could use the psalm as a lens through which to assure such a congregation, household, or individual that God is present and actively working to create an appropriate community of witness today. Taking a cue from the form of Psalm 105, the preacher might mention several moments in history in which congregations and individuals have come home from exile. For today, the preacher might help the congregation identify individuals or groups who are as different as Jacob was from the Egyptians, but with whom they might share common cause. To be sure, contemporary situations of exile can result from unfaithful behavior on the part of the congregation. The preacher may need to help the congregation recognize that the way home is through repentance.

A third sermon might explore the figure of Moses as a paradigm for today. Psalm 105:26 correlates with the lectionary reading for today

Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b

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blessing them in strength and number, caring for them as unconditionally as a parent and siding with them even as God turned other hearts against them.

This sort of exclusivity is also reflected in the fact that it would take an insider to understand the many references to Israelite history that are contained in these central verses, not only verses 23–26, but in the entire section of verses 7–45b. Ham, in verse 23, the Hebrew name for Egypt, is typical of the insider references throughout the psalm. God showed exclusivity in favoring Israel, and Israel in turn developed a rich shorthand for the blessings that came with that exclusivity. The vaguest mention of a given event in Israel's history was enough to bring back a flood of memories from their oral tradition. For Israel, as for a family today, the slightest reminder of a past event can evoke powerful recollections for the family members who experienced it. The psalm was written centuries after these events took place, yet their strong oral tradition guaranteed that each successive generation reimagined each event as if it were their own experience. This oral repetition in itself serves as part of worship and of “making God's deeds known among the peoples” (v. 1).

The final words in verse 45, “Praise the LORD!” are a summary of the entire psalm that comes directly after an admonition to obey God's statutes and laws. While in contemporary times it might be hard to convince people that regulations are worthy of celebration, the Israelites viewed the book of Deuteronomy and its instructions for their lives as a gift of grace in parallel to their release from slavery. Guidance on how to live in peace and harmony with God and neighbor was nearly as important a part of liberation as being freed from their oppressors, and served as an integral part of the graciousness of God that the Israelites celebrated in worship, remembrance, and proclamation.

REBECCA BLAIR YOUNG

Pastoral Perspective

Greek author who wrote near the end of the fifth century CE, who is a representative of this tradition. In describing his thought she writes,

It is easy to deny the physical names: God is plainly *not* a rock, a gentle breeze, a warrior, or a creator. But when we come to the more conceptual descriptions of God, we find that we have to deny these too. God is *not* Mind in any sense we can understand; God is *not* Greatness, Power, Light, Life, Truth, Imagination, Conviction, Understanding, Goodness—or even Divinity. We cannot even say that God “exists” because our experience of existence is based solely on individual, finite beings whose mode of being bears no relation to being itself.²

Even if we are not able to embrace the apophatic tradition, an awareness and appreciation of it enables us to read, honor, preach, and sing psalms like Psalm 105 in a more authentic way. It encourages us to begin with worship, even as we acknowledge that the language we use to honor God is imperfect and incomplete, that even our truest truths come wrapped in error and incompleteness. It encourages us to enter into worship with the understanding that what we say *about* God should never be mistaken *for* God. It enables us to admit that there are times when silence in face of the mystery that is God is our most appropriate response.

This perspective also enables us to speak from our own experience, and the experience of our spiritual ancestors, of the human encounter with God. It enables us to proclaim that our experience is indeed limited. Nevertheless, in ways profound we have experienced the power and goodness of God. We cannot, and would not, impose our experience on all, but in order to live with integrity, we must confess. In our lives and in our time, God is doing great things. Tell us, are there ways in which this is your experience as well?

H. JAMES HOPKINS

2. Ibid., 125.

Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45b

Exegetical Perspective

The implicit battle between God and Pharaoh in Exodus is made explicit in this psalm. The “chosen ones” move from plenty and prosperity in a foreign land to the harsh reality of oppressive immigrant slavery, not simply because “now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). The “chosen ones” become slaves in Egypt because God continues to bless them and they multiply until these immigrants are a visible and growing threat to the ones in power. For those living in exilic or postexilic times who were tempted to see slavery or exile or the despair of postexile as a sign of the defeat or absence of God, verses 23–26 offered great words of comfort.

Our lectionary text then leaps over the rest of the exodus story to stress the purpose behind all the mighty acts of God: “that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws” (v. 45). About the concluding verse of Psalm 105, Jim Mays writes: “There was a purpose to the promise and the history that unfolded out of it. The LORD wanted a people in the midst of all the other peoples of the world who ‘keep his statutes and observe his laws’ (v. 45). The sovereign of the universe sought to establish a colony of obedience, an enclave of those who represented and displayed his reign.”³

To those who are quick to dismiss the gracious providence of God or who too easily confuse “making a name for ourselves” with our God-given identity, our lectionary texts view God and identity through a different lens. According to our Psalter text, “chosen ones” are chosen by God to “remember” the mighty acts and generous covenant of God. Those who “remember” are those who give thanks and glory in the goodness and gracious ways of God. They do not rail against being servants, but count such a title as a divinely bestowed honor.

GARY W. CHARLES

Homiletical Perspective

from Exodus 3:1–15. The psalm refers briefly to Moses as a servant, that is, as one whose call is to serve God’s purposes. God calls Moses as God’s agent in liberating the Hebrew slaves. The point is clear: God wants people to be free to respond fully to the opportunities for blessing that God will provide in the promised land. Furthermore, God works through human agents to effect such freedom. Preachers often hold up Moses, the prophets, and other leaders as courageous individuals who, almost like lone rangers, stood against popular opinion. However, in antiquity, identity was much more communal than individualistic. God’s call is not simply to Moses as an individual, but to Moses as representative of Israel. God’s call is for the community to act in a Moses-like way. The pastor could help the congregation hear God’s call to act as God’s agents of liberation in the congregation’s world. Where are situations in the congregation and in contexts outside the congregation in which people cannot respond fully to God’s opportunities for blessing?

Based on the preceding perspective, this text could become an occasion for ministers to discuss their own calls as well as God’s call to the congregation. In so doing, the preacher could connect that discussion with an important motif in the contemporary theology of ministry. Several churches today speak of representative ministry, that is, the minister is called to represent the ministry of the congregation both in the larger world and to the congregation itself.

Many in the congregation will identify with Moses’ reluctance to embrace the call. The preacher needs to treat such hesitations with respect. Indeed, the congregation is likely to identify with this part of the sermon if the preacher describes such reluctance with sensitivity. At the same time, an implied theme from the psalm and an explicit theme from Exodus 3 come together to assure the congregation that God is with them to strengthen them as they set about the work of liberation.

RONALD J. ALLEN

3. *Ibid.*, 339.

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**PROPER 18 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 4
AND SEPTEMBER 10 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 12:1–14

¹The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. ³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the

Theological Perspective

“Have you been saved?” Often, mainline Christians bristle at this question. Annoyed, they reply, “Saved from what?” Admittedly, well-meaning believers raise the question in search of the one unmistakable moment salvation happened. Unfortunately, the “moment” becomes the measure of spiritual life, revealing only a flat line in the absence of an identifiable experience. For the people of Israel, the moment of salvation is the exodus, and the way out begins with the safe passage through the night over which death reigned. In this speech of YHWH, the Lord identifies this moment as “the beginning,” sealed in blood and lived out in faithful anticipation of what God will do next.

“This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you,” declares YHWH (v. 2). Out of slavery, God calls a people and establishes them upon a new foundation, and time itself will be marked differently. Brevard Childs writes, “The new beginning of life for Israel is remembered by marking the beginning of a new year.”¹ Foundationally, this is the moment, the experience around which their life takes shape. This is the beginning of liturgical time, time dancing to the

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 197.

Pastoral Perspective

Standing behind the table, the pastor launches into the familiar words. “For I received from the Lord that which I deliver also unto you.” The congregation sits quietly. They have heard these words before, so many times, in fact, that they barely pay attention to them. Far too many in the congregation have let their thoughts drift away to their postworship lunch or the kickoff they are missing because the worship service has run long again.

The fact that they are not paying attention really is not a problem for most of them. They know their part. They know the ritual. They know what comes next. Scanning across the room, the pastor realizes that the most attentive group in the sanctuary seems to be a handful of middle-school students, watching intently to see if this might be the day when one of the elders drops one of the trays of juice.

Of course, it does not happen, and the ritual proceeds just as it has on the first Sunday of every month. Rituals and rules—every church has them. Some are written, most are not. They serve as the glue for a congregation, the familiar prayers and litanies that bring a calming sense of security in the midst of the constantly changing world outside the walls of the sanctuary.

With last Sunday’s Communion liturgy still in his mind, the preacher sits down to reflect on this

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fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. ¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Exegetical Perspective

Today's first reading presents liturgical directions for the celebration of the Passover. These instructions interrupt the dramatic account of Israel's escape from Egypt under the oppressive rule of the pharaoh. Throughout the exodus narrative, Moses and Aaron have been beseeching the pharaoh to let the people go, so that they may worship God in the wilderness. In Egyptian thinking, the pharaoh is a semidivine being, depicted in the stories of the plagues as engaged in a battle with the God of the Hebrews. Pharaoh attempts to control life, history, nature, and the Hebrew people, but the God of Moses and Aaron has power over the Egypt's ruler, even to hardening Pharaoh's heart (9:12). The conflict between the two contestants for divine status comes to preliminary climax when God announces the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. With literary symmetry, the tenth plague parallels Pharaoh's original command to the midwives to kill the sons of the Hebrews at birth (1:16).

Chapter 12 shifts attention from the fearsome events about to occur that night to focus upon rules for family liturgies. The Passover ritual may come from a later time than the escape itself, but it is inserted here for important reasons. From a literary point of view, the ritual heightens the drama of the escape by disrupting it, but from the point of view

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Why is this Sunday different from other Sundays? Because this Sunday falls on Labor Day weekend and many people will not be in church! Even if that's not true where you are, this Passover text seems out of season in early September. The semicontinuous reading of Old Testament texts pays no attention to the liturgical season or the Gospel text. This is a gift, because the sermon can engage Exodus 12 without turning to Maundy Thursday or twisting the story to fit Jesus' instructions to the church in Matthew 18.

If the congregation heard Exodus 3 last Sunday, today's reading has jumped over several chapters. It may be helpful to recap Moses' journey from the burning bush back to Egypt and his unsuccessful attempts to convince Pharaoh to let the people go. Nine plagues have come and gone and still Pharaoh has not freed the slaves. Then in chapter 11 God gives notice of one final, terrifying plague: the death of every firstborn in the land of Egypt. Chapter 12 does not begin with that plague of death or the exodus itself. Rather, this chapter begins with liturgical rubrics laid out in great detail. We hear the voice of the Priestly writer intent on good order—the date exact, the preparations clear, the lamb without blemish. One rubric has nothing to do with eating: take some of the blood and put it on the doorposts of the house: "When I see the blood,"

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rhythm of God's sovereignty, time measured by the work of God's people responding to God's grace. At its best, the evangelical question "Have you been saved?" addresses the dynamic of beginnings, the identifiable marking of one's life to a new, divine rhythm. Maybe such rhythm can be marked with one moment, or maybe many moments serve as referent points beyond which one's life is never the same. As contemporary stories are shared, what are the foundational narratives that mirror Israel's paschal testimony?

While foundational narratives orient and define individual lives, scriptural emphasis rests on the broader communal context. The Passover meal is shared by families. They are to take a lamb for each family, for each household, and if the family is too small, the circle expands to include the closest neighbor. Proportionally, the lamb is divided and shared among all, and no one eats alone. This moment marking the beginning of new life is lived out among others who together learn of God's faithfulness. In this spirit, families mark the doorposts and lintels of their homes with blood spilled from the slaughtered lamb. This blood, explains YHWH, "shall be a sign for you" (v. 13), assuring safe passage through the night, and shall seal this new beginning. It establishes a sanctuary within which divine faithfulness is trusted and acted upon.

Significantly, as Israelite cultic practices develop, the blood continues to mark off the most sacred of spaces, and even the high priest lives out his faithful response behind a veil of blood, in both his ordination and the execution of priestly duties. In this Passover narrative, the sacred space of the home is lifted up as families are marked with the sign of God's faithfulness, and beyond this veil of blood they respond to God's promise. In a ritual not unlike an ordination, the family home is set apart and becomes a place of encounter with God and indescribable *shalom* in the midst of fear and uncertainty. It becomes a place where familial units are set aside for divine purpose and providentially secured for a promised future.

This theme continues with the perpetual celebration of Passover, as families gather annually to feast and hear again the story of God's faithfulness. In the Deuteronomic tradition, the family home remains central in faith development as fathers and mothers remind their children of God's deliverance from Egypt and the implications of being God's people. With the language of faith continually on their lips, the family remains marked as the focal

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week's text. It has that familiar ring of ritual to it. "Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth on this month they are to take a lamb for each family . . ." (v. 3a). It sounds vaguely like words from his denomination's directory for worship. The words are so precise and to the point: "Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs" (v. 9). There are even rules to cover all the possibilities: "If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one" (v. 4a).

Reading over the text, he wonders to himself if the people are as distracted when they celebrate this ritual as his congregation was last Sunday. Probably not. After all, they do this only once each year. Still, "throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance" (v. 14c). Surely after multiple generations even this ritual has become empty and rote for many.

Over and over he reads through the text, each time pausing on the words of verse 14: "You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD." A festival. The word sounds so active and alive. Festivals are places of celebration and joy. Festivals conjure up images of people talking and laughing and sharing together in the enjoyment of the day.

Last Sunday's dry Communion celebration was the antithesis of a festival. There certainly was no laughter, and the only interaction between people was their nervousness as they passed the tray from one to another, fumbling with the little cups of juice along the way.

Rituals are important in the life of the church, just as they were important in the lives of the people of Israel. They provide an anchor, a safe harbor in an ever-changing world. Rituals draw us back to our foundations and provide a vehicle for transmitting truth from one generation to the next. However, there is a danger as we pass on the rituals as a "perpetual ordinance." What happens when the ritual becomes rote? What happens when the certainty behind the ceremony is forgotten?

In the same way that last Sunday's Communion liturgy portrayed the central event in the life of Christ, the twelfth chapter of Exodus passes on the primary event in the life of Israel. It is a celebration of deliverance, of freedom, of new life. Not long after this event, there will be a miraculous exodus from bondage. The seas will part and the people will cross over to a new life with singing and dancing and celebration. In every sense of the word, it will be a festival—"a festival to the LORD."

Exodus 12:1–14

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of theology, the liturgy demands that future readers remember that night of the “passover of the LORD” (12:11) and participate in it as if it were happening to them. It is to be “a day of remembrance for you,” “a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (v. 14).

To “remember” in ancient Israel means more than simply calling a past event to mind. To remember means to reenter the experience as if it were happening now. The family meal urged upon readers here creates a sacred space for performing and participating in the Passover of the Lord. The result is that later generations of Israelites become connected to the story of rescue by this ritual, experience it anew to this day and celebrate it in the Seder. One scholar has suggested that the ritual meal itself became the venue in which the surrounding story of escape was told and expanded year after year and so preserved. The meal makes the events live again and gathers the community over many generations, reminding them of the God who continues to rescue them and bring them through the waters of the sea.

The Passover is a liturgy of renewal. Perhaps this is why it will serve as “the first month of the year for you” (v. 2). The ritual itself begins with God’s command to Moses and Aaron to convene the congregation of Israel in a fresh beginning, an interruption of time in which the year begins. The liturgical directions that follow specify that each family or extended household should celebrate the meal (vv. 3–11). Each should obtain its own lamb, but if the household is too small to consume the lamb, it should join with a close neighboring household. The lamb is to be apportioned among the people gathered in equal shares. It is both intimate and egalitarian.

Further regulations indicate that the lamb must be without blemish, a year-old male sheep or goat (vv. 5–10). The animal will be sacrificed to God and therefore should be perfect. The slaughter will take place among the whole congregation, and before it is eaten, the animals’ blood is to be put on the doorposts of their homes. The blood serves as a sign, a marker of the presence of the Hebrew community, a protection for them against the judgment about to be executed against the Egyptians.

The manner of eating the sacrificial animal is also symbolic and joins the meal to the surrounding story of escape. After roasting the lamb, the people are to eat it with girded loins, sandals on their feet, and staves in their hands. They are to eat on the run,

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God says, “I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you” (v. 13). That bloodred sign will mark the first exodus: an exodus from the angel of death.

We read these instructions wishing God would hurry up. This is no time for so many intricate details. Surely these rubrics were filled in later, long after that midnight hour when the angel of death passed over Egypt. This reading is both timely and timeless. Hurry! Eat with your sandals on your feet, your staff in your hand! Yet there is also a sense of timelessness: this Passover will be remembered forever: “throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (v. 14). Though September is the time of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, this text takes us back to spring, when Jewish people gather to remember the exodus. People lean forward as the youngest child at the table asks the question: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The question is always in present tense. People not only remember the story; they are *in* the story. After thousands of years, they are once again in Egypt eating unleavened bread.

This story has sustained Jewish people through pogroms and holocausts, in death camps and exile. This story of liberation has also captivated people longing for freedom in many lands. African American slaves adopted the exodus story as their own. “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land,” they sang—even though they were far from Egypt. This story is not only liberating; it is also terrifying. We hear wailing in every Egyptian household, even as parents in Bethlehem will weep centuries later over the death of their infant sons (Matt. 2:16–18). Children who hear this story are often outraged. “What about the baby kittens? They didn’t do anything wrong.” To say nothing of the innocent children condemned by God in the chapter before: “Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill” (Exod. 11:5). This is freedom at a terrible price.

There is another story about a bloodred sign we could hear in conversation with this passage. Joshua 2 tells the story of Rahab, the prostitute who saved the Hebrew spies sent on a reconnaissance mission to her city of Jericho. She had not stood at the foot of Sinai and was not counted among the chosen people. Yet she spared her enemies—the Hebrew spies—and asked them to spare her and her family. Before letting them escape through her window, Rahab asked for a sign. “Tie a crimson cord in your window,” they told her. “Gather all your

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point of remembering the past and preparing for the future.

Imagine the anxiety of families during the first Passover. With hearts racing and hands trembling, obedience was tried. As the tenth day approached, families scurried to secure a lamb, either sheep or goat, and then the wait, the four-day wait until it all broke loose. The massive slaughter of lambs. The rush home to paint the doorposts and lintels. No time to worry about lines and edges, blood splattered as they smeared it around the entryway. Then the roasting, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs, all hurried and quickly eaten, for day would soon break, and death, they hoped, would have passed them by—and oh, yeah . . . the girded loins, sandals, and staff. Breathtaking, is it not? This is the way life often happens, even in those sacred spaces marked off for God.

Too often biblical stories are recounted with a kind of stale serenity that leaves them as lifeless as the black and white pages on which they are printed, and obedience goes down as smoothly as Sunday dinner at Grandma's house. It is as if Israelite families gathered for the great assembly while the lamb roasted in the oven, timed just right for dinner upon their return. In reality, death loomed, and the ominous shroud of darkness threatened everyone. Within this context obedience was tried, and faith trusted in a reality yet unseen. Families determined to believe in a future secured only by a promise, a promise that somehow they would make it through the night. In the chaos, they dared to obey. As if they really believed God, they dressed, stood ready, and ate. Staff in hand, they anticipated deliverance.

In the obedience of the people, God's purposes unfold, so that their faithfulness and God's faithfulness somehow converged in the fulfillment of the promise. Uncertainty, anxiety, fear, obedience, and *shalom* all comprise the arena of experience with God. As the clock ticked down, desperation rose. The stakes grew higher, and on this one incredibly messy night, families obeyed. A new beginning, a moment beyond which they would never be the same—a salvation moment.

SEAN A. WHITE

Pastoral Perspective

Still pondering this week's sermon, the preacher begins to realize what has been missing from the rituals of his congregation. Yes, they have anchored the people in their past. They have provided that much-needed constancy in an always-changing world. They have fulfilled that role well.

However, the church's rituals have fallen short in propelling the people into the new life of the future. Within hours after Jesus broke that bread, his death and his resurrection parted the waters and brought new life to the people of God. When he wrote to the Corinthians, Paul said it this way: "Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). The bondage of Pharaoh has been broken. The sin and corruption and brokenness of this world will not have the final word. The worry and the anxiety and the fears that have held that congregation captive have been defeated.

Rituals anchor us in the past, but their real power is in their ability to propel us into the future. It is vitally important for the people to remember what God has done in the past, but the real celebration comes in seeing what God is doing in the present. People are still being liberated. Lives are still being renewed. Hopes are still being restored.

The bread is broken; the cup is poured; the people are served. Yes, it points to the past and calls us to remember what happened two thousand years ago. But this is a festival . . . a festival to a living Lord who is still in the business of leading people out of bondage and into a new journey of hope and promise. It was not just two thousand years ago. It is today, and it is past time for the congregation's ritual to become a festival! The postworship lunch will gladly wait. We are celebrating the life-changing power of God!

E. LANE ALDERMAN JR.

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Exegetical Perspective

hurriedly, ready to depart, for it is the “passover of the LORD” (v. 11). The meal conveys the urgency of the story, the fear of pursuit, and the hope of escape.

At stake in this ritual is the identity of the true God. The God who governs the world is not “all the gods of Egypt” (v. 12), that is, the gods of empire, who believe they have sovereign control over the people. Rather, by reversing the destruction they intend against Israel and turning it against Egypt itself, the God of Israel emerges as the true God of the cosmos, who defeats the imperial powers of Pharaoh and his deities. The Passover meal enacts the identity of the God of Israel, the God who “heard their groaning” (2:24) and comes down to deliver them from the Egyptians and will bring them to a good and broad land (3:8). Also established here is Israel’s identity as the chosen people. They are set apart by the blood on the doorposts, protected from the most horrible of the plagues and from the annihilation that the empire intended for them.

At the narrative level, the announcement of Passover regulations heightens the drama of escape and creates narrative tension. Will the people escape in time? Will they be delivered from the military powers of the empire? Will they be nourished on the way? Christian reverberations manifest themselves across the text, for the Passover of the Lord is at the root of the eucharistic meal, that is, the Lord’s Supper. Christians hold that the perfect, unblemished lamb of sacrifice is Jesus himself, offered for us as food for the journey. We join with our Jewish brothers and sisters in celebrating, in our own ways, that we are rescued from slavery and the forces of evil, that we are chosen and formed into a community of freedom, called to live in intimacy with our covenanting God. Such a vision invites us to examine our own existence as a powerful empire in the twenty-first century.

KATHLEEN M. O’CONNOR

Homiletical Perspective

family inside your house and you will be spared.” That bloodred sign in the window saved Rahab and her family, even though others in Jericho were destroyed. What if every home in Jericho had been marked with a crimson cord? What would change if religions and nations saw the bloodred sign on the homes of all people, including their enemies?

Over the centuries Jewish people have altered the Passover ritual to remember other cries for freedom. In April 1969 Jews and Christians gathered in the basement of a black church in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the Freedom Seder. This Seder marked the first anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., killed at a time near Passover. Words shared around the table acknowledged the blood spilled in past freedom struggles and called for an end to bloodletting in our own time.¹

Passover rituals have also expanded to include those who have been invisible. No women are mentioned in Exodus 12. Moses and Aaron are remembered by name, and even the lamb is male! Women must have been involved in roasting the lamb and baking the unleavened bread. In recent times Jewish women have invited Miriam, Moses’ sister, to the Passover Seder. Miriam’s cup is filled with water rather than wine. Women of all generations are invited to fill her cup with a bit of water from their own glasses. When Miriam’s cup is filled, they raise their goblets in honor of the importance of Jewish women’s roles throughout history and tradition, even though their stories are sparse.²

Who has been left out of God’s freedom story in our communities? Where are we called to see the red thread at the window? A sermon on this text invites us to imagine answers to these questions, not by erasing the text but by responding to God’s gift of freedom without demanding the death of anyone’s firstborn child.

BARBARA K. LUNDBLAD

1. “The Freedom Seder,” www.theshalomcenter.org/node/899.

2. “Miriam’s Cup: A New Ritual for the Passover Seder,” www.miriamscup.com.

PROPER 18 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 4 AND SEPTEMBER 10 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 149

¹Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
²Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
³Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.
⁴For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.
⁵Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.
⁶Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
⁷to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
⁸to bind their kings with fetters
and their nobles with chains of iron,
⁹to execute on them the judgment decreed.
This is glory for all his faithful ones.
Praise the LORD!

Theological Perspective

How does liturgy enact, or dramatize, the life of faith? In what ways does the worship of God's people prophetically embody who they are and what they are to become? British theologian H. Wheeler Robinson described the work of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah as "prophetic symbolism," actions that did not merely symbolize future events but actually set them in motion.¹ As a hymn composed to accompany a festival drama,² the prophetic symbolism of Psalm 149 enacts and embodies the identity of God's people and sets in motion who and what they are to become. The exuberant and unrestrained praise of YHWH equips the faithful for mission in the world and establishes them as integral partners in inaugurating God's reign.

Often the call to mission precedes the call to worship, and in the spirit of liberation theology, the emphasis is on action. The people of faith are a people at work in the world, and the practice of faith serves an epistemological function, aiding in both the understanding of God and the self-understanding of God's people. We come to know who we are and who we serve in the interface with

Pastoral Perspective

There is a little bit of tightrope-walker in every preacher. Every sermon is an attempt to cross a hermeneutical bridge from ancient text to modern world without a single misstep. One slip in either direction and the sermon plunges into that abyss of boredom and meaninglessness or, even worse, into a realm of misdirection and misinformation. Every sermon, every text, carries that inherent danger.

In some texts, however, that danger seems magnified. The tightrope is stretched higher over the circus floor; the distance from ledge to ledge is greater. At first glance, Psalm 149 seems harmless, a relatively easy walk on the tightrope. The psalmist lifts up songs of praise to the creator God: "Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King" (v. 2). Calling us to a celebration with dancing, tambourine, and lyre, it seems to be an innocent song whose primary purpose is to lead us to the better-known song of praise in Psalm 150.

However, in the midst of its call to "let the faithful exult in glory," the psalm makes a sudden turn. Midway across the tightrope, the preacher who tackles Psalm 149 is trapped with its especially haunting line: "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands" (v. 6). This journey across the tightrope suddenly becomes more dangerous.

1. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (Digswell Place: James Nisbet & Co., 1928; repr. 1958), 192–93.

2. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 800.

Psalm 149

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 149 joins with the other psalms or hymns of praise (Pss. 146–150) that form the conclusion to the Psalter. As the book's final segment, these hymns of praise bring to a resounding crescendo the music and prayer of a way of life enjoined upon readers in Psalm 1. That introductory psalm invites the community to choose the path of righteousness, to meditate upon the Torah day and night, and to avoid the way of the wicked. If they choose that path, they will be like a tree planted by running water that yields fruit in season. In other words, the opening psalm points out the path to adult faith, a road toward a life of praise in harmony with the whole community of God's creation. The Psalter ends with a hymn of praise: "Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!" (150:6). The path between the invitation to a life of prayer (Ps. 1) and the book's final chorus of praise (Ps. 150) is not a straight one. Between those poles, psalms beseech God for help, cry out, "How long?" and complain about enemies, loss, and afflictions.

The concluding collection of hymns of praise, then, suggests a spiritual rebirth, a maturity of faith, and a renewed life marked by integration, gratitude, and wholeness found after long struggles and dark nights. The typical hymn of praise both begins and ends with a call to praise, and the body of the psalm

Homiletical Perspective

There is only one more psalm to sing before we have sung all 150! It is time to get up from the pews and start dancing in the aisles. Even if the congregation is not accustomed to such exuberance, it is time to pass out the tambourines. The invitation to celebrate came at the end of Psalm 145: "My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever." This is a song for each person to sing—"my mouth"—and a huge oratorio to be sung by "all flesh." After this invitation, the five concluding psalms begin and end with the same refrain, "Praise the LORD!" At the end of the Psalter, after 145 previous psalms have expressed the range of human emotion, these last five psalms are all filled with exuberant praise.

Well, not completely. There is a jarring turn in Psalm 149, right in the middle of verse 6: "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands." Should the music change in midsentence? Should the lyre shift from major to minor key? Should the tambourines be silenced, or shaken with warlike frenzy? We are tempted to put a comma in the appointed text, deleting everything from verse 6b until the final "Praise the LORD!"

Life, however, is not that tidy. As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, "The Psalms, with few

Psalm 149

Theological Perspective

others, especially those on the margins, and mission is worship. In Psalm 149, however, the formation of God's people begins "in the assembly of the faithful" (v. 1c), and the liturgical gathering is the foundational experience.

Within the assembly, the drama unfolds as the faithful praise God and sing a new song. While the occasion for this psalm may have been a festival dance, the particular context remains a mystery. Maybe the saints gathered to celebrate a battle won or an abundant harvest. Maybe they convened on the horizon of circumstances unknown or in the aftermath of a harvest lost or national tragedy. Whatever the case, the festival serves as a sacred space carved out within their common life and reminds them of the one in whom they live, move, and have their being. Be glad in your Maker, the one who breathed life into dust and tamed the sea so that it became the way of deliverance. Rejoice in your King, and sing a new song—a song rooted in God's past faithfulness and robust in its ability to draw hearts into the future, confident in the King's power to do something new.

Within present circumstances either pleasant or painful, the assembly of saints is reminded of the creative and sustaining governance of their divine King, and this sacred space is replete with dancing and melody making. Beyond their confidence in the Lord's sovereign authority, this exuberant celebration is grounded ultimately in the assurance that "the LORD takes pleasure in his people" (v. 4a). The Lord's delight evokes a worshipful release of body and spirit, and the festival dance frames God's power within the tender expression of joy over God's people. Raucous, with their bodily rhythms keeping time to the tambourine and lyre, the faithful are caught up in the assurance of this prominent position in the divine heart. Here, they know victory. They are adorned in the reality of rising above whatever would weigh them down. They are draped in the freedom of knowing that every enemy will be conquered. In this glory, the faithful rejoice, and upon this foundation, the liturgy turns to an enactment of mission.

Bodies and spirits move freely in this liturgical dance, and the movements now express the posture of the faithful in the world. "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands" (v. 6). Rather than live quietly basking in God's delight, God's people find themselves confronting nations and the seats of power within those structures. Their actions are warlike and

Pastoral Perspective

Through the years, some have read this text as a militaristic call to arms. "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," a song composed during WWII,¹ seems almost a paraphrase of verse 6. Indeed, for many, the psalm has been a rallying cry, calling people to battle in the name of the Lord. Step too far in one direction while reading this psalm, and our tightrope-walking preacher will begin to take a militant and combative stance. We live in a broken world, and God is calling us to arms to do battle against those forces of evil that would seek to destroy us. The preacher who steps too far in that direction will lead the congregation away from the Scripture's overwhelming call for peace and reconciliation. Surely that is not the direction our tightrope-walking preacher needs to take.

Some preachers have taken a step in exactly the opposite direction, claiming that the psalmist is not speaking literally when calling us to "execute vengeance on the nations" and does not really mean for us to wield the "two-edged sword." The lines are merely figures of speech, ancient militaristic symbols best kept in an ancient world. Step too far in this direction, and the psalm becomes nothing more than a bland and lifeless hymn of praise. It still has meaning, but basically it has lost its punch and its power.

So how does our tightrope walker proceed? Having ventured onto the rope high above the circus floor, the preacher encounters verse 6 as a potential stumbling block on the precarious journey to the other side. How shall the next step be taken? Perhaps a word of honesty comes first. Despite our reflexive response against the militaristic language of the psalm, the fact is we are in a battle. Paul called us to put on "the whole armor of God," because we are engaged in a battle against "the cosmic powers of this present darkness" (Eph. 6:11–12). Our preacher must be honest about the cosmic battles in which we are engaged.

Psalm 149 does call us to arms, but not into a battle of bloodshed and violence. The call is to a battle for a new world, a world in which the humble overcome the powerful and are adorned with victory, while kings are bound with fetters. It is the world of God's kingdom, a world the mother of Jesus anticipates when she utters her words of praise: "[The Mighty One] has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful

1. "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition!" words and music by Frank Loesser (New York: Famous Music Corp., 1942).

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offers a particular motivation for that praise. Psalm 149 follows that pattern, beginning and ending with the command for the community to praise, “Praise the LORD!” (vv. 1 and 9).

The opening poetic unit reiterates that command in musical terms, with an exuberance that requires repetition and accelerating energy (vv. 1–3): “Sing to the LORD,” “Let Israel be glad in its Maker,” “Let the children of Zion rejoice” with dancing, melody, tambourine, and lyre. The call to praise requires the commitment and participation of the whole congregation—singing, rejoicing, dancing, sounding instruments—in a kind of ecstatic excitement, as if the psalmist is trying to rouse the deadened spirits of the people. The song they are to sing is to be a “new” one, addressed in gladness to Israel’s maker.

Only in verse 4 does a reason for this call to praise become part of the prayer: “For the LORD takes pleasure” in the people and “adorns the humble with victory.” This part of the hymn seems to follow upon a military battle, the defeat of an enemy, or perhaps the ending of some long struggle. There are many moments in Israel’s history when the prayer would aptly fit the political and international circumstances, but the psalmist does not specify. Rather, this psalm stresses the attitude of the community and insists upon God’s delight in the people. The delight is mutual and underscores the unique relationship of God with Israel. They are the humble who receive God’s victory, like the community whose lowly place in the world undergoes reversal in Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and later in Mary’s song (Luke 1:46–55).

The psalm then utters new commands to praise (vv. 5–6) and enlists the faithful ones in a military effort to bring justice to all the nations of the earth (vv. 7–9). The community of the faithful is encouraged to “to exult in glory” and to “sing for joy on their couches,” with the “high praises of God in their throats” (vv. 5–6). The singing on couches suggests that they are at table, or in nonaggressive postures; their posture is a puzzling contrast to the military mission (vv. 7–9). They have double-edged swords in their hands to “execute vengeance on the nations,” “punishment on the peoples.” They are to capture the leadership, binding kings with fetters and nobles with chains of iron, and to execute the judgment so decreed. Such a mission is “glory” for all the faithful (v. 9).

Psalm 148 sets Israel’s praise within the context of the whole created world. By contrast, Psalm 149 sets that praise in the context of international relations

Homiletical Perspective

exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity, gathered over a long period of time; a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity.”¹ The psalms do not censor nasty emotions—even in the midst of jubilant praise. What are the people saying to God? If these concluding psalms come from a time after the exile, the people are speaking from their traumatic experience of loss and destruction. They have learned the folly of trusting earthly rulers. Psalm 146 sounds the motif that runs like a continuo under the verses of these concluding songs: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help” (146:3). Even nature itself recognizes the power of God and joins in singing. Fire and hail, snow and frost will sing praise! Mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and all cattle will join in singing (148:8–10)! Why could Psalm 149 not just keep singing in a major key?

If psalms are “the voice of our own common humanity,” we know that new songs often insist that former things must change. In violent counterpoint to the triad of dancing, tambourines, and lyres, the psalmist sings of vengeance, fetters, and chains. Oppressed people in every age have cried out for the defeat of their enemies. At the end of the last century, new songs arose from Latin American base communities. These songs were created by the poorest of the poor. They were unafraid to name the evil forces that kept them down, even as they dared to believe that God would lift them up. “This kind of identification of evil and announcement of the new age can be done legitimately, however, only from the depth of suffering, of utter deprivation. . . . the same words of psalms and hymns used in a position of power would become cynical instruments of exploitation.”²

Praise and protest sing together in Psalm 149. We might imagine a civil-rights march or a protest against the war. The feeling of hope is electric in the crowd marching toward Selma or standing shoulder to shoulder on the Washington Mall. “We shall overcome,” the people are singing. “Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.” There is fervent hope and joy in believing that justice will come, but there are also songs of defiance and anger: “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around,

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2001), 13.

2. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Singing a New Song: On Old Testament and Latin American Psalmody,” *Word and World* 5:1 (Spring 1985): 155–67, quotation on 163.

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establish them in authority over world leaders contending for justice and righteousness.³

Within the reign of their sovereign King, every other authority is at best a secondary loyalty, subject first to the rule of YHWH. The seats of power now shift to the ethics of God's reign, and God's people bear responsibility for holding nations and leaders accountable. Armed with the standards of the kingdom set forth in the law and prophets, they confront the structures of the world, executing "vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples" (v. 7). They bind kings with fetters and nobles in shackles of iron, executing the judgment of God.

Far from settling for a faith experience that separates them from the world, the assembly at worship enacts what it looks like to be those in whom God takes pleasure. As for "prophetic symbolism," the liturgical wielding of that two-edged sword surely serves at least two purposes. First, it establishes the faith community as God's partner in executing justice and holding earthly powers accountable. Second, it eschatologically sets in motion the certainty of God's plan to establish his reign. In the assurance that God's purposes will be accomplished, the assembly dares to be so bold. In its worship, God's plans for God's people and the world begin coming to pass. In the words of the psalmist, "*this* is glory for all his faithful ones" (v. 9b). From *doxa* to *doxa*, from the glory of pleasuring the heart of God to the glory of mission in the world, the journey of the faithful forms in the liturgy of a festival dance.

SEAN A. WHITE

Pastoral Perspective

from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51–53).

With militaristic and violent images that at times seem offensive, the psalmist is calling us to live into a new world, to stand for justice and truth, even though we are up against the power of kings and nobles. If the preacher is going to cross over the tightrope with this psalm, the honest truth of this battle cannot be avoided. It must be addressed.

Facing the truth of the warfare around us, however, leads to another important step our walker must take. It is the step of allegiance. This battle is being fought and won not by *our* power or by *our* strength. It is the hand of God that will bring deliverance. When justice is done and vengeance is executed, it is God who will receive the praise, for it is God who has won the battle. Anyone who ventures into battle knows the inherent danger of losing focus, of beginning to think that "my goals" and "my security" are all that matter. The warrior of Psalm 149 cannot make that mistake. When justice is done for the poor and the humble, it is God who will bring the victory, and it is God who brings order to the world.

Our tightrope-walking preacher ventures out onto the high wire of Psalm 149, anticipating a routine and simple journey to the platform on the other side. Midway through, at verse 6, the walk suddenly becomes more perilous. With a word of honesty about the battles we face in today's world, and a word of allegiance to the God who leads us in those battles, the preacher will make it to the other side. With the help of God, the congregation will make that journey as well!

E. LANE ALDERMAN JR.

3. Ibid.

Psalm 149

Exegetical Perspective

and asserts with firm faith that God will use Israel to bring about justice. Although the words of warfare create ethical problems for many modern readers, it is unlikely that this attitude was perceived as a problem by the ancient Israelites. The psalm expresses Israel's point of view alone. They were a people conquered again and again by more powerful neighbors, subjected to invasion, occupation, taxation, and loss of self-determination for centuries by a variety of powerful foreign rulers. The psalm insists not only that they are a humble people special to God, but also that somehow God will bring justice. The nations that have so wounded them, so overturned their lives, destroyed their well-being—those aggressive empires will face a balancing of the scales.

Hence the God of this psalm is declared to be the Lord of the world, the Overseer of the nations, one who cares mightily for the *shalom* of the people and who appoints agents to execute judgment on oppressors. The absence of names of the kings, nobles, and international powers that will experience this judgment suggests that the psalm is more an act of theological imagination than a program for the vindication of Israel against the nations. Israel often set into poetry its own liturgical and imaginative enactment of justice against the nations. The Psalms are an arena where justice is always done, the afflicted always are seen, and the brokenhearted always healed—if not now, then soon.

The motivation for this psalm of praise rests in complete confidence that the God of Israel is a God of justice, an arbiter among the nations on behalf of the humble, afflicted, and oppressed. They can rest on their couches, shout for joy, and sing praise, for God is bringing about their hopes, lifting up the downtrodden, and punishing the wicked. It is already happening. Praise the Lord!

KATHLEEN M. O'CONNOR

Homiletical Perspective

turn me around, turn me around!" Sometimes anger is directed at a specific societal evil: "Ain't gonna let segregation turn me around!" Sometimes that anger is directed at a specific person: "Ain't gonna let (name of president or governor) turn me around!"

If the psalms are voices of our common humanity, we admit that something inside us cries out for the defeat of our enemies. We want God to put them in their place. In this psalm vengeance is not left to God; rather, those who praise God hold the swords in their hands. The Bible does not erase the parts we do not like. The preacher's task is not to delete these vengeful verses but to acknowledge these violent impulses within the book we call holy. If we prettify the Psalms, we will have to erase the anger and outrage, the sadness and complaining—all the very real emotions expressed in the psalms that preceded these psalms of praise. There is something even more dangerous: if we delete these vengeful words, we will come to believe that other religions are responsible for the violence in this world. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, there have been many accusations against Muslim people and against their holy book, the Qur'an.

Our task is not to censor what was written but to respond in new ways with our songs and our actions. Martin Luther King Jr. taught us to sing new songs; in Selma and in Washington, he refused to sing with a sword in his hands. Though he was clear that dramatic reversals were needed to transform the racist culture of the United States, he insisted on nonviolent responses to his enemies. Dr. King was God's psalmist in our midst. He sang a song that was not always popular: "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence," he said. "It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."³ Perhaps the musicians in the congregation can help us write new words to sing alongside the old.

BARBARA K. LUNDBLAD

3. James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 39.

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**PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11
AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 14:19–31

¹⁹The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The

Theological Perspective

The flight from Egypt begins with great promise, and the Israelites are ready to take on the world. "Prepared for battle," they emerge from Egypt (13:18). By the middle of the next chapter, the very thing for which they have "prepared" is upon them. Literally. Encamped by the Red Sea and surrounded by Pharaoh's cavalry, their bravado fades, and what little position they have is about to be surrendered. Turning to Moses, they fume, "What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?'" (14:11b–12). The way of faith is never easy.

"Let us alone" could very well be the theme of Scripture, for God's people, more often than not, are determined to be self-determined. This is the story from the beginning. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve question God's assessment of how things really are, and the serpent invites them, not so much to see things through his eyes, but to see for themselves. Once they determine that the fruit delights their eyes and arouses desire for wisdom, they eat. In the aftermath, they hide, but God denies them this option. Determined to interrupt their lives, God hunts them down, and human history commences on God's terms (Gen. 3:1–19).

Pastoral Perspective

As the pastor prepares for Sunday's sermon, the events of the week swirl around in her mind. Sadly, this week is no different from most others. There are consequences to people's actions. The cheating spouse ends up destroying a family. The unethical decision at work results in a termination. The heated political rhetoric leads to a violent outburst in the community. A guilty conscience results in night after night of restless sleep. Actions have consequences. Every pastor knows it is true.

Exodus 14 knows that truth as well. The Egyptian army, that symbol of power and oppression, pursues the people of God out into the desert. Having watched God's people cross through the sea on dry land, the Egyptians venture out into the divided waters themselves, only to be tossed into the sea. "The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained" (v. 28). It is a haunting and frightening picture, but every pastor knows it is true. Actions have consequences.

The oppression of God's people could not last forever. God would not allow it. Deliverance for the people of God also meant destruction for those who opposed that deliverance. One step could not

Exodus 14:19–31

Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.”

²⁶Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.” ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Exegetical Perspective

This passage marks the climax of Israel’s escape from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh’s oppressive regime and concludes the conflict between two claimants for lordship, between Pharaoh and the God of Moses and Aaron. The conflict over who controls the earth and its people comes to a high point in the story of the ten plagues, where again and again Moses and Aaron are able to defeat Pharaoh’s magicians, but Pharaoh reneges on his decision to release the Israelites and sets out in pursuit of them with his great military power.

Today’s reading takes place in the darkest hour, the turning point in the narrative. With Pharaoh and the army behind them and the sea in front of them, the Israelites seem to have come at last to the place of extinction, but God’s triumph over Pharaoh and his empire is already anticipated, for God rules Pharaoh’s own heart and will gain the glory “over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers” (v. 18). Exodus presents the rescue through the sea as an epic battle, crafted to reveal the identity of God as ruler of the world with power over all other claimants to such authority.

For the Israelites, poised between life and death, the darkness symbolizes all the powers of death that aim to destroy them; but the darkness is not

Homiletical Perspective

Why could this story not have ended sooner? Perhaps a few verses back, when God threw the Egyptian army into panic, when their chariot wheels got clogged with mud, when they said to one another, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt” (v. 25b). Would that not that have been enough? The army was retreating. The Israelites were safe on the other side. The Egyptian soldiers acknowledged the power of God. Was that not enough? Did the Egyptians have to be drowned in the sea? Did we have to see their bodies dead on the seashore? We know what comes next. Moses and all the people will sing a victory song. We used to sing the song at church camp. Actually, we sang Miriam’s shorter version: “I will sing unto the LORD for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea” (15:1). The song had three different parts, and we sang each part with gusto. If we had had tambourines, we would have joined Miriam and the women in their dancing.

Exodus 14 sounded different when this text was read shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. We saw the dead bodies floating in the water. We saw people stranded on rooftops and clinging to branches. We know that some neighborhoods were flooded to save others that were

Exodus 14:19–31

Theological Perspective

Exodus begins as God meets the Israelites' cry for help with a promise to deliver. However, one lesson most difficult for them to learn is that it is never about them. Even in their deliverance, it is not about them. True, as Moses describes, "The LORD will fight for you," (v. 14), but it is not about them. It is about God. "I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians . . . and so I will gain glory," explains the Lord (v. 17). "The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory . . . over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers" (v. 18). Not only has God denied humanity the option to be left alone, hiding in the garden. God's determination is to be involved. *God's* purposes are working out. *God's* glory is being revealed, not humanity's. Thus, though Moses reassures the people and invites them to "keep still" (v. 14), God's plan lies beyond their personal comfort, and even God's faithful presence grows unpredictable.

Early in the journey, the Lord made himself known in the pillar of cloud and fire. By day and by night, God's dependable presence guided their every move and never left its post in front of them (13:21–22). As the Egyptian army pursued them, God's presence moved behind the Israelites to come between them and the advancing Egyptians (14:19–20). To the Israelites, it must have appeared that after having led them to the shores of the Red Sea, God's presence was withdrawn. The one predictable piece of this entire journey, the mysterious and yet familiar force that drew them forward, seemed to have vanished. From the beginning, this fire and smoke assured them of their next step and invited them to follow, but in their most desperate moment, God's reliable presence failed.

Some would insist this story is about faith, trusting God completely, even when God seems not to be present. The "dark night of the soul," they would insist, actually beckons us to the purity of such allegiance. Often, however, the angst of such moments weighs too heavily to be ignored. What happens when God disappears, when the sensory awareness of God's presence, however that is experienced, is no more?

Imagine the sheer terror as they stood trapped with their backs to the sea as the Egyptians approached. God's move to the rear ultimately served to protect them from the enemy, but this shift in God's faithful presence must have been confusing. No longer did God appear out front, guiding and preparing the way. Instead, they could see only the solitary prophet, Moses, standing at water's edge,

Pastoral Perspective

be taken without the other. Victory for Israel meant destruction for Egypt. "Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (v. 31). Actions have consequences.

The preacher is trying to get those thoughts out of her mind and to focus on the victory of the passage. That is where the good news is going to be found. The people were delivered from bondage; thanks be to God, so are we! We who have been in bondage to sin and brokenness have been rescued. The cries of God's people have not been ignored. Through a cross and an empty tomb, our exodus from sin has begun. That is the promise her people need to hear.

Still, there are those Egyptians, and as much as she tries to avoid them, our preacher's attention keeps being drawn back to their demise. That the writer spends so much time in the passage focusing on their destruction is what bothers her most. Like all pastors, she knows the haunting truth, that too often *we* are those Egyptians, standing in the way of God's truth. Too often *we* are the ones who have denied justice to God's people and turned our backs to the cries of the poor and the oppressed.

Exodus 14 calls us to a celebration of God's victory, but before we can get there, we need the honest confession of our guilt. We have not always been the innocent victims of the sin and brokenness of this world. Too often we have been the very ones who have brought suffering to others, or, at best, we have been the ones who have avoided the cries of those who suffer at the hands of this broken world.

The preacher knows that if she is to proclaim the good news, she must begin with a call to confession. If she is to issue that call to her congregation, she knows it must begin with her own life. It is not just "those" sinners out there who deserve the wrath of God's punishing waters. "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."¹

Before her sermon writing can begin, there must be a time of honest confession. It is not easy, and the temptation is to jump quickly to the victory of God's people. That victory came at a price, and she knows that more often than not, she deserves the wrath of God more than she deserves the triumph of God. After all, actions have consequences. She has seen it in the lives of her congregation, and knows she must confront the truth in her own life.

But the passage is not just about the defeat of the Egyptians. It begins and ends with the victory of

1. Traditional spiritual, author unknown.

*Exodus 14:19–31***Exegetical Perspective**

complete (vv. 19–20). The angel of the Lord and the pillar of cloud move between the Egyptian army and “the army of Israel” (vv. 19–20). The released Hebrew slaves appear as a military force, part of the holy war in which God defeats the powers of evil. The cloud protects the Israelites by creating a barrier of darkness between the two armies, but paradoxically, the cloud “lit up the night” (v. 20).

The next verses reveal more fully what is happening in the conflict between the empire and its slaves (vv. 21–25). God commands Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, drives the east wind, turns the sea into dry land, looks down from the cloud, and then throws “the Egyptian army into panic” (v. 24). It is God alone who is fighting this holy war, God alone who “is fighting for them against Egypt” (v. 25).

God again commands Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, this time to bring the waters back down upon the pursuing hard-hearted Egyptians (vv. 26–29). The waters flood over the Egyptians, the chariots, and the charioteers. The fearful darkness of the night escape ends with the dawn of light and freedom. After Moses’ gesture of arm stretching, “the sea returned to its normal depth” (v. 27). As the Egyptians try to outrun the walls of water, God tosses them into the sea. The oppressive, life-destroying, slave-supporting Egyptian empire is no match for the warrior God who can merely lift them up and fling them into the waters. “Not one of them remained” (v. 28). The Israelites, the afflicted ones whose cries God hears (2:23; 3:7), walk on dry ground through the sea between walls of water on either side of them. They escape death one more time. They walk out of the waters: rescued like the infant Moses, and like Christians in baptism, descending into death and rising as new people, ready for life on a new footing.

The narrative of rescue ends with an interpretation of the whole story (vv. 30–31). The final scene forms a summary statement and a theological conclusion to the whole narrative of escape. As promised to Moses at the burning bush, God came down to deliver the afflicted Israelites from the Egyptians (3:8). The narrative makes clear that this is so, because the Israelites could see the “Egyptians dead on the seashore” (v. 30). They saw the meaning of what they observed. Israel “saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians.” Their response is “fear of the LORD,” that is, a right relationship with God of faith and trust.

The story comes to its completion in the next chapter when the people of Israel, Miriam, the

Homiletical Perspective

more desirable. Even in the midst of devastation, some political leaders sang strange victory songs. A politician from Baton Rouge was overheard telling lobbyists that God finally had cleaned up public housing in New Orleans.¹ Perhaps if he had had a tambourine he would have sung, “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously.”

Does God want such songs? Long after the sea was crossed, after the singing died out, the rabbis struggled with this text. They wondered about many things. Did the people walk into the sea, or did they walk on dry ground? The text seems to say both. Did God part the sea only *after* the people showed their faithfulness by stepping into the water? To answer such questions the sages developed the art of midrash, stories that fill in the gaps, to deal with questions and contradictions. In one story from the Babylonian Talmud, angels watching the victory wanted to sing as the Egyptians went under the waters. God rebuked the angels, saying, “The works of My hands are drowning in the sea, and you would utter song in My presence!” (B. *Sanhedrin* 39b). A rabbi friend told me that over the years this midrash has been retold with God rebuking the Israelites themselves.

The midrash did not erase the text; a midrash never does that. Nor did the midrash ease the tension. How could God chastise the angels when it was clear in the story that God had caused the Egyptians to drown? The text could not be erased, but a new word could be spoken, a word that gathered up other strands of Torah—words about strangers and foreigners, exiles and wanderers. If God is the God of the stranger and the alien, why would God delight in the drowning of foreigners, enemies? Who can answer? Only God is God. Biblical scholar John Collins put it this way: “The Bible does not demystify or demythologize itself. But neither does it claim that the stories it tells are paradigms for human action in all times and places.”² The rabbis found a way to live with the tension: hear the text, yet also hear that God’s heart was broken by the need to destroy these Egyptian people whom he had created.

God’s heart must have been broken even before the levees broke in New Orleans. God saw what thousands of people in the United States refused to see. Why else did some who watched the scenes on television respond by saying, “This can’t be

1. Maureen Dowd, “Neigh to Cronies,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2005, A17.

2. John Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 1 (2003): 20.

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hands raised, as if something were going to happen. He shouted for the Israelites to move forward (v. 15), but in that moment, only a strong wind stirred. There was no immediate parting of the sea, no bridge miraculously appearing over these troubled waters. There was only the prophet Moses, with whom the people were already furious.

Imagine the terrified and angry shouts echoing in Moses' mind: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? . . . What have you done to us? . . . Let us alone!" (vv. 11–12). He must have thought, "What am I doing? Oh, God, what am I doing?" Neither faith nor leadership is easy.

All night Moses stood in the gap, in the strong east wind, believing, or hoping, that God would prove faithful. He had followed God's command: "Lift up your staff. . . . Stretch out your and. . . . Tell the Israelites to go forward" (vv. 15–16). Lifting, stretching, and telling; he hoped his faithfulness would make a difference, and it did.

The waters divided and the people actually went forward into the sea on dry land (vv. 21–22). The thrill was tempered by fear, as the Egyptians continued their pursuit; then the pillar of fire and smoke ominously rose to meet the army in the sea. Thrown into a panic, the Egyptians lost ground and their chariots bogged down; they realized God was fighting against them (v. 24).

Despite appearances, God did not leave the people alone. Moses did not lose faith. As Moses once again stretched out his hand, God caused the water to cover the Egyptians, while the Israelites continued to safety, and finally the people came to fear and believe in the Lord and in his servant Moses (vv. 26–31).

Faith is never easy, but its venture brings God glory. In the fusion of divine presence and faithful response, God's purposes unfold—enemies are conquered, belief is strengthened, and all of us learn the fear of the Lord.

SEAN A. WHITE

Pastoral Perspective

God's people. It is the people of Israel who crossed in the light of day, who "walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left" (v. 29). By the power of God, new life has begun for the people of God. That is the invitation she has to offer in her sermon. It is a message her people need to hear, and it is a message she needs to hear in her own life. Come join the people of God. Walk away from the armies of this world that cling to the power and the pleasure and the lust and the goods of this world. Clinging to those lost icons will have consequences, and ultimately those consequences will bring our destruction.

Even after God enabled them to cross over to the other side, the people of "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore" (v. 30). Even in their moment of victory, they were surrounded by the pain and the loss of this world. That brokenness cannot be ignored, and our preacher knows that the fate of the Egyptians should have been her fate as well. Too often their journey has been hers.

Thanks be to God, there is another way to travel! Having crossed through the waters, the people of Israel are welcomed into a new land, a place of hope and promise. The amazing grace of God's invitation, which the congregation will hear this Sunday, is that in the midst of our confession comes an overwhelming truth. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Undeserved and unearned, the good news rings true. "Thus the LORD saved Israel that day" (v. 30).

E. LANE ALDERMAN JR.

Exodus 14:19–31

Exegetical Perspective

women, and Moses sing and dance in praise of God's work on their behalf (15:1–21). According to this birth story of Israel, this is the human calling, to be free of all forms of slavery to praise God in community.

This story is lost to history. Interpreters fight over when, how, or if it happened. The story is an interpretation of history, raised to the world of symbolic truth, an interpretation of the nation's birth as the creation of God. It asserts that God cares mightily for the afflicted, enslaved, and broken, for those in darkness, those facing death, those about to be annihilated by military might and drowned in the waters of the sea. God comes to deliver them.

The beginnings of Israel's life as a people are rooted in the firm insistence that the nation has little to do with its own coming to be. Instead, the God who sides with them against the forces of empire, the God who hears their cries and sees their suffering, turns dark nights into safe spaces, looks down from clouds, and overturns despair. This is a story of divine grace and generosity, and it claims that God wants freedom for all people, that they might live lives of praise. God protects them and surprises them at the moments when no life seems possible at all. This story tells of the beginnings of Israel; and it prefigures the Christian story of our rescue by a God who attends to the broken and afflicted in ways beyond our imaginings.

KATHLEEN M. O'CONNOR

Homiletical Perspective

America." This *was* America, the America we had not wanted to see. Is God now longing for a midrash shaped by what we have finally come to see? Will seeing change our songs?

Sometimes poets speak when politicians and preachers lose their voices. Ursula Le Guin is one such poet who has come to see. She does not struggle with the gaps in the Hebrew text, but with the gaps in the text of her own life. Whether she is writing in her own voice or speaking as an imagined New Yorker, she comes to new awareness in her poem "On 23rd Street." She speaks of her encounter with a homeless woman who seems to be mentally ill. The woman is dressed in too many layers of clothing and rants about her parents, who failed to tell her about the communists. As the poet walks past the woman, she thinks to herself, what would it be like if I were this woman's mother, seeing my daughter like this? Then the poet realizes: *I am* her mother, her sister, her brother, her father, and I see her like this. She sees other women and men who are too poor to leave the city or the wrong color to find a living-wage job or a decent school. They are women and men seen only as collateral damage.³

Perhaps the ancient writers wanted us to see the bodies dead on the shore. Our question now is this: will we sing a song of victory over these dead bodies? God is longing for a midrash that calls forth our better angels—even as God called forth new visions out of exile. Centuries after the crossing of the sea, with memories of trauma and homelessness, Second Isaiah called people to open their eyes to the needs around us. Isaiah sang his song as questions longing for answers:

Is not this the fast that I choose . . . ?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see them naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself *from your own kin*?
(Isa. 58:6a, 7; emphasis added)

I am her mother, her father, her sister, her brother,
and I see her like this. I will sing unto the Lord, who
has given me relatives I had not seen before.

BARBARA K. LUNDBLAD

3. Ursula K. Le Guin, "On 23rd Street" in *Sixty Odd: New Poems* (Boston & London, Shambhala, 1999), 30.

PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11 AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)

Psalms 114

¹When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,

²Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.

³The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.

⁴The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

⁵Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
O Jordan, that you turn back?

⁶O mountains, that you skip like rams?
O hills, like lambs?

⁷Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,

⁸who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

Theological Perspective

This compact psalm praises the God of nature and of grace. This is the God to whom all creation looks in awe and reverence; and the God who chooses, saves, and preserves a people with whom to be in relationship.

This psalm is the second of the Egyptian Hallel ("praise") psalms (Pss. 113–118), which mention Egypt (Ps. 114:1) and were used in Israel's annual festivals. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the meal began and during the family celebration of Passover. Psalms 115–118 were sung when the meal was completed (see Mark 14:26).

The force of this psalm, set in worship, was to make the scenes present, a kind of "actualization." The psalm moves from reference to the exodus to the poetic descriptions of nature, while the upheavals of the natural world call for all the earth to tremble at the presence of God. Theologically, the psalm shows the unity of nature and history, or that the God of creation is also the God of redemption. In the presence of God, the natural world obeys the creator and retreats in awe as the earth trembles (v. 7).

The God who evokes such a reaction is the God of Israel who liberated the people from Egypt (v. 1), so "Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion" (v. 2) or "Judah became the LORD's holy people, Israel became his own possession" (TEV).

Pastoral Perspective

It was late in the week, later than she wanted it to be. Sunday morning seemed as if it were just a few hours away, and the sermon was not yet written. It had been one of those weeks when one pastoral call after another had overtaken the sermon preparation time. It had been exhausting, but in a powerful way it had been renewing. Weeks like this confirmed why God had called her into the ministry in the first place.

As she read Psalm 114, her text for the week, a smile emerged on her face. Even without her awareness, the events of the past few days had crafted her sermon for this Sunday. Time after time, in one encounter after another, despair had given way to hope.

The psalm spoke of moments of crisis and despair in the history of God's people. The sojourn in Egypt had been a time of living among "a people of strange language" (v. 1). The Sea of Reeds had presented a seemingly insurmountable challenge as the Egyptians pursued them. There had been desert hills and mountains to overcome, thirst and hunger, doubt and despair. Even the final push into the promised land was delayed by their inability to cross the Jordan River.

As she read that psalm, she was remembering the despair on the faces of the young couple who, after years of trying to have children, were coming

Psalm 114

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 114 is the second in a sequence of six psalms (Pss. 113–118) that together are called the Egyptian Hallel and are used in Jewish tradition at the three annual pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles) and Hanukkah. The Hebrew *hallel* means “praise,” and each of these psalms praises the greatness and the graciousness of God, although only Psalm 114 speaks specifically of God’s actions in Egypt on Israel’s behalf. In Jewish family celebrations, Psalms 113–114 are sung just before and Psalms 115–118 just after the Passover Seder meal.

The essentials of the lengthy narrative in Exodus–Joshua are reduced here to eight verses of highly evocative poetry. Hebrew poetry is based on the *rhyming of ideas* rather than rhyming sounds. A verse of poetry consists of two or more parallel statements in which the thoughts expressed in one statement are echoed, contrasted, modified, or amplified in the following statement or statements. When the parallel terms *echo* each other, repeat the same information expressed in slightly different terms, the poetic structure is referred to as *synonymous parallelism*. Each of the eight verses in this tightly crafted psalm follows this poetic format. Furthermore, in each verse there is an *ellipsis* (i.e., a significant word or phrase is explicit in the first line and implicit in its parallel). Thus, for example, the verb that occurs in the first

Homiletical Perspective

God is in the business of creating. God loves to create new things. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). In Psalm 114, a creation hymn poetically condensed into just eight verses, God’s creative power in the cosmos is revealed in the creation of Israel. The psalm celebrates a cataclysmic event that turned the world upside down and reframes the exodus as a new creative act of God. Just as Genesis describes God ordering the world out of a chaotic sea, Psalm 114 tells how YHWH uses the raw, discarded material of an oppressed band of slaves and shapes them into a sanctuary for God, God’s dwelling place (vv. 1–2).

The created world’s reaction to God’s creative intervention is dramatic. In response to God’s new creation of Israel, the natural world abruptly halts its normal proceedings. The massive waters of the sea flee, powerful rivers stop flowing, and immovable mountains skip (vv. 3–4)! All of nature recognizes God’s creative presence in the formation of Israel and responds in awe (v. 7). The psalm seems to function as an implicit exhortation to the people that their own wonder at the mighty acts of God match that of creation.

This psalm functioned in Israel both as a reminder of God’s mighty acts and as a promise of future dynamic intervention. During the days of

Psalm 114

Theological Perspective

The exodus, as the central event in constituting Israel as the people of God, is the source of Israel's knowledge of God—the God who is also creator of all (Gen. 1:1). God the creator is also God the redeemer, an affirmation the Christian church continues to make as we see God's redemptive and liberating action in Jesus Christ.

Three important theological dimensions emerge in this psalm.

God Saves a People (vv. 1–2). Each year, from ancient times to today, the people of Israel remember their liberation from slavery in Egypt in the Passover celebration. In worship and praise, the people celebrate that God formed a people who “went out from Egypt.” As Calvin put it, “This psalm contains a short account of that deliverance by which God, in bringing his people out of Egypt, and conducting them to the promised inheritance, gave a proof of his power and grace which ought to be held in everlasting remembrance.”¹

Images of salvation or redemption are found throughout the Bible. The exodus event and the covenant enacted at Sinai are major sources from which our understandings of God's actions to establish a relationship with the people of God begin. The people are saved to be God's holy people, God's possession, and to live in obedience, trust, and love in relation to the God of their salvation. Calvin said, “The design of that wonderful deliverance was, that the seed of Abraham might yield themselves wholly to God, who, receiving them by a gracious act of adoption, purposed that they should be to him a holy and peculiar people.”²

Worship celebrates this salvation, beginning in the exodus and, for the church, culminating in Jesus Christ. This is the basis from which our knowledge of God and our service to God flow.

God Is the Lord of All (vv. 3–7). The images in these verses evoke God's continuing redemption, guidance, and lordship over all creation. The God of the exodus led the people across the Jordan River (Josh. 3:9–17) to safety. The “Jordan turned back” or “stopped flowing” (Ps. 114:3 TEV), so the people crossed on dry land, reminding them of the earlier crossing of the sea (Exod. 14:10–31). The God who saved continues to save and to turn certain death into life. God guides the people to the promised

Pastoral Perspective

to grips with the fact that they were infertile. Their whole identity seemed at stake. All of their dreams were vanishing. They had sat in her study earlier that week, pouring out their hearts. It was as if they were facing a life of living in a land with “a people of strange language.” This was an identity they had never faced, and they had no idea how to cope, how to build a life with a new set of dreams.

Not long after her conversation with this couple, a call came from the regional hospital. Mr. Evans, a patriarch of the church, had been admitted and was asking to see her. He was in the late stages of cancer, and it was one of those honest moments in which he was opening up about events in his past. While she sat by his bedside, he wondered aloud whether or not he had been a good husband and father. He had tried, but there were those moments when life's challenges had consumed him. He did not refer to Psalm 114, but his words spoke of the hills and mountains he had faced, the obstacles that had stood in his way.

These stories and so many others flashed through her mind as she read the psalm. There were the events on cable news . . . more violence in the Middle East, more contentious division in American politics, more misplaced priorities among the American people. There were her own frustrations with the church's leadership, which did not grasp her vision of transforming unused space into a shelter for the homeless during the upcoming winter months. Why could they not see the possibilities for real ministry? There was her own health, the blood tests that repeatedly signaled that something was not right.

She read the psalm over again, and this time she caught the transition. There it was, staring at her in the closing verses. The psalm was taking her from despair into hope. These stories from the past were the foundation of her hope in the present.

The psalmist had wondered why God had delivered the people. Why has God done such marvelous acts? “Why is it, O sea, that you flee?” (v. 5) The question is answered in the closing couplet. God's great acts from the past give us confidence and hope in the present. Because of God's deliverance in the days of the exodus, we have confidence of God's deliverance in the days of our trials.

She smiled as she read the psalm, because she knew that God had already written her sermon through the events of the week. Her compassionate listening as she helped the young couple learn a new language for their life; her words of promise and hope sitting by that bedside of a dying man; her own confidence as she prepared for her next church

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, Calvin Translation Society, *Comm. Psalm 114:1*.

2. *Ibid.*

Psalm 114

Exegetical Perspective

line of verse 1 (“went out”) is assumed but not said in the rhyming second line.

As is often the case with poetic parallelism, one of the parallel ideas is spoken of in more general, literal, or prosaic terms, while its corresponding idea is spoken of in more figurative or more specific terms. Thus the entities that have literal, prosaic names “Israel” and “Egypt” in the first half of verse 1 are spoken of in more figurative terms in the second half of the verse. In the poetic parallels, Israel is called “the house of Jacob,” and Egypt is called “a people of strange language.” These poetically parallel statements represent two ways of describing the same event (Israel’s exodus from Egypt).

The poetic structure indicates that the terms “Judah” and “Israel” in verse 2 also should be understood as roughly synonymous terms. Instead of highlighting the later political divisions during the period of the divided monarchy, the poetry indicates that “Judah” and “Israel” together refer to the whole of the promised land inhabited by God’s chosen people. In a similar way, the parallel words “sanctuary” and “dominion” also express one complex idea rather than two. Since the word translated “sanctuary” denotes a people set apart, the complete thought expressed in both lines is that the entity composed of both Judah and Israel became God’s set-apart dominion.

The psalm moves quickly from Israel’s escape from Egypt (the subject of the OT reading for the day) to their entry into the promised land, then mentions their wilderness experiences briefly in verse 8 (the episode of water from the rock), as if speaking of one continuous event. While verse 3a seems to refer to the sea that was involved in the escape from Egypt, the second line, verse 3b, clearly refers to the Jordan River and entry into the promised land. Even if the psalm is referring to two different events, the poetic structure implies that the two miracles were facets of the same saving event. Both demonstrate God’s power over the barriers (waters) that stood between the people of God and their promised land.

The waters and the mountains or hills are pictured as living creatures who can see, leap, and flee in fear (vv. 3–6). Several ancient Near Eastern texts speak of a struggle between a creator god and a personified sea who has to be restrained in order for creation to take place. Poetic texts in the OT also refer to YHWH’s victories over Yam/Sea, River, or Many Waters (especially in the Psalms and Job, but also see Hab. 3:8–15; Isa. 51:9–11). However, in Psalm 114 there

Homiletical Perspective

exile, this psalm gave Israel hope that the God who transformed them from slaves into a chosen people would usher in a day of liberation. Many years later, Jews associated Psalm 114, along with the other *hallel* psalms (Pss. 113–118), with the celebration of Passover. Traditionally, Psalms 113–114 are sung before the Passover meal and Psalms 115–118 are sung after the meal. In this context, the psalm prepares Israel for its greatest commemorative act of God’s saving power and special concern for the people of Israel.

Just as God’s creative activity did not cease with the ordering of the cosmos, it also did not stop with the establishment or even the renewal of Israel. God is continually the God who proclaims, “Behold, I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:5 RSV). The remarkable response of creation in Psalm 114 finds a striking parallel in the climactic work of Christ on the cross. When the Christ was crucified, the sun stopped shining and the whole sky turned black (Luke 23:44–45). At the moment of Jesus’ death, the earth shook and rocks split open (Matt. 27:51). Three days later God raised Christ from the dead, creating for him a new body (1 Cor. 15:44). Christ became the “first fruits” of God’s new creation (1 Cor. 15:20). The resurrection of Christ gives all a foretaste of the new creation waiting for God’s people.

This psalm, therefore, celebrates God’s creative power at work in two primary ways: in the life of Israel and in the natural world. First, as a Passover hymn, Psalm 114 serves as an exhortation to Israel to celebrate the creative power of God at work in their life. The psalm’s trajectory continues to provide a matrix for Christians in the context of celebrating the Eucharist. It provides a fresh perspective on the power and significance of this sacrament. As we partake, we experience once again the wonder and amazement at what God has done through Christ in transforming a powerless and foolish group of individuals into the people of God (1 Cor. 1:26–31).

Second, as a creation hymn, Psalm 114 celebrates the powerful interaction between God and the natural world. God acts upon creation by converting rock into water (v. 8). The earth responds to God’s mighty works by trembling at the presence of the Lord (v. 7). Creation expresses deep reverence for its Creator. Like humans, the earth also longs for God’s new creation, when it “will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:21).

For Christians, Passover and creation dimensions of this psalm come together in the celebration of the Eucharist. Through “the blood of his cross,” God

Psalm 114

Theological Perspective

land, where they will live out their relationship with their Lord.

A God who can save like this evokes responses, not only from people, but from the whole created order. The sea, the Jordan River, and the mountains all exhibit awe and fear in the face of the God who created all things (vv. 3–6). In addressing these natural features as persons, the psalmist says, “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the God of Jacob” (v. 7). God is the Lord of all the lands and seas as well as those who live to be God’s people. Ultimate allegiance of all things is to the Lord of all. This is a continuing word to Israel, and to us.

God Brings New Life (v. 8b). A final allusion here points to the positive dimension of God’s creating and sustaining power, the power to create new life. The God who “turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water” is a reference to a wilderness event when God brought forth water from a rock, “so that the people may drink” (Exod. 17:6; cf. Deut. 8:15).

God’s mighty power over nature brings forth the means to new life for people in need. The earth trembles to recognize such an awesome God! Here we find the majesty of God and God’s care for Israel. The psalmist recognizes God’s power to bring “pools of water” and “flowing springs” from the rocks and “solid cliffs” (TEV). Nothing is too hard for this God! It is this God who continues to nourish and sustain the people. Water for life can emerge from the most barren places, due to the goodness and providential care of the creator, who is also the redeemer. In the “presence” (v. 7) of such a God, our response is awe and worship.

Since the sixth century, the church has used this psalm for those who were dying and for the burial of the dead. It has also been used at Easter, as a song of praise, because of the deliverance we have in Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all and brings new life.

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

officers’ meeting—all found their strength in the promise that God is still at work.

God’s deliverance did not end with the events of the exodus. These stories from the past really are our stories for the present. The empty tomb is not just an event from long ago. It is the promise of today, the hope for our world. “Because I live,” Jesus reminded his followers, “you also will live” (John 14:19).

Her week had been filled with despair. Terrorism and bloodshed and death seemed to rule the day all around the world. Anxiety about health and about life’s meaning seemed overwhelming; but in story after story, the despair had given way to hope.

She knew without a doubt that there would be more challenges in the upcoming weeks. The names would change and the particular stories would be different, but the despair would still be present. The doctor’s office would call with the results of those tests, and those obstinate officers would be coming to the meeting Monday night.

However, those challenges would not have the final word! “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water” (vv. 7–8). In the face of a God who brings water out of a rock—and life out of a tomb—the struggles and frustrations of the day are already defeated. At the hand of God, despair has turned to hope! It is a week to be reminded of Isaac Watts’s powerful words: “Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come!”

E. LANE ALDERMAN JR.

Psalm 114

Exegetical Perspective

is no hint of the ancient Near East struggle motif; there is no contest. Here the personified sea, River Jordan, hills, and mountains seem terrified by the mere appearance of the God of Jacob. The questions addressed to them in verses 5–6 are taunts that ridicule them for their lack of courage.

When the verb translated “skip” or “skipping” (*raqad*, vv. 4, 6) is used in contexts of merriment, it connotes dancing (e.g., Eccl. 3:4). However, in this context of fear and flight *raqad* implies running away in leaps and bounds. In Psalm 29:6 the same verb is used to describe how the mountainous areas called Lebanon and Sirion respond to the voice of YHWH.

Oddly enough, the proper name YHWH is not used in this psalm. The word that is parallel to the God of Jacob in verse 7 is *adon* (the generic honorific meaning “lord, master, or sovereign”). Since the rest of the psalm celebrates the promised land’s reaction to the coming of Israel’s God, the word *erets* in verse 7 (which can mean either “land” or “earth”) probably refers to Canaan rather than to the whole earth. “Tremble” seems like a very bland translation in light of the Hebrew word’s more active meanings (“writhe,” “twist,” “whirl”). The same verb is translated “whirl” in Psalm 29:9.

Verse 8 flashes back to Israel’s adventures in the wilderness to explain the land’s fearful reaction. The presence of the God of Jacob overwhelms the land because of the power God has demonstrated on Israel’s behalf. Once again, poetic parallelism would indicate that verse 8 describes one event rather than two. While the Pentateuch seems to describe two separate occasions on which God brought forth water out of rock (at Horeb in Exod. 17:2–7 and at Kadesh in Num. 20:2–13), both texts call the resulting place the “waters of Meribah” (quarreling). Whether or not the two prose narratives represent two different occasions or (as many scholars conclude) two different accounts of the same occasion, the poet speaks of one highly memorable demonstration of God’s power over both the waters and the rocks of the land that represents Israel’s destination and God’s dominion.

KATHLEEN A. ROBERTSON FARMER

Homiletical Perspective

will reconcile all of creation, human and nonhuman alike, making all things new (Col. 1:20). Therefore, we go forth from participating in the sacrament with new hope and joy. The Eucharist stands as an affirmation and a promise that God will restore all things in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:10).

Ultimately Psalm 114 offers an implicit exhortation to Christians to participate in God’s creative acts. God is going to bring about a radical transformation of this world, a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1). This does not mean we should live passively, waiting for God to take care of things. Our task is to partner with God in bringing about God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. It is not our responsibility to build the kingdom, “but we can build *for* the kingdom.”¹ The hope of God’s new creation “inspires and empowers Christians to stand strong, work hard, pray more fervently, and live with compassion.”² This involves inviting others to participate with God. It also involves the responsible treatment and care for creation.³ Finally, it involves following the example of creation in celebrating God’s creative power.

DAVE BLAND

1. N. T. Wright, with Kevin and Sherry Harney, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, Participant’s Guide (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 82.

2. Ibid.

3. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 210.

PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11 AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)

Exodus 15:1b–11, 20–21

^{1b}“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

²The LORD is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

³The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name.

⁴“Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea;
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

⁵The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.

⁶Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power—
your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.

⁷In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;
you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.

⁸At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

Theological Perspective

Many scholars regard this Song of Moses or Song of the Sea as among the oldest forms of Hebrew poetry. Its ancient origins reinforce its importance as a statement of Israel’s faith, as constituted by the events it praises: the people’s liberation from Egypt and the provision of salvation by the Lord who for nation and individuals is “my strength and my might” (v. 2).

The form of the song has been variously assessed by scholars as hymn, enthronement psalm, litany, victory psalm, and thanksgiving psalm. Elements of each of these can be found throughout, but no one genre can fully describe how the song functioned in Israel’s early life.

The song praises God’s saving actions for the people who had left Egypt in the exodus but faced potential destruction from their pursuit by Pharaoh’s soldiers as they stood on the brink of a water body (Sea of Reeds) that threatened to drown them. The song exults in the Lord as “a warrior” (v. 3) who caused the floods to cover the Egyptians so that the Lord’s “adversaries” were overthrown. The enemies were “consumed . . . like stubble” (v. 7) and “sank like lead in the mighty waters” (v. 10). None among the “gods” is like this Lord, who is “majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders” (v. 11).

Pastoral Perspective

A charge that is often repeated at the close of worship invites believers to “Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak, and help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹ We are God’s people, sent into the world to embody the divine love and grace we have received.

Living this graciously is easiest if we trust the people around us and our world is not too challenging. If we are surrounded by people with whom we feel comfortable, it is not difficult to be irenic and supportive. If things are going our way, we can more easily choose what seems to be good. However, when the harsh realities of life confront us, living into this charge can be more difficult.

A case in point is the text before us, the songs that Moses and Miriam sing on the shore of the Red Sea. We see little in these texts to suggest that the children of Israel are ready to return no one evil for evil—quite the contrary. This text is filled with vindictiveness and a delight in the sufferings of others. God has vanquished the Egyptians, and the children of Israel could not be happier. The singers

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 78.

Exodus 15:1b–11, 20–21

⁹The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.'

¹⁰You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

¹¹"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?"

.....
²⁰Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and
all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. ²¹And
Miriam sang to them:

"Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Exegetical Perspective

With exuberance, Moses, the Israelites, and Miriam celebrate their deliverance from bondage, the defeat of their Egyptian enemies, and their safe passage across the Red Sea. They are now far away from Pharaoh and his taskmasters, who have inflicted harsh oppression upon God's people.

This lectionary passage enjoys a rich tradition and background. Verses 1b–11 have typically been ascribed to Moses, with verses 20–21 credited to Miriam, Moses' sister. This traditional ascription of verses 1b–11 to Moses, however, was challenged in the mid-twentieth century. All of the literary, textual, sociological, historical, and social-scientific evidence points to Miriam as the author. Thus verses 1b–11 can be appropriately designated the Song of the Sea and classified as a victory song, a genre more often associated with women than with men. In the ancient Near East, the women greeted victorious soldiers returning home with song, dance, and drums. Women were expert percussionists in the ancient world, as depicted by small Iron Age terracotta figurines of women drummers.

Many aspects of the song are mythological in form and content. The source for many of its referents is most likely the epic poetry of ancient Canaan, particularly the story of the god Baal's victory over the sea monster. In ancient

Homiletical Perspective

The Song of Moses may be one of Israel's oldest hymns of praise. In this song, offered on the shores of the Red Sea after the Lord's victory over the powerful Egyptian army, Israel can no longer contain her joy. The people burst forth in song. Such a response was not uncommon. When Israel was at her best, Israel made praising God a way of life. The book of Psalms witnesses to such a lifestyle (its Hebrew title, *Tehillim*, means "praises") and preserves for Israel a rich collection of songs.

This commitment to praise is evident throughout Scripture. For example, regardless of how harsh their words of judgment were to the people, all the prophetic books end on a note of hope and adulation. Paul himself displays this natural bent as he frequently and unexpectedly breaks forth in praise to God as he writes his letters to the early churches (e.g., Rom. 1:25; 9:4–5; 11:33–36; 16:27). Israel, the Jews in exile, and the early Christians always looked for opportunities to sing praises to God.

Exodus 15 forms the headwaters of this rich tradition. The poem traces the story of liberation from oppression under Pharaoh to the land of promise. It expresses bold, passionate faith and confidence in God's future deliverance. It is a faith well placed, because the story of deliverance from oppression is the story of YHWH. Regardless

Exodus 15:1b–11, 20–21

Theological Perspective

The Song of Miriam (Moses' sister) that follows is a festive celebration of Miriam and "all the women" as they praised: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (vv. 20–21).

These ancient songs celebrating the crossing of the sea and the ultimate safety of the new nation of Israel form a continuing, poetic remembrance of the great "narrative" event of the crossing of the sea in the context of the exodus from Egypt. As such, they reflect the way of God in working to form the new nation that would be "the people whom you redeemed" (v. 13). The people were saved at the Sea of Reeds, led into the Sinai wilderness, and journeyed through the wilderness to the promised land of Canaan. Their relationship with God was sealed through covenants. They were to serve the God who was actively powerful in knowing them, planning for them, and willing to be their God as they were God's people.

The importance of these songs in Israel extends to the church in seeing and celebrating God's actions in salvation history. Centrally, the songs describe what are considered basic, constitutive events in establishing the nation and faith of Israel and God's relationship to the people. This runs through the Hebrew Bible and is consummated in the coming of Jesus Christ as the one in whom Christian salvation is found.

Three theological dimensions are important.

A Testimony to Redemption. The songs in the mouths of Moses and Miriam have the force of being the testimony of all Israel to what God had done. The exodus event is a central and determinative feature of Old Testament theological understanding. The songs amplify an important feature of the exodus—the crossing of the sea; and elevate that event to the status of praise. The meaning of the deliverance is found in what Israel was saved from and also what Israel was saved for—service as the people of God.

This pattern is replicated, redemptively, in Christian experience. The people of God find liberation from the power of sin and its dangers, and find redemption in Jesus Christ. Paul writes of the memory of ancestors who "passed through the sea" (1 Cor. 10:1) and the "spiritual rock" from whom they drank "was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). Redemption now is "in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

God Alone Saves. Both poems praise God alone as the one who saves the people. God's "right hand . . .

Pastoral Perspective

of these songs delight in the way God tossed the Egyptians into the sea; they revel in remembering how the Egyptians went down like stones and sank like lead. These singers express no remorse, no empathy at the sight of these violent deaths. They sing; they celebrate; they delight in destruction.

The singers' vindictiveness is perhaps understandable, shaped as it was by centuries of slavery and a narrow escape from death. The people of Israel had suffered mightily at the hands of the Egyptians. Their recollection of oppression made it a delight for them to watch the Egyptians be eradicated. We appreciate where these singers are coming from.

In fact, some of us have entertained similar feelings, have we not? How many of us have been relieved by the deaths of Afghani or Iraqi militants? How many of us have taken satisfaction from the forced deportation of undocumented workers in the United States? How many of us have been gladdened to see street criminals behind bars? If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that sometimes we take pleasure when those we fear or distrust get what we think they deserve. It is a deeply human instinct to distance ourselves from people we perceive to be dangerous, and when they get their just deserts, it is also deeply human to feel happy relief. At times we stand with the Israelites on that far shore and look back gleefully on the misfortune of those who threaten us.

At the same time, we stand with the children of Israel and look back on a God who saves us, do we not? God's gracious and redemptive presence is the other truth that weaves through these songs. Although the children of Israel are inclined to forget or overlook it, God has seen their suffering, heard their cries, and delivered them. These songs recognize God's emancipating power. Moses and Miriam sing, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" (v. 11). Who, indeed, is like our God? God has the strength to destroy the mightiest human army in a morning. The Holy One can command water and wind, fire and cloud. God can do what humanity cannot. God can and does work miracles, and God transforms a hopeless, dire, and dangerous situation into a promising future. Praise God, for whom all things are possible.

Moses and Miriam sing their songs in hindsight, standing on the shore of the Red Sea. Behind them they see symbols of Egyptian power and recall its brutality. They see the effects of God's power over

Exodus 15:1b–11, 20–21

Exegetical Perspective

Mesopotamian and Canaanite mythology, the sea oftentimes represents a force of chaos and destruction that threatens the gods and the world. The conquest of the sea signifies the reestablishment of cosmic order and the royal rule of the chief god of gods. Israel's Song of the Sea reflects many of these ancient influences, and although the song is a victory song, it is also a song of praise that celebrates the power and the might of Israel's God.

The Song can be divided into units: verses 1b–3, a confession; verses 4–10, a description of God's power; verse 11, a confession; (verses 12–19 are not part of the lection); verse 20, a narrator's comment; and verse 21, an expression of celebration.

The song opens with Moses and the Israelites confessing to their wondrous relationship with their God (vv. 1b–3). God is worthy of praise because God has defeated Israel's enemies, the Egyptians, by casting their horses and riders into the sea (v. 1b). This first verse alludes to Exodus 14, where the biblical writer recounts the fate of the Egyptians who have pursued the Israelites as far as the Red Sea. Because of God's great show of power, the Israelites are able to speak of God in personal terms: "my strength," "my might," "my salvation," "my God," "my father's God," who is deserving of praise and worthy of being exalted (v. 2). Israel comes to know, love, and respect God because of what God has done on Israel's behalf.

Verse 3 is the first time in the Old Testament that God is referred to as a "warrior." This image of God signifies cosmic power and becomes a predominant metaphor for God in the writings of the prophets (e.g., Isa. 19:1–17; Jer. 25:30–31; Ezek. 21:1–17). The assertion that the name of God is "LORD" underscores the power of Israel's God (e.g., Isa. 42:8; 59:19; Jer. 16:21; 22:2; Amos 9:6).

The celebration of God's awesome power continues in verses 4–10. Clearly the Egyptians are no real threat to Israel's God, whose right hand and smoking nostrils cause the Egyptian warriors to come to naught. Even the strongest men—the "picked officers" of Pharaoh—cannot stand up to the power of Israel's God. Israel's adversaries are also God's adversaries (v. 7). The elements of the natural world respond in accordance to the anger and liberating initiatives of Israel's "storm god," who is not only Lord of history but also Lord of all creation.

The anthropomorphic use of the right hand as a source of divine power becomes a dominant image in the Psalms (e.g., Pss. 44:3; 48:10; 60:5, 8; 98:1; 110:5; 118:15, 16; 139:10). The image of God's

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of external circumstances, YHWH makes the world secure for those who enter into covenant relationship with YHWH. The only proper and natural response for Israel is to worship God.

The Song of Moses consists of three parts. The hymnic opening announces the fundamental victory: YHWH has thrown horse and rider into the sea (vv. 1–3). The song then retells the liberation story of YHWH's defeat of a superpower; God's power is never even contested (vv. 4–12). All the people celebrate YHWH's victory. The third stanza (vv. 13–18) describes the aftermath of victory as Israel moves through occupied territory. This is a victory parade, a triumphal entry. Those along the parade route watch in awe at the steadfast love displayed by God (v. 13). God's *hesed*, or loyalty, is demonstrated across many generations and in many different circumstances. When others hear of the victory, they too will break out in praise; they will experience the strength and salvation that is generated through the singing of the song. God's adversaries are dismayed. They melt, tremble, and are immobilized by fear because of YHWH (vv. 14–16)! The song concludes with the Lord enthroned (v. 18).

God's people are people of praise. They look for opportunities to create and sing songs of praises to their God at all times. Put an individual in the simplest cabin, and he or she will plant petunias all around. Send a person to live in a cave, and that person will take berries, extract the juice, and make art on the walls. Put someone near a pile of sticks, and that individual will take one of those sticks, make a flute, and play a favorite tune. Imprison a human being, and he or she will sing songs at midnight. Extract from a person's life a healthy dose of celebration, and you reduce that person to something less than a human being. Praise is fundamental to what it means to be Christian.

In the end, Christians discover that there is restorative power in celebration and praise. The African American tradition discovered this long ago, while in slavery; their courage to praise God, even while they were chained and in despair, provides for all a model to emulate. A special restorative power is released to Christians when they are able to lift their voices in praise to God.

Praise is by no means the only focus of the exodus, of course, but in a sense the whole event leads to and culminates in the kind of praise exemplified in the Song of Moses. The song reinforces the purpose of the exodus, that Israel might serve God and that the nations might know

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Theological Perspective

shattered the enemy” (v. 6) and in the “greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries” (v. 7). Israel “did not co-operate or even play a minor role. . . . Yahweh alone effected the miracle at the sea.”¹ Put another way, [YHWH] “threw horse and rider into the sea, and never an Israelite had the slightest hand in the matter.”² The initiative and action in Israel’s liberation and salvation was God’s—God “has become my salvation” (v. 2). This continues, so, out of God’s love, God “gave his only Son” for salvation (John 3:16).

Since salvation is from God, the appropriate response is praise. The songs of Moses and Miriam are sung and worship begins: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously” (v. 20). God’s divine work brings the new life; worship, praise, song, and joy are the responses of gratitude, in ancient days and in our own day.

God Acts and Will Act. The praise of God in these songs is focused on God’s mighty acts in history. Moses’ song goes on to praise God’s leading the people into the promised land (vv. 12–19). In recounting the victory at the sea, the songs praise God in the present for what was done in the past, recognizing God’s present “presence” and the ongoing anticipation of God’s continuing actions in the present and future. As Childs notes, “the tone of the poem is closely akin to that of Joshua in celebrating the unbroken solidarity of Yahweh and his people which results in victory (Josh. 1.9; 2.9, etc.).”³

God’s acts of redemption, liberation, and salvation have continuing effects in present and future. They also assure us, in hope, that God’s solidarity with us—now in Jesus Christ—is leading us toward “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). God is with us and for us, from exodus to the end of time!

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

human force and natural forces. They see their own deliverance, and they know that God is responsible.

The God who delivers the children of Israel is not just any God. This is the Holy One of Israel, and of this God these songs make a bold claim: God exercises redemptive power in the realm of human politics, on behalf of the weakest. God takes a side politically, and the side God takes is that of the disadvantaged. We do not always like to hear this bold claim. It makes us uncomfortable. The church should focus on spiritual matters, not social or political issues, some of us insist. This text does not spiritualize anything. These songs proclaim a God who wades deep into the waters of the uses and abuses of human power, and who stands firmly on the side of the underprivileged.

Go out into the world in peace. This will not be easy. The harsh truth is that, like the children of Israel, we live in a world where people oppress and brutalize others, a world that uses violence to solve problems, a world in which people tend to forget the One who creates and redeems. Yet God is here, among us, and God redeems. God transforms desperation into hope. These songs bear witness to the complicated nature of our existence. We are set amid the harsh realities of human history, God’s commitment to human wholeness, and the wonder of God’s redemptive power. How shall we live, challenged and graced as we are?

The invitation of our charge is to live boldly in the spirit of God’s redemptive presence. Yes, the world is harsh, scary, violent, and not readily receptive of the gospel, but God is with us. We are not alone. That is the good news that these songs celebrate.

DEBORAH J. KAPP

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 249.

2. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1970), 356–57.

3. Childs, 252.

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Exegetical Perspective

smoking nostrils that send forth a destructive wind is adopted in Psalm 18:8, 19. The unbridled arrogance of the Egyptian warriors comes to the fore in verse 9 as they imagine that their sword, their “hand,” will destroy the Israelites. Little do these warriors realize that they are powerless before the might of Israel’s God, whose breath causes the sea to cover them, so that they sink like lead in the mighty waters. Thus both the Egyptians and the Israelites learn that neither human power nor the power of any god can surpass the power of Israel’s God.

The double rhetorical question in verse 11 highlights the majesty, splendor, and sovereignty of Israel’s God, who cannot be compared to any of Egypt’s gods. Here God’s holiness is associated with God’s wondrous deeds on Israel’s behalf (which become curses and plagues for the Egyptians). To this mighty God, Israel is wholeheartedly devoted; but such devotion will be short lived (see Isa. 2:8; Ezek. 14:6; 16:36; Hos. 4:17; Mic. 1:7).

The Song of Miriam (vv. 20–21) describes how the women among the Israelites celebrate the victory in both song and dance. In the history of the tradition, the Song of Miriam most likely preceded the Song of the Sea (vv. 1–19), and like the Song of the Sea, Miriam’s Song is considered to be some of the oldest poetry recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, is mentioned by name in the book of Exodus only in these two verses (although she may be the same sister who watched over the infant Moses in his basket of reeds in Exod. 2:4, 7–8). Miriam is called a “prophet,” which attests to the fact that both men and women were raised up by God to fulfill this divine office. Miriam’s Song functions not only as an antiphon to the Song of the Sea but also as an experience of solidarity, as the Israelites celebrate their freedom from oppression and the graciousness of their liberating God.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

of God’s power. The refrain all through the opening chapters of Exodus emphasizes this purpose: “Let my people go, so they might worship me” (5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Through their liberation and worship, Israel displays God’s power to other nations so that those nations will come to know YHWH. Additionally, God’s liberation of Israel at the Red Sea creates hope for the future. As Israel continues on her journey for decades and centuries to come, biblical writers regularly hearken back to the exodus and the Red Sea event as a source of hope.

In the end, everything turns on the praise of God’s glory. The nations see the great works God has done through Israel and praise God’s name. Israel, for its part, reflects on its deliverance from bondage, and remembers to hope; hope, in turn, generates the lifeblood of praise. In this way, the Song of Moses typifies the appropriate response of God’s people to the mighty works of their Maker, both past and future. God takes the human impulse for praise and gives to it an object worthy of our adulation.

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**PROPER 20 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18
AND SEPTEMBER 24 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 16:2–15

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” ⁸And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard

Theological Perspective

To read the accounts of the people of Israel in the wilderness, one gets the impression that all they did was complain. The people’s grumbling is a frequent theme. Exodus 16 begins by saying that “the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness” (v. 2). Their complaints were directed against their leaders, but in a larger sense, they were directed against God (v. 8). The people lamented their current situation, even complaining of God’s deliverance: “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread” (v. 3). Now they faced the problem of lack of bread.

To wish to have continued to sit by the “fleshpots” of Egypt—and not to have been liberated by God—was to reject the relationship God was establishing with the people. It was, as Brevard Childs notes, “not a casual ‘gripe,’ but unbelief which has called into question God’s very election of a people.”¹ Despite the gravity of the people’s murmurings, God promised Moses to “rain bread from heaven” so each day the people could “gather enough for that day” (v. 4). On the sixth day, they would receive twice as much bread, and on the seventh day, called a “sabbath” (v. 23), there would

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 285.

Pastoral Perspective

One of the stark realities of the human condition is our physical fragility. Modern conveniences, access to good health care, and privileges of class sometimes make it easy for us to forget the limitations of our bodies, but human we are. Every day we need to sleep, drink, and eat in order to sustain our lives. We need to pause on a regular basis to renew ourselves, regain energy, and keep going.

A related truth is that human labor produces much of our food. Even the most basic foodstuffs, like bread, result from plowing, planting, tending, harvesting, processing, baking, packaging, marketing, buying, and final preparation. We are dependent on the labor of others for the food we eat. At an even more basic level, we are dependent on God’s good creation for this food. When we eat, we ingest the energy of the sun that is found in earth, plant, and animal life.¹ These are God’s gifts to us and, indeed, to all of life. These are the work of God’s hand, God’s breath, God’s word. We are dependent on both God’s work and human labor for the food we eat.

In this text from Exodus, our fragility and dependence meet up with another reality of the

1. William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991). Cronon examines the interconnections of nature, work, food, consumption, and urbanization.

Exodus 16:2–15

the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD.”

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’”

¹³In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.”

Exegetical Perspective

For the Israelites who are traveling through the wilderness, death back in Egypt seems easier to bear than this new, uncharted terrain that calls the people to an ever-deepening faith and trust in their liberating and gracious God. Exodus 16:2–15, the story about the manna and the quail, can be divided into six units: a complaint against Moses and Aaron (vv. 2–3); divine address to Moses (vv. 4–5); address of Moses and Aaron to the Israelites (vv. 6–8); Moses’ address to Aaron, Aaron’s address to the Israelites, and their response (vv. 9–10); divine address to Moses (vv. 11–12); and a divine response to the Israelites’ complaint: quail and manna (vv. 13–15).

The story opens with all of the Israelites complaining against Moses and Aaron (vv. 2–3). Soon after the people experience freedom from bondage and a God who loves them dearly, they are faced with deprivation and hunger. In Egypt they had food, and now they lament that they did not stay in Egypt and die under the heavy hand of Pharaoh rather than here in the desert.

When the people were oppressed in Egypt, God heard and responded to their murmurings (Exod. 2:23–24; 3:7–8). Now God once again responds to the anxious people: God offers a word to Moses that reveals what is about to occur (vv. 4–5). God promises to rain down bread from

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Today is the fifth Sunday of the lectionary’s Exodus journey. One week ago Israel passed through the sea. Today the story continues; it is now one month later and Israel has journeyed into the wilderness. The exhilaration of the glorious triumph over Pharaoh has quickly become exasperation and enervation. “The whole congregation of the Israelites complained.” What resonates with contemporary hearers of this text? The frequency of complaint, seven times in these fourteen verses, locates us in the spiritual wilderness of ingratitude. The urgency of hunger locates too many in the physical wilderness of deprivation.

This text may be more problematic for the preacher than for the congregation. The homiletical connections to complaining congregations are plentiful! Even the use of the word “congregation” here pulls the reading and hearing of this text to our immediate contexts of life together. Complaint is often a short step from conflict, when leadership motives are impugned and an idealized past is lifted up as an escape route from an unimagined future. Rhetorical hyperbole and personal accusations escalate complaint to conflict, as the text demonstrates. “The *whole* congregation” complained; “*You* have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this *whole* assembly with hunger” (vv. 2, 3). Preaching this text may require pastoral restraint in comparing

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be no provision. The people would receive “meat to eat in the evening” and their fill of “bread in the morning” (v. 8). Despite their ingratitude for salvation in the exodus and their serious statements toward rejecting their emerging relationship with God, still God provided. God provided for them quail in the evenings (v. 13). In the mornings, the people received “a fine flaky substance” called “manna” (v. 31), which was “the bread that the LORD has given you to eat” (16:15); its appearance demonstrated “the glory of the LORD” (v. 7).

This story resonates in other accounts in the Old Testament (Num. 11; Deut. 8:3, 16; Ps. 78:24; cf. Ps. 105:40) and New Testament (John 6:31, 49, 58; Heb. 9:4; Rev. 2:17; cf. 1 Cor. 10:3) and the account of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand (Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14). It has a place of interest in the history of exegesis from early writers such as Ignatius, who identified the heavenly bread with the Eucharist, through later commentators who argued manna was a natural substance that is still found in the desert and is gathered for food by Middle Eastern travelers.

A number of angles provide theological importance to this passage when the full witness of Scripture is taken into account. Three perspectives stand out.

God Provides for Needs. The “bread from heaven” is part of God’s leading Israel through the wilderness on the long journey to the promised land. God protects and provides for the people along their way. New Testament writers elaborated some themes from the manna experience. They saw that “the gift of manna is above all a gracious sign of God’s care which sustains a rebellious, murmuring people and seeks to point them to an apprehension of the real meaning of provision through this divine favor.”²

God provided for the people’s physical needs through manna and meat. Added to all “spiritual meanings” of the exodus, like the giving of the law at Sinai (Exod. 20) and further covenants for the future, the story of the exodus says that God provides for needs, including physical needs. John 6 identifies Jesus as the “bread from heaven,” recalling the manna of Moses’ day (John 6:32). The story begins with the feeding of the five thousand, where Jesus himself raises the question of how the people’s need for food will be satisfied (John 6:5). Human hunger is a concern of God and of Jesus. It should be a concern of ours too.

2. Ibid., 302.

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human condition: we have short memories, or maybe it is more accurate to say that we often fail to understand whose we are. We take for granted our access to food; we lose sight of how dependent we are on others; we forget how deeply and utterly dependent we are on the God in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Such forgetfulness is perhaps exacerbated in urban settings, because there we are physically removed from sites of food production. We are separated from the sights and sounds and smells of farm and feedlot. In highly urbanized areas like the United States, where nearly 75 percent of the population can be characterized as urban, our separation from food production is extreme.²

When we encounter the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sin, they have come face to face with their fragility. It has been about a month and a half since they left Egypt, and obviously their food has run out. They are hungry. They are frightened. They are angry. They complain to Moses and Aaron, their leaders. The children of Israel already speak of Egypt with selective memory—it has become a site of plenty, a place where they had plenty to eat. Now their lousy leaders have led them into a wilderness where they will starve. They murmur. They complain—again and again. The children of Israel are unhappy, and their leaders are going to hear about it.

The children of Israel may have come face to face with their fragility, but this story emphasizes that what they have really encountered is their dependence on God and their inability to understand it. Juxtaposed with the frequency of the people’s complaining is the assurance that God will provide the food they need. These themes are woven together in this narrative. The people are truly hungry. God recognizes their need, and God will provide. God will rain down quail at twilight and bread at dawn, and in the evening and in the morning the people will know that God is the Holy One of Israel. The very goodness of the rhythms of creation is echoed in this text as God assures Moses that daily bread will be forthcoming.

The children of Israel are thickheaded. They do not *know*. They do not understand that they are dependent on God. They do not appreciate that God is good and hears their cries. They do not know that God will provide. Even when God does provide, they do not understand what it is. They see the

2. J. John Palen, *The Urban World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 55.

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heaven—manna—that the people are to gather daily. On the sixth day, they are to gather twice as much, so that they will have enough food for the seventh day—the Sabbath—which they are to keep as a day of rest.

According to the text, God's intention is to "test" the people to see if they will follow the instructions set down for them (v. 4). This "test" is the second one that occurs during the wilderness journey. The first test occurred at Marah, where God made bitter water drinkable (Exod. 15:22–27). Note that not only the people are tested; God is also tested (see, e.g., Exod. 17:2, 7; Num. 14:22; Deut. 6:16; Pss. 78:18, 41, 56; 95:9; 106:14). God will provide for the people's daily needs, and the people in turn are called to trust their God.

In verses 6–7, Moses and Aaron address the Israelites and assure them that, indeed, God has heard their murmurings and is about to respond to their complaint. The gift of food in the wilderness is a sign of God's continued presence among the people as they journey forward. The unit closes with a rhetorical question that puts the people "on notice." Their complaint against Moses and Aaron is not justified; they clarify for them that their anger is to be directed toward God. Moses continues to address the Israelites, and again reassures them that God is going to take care of their daily need for food. Moses reminds them a second time that their anger and frustration is to be directed toward God and not toward himself and Aaron (v. 8; cf. v. 7). The food promised will consist of meat in the evening and bread in the morning. For the Israelites, meat, bread, and water constitute a full diet (cf. 1 Sam. 25:11; 1 Kgs. 17:6). The meat will be the quail, and the bread will be the manna.

Following Moses' and Aaron's address to the Israelites, Moses next addresses Aaron and instructs him to encourage the people to draw near to God (v. 9). The crisis in food has led to a deepening crisis in faith. Aaron follows Moses' command, and as he addresses them, they look toward the wilderness, and lo and behold, the glory of God appears in a cloud (v. 10). The reference to "the glory of God" in verse 10 is the first time the phrase appears in the Hebrew Bible. The phrase is a designation for the presence of God and reflects a convention from ancient Near Eastern literature that features the majesty of gods and kings expressed by a fiery or blazing radiance surrounding them. This magnificent glory of God, too bright to gaze upon, appears in a cloud, another symbol of God's presence (cf. Exod. 13:17–22).

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the Israelites' narrated behavior of complaining, "grumbling" (NAB), and "murmuring" (RSV) to congregational and denominational dynamics of the day, overwhelming the good and surprising news of God's gracious provision. The human proclivity to complaint and ingratitude will strike a chord on the contemporary ear, but homiletic integrity will insist on what is being revealed about God in this story.

God Hears. "The LORD has heard." Is the complaint the petty whining of dietary preference? A Torah commentary recalls that in Egypt, the baking of bread was a fine art and there were fifty-seven different kinds of bread.¹ The unleavened bread they left home with, if not depleted, was surely monotonous! The account in Numbers 11 details the left-behind cuisine as the Israelites "remember the fish we used to eat . . . the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, onions, and the garlic; but now . . . there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num. 11:5–6). Is the complaint a lament of deep hunger and a fear of survival? The story allows a range of interpretations on the nature and legitimacy of the complaining, but is unequivocal in conveying that "the LORD has heard" (vv. 7, 8, 9, 12).

God Responds. "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you." God answers complaining with sustaining grace! Ingratitude is met with the divine largesse; deprivation is alleviated by physical sustenance. Wilderness provisions! Who knew "the fine flaky substance" could be gathered and baked into a fifty-eighth variety of bread? Who wants to know that the bread of heaven is actually the excrement of plant lice? God's good creation provides for God's good, if cranky, creatures. The "miracle"—an act outside of *human* nature—will be that there is enough, and that there will be an awareness of sufficiency and a practice of just distribution.

Today's Gospel reading, Matthew's parable of offending generosity and equal payment, is a fitting conversation partner for this text. "Enough for [each] day" (v. 4). Here the preacher may echo the ethic of the Christian prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," and root the petition in this Exodus story. John Dominic Crossan makes the connection: "It is a request that 'our daily bread' be never again exceptional or conditional as in the past, but always

1. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut and David E. S. Stein (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 498.

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God's Providence Sustains. The provisions for food were to show the people that it was God who had “brought you out of the land of Egypt” and to display “the glory of the LORD” (16:6, 7). God’s promise for the provision was daily, except for the double portion in anticipation of the weekly Sabbath. The result was that “morning by morning” the people gathered, “as much as each needed” (v. 21).

God did not provide just once. God provided daily. The people lived by faith, daily trusting God’s ongoing provisions for their needs. Theologically, God’s providence was sustaining, through all the long years. People could not hoard the manna (vv. 19–20); and they received just what they needed. God’s ongoing care, guidance, and provisions continued to sustain the people at every step, every day—just as God’s providence sustains us, now.

Manna Is Not Enough. Some rejected the manna as having no value, being just common stuff (Num. 11:6). For most of the Israelites, manna meant life—but not fully and completely. “The manna—no matter how great a miracle—in itself cannot sustain life. It must point to God’s true work which provides eternal life.”³ Crucial for Israel was to receive God’s gracious gift, reverse their complaining, and accept it with joy and gratitude. In doing so, the people accepted their relationship with God, by faith.

As Jesus said, it is God who gives “the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32). The Israelites, like Christians today, realize that God is the one who provides for us. There are “manna moments” that point to God and should focus us on the giver of the good gifts. For Christians, it is Jesus Christ who is “the bread of God” who “comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). Jesus himself is the gift, “the bread of life” (John 6:35).

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Pastoral Perspective

manna on the ground, fine and flaky as frost, and they say in Hebrew, “*Man hu?*” (“What is it?”). They do not know; they cannot recognize the food God has put before them. Our very word, *manna*, the transliteration of the people’s words of confusion, reminds us that we do not know. Or, we forget.

The complexity of our ignorance and our unwillingness to admit our dependence on God are spiritual traps for us. In verse 4 the story speaks directly of temptation. God tells Moses that in arranging a system of daily food provision and gathering, God establishes a test for the children of Israel, to see if they walk by God’s instructions or not. I am not sure that this portion of the story does full justice to the extent of our temptations.

According to this text, God’s intent in providing daily bread concerns both our physical and our spiritual welfare. God’s plan in feeding us is (1) to provide daily bread for *all* of God’s people; (2) to provide a daily practice of receiving our portion of God’s blessings, presumably with gratitude and without greed; and (3) to help us know who God is. In our own dependence on daily bread, we are regularly tempted to forget God’s intentions. We ignore the needs of those who lack sufficient access to daily bread. Sometimes we couple that hard-heartedness with a tendency to hoard our blessings. More than anything, we forget our dependence on the One who blesses us in the first place. Every day, when we overlook the hungry or take for granted the bounty of our table, we are tempted to lose sight of God’s love and care for us.

So we pray for our physical and spiritual welfare, “Give us this day our daily bread. . . . And do not bring us to the time of trial” (Matt. 6:11, 13).

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3. Ibid., 303.

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Exegetical Perspective

After Moses addresses Aaron, and Aaron addresses the whole congregation, God once again addresses Moses (v. 11). Moses is to reassure the people that, indeed, God has heard their complaint and will feed them (v. 12). This gesture will be a sign of God's enduring presence among the people, and this second episode of reassurance (cf. v. 6) is meant to quell the people's faith crisis.

Verses 13–15, the divine response to the Israelites' complaint, provides the details of how God feeds the Israelite congregation with quail and manna. A quail is a small migratory bird, about 7½ inches long, brown or sandy in color, with yellow streaks. Quail migrate from their winter habitat in Africa and follow the wind to arrive in Palestine and Sinai around March or April. If a shift in wind occurs, the quail are usually forced to land, and thus they become easy prey for predators. The manna is the secretion of two insects that live on the tamarisk tree. The substance drops down from the tree and gradually hardens. The notion of manna falling from the sky is common in the Old Testament (Num. 11:9; Deut. 33:28; Hag. 1:10; Zech. 8:12). The manna and the quail symbolize divine favor and highlight the fact that God cares for the people and remains faithful to the divine promises given to them. Ironically, the Israelites do not know what the manna is. Then Moses tells them that it is bread from God, given to them for their sustenance. Thus the story about the manna is a lesson in faith and fidelity both on God's part and on the part of ancient people struggling to survive in the midst of a new and evolving faith.

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normal and unconditional in the present and the future.”²

The People Respond. “What is it?” Preachers who enjoy dazzling their congregations with a bit of Hebrew now and again will relish sharing the popular etymology of “manna” as the question: “What is it?” (*man hu*). “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat . . . [so] the house of Israel called it manna” (vv. 15, 31). *Man hu* is well known and even onomatopoeic, but it is unknown in Hebrew! I cherish a long-ago “discovery” in my 1974 edition of *The Book of Exodus* in the Old Testament Library, where page 274 is dog-eared and note 15 is highlighted. Brevard S. Childs, acknowledging the “unknown form” of *man hu* in Hebrew, affirms that in Arabic and Aramaic, *man* means “who.”³ This translation turns the homiletic question from “What is it?” to “Who is it?”—a significant shift from the nature of the gift to the nature of the Giver. God feeds our understanding of God's self: “You shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (v. 6). There is no comma after “LORD.” The phrase “who brought you out of the land of Egypt” does not confine God to that descriptive clause, but expands the revelation of this God from the Liberator to the God who is also the Gracious and Compassionate Sustainer, giving meat in the evening and bread in the morning. “Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God” (v. 12). Knowing the “what” of manna is not the issue; they—and we—shall know the “who” of God. This is the God who spreads a table in the wilderness (Ps. 78:19); in today's psalm, this is the God who gives food in abundance (Ps. 105:40). This is the God who is known in the giving and the breaking of bread. “Who is this?”

The exodus journey is a journey of coming to know who God is for us.

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2. John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 138.

3. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 274.

PROPER 20 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18 AND SEPTEMBER 24 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

¹O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
²Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
³Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
⁴Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.
⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,
⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.
.....
³⁷Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold,
and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.
³⁸Egypt was glad when they departed,
for dread of them had fallen upon it.
³⁹He spread a cloud for a covering,
and fire to give light by night.
⁴⁰They asked, and he brought quails,

Theological Perspective

Psalm 105 is one of a cluster of psalms of thanksgiving that move quickly from the generic (vv. 1–6 give the same recitation as 1 Chr. 16:8–13) to the historically specific, grounding their praise and thanks in a recollection of the events of the captivity and exodus from Egypt (see Pss. 78 and 106). This is a decidedly theological move, rich in homiletical implications.

For whatever reason, much preaching has become noticeably less theological. Not only do preachers deal less with doctrine and dogma and more with biblical exegesis and pastoral concerns, but preachers are less self-consciously theological in their habits of pastoral practice, content with hermeneutical and epistemological assumptions rather than explorations. The historical and theological self-consciousness of the psalmist challenges this homiletical status quo, and invites the preacher to reflect, in both preparation and delivered sermon, on the grounding of her or his own faith commitments. As the psalmist moves past generic affirmations of God's goodness—"O give thanks the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples" (v. 1)—to the detailed exposition of those deeds in verses 7–45, so must the preacher.

"Praise the LORD!" Sure, but why? "Well, because the Lord is good, God's steadfast love endures

Pastoral Perspective

There is a lot of talk these days about worship. When should it take place? On Sunday mornings or at some other time in the week? Where should it happen? In a sanctuary with pews? In a multipurpose room with flexible seating? In a movie theater or school gymnasium? In a coffee shop? What should it be like? Formal or informal? With or without robed clergy and choirs? Geared for seekers or for people mature in their faith? What type of proclamation of the Word should be included? A sermon from a manuscript delivered from a pulpit? A sermon offered from memory or from an iPad, down close to the people? A conversation with the gathered community? A sermon that includes art, multimedia effects, or technology? What about tweeting? What kind of music should be included? Hymn singing with a piano or organ? Classical music? Contemporary worship songs led by a praise band or from a CD player? Worship music from around the world? Simple chants? These and many other questions challenge us to think about the purpose of worship, the why, so that we can make faithful decisions about the when, what, and how.

Psalm 105 is a forty-five-verse call to worship! This psalm can aid our thinking about the centrality of worship in the community of faith, and shed light on particular worship practices that can shape the

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

and gave them food from heaven in abundance.

⁴¹He opened the rock, and water gushed out;
it flowed through the desert like a river.

⁴²For he remembered his holy promise,
and Abraham, his servant.

⁴³So he brought his people out with joy,
his chosen ones with singing.

⁴⁴He gave them the lands of the nations,
and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,

⁴⁵that they might keep his statutes
and observe his laws.

Praise the LORD!

Exegetical Perspective

“History” for us is a subject we studied in school, something invoked when politicians talk, a world discovered in books, museums, or television. For the ancient Israelites, history consisted of ancestral narratives passed by word of mouth among families and neighbors. That history was imprinted deep in the souls of the people pressed into the Jerusalem temple on high holy days.

Worship in Israel was not just praise of God’s being or prayers for God’s assistance. Time was devoted to recounting the great deeds God had done, not for any individual, but for the whole nation. Psalm 105 is quite lengthy, a poetic recital of the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the exodus. Human exploits are not the focus: it is the miraculous actions of God that are extolled. God birthed a great people, carried them through the corridors of the years, and finally brought them into a good land. The people are grateful and amazed, their identity confirmed, their hope assured.

Interestingly, Psalm 105 is nestled next to another historical psalm, Psalm 106. The two are very different. Psalm 105 takes a sunny view of the grand moments of history. Psalm 106 turns the rock over, and we get a glimpse of the dark side, the sorry chronicle of Israel’s foolhardy failure to live into the grandeur of God’s plan. Clint McCann suggests that

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A Case for Preaching This Psalm. The Psalms are Israel’s worship book and, as such, are not often used for preaching. However, they provide excellent sermon fodder. Psalm 105, which is classified as a teaching psalm, reads like a short course in how God’s people should relate to God. One can almost imagine that Psalm 105 was the result of a long-ago rabbi slapping a stack of blank pages in front of a student with the instructions: Tell me the story of God and God’s people. You have only fifteen minutes. No time to linger. Just hit the high points. Now begin! If the preacher’s prompt were the same as the psalmist’s—tell the story of God and God’s people—what sermon might arise?

Praise Bookends. The psalmist, imagined here as a diligent student, makes sure to begin the essay with a few verses of praise to God. Indeed, the goodness of God is extolled for six verses. Like an author setting up a romance between idealized lovers, the psalmist takes care to let the reader know that the object of love is worthy. The diligent student also concludes with praise, effectively sandwiching the story of God and God’s people between bookends of praise.

A Little Whitewash. In between the praise bookends, verses 7–36 (outside the limits of this reading)

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

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forever” (Ps. 136:1). Really? Tell me more. Tell me what you know, tell me what you remember. Tell me what God did that makes you so sure that God is good and worthy of praise. Be specific, use examples. Consider three.

1. Historical/traditional. At its heart Psalm 105 is a reflection on Exodus 3–17, a purposeful remembering of the Lord’s actions in first bringing the children of Abraham to Egypt to escape famine (v.16) and finally bringing them back to the land promised to Abraham (vv. 8–11) by divine miracle and the human leadership of Moses (vv. 26–42). The psalmist demonstrates the truth of the claim that God is worthy of all praise by an act of recollection, *mimesis* in its truest sense, retelling in shorthand what is detailed in the book of Exodus. The Lord is to be known, not by any act or word, but by the actions at the heart of Israel’s tradition.

If we compare Psalm 107, we find a similar, but theologically distinct claim: the Lord is to be known and understood through recalling acts of deliverance and redemption (Ps. 107:2). In Psalm 107, the acts chosen are not from the biblical tradition but from the realm of personal experience. The author of Psalm 107 includes a liturgical refrain, repeating two verses after each example recounted: “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress” (Ps. 107:6, 13, 19, 28). “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind” (Ps. 107:8, 15, 21, 31).

By contrast, Psalm 105 moves forward through history, from the wandering of the patriarchs, to Joseph’s imprisonment, through Israel’s deliverance from famine by sojourn in Egypt, to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt by plague and miracle. The question for the preacher seems obvious: what are the biblical and traditional “mighty acts of God” foundational for those with whom you will share this sermon? Not the interesting stories one might tell, but the *foundational* acts of God for this community.

2. Collective. Ask someone their favorite psalm, even take away Psalm 23, and most of the faithful will mention a psalm with a personal focus, lots of “I” and “me” and “my”: “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?” (Ps. 121:1) “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice!” (Ps. 130:1) “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Ps. 42:1–2) A

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identity and experience of the faithful. Verses 1–6 set the stage for this psalm. The remaining thirty-nine verses put into practice what is talked about in theory at the beginning of the psalm.

The verbs in verses 1–6 make it clear that worship is not a passive experience. Quite the opposite is true. Worship is full of action: Give. Call. Make known. Sing. Tell. Glory. Seek. Rejoice. Remember. Perhaps these verbs can reorient some of the current discussion in our worship committees, churches, and denominations.

1. Give Thanks. Verse 1 calls us to give thanks to God. Giving thanks is the first action, and perhaps the most important. Worship pours forth from a grateful heart. In our sanctuary, the children’s choir sits in a choir loft directly behind the pastors. One Communion Sunday, as the tray of bread was being passed to the children, an eight-year-old named Alexander looked up at the elder serving the sacrament and said, “Thank you!” He was not being prompted by an adult to show his good manners. Gratitude naturally spilled out of his mouth, and when that happened, he ministered to me that day.

2. Call. We are to call on God’s name. The gratitude of our hearts is for a particular God, named YHWH, and for the covenant relationship we share with this God. This is not a generic sort of gratitude, “I am thankful,” but “I am thankful for God.” When a child calls out in the middle of the night, terrified by a bad dream, he is not calling out for help from a stranger passing by on the street. He is calling out the name of a loving parent, one he knows to be trustworthy and compassionate.

3. Make Known. We are to make known God’s deeds among the peoples. The gratitude of our hearts takes on vocabulary, bearing witness to God’s actions in our lives and in our world. To tell others of God’s deeds, we must know our collective history, the story of God’s people both ancient and modern. In addition, we must pay attention to our own individual stories, looking for fingerprints of God’s grace. Our culture has trained us to take credit for all the good we experience. I am well off because I studied hard in school and got a good job. I am in good health because I exercise and take my vitamins. I have wonderful children because I am a good parent. Our challenge is to acknowledge our dependence upon God and to see the bounty and beauty of our lives as a gift, not as something we have earned.

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these two “should be read together. On the one hand, Psalm 105 makes the people’s faithlessness look all the more grievous. But on the other hand, Psalm 106 makes God’s grace look all the more amazing.”¹

The lectionary focuses on just the introduction and the sweeping conclusion to Psalm 105. To “give thanks” to the Lord is not merely to sing and feel grateful: Israelites brought thank-offerings, something precious to them, that they offered to express their devotion to God and to proclaim tangibly who is the Lord of it all. To “call on the Lord’s name” is interesting, in light of the very history of the name of the God who acted in history: YHWH, parsed as a verb, implies something like existence, but also activity that causes things to be, and there is a nuance of a secure future. Robert Alter translates verse 3: “Revel in his holy name.”² Just to contemplate the name is poignant, and delightful.

Israel not only relishes God’s deeds but has a “light to the nations” role: “Make known his deeds among the peoples!” It is intriguing to consider that this psalm, which has God’s actions in the rearview mirror, looks forward with the verb “seek,” not once but three times. This God of the past is to be sought in the future; our relationship with this Lord is not a nostalgia trip.

This lectionary selection skips from Abraham to the exodus. The memory of the dramatic deliverance from Egypt begins on a surprising note: “He brought Israel out with silver and gold.” In a moment that verges on the hilarious, God told Israel to ask the Egyptians for their gold and jewelry (Exod. 12:35)—and the Egyptians gave it to them! Surely Israel was humbled as they sang these words, recalling that God did not merely want the Israelites to have some finery to wear to parties. The gold and silver were intended for them to build the tabernacle, and eventually the very temple where they were reciting the psalm! However, they squandered God’s holy intention by tossing the precious metal into the fire to fashion the golden calf (Exod. 32)!

Psalm 105:37 tells us something unmentioned in Exodus: “There was no one among their tribes who stumbled.” Surely a few tripped in some soft sand! Elie Wiesel thought deeply about their steps, Pharaoh’s chariots rumbling behind them, the sea before them, imagining the people “running breathlessly. . . . And there they came to an abrupt

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trace the history of the exodus, but with a certain whitewash. Perhaps it is a child’s memory, from one who was not aware that the grownups grouched as they trudged through the desert. Perhaps it is an optimist’s perspective, with the contentious parts of the story left out. Perhaps it is a pious answer, as if a reader will better notice God’s goodness if no one ever questions that goodness. Certainly the psalmist cannot linger over details, because the clock is ticking as the pages fill with the sentences of the essay answer. A few details are at variance with the source material—the order and number of plagues, for instance—but does it matter? The essential story is there: YHWH was good and faithful, and the people faithfully followed their leaders, who followed YHWH.

The Whitewash Intensifies to Prove a Point. By verse 37 the people have come out of Israel, and the psalmist continues to recount the story with a sure hand, though the details are now thoroughly idealized. The narrator reveals purpose by choosing which details to include and which to exclude. Not one Israelite stumbles as they leave Egypt. Not one Israelite grumbles before the manna falls from heaven. Like every telling of a long and complicated story, Psalm 105 is an edited version of history, shaped to advance a particular philosophy. Other psalms may have other purposes. To the author of Psalm 105, the people’s complaints were beside the point. The point was that God provided everything necessary. The point was that God guides God’s people. No matter what happens, no matter how dire the circumstances, God’s people can rely on God to guide them.

Having established the story line, the psalmist concludes with an imperative. Given God’s guidance and goodness, what should the people’s response be? The people must keep God’s statutes and observe God’s laws. Imagine the writer shaking a cramped hand with a satisfied sigh before setting down the concluding words of praise: “Praise the LORD!” The psalm has come full circle.

Preaching Challenges. The preacher might wonder: Do we sometimes whitewash the facts for a purpose? Do we sometimes step outside the relational parameters of a story to heighten the awareness that it is “All God,” as Calvinists like to emphasize?

Perhaps the most challenging preaching application comes if one follows this passage to its finale in verses 44–45: YHWH gave them the

1. Clinton McCann Jr., “Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:1104.

2. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 369.

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common variation is to stay in the first person, but make it plural: “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. . . . The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Ps. 46:1, 7).

Not so Psalm 105. In English translation the psalm is almost entirely in the third person, with an occasional second-person command. The psalm is not about me, or us, but about the Lord and the people of the Lord. Without saying, “It is not about you,” the psalmist says, loud and clear, it is not about you. It is about God, and the children of God. You and I may very well share in the blessings and deliverance described, but we do so by our membership in the group, not individually, not personally, but collectively. One can scarcely imagine something so antithetical to typical proclamation of the Christian faith.

3. Specific. The more generic approach of Psalm 107 was above contrasted with the biblical and historical strategy implemented in Psalm 105. The Lord does not just do good things. The Lord did these good things, in this way, at this time, for these our ancestors, and so for us. More is at work here than fidelity to Scripture and tradition. The psalmist, anticipating advice given to preachers for generations, was concrete and specific. This is a bold theological move, not just an effective homiletical strategy, and one that needs to be reclaimed in contemporary proclamation. You know the temptation: to tell the gathered faithful about all the wonderful things God did long ago and far away, perhaps adding a general claim that God is still at work in the world, healing, helping, and giving hope. It is not enough. You must tell them how God is at work *today*, right here and right now. Name names, tell stories about people *they* remember, *they* know. Be as specific, concrete, and audacious as you can. Praise the Lord!

WILLIAM F. BROSEND

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4. Sing. In verse 2, worship leads us to sing to God. Our bodies are hard-wired to respond to rhythm and melody. So too it is natural for praising God to be offered in song. This can be the song of an individual, or one sung with the company of other voices. This song may be quite beautiful, but its value is not in its aesthetic perfection. The true value of music in worship is the degree to which it conveys our love, gratitude, and praise to God.

5. Tell. Songs that tell of God’s wonderful works combine the actions of singing and making known God’s deeds among the peoples.

6. Glory. Glory in God’s holy name. To glory is to praise God. Even God’s name is to be praised.

7. Seek. Seeking the Lord encourages intentionality in our relationship with God. This is not the child’s game of hide-and-seek. Our God longs to be sought because God’s great delight is to be in relationship with us. As we seek, we will experience both God’s strength and God’s holy presence.

8. Remember. Perhaps the fact that we are told to remember serves to remind us how easy it is for us to forget. My children love to be told stories about their births and about what they were like when they were babies. They cannot remember these formative moments on their own, so it is up to my husband and me to remember and to tell them the stories again and again. This is hard! Over the years, memories fade. I cannot recall which child uttered which word first. I cannot easily recall the details of their early milestones. This is where their baby books and photographs are invaluable. In a similar way, the people of Israel and the Christian community can easily forget who God is and what God has done. Our times of worship are occasions to remember, bear witness, and celebrate God’s loving and saving acts in history. The psalmist begins with the Abrahamic covenant and continues the storytelling until Israel is freed from slavery and living in a new land.

These eight verbs may not answer a church’s questions about when to schedule worship or which hymnal to use, but they can serve as a powerful reminder of why we gather and what our worship should include.

NANCY A. MIKOSKI

Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

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halt: this was the end, death was there, waiting. The leaders of the group, urged on by Moses, pushed forward: Don't be afraid, go, into the water! Yet, Moses suddenly ordered everyone to a halt: Wait a moment. Think, take a moment to reassess what it is you are doing. Enter the sea not as frightened fugitives but as free men!"³

It was as free men and women, *freed* men and women, that Israel left Egypt. Psalm 105:43 declares, "He brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing." Did the psalm have Exodus 15 in mind? They made it through to safety, and then Moses and the people sang, and Miriam and the other women played timbrels and danced! There is another question: "He brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing"—but whose joy, and who sang? Surely the text implies the people, but cannot we assume there was even greater joy in the heart of God, and triumphant singing in the chorus of the heavenly host?

Psalm 105 recalls that the people were led by a cloud by day and fire by night. Was there an active volcano, even Sinai itself, in the distance? This gradual, daily and nightly leading is a key theme in Exodus, and thus in the psalm. A little manna each day, a little light, a little further, the people stick close, and do not know the full itinerary; trust is required.

The whitewashed nature of this version of the story is evident in Psalm 105:40–41: "They asked, and he brought quails. . . . He opened the rock, and water gushed out." They *asked*? No, they *murmured*, they griped, they accosted Moses and threatened to flee back to Egypt. Psalm 105 takes the positive—and true—view of the character of this God. Even though they murmured, the Lord heard it as a plea ("asked"), and the Lord was gracious. This is what ties verses 1–6 tightly to the distant verses 37–45: God made a promise to Abraham, to bless the people and use them, and in faithfulness to that promise God did everything else, including feeding murmuring, recalcitrant people.

JAMES C. HOWELL

Homiletical Perspective

land, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. The first problem lies in the easy ascription of conquest and plunder to YHWH. An entire study course could be devoted to this topic, and current news stories, especially those from the Middle East, would provide continual fodder.

The second challenge lies in the phrase "that they might," which suggests that the sole purpose of God's care is to shape a people who are obedient to the divine laws. The entire psalm has been driving to this point. One option for the preacher is to follow this trajectory to its end. What does it mean to follow God's laws? Given that contemporary Christians are not constrained by dietary laws, Sabbath laws, and laws regarding the ownership of slaves and animals, application of a command to "keep God's statutes and observe God's laws" (v. 45) can be rather confounding. Perhaps the most essential homiletical task is to see the law in this larger context, the role it plays within salvation history, not as burden, but as gift. The law, like the journey out of slavery itself, gives the people a way to be in relationship to God.

Repetition Is Helpful. Repetition Is Good. Preachers need not be afraid of repetition. A simple story oft repeated has shaping power. Let children be our learning model. Simple facts slotted into a straightforward chronology communicate well. Hearers and preachers can mature as they hear and tell a simple story yet again. It is tempting to think people need the new, the original, the novel. Perhaps the people do not need to hear a brand-new story. Perhaps they benefit most from fitting the pieces of the old story together with new understanding. Perhaps this time they will become the diligent students who make the story their own.

May the Spirit bless the preacher who seeks to fit these pieces of salvation history into a word appropriate for this place, this year, this context, these people.

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3. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 193.

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**PROPER 21 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 25
AND OCTOBER 1 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 17:1–7

¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Theological Perspective

“Is the LORD among us or not?” (v. 7) Is there a more profound theological question, in any place, at any time, for any people? That may be why this passage was also assigned in the lectionary just six months ago, on the Third Sunday in Lent. Is the Lord among us or not?

Context—biblical, historical-traditional, and so on—is important for a certain reading of the passage. However, theologically the question stands alone, resounding across the millennia, in need of no interpretation or explanation, because it is not at all limited to the experience of the Israelites in the desert. It is *the* question, for all people, and in particular for the people with whom we will preach on Sunday. Is the Lord among us or not? Are we alone, absolutely on our own, eternally left to our own devices? Or not?

We cannot ignore the biblical context, and it is tempting to read backward from the people’s concluding question to the people’s demand of Moses at the beginning of the passage, out in the desert beyond the wilderness of Sin, no water source within sight, children crying, cattle dying, “Give us water to drink!” Is that so unreasonable? It depends on the context. If the only context you give your listeners is Exodus 17, it is a very sensible question, and Moses and God seem a little harsh in their

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Walt Disney’s movie *The Prince of Egypt* is an adaptation of the story of Moses. To be honest, there were moments when I had to strain to find the biblical account in the movie. Nonetheless, the movie portrays Moses responding in faith to God’s call to confront Pharaoh and to bring the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. In the final minutes of the movie, we see Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and Zipporah hug, sing, dance, and praise God for the victory. This is followed by a picture of Moses holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments from atop a mountain. Then the credits roll.

As I read Exodus 17, I am not at all surprised that the filmmakers decided to skip over chapters 16–19 and end *The Prince of Egypt* with a victorious Moses on the mountaintop. The scenes missing from the movie would kill the joy associated with the exodus. However, the balloons and noisemakers from the celebration that followed the crossing of the Red Sea are hardly cleaned up when things begin to sour. After three days in the wilderness of Shur, with no drinkable water in sight, the people begin to cry out to Moses. “What shall we drink?” I imagine Moses was asking himself the very same thing. He may have been their leader, but he was not superhuman. His mouth would have been

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Exegetical Perspective

Cartographers have guessed where Sin, Rephidim, and the paired Massah/Meribah might be, but we really do not know where they were. The ancient Israelites certainly had no clue where they were! A meandering course indicates they were not making a beeline to the land of milk and honey.

The name Massah means “test,” and Meribah means “dispute.” With such meaningful names to play with, we can envision a nomadic sage, having gathered a few families around the campfire, pointing to a rocky crag gurgling with fresh water, explaining to his compatriots that “we call this spring Meribah, for it was here that your ancestors *meribah*-ed [disputed] with the Lord; but the Holy One, blessed be He, brought forth this water”; or “this place is known as Massah, for here your grandparents demanded *massah* [proof] from the Lord.”

Exodus 17 can be thought of in relationship to its sister text, Numbers 20. These passages frame the long encounter with God on Mount Sinai. Water was scarce and precious; survival hinged on finding drinkable water. Rephidim could well have been the “last stop before Sinai,” yet we do not know the precise location, and our guesses could be off by dozens of miles. The Israelites, with no maps or prior visits, surely felt they were lost.

Homiletical Perspective

The candidate for ministry was nervous. She had fielded a dicey question about God’s justice versus God’s mercy. What would the next question be? An elderly presbyter came to the microphone to ask, “What biblical character do you use as a model for ministry?” The candidate’s face relaxed into a smile as she answered, “Moses.” Perhaps ministers secretly fancy they understand Moses’ predicament, leading a stiff-necked people on a long and arduous journey toward an unknown promised land. So how do Moses-wannabes preach this passage to a complaining congregation, especially if they are thirsty themselves?

This passage is the second in a series of three thirsty stories. The complaining began a few chapters ago (Exod. 14) on the banks of the Reed Sea. There God responded by opening a path through the waters. A few days later (Exod. 15) the people demanded water because the only available water was bitter. God instructed Moses to put a piece of wood in the water, making it sweet. Soon (Exod. 16) the people complained of hunger and God provided manna and quail. Now (Exod. 17) the Israelites have arrived at a place called Rephidim and again have no water. The people quarrel with Moses and say, “Give us water to drink! . . . Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (vv. 2–3).

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evaluation of the situation. Except that Exodus 17 follows the account of God miraculously providing “sweet water” at Marah (Exod. 15:22–25) and giving manna and quail in the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:1–35), one of the OT readings for last week. If you do not put the demand for water in its biblical context, a triptych of water-food-water, all provided miraculously by God after the deliverance from Egypt, you will misunderstand the question and its relation to our contemporary versions of it.

Is the Lord among us or not? We do not ask this question in a vacuum of experience but, usually, in an emotional vacuum. We feel so abandoned or alone or despondent that we are unable to recall ever feeling differently. Do you remember when you first asked your own variation of this essential question? It is not just an abstract, cosmic matter; it is deeply personal, as personal as thirst and fear and desperation. You might have been a teenager grieving the loss of a friend in a car accident, or a grandparent to illness, or your family moving from the town of your birth and rearing to a place you did not know and where you were not known. It could have been in college, or in the military on a first deployment, at the breakup of a long and, you had hoped, lasting relationship. Perhaps more to the homiletical point, can you imagine when and how your listeners may have first deeply pondered the question of God, and their relationship to God, and perhaps their sense of absence or alienation from God? Why does it matter? Because it may not be possible to speak truly of faith until one has dealt fully with doubt.

I do not know why we forget goodness and deliverance and grace so quickly, and cling tenaciously to disappointment, slight, and loss. That is a pastoral and psychological matter, rooted in formative experiences, but it is not without theological aspect for those who understand their God to be a God of abundance, promise, and hope. The question of God’s presence is not finally a question of the moment or even the question of a lifetime, but a question for the ages. Which makes it all the more important to be a part of a story that transcends the story of oneself, one’s family, and one’s nation, people, and culture.

There is a crucial historical dimension in the exodus experience of God’s presence that confronts the apparent absence of God’s presence in the Holocaust. That the Holocaust is also called *Shoah*, “remembrance,” is a testimony that we should never forget that God’s presence on this earth is connected

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parched, his skin dry, and his thinking fuzzy as his body experienced dehydration like all the others.

In faith and perhaps a bit of desperation, Moses cried out to the Lord, and God gave him directions on how to make the bitter water sweet. God even used this as a teachable moment, explaining to the people that this was a test. If they would follow God’s commandments, God would spare them the diseases of the Egyptians, “for I am the LORD who heals you” (15:26). Then they camped at Elim and enjoyed the twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees. Once their thirst was quenched, they began to hunger. Growling stomachs led to regret, anger, and fear. From a heart of love, God provided manna, a flaky, breadlike substance, with the command to gather only one day’s portion, except in preparation for the Sabbath, when they could gather enough for two days. In this way, God fed the people and taught them day by day to trust in God’s ongoing provision for their lives.

Bitter water made sweet. Daily bread raining from heaven. The former slaves had tasted not only freedom, but also God’s mercy in the form of sweet water and manna.

By the time we get to Exodus 17, our hopes are high that this motley crew of former slaves has learned their lesson well. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As the company of men, women, and children camp at Rephidim, the quarreling begins again. They argue once more with Moses about the lack of water. One can imagine that they also argue among themselves about his leadership ability. Moses interprets the bickering and threats as more than a family feud; it is also a test of the Lord. The very real struggles of these human relationships have a spiritual dimension. Moses turns to God for a solution, and the Lord proves once again to be both patient and dependable. Moses obeys the Lord, strikes the rock at Horeb, and the water flows. This place Moses names Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrel and test the Lord, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (v. 7).

The pastoral implications of this story are numerous. While our church members may never know the threat of starvation or dehydration in the desert, many will be able to identify a situation in their own life story when circumstances seemed dire, when hope was all but lost, and they were filled with fear: “You have cancer.” “I never loved you anyway.” “No one will believe you.” “You have thirty days to vacate the premises.” Anxiety can easily overwhelm us and erode the trust we have in

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A preacher, teacher, or storyteller might capitalize on our (and their!) uncertainty. In a visceral sense, modern hearers know exactly where Rephidim is; the people are doing their best to follow the Lord's leading, but they wind up in a desolate place, parched with thirst. Like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), they are thirsty at two levels. They must get some water—and soon!—or they will die; but there is a deeper thirst, familiar to Bible readers and people who think deeply about life. We understand the metaphor of longing in Psalm 42's image of a deer sniffing the air for any hint of a flowing stream (cf. water imagery in Pss. 63 and 84, Isa. 43, Ezek. 47, and Rev. 21).

The Israelites are not pious seekers after the living water of God's heart. They "murmur"—a word that sounds like the undertone of grumbling that was going on. In the Old Testament stories that involve the murmuring of the rabble, we can detect two different patterns:

Pattern I—need//complaint//intercession//miracle
Pattern II—complaint//punishment//intercession//
reprieve

The murmurers in Exodus 17 should be glad they are not yet Pattern II murmurers! In Numbers 11, 16, and 21, fire, plague, and serpents are unleashed to punish Pattern II murmurers. In Exodus 17 the Lord is calmer, less frayed by Israel's constant muddleheadedness. In Exodus 17 they murmur, and God quite simply sends water. It is pure mercy, all grace. It is as if God decides, "You cannot fault them for being thirsty, can you?" The miracle of the water is decidedly unspectacular; no razzle-dazzle wows the throng. In fact, only the elders actually witness the miracle, and Moses cannot be mistaken for a charismatic magician of any sort.

"Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (v. 3). The weighty theological question looms over the whole story—and our lives: "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" The people were not just wandering; they are also wondering. The narrator masterfully lifts up their excruciating dilemma. Is the Lord among us—or not? Their deepest thirst is to get this issue resolved.

A modern exposé of sorts may cast an even longer shadow on this question. Journalist Ian Wilson regales us with a story of the British Sinai Camel Corps who traveled in the Sinai area in the 1930s. They stumbled into a dried-out wadi. A Bedouin attached to the unit wielded a spade, shattering the

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Why have the Israelites not learned their lesson? They have dealt with thirst just a few verses before, and God has provided. Perhaps the preacher pauses to fix a cup of tea while contemplating the passage. It is worthwhile to "follow the thirst." Bodies are wonderful teachers, because they are so insistent. The human body needs water to live: "Give us water to drink!" (v. 2). To learn the lesson of depending on God for something as fundamental as water will require yet a third learning moment (Num. 20:1–13). Thirst is a powerful taskmaster. Can it also become a teacher?

A preacher might use this passage to examine leadership, perhaps at a retreat of the session, or board, or another church group. Notice how the people are quick to turn against Moses, who functions as God's representative. The people are consumed by negativity. Call it hardheartedness, or stiff-neckedness. Emphasize the people's ingratitude, or fear. All of these words simply name a quality of the human condition that is easily recognizable. These qualities exist in the people as an aggregate, in individual people, and, indeed, in the leaders. How does a faithful person attempt to deal with complaining hearts?

First, acknowledge what is going on. Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" (v. 2). The people complain to Moses, but Moses knows that the people's complaints are with YHWH. Their problem is not their inadequate human leaders; their problem is their inadequate faith in God. The people think they have a lousy leader; but the truth is that they have lousy faith.

Meanwhile, Moses has his own complaints for YHWH. "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (v. 4). The preacher might dunk that tea bag a few times and remember: Moses was happily herding sheep a few chapters before. Moses never asked for this job! This text helps us examine the myriad ways that leadership tests a leader. How can a leader rise to such challenges? In this instance, Moses must go ahead of the people with a few hand-selected elders. The simple choreography of the story is instructive, as is the role of the staff, which is the symbol of Moses' authority. At a designated place, Moses struck a rock, making water come out of it.

A whole sermon might spring from the names of the place, because every congregation knows this place: Massah (from the Hebrew root *nasah*), meaning "put to the test"; and Meribah (from the

Exodus 17:1–7

Theological Perspective

to how those who profess God make God known. Clichés about the faithful serving as “God’s hands” on earth belong with Hallmark, not homily, but human evil nevertheless makes claims of divine absence eloquent enough to demand humbled silence. “Where was God in the Holocaust?” is the shadow form of the question of Exodus 17:7. It cannot be ignored, and it is not limited to the evils committed by the Nazis in Europe. Just in the last century—Stalin’s gulags, South African apartheid, Cambodia’s killing fields, Rwandan massacres, and on and on and on—there have been holocausts almost beyond counting. “Where was God?” is a question not easily or lightly answered.

The water flowed from the rock, the people endured, and a new generation crossed into the promised land. It was not the end of the story or the final fulfillment of the promise, which tracks through the rest of Scripture and the history of the children of God. What we remember and what we recall and retell matter. Not that we should erase hardship and betrayal and decimation from the record, denying the reality of another’s experience in order to make ours look good; but the water did flow.

Questions of divine identity, presence, and authority echo through the passages assigned for this Sunday. The eloquence of the canticle from Philippians 2 is balanced by the two questions, one answered and one unanswered, in the Gospel. God is present in human form and likeness, claims the song, as real and tangible—and as extraordinary—as water in the desert, ambivalent children, a humble slave, and an innocent man on a Roman cross. The theological challenge is to hold the real and tangible in re-creative tension with the extraordinary, so that our answer to the question, “Is the Lord with us or not?” will allow the truth of the listener’s experience to sing in harmony with the psalmist, “This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes” (Ps. 118:23).

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Pastoral Perspective

each other and in God. We may think the Israelites were crazy, dreaming of going back to Egypt where they were enslaved, but many of us can relate to the temptation to hold on to something that is not good for us, out of our fear of the unknown.

A second theme is the challenge to be a faithful leader during trying times. The Israelites want something from Moses that he simply cannot give them: water. Perhaps they misunderstand the grace of the previous miracles to have been magic tricks pulled off by the great Moses. “Do it again, Moses!” “Work your magic!” The Christian church in North America is in the midst of great change. Our old assumptions simply do not hold up anymore. We know that our way of doing church, of being the body of Christ for the world, is changing, but few of us feel confident enough to predict exactly what the church of the future will look like. Congregations turn to their pastors and other leaders for answers. The church is dehydrated and needs water immediately. The answer to our dilemma will not come from a church-advice guru or from Madison Avenue. Pastors are human beings, and they cannot provide the water themselves. They are called, like Moses, to bring the needs of the people before the Lord and to respond in obedience. To be a leader in the church today is to live day by day relying not on one’s own strength but on the grace of God.

Finally, a third theme to explore carefully with the Christian community comes from the final verse of this passage: “Is the LORD among us or not?” (v. 7). The Israelites are unable to see the hand of God in their experience. They feel abandoned or duped. Such is the case for many Christians today. God’s presence is a grand idea more than a lived experience. “Where is God at work in my life?” “If God is present, why do people suffer?” These are the questions of thirsty people. The good news is that God knows their needs and longs to refresh their bodies and souls. What an honor it is to be able to point people to the oasis in the desert.

NANCY A. MIKOSKI

Exodus 17:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

weathered, crusted-over limestone. A small geyser spewed water, to the astonishment of the British. Bystanders cried out, “Look at him! The prophet Moses!”¹ Is astonishment any less astonishing if the water surprised the Sinai Camel Corps just as it did the ancient Israelites?

Exodus 17 figures prominently in Psalms 81 and 95. At a festival in the Jerusalem temple, God’s mercy was remembered and celebrated, albeit with dire warnings. A Levitical prophet would speak God’s words: “O Israel, if you would but listen to me!” (Ps. 81:8); “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah” (Ps. 95:8). As Spurgeon restated it, “Let the example of that unhappy generation serve as a beacon to you; do not repeat the offenses which have already more than enough provoked the Lord.”²

God’s sustaining gifts of food and water are still today commemorated in a weeklong harvest festival called the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), during which Psalms 81 and 95 are read. Sukkot is a festive time in autumn when families sit outside to eat meals in temporary shelters and remember when their people lived in the wilderness under the stars. From ancient times, this festival also was one of the occasions for pilgrimages to Jerusalem. A modern preacher or teacher could, with exegetical soundness, imagine a worshiper, awed by the splendor of the temple, pushed along in the throng of celebrating pilgrims, thrilled by the trumpets, lyres, and choirs, moved even to pulsate to the drumbeat, to swirl with the other dancers, hearing again the story of the gift of water in the dry wilderness.

In Jerusalem, the festival’s climax was reached when the people gathered around the waters of the spring Gihon and the pool of Siloam at the foot of Mount Zion. The priest would dip a golden pitcher into the water and carry it at the head of a procession of singers to the temple precincts. After marching around the temple seven times, the priest would pour the water out on the ground. In such a context, we may well imagine Jesus saying, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and . . . drink” (John 7:37–39).

JAMES C. HOWELL

Homiletical Perspective

Hebrew root *rib*), meaning “quarrel, strive.” These verbs are a springboard to examine the relationship between God and humans. It is human nature to put God to the test, quarreling all the while. However, it is God’s nature to be faithful and gracious. The entire book of Exodus proclaims the faithfulness of God, and the human journey of learning to depend upon that divine faithfulness.

These lessons are so fundamental that they must be learned anew in every generation. No wonder the people of Israel must wander in the desert for forty years—long enough for an entire generation to pass away—so that a new generation can be thoroughly shaped into a people that will trust God. This story reminds us that God cares for each of us as an individual, but also for all of us as a people. God loves God’s people. How can we—not only as individuals but collectively as a people—move from fear and doubt to faith and trust? Surely the faultfinding thread of this story is one that preaches well because it is so close to everyday experience. In the end, both preacher and people can find comfort in the way that Moses always brings his problems to God. Perhaps this fact alone is what makes him an exemplary leader.

Before the sermon comes to a conclusion, no preacher should ignore the painful, but incontrovertible fact that people do sometimes die from thirst. God does not always provide the essentials of life. How do we reconcile the fact of thirsting death with this story of provision? The politics of water frequently make headlines. People die of thirst at border crossings; areas hit by hurricanes and earthquakes reveal the economics of clean water; and development run amok in desert regions upsets natural balances. What are the limits to God’s provision? Do human leaders have responsibilities to ensure there is water for all thirsting people?

As the preacher empties the teapot, may its contents—however tepid or tasty—be a reminder that God’s provision may not be what and when the people desire. Can it be enough?

May the Spirit bless the preacher who seeks to bring water to those who thirst.

RUTH H. EVERHART

1. Ian Wilson, *Exodus: The True Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 149.

2. Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 2:167.

PROPER 21 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 25 AND OCTOBER 1 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

¹Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
²I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
³things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
⁴We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

.....

Theological Perspective

The strategy employed by the author of Psalm 78 is much like that of the author of Psalm 105, as it recalls God’s deliverance of the people of Israel in the exodus events. What is intriguing, distinct, and wonderfully suggestive is the translator’s decision to use the technical term “parable” in verse 2 to describe verses that most modern readers would consider anything but parables: “I will open my mouth in a parable” (Heb. *mashal*; Gk. *parabolē*).

The *mashal* or parable teaches us that Scripture’s richness of meaning is not limited to the appropriation of historical facts and theological doctrines. Parables (*mashalim* also include proverbs, allegory, riddles, taunt songs, and “dark sayings”), by their very openness to more than one interpretation, insist that Scripture not only *invites* multiple meanings; Scripture *thrives* on them. So how in heaven did the faithfulness of the people of God become defined by an insistence on a single, historicized, read-it-like-I-do-or-you-are-going-to-heck approach to Scripture?

To stay close to home for many of our listeners, consider the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5–7, which concludes with the short parable of the Two Foundations. The sermon is entirely filled with metaphor, simile, analogy, hyperbole, comparison, and other examples of *mashal*. Matthew

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 78 invites the reader into brief glimpses of the complicated relationship between God and humanity. Looking beyond the lectionary text, these glimpses reflect the troubling truth of a humanity that is sinful and wayward. This historical mirror reflects a humanity that was “stubborn and rebellious” (v. 8), that “refused to walk according to God’s law” (v. 10), that “spoke against God” (v. 19), that placed no faith in God’s saving power (v. 22), that “still sinned” (v. 32), that “tested God” (v. 41), and that was rebellious against God (v. 56). This portrait of God’s people might cause even the most positive person to blush, for the rebellion of the people is surrounded by the love of God. Even more troubling, the truth of these stories does not lie buried in the depths of the ancient civilizations of the Bible. Its truth shames God’s twenty-first-century people too.

To these rebellious people God reacts much like a parent, first displaying anger and punishment, then offering forgiveness and renewed relationship. These historical glimpses remind us that the Israelites’ concept of the justice of an all-powerful God led to a particular interpretation of the hardships and sufferings of life. In times of national or personal tragedy—war, drought, famine, plagues, sickness—Israel understood these to be God’s punishment for their sinful nature. This interpretation is alive and

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

¹²In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels
in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

¹³He divided the sea and let them pass through it,
and made the waters stand like a heap.

¹⁴In the daytime he led them with a cloud,
and all night long with a fiery light.

¹⁵He split rocks open in the wilderness,
and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

¹⁶He made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

Exegetical Perspective

Form critics have been a bit baffled by Psalm 78. What is it? A didactic poem? A psalm of praise? A historical psalm? A liturgical piece of some type? Certainly the psalm aims to teach, and certainly it was used in worship. Would it not serve capably as a prelude to the confession of sin? The historical psalms (such as Ps. 78 but also Pss. 105 and 106) commemorate the nation's history, but never boast of the exploits of military or political heroes. The underlying plot is God's establishment of Israel and God's miraculous interventions in the course of events—in verse form, to be memorized and chanted or sung, probably in the temple, but also when back at home, during a grueling afternoon of hard labor in the field, or over the campfire at night.

The psalm labels itself as a “parable.” A *mashal* is a wise lesson. Charles Haddon Spurgeon claimed that this psalm is “not a mere recapitulation of important events in Israelitish history, but is intended to be viewed as a parable setting forth the conduct and experience of believers in all ages.”¹ History is more than a simple chronicle of events, with names and dates. We gaze into the past, not merely to learn pithy lessons, but to be awed by the hidden and not-so-hidden workings of God,

1. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 2:331; quote in the next paragraph is from the same page.

Homiletical Perspective

Give Ear. Our culture inundates us. Words and images clamor for attention. Shiny objects beckon as items to be desired or purchased, but also as stories to be consumed, whether in print or on screen. Web links offer endless rabbit trails. In the face of all this stimulation, the psalmist enjoins us to “give ear.” That is the preaching task, overtly stated. How might a congregation “give ear” to a timely message from a psalmist who wrote during the time of David and Solomon, so long ago?

Spliced and Diced. The lectionary has carved this psalm rather drastically. Perhaps the splicing itself can be helpful to a generation accustomed to sound bites. The psalm begins (vv. 1–4) with an exhortation to give ear to “dark sayings from of old” (v. 2b). The next section (vv. 5–11), omitted from the lectionary passage, focuses on the expectations of YHWH and the ways that the people of Israel failed to meet those expectations. The following section (vv. 12–16), included in the lectionary passage, tells the story of the exodus, touching on the division of the Reed Sea and the people being led by fiery cloud, and concluding with the story of Moses striking water from the rock. The greatest section of the psalm (vv. 17–72) is omitted from the lectionary passage. This omitted section recaps the

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

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5:17–48 offers a series of “antitheses” bounded by extraordinary sayings about Jesus fulfilling the Law and the Prophets and his followers being called to “be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The sayings quote Torah and then explore nuances of meanings by comparing anger to murder, lust to adultery and divorce, and by insisting on simple speech, forbearance, and love of the enemy. When we think about what Jesus is calling for, we cannot help but think, “No way. That’s impossible, nobody is perfect.” Nevertheless Jesus said, “You must be perfect.”

What do we do with a command to be what we cannot be? It is an important question, because such commands are everywhere, not only in the Sermon on the Mount, but throughout the parables and the rest of Scripture. Go to a verse we usually avoid, Luke 14:33: “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Jesus could not possibly expect us to take this literally, could he? Who would pay the preacher? It is a very clear statement, just as clear as prohibitions against divorce, adultery, and homosexual activity in the Old Testament. The *hermeneutical* issue is to determine the basis upon which you decide to read one command literally and binding across all time, and another as not.

The appeal to parable as a model for biblical interpretation frees us from a rote literalism that privileges one reading to the exclusion of all others and from a perpetual choice between absolute right and wrong. That is always a false choice, because living faithfully is always more complicated than right and wrong. It was complicated 2,000 years ago. Today, after centuries of copying from manuscript to manuscript, varieties of translations of the original Hebrew and Greek, the Reformation, archeological discoveries, and all manner of exegetical methodologies, it has not become any easier.

Parables require agility, a lightness of reading, that we can apply to more of Scripture than we usually allow. Parable invites us to look at longer narrative threads, to see how the large stories of Scripture speak in ways that the individual lections we tend to focus on do not. For instance, when we read passages from Genesis, we may enjoy this or that episode from the lives of the patriarchs, but we are not especially aware of the broader narrative telling us how the “chosen people” came to dwell in Egypt, nor of the parallel narratives of Sarah and Hagar, and Leah and Rachel. Rarely do we attend to the even broader narrative of election and

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strong in the Christian faith as we hear phrases like “Everything happens for a reason.” Others challenge such an interpretation, arguing that it leads to unfair scapegoating and victimization. Did the people of New Orleans deserve the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, as some preachers teach? Does Africa deserve its epidemic of AIDS? Did the sorrowful death of a particular child truly bring about divine justice? This psalm again challenges the preacher and teacher to consider the complexity of the relationship between God and humanity without adopting too quickly the simplest conclusions.

In the lectionary verses, the psalmist quickly establishes the relationship between teacher and student, and she or he begins by calling the class to attention. These “sayings of old” offered by the teacher are much more than the worn-out stories of their confused and wayward ancestors. Rather, they are parables, inviting the students of that day and the students of this day to reflect upon their message, within their current context. This process of education focuses not just upon the individual, but truly upon the people—past, present, and future. The generations present and future must understand the lessons of their ancestors’ complicated history, for it is from God’s judgment and God’s mercies that future generations will learn and continue to construct and reconstruct their paradigm for interpreting the good and the bad of their lives.

The specific example of the lectionary text (vv. 12–16) summarizes the exodus and retells how, again and again, God rescues a people who are on the brink of death. The enemy approaches, and God provides a way across the sea. The people are hopelessly lost in an unforgiving desert, and God shows the way. The people are starving and suffering without the necessities of life, and God provides. Through this educational process, the teacher hands down not just facts, but hope—hope that the power and confession of the God of the exodus is still sufficient in times of present suffering. People continue to yearn for that hope during times of economic unrest and denominational conflict, during times of war and hunger, during times of broken relationships and broken childhoods.

This emphasis on using the stories to educate the people into the hope through God raises another important issue. As the teaching psalmist addresses the students, she or he describes stories “that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us” (v. 3). The teacher presumes that the students already share a familiarity with and an appreciation

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

Exegetical Perspective

and to marvel, and to be grateful, and to discover a compass for moving forward.

The eloquence of Psalm 78, even in English translation, is itself astonishing. The first half of verse 2 intrigues: “I will utter dark sayings from of old.” What is old is not merely past and gone. It is a riddle in need of constant solution: These “things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD” (vv. 3–4). The psalm seems anxious that the past not be lost. Psalm 78 was heard, chanted, memorized, and passed down, generation to generation, even to us, so we might remember. Memory is hope; memory is the benchmark of faith; memory is the heart of God laid bare.

The lectionary dices the psalm and prescribes only the opening admonition and then verses 12–16, which deal with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Psalm 78 follows the narrative of the book of Exodus quite closely. The vivid image in verse 13, “[God] made the waters stand like a heap,” is a direct quotation from Exodus 15:8. That fifteenth chapter of Exodus is itself instructive: astonished, the people survived not only the menacing sea and the pursuing chariots of Pharaoh, but also their own trepidation. They were astonished and overjoyed that they had made it! So they broke into song. Miriam, Moses’ sister, and other women played timbrels and danced enthusiastically. We cannot know the precise details, but Psalm 78, when performed in the temple, was probably accompanied by musical instruments, trumpets, percussion, fanfare, and women most likely danced. The telling of this history would have been more like what we think of today as opera—big, festive, visual, oral, aural, titillating.

The lectionary conveniently lops the reading off at verse 16, when everything seems just dandy, God having mightily delivered Israel. As faithful readers we cannot miss the very next word of the psalm: “Yet.” Verse 17 exposes the underbelly of the sad tale: “Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High.” History is a riddle. Those who hear it are being tested, and with wry irony the psalm recalls that sad moment when Israel tested God (v. 18). Whitney Brown once explained (quite humorously) why we are not fond of history: “There’s a lot we should be able to learn from history. Yet history proves we never do. In fact, the main lesson of history is that we never learn the lessons of history. This makes us look so stupid that few people care to read it. They’d rather not be

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story of God’s provision for the Israelites, especially the manna and the quail, and returns to the stories set in Egypt. This version of the exodus story does not turn its back on the people’s complaints or YHWH’s anger. In fact, the storyteller seeks to capture the “dark side” of the story. Verses 56–57 indicate the mood: “Yet they tested the Most High God, and rebelled against him. They did not observe his decrees, but turned away and were faithless like their ancestors; they twisted like a treacherous bow.” Set in context, the teaching to which the faithful should “give ear” is to trust in the goodness of God by continuing to be obedient, with a warning of dire consequences, should they fail to do so.

What Do We Tell the Children? The first section of this psalm (vv. 1–4) speaks to the preacher, Christian educator, and parent. Verses 2–4 talk about the “dark sayings from of old” and assert, “We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.”

Churches try to do this task of telling the coming generation about the wonders God has done. In many congregations there is a children’s sermon, often a watered-down version of the central message for the day. In some congregations, the entire Sunday morning experience is made appropriate to children, and some of the adults wish it included more “meat.” These verses suggest that the people of God can do both: include the children, and not dilute the message. Tell the “glorious deeds of the LORD,” even when they are awesome or a bit frightening. Perhaps congregations can take a clue from J. K. Rowling and her Harry Potter novels. Trust that children are ready to see an honest confrontation between good and evil, and even to realize that such a battle exists in their own hearts.

Keep It Simple. The second section of this psalm (vv. 12–16) summarizes a few familiar stories. Perhaps the preacher/educator/parent can again learn from the way children devour a story: repeating it, resisting all variations except the one they know best, the telling that most closely echoes the way their parents told it. What is the point of the stories summarized in these verses? The people are exhorted to remember that God can be trusted to provide everything necessary.

Water Play. The last few verses (vv. 15–16) suggest another focus for the preacher. Water is absolutely

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

Theological Perspective

establishment, apostasy and exile, repentance and restoration, that moves through Scripture. Psalm 78, by simply placing the term *mashal* alongside the events of the exodus, invites this manner of reading.

A parabolic hermeneutic also helps to illuminate complicated texts in places we do not expect—the laws of Deuteronomy and Leviticus and the theology of Paul. Contemporary arguments about the place of the ethical and holiness codes in Torah center on the question of what is still relevant for modern conduct, and what is so inextricably tied to ancient practices as to be helpful today only for understanding Israelite religion. These readings inevitably deal with individual laws; so we might keep the Sabbath (actually we mostly do not), but we do not keep the dietary laws, yet we do not understand the story that the laws themselves are telling. Leviticus 13 and 14 devote 116 verses to the detection, treatment, and ritual cleansing of skin diseases. What is that all about? If we do not ask the larger narrative question of the story the laws tell, how will we know? The narrative of Paul's theology is also lost in discussion of, say, his approach to the role of women in the life of the community. We forget to unpack his rhetoric when arguing about whether we agree with what he said, but if we do not understand how he said what he said, and how that fits into the larger movement of his theology—from sin to salvation by the grace of God in Jesus Christ—we lose the meaning in the argument.

Which brings us back to Psalm 78. What does it mean to understand a psalm as a *mashal*? It means to accept the author's suggestion of the best reading strategy, a clue as plain as "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10) and "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (Ezek. 1:1). "Put your interpreting-a-vision glasses on!" say John and Ezekiel. "Put your reading-a-parable glasses on," says the psalmist. Perhaps we need to keep these lenses handy and use them more often.

WILLIAM F. BROSEND

Pastoral Perspective

for these stories. Most religious professionals will attest that such a presumption is unfounded in the twenty-first-century church. As church professionals might want to delve into deep questions like theodicy, many folks inside and outside of the congregations are asking, "What is a psalm?" "What do you mean by the exodus?" "What is this exile, and why do you keep talking about it?" "Didn't God write the Bible?" In truth, many parents need as much biblical education as their child or grandchild.

Finally, while the pieces of history recited in this psalm and in these verses serve an important educational role, they also serve an evangelical role. In the educating of the children, teachers share an understanding of their faith and hope in God. These stories are foundational for the passing on of their faith and heritage. The thought of practicing evangelism intimidates many good folks, and it pushes many more beyond their comfort zone. This psalmist provides one model of evangelism that might be more accessible to many folks: just tell the stories of the faith. This model does not require the evangelist to respond to every argument or to explain every theological issue. Just tell the story, and let the Holy Spirit take over.

One summer I was serving as chaplain for the week at our local Presbyterian camp. I was working on my computer in one room while children engaged in activities in another. A girl, probably eight or nine, passed me. On her return trip, I engaged her in conversation, asking how she liked camp. In that conversation, she volunteered, "My family doesn't believe in God—Daddy says our family doesn't believe in God." As I contemplated why her daddy might have sent her to our Christian camp, I said to myself, "OK, chaplain, how do you respond?" Blessedly, she responded for me. She continued, "But I love the stories, especially the stories of Jesus. Did you know that he could do miracles?" I responded, "Yes, I have heard about those miracles." As she departed, I said, "Just keep listening to those stories of Jesus. Just keep listening to the stories."

DAVID M. BENDER

Psalm 78:1–4, 12–16

Exegetical Perspective

reminded. Any good history book is mainly just a long list of mistakes, complete with names and dates. It's very embarrassing."² The psalmist would concur, and this embarrassment leads to the confession of sin, a renewed reliance on the God of history, and into a hopeful future.

This psalm's plot is the plot of all of Scripture: God graciously acts, yet these actions are met with disobedience, and then destructive consequences ensue, requiring more grace and restoration. Clint McCann wisely wrote that "for Christians, this pattern that portrays God's dilemma is stamped most clearly and decisively in the shape of a cross."³ Jesus would have learned this psalm, probably from his mother Mary at home, but then also when his family made pilgrimage to the temple. He knew the "dark sayings of old," and himself spoke in parables. He knew that "yet they sinned still more against him" (v. 17) and experienced it in the most painful way imaginable. Just as he remembered the mighty acts of God, he became the mightiest act of God. He would not have the story hidden from the children, whom he welcomed and loved.

JAMES C. HOWELL

Homiletical Perspective

primal. A good water story is an open door for both children and adults. The preacher does well to play with this most essential element. Consider what other texts might want to come to the water park for an hour some Sunday morning. In the lectionary, this section of Psalm 78 is paired with Exodus 17:1–7, the familiar passage where Moses strikes a rock to provide water for the thirsty Israelites. The two texts are tied together as Psalm 78:15–16 references the Moses/rock/water story with dramatic language, attributing all action to YHWH rather than to Moses: "He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers." A preacher might wonder aloud: What difference does it make who does the acting in this story? Are our ways God's ways if they bring water to thirsting people? How might we actually provide water to the thirsty, both metaphorically and literally?

Perhaps the people of God will hear the echo of Amos 5:24: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," or the voice of the Samaritan woman at the well, who says to Jesus, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (John 4:11). The good news flows; so yes, do invite John to the water park. Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. . . . 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37–38).

May the Spirit bless the preacher who seeks to turn ears toward the good news that flows from the "dark sayings from of old."

RUTH H. EVERHART

2. A. Whitney Brown, *The Big Picture: An American Commentary* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 12.

3. Clinton McCann Jr., "Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:992.

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**PROPER 22 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 2
AND OCTOBER 8 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20

¹Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. . . .

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. . . .

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

Theological Perspective

Consider the ways three theologians challenge us to think about the commands of God in this passage and elsewhere in the biblical text. The first challenge comes from the twentieth-century liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle. Citing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Soelle asks, “Can the church preach the commandment of God with the same certainty with which it preaches the gospel . . . ? Can it preach, ‘Do not engage in war,’ with the same certainty as it can say, ‘your sins are forgiven you?’”¹ With these words, she calls the church to task for failing to proclaim the prophetic word, being content, instead, to preach the easy word. Soelle affirms Bonhoeffer’s belief that real proclamation involves risk. That risk entails the willingness, or perhaps the prophetic courage, to answer the questions above with a resounding “Yes!”

Preachers fail to preach the commandments of God, Soelle argues, because the commands are misconstrued as threats and demands that run counter to a perception of the gospel as a gracious and forgiving word that provides happiness. The notion that the gospel overthrows or changes the “attitude” of the God who commands, so that we now deal with a kinder, gentler Deity, is

1. Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking about God* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 146; ideas in the next paragraph are from the same page.

Pastoral Perspective

The broken church sign down the street blares, “The Ten Commandments are NOT multiple choice.” We watch the annual broadcast of Charlton Heston’s cinematic portrayal of Moses, and we read about lawsuits around the country challenging efforts to remove the Ten Commandments from courthouse walls. Doubtless these treasures maintain their important influence within today’s communities. They raise innumerable pastoral issues, from how we choose faithful and unfaithful exclusions to “thou shall not kill” to confessions of how many ungodly influences we worship. They beg interpretation on the many ways people dishonor each other through abuse, neglect, and exploitation. While these issues are important, this essay offers other perspectives.

1. New Beginnings, New Values. The Bible is full of new beginnings, from the creation poetry of Genesis 1 to another creation story starring God and Noah (Gen. 7–9), from the exodus to the promise and hope of Pentecost. After their escape from Egypt, the Israelites face another new beginning at Sinai. Gone are the days of slavery and exploitation in Egypt. Now the laws provide the Israelites an opportunity to root their new society in the true God, to base it upon something other than exploitation. No more shall the key to success be found in cheating, stealing,

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¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." ²⁰Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Exegetical Perspective

Many people regard the Ten Commandments as general statements of how life *should* be organized and how people *should* relate to each other. People think of these commandments as basic principles upon which all people can agree and to which all people can ascribe.

Exodus 20 gives us a different picture. The Ten Commandments are laws given by the Lord, YHWH, the God of Israel (v. 1), on the basis of the covenantal relationship between YHWH and the people. They are a natural outgrowth of the exodus event of liberation from Egypt (v. 2). In essence, because of what the Deity has done for the nation, they have reciprocal responsibilities in allegiance to the Deity.

Though we tend to think of these commandments as basic principles by which to live, the content of the laws raise serious problems from both a gender and class perspective, as we shall see. The laws are rules for right relationship to God and to neighbor, yet they reflect a patriarchal society in which slavery was still practiced. The problem for the modern interpreter is that we no longer believe in some of the values reflected in these commandments:

1. *The Laws Are Addressed to Men.* In Hebrew, the "you" to whom the laws are addressed is masculine

Homiletical Perspective

We memorized them in Sunday school when we were young. We remember the Cecil B. DeMille version, with Charlton Heston as Moses. We hear of ongoing efforts to engrave them on the courthouse wall. These Ten Commandments are basic, primal, the core ethics of the Judeo-Christian tradition. They are ancient, literally carved in stone. They are still open to interpretation, applicable, and relevant. Any number of sermons might be preached on any one of the ten. There is more than a series of ten sermons here.

A familiar, fearsome story frames the Decalogue, a story that gives us a popular paradigm for the preaching of the Word. The great I AM speaks from the heavens, in a voice that literally thunders. The Holy One is above it all, yet claiming our attention. Moses, the leader, the prophet, climbs the mountain, dares to enter the stormy clouds of divine presence. The rest of us are at the foot of the mountain, trembling. God speaks directly to Moses. The thunder and lightning engrave Hebrew letters onto stone tablets. The Maker of heaven and earth has spoken. The prophet carries the sacred stones down to the rest of the earthlings. They will listen to Moses, but are still afraid of the voice in the clouds.

Is it too far-fetched to think that we preachers are sometimes seen as the one who goes up the

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mistaken; the Gospels reiterate God's commands and sometimes render them in even more stringent terms (e.g., Matt. 5:17–48). Rather than dismissing God's commandments, we must find a way to acknowledge that the same God who forgives also commands. In fact, the radical nature of God's forgiveness of sin, which is the heart of the gospel message for many Christians, is diminished when human sinfulness is never preached, or preached simply as a temporary mistake in judgment. Theologically, to fully honor the overwhelming acts of God through the Christ event—birth, death, and resurrection—we must be willing to fully name the mangled human nature God seeks to aid.

Practically, the power of “Thou shalt not” is emptied when we are afraid that naming these demands of God will offend some people and thus further empty pews. Specific to this passage, how do we preach and teach against idolatry? The word itself sounds fairly archaic to contemporary ears. There are no literal golden calves these days. For our second theologian, the twentieth-century existentialist Paul Tillich, however, idolatry is alive and well, as, for instance, in the wholehearted pursuit of professional success and economic power, or nationalism, or fandom. We elevate mundane pursuits to the position of gods, “worshiping” them at the expense of everything else. Even our dedication to family, health, and community involvement can become idols. We center our faith, and the totality of our potential well-being, on those elements of life that seem to promise us complete fulfillment. These false gods eventually leave us feeling more hopeless and despairing.

The idol that fills the space where God should be cannot ever cultivate within us integrity, well-being, or *shalom*—the sense of being whole and fulfilled—that all of us desperately seek. Many of us live in fear that the loneliness, agitation, desperation, and longing that can overtake us have no resolution; therefore, we invest ourselves in the socially sanctioned temporary fixes, the transitory gods of money, sex, addictions, and anything that temporarily fills up the space where our loneliness, fear, and anxiety reside. Relying on that which is not-God will finally leave us more lonely, fearful, and desperate when its power evaporates. Only God can and should take all our best energies; God should be our ultimate concern.² Only God sustains us and never fails us. So I would add to Soelle's

2. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper Books, 1957), 1–12.

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and killing. Now it shall lie in relationship with the true God. Because we live in a political world where the elected and their ideologies change regularly, we often experience new beginnings. Might each of these new beginnings provide an opportunity to decide anew how best to live in community without exploitation? Folks in our pews know both the promise and the trepidation of new beginnings on a personal level, as well—from periods of joblessness to the realization of a new call; from new love found to love lost; from church transformation to the need for the familiar; from economic security to depleted bank accounts. As we face new beginnings of many types, the story of Sinai reminds us to ask, “Who will be our God?”

2. Love for One Another. Many folks hear the strong statements of these commandments, but they are unaware of what is absent. The Ten Commandments present a beautiful statement about placing God at the center of our lives, and they include an important list of prohibitions that help order human relationships. However, the only mention of “love” refers to God's relationship with humanity (v. 6), and “love” occurs nowhere in the last six commandments, which deal with relationships between people. These last six commandments guide humanity in avoiding exploitation and abuse, but they do not go further to require love, service, commitment, or sacrifice. Some interpreters argue that loving God implicitly requires the loving of neighbors; one cannot have one without the other. Others argue that many other biblical texts teach love and relationship. These arguments are valid, but miss one reality: no one is suing the government to keep the words of Matthew 22:37–40 (about loving God and neighbor) on the courthouse walls. We rarely see the proclamation of Micah 6:8 (about doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God) on a church sign. Folks are not writing articles explaining how our system of laws hearkens back to the words of Matthew 25:40 (“As you did it one of the least of these . . .”). A great many people identify with the Ten Commandments. This reality challenges church leaders to remind the congregation of both what they proclaim, and what they do not.

3. Relevance. We must recognize that the response of a growing number of folks to the Ten Commandments is, “So what?” Newer generations are products of postmodernity, a paradigm that questions the assumptions of modernity and its

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singular. In other words, these laws specifically are addressed to a man, not to a woman.¹ Were the “you” in the masculine plural, one could argue that women were included and were also addressed, because Hebrew verbs and pronouns always describe a group of both men and women in the masculine plural. With the usage of the masculine singular, however, such a case cannot be made—at least not on the grammatical level.

Further evidence of the patriarchal bias in these laws can be seen in the instructions preceding the Ten Commandments, as people prepared and purified themselves the covenant ceremony (Exod. 19:15). Though these instructions are given to “the people,” *ha ‘am*, the instructions say that those who are preparing must ensure their purification by not touching a woman. In other words, these instructions are given to men, and apparently women were excluded from participation.

2. Property Rights of Men. The Tenth Commandment stipulates that a person must not covet his neighbor’s house, wife, male or female slave, ox or donkey, or “anything that belongs to your neighbor” (v. 17). It is clear from this law that the “neighbor” must be a man, since he has a wife. It is also clear that the man’s neighbor owns property (human, animal, and land) and that his wife is considered part of that property, as she is listed among house, cattle, land, slaves, and other belongings.² The abundance of property mentioned suggests that these laws mainly protected men of wealth.

The commandment prohibiting adultery (v. 14) also has something to do with violation of property rights. The commandment must be interpreted within the ancient Israelite understanding of adultery, as expressed in the laws in Leviticus 18:20 and Deuteronomy 22:22–24. Adultery was defined as sexual intercourse between a married or engaged woman and a man who was not her husband or her betrothed. The same rules did not apply to men; sexual intercourse between a married man and a woman (married or not married) was not considered to be adultery on the man’s part. A married man did not sin against his wife by having extramarital relations, because he did not belong to her in the same way she belonged to him.

1. Athalya Brenner, “An Afterward: The Decalogue—Am I an Addressee?” in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Exodus through Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 255–58.

2. David Clines, “The Ten Commandments, Reading from Left to Right,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology and Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 26–45.

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mountain in order to bring God’s Word to the people? Do our congregations see us this way? Do we see ourselves this way—especially if we have to step *up* into the pulpit? Is this a good or a dangerous image for us? Are we leaning too much in the direction of transcendence when we stand tall in the pulpit, having studied those Hebrew letters, the original context, prayerfully encountered the text and its Author? On the other hand, are we leaning too much in the direction of immanence when we preach at ground level, perhaps without a preaching gown, and with a body mike, pacing back and forth, chatting warmly with the gathered community? This story forces us to think about preaching itself, physically, spiritually, theologically, biblically, and about our own preacherly selves.

Yes, any number of sermons could be preached on the Decalogue. Some would be better than others, some more fiery, others more down to earth. There are sermons here about idolatry, about the gods (small g) that we worship in our world, about family, about what matters to us. There are sermons here about capital punishment, about war and peace, about Sabbath keeping, about wealth and honesty. A sermon on this passage could take any number of forms. Here are three possibilities.

1. The Two Tablets. The Ten Commandments have two dimensions, vertical and horizontal; they are about transcendence and immanence, both at once. We sometimes speak of the first four commandments, those that seek to define our relationship with God, as the “first tablet.” The “second tablet” holds those six commandments that speak of human relationships in a just community. Of course, the two are connected, like the pages of a book, like the two testaments. We encounter the Holy One, the One to whom we belong, body and soul. We are reminded that this One is the great I AM of the burning bush, the One who leads us from slavery to freedom, who is utterly gracious and worthy of our worship and devotion. We come to see that this holy relationship puts all relationships into perspective. We honor family, friend, neighbor, stranger. We see that these commandments help us live out the love and justice of God.

2. Law and Gospel. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 42, asks, “What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?” The answer? “To love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our

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questions above, “Do you teach and preach against idolatry?”

Finally, the postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan challenges us to remember that the command “You shall have no other gods before me” has a bloody legacy. The biblical text, she argues, “cannot be naively seen as a religious text reflecting the faith of the Hebrew people and the early Christians. Instead it must also be seen as a political text written, collected and redacted . . . under the shadow of empires.”³ Those “other gods” represent the real faith of real people. The commandment to “have no other gods before me” has been used by Christian colonizers as license to *eradicate* other gods to the glory of the one, true God. Eradication has often involved killing or enslaving the followers of those “other gods.” The complete eradication of other people’s gods as a sign of faithfulness to the one God often appears to have an ulterior, economic motive. “Christianizing” the heathens on the so-called “dark continents” has entailed claiming their “foreign” lands and all of their natural resources for the Christian Empire.

Many postcolonial theorists have written about the process of “othering”—a form of dehumanizing those people whom we wish to dominate. This is a process by which those in the colonizing culture justify their domination by caricaturing “other” people as exotic, dangerous, and in need of the civilizing powers of Christianity. If we define others as dangerous or licentious or heathenistic (they have “other gods”), it then becomes a theological mandate to subdue them, as part of the process of replacing the “other” gods. Theologically, if other gods are false, that means our God is true; anthropologically, if the worshipers of those idols are unsavory, then the worshipers of the true God are pure. Drawing from the work of Native American scholar Andrea Smith, Kwok concludes that the “other” serve to make possible the goodness, civility, and propriety of the colonizer.

So, in keeping with the power of the commandments, and the slipperiness of the term “idolatry,” I add, “What real, faithful human face do you see in the worshipers of these other gods? Whom have you implicitly or explicitly ‘othered’ in your worship of the Christian God?”

EMILY ASKEW

3. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 9; reference in the next paragraph is to page 15.

Pastoral Perspective

foundations in the scientific advancements of the Enlightenment. Modernity promised that by asking the right questions, reading the right books, and believing the right things, a person could arrive at the right answers. Postmodernity questions the concept of authority and is suspicious about claims of right beliefs and right answers. While some scholars view this new paradigm favorably, Robin Meyers, a minister in the United Church of Christ (UCC) and a philosophy professor at Oklahoma City University, argues that postmodernism rejects all authority to the extent that “the self is the highest seat of authority.”¹ Meyers warns that as the postmodern paradigm becomes more prevalent, more folks will question the relevance of the Bible and the authority of the Ten Commandments. Church leaders face the challenge of persuading people living in a postmodern world of the relevance of these commandments.

4. *The Sabbath as Protest.* Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, offers a strong pastoral perspective on the commandment to honor the Sabbath. While the Israelites were enslaved for 400 years in Egypt, the Sabbath became crucial in the maintenance of their identity as God’s chosen people. Maintaining the Sabbath embodied a strong statement that God’s people resisted a system that exploited and abused them. The Sabbath is a “political assertion of disengagement from the economic system of productivity that never has enough,” Brueggemann writes.² Folks in our pews would benefit from understanding that the relevance of the Sabbath is not limited to rest, play, and worship. Sabbath observance makes a forceful political statement that the system is broken. Many folks in our religious communities live in that broken system. They know jobs and other challenges of life that exploit them by continually demanding more commitment and more time, to the detriment of their health and family. Honoring the Sabbath serves as a protest against that system and affirms that the system does not reflect God’s will.

DAVID M. BENDER

1. Robin R. Meyers, *With Ears to Hear: Preaching as Self Persuasion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 22, 51–52.

2. Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:846.

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Exegetical Perspective

3. Human Slavery and Treatment of Non-Israelites. It is surprising that the Israelites were slave masters, because these laws open with the declaration that the basis of the divine-human relationship is the Israelites' liberation from slavery. The Sabbath law (vv. 8–11) indicates that slavery was an acceptable social order. Does this mean that the Israelites' enslavement by the Egyptians was wrong, but Israelite slave-holding was acceptable? One would have to say yes, given the laws related to slaves in the Covenant Code (Exod. 21–23).

The “neighbor” mentioned in verses 16–17 is also of exegetical concern. From other usages of this term, we know that it refers to an individual who is related to one's own ethnic group or is an in-law (e.g., Exod. 32:27; Lev. 20:10). In other words, these laws speak to how Israelites should relate to other Israelites, but they do not require such treatment of non-Israelites. This understanding is reinforced in the differentiation of the treatment of Hebrew and non-Hebrew slaves (Exod. 21:2–6).

4. A Jealous God. The Ten Commandments raise questions about the nature of the God who gave them. The self-revelatory formula, “I am YHWH,” appears throughout Exodus 1–12 as God's motive for liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The stated reason for the Israelites' liberation is that both the Egyptians and Israelites will know who YHWH is (6:7; 7:5, 17; 10:2; 14:4, 18). This fits with the Lord self-identifying as being “jealous” (v. 5). Given the later usage of adultery as a metaphor for apostasy in Hosea and Jeremiah (where God is described as a jealous husband), the nature of the divine-human relationship can be described as a marriage. Given the Israelites' understanding of adultery, if God is a jealous husband, and Israel the wayward wife, this suggests that the people were the property of YHWH, and it could also explain why Moses told the people to “fear the LORD” (v. 20).

The problem for modern audiences is that these commandments present YHWH as a deity who liberated a people so that they could be his property and serve him. In exchange, YHWH established laws that included protection of the property rights of wealthy men, and regarded women as property.

Some people want to post these laws in our courthouses.

RANDALL C. BAILEY

Homiletical Perspective

neighbor as ourselves.”¹ The two tablets lead us to the two testaments. Luther, Calvin, and many of our Reformation texts reflect on the implications of the Decalogue. Luther saw the gospel reinterpreting the law. (He liked Galatians.) Calvin saw the gospel as sending us back to the law. Our reading of the Ten Commandments in the church cannot help but be influenced by New Testament and even Reformation readings. The gospel does not release us from the law; it deepens the law's claims on us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus connects murder with anger, adultery with lust (Matt. 5). Our forebears saw each “shall not” as containing also a “shall.” So the sixth commandment asks us also to preserve all life; the seventh to “preserve our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior.”²

3. Preaching and Practice. Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please.” Sounds easy, but loving God and neighbor takes inner transformation and lots of trial-and-error practice. The Decalogue hanging on a courtroom wall may seem like a simple way of promoting biblical values, but the law must also be written on our hearts. Preaching and practice go together. The tablets have a vertical and a horizontal dimension, but each command has an inner and an outer dimension as well. Each of the ten asks us to nurture that deep and abiding love for the God who is love, the one who frees us, saves us, and forgives us. Each of the ten asks us to live our lives as though we believe in that just and loving God, as though divine being were renewing and remaking human being. Augustine—and Jesus—were hoping for a transformation of our wills, but also of our living.

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1. Westminster Shorter Catechism, in *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 7.042.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.068, 7.071.

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**PROPER 23 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 9
AND OCTOBER 15 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 32:1–14

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” ²Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves

Theological Perspective

Two remarkable theological insights occur in this passage: first, we are warned against attempting to domesticate God. Second, we are reminded that God has responded to pleading and perhaps has a concern for God’s own legacy. These two theological elements are intimately connected by the awe-fullness of God.

Texts like this one remind us that the nature of God is awful. The word “awful,” like the related adjective “awesome,” describes the necessity of our awe before God’s nature. This awe is ambiguous. The God who frees slaves can just as easily destroy them in a fit of temper. The God who makes the Noahic covenant with all of creation (Gen. 9:8–17), has, just chapters before, destroyed everything but an ark-full of life, in frustration and grief over the very human nature God created (Gen. 7:1–24). The God who tames the sea monster Leviathan authorizes war on Job’s faith, permits his children to be killed and his body to suffer all manner of dis-ease.

In the New Testament, blood buys freedom, as the Son of the God who is called Love is killed on our behalf. We remember that eschatological hope, in which we will finally live together in just and peaceful community with God, comes true through the violent de-creation of the cosmos and the horrible torture of the unrepentant: “They were allowed to

Pastoral Perspective

How natural it feels to follow God’s lead and to cast stones at the Israelites for their dance around the calf. Do they not remember God’s many gracious gifts? Have they forgotten that God provided Moses to stand up to Pharaoh and lead them out? Do they not remember the Passover and the deluge of death from which they were saved? Were they sleepwalking as they traveled safely across the Red Sea, a body of water that thereupon consumed the entire Egyptian army? How can they now turn away from God to worship other gods?

As we cast those stones at the Israelites, the narrative describes not a people who seek to supplant God with these other gods, but people who long for the support, strength, and hope that they once knew in relationship with God. Now that God appears to be absent, they seek a present, active force to fill the void. The language of the story indicates that Aaron attempts to return them to the Lord, and their dancing around the golden calf is an expression of worship. We have no trouble recognizing the idolatry of the people. However, casting stones at their idolatry is to miss their overriding problem—impatience. They perceive that God is missing from their community, and they can wait no longer for God’s reappearance. This story reminds our congregations that God operates on God’s own

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an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.

¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary reading is divided into two main parts. Verses 1–6 deal with Aaron and the people constructing the golden calf, and verses 7–14 deal with YHWH and Moses dialoguing and struggling over what to do about the people. The narrator sets up the story by telling the reader that Moses is delayed coming down from the mountain. This delay causes the people to grow restless. Moses is still absent; they "gather around" Aaron (v. 1a). In Hebrew, the term used for "gather," *qhl*, is followed by the preposition "against." The English translation "gathered around" does not capture the threat; that the people "gathered *against*" Aaron suggests they were ganging up on him.

As the people begin to speak, they use double imperatives: "*Get up* and *make* for us gods who shall walk before us" (v. 1b, my trans.). "Walking before" them is, of course, precisely what YHWH did while leading them out of Egypt. However, in this passage, the people say that it was *Moses* who led them (v. 1). Moses and *his* God. Now Moses has disappeared, and they have no idea what has happened to him and whether he will return.

Recall that during the rebellion in the wilderness (16:3), the people accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt so they would die, since they had no food to eat. At that time, Moses corrected them by

Homiletical Perspective

The twists and turns in this story's plot are almost as disorienting as the wilderness wanderings of the freed slaves on the way to the promised land. The exodus band has encountered setbacks and switchbacks along the way. Moses has had negative feedback and pushback from all quarters. Even imagining Moses as raconteur, the tale's plot is hard to follow. The narrative flow is further complicated by the history of the text itself—word of mouth, repeated for generations, jotted down, pieced together. So a sermon on this passage, this leg of the journey, might well be full of surprises.

Moses went up the mountain to receive the law a few chapters back. Perhaps the wayward Hebrews have not yet heard the Ten Commandments. By taking off their gold jewelry, melting it down, and forming it into a solid gold cow, they are flying in the face of the first and second commandments: no gods before me; no graven images. Dare we ask who had the skill in metallurgy to do the melting and smelting and molding that such idolatry would require? It is all terribly surprising and unpredictable. In a way, that is what makes the story so captivating.

Aaron is Moses' lieutenant, left below to keep things under control. Is he leading a rebellion, or going along with it? Is this a festival to the Lord

Exodus 32:1–14

Theological Perspective

torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them” (Rev. 9:5–6). Biblical scholar Timothy Beal establishes the ambiguity that characterizes God’s nature this way: “the ‘monstrous’ is just the mysterious in gross form.”¹ The God of Noah, Job, the crucifixion, and Revelation can just as easily upend the world as save it.

We deny the ambiguity at the heart of the “awesome” nature of God at our own peril. Reducing God to divine beneficence (a benign deity), means reducing God to a manageable form, like a golden calf. We domesticate God when we cannot tolerate the ambiguity at the heart of theodicy. In longing to know “why,” we jump to glib conclusions that offer *us* temporary respite from the inherent mystery of God, and thus we make God in our own image. We make gods from that which decorates *us* (“Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters” [v. 2]). We long for a discernable Theo-logic, and when we can’t find it, we make it. Beal interprets the theodicy at the heart of the book of Job as a reminder that the order prescribed in Deuteronomy to keep the law and be blessed, disobey and be cursed, is only temporary.²

The awe-full nature of God extends to God’s response to human pleading. Concerned about God’s anger at idol making (making God from our own needs), Moses has the temerity to remind God that God would look really bad if, after bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, God killed them in a fit of pique. More still, Moses demurs, what about all those promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel? All those would become vacuous, if God burned up God’s people. Amazingly, God gives in. We do not know why. Perhaps because Moses touched God’s compassion for us maddening humans, perhaps because Moses reminds God that acting rashly has long-term consequences for God’s legacy. God spares them all and makes of them a great nation.

Fast forward to Matthew 27:45–46, when Jesus, dying on the cross, cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This time, God does not change God’s mind. How much more troublesome will this legacy become for God, as many, many theologians, including myself, try to

1. Timothy Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 53.
2. *Ibid.*, 41.

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schedule, and that God’s merciful love is always present, waiting. It challenges us with the truth that it is usually God who waits for us, and not we who wait for God.

While many questions arise, folks sometimes forget to ask an even more piercing question: Why was Moses rewarded but Aaron punished for very similar behavior? Both brothers demand from the people of Israel their gold and treasures (Exod. 25 and 30). Both cast the gold into the fire and create a golden, humanmade object. Both bring sacrifices and offer celebratory worship around the golden object. For Aaron, that object is a calf; for Moses, it is the ark of the covenant. So why is Moses exalted while Aaron is vilified? Quite simply, Moses remained in constant communication with God, and his building project resulted from faithful discernment. Aaron, however, surrendered to the impatience of the people and acted independently, without the discernment of and guidance from God. It is too easy for folks to assume their own expertise and to rush ahead toward accomplishments, without waiting for God’s guidance. It is too easy for congregations and governments to act quickly upon a promising idea without asking the hard questions about God’s will for the project. It is too easy for people to make the most important life decisions—marriage, calling, career, family—without bringing God into the conversation. It is sometimes too easy to be just like Aaron.

When Moses and Aaron order the people to offer their gold and treasures, the people probably have little to spare. Their 400 years in Egyptian slavery were not conducive to the accumulation of wealth. When the Passover deaths finally convince Pharaoh to free the people, they asked for some pittance of treasure and clothing. While the Egyptians provided them with parting gifts for the trip, one can assume that the gifts were not extravagant and heavy to carry. By the time of the exodus, the Israelites left too quickly to gather many belongings. They left expediently, running for their lives, with their minds on anything but their empty pockets. In summary, these narratives tell the story of community leaders who require the monetary treasures of the struggling people to pursue an agenda aimed loosely at benefiting the whole.

In today’s political and economic climate, this narrative speaks volumes to the folks in our pews. Many folks relate too well to the crunch of financial struggles coupled with the greater taxing demands of the government. As we live this reality, folks continue

Exodus 32:1–14

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saying it was YHWH who brought them out (16:6), and YHWH would feed them (16:8). However, with Moses still away and no sign of Moses' God, the people begin looking for another source of divine leadership; they are acting on their own. By doing so, they imply that YHWH has also abandoned them there in the wilderness.

Unlike Moses, Aaron does not attempt to set them straight. Perhaps out of fear of the people "gathered against" him, or perhaps because he too has his doubts about Moses' return, Aaron springs into action and tells them to bring jewelry from the ears of their wives, daughters, and sons (v. 2). Out of the gold jewelry, Aaron forms (*ysr*) for them an idol representing a calf. The verb *ysr* is the same word that is used when YHWH forms the human from the ground in Genesis 2 and for forming parts of the temple in 1 Kings 7. What might this choice of words say about Aaron's act of forming and creating, in this story's context?

In the second subunit, the scene shifts to relate the dialogue between YHWH and Moses about what is going on among the people. It begins with YHWH giving commands to Moses to go see about "your" people, whom "you" brought up from Egypt (v. 7). By saying "your people," YHWH reverses the divine speeches in Exodus 3:7–12, where YHWH claims they are "my people." YHWH dissociates God from these "stiff-necked people" and foists them off on Moses.

YHWH next reports what the people have done; they have sacrificed to the foreign gods and have claimed that these deities, not YHWH, led them out of Egypt (v. 8). YHWH expresses anger and an intention to destroy the people. Not only does YHWH plan to destroy them, YHWH wants to make another people—from Moses (vv. 9–10). This is a reversal of the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. This characterization of YHWH is also reminiscent of Genesis 6, where YHWH decides to destroy humans and start anew with Noah.

Like Abraham in Genesis 18:23–32, who bargains with YHWH about his intention to destroy the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses challenges YHWH on his intention to destroy the Israelites in the desert (vv. 11–13). Abraham appealed to the justice of the Deity, but Moses appeals to YHWH's reputation. Moses suggests that if YHWH were to kill the people, this action would tarnish YHWH's image. First, Moses reminds YHWH that the Israelites are "*your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt" (v. 11), and suggests to YHWH how bad it would look if YHWH were to destroy

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or a revel or both? Why a calf? Surely this was some kind of foreign deity. Egyptian? Canaanite? (Of course, they had not been to Canaan yet!) Aaron himself seems confused and confusing. One minute he sounds sarcastic, the next serious. We can sympathize, perhaps, with their urge to do something, to make a sacrifice, to worship, to create a tangible deity when both Moses and his God were up and away. Quite honestly, it seems as if the chosen people are hedging their bets.

These verses have a kind of upstairs, downstairs quality to them. We first get the perspective from below, where Aaron and his charges are feeling neglected, abandoned. The next scene takes us up the mountain, to one of the most unexpected, out-of-character divine-human encounters in all of Scripture.

The great I AM sees what is happening down below and burns with anger. God wants Moses to get down there and take care of things. Notice that the Holy One wants to be left alone to sulk. In a fascinating reversal, God, who is burning mad and ready to wreak havoc, is challenged by the patient and reasonable arguments of a mere mortal, Moses (a man who, incidentally, also killed someone in anger [Exod. 2:12]). We get to see the all-too-human face of God, the One who feels betrayed and lashes out. We get to see the divine spark in Moses, patient, reminding the Angry One of other feelings—love and mercy and compassion. His arguments work, and the divine mind changes—perhaps the most startling plot twist of all.

This story is alluring largely because of its grand reversals. This story is hard to believe, because it seems so unlikely. Divine wrath, even righteous indignation, does not go over too well among church folk who expect God to be civil, polite, and well-behaved. For those who want God to be in control of everything, unchanging, immutable, this story is disconcerting. Yet this disconsolate deity is so very lovable, precisely in that deep, deep hurt that is the result of even deeper love. This God feels what we feel. This One has passion.

So how will the preacher help hearers to open their ears and hearts to the surprises this story has to offer? The form of a sermon on this text will have its twists and turns, its lack of logic. Through storytelling and rhetoric, the congregation might be led along a path that ends up in strange and unfamiliar terrain. The people may feel lost and then found as they follow the preacher's line of thought. Perhaps a joke will be told that has a serious punch

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read around the issue of divine child abuse at the heart of the theory of sacrificial atonement? Like our desires to reduce God's mystery to what we like, and not to what we fear, we read these words of Jesus through the lens of the resurrection and conclude, "Yes, but God had even *better* plans for Jesus." We cannot, however, get around the fact that the God who resurrects also kills; that there can be no eternal life without the often painful loss of the material one. So, why does God listen to Moses and spare the Israelites, but deny Jesus? By what Theo-logic does God choose? Whatever answers to this question we come up with probably serve only to vitiate our own anxieties. When pushed, I do not think we actually want a God who does our bidding, but the price for worshiping a God out of our control is that we must take the monstrous with the mysterious.

EMILY ASKEW

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to ask which parts of the government's agenda are worth the price of our dwindling treasures. Is it worth our sacrifice to pay for wars that are the longest and most expensive in American history? Should the government use our hard-earned money to pay for a universal healthcare plan that might provide care for many people, but that many people do not trust? Should we pay to support a higher quality of public education, even if we do not have school-age children? Should the government dedicate a growing portion of our income to relieve the suffering of abject poverty in the two-thirds world, while poverty and debt grow in our own country? Should the government continue to sacrifice tax money to provide extra financial advantages to clergy? While answers to these questions are difficult, it is important that we ask them.

Now, we return to the question of the impact of God's response to the unfortunate dancers around the golden calf. God's anger has been raised, and God's language almost disowns the people. The time has come to rain down hot wrath and to watch the little people wriggle and squirm until they move no more. Then Moses pleads, and God changes God's mind.

Many people reject the idea that God's mind can change. Congregations are more comfortable with the tradition "immortal, invisible, God only wise." Folks resonate with the Creator in the beautiful poetry of Genesis 1, who appears to be in total control. People better recognize the description of God who "changest not." However, God's mind does change. The story indicates that Moses' arguments convince God to do that which God originally did not intend. While the thought of a changing God brings dis-ease to many, perhaps the conversation between Moses and God might bring comfort. Perhaps these words indicate that, occasionally, God has just not yet decided. Perhaps God is so serious about God's relationship with humanity that God might give a decision a second thought. Perhaps God not only listens to our tears and prayers but even respects them.

DAVID M. BENDER

Exodus 32:1–14

Exegetical Perspective

them. Other nations would talk. They would say he liberated the people to kill them himself. Ironically, this is just like the charge of the people against Moses in Exodus 16:2, that he had led them out of Egypt only to let them die in the desert.

Moses then appeals to the promises God made to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that God would make them into a great nation; Moses reminds YHWH of YHWH's own words in Exodus 6:2–9 regarding this promise to the patriarchs.

Somehow, Moses' strategy to hit YHWH in the ego works. Perhaps Moses has learned from YHWH's repeatedly saying, "Then they will know that I am the LORD," as the rationale for the liberation of the Israelites. Perhaps Moses knew that pushing that particular button would work. He has been listening to YHWH, and he uses what he has learned to get YHWH to avoid doing the wrong thing. YHWH has continually said, throughout chapters 3–12, that the main concern in liberating the people is getting both the Israelites and the Egyptians to recognize YHWH's mighty power. Moses uses that argument to convince YHWH not to carry out his plan.

While most commentators concentrate on the apostasy of the people, the narrator actually gives more attention to the speeches of Moses and YHWH, thereby showing that what is at stake is YHWH's reputation and that, in a way, this is what the people have challenged. That YHWH responds by acquiescing to Moses' suggestions confirms this characterization of YHWH in the narrative. The Deity, who describes himself as the jealous type (Exod. 20:5), responds positively to Moses' statements that his reputation with the Egyptians is at stake if he destroys the people: "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (v. 14).

RANDALL C. BAILEY

Homiletical Perspective

line. Perhaps a serious story will be retold that has a funny ending. Perhaps a familiar tale will be recounted that ends in a strange way.

Twists and turns are there in the narrative, but they are also there in the characters. Inviting hearers to think of themselves in turn as one or another of the players might help the faithful see themselves in the thick of things. Are they like Aaron, left behind, in over his head, confused and with the people, but trying to lead and be faithful nonetheless? Are they among the wilderness wanderers, tired, hungry, lonely, frustrated? Are they feeling the absence of God? Are the people of God simply wanting to take things into their own hands, worshiping something that is not God, making gods that suit the frustration of the moment? What if the people put themselves in those divine shoes for a moment? Could we begin to see that maybe God has feelings too? Maybe some could see that anger is a feeling that can be holy at times. Could the faithful be open to the possibility that we have the power to hurt, to let God down? What about Moses? Are there times when our prayers, our memories, our patient words can calm righteous indignation, can lead to a change of heart, human or divine?

In the end, this topsy-turvy story is about prayer. It is a way of believing that our prayers really do have an effect on God, and that the waves of emotions we experience—mad, glad, happy, sad—are reflections of the divine image in us. The story is about real, raw emotions, both human and divine, and about the ways that God is with us through all the twists and turns of our lives.

REBECCA BUTTON PRICHARD

PROPER 23 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 9 AND OCTOBER 15 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 106:1–6, 19–23

¹Praise the LORD!

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

²Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD,
or declare all his praise?

³Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times.

⁴Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people;
help me when you deliver them;

⁵that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 106 describes a perpetual theological relationship between human impatience and divine, long-suffering justice. However, what I want to focus on in these sections from Psalm 106 is the very un-American nature of this prayer for help. What is un-American about it? We in America typically think of ourselves as rugged individualists. This passage is about an individual hoping to share in the goodness God will grant to the community. Consider these lines in which I have highlighted several words:

Remember *me*, O LORD, when you show favor to
your people;
help *me* when you deliver *them*;
that *I* may see the prosperity of *your chosen ones*,
that *I* may rejoice in the gladness of *your nation*,
that *I* may glory in *your heritage*.

Our radical American individualism gets teased out when we ask ourselves honestly, am I willing to answer for things I did not personally do? Many of us do not want to see the ways in which our actions, fortunes, and sufferings are linked to one another's. I know that I do not want my deeds to be judged on the basis of the collected actions of my people.

As a white woman, I balk when I am accused of racism. I say I do not act that way. If I think that this

Pastoral Perspective

The lectionary offers only two slices of Psalm 106, though these pieces fit well with the lectionary text from Exodus 32. While Exodus narrates the story of the people's disobedience, the psalm provides serious theological reflection on that story and others. The psalm begins with a hymn of praise to God, and it recognizes God's sovereign role in the history and in the future of the people. The people recognize the plight of their sinfulness; they are powerless to alter their own course, their own destiny. All they can do is voice their petitions to God, recognize their depravity, and pray for the best. This beautiful poem tells the story of that prayer.

Looking at the whole psalm, the reader follows the many twists and turns in this description of the people's relationship with God. At the beginning, after their petitions (vv. 4–5) and their prayers of confession (vv. 6–7), the relationship seems doomed. Verse 8 turns the conversation to hope with its strong "Yet," and God's salvation narrative proceeds. Just when the reader grows confident in the strength of God's covenant and the sincerity of the repentance of the people, we encounter that woeful "But" in verse 13, and the psalmist proceeds with story after story of how the people forgot and failed God. In the midst of God's bringing the people low as a result of their rebellion, the reader is relieved by

Psalm 106:1–6, 19–23

⁶Both we and our ancestors have sinned;
we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.

.....
¹⁹They made a calf at Horeb
and worshiped a cast image.

²⁰They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats grass.

²¹They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,

²²wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

²³Therefore he said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him,
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 106 begins with a call to praise and thanksgiving (vv. 1–3) and an individual’s prayer for help (vv. 4–5). It ends with a communal prayer for help (v. 47) and a liturgical call to praise (v. 48). In between the *hallelujahs* (which the NRSV translates “Praise the LORD”), we find a confession of sin (v. 6) illustrated with examples drawn from the historical narratives of the Pentateuch (vv. 7–46). The theological perspective of the whole psalm echoes the framework of passages in Judges (e.g., Judg. 2:11–19; 3:7–9) and several parts of Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut. 9:6–7, 24). The psalmist is thankful that the people of God (both past and present), who have done “wickedly” (v. 6) and have suffered for it, still have been saved repeatedly by the abundance of God’s steadfast love (v. 45).

YHWH’s essential goodness and unending steadfast love (*hesed*) are cited as primary reasons to give thanks and praise (v. 1). *Hesed* is a complex idea that melds the qualities of kindness, loyalty, mercy, and love into the single most important attribute of Israel’s God. It is God’s goodness and unfailing *hesed* that require God’s people to practice justice and righteousness in their own lives (v. 3).

While no one can adequately describe all of the praiseworthy things YHWH has done (v. 2), the psalmist assumes that those who do justice (*mishpat*)

Homiletical Perspective

Today’s Psalter reading is an excerpt from Psalm 106 that forms a companion piece to the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32. This is an historical psalm, one that recounts early salvation history within a liturgical context. The psalm extends to forty-eight verses and recalls the exodus, the wilderness wanderings, and early events in the land of promise. Robert Alter notes that the previous psalm (Ps. 105) is “a celebration of God’s providential care,” but Psalm 106 is an account of Israel’s sins: “The scenario of the poem is rebellion and betrayal of the covenant followed by defeat and exile, which then lead to contrition and a sincere turning to God, Who is then moved to relent.”¹ This psalm is about remembering and repenting, about forgiving and forgetting. In the end it is also about how God keeps the covenant, but this excerpt never quite gets that far. The psalm begins and ends with praise, suggesting a liturgical setting.

Memory is an amazing gift; all learning and wisdom are based upon it. Memory can be sharp or fuzzy, at times a somewhat unreliable gift. Here the memory of God and of the psalmist is stirred and invoked and repeated. As a gloss on Exodus 32, the Psalter portion recounts those earlier events

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 375.

Psalm 106:1–6, 19–23

Theological Perspective

charge of racism excludes me, I fail to acknowledge the benefits I have received as a white person because of the racism of my nation—education, job opportunities, political opportunities. I am rightly indicted as complicit in the racism of my nation. There are two major stumbling blocks we confront in trying to accept a communal vision of who we are.

1. *We Americans have a defensive sense of who “we” are and who “they” are.* When the earthquake devastated Haiti, a cry went up from some parts of Christian America that the earthquake was divine punishment for Haitians’ “pact with the devil” that they allegedly made to get themselves out from under French colonialism. Some Christians called the AIDS epidemic a punishment for homosexuality and Katrina the wrath of God on the profligacy of New Orleans. As Christians, we can much more easily divide ourselves into liberal and conservative churches and denominations than claim we are all one as the body of Christ.

2. *We have a false sense of independence, rather than an accurate sense of our radical interdependence.* The Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye constructs her theological anthropology around this African understanding of selfhood: “I am because we are.” Faithfully living out this notion of selfhood as radical interdependence consists of embracing and practicing responsibility, reciprocity, and hospitality.¹ While we could make the case that these three qualities come from the African sociopolitical and environmental contexts from which she writes, such an argument only temporarily averts our attention from the fact that responsibility, reciprocity, and hospitality are at the core of the Christian witness, encapsulated in Matthew 25:40, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

By claiming our different contexts, we distract ourselves from the mandate that our fortunes, our sins, our past, and our future are and always have been messily and blessedly intertwined. However, so far removed are we as Americans from the Christian call to radical interdependence that the very concept of “I am because we are” is easily pathologized as “co-dependence.” Honoring the truth of our interdependence is not pathological—it is theological.

Another phrase from Oduyoye’s work, “the household of God” (her translation of “the kingdom of God”), highlights the collective nature of our life

1. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 76.

Pastoral Perspective

the hopeful “Nevertheless” in verse 44 that signals yet another twist in the story of this relationship. Finally, after the people’s confession of faith in verses 6 and 7, they receive their assurance of pardon in verses 45 and 46. The poetry describes a long and difficult relationship that embodies more ups and downs and twists and turns than a roller coaster.

In many ways, we can relate to this description. While we hope that our relationship with God maintains a straight and smooth course, honesty forces folks to recognize that their relationship with God, like their relationship with other people, is not easy or simple. Folk’s faith journeys take them places where they never hope to go. Sometimes we doubt; sometimes we blame; sometimes we stray; sometimes we hurt. God remains faithful.

The psalmist reminds us of the waywardness of the Israelites through the many narratives in verses 14–42. These images take the ancient listener and the modern reader on a stroll through some of the lowlights of the history of Israel. In essence, the psalmist confesses and reflects upon its current sinful nature by remembering the stories that demonstrate its history of ungodly behavior. The world of politics and the world of history remind current generations that if we do not remember our past, we are doomed to repeat it. Maybe now is an appropriate time to review our church history and to remember the sins and struggles of our past. Maybe now is the time to remember how many people have been killed in the name of Jesus. Maybe now is the time to remember the many moments where judgment and hatred have scarred and wounded the Christian message of love and hope. Maybe now is the time to remember many times where religion has been relegated to be the handmaiden of political ambitions and aggressiveness. Maybe now is the time to look back and to learn about today.

Still, this psalm emphasizes only one side of the story. It dwells on the greatness of God and the depravity of humanity. The Scriptures provide a richer and more complex view of humanity’s capacity for good. One can find many stories illustrating the faithfulness of the people. Poetic examples from the Psalms include the beginning lines of Psalm 1, where the psalmist demonstrates humanity’s capacity for faithfulness: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:1–2). The beautiful creation poetry of Psalm 104 includes the hope that

Psalms 106:1–6, 19–23

Exegetical Perspective

and righteousness (*tsedaqah*) are responding appropriately to YHWH's *hesed*. The word translated "observe" in verse 3 means to "practice" or to "carry out" justice (not merely to watch it happen). In the prophets, it is clear that to observe justice means to "rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:17). To do righteousness means virtually the same (see Jer. 22:3), and the two terms (*mishpat* and *tsedaqah*) are commonly paired as synonyms in prophetic texts.

The poetic devices at work in the psalm convey meaning as well as artistry. Poetic parallelism (the rhyming of thoughts rather than sounds) allows one line of poetry to elucidate or clarify another. Thus the meaning of "show favor" in verse 4 is explained in its poetic parallel, "deliver" them. In the context of this psalm, YHWH's favor means deliverance from the unspecified crisis that currently afflicts God's people.

The word translated "good" in verse 1 is interpreted as "prosperity" in verse 5. Given the moralistic sense of verse 3 (lit., the doer of justice is blessed), "goodness" would be a better choice in verse 5 than the rather materialistic "prosperity." If those who do justice and righteousness are happy (v. 3), then the goodness of God's chosen ones should also lead to the gladness of the nation (v. 5).

The psalmist's plea to be remembered (v. 4) turns abruptly into a confession of sin (v. 6). However, the NRSV's translation mutes the force of the original statement. The Hebrew asserts that *we* (the present generation) have sinned, *just as* our ancestors sinned. The synonymously parallel lines drive home the speaker's point: our generation has committed iniquity and done wickedly, just as our ancestors did. The ancestors' sins are then described in verses 7–39, in order to encourage the present generation to consider how their present-day actions and attitudes echo those of their ancestors.

The lectionary skips through the list of the ancestors' transgressions and settles on the one that is covered in the OT reading for the day (the Exodus version of the golden calf heresy). "Horeb" (v. 19) is used (mostly in Deuteronomy, but occasionally in Exodus) as an alternate name for Mount Sinai. The use of "Horeb" in the psalm is congruent with its Deuteronomistic theological perspective. Deuteronomy's version of the golden calf incident is specifically set at Horeb (Deut. 9:8) and is preceded by reminders of Israel's historical unrighteousness, stubbornness, and rebelliousness (Deut. 9:4–7).

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collectively, in the worship of later generations. Perhaps these memories were first recalled among exiles who had reason to reflect on their own dire straits. How is memory prompted in this lesson?

"Remember me, O LORD" (v. 4). After a burst of praise, the psalmist becomes contrite. Perhaps an exile, the speaker feels forgotten by God. This cry for help is really a call for divine attention. Just so, the freed slaves felt abandoned and forgotten by God and Moses (Exod. 32). In times of bondage and exile, in deserts of loss and despair, memory can be a fickle friend. The prayer's focus is on human failure more than on divine guidance. Yet there is a sense that God's memory also needs to be jogged. This prayer, asking for God to remember, quickly becomes a prayer of penitence.

"They forgot God, their Savior" (v. 21). This holy history recalls how quickly the people forgot God's deliverance and power. The golden calf was a failure of short-term memory. The poem becomes a reminder of all the ways the people's memories failed them, a remembering of their forgetting. The poem is also a reminder of all the ways that God remembered the covenant, in spite of human memory lapse. The memories here are not all good. They seem a kind of groping in the dark, a feeble attempt to bring ancient recollections of salvation and steadfast love to the surface. Remembering the story of the golden calf is a recollection of forgetfulness, human and divine.

Remembering Well. An historical psalm such as this becomes an exercise in restored memory, one that can lead to healing and wholeness. History is a looking back, sometimes in curiosity, sometimes seeking identity. In an honestly contrite prayer such as this, looking back becomes a way of making sense of the present situation. An honest appraisal of past failures can be freeing, while wallowing in guilt can be disabling. This psalm is a spiritual exercise, a liturgical exercise, a way to nurture a new beginning, a fresh start. Between the lines of this honest recollection are the memories also of divine goodness and patience. Within the context of worship, confession and pardon are acts of remembering well. So also is the hearing and proclamation of ancient texts.

Forgiving and Forgetting. At the center of the collective memory in this Psalter is the admission

Psalm 106:1–6, 19–23

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together with God as homemaking. In this metaphor we move conceptually from life in an exclusive Christian apartment complex (emphasis on apartment) to living all together in the household, making and keeping God's home. To say that we are radically interdependent, making a home together with God, means that we are a family, and no one gets left outside the front door looking in while we feast.

When we Americans living in our apartment rejoice at the availability of low-cost electricity from coal, the metaphor of the household of God encourages us to think of our brothers and sisters who die in mining accidents in West Virginia and China and Brazil. How "low-cost," then, is this electricity, really, when lives of miners and the suffering of their families are factored into the equation? We cannot rightly count blessings that are not afforded to all.

EMILY ASKEW

Pastoral Perspective

God will "rejoice in his works" (Ps. 104:31), and those works include humanity. Many of the psalms that petition God for help and rescue claim the people's faithfulness as a reason for God to act, as in Psalm 26, which says, "Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering" (Ps. 26:1). Psalm 51 eloquently demonstrates the two competing natures of humanity as the psalmist confesses his sins and transgressions against God, declaring that he was "born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). Later, the psalmist demonstrates the capacity for faithfulness as he prays, "Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance" (Ps. 51:14).

In fact, buried within the Psalms lies the accusation that, at times, the people are faithful and God is not. After describing their rejection and defeat, Psalm 44 declares, "All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way, yet you have broken us in the haunt of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness" (Ps. 44:17–19).

These are but a few of the examples demonstrating that these few verses of Psalm 106 do not adequately answer the question of the faithfulness of the people. The Scriptures as a whole, including the words of the Psalms, describe a richer, more complex relationship between God and humanity.

DAVID M. BENDER

*Psalm 106:1–6, 19–23***Exegetical Perspective**

The Hebrew of verse 20 says they (the ancestors) exchanged their glory for an image of an ox. The NRSV understands “their glory” to refer to God. Clearly, glory is not something that can be captured or even reflected in physical form.

The NRSV obscures the poetic parallelism of verses 20–22 by changing the Hebrew meaning, “the God who saved them,” into “God, their Savior.” The original thought-rhyme points out that they exchanged one god for another. The God who saved them is not the one who eats grass but the one who has done great things, wondrous works and awesome deeds in Egypt and at the Red Sea. “The land of Ham” in verse 22 is synonymous with “Egypt” (v. 21b). While two of Ham’s sons (Cush and Misraim) were said to have been the ancestors of the Ethiopians (Cushites) and the Egyptians (Heb.: *Mitsraim*), Egypt itself is called “the land of Ham” only here and in Psalms 78:51 and 105:23, 27.

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, Moses intervenes (i.e., stands in the breach) between Israel and YHWH, defusing YHWH’s anger over Israel’s betrayal. The vocabulary used in Psalm 106 most closely resembles that of the account in Deuteronomy. The English word “destroy” is used twice in verse 23 to translate two distinctly different words in Hebrew (*hashmid* in the first line and *hashkhit* in the last line). The same two verbs (meaning “destroy, annihilate, or exterminate”) are also used in Deuteronomy 9:25–26, but they do not occur at all in Exodus.

Even the lectionary’s truncated reading (listing only one instance of the ancestors’ sins) allows the audience to consider ways in which their current behavior echoes the idolatry at Horeb. However, ending the lectionary passage with verse 23 seems to place the emphasis of the reading on the efficacy of Moses’ intervention, prompting the listener to ask, “Who will intervene for us?” Intercessory prayer is a very minor theme in the historical narrative of the original psalm. The main point of the psalm in its original form could have been preserved if the lectionary had ended the reading with verses 43–45 instead of verse 23. The psalmist calls us to praise the Lord while confessing our sins, because the Lord continues to extend *hesed* (loyal love, compassion, grace) to us, in spite of our continuing propensity to sin.

KATHLEEN A. ROBERTSON FARMER

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that at times, divine discipline has been warranted. The Hebrew people know that a gracious God is not simply saying, “Never mind,” to human sin. Rather, the God of grace exhorts the people to make life-affirming choices, to remember God’s covenant love, and to begin again to follow faithfully. Divine forgiveness listens for that honest recounting of failure; once sins are remembered and recounted on the human side, they are forgiven and forgotten on the divine side. Sometimes our memories are too good. The challenge is for forgiven souls to forget their own failures and those of neighbor and stranger.

This Psalter portion is to be read, sung, or recited along with Exodus 32, a Torah portion that echoes themes of remembering and forgetting. The people feel God has forgotten them. The people quickly forget how they have been delivered from slavery in Egypt. Even God forgets for a moment God’s own steadfast love and faithfulness that brought these children out of bondage. Moses reminds God of that divine and loving purpose. This psalm remembers also Moses’ part in the story, both past deliverance and future promise.

A sermon on this psalm will need to look back; it will need to reflect on the power of memory and on the failure of memory. A sermon on this psalm may want to note that the poem begins and ends with praise, that it was sung first in the context of worship, possibly worship in exile. A sermon on this psalm will do well to think about how grace is revealed also in forgetting, the kind of divine memory lapse that is able to truly forgive. There is a communal aspect to this remembering and forgetting as well. Remembering the sins of the past will warn us of our fallibility, and may well offer present-day worshipers a new beginning. Remembering the steadfast, forgiving, covenant love of God in the face of human fallibility may also inspire our worshiping communities to keep the faith in times of exodus and exile.

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**PROPER 24 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 16
AND OCTOBER 22 INCLUSIVE)**

Exodus 33:12–23

¹²Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

Theological Perspective

A central theme in twentieth-century theology is revelation. Can God be known, and if so, how? The European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries raised serious questions about traditional Christian claims that God exists and can be known, either by means of an authoritative Bible or on the basis of miraculous events. Theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Hegel to Barth, turned to various notions of revelation in order to describe how Christians know God. Proposals by “modern” theologians for how best to construe revelation are numerous and diverse and cannot be reduced easily to a common template. There are, however, some common themes in these various interpretations of revelation that are reflected in this encounter between Moses and God at the foot of the mountain in the wilderness.

In the first place, the human desire to know God is never a matter of disinterested intellectual inquiry. The yearning to know God is not a matter of expanding one’s knowledge of objective reality, not a matter of collecting information, but always an “existential” quest that understands knowledge about God and, more importantly, knowledge of God to bear decisively on one’s subjective self-understanding. That is, the desire to “know” God in Exodus (and in the rest of the Bible as well) is

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Moses is in a difficult position. The Israelites, whom Moses is leading through the wilderness, have short memories when it comes to their former enslavement in Egypt. As anxiety levels rise, the people complain against Moses. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (Exod. 17:3) The threats are serious enough that Moses cries out to God in fear for his life. “They are almost ready to stone me,” Moses says (Exod. 17:4).

On the other hand, the people rely on Moses. They need him as their leader and as the one who goes to God on their behalf. After making for themselves a golden calf idol in Moses’ absence, it is Moses who says, “I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (Exod. 32:30).

Moses is keenly aware of both the wrath of the people and the wrath of God; no doubt he feels the strain and stress of his position. We hear it clearly in his words to God in our pericope for this day. To paraphrase the prophet: “You give me this monumental responsibility, but you leave me guessing as to how to accomplish it. You say that I have found favor in your sight, but I feel very vulnerable. You say that you will go with us, but if you will not be there too, then do not send us!” (Preachers will likely want to refer to Exod. 33:1–3,

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¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” ²⁰But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

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After the golden calf debacle (Exod. 32:1–35), the time comes when the people need to continue their journey, but YHWH reveals that he is still angry with them: “I will send an angel before you . . . but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (33:2–3). Just as he mediated between YHWH and the people immediately following the golden calf incident (32:11–14), Moses intercedes once again.

Moses begins his prayer with a complaint (33:12–13). To paraphrase: “You say you favor me. You say I am supposed to lead these people, but you have not told me whom you will send with me.” Moses also takes the opportunity to remind YHWH that this nation is *YHWH’s* people (33:13; cf. 32:11–14) and hints that it really should be *YHWH’s* presence that goes with them.

YHWH replies: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (v. 14). “To give rest” in this instance is a reference to the peace and prosperity the people will enjoy in the land (e.g., Deut. 3:20; 12:10). It would appear that Moses has received everything he asked for, but this assurance does not satisfy Moses. His next statement pushes God a bit further: “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here” (v. 15). Moses is well aware that without YHWH, Israel is no longer a people (v. 16).

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My favorite line from the acclaimed musical *Les Misérables* is the sentence “To love another person is to see the face of God.”¹ The connection between the experience of love and the “sight” of God’s face is powerful. However, this passage from Exodus serves to remind us that God is eternally mysterious. As much as I love the poetry of the words from the play, they represent an imperfect attempt to articulate the experience of God. Moreover, as this lectionary passage illustrates, we cannot ever see God’s face. We catch glimpses of God in the magnificent miracles that occur around us, as well as the quotidian ones. We sense the presence of God within the relationships that nourish and sustain us, in the breathtaking beauty of nature, in the hopeful systemic movements toward God’s shalom; but we do not see a literal, physical body of God. We may wish to, but Exodus 33 makes clear that it is not going to happen.

One possible homiletical angle for this passage is to raise the metaphysical question of whether or not God has a literal face, or any “body” at all. As I have gotten older and read more in the dense field of theoretical physics, I realize even more how

1. Herbert Kretzmer, lyricist for English adaptation of *Les Misérables*, Geffen Records, Universal Music Group, 1985. Music composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg, with French libretto by Alain Boublil, 1980. Based on the novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, 1862.

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rooted in the desire to understand one's self in relation to that which is ultimately real. Moses' request in Exodus 3:13–15 that God disclose God's name; Israel's fear in Exodus 32, at the foot of the mountain, that God may have gone missing and might no longer lead Israel in the wilderness; and Moses' plea in Exodus 33:12–23 to see God's glory in order that he might "know you and find favor in your sight" (v. 13) are all questions about God's reality, prompted by a recognition that God's character and identity determine human identity and destiny.

In Exodus 32:1 Moses has been "delayed" on the mountain. Both Moses and God have gone missing; "as for this Moses . . . we do not what has become of him." Israel has been left alone in the wilderness, and in their anxiety the people ask Aaron to make them gods "who shall go before us." In the wilderness, where death lurks everywhere, a god in the hand is worth more than a God in the bush (or on the mountain), and in their anxiety the people succumb to idolatry. Similarly, in Exodus 33 Moses begs to see God's glory and therein to know God's presence, so that he will know that he and his people have found favor or grace with God. Knowledge of God here is anything but disinterested inquiry. It is a matter of life and death.

Second, the knowledge Moses seeks is not knowledge that can be acquired, but knowledge that can only be given and received; not knowledge that can be discovered, but knowledge that must be disclosed; not knowledge that can be grasped by human inquiry, but knowledge that is gracious gift. Moses can know God only because God chooses to disclose God's self to Moses. In Exodus 3, before Moses knows God's name, God addresses Moses by name (v. 4) and commissions him to deliver Israel from Pharaoh (v. 10). In Exodus 33 Moses knows God's name, but he does not yet know God's ways and has not yet seen God's glory; he asks, "Show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight" (v. 13). In revelation we are known before we know, and it is because we are known that we are enabled to know.

Third, although Moses has learned God's name in 3:14, Moses still asks that God reveal "God's ways." God's name, disclosed in the burning bush in 3:14—"I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE"—reveals that God is what God does. Unlike every form of human identity, there is no difference between who God is and what God does. God is "pure act." Hence, in order to know God and in order to know if God is

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which contains the original command to which Moses is responding.)

Who in our pews will find it difficult to relate to Moses' urgent need for God to show up? Which parishioner, at one time or another, has not cried out, "God, I need you; I need you to speak; I need you to come. I need you to be present—and not in some hidden or veiled way. I need to know your will, and I need to know it now!"

I am reminded of a young woman who was forced to make a very difficult decision, a decision that she felt was hugely important—one that would change the course of her life forever. At first she prayed calmly and gently, hoping that clarity from God would come. It did not. As time went on, the young woman grew from concerned to stressed to panicked to angry. "God, you say you love me. You say you care about my life. You say you are here for me. Where are you? Speak! Show up!" The young woman resolved not to move from her room until she had heard from God a very clear answer.

It was not long, to her surprise, before she received her answer. God showed up with remarkable clarity. God did not tell her what to do in regard to the decision that she had to make. However, God became intimately present to her. God graced her angst-filled silence with calm and peace and told her again and again, "I love you." It seemed that God perceived a more urgent question. God addressed a more important matter, and suddenly the young woman's question, which had previously been so pressing, could wait.

Well-meaning Christians are fond of saying, "God never gives us more than we can handle." Of course, the problem with such a statement is the assumption that it is God who is dishing out these burdens. However, if the wording is changed just a bit, perhaps the statement reflects an important truth. We might say, "God never gives us more of God than we can handle." We can translate that statement to mean something like this: *God comes to us as we are best able to receive God. God addresses not our questions but our primary need for God.* Perhaps the image from our Scripture of Moses in the cleft of the rock, shielded from viewing God's face but offered instead a view of God's back, will provide preachers with a fitting symbol for this point (vv. 19–23).

It is possible to read this entire dialogue between Moses and God as a lesson in prayer. In other words, in the process of their discussion, we are taught what to ask for in prayer. In the beginning, Moses

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YHWH assures Moses a second time that he will comply, “for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name” (v. 17). Some interpreters consider Moses’ response, “Show me your glory, I pray” (v. 18), to be evidence of Moses’ continuing doubt, yet another request for proof that YHWH is with them. I wonder if “show me your glory, I pray” is Moses’ reciprocation to YHWH’s overture of intimacy: “I know you by name.”

However it is interpreted, this exchange may cause a pang of longing in some members of the congregation. There are people who desperately want to know God and to be reassured that God knows them by name, but they dare not ask, “Show me your glory, I pray.” The preacher might refer to Psalm 139 and to the Gospel of John’s bold claim that Christ is the good shepherd who *knows his sheep by name* (John 10:3) and John’s testimony that “*we have seen his glory, . . . as of the Father’s only Son*” (John 1:14).

Even while offering these biblical assurances that God does know us, we must not stray too far from Exodus 32–33’s reminder that YHWH’s profound and incomprehensible being should not be reduced to something we find comfortable, safe, and under our control. The Israelites created a golden god so that they could worship on their own terms. We also run the risk of creating a tame, “warm and fuzzy” god who is limited according to our own needs and desires. As Exodus makes clear, even as YHWH draws near, YHWH is a God beyond our control and even our description.

Exodus 33:19 resonates with the story of the burning bush, where YHWH first reveals himself to Moses with the enigmatic self-description “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” (Exod. 3:13–14). In Exodus 33:19, YHWH elaborates on that self-description: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”¹ The “I AM” who freely chose to lead the people out of Egypt will freely continue to be gracious and merciful to Israel.

The interplay between YHWH’s inscrutability and nearness continues as YHWH plans to pass before Moses—but Moses cannot see YHWH’s face, “for no one shall see me and live” (v. 20). This depiction of YHWH’s divine otherness, so overwhelming that it can kill a mere mortal, reinforces the commandment, so recently broken, against creating an image of this God; the face

1. See J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 248.

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ultimately incomprehensible God is. Language is a woefully inadequate tool for describing God, but nevertheless it is the tool at our disposal.

Perhaps as preachers the best service we can do for our congregations is to get out of the way and let the mystery of God speak for itself. We can use the sermon as a place to raise questions, rather than think we have to provide answers all the time. Listeners who are looking for clear-cut rules and descriptions are going to be dissatisfied, but those who seek permission to use their own imaginations to explore the nature of God are going to be relieved to know that there is not only one “face” of God.

The exchange between Moses and God is illustrative of the natural human desire for clarity and specificity. “*How do we know?*” surely must be among the most common questions that we cry out in our doubt and frustration. How do we know that God is with us? How do we know that God loves us? How do we know what God wants us to do? How do we know what God expects from us? Moses is just like so many of us—he wants answers, and his irritation with the dearth of answers in this relationship is showing. “You have not let me know . . .” he says (v. 12). “Show me your ways . . .” he pleads (v. 13). “How shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight . . . unless you go with us?” (v. 16)

Moses knows that people want to bet on a sure thing. The evidence is not yet strong enough that God is with them and will see them through whatever trial they face next. The future is uncertain, and the people are afraid. As the one leading the Israelites, Moses is feeling the heat from the disgruntled people whom he is shepherding, and he is calling for backup.

Who among us has not felt scared and longed for unmistakable evidence of the presence of God to see us through? Rather than chastising Moses and the Israelites for their need for absolute certainty, this is an opportunity for a preacher to point out the human characteristics that we share with our biblical ancestors, and to remind ourselves that God loves us in spite of our quirks and our doubts. Chances are that most of us can relate to the desire for confirmation that God travels with us on whatever journey we undertake. Once we point out the commonalities between people now and people then, we have made the story more tangible, more “real,” for those who are listening.

I like how God meets Moses more than halfway in response to Moses’ request. God senses that Moses needs some reassurance and is prepared to

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indeed favorable or “gracious,” Moses must know God’s “ways.” Favor or grace is not a static attribute of God but what God does; it is the very reality of who God is as the one who leads and the one who delivers. In knowing God’s ways Moses will also know God’s presence, because it too is not a static concept but a living, dynamic reality.

Finally, God grants Moses his request, at least in part. Because God has chosen to know him, Moses has found favor with God, and God will disclose God’s glory to Moses. Appropriately this theophany, this disclosure of the holy, is in keeping with who God is. God discloses his glory to Moses by “passing before him.” God is not an object to be known but a life-giving act. “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.” It is God’s way. “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’” (v. 19a). What is revealed to Moses in God’s passing, in God’s way, is that God “will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (v. 19b).

Moses cannot see all of God’s glory, because God is holy, and “no one shall see me and live” (v. 20). So Moses sees God’s favor, grace, and mercy precisely in what God does not allow him to see. God’s holiness demarcates the boundary between that which is everlasting and that which is not, the boundary between life and death. God not only hides Moses in the cleft of the “rock of ages” but also covers him with God’s hand in order that Moses may see only God’s back, God’s passing before, and not God’s face. God agrees to lead Israel in the wilderness, despite Israel’s idolatry at the foot of the mountain, and in passing before Israel, God is what God does. “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.”

GEORGE W. STROUP

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asks for answers, for the knowledge of God’s ways, for the assurance of God’s guidance. Later, Moses asks to see God’s “glory,” or “honor,” or “dazzling presence,” depending on the translation. It is not that the earlier requests are wrong or inappropriate. It is more the case that the latter request is the one that addresses our greatest need. Furthermore, when the latter request is granted, the previous requests are also often addressed.

Moses’ ultimate request, to see God’s glory, is a reminder to us all that the most precious gift we are given is the gift of God’s very self. Simon Tugwell makes the point most thoughtfully in his discussion of the power and weakness of God. He writes, “We had thought of God as the dispenser of all the good things we would possibly desire; but in a very real sense, God has nothing to give at all except himself. . . . God has only the one thing to say, which is himself, he has only the one thing to give, which is himself. And he invites us to hear that Word, to treasure it in our hearts and find in it the source of all our bliss.”¹

The most important sermons are the ones that awaken within church members their longing for God and their sense that in the midst of their questions and concerns this God is already nearer and always greater than they know.

TIMOTHY B. HARE

1. Simon Tugwell, *Prayer: Living with God* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1975), 124, 127.

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of YHWH cannot be “seen” in this way. YHWH will pass by (similar to Elijah’s encounter, also on Horeb/Sinai, in 1 Kgs. 19:9–14), but YHWH must shield Moses.

While Exodus 33 emphasizes God’s holy freedom and inscrutability, other biblical passages reveal that death is not the only possible outcome of “seeing” God. In Genesis 32:30, Jacob, the eponymous ancestor of Israel, names the place where he wrestles all night Peniel (“face of God”), because “I have *seen God face to face*, and yet my life is preserved.” Indeed, just a few verses before today’s passage, the narrator relates that YHWH regularly spoke to Moses “*face to face*, as one speaks to a friend” (Exod. 33:11). Other passages affirm that YHWH knew Moses “*face to face*” (Num. 12:8; Deut. 34:10) and that Moses beheld “*the form of the LORD*” (Num. 12:8). The English translation “face to face” in Numbers 12:8 does not capture the profound intimacy of the original Hebrew, where YHWH says of Moses, “I speak to him *mouth to mouth*” (*peh el-peh*).

YHWH once again responds to Moses’ plea and renews the covenant (34:1–10), and the people too end up seeing YHWH’s glory, as it is reflected from Moses’ face (34:29–35). Persistence in prayer does not guarantee that God will do what we want, yet this story suggests that God is listening to our prayers on behalf of God’s people. Our genuine longing for God’s presence may result in renewal of life, perhaps even in intimacy, as God calls us by name. At the very least, we might see God’s glory reflected in the face of one who has seen God “face to face” and lived to tell about it.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

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give it. Nevertheless, anthropomorphism is not the technique used here to describe what happens. God does not say, “I will walk by you,” or “I will sit down beside you on this rock.” God says, “I will make all my goodness pass before you” (v. 19). Again, the implication is that this is a Being who cannot be seen or experienced in conventional ways, but that this Being is one who encompasses all that is good.

Furthermore, even though God has granted Moses a peek of God’s nature, the full “blast” of God’s glory would be too overwhelming for Moses to comprehend; so God says specifically, “You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live” (v. 20). Even at the moment when God is most present, we catch only a glimpse of the wonder of God (the “back”). As unsatisfying as that may seem, the preacher can point out that if the limited experience we have of God is this astonishing, how much more wonderful will it be when God finally fully reveals God’s self to us? (see 1 Cor. 13:12). That moment is something to which we can look forward with awe and hope, rather than abject terror.

So in the end, while it does not show the full breadth of who God is, perhaps the librettist who put Victor Hugo’s famous novel to music has come as close to the truth as any of us to date: “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

LESLIE A. KLINGENSMITH

PROPER 24 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 16 AND OCTOBER 22 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 99

¹The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
²The LORD is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
³Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is he!
⁴Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.
⁵Extol the LORD our God;
worship at his footstool.
Holy is he!

Theological Perspective

Psalm 99 is the last in a series of psalms that celebrate “The LORD is king!” (Pss. 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1). Not only is God’s “kingship” the central theme in these psalms, but, according to James Mays, when coupled with God’s name “reigning and kingship constitute the root metaphor that gives coherence and definition to the other aspects of the theology of the psalms.”¹ God’s kingship, therefore, is at the center of the theology of the Psalms. What is God’s kingship? Traditionally Christian theology has interpreted God’s kingship as God’s “sovereignty”; to attribute sovereignty to God is, on the one hand, to make a distinction between God and God’s creation (the two must not be blurred or confused) and, on the other hand, to claim that God exercises unrivaled power in God’s creation and in the personal, daily lives of God’s people.

When used in reference to God, the metaphor of kingship combines theology and politics. God is both “other” than (or “transcends”) creation and is involved in the administration of the human *polis*. On the one hand, God’s kingship suggests an ontological distinction between God and creation. The sense in which God “is” is different in kind from the ways in which creation “is.” God is “king” in that

Pastoral Perspective

How will the congregation hear Psalm 99 as it is read in worship? Will the reading feed notions that the Old Testament God is an angry and intimidating God? Will people hear the psalmist celebrating a God who lacks the personal care and closeness that they experience with Christ? Will the words resonate in a more positive way? Will the people be reminded of God’s power and of their own capacity to do great and glorious things with the strength of God behind them? Will the image of God as a “lover of justice” stand out and encourage a passion for the ministries upon which the church has embarked?

Though one single answer will never fully describe the entire congregation’s response, the questions are worth asking as a way of clarifying one’s context. For instance, this psalm would have contributed well to the liturgical celebration that a small church offered after raising a significant sum of money, despite a struggling economy and a less-than-balanced annual budget. The psalm likely would have fueled a sense that God’s wisdom had guided them, God’s generosity had blessed them, and God’s Spirit had strengthened them to do for Christ’s church what they had thought was not possible. Perhaps more importantly, the psalm might have reminded them that the One who is “enthroned upon the cherubim” (v. 1b) had more

1. James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 30.

Psalm 99

⁶Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.
They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.
⁷He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
they kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.
⁸O LORD our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
⁹Extol the LORD our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy.

Exegetical Perspective

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!” So Mark’s Gospel characterizes Jesus’ early preaching (Mark 1:15). Given contemporary Christian illiteracy in the Old Testament, many of the people in our pews tacitly assume that Jesus invented this image of God’s reign. Others imagine that the kingdom of “the Old Testament God” must have been harsh and legalistic. The Psalms correct that assumption by helping us place the early Christian understanding within the theological legacy of ancient Israel.

“The LORD reigns!” says the psalmist. “The LORD is King!” When Psalm 99 celebrates this divine reign, it pictures a God who loves justice, has established equity among God’s people (v. 4), and listens to the cries of the people (v. 6). This is no supersized social worker. This God forgives sinners, but avenges sins (v. 8). At the proclamation of the divine reign, the peoples of earth ought to tremble (v. 1). All of this power and justice and attentiveness is captured and reiterated in the triple refrain of the psalm: “Holy is he!” (vv. 3, 5, 9)

Context and Structure. Psalms 93 and 97 begin, as Psalm 99 does, with the words “The LORD reigns/ is King!” Psalm 93 focuses on YHWH’s majesty as Creator of the earth. Psalm 97 pictures the

Homiletical Perspective

A preacher must be more careful with “king” metaphors now than in the past. When monarchies were common, it surely made sense to refer to God as “King of kings,” and to place God in a separate category, over and above any mere human being who only owns/rules/governs a particular country or territory. Since many kings (and queens) were less than benevolent people, who did not have the common good as their first priority (or even on their priority list!), it would have comforted many a worshiper in the Middle Ages to hear a message that proclaimed a God-King who cared about all people and wanted them to have a sense that they were loved and cared for.

However, in the twenty-first century, monarchies, for the most part, have lost their power. Even in countries that still have a king or queen, the royal role is largely ceremonial, not political. Human beings have become increasingly independent in our thinking. We are suspicious of empire and dictatorships and totalitarianism, as we should be. We also are less likely to gravitate to images of physical power and military might. All of these problematic images can be associated with kingship. On Christ the King Sunday, for example, I have often encountered resistance from my congregation to linking Jesus with any kind of political role, but

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Theological Perspective

God cannot “not be.” That is, God exists necessarily. Everything that makes up creation, however, can “not be” and will not be, but God cannot not be. Hence God’s kingship differs importantly and profoundly from that of every human monarch. As the psalmist puts it, mortals are like grass; “they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more” (Ps. 103:15b–16), or in the words of Second Isaiah, “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa. 40:8).

The Creator is utterly “other” than creation. “Majestic on high is the LORD” (Ps. 93:4), for the Lord is “exalted over all the peoples” (Ps. 99:2). According to Psalm 93:1, the Lord who is king “has established the world; it shall never be moved”; consequently, the Lord and the Lord alone is to be worshiped—a frequent refrain in these psalms—because God alone is maker of heaven and earth (Ps. 95:6). Only God brings into being the things that are—the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, the sea and the dry land (Ps. 95:4–5). All of it is God’s “for he made it” (Ps. 95:5), and because he and he alone is “Maker,” God’s people should “worship and bow down” (Ps. 95:6). Christian theologians describe the sovereignty, the kingship, of this Maker God as *creatio ex nihilo*; God creates out of nothing the things that are.

Psalm 99 describes this sense of God’s kingship, God’s otherness, as God’s holiness. God is king because God is holy: “Holy is he!” (vv. 3b and 9c). Because only the Lord is holy, only God’s “great and awesome name” is to be praised and worshiped (vv. 3, 5). The holiness of God demarcates Creator and creation. Karl Barth has argued that God’s holiness should be understood in relation to God’s grace, because when God freely and graciously turns to the other, “He remains true to Himself and makes His own will prevail.”²

On the other hand, God is not so distinctly “other” than creation that God cannot act within it. The God of the Bible is not the God of deism. God has not chosen to exist apart from what God has created, but is intimately involved with it. God has chosen covenant relationship with Israel, and that covenant is rooted in the promise “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod. 6:7a). Consequently, there is no place in creation, according to one well-known psalm, in which the God who is other than all creation is not also

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 360.

Pastoral Perspective

in store for them. God would do even greater things through them!

Preachers always do well to consider the state of their congregation as they discern their message. I shared Psalm 99 with a discipleship group at my church. The reaction was less than positive. The psalm’s image of God as “king” who is “mighty” and “exalted” and who causes the people to “tremble” and the earth to “quake” conflicted with the sense of deep intimacy and love that they have come to associate with Jesus. The psalmist’s intent is clearly to encourage people’s praise and worship: “Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain” (v. 9a). Modern church members may in fact feel put off. Preachers have here an excellent opportunity to explore the relationship between God’s might and God’s love. Must the two feel mutually exclusive to people?

Words like “transcendence” and “immanence” may sound like academic terms, removed from the lives of most churchgoers. Nonetheless, these words are at the heart of the psalm’s proclamation. Preachers should reclaim them. The Lord who is “holy,” this “Mighty King” who sits upon his throne and causes creation to tremble, is the same God who loves “justice,” “equity,” and “righteousness” among the people. It is the same God who calls real people such as Moses, Aaron, and Samuel to be leaders. God answers them when they cry out; God speaks to them, forgives them, and avenges their wrongdoings. This God of utter power and greatness is not at all removed from human activity. On the contrary, this God is intimately involved.

The life of faith encourages an intimacy with God, but that intimacy is unique. It is not like the intimacy of other relationships, precisely because God is great beyond all human knowing. Psalm 8:3–4 says it well: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” God *is* mindful of them. God *does* care for them. When we stop to consider the infinite power, beauty, and mystery of a God who created the endless stars of the heavens and the fathomless depths of the seas and everything in between, we are struck by the impossible grace of being so deeply known and loved by this God. Intimacy with God is an utter miracle of grace! If our intimacy with God is not humbling, then it is not God with whom we are intimate.

The transcendence/immanence issue colors the way we think about God. How we think about God

Psalm 99

Exegetical Perspective

throne veiled in clouds and majesty, and celebrates YHWH's power and righteousness. These join a full slate of psalms that proclaim, describe, and celebrate YHWH's reign. God as Ruler over Israel and Judah is a common image in these psalms, beginning with Psalm 5:2, where the suppliant prays, "Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God!" These psalms emphasize different aspects of the reigning God's character. (See Pss. 10:16; 24:7–10; 29:10; 44:4; 47:2; 48:2; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 89:18; 95:3; 96:10; 98:6; 145:1; 146:10; 149:2.)

Psalm 99 has three parts, which are defined by the three climactic exclamations that God is holy. The first (vv. 1–3) features God's reign over the whole world from Jerusalem, the second (vv. 4–5) God's justice and equity, and the third (vv. 6–9) God's attention to the cries of God's people.

The three parts are not equal in length or even alike in structure. The first employs the third person in its description of God's traits, turns to second-person address for prayer in verse 3a, and then takes the voice of the congregation in verse 3b: "Holy is he!" The second begins in the second person for the description of God's traits, then turns its second-person address toward the people (v. 5a), before the congregation joins voice in verse 5b: "Holy is he!" The third (and longest) part begins with third-person description of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel's history (vv. 6–7), moves to a second-person address of God as the answerer (v. 8), turns to a second-person call to worship (v. 9a), and closes with an explanation rather than the usual brief congregational response.

Message. The psalm begins at the throne. Throne scenes are standard equipment in the psalms that call God king. Here, God sits enthroned upon the cherubim. Cherubim are the angelic figures that first appear to block Adam and Eve from reentering Eden (Gen. 3:24), and drop in here and there throughout Scripture (e.g., Isa. 6). Here, though, the psalmist imagines God seated upon the gold cherubim that were carved into the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:17–18), which was placed in the holiest section of the temple (see 2 Sam. 6:2). The psalmist pictures God reigning over the whole world from a throne in the temple.

So what does this reign look like? The description of these qualities is brief. The psalmist assumes that the reader/singer will know what these words mean. So what do they mean? Do they describe the justice of a punitive judge, as the term sometimes does; or the justice of a righter of wrongs, who watches

Homiletical Perspective

especially that of king. At times, I have wondered if kingship is an outdated metaphor that should be jettisoned in favor of something that makes more sense in the postmodern world.

So what is a preacher to do? These texts are here before us and cannot be simply tossed aside. Perhaps it is better to refurbish a metaphor, or peel back the layers to its original intent, than to banish it. A return to some of these royal psalms, including Psalm 99, is an opportunity to revisit the ideal of kingship rather than the human embodiment of that concept. We can attempt to bring out the psalmist's original intent.

As people who lived in Jesus' time read the words of Psalm 99, they would have had a different idea of what it meant to be a king. The promised Messiah was not someone who was going to be interested in exploiting people for his own gain. The king that God would send would not be characterized by a luxurious lifestyle or a sense of himself as somehow above ordinary folk. Instead, this one would usher in an age of justice and equality. What a different and liberating picture of a king from the so many selfish and even insane men who have been kings throughout history.

When we as preachers and worshipers understand the depth of meaning that these prophetic poets ascribed to the word "king," we may be better able to travel spiritually to a place where we can refer to Christ as king with integrity. For this to happen, we have to strip away the political and social encumbrances of ages past. "King" may never be our favorite image for God or Christ (especially for those of us who define God as not exclusively male but "neither and both" male and female). I do think, though, that preaching a royal psalm is an opportunity for the preacher to shepherd our worshiping communities to a different understanding of what it means to be a "king" in the realm of God.

James L. Mays, in his outstanding commentary on the Psalms, points out that the "throne" referred to in verse 1 is actually a reference to the ark of the covenant, in which the Israelites kept the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. As a preacher, I would certainly make this connection known, as it sets up the biblical king to be one who rules according to the law of God, not the often-bogus and self-serving laws of humanity. Furthermore, the biblical king, although established in Zion, would be working to establish relationship and reconciliation among all peoples. The promised king would have a unique bond with Israel but would

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present; “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” (Ps. 139:7). God not only transcends that which God creates and is ontologically other than it, but God is also immanently involved in it, working God’s will both in the cosmos and in the daily lives of God’s people.

In Psalm 99 God exercises God’s will, God’s kingship, “mightily” as a “lover of justice.” God has “established equity” and “executed justice and righteousness” in Jacob (or Israel). God’s justice, however, is not to be confused with human standards of justice, for it is God’s *holy* justice. Just as the Creator should not be confused with creation, so too God’s justice is not simply human theories of justice “writ large.” God’s justice is not simply the projection of human notions of justice, but is to be discerned in the works and ways of God in the world. God has made God’s justice known in God’s decrees and statutes—that is, in God’s commandments—given to Moses and Aaron in the pillar of cloud (vv. 6–7).

Because God’s kingship is both holy and just, God’s people can cry to the Lord, and in God’s own time and in God’s own ways their cries will be answered (v. 6b). It is in crying to God—that is, in the activity of prayer—that Israel knows both God’s forgiveness and God’s justice, for God forgives what human beings cannot, and God “avenges” and makes right according to God’s will and God’s justice, not according to human vengeance. According to Psalm 99 God’s people are to call upon God because only God is king—that is, only God’s name is holy and only God’s justice will finally be done in heaven and on earth.

GEORGE W. STROUP

Pastoral Perspective

affects how we think and act in this world. I once listened to a Christian radio-show host talk about the question: Did Pope John Paul II go to heaven when he died? Most callers were skeptical that the pope was properly “born again.” The host admitted that he was not sure. At first I was angered by the audacity of the whole discussion. Then my anger turned to sadness. Why is it that we are so tempted to make judgments that we are not equipped to make? Why is it that we so easily turn the life of faith into our own ticket to heaven? Why is it that we are so prone to rejecting the kind of grace that takes us beyond ourselves in favor of the kind that limits us to ourselves?

At first I considered what a debate with the radio-show host might be like. I considered what I might say to make him look foolish. Then I was struck by a different thought: *If we had just a taste of God*, if we had the slightest insight into God’s glory, if we had even a faint picture of the eternal beauty and wisdom that is God, we would both be on our knees praising God as sovereign and thanking God for the mercy and love that we have received. Our differences would take a back seat to our discoveries. My desire to expose another’s foolishness would look foolish itself. We would both be consumed by something that words like “mighty” and “holy” can only approximate.

It is remarkable to think that we are fearfully and wonderfully made in this God’s image. It is remarkable to think that this God has numbered even the hairs on our heads. It is remarkable to think that this God was born among us, suffered our rejection, died by our hands, and yet rose to return once again to us. It is remarkable that we share in this God’s very Spirit.

The God of *all creation* loves *us*! That is grace, and it is utterly amazing.

TIMOTHY B. HARE

Psalm 99

Exegetical Perspective

out for the fatherless (Deut. 10:18)? Both, as in Isaiah 61:8? The only clue we get for answering this question is in God's listening attentiveness to the cries of the people.

A Listening and Answering God. In ancient Near Eastern aspiration, the ideal ruler listened to his or her subjects—heard the cries of his or her people. Whether and how often that hope was realized, we do not know.¹ The divine Ruler in Psalm 99 listens to the people Israel. The psalmist names Moses, Aaron, and Samuel as the intercessors on behalf of the people. Moses and Samuel play that role in Exodus 17:1–11 and 1 Samuel 7:5–9, respectively (see also Exod. 32:7 and Num. 16:20). While Jeremiah 15:1 portrays a God who refused to listen to these two leaders (“Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people”), in Psalm 99 YHWH not only heard but “answered them”—was even “a forgiving God to them” (v. 8).

A Holy God. The one structural link between the parts of this psalm is the thrice-repeated refrain, “Holy is he/The LORD our God is holy!” (vv. 3, 5, 9). While the psalmist does not define holiness, each of the three supplies it as an utterance of worship. The refrain follows these phrases: “Let them praise your great and awesome name. . . . Extol the LORD our God, worship at his footstool. . . . Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain.” Holiness is the awe-inspiring, worship-evoking character of God.

In this psalm God's holiness is the awesome essence of divinity, as we would expect. That holiness does not simply exist; it acts. In Isaiah 5:16, God's justice and righteousness are emblems of holiness, and so it is here. In fact, holiness seems defined by its acts. The acts of reigning over all peoples from Zion (vv. 1–2), of executing justice in Israel (vv. 3–4), and of listening to Israel's cries and answering (vv. 6–8) characterize God, and each inspires its own call to worship.

In Psalm 99, the God of awesome power rules in a just and equitable realm by listening to the subjects. The realm spans the whole world, and is reflected specifically in the way God rules Israel. The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news!

ALLEN HILTON

Homiletical Perspective

be concerned with the welfare of all peoples. The covenant with Israel did not mean that Israel would be treated well or protected at the expense of other peoples.

The psalmist invokes the names of people who were “giants” in the collective imagination of Israel: Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. When preaching this psalm, I would be careful to point out that these men are not being invoked as military or even political giants; these were people who cried out to God, who came to God in all their vulnerability, needing help. Even the most exalted leader among us needs help from God—and God listens and provides that sustenance.

Finally, the preacher has a responsibility to point out the dual responsibilities of God: God forgives, but God also “avenges” our wrongdoings. I am not comfortable with images of a wrathful, punishing God, but we do have to understand that if God is truly to establish justice, the status quo cannot continue undisturbed. Establishing equity is going to include correcting the systemic injustice that oppresses so many of God's children. We are culpable to varying degrees in this injustice; we are at the very least complicit. Pointing that out will make worshipers feel uncomfortable, but if we place our faith in the biblical king, we have to be prepared to have our lives changed. We have to trust that, as we deal fairly and justly with one another, God will deal fairly and justly with us. It is only after we face our role in the injustices that pain God so much that we are spiritually ready to accept God's forgiveness.

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1. James Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989).

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**PROPER 25 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 23
AND OCTOBER 29 INCLUSIVE)**

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

¹Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” ⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was

Theological Perspective

In apocalyptic literature, visions and dreams are common. Daniel’s dreams and visions in chapters 7–12 and John’s witness in Revelation to “the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw” (Rev. 1:2) are well-known examples. What is seen is what is not yet, but what in God’s good time will surely be. What is seen is that the broken will be mended, the crooked will be set straight, what has gone wrong will be set right, God will triumph over evil, God’s faithful witnesses will be vindicated, and God’s promise of *shalom* will be fulfilled “on earth as it is in heaven.” Visions and dreams are appropriate media for these realities, because they, like faith itself, are “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Visions and dreams are a form of seeing, but what is seen is not accessible to everyone. What is seen in these apocalyptic visions cannot be seen directly or “face to face,” but only indirectly, only parabolically, only as promise.

Deuteronomy 34 is not an apocalyptic text, but its description of Moses’ death shares many themes with that genre. Before Moses dies, God takes him to Mount Nebo (or perhaps Pisgah, they are not the same) and shows him the promised land, the whole of it, from north to south and east to west. God lets Moses see it “with your eyes” (v. 4), but what

Pastoral Perspective

Preachers may be tempted to steer clear of the death of Moses. When I asked church members to share their initial reactions to the story, one responded, “There is not much to say about it. It is pretty straightforward.” At first glance, the Matthew lection for today has much more to offer. When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus goes a step further and hangs “all the law and the prophets” on loving God and loving neighbor. Discerning a message for the people from such a rich text may feel like the way to go.

However, Scripture has a way of drawing us into its layers of meaning. Preachers who live with the Deuteronomy text for a while will find that it too is rich with sermon material. In fact, our reading may be less removed from the Gospel lection than we had imagined.

The description of Moses as an “unequaled” (v. 11) prophet “whom the LORD knew face to face” (v. 10) is no surprise to the reader. Similarly, as a testament to his heroic work for the Lord, it makes sense that the author would highlight his unimpaired sight and vigor even at the age of 120. However, attentive parishioners will want to know why, given his health and his standing, Moses died. The answer in verse 5 is that he died “at the LORD’s command.”

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

unimpaired and his vigor had not abated.⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.¹¹He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land,¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Exegetical Perspective

Moses' life comes to an end as the book of Deuteronomy draws to a close. Before Moses dies, however, God shows him the land that the Israelites are about to inherit under the leadership of Joshua, Moses' assistant, who will succeed Moses and lead the people into the promised land. The book of Deuteronomy opens with a focus on the land (Deut. 1:7–8) and concludes with this same focus on the land (Deut. 34:1–12). What God has promised, God will bring to fulfillment.

Deuteronomy 34:1–12 is composed of four episodes: Moses being shown a panoramic view of the land by God (vv. 1–4); Moses' death and the Israelites' expression of grief (vv. 5–8); Joshua's new leadership role (v. 9); and a final tribute to Moses (vv. 10–12). The first episode opens with Moses on the plains of Moab, ascending Mount Nebo, and going up to Pisgah, the mountain's summit. The plains of Moab are located in the Transjordan between the Ammonites to the north and the Edomites to the south. The area where Moses was standing was probably east of the lower Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Mount Nebo was surrounded on the east by the Wadi Afrit, on the north by the Wadi Uyun Musa, and on the south by the Wadi al-Judaydah, which extends into the Wadi al-Kanysah. The Israelite tribes camped by Mount

Homiletical Perspective

Deuteronomy 34 brings to mind the words from the Carrie Newcomer song "If Not Now," about there being a good chance we will never see the promised land, but that it is worth making the journey together anyway.¹ Moses did in fact see the promised land, as we are shown in this poignant closing to Deuteronomy, but it has always seemed supremely unjust that he did not get to enter it and live at least a few years in relative comfort and peace. However, given Moses' steadfastness and determination to lead the Israelites to a better life, I suspect that he would have undertaken the wilderness journey with them even if he had known that he himself would not participate in the homecoming.

Deuteronomy 34 lends itself to preaching "the long view." Preachers want to proclaim hope, to remind their congregations about God's justice and our responsibility to participate in that justice. However, life in the social responsibility trenches can be messy and disheartening. Sometimes it seems as if we are not getting anywhere, that the forces of avarice and exploitation are winning the battle and will ultimately win the war. There are occasions when the preacher must remind the congregation that we are not at war—we are a people who build up rather than tear down.

1. Carrie Newcomer, "If Not Now," ©2010 Carrie Newcomer Music (BMI).

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Theological Perspective

Moses sees, with God's help, is not the land as it is, but the land as it will be when God's promises are fulfilled. God enables Moses to see with his own eyes what God sees, because, for God, past, present, and future are simultaneously present. Moses, however, is not allowed to "cross over" into the promised land beyond the Jordan; he crosses over, not into the land promised to Abraham, but into the care of God. At God's command Moses dies, and God buries him in an unmarked grave in a valley in Moab, but not without first promising him that the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will indeed be given to Moses' descendants. The reader is told that when Moses died "his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated" (v. 7).

This text has important things to say about the nature of Christian hope. As in apocalyptic literature, the theme of vision and sight runs throughout Deuteronomy's description of Moses' death. Moses sees and he does not see. God enables him to see with his own eyes what only God can see—the fulfillment of the promise of the land. While the land is indeed promised, it is not yet a reality. The promise will be fulfilled only with Joshua and David, and that story, at the conclusion of Deuteronomy, remains to be told. The Lord shows Moses "the whole land" (v. 1), the land as it is and the land as it will be. Moses dies in the midst of unfulfilled promises, as so many people do, on the border, the boundary, between what now is and what is hoped for. What is Christian hope when death comes while the promises and the expectations are still "not yet"?

The first thing this story tells us about Christian hope is that it is utterly realistic about death. There is a sense of incompleteness, of promise unfulfilled, in Deuteronomy's description of Moses' death, as there is in many of our deaths. Many people die in the midst of unfulfilled dreams and promises. Moses' mission, his life work, his calling, is not only to lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt, but also to lead it into the land God has promised, a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses' vocation, his calling from God, is only partially realized. He will not see the fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime; their fulfillment lies beyond the horizon of his life.

Second, even though Moses has done "signs and wonders" and "mighty deeds" unequaled in Israel and has performed "terrifying displays of power," he cannot make the promise become a reality. His hope, like that of all people, must finally rest in one who alone can do what Moses cannot. For this greatest of Israel's prophets, as for the rest of us,

Pastoral Perspective

Here again, the question is, why? Why would the Lord command the great leader's death? The answer is stated in Deuteronomy 32:51: "because both of you [Moses and Aaron] broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to maintain my holiness among the Israelites." Thus Moses dies at the Lord's command because he and Aaron, God's trusted leaders, failed God. His death is a consequence of his failure.

The event in question is recorded in Numbers 20:1–13 and perhaps Exodus 17:1–7. In both passages Moses' failure is difficult to discern. In the Exodus passage, there is no mention of God's anger in response to Moses' actions. In fact, in the verses that follow, Moses is immediately victorious in battle with the help of the Lord. However, in the Numbers passage, while Moses' sin is not clear, God's displeasure is. Because Moses and Aaron did not show their trust in God before the people, God vows not to allow them to bring the Israelites into the promised land.

In our Scripture selection God remains true to this vow, despite honoring Moses with a divine burial and the scriptural proclamation of Moses' unparalleled standing as a prophet. As we peel back the layers of this story and consider the great history of Moses' "mighty deeds" and "terrifying displays of power" (v. 12), his death at God's command may feel astonishingly unfair. Though preachers have pointed to Moses' death as an example of God's reliability—God is always true to God's word—such a positive spin on the story only begs deeper questions about God's character. After all, Moses was called by God, despite his hesitations, to confront Pharaoh, demand liberation, guide the people out of captivity, lead them through the wilderness, intercede on their behalf, make amends for their sins, suffer their threats, convey God's laws, settle their disputes, and on and on. When God allows Moses only a view of the promised land before taking his life, the modern reader is not likely to find consolation in God's resolve to keep God's word about a punishment that makes little sense in the first place.

Preachers might find here an opportunity to explore important questions related to the character of God. Why do bad things happen to good people? How does God feel about those bad things? How does God work through those bad things? Preachers might consider another line of questioning. Why do the good die young? Why do the wicked prosper? Where is God's justice in a world that can feel unfair and unjust?

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Exegetical Perspective

Nebo (Num. 33:47), and Balak took Balaam toward the mount's summit to curse the Israelites (Num. 23:13–26). Mount Nebo was part of the Abarim mountain chain (Num. 33:47–48), and Pisgah was Nebo's summit.

From Pisgah, Moses viewed the promised land. Like Abraham (Gen. 13:14–15), Moses looked at the land from the right to the left: first north, then west, and then south. The land promised was expansive: Gilead as far as Dan, all of Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—the valley of Jericho—as far as Zoar (vv. 1–3). Gilead was an area on the east side of the Jordan River. This area extended from Arnon in the south to Bashan in the north. The city was famous for its balm (Jer. 8:22; 46:11). Dan, known as the fifth son of Jacob, was located in the north of Israel at the foot of Mount Hermon. The area of Naphtali, also known as the sixth son of Jacob, was located far north in the Galilean highlands (Josh. 19:32–39). Asher was on its west, and on its east side was the Jordan from Mount Hermon to the Sea of Galilee. Ephraim, synonymous with the northern kingdom of Israel, was one of Israel's tribal territories, as was Manasseh, which was west of the Jordan River. Manasseh encompassed all of the northern part of the central Palestinian hills. Judah, the name of another Israelite tribe, was located in the southern part of the mountain ridge that extended from the Jezreel valley in the north to the Negev—the desert. The Western Sea is the Mediterranean Sea. Zoar was a city in the plain of the Jordan near the Dead Sea. The city was one of the five cities of the plain. The others were Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim. Thus the land that Moses viewed was expansive.

This land that Moses viewed was promised to Israel's patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Gen. 12:1–3; 24:7; 35:12), and all their descendants, including Moses. Moses, however, could not enter the land, for reasons not stated here (v. 4), but Deuteronomy 1:37 and 3:26 suggest that Moses' ban from entering the land was the result of God's anger at the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea. Even though Moses was not to blame for the peoples' lack of trust in and obedience to God (see, e.g., Exod. 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13), he was responsible for their actions. In Deuteronomy 32:50–51, however, Moses' exclusion from the land is based on his own failure (see Num. 20:12–13; 27:12–14).

After Moses saw the promised land, he died in the land of Moab and was buried in a valley there,

Homiletical Perspective

Building the realm of God is a process, and we each have our part to play, even if we will not be around to see all our hopes come to fruition. Even if we will not be present for the final outcome, it is important that we build the realm of God in the here and now, trusting God to work through each of us to bring about God's vision for the world. Furthermore, God assures us in this passage that there will be people to continue leading us to the promised land and building God's kingdom after we are gone. The emergence of Joshua as the new leader of the Israelite people shows us that the work to be done is bigger than any one individual, and God will continue to provide prophetic presence through different people and voices.

Moses' death gives the preacher an opportunity to do two things. First, she or he can lift up an important ancestor in our faith and speak about the importance of obedience in leadership. If we look back on Moses' story, we have to take into consideration the larger context of Exodus and the whole journey that Moses made with the Hebrew people. When we look at the story as a whole, we remember details about his life that will resonate with our congregation's members. Moses did not believe that he was the right person to speak God's truth to Pharaoh's earthly power. Moses did not think he was articulate or smooth enough to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites. Nevertheless, God called Moses, and (for a time at least) Moses was God's voice, the voice of justice and reason in a tense situation. Between Moses' words and the God-driven plagues with which Egypt was afflicted, Pharaoh eventually got the message. In spite of Moses' own self-doubt, he chose to move forward at risk to himself, trusting God to help him free his people. Moses displayed this same obedience later in the story, when the Israelites were complaining about all their hardship and losing trust in God. Rather than have his faith in God crumble, Moses went to Mount Sinai and returned with important words from God for the people—the Ten Commandments.

The second opportunity for the preacher is to help the hearers understand that Moses did not have unique abilities or powers that were his alone. What Moses was able to accomplish was by the grace of God, with Moses working in tandem with God to bring about God's purposes. God gave Moses what was necessary to set the Israelites free from slavery. Even the most ordinary of people can do the same thing. We may not be responsible for freeing a people

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Theological Perspective

hope is finally hope only in God. God will bring to completion in God's good time the promises made to Moses and to Israel.

The great enemy in Deuteronomy is not the wilderness or the people who occupy the promised land, but idolatry—Israel's succumbing to the gods of the peoples around them, or ceasing to trust God and trusting only in themselves. Israel is not Israel's hope. Not even Moses, Israel's greatest prophet, can be Israel's hope, because Moses must die. Israel's hope and Moses' hope as well must be only in the faithfulness of God.

Finally, even though Moses does not live to see the fulfillment of God's promise of the land to Israel, in his death he may receive an even greater gift. During Moses' life we are told God knew him "face to face" (v. 10). The text does not, however, tell us that while Moses lived he knew God face to face, but only that God knew him that way, because no mortal human can look upon the face of the Holy One and live. Having "crossed over," not into the promised land but into death, perhaps Moses is finally able to see what he could not see in his mortal life. Perhaps God not only continues to know him face to face, but Moses now sees and knows God face to face as well. As the apostle Paul put it, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

GEORGE W. STROUP

Pastoral Perspective

Preachers might choose to read the death of Moses through the lens of the gospel. "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (v. 10). That was the case until Christ. Christ does not *know* the Lord face to face. Christ *is* the Lord's face. Christ is God's very presence, who shows the world God's will. In Christ, God gives the world God's word, and that word is life, even in the face of death. God remains true to God's "Word"! This is the reality of God's character and the good news that enables us to discover hope and new life in the midst of our many questions.

Another matter to consider is Moses' response to God's words of punishment. In Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 Moses moves on as if he had never sinned. In Numbers 27, when God shows Moses the promised land and reminds him that he will not enter it, Moses asks only that God find a suitable replacement. Moses seems untroubled by any injustice on God's part. Perhaps our concern is not his. Moses puts the bulk of his energy into working with God to prepare the people for this new phase in their journey with God. He blesses Joshua: "Be strong and bold. . . . It is the LORD who goes before you" (Deut. 31:7, 8). He says the same to the people as they ready themselves for the next step, which they will take without him.

Moses' death is a reminder of Christ's words in Matthew, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39). It reminds us of our baptismal theology of dying to self and rising with Christ. It reminds us of Bonhoeffer's concept of "costly grace." Christ calls his people into ever-deeper fellowship with God, and often that step demands the "death" of relinquishing control and trusting that God goes before us. Just as the Israelites must cross into the promised land without their trusted Moses, so we must risk uncertainty and step out in faith. No one can step for us. No one can trust for us.

The good news is that God goes before us. As a guide in the wilderness we are told to be strong, be bold, love God, and love neighbor. God will handle the rest.

TIMOTHY B. HARE

Deuteronomy 34:1–12

Exegetical Perspective

opposite Beth-peor. Moses' age of 120 years is hyperbolic. He lived into old age, which is a sign of righteousness and divine favor. Beth-peor, "House of Peor," was a Transjordan site, possibly located northeast of Pisgah. Thirty days is the typical time period for mourning and was the same time period allotted to mourning Aaron's passing (see Num. 20:29). All of these events frame the second episode of Deuteronomy 34:1–12.

The third episode features Joshua assuming a new leadership role as the successor to Moses (v. 9). Joshua was Moses' assistant during the wilderness journey (Exod. 24:13; 33:11; Josh. 1:1). He first appeared on the scene in Exodus 17:8–13, where, at Moses' command, he fought against the Amalekites. In Numbers 27:12–23 Moses commissioned Joshua as his successor. Part of the commissioning involved the laying on of hands. This gesture symbolized the transfer of power and the deeper awakening of the Spirit within a person. It was an outward sign that recognized a person's spiritual qualifications and gave authority to that person to lead others. Having experienced this gesture, Joshua was filled with the Spirit of wisdom.

The last episode, a final tribute to Moses (vv. 10–12), celebrates Moses, not only as God's servant, but also as a great prophet whom God knew "face to face" (v. 10; cf. Exod. 33:11). Moses was known to be a great prophet, not because of what he proclaimed, but because of what he did, particularly during the days and events that led up to the exodus from Egypt. Moses embodied and gave proof to the incredible power of God, in whose spirit Moses walked. This last passage of the book of Deuteronomy ends a particular chapter in the lives of the Israelite people but looks forward to the book of Joshua, when the Israelite people will enter into the land that was promised to them and their ancestors of old.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

(in fact we most likely will not be), but we each, with God's direction and help, can make a contribution. We may have times when we are certain that we are in over our heads, that what is asked of us is more than we have to give, or not something that we can produce in the first place. God's relationship with Moses reinforces the truth that God does not call us to a task and then abandon us.

One key difference between Moses and prophetic leaders of our time is that Moses knew what he was getting into. Sometimes we find ourselves in a position of influence, and when that happens, we have to be willing to go with it, as Moses was. Rosa Parks probably did not realize when she refused to give up her seat on the bus that her life, and the lives of many others, was about to change permanently.

While Moses was blessed enough to receive direct instructions from God, we are often fumbling, discerning God's leading only in hindsight rather than in the moment. Admittedly, the miracles that occur today and the revelations that come to us from God are (in most reported cases, at least) much more subtle than a burning bush. A preacher would do well to explore with the congregation the question, what are the "burning bushes" of our own lives—the circumstances, people, and writings through which we hear the voice of God calling us?

Finally, circling back to the words of singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer, Moses' death can show our worshipers that even if we do not make it all the way to the promised land, there is value in the journey. The value lies in the growth, the relationships, and the spiritual development we experience along the way, not to mention the incremental progress that we make toward creating the just and peaceable world that God desires for all of creation.

LESLIE A. KLINGENSMITH

PROPER 25 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 23 AND OCTOBER 29 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17

¹LORD, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.

²Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³You turn us back to dust,
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”

⁴For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.

⁵You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;

Theological Perspective

Treatments of Psalm 90 oscillate between an emphasis on human finitude and an emphasis on God’s eternal sovereignty. The passage is an account of God’s eternal and sovereign power, but it is likewise an account of human beings and their precarious existence. After all, just as theology is an account of our experience of God, it is just as much an account of who we are as human beings. In other words, the Psalms’ account of God’s power and eternal character is at the same time a meditation on human finitude and temporality.

Classical theology makes a sharp distinction between God the Creator and humans, the creatures. God the Creator is the eternal creative wellspring, and God shares God’s creativity with humankind. God the Creator is the eternal source of life, and all lives depend on this eternal source. God is the beginning and God the end of all that is. This is not to say that God *has* beginning and ending; to say that would be to put God inside the limits of time and space, like a creature. Yet it does not mean that God is not in time and in space—for God is both timely and spatially present. God, who is beyond time and space, embraces and dwells in both without being limited by them.

In contrast to God, human beings are finite creatures. Human life is fragile, precarious, and

Pastoral Perspective

The lectionary suggests that we skip the middle six verses of the psalm. Though there are reasons for the suggestion, the abbreviated version makes interpretation difficult. Ending at verse 6 and beginning again at verse 13, we read, “Turn, O LORD! How long?” Parishioners will likely ask: Turn from what? The first six verses of the psalm do not clearly answer that question. Verses 1–2 compose a word of praise, a proclamation of God’s eternal lordship. Verses 3–6 read like a reflection on the passing of time from the perspective of God. The skipped verses (vv. 7–12) are the ones that clarify the connection between the unfolding of the years and the plea for God’s compassion: God is angry.

The psalmist perceives the misery of God’s people to be a consequence of their sin. Their misery is the punishment that God has chosen for them, and it is defined by a sense of meaninglessness and futility. The years pass, and to what end? We will live to be eighty if we are lucky, but even those years are full of toil and trouble. Our lives are fragile and difficult, and to God they are gone in the blink of an eye. *Our lives seem pointless*. This is the “wrath” that weighs so heavily on the people.

An exploration of God’s wrath might be a useful theme for a sermon on Psalm 90. In what sense might God be angry with us? In what ways is the fear

Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17

⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

.....
¹³Turn, O LORD! How long?

Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁵Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.

¹⁶Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.

¹⁷Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

Exegetical Perspective

Traditionally, the Psalms have been grouped into five sections or “books,” based on brief doxologies that appear at the end of each book. Psalm 90 is the first entry in Book IV (Pss. 90–106), which begins and ends with references to Moses and his career. The name Moses in the heading calls attention to several similarities of language between this psalm, the Song of Moses (Deut. 31:30–32:43), and Moses’ intercessory prayer in Exodus 32:11–14 (note comments below on vv. 2, 13). While this is the only psalm attributed to him, Moses is said elsewhere to be a singer or composer of songs (e.g., Exod. 15:1; Deut. 31:19). Psalm 90 is an appropriate accompaniment to the OT reading for today, since Deuteronomy 34:1–12 tells about Moses’ death and eulogizes him.

This prayer-psalm is directly addressed to the Lord, using the generic honorific *adonai* (meaning “master” or “sovereign”) in verse 1 and again in verse 17. However, the passionate appeal to God’s mercy in verse 13 uses the divinity’s proper name, YHWH.

“Dwelling place” (v. 1) has overtones of safe place or hiding place (like an animal’s den or lair), but it is also the word Moses uses in Deuteronomy 26:15 to refer to God’s habitation, in synonymous parallel to “heaven.” The speaker does not say the Lord

Homiletical Perspective

Preaching the Psalms allows thematic and allusive homiletic styles and structure to come to the fore. Our lection from Psalm 90 is rich with imagery of our true dwelling place in God, God as creator, the reality of mortality, and the passing of time. We also read pleas for fairness, justice, and prosperity, the nature of any of which could be explored in a sermon.

Portions of Psalm 90 are offered at this point in the lectionary first and foremost as a response to the Deuteronomist’s story of the death of Moses before the people cross over into the land of promise. Moses had lived a long and blessed life, but there is nonetheless some sense in which his death could be considered untimely. There are people in every congregation who will be familiar with such a sense of untimely loss and who would welcome its being addressed homiletically. Psalm 90 offers a framework for such a sermon.

The psalm begins with an affirmation that our true home is in God (v. 1), allowing for a reflection on home as the nearer presence of God, home as return from exile, or home as our true land of promise. Here a preacher might want to consider the Matthew reading appointed for this day. The Gospel of Matthew interprets the law and the prophets to indicate their fulfillment in Jesus. During the Passover Seder on the night before he died, Jesus is

Psalms 90:1–6, 13–17

Theological Perspective

transient. Human bodies are subject to diseases and decay. Like flowers in the field, one day they bloom, the next day they wither and return to the soil. As time passes, all human toil fades into the distant past and is forgotten. It is not a surprise that, as creatures of the eternal God, human beings long for the eternal significance of their work.

Fragility, temporality, transience, brevity, and ending are not easy for humans to embrace. Even though human beings know they are temporal creatures, this is painful to accept; this is experienced as pathos. This pathos becomes more acutely problematic under the condition of what the Christian tradition calls “sin.” Under the impact of sin, what was once natural becomes a dreaded condition. Death, the supreme example of temporality and transience, becomes the dreaded, inevitable possibility, and some theological interpretations make sin the *causal* factor for death. This is how Romans 6:23 has been commonly interpreted: for the “wages of sin is death.” As a consequence, Adam and Eve are viewed as having been immortal creatures until they committed sin and thus entered death.

Such a theological reading flies in the face of what naturally belongs to a creature—finiteness and temporality. Several theologians speak of the tragic character of human existence. The ability to transcend (e.g., the ability to ask questions about limitations) enables human beings to see open possibilities for realization, and it also makes it possible for them to become aware of their contingencies brought about by temporality and embodiment. Caught up in the tension between their possibilities and the awareness that they may cease to be, human beings experience anxiety. Threatened by deep-seated anxiety and insecurity, human beings make every effort to secure all windows of vulnerability. This leads to idolatry and death. It is in this context that we need to interpret the relationship of sin and death.

Sin is not the cause of physical death, because death is inherent to life. However, in theological interpretation, death becomes related to sin and is experienced as wrath or judgment, as God’s “final and ultimate ‘no’” that cancels any human pretension to autonomy.¹ Death is experienced as judgment because it exposes the transient character of mundane goods that humans have given the status of eternal security. From an ecological-relational point of view, death is a judgment because it is

1. James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 292.

Pastoral Perspective

of God’s anger the motivation for our faith? Many pastors share the same concern that fear is used improperly in relation to God. Though the fear of God is more appropriately understood as a reverence for God or a deep sense of God’s overwhelming beauty and power, unfortunately the fear of God is used by many faith leaders as a threat: “Commit sin, and be punished! Doubt, and God will refuse favor! Accept Jesus, or go to hell when you die!”

The psalmist’s mention of anger and wrath may trigger such associations for many people. However, the psalmist maintains that God is compassionate and steadfast in love (vv. 13–14). Thus such associations are likely not the psalmist’s intent. Threats about God’s wrath and eternal punishment make it nearly impossible for notions of love and grace to be the primary factors in a relationship with God. Furthermore, an unhealthy fear of God turns Christian living from the realm of joyful mission to the endless and defeating task of trying to “measure up” to God’s expectations or to be “good enough” for God.

Nonetheless, if God is a God of love, certain actions and situations must displease God. How does God express this displeasure? What are the consequences of God’s anger? The psalmist points us to at least one answer: the consequence of faithlessness is a sense of meaninglessness. The result of sin, which is separation from God, is the discovery of one’s own futility. Apart from God, our lives ultimately have no substance. They do not last. Whether devoted to survival, gain, status, riches, or something else, they are ultimately devoted to that which is temporary and unable to satisfy. Only when our lives are tied to a God who is greater than us, a God whose beauty and power exceed our understanding, a God who exists from “everlasting to everlasting,” do our lives transcend finitude and find their true home and purpose.

Seeing God’s anger or wrath in this light leads us to another conclusion. Though discerning what is truly punishment from God will always remain difficult, it is clear that God’s wrath is redemptive and not vindictive. If God’s punishment is the despairing sense of human frailty, it is given for the sake of recognizing and grasping the hope and purpose of life in fellowship with God.

Verses 1 and 2 remind the reader (and perhaps God!) right off the bat that a state of punishment is ultimately not God’s will: “You have been our dwelling place in all generations.” *Yet, we, your people, are in misery. Things are not right!*

Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17

Exegetical Perspective

provides us with a safe place, but that the Lord is our safe place (i.e., as God dwells in heaven, we dwell in God). The phrase “in all generations” is also used in Exodus 3:15. There is a subtle pun in the Hebrew of this first verse, since the word *dor* can mean both “generation” (or “age”) and “dwelling place.”

NRSV’s translation “brought forth” (*yld*) and “formed” (*hll*) in v. 2 weakens the metaphor that pictures God’s creative activity as a process of giving birth. Elsewhere, the NRSV translates the same verbs *yld* and *hll* in a way that is more appropriate for the metaphor: “You were unmindful of the Rock who bore you [*yld*]; you forgot the God who gave you birth [*hll*]” (Deut. 32:18).

The NRSV translator personalizes the statement in verse 3 by changing the Hebrew word for human-kind (*enosh*) to “us.” The Hebrew noun translated “dust” is not found elsewhere, but the corresponding adjective occurs twice; NRSV translates it “crushed” in Psalm 34:18 and “contrite” in Isaiah 57:15. In both texts, the adjective modifies spirit (*ruach*), suggesting that “dust” in this context is a figure for contrition or humility.

The Hebrew *shuv* (used twice in v. 3 and once in v. 13) can mean “turn,” “return,” “turn back,” or “repent.” The psalmist may be using two different senses of the word *shuv* in verse 3, implying that the God who turns humans back to dust (or turns them toward humility) also calls upon them to repent. In verse 3 God addresses mortals with the imperative: “Turn back, you mortals.” In verse 13 mortals will address God with an imperative: “Turn, O LORD!”

The first two lines in verse 4 are paraphrased in 2 Peter 3:8. The second and third lines echo each other. In God’s life, a thousand human years go by as quickly as a day or a night watch (typically four hours long) pass by in human experience. Each time period disappears like a dream or dries up like grass (vv. 5–6), becoming nothing but a brief memory.

Because the Hebrew in verse 5 makes little sense as it stands, various translations have added words to the text to try to make it into a coherent statement. The NRSV changes “sleep” to “dream” and adds the comparative “like.” It is not clear, in either the Hebrew or the NRSV, if “them” in the first line of verse 5 refers back to humankind (v. 3) or to a thousand years (v. 4). The NIV assumes the antecedent of “them” is humankind and adds “men” to the text, changing “sleep” into “the sleep of death.” The simile in verses 5–6 uses the same word as Isaiah 40:8 (*khatsir*) to compare humanity’s transience with short-lived grass.

Homiletical Perspective

essentially saying that the long-hoped-for promised land is now to be found in relationship with him, as he breaks the bread and shares the cup.

With our true home established, the psalmist goes on to remember that God is the source of all that is and the ground of our being. A thousand years are as nothing in the sight of God, who creates all that is, who forms the world “from everlasting to everlasting” (v. 2). We can presume that creation includes finitude, allowing for the reality that death is part and parcel of life itself (v. 3). A preacher could follow the psalmist in describing death as a horizon of sorts. Time is swept away “like a dream” (v. 5), only to flourish and be renewed in the morning (v. 6).

When Paul cries, “Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55), he is acknowledging the reality of death; at the same time he is celebrating the truth that death is not our final horizon. We tend to imagine that death is the last word and the worst thing in life. However, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus overcome the power of death in our imaginations, and the reality of death itself.

We know that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23) and that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), and so we have been enjoined frequently to avoid death at all costs. Here the psalmist seems to understand intuitively what we will learn from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and in his passion: that death is not the worst thing in life. Rather, the worst thing in life is breaking faith with the source and ground of our being, the Love that made us for Love. Jesus went to his death putting his whole trust in God’s grace and love. In time he discovered that the One who gives life in the first place can and does bring new and resurrected life out of death, “like grass that is renewed in the morning” (v. 5).

Of course we do not escape pain or grief in our finitude, and lament is an appropriate response to an untimely or otherwise tragic death. Even as we pray that we may know the morning and be satisfied with the steadfast love of God in our lives, so that “we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (v. 14), so we also recognize and remember the reality of the days in which we have been afflicted, our pain and loss and grief (v. 15).

Grief, mourning, sadness, loss, and regret are all part of the content of lament, and the poet gives expression to these emotions: “Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants!” (v. 13). A preacher’s comment on lament can free

Psalm 90:1–6, 13–17

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experienced as a separation from the web of life-giving relationship. When humans fear, then death becomes death-serving: death causes sin as much as sin brings death.

Is there a way out of this sorry mess? How can we embrace temporality and impermanence as part of life, even as a gift of life? It is only through submission to the eternal God that we can learn to accept what is truly part of us, our temporality and impermanence. When we learn to accept this part of our humanity and to trust in God's steadfast love, we start learning how to number our days, and we begin to acquire the heart of wisdom. We learn to see the significance of our borrowed time and realize that, following Daniel Migliore, "if our time were infinite, no particular time would ever be decisive, urgent, precious."²

From the Christian point of view, we acquire the heart of wisdom by way of the grace and forgiving work of Christ. When the sting of death (sin) is overcome, we become receptive to the heart of wisdom and to transience as a *gift*. We can live life with confidence that, after all, our time is within the eternal God and that our time is not all there is to measure. Moreover, when we submit ourselves to the ubiquitously present God, God becomes our dwelling place. Fragile and transitory though we are, the eternal, enduring, and everlasting God is our true home. When the eternal God accepts the offering of our lives and the works of our hands, we need to remain open to God's surprise: God may just delight us by giving eternal significance to the transient works that we have cherished all our lives.

ELEAZAR S. FERNANDEZ

Pastoral Perspective

Circumstances are out of order! The psalmist's determination is remarkable. His resolve to maintain hope for a righted way in the midst of such despair is a powerful witness for all people of faith.

The psalm hinges on verse 12: "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." In other words, if "a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past" (v. 4), help us to see the days the way you see them. Help us to lose our limited perspectives and to see from your perspective. Help us to trust in the wisdom of your plan when through our own wisdom we cannot understand what is happening. It is not difficult to imagine the encouragement that such an appeal would have provided to the postexilic Israel for which this psalm was composed. Likewise, neither is it difficult to relate to such a prayer when in our own lives we find that we are lost and uncertain.

Notice the verbs that introduce the remaining verses: "Turn, O LORD." "Satisfy us . . ." "Make us glad . . ." "Let your work be manifest . . ." "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us . . ." "O prosper the work of our hands!" The psalmist calls for strong action. The psalmist calls for God's help: *Teach us; transform us; use us!* This is a confession that we cannot do it on our own. We need God. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

In the final five verses, the psalmist brings us to the truth of human existence: to be whole, we must rely on grace. To be fully human, to be in right relationship with God, we must rely on God. We must acknowledge that we are dependent beings. We must, in a word, submit.

A final thought: read Psalm 90:13–17 one more time. Hear the psalmist making his requests. Then spend some time contemplating what God, who is "our dwelling place in all generations," might say in reply.

TIMOTHY B. HARE

2. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 158.

Psalms 90:1–6, 13–17

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary skips from the prayer's initial complaint about the shortness of human life (vv. 3–6) to the petitions in verses 13–17, leaving out all references to YHWH's anger, which humans have unwisely provoked. However, clipping out verses 7–12 eliminates the original reasons for the petitions in verses 13–17. The original prayer, composed in the context of an unspecified national crisis, hoped to turn God away from what the people perceived as God's wrath. The words translated "turn" (imperative of *shuv*) and "have compassion on" (*vehinnakhem*) in verse 13 are also used by Moses in Exodus 32:12, where they are translated, "Turn [*shuv*] from your fierce wrath; change your mind [*vehinnakhem*] and do not bring disaster on your people."

"How long?" is a cry of pain and protest that occurs frequently in psalms of lament, as well as in Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk. It is an expression of impatience, rather than a request for information. Here it acts as a prelude to a series of imperatives asking for YHWH's compassion (v. 13), steadfast love (v. 14), and favor (v. 17), for gladness at least equal in extent to their sufferings (v. 15), for an understanding of what God is doing in the world (v. 16), and for God's backing or support for human endeavors.

The verses missing from the lection (vv. 7–12) suggest that the shortness of humanity's lifespan is a problem primarily because YHWH's anger over human sin lasts longer than human beings do. This explains the plea in verse 15 requesting balance between good days and bad, implying that the brevity of human life is acceptable, if we have at least as many happy times as bad times. The lectionary reading makes the petition in verse 13 into a request for more human durability—which is then supported by the final, repeated request in verse 17, asking God to have compassion on those whose lives are so fleeting by allowing some of their works to "prosper" (meaning "stand" or "endure"), presumably beyond their deaths.

KATHLEEN A. ROBERTSON FARMER

Homiletical Perspective

those who hear to give voice to their own grief. In the psalm, a reasonable and holy hope is born from the lament. The demands of justice, and therefore a reasonable expectation of a just God, mean that we can hope for a measure of gladness in some relation to our affliction. So our prayer becomes one for the manifestation of that justice in the powerful working of God in our lives (v. 16). Here the preacher will need to be careful to avoid implying that such a manifestation is a quid pro quo, in which God is somehow constrained to act in a certain way. Examples of God's hand at work, in stories of healing, blessing, or good fortune, or in an account of evil being put to flight, must be offered, not as examples of God doing humanity's bidding, but as a matter of the grace and mercy of God. Any manifestation of God's hand at work is a gift, pure and simple, a hope rather than an expectation.

In the end the psalmist asks for God's favor in the relationship between work and prosperity (v. 17), once more offering the preacher opportunity to explore the reality of grace and to warn against setting up expectations (such as those implied by the "prosperity gospel"), which are resentments under construction. The preacher, like the psalmist, can end the reflection on death by pointing squarely toward God's grace among the living.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

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PROPER 26 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 30
AND NOVEMBER 5 INCLUSIVE)

Joshua 3:7–17

⁷The LORD said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, ‘When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.’” ⁹Joshua then said to the Israelites, “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God.” ¹⁰Joshua said, “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. ¹²So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.”

Theological Reflection

The faith that we have is also the faith that we have heard or received from others. We are inheritors of a great tradition, even as our faith is at the same time a matter of personal encounter with God. Having a personal faith experience and inheriting a tradition are not contradictory. They inform and enrich each other; they give particular shape to our faith. Tradition (*traditio*) basically means to “deliver” or “hand over” what has been received in the past. The “handing over” is no mere act of repetition, but an act of interpretation, if not of betrayal.

Italians have a saying: *traduttore traditore*, a translator is a traitor.¹ The past is retrieved to make it alive in the present. It is for this reason that it is called a living tradition. Bishop Thomas Roberts’s aphorism offers a helpful distinction: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”² It is crucial that we open our ears to traditions that may have been muted. When we do so, we will begin to understand that tradition, after all, is actually plural—traditions.

Our lectionary reading gives us an account of handing over a tradition. It recounts the story of

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Ask the fourth-grade Sunday school class, “Who fought the battle of Jericho?” and they will answer without hesitation: “Joshua!” They might tell you how Joshua marched his army around the city for six days and how on the seventh day the people blew trumpets and gave a mighty cry, and “the walls came a-tumblin’ down.” If you ask those same children, “How did Joshua cross the Jordan?” you will get no response at all. That is the challenge with this passage from Joshua: the miraculous crossing of the Jordan is totally eclipsed by the fall of Jericho in chapter 6.

Both events demonstrate the power of the living God, but for my money, mastering the waters of the Jordan is far more awe-inspiring than destroying the fortifications of Jericho. In the Hebrew Scriptures, water represents chaos (Gen. 1:2) and God’s judgment on humankind (Gen. 6). Water has the power to bless as well as to curse. Water is both the source of life and the source of death, as we have seen in tsunamis and flooding. Because water is outside of human control, it becomes a sign and symbol of God’s power and God’s promise.

This is not the first time the Israelites have crossed a body of water. When Moses led the people through the Red Sea, they began the crossing as slaves and emerged as free people. When Joshua

1. Justo L. González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 57.

2. Thomas Roberts, cited in Paul Lakeland, *Theology and Critical Theory: Discourse of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 143.

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¹⁴When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people. ¹⁵Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing toward the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho. ¹⁷While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

Exegetical Perspective

After the death of Moses, his young assistant, Joshua, becomes the leader of the Israelite people, and through his efforts, the Israelites enter Canaan, the promised land. The crossing of the Jordan River is a pivotal event, as important as the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14), which symbolized the Israelites' leaving a settled experience of oppression in Egypt, to become wanderers sustained by God and living under divine promise. The crossing over the Jordan River takes the people out of the wilderness, completes their initial formation as God's people, and symbolizes a move toward unity, stability, permanence, and well-being.

The story opens with the Israelites camped at the Jordan. At this place, Joshua receives divine favor and promise, as well as his first instructions from God. Joshua will be "exalted" by God. Like Moses, he will be divinely raised up from among the people to lead the Israelites out of bondage. This divine action will take place in the sight of "all Israel." Joshua's public exaltation will not be for his own spiritual edification; it will be for the sake of the people, so that they may know that God is with Joshua in the same way that God was with Moses (v. 7). Thus Joshua's exaltation serves as a sign and validation for the Israelites and assures them of divine care and presence through the leadership

Homiletical Perspective

The homiletical approach to any text depends in large part upon the place in the flow of the text at which we enter. Like the priests who carried the ark of the covenant, we hope to follow God's direction as we stand in the current of the words, images, and metaphors that make up the lection. Still, we are the ones who choose exactly where to put our feet into the water. As with any other reading, Joshua 3:7–17 provides ample occasion to step in. We will explore three of those places here: the boundary/barrier of the Jordan River, the step of faith required to cross that boundary/barrier, and carrying the artifacts of our faith tradition with us.

The Jordan River as Boundary/Barrier. Anyone who has seen the Jordan River can attest that most of the year the Jordan would hardly qualify as a river, at least by North American standards. It would most likely be considered a creek or stream. However, in flood time (late spring, the time of this crossing according to our text), the river can stretch to more than a mile wide. Attempting to cross the Jordan during that time would prove a hazardous venture indeed. While the Jordan is supposed to be a kind of boundary of the land of promise, in this lesson it has become a barrier.

It is easy in our time to forget that in the ancient world rivers and other bodies of water were barriers

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Joshua leading his people on their final approach to God's promise: a land for a displaced people. The purpose of the (re)telling is not simply to report a significant event in the past, but to make it present in the lives of the hearers. The (re)telling is intended to monumentalize and memorialize an event, so that it will loom large and become embedded in the memory of the people. In the liturgical recounting of Joshua's leading Israel across the Jordan River, reminiscent of Moses's leading them across the parted waters of the Red Sea, the people are reconnected to a faith-formative past that informs their anticipation of God's promise of a new and better tomorrow.

What is the significance of this tradition to contemporary believers? The central theological message of this tradition is about a God who accompanies, protects, defends, and liberates the defenseless. It is about a God who fulfills a promise to those whose hopes have been betrayed by the powers that be. It is about a living God who confounds the mighty, scatters the proud, and brings release to the captives. Central to our lectionary reading is the tradition of a God who makes "a way out of no way." When all possible ways are closed, the God who has been with the people makes a way out of no way. In God there is hope for deliverance. To use a religious idiom of the black church in North America: "God ain't finished with us yet!"³ History is not closed; God is not yet finished with history. The Red Seas and Jordan Rivers of history are not barriers to God's purpose. In God and with God, the people will overcome.

Before we proceed further, two caveats need to be made. First, God's companionship and protection cannot be contained, controlled, or manipulated. The ark of the covenant, for example, is not a magical lamp that contains a powerful genie who will grant wishes. We have a tendency to make theology a God-management system. Second, the import of any theology cannot be detached from its context of utterance and the shifting power dynamics.

This is a discourse on a God who does the work of overcoming for the sake of a people. In our lectionary reading, overcoming is a language that belongs to those who have experienced being silenced by the powerful forces of history but have also experienced God's liberating love. This is a language that marginalized people can claim as their own. Detached from its function in the experience of disempowered communities, the language of overcoming gets twisted in favor of those who wield power. When slaves, for

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leads the Israelites through the Jordan, they cross as nomadic tribes and emerge as a settled nation. More than that, these two water crossings act as bookends, bracketing God's promise to free the people and bring them into a land "flowing with milk and honey." God's promise is fulfilled in their passing through dangerous waters, proving that God, who alone has power over the chaos of the water, has done this great thing.

Of course, Joshua and the priests have to take the first step. They have to get their feet wet before God will act. Too often in the church, we find lay leaders and pastors unwilling to step into the water, unable to risk anything for the sake of the gospel. We cannot overcome our fear of failure. A small rural church I served for a year was in desperate need of an elevator. The local funeral home had dubbed us "the stairway to heaven" because of the twenty-two steps that led from the street to the sanctuary. After years of debate and planning, with attendance in decline, the church council finally decided they needed to act. The projected cost was \$78,000, almost twice the annual budget. "What if we cannot pay for this?" asked one man nervously. "We have to take that chance for the sake of the church," responded the chairman. With some fear and trembling and a lot of prayer, the contract was signed and the work began. A month later, the church received an unexpected windfall of \$250,000. It felt like a miracle. There were other capital projects that could easily have absorbed the money, but since we had already gotten our feet wet and made a commitment, the elevator was built—and it renewed the church.

Another lesson this passage offers is the importance of ritual in creating identity and theological meaning. When Moses crossed the Red Sea, circumstances were desperate. With Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, the Israelites probably scrambled across without much thought about the greater theological meaning of the event. In this passage, God gives Joshua very specific liturgical directions. In the first part of chapter 3, the people are told that the ark will pass before them, but they must keep their distance, because the object is dangerously holy (3:4). On the eve of the crossing, Joshua tells the people to sanctify themselves, "for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you" (3:5). Each tribe chooses one priest to carry the ark before the people, and when the priests step into the water, the river is "wholly cut off" (v. 16). The people cross over on dry ground, as the priests stand in the middle of the Jordan holding the ark aloft.

3. E. Oglesby, *Born in the Fire: Case Studies in Christian Ethics and Globalization* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), viii.

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of Joshua, on whom God's favor rests (cf. Exod. 3:1–12, esp. v. 12). Having Joshua raised up to be the equivalent of Moses affirms Joshua's close connection to Moses (see Josh. 1:3, 5, 7, 17) and assures the continuity of leadership that God had arranged during Moses's lifetime (Deut. 1:37–38).

Joshua is then given a double charge: first, he is to command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant; second, he is to stand still in the Jordan (v. 8). Even though the priests are part of the religious leadership and have a certain status, the biblical writer makes the point that Joshua has authority over them. In early biblical times, priests were not ordinarily called by God; instead, priests were either appointed to this role or were born into a priestly family and thus inherited the role. Priests were responsible for serving God and caring for the sanctuary (1 Sam. 1:3, 21–22; Judg. 18:30). They communicated God's thoughts, ordinances, and decisions (e.g., 1 Sam. 14:18–19; Deut. 33:8–10). They helped to determine who was innocent or guilty in matters of justice (1 Sam. 14:41–42). They were teachers of the Torah (Deut. 31:10–11; Mic. 4:2). Some performed therapeutic functions. They observed, diagnosed, and quarantined various diseases and ailments (e.g., Lev. 13–15). Finally, priests were often associated with lamentation rituals in which they might pronounce a salvation proclamation, a role usually carried out by Levite priests in postexilic times (e.g., Ps. 12:6; 2 Chr. 20:13–17).

In this story of the crossing of the Jordan, the priest's function is to bear the ark of the covenant, one of Israel's most sacred objects. The ark symbolizes God's presence among the Israelite people and serves as a divine guide. The priests are to stand still in the waters of the Jordan, by the edge of the river, to cut off the flow of water from above (vv. 13, 16).

Having issued a preparatory command to the priests, Joshua next addresses the Israelites (vv. 9–13). He assures them of the living God's presence among them that will be made manifest through the passing of the ark of the covenant into the Jordan. Joshua further assures the Israelites that they will inherit the land they are about to enter because God will drive out the peoples who already occupy the land. It is important to note that the conquest model of taking the land that is represented in the book of Joshua is no longer widely accepted among biblical scholars; several alternative theories exist.

One of the prevalent theories is that there was no actual "conquest"; rather, the people who

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to travel as well as means of conveyance for goods by ship or smaller boats. This is not the first time in this narrative that the children of Israel have encountered a barrier. As Moses led a ragtag group of slaves from the cruel exploitation in Egypt, they encountered the *yam suf*, the Sea of Reeds (also known as the Red Sea). In that case Moses was instructed by YHWH to raise his staff, and the people passed through the waters safely. Pharaoh's army, which was chasing them in order to capture them and take them back into the slave camps of Egypt, was not so fortunate, however. The water closed around the army, and they were drowned. This story would have been alive and well in the oral traditions of the people who stood on the verge of the Jordan.

Just as the Sea of Reeds brackets the beginning of their wilderness wanderings, the Jordan serves as the closing bracket, to mark the end of those wanderings. Though a much less dramatic occasion, the crossing of the Jordan replicates the people's encounter with a barrier and then with God's help passing beyond it.

In spirituals the Jordan River is a metaphor for all those barriers that the powers and principalities of this world place in front of those who feel powerless. The barrier is the boundary to the place where God's promises will be fulfilled. The Jordan River may be chilly and cold, but those crossing the barriers that stand before them can be assured that those waters chill the body but not the soul.

A Step of Faith. Since the time of Søren Kierkegaard, the term "leap of faith" has become common parlance among Christians. While we rarely use the term with the subtlety and nuance that Kierkegaard did, it is commonly employed to describe that which is required to move beyond the limits of rational thought and into the realm of faith. What we have in this text, however, is not so much a leap of faith as a tentative step of faith. Though some preachers counsel parishioners to take a wild and extravagant leap of faith, most of us are not so adventurous. We move toward a deeper faith by steps rather than leaps.

First, the priests carrying the ark are told to stand in the water. As soon as the priests follow those instructions and "wade in the water," the flow from upstream is stopped and is heaped up on the upstream side. The priests then carry the ark into the middle of the river (on dry riverbed, the narrator adds) and hold it there until all the people have

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example, sing, “We shall overcome,” it means overcoming slavery. When riot police sing it, the same song presents the opposite: quelling resistance. We must bear this in mind as we seek to make sense of God’s work in light of the power differentials between Israel and the Palestinians.

The theme of God’s companionship and overcoming work continues in Christian traditions about Jesus. We can discern this theme in Mark’s account of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River (Mark 1:1–11). That the heavens split open (not just a river) during the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:10) signifies the qualitatively new thing that God is doing in and through Jesus. The powers that be tried to stop Jesus through crucifixion, but he did not succumb, even to save his own life. Even in death he overcame; God resurrected him, which is God’s work of making “a way out of no way.”

God’s decisive act of overcoming—the resurrection of Jesus—continues in the lives of people who have embodied resurrection in the midst of daily crucifixions. In being faithful to the God of the Crucified One who was resurrected, they have become living embodiments of the Spirit that overcomes.

ELEAZAR S. FERNANDEZ

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As they fled from the Egyptian army, the people might have missed the theological significance of crossing the Red Sea, but no one could mistake the crossing of the Jordan for anything other than a demonstration of God’s mighty power. The second event calls to mind the first event, clarifying their understanding of who they are, and who God is. It is this understanding that enables and equips the Israelites to conquer and occupy the land.

In many churches, we have abandoned some of our rituals and liturgy in an attempt to make people feel “comfortable.” Few things are treated with a sense of reverence or awe. We are just plain folk, and this is just plain worship—nothing special. That was the response I got when I asked why we had no baptismal font. The story was that a decade before, during a renovation project, the font had been damaged or lost—and no one had thought to replace it. Instead, when it came time to celebrate the sacrament of baptism, a small silver punch bowl was brought into service. Then last year, a group decided to commission a local sculptor to create a new font. He carved it out of cherry wood, an open pillar of vines and branches supporting a large glass bowl in the shape of a boat. We dedicated the font in January with the baptism of two babies. Afterward, a woman approached me and asked if she could be rebaptized. When I asked why, she said, “Looking at that font, I now understand what baptism really means. It is something God does, not us.”

The same reverence and awe the Israelites felt crossing the Jordan should be present in our worship today. After all, we worship the same living God.

SHAWNTEA MONROE

Joshua 3:7–17

Exegetical Perspective

escaped from Egypt migrated in the direction of Palestine and mingled with indigenous populations there. There is very little archaeological evidence to support the stories of wholesale military victory described in Joshua. In the ancient ruins of the sites, archaeologists have found no burn layer, no remains of weaponry or destruction in the time period Joshua represents. Some scholars now think that the stories in Joshua were written to explain how God fulfilled the divine promise first made to Abraham, that Israel would become a great nation (v. 17; cf. Gen. 12:1–3). The archaeological evidence suggests that *how* this divine promise was fulfilled may not correspond to the description in Joshua, but may instead be the result of many years of development. This theory of a more peaceful settlement may be a relief to congregants who are disturbed by the violence in these biblical accounts. The book of Joshua makes clear the belief that settlement in the land of Israel is part of God's divine plan for the people. The emphasis on God as "the Lord of all the earth" (v. 13) signals God's sovereignty over all the earth (Gen. 1–2) and confirms the Israelites' claim to the land. The last section of the story narrates the Israelites' crossing over the Jordan (vv. 14–17). The priests stand in the middle of the Jordan and hold the ark of the covenant. The Jordan waters are cut off, just as the waters parted when the people crossed the sea while escaping from Egypt, and the people are able to cross over the river. The God of signs and wonders has again acted on behalf of the people, and the sojourners are settle in a new land.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

passed across the last geographical barrier into the land of promise.

There is no leap of faith here. Rather, trusting God's promise, the priests step into the water, and example allows the people to trust that the waters will remained heaped up until they too can make it across safely. Note that the waters do not stop flowing until the priests are willing to enter the water. While God takes the initiative, sometimes we have to take a step of faith before we can receive the goodness of God's dream for us.

Carrying the Faith. Protestants do not talk much about relics, but we have them: those artifacts that we are unwilling to give up or to throw away, simply because they remind us of a significant story in our lives. The ark of the covenant that the priests carry contains the tablets on which the Decalogue was written, Aaron's staff that budded and flowered, and a sample of manna. Each of these objects serves as a reminder of the story of the people's release from slavery and of the God who brought them out of the land of bondage.

Relics, at least in this context, function as concrete reminders of parts of the story of faith and the God who has brought us to this point on that journey. The objects carried in the ark remind the children of Israel that the God who has brought the people out of Egypt is the God who has fed them in the wilderness, who has given them the commandments by which to order their lives together as free people, and who has employed the staffs of Moses and Aaron in powerful ways, but none more powerful than bringing new life out of a dead, dry stick.

What are our relics, those things in our lives that remind us of the God who has brought us this far on our journey?

MICHAEL E. WILLIAMS

**PROPER 26 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 30
AND NOVEMBER 5 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37

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.

⁴Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town;

⁵hungry and thirsty,
their soul fainted within them.

⁶Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress;

Theological Reflection

World events provide the backdrop for this theological reflection: an earthquake triggered a devastating tsunami in Japan, cruise missiles caused civilian casualties in Libya, and workers' rights protests spread to several states in the United States. In these three events we can see the interweaving of what insurance companies call "acts of God" and human actions that create, contribute to, and exacerbate creation's suffering. "Tragedies like an earthquake," says Jon Sobrino, "have natural causes, of course, but their unequal impact is not due to nature; it stems from the things people do with each other, to each other, against each other. The tragedy is largely the work of our hands."¹ While major calamities are shared by all, the weight of calamity usually falls most heavily on the poor. Beyond the interweaving of natural and human responses are sociopolitical constructs that dehumanize and destroy life. The global community is reeling from adversities of various kinds. Our lectionary reading takes account of various adversities and presents the cry of a suffering people, a cry that is also our own.

People cry when they are in trouble; they cry when they are suffering. Crying is an expression that things are not right. When their anguish is too much to bear,

1. Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God: Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 3.

Pastoral Perspective

The first time I served Communion by intinction (members of the congregation come forward to receive the bread and then dip the bread into the cup), it was as an associate minister at an affluent suburban church near Boston. It was the kind of church where everyone drove nice cars, sent their children to excellent schools, and seemed, by every measure, to be successful. One dear man was an exception: his business had failed, his wife had left him, and his daughter had died tragically in her twenties. Bob reminded me of the saying "If it weren't for bad luck, I would have no luck at all." Still, he was a faithful member of the church, so when I invited people to come forward and receive the sacrament, Bob was first in line. "This is the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, given for you," I intoned, as he dipped his bread in the wine. Then he popped it in his mouth, smiled broadly, and said, "Don't I know it!"

Psalm 107 was written by a Bob—someone who knew suffering and redemption firsthand. "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (v. 1). This joyful song of praise is born of experience. People were suffering and God responded. "Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress" (v. 13). Only those who know what it means to

Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37

⁷he led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.

.....
³³He turns rivers into a desert,
springs of water into thirsty ground,
³⁴a fruitful land into a salty waste,
because of the wickedness of its inhabitants.
³⁵He turns a desert into pools of water,
a parched land into springs of water.
³⁶And there he lets the hungry live,
and they establish a town to live in;
³⁷they sow fields, and plant vineyards,
and get a fruitful yield.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 107, a community thanksgiving psalm, opens the fifth and last book of the Psalms. This final book, which contains forty-four psalms, is the longest of all the books. Verses 1–7 and 33–37 are part of a larger structure that includes a call to give thanks to the Lord for God’s steadfast love (vv. 1–3), a series of four reports of that steadfast love in action (vv. 4–9, 10–16, 17–22, 23–32), with a reference to that love in verses 8, 15, 21, and 31, and a celebration of the Lord’s blessings (vv. 33–42). The psalm itself may be very old, and it could have been a liturgy for a festival of thanksgiving arranged by the priests of the time. The psalm praises a God who hears and answers the cries of the distressed, a God who intervenes to affect and change the course of the history so that people can experience “the good life” (Lev. 25:18) and live in freedom and peace.

The call to give thanks to the Lord (vv. 1–3) begins with a simple vocative followed by a general command that serves as an invitation: “O give thanks to the LORD . . .” (v. 1). Two reasons why the people should give thanks are stated: because God is good and because God’s steadfast love endures forever (v. 1). These two independent reasons are intertwined. For the Israelite people, God is good because God’s steadfast love led them across the Red Sea and out of oppression, and across the

Homiletical Perspective

Psalms present a particular challenge to the preacher. In the first place, they are poems. If the writer could have put the same experience into prose, it would have been written that way in the first place. Secondly, as poems, psalms have neither a theological system nor a narrative structure. They are songs, intended to be sung. They are usually given their structure by a series of parallel lines, with the second (and sometimes third) line either restating the idea in the first line with similar imagery or presenting contrasting imagery and ideas.

The lines selected for this pericope are similar to the “sampling” that takes place in the recording industry. The lines are “sampled” from the larger psalm and placed in an entirely different sound context, our sermon. So one task of the preacher is to place the sample in a context that will allow these particular verses of the psalm to have a voice. Since few, if any, of us will sing our sermon, that means these lines must be given a place within our spoken prose that will allow its ancient resonances to take root in the soil of the lives of today’s listeners.

In verses 1–7 the singer calls listeners to praise God and lifts up the reason for expressing gratitude: God’s is good. God’s love, we are told, can be counted on and lasts for all time. These phrases are so familiar that they can roll right past the listener

Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37

Theological Perspective

people raise their anguished cries. These are not just cries of unbearable pain; these are cries for help—for deliverance from adversities. For people whose worldview is theistic, this is a cry for God's help. The cry for help may take the form of wrestling with God, especially when God's response seems not to rhyme with human expectations. Human adversity, more than intellectual curiosity, provides the fertile soil for the most profound insights about God. Human adversity may present occasions for the rejection of God, or provide the soil for strengthening faith.

The history of Christianity is replete with stories of adversities and questioning God's power and goodness, but faith has been sustained and thrived through the ages because people, especially in their darkest hours of need, have experienced God's timely saving and liberating acts. Without this experience of God's saving acts in the *present*, God's saving acts in the past would not even be remembered. It is out of the experience of God's saving love that Christian faith has survived the ups and down of history, and it is out of this experience that contemporary expressions of Christian religiosity must be judged.

God, from the point of view of Psalm 107 and the experience of contemporary believers, is not indifferent to the pains and anguished hope of people. God hears the agony and cry of the whole creation. God is not the aloof and unmoved mover of the philosophers, but is within reach by human laments and supplications. If there is one central theological metaphor that tells us who God is, it is that God's very being is steadfast love. Our lectionary reading is more than an account of God's mighty power; it is a report of God's mighty acts of steadfast love. God acts with mighty compassion because God is steadfast love. God's saving act through the processes of nature is an expression of God's very being: creative steadfast love. In nature and human history God acts out of steadfast love to preserve, nourish, and bring to fulfillment the whole of creation.

There is good reason to make use of God's steadfast love as a central organizing metaphor in talking about divine providence. It seems a consistent image of the God who was revealed and embodied in Jesus, the Crucified One. Steadfast love is what Christians throughout the ages have experienced of God's providence. God's providence is manifest in God's steadfast love that preserves, accompanies, and governs the whole of creation. God's acts of creation are God's acts of providence. In creating, God's steadfast love forms a covenant with the whole

Pastoral Perspective

suffer are capable of such unrestrained praise. God is good! Let all Bobs say, "Amen!"

Those who do not know what suffering is cannot appreciate the truth of Psalm 107. Do we not all suffer, to a certain degree? I think the lectionary guts the power of this psalm by giving us just one example of suffering: physical hunger. If we read all forty-three verses, we discover suffering of every kind: those who suffer imprisonment, literally and figuratively (vv. 10–16); those who suffer physical and spiritual sickness (vv. 17–22); those who are nearly lost on a stormy sea (vv. 23–32). Some of the suffering is caused by nature and some by sin. Yet all of these people, in great distress, cry out to the Lord and are saved. As you read the psalm, somewhere in these verses you will find yourself—like it or not.

That is the real trouble with Psalm 107: we do not like it. We do not want to think of ourselves as suffering—even when we are. Because suffering seems like failure, and we want to succeed. Our Stephen ministers lay-ministry program has been floundering lately because no one wants to be a care receiver and admit they need help through a difficult time. Instead, when I suggest that someone might benefit from the help of a Stephen minister, the person usually responds, "Oh, it is not that bad. I will get through this on my own." Did they cry out to the Lord in their distress? Not so much.

Another problem we have is believing that God is really present, capable of providing help in times of trouble. American society is addicted to the myth of personal responsibility and self-reliance. We trust in our own resources and abilities and put little faith in God's capacity for deliverance. At a contentious finance committee meeting, we were discussing what to do with an unexpected gift of \$10,000. Most of the committee members wanted the money to go toward mission, but our vice-chair was adamant about putting the money into our "rainy day" fund—just in case our giving fell short. I said, "Jesus did not say anything about storing up money for a rainy day. He calls us to sell the second coat and give the money to the poor." The vice-chair turned and said, "Jesus does not pay our gas bills." I looked at him for a moment and said, "Actually, he does." Many people in our churches feel exactly like this man: faith is all well and good, but when it comes to the real issues of life, we are on our own.

Since we are far more willing to trust in human resources than divine resources, sometimes we are blind to the redeeming work of God. It is like the old joke about the priest who walks into a bar in

Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37

Exegetical Perspective

Jordan River and into the promised land. God's steadfast love sustained, guided, and nurtured them throughout their journey, even when they had forgotten their God and God's ways.

In verse 2 those who have been redeemed are called upon to attest to God's steadfast love (cf. Pss. 106:1; 118:1; 136:1). This verse may be secondary, and its immediate referent may be the people who have been liberated from exile (cf. Isa. 62:12). Such a reading is supported by verse 3, which is a clear reference to the postexilic Diaspora. What was promised in Isaiah 43:1–7 has now come to pass, which is cause for celebration. Thus the God of Israel has redeemed the people not only from affliction, oppression, and injustice, but also from exile.

Verses 4–7, the psalm's second segment, is part of a larger poetic narrative report that continues to describe God's active, steadfast love first introduced in verse 1. These verses develop the thought of verses 1–3 and join together those Israelites participating in the thanksgiving festival with all Israelites through the ages. The psalm is a communal celebration of thanksgiving, as pilgrims come together from around the world to recall God's steadfast love past and present. Verses 4–7 refer specifically to the wilderness wanderings (see, e.g., Num. 11–33). Verses 4–5 describe the hardships that some Israelites experienced as they wandered in desert wastes (v. 4). The people became physically hungry and thirsty, which, in turn, caused them to suffer spiritually: their soul fainted within them. In essence, they became dispirited (v. 5).

In the ancient world the desert was generally a barren or semibarren geographical area characterized by low rainfall. The desert constituted the "wilderness," a place of hardships, the home of dangerous wild animals (Isa. 30:6) and of demons (Isa. 34:14). The desert was a central place of learning for the Israelites. There they transgressed against their God, and there they learned through experience the reality of God's constant, compassionate, forgiving love. In the desert the Israelites learned about faith and ethics and the importance of right relationship with God and with one another. The desert was also the place of revelation, where God interacted directly with the people, as evidenced by verses 6–7.

In verses 6–7 the psalmist describes what the hungry, thirsty, dispirited people did: they cried to God, who "delivered them from their distress" (v. 6) by leading them in a straight way "until they reached an inhabited town" (v. 7). Throughout their lives, the Israelites cried out to God, and always God

Homiletical Perspective

without ever really being heard. The singer then calls for those who have been pulled out of hard spots, who have experienced the saving help of God, to tell their story and sing their song. The listeners are familiar with this exhortation; it is more of the same, when it comes to praise language.

Now that we are on our feet, swaying with our hands in the air, the singer utters a line that changes everything. The singer invites those who have been taken out of hard situations *in foreign lands* (v. 3). Wait! What does that mean? Are we including immigrants, refugees, and deportees now? Well, there goes the neighborhood! In one rhetorical turn the psalmist has turned a rather innocuous praise song into an offensive and dangerous song of freedom.

Verse 3 opens the door to those who have come from all directions, from other countries. These are no longer people who are like us. A number of years ago a group of teachers of preaching from the United States and Canada were gathered in a cathedral in a state that borders Mexico. At that time, "sanctuary churches" would welcome a single undocumented worker or family at a time. The priest refused to describe his congregation as a "sanctuary church," because 40–60 percent of the congregation were undocumented workers. This is the kind of situation for which the singer is inviting us to praise God. We are placed into a community so diverse we can hardly imagine it. A community of people who have done nothing to deserve to be included—that pretty much describes us too. Still, we are all called to praise the God who has reached out to us all.

In verse 4 some of these refugees have "wandered in desert wastes." Could that be the desert between the United States and Mexico? They were so exhausted with hunger and thirst that their very souls were ready to faint. Were they exploited by coyotes or hounded by border militia? When these totally exhausted immigrants, suffering from hunger and thirst, cry out for help, who hears them? It is the God of Israel, the same God who heard the Hebrew slaves in Egypt cry out in their misery.

Though people showed no pity toward the Hebrew slaves in their plight, the God of slaves and immigrants and refugees heard them and led them to "a city where they could settle" (v. 4 NIV). Could that be our town? Those people who put on our roofs and pave our roads and construct our McMansions? Suddenly a psalm that seemed so innocent has turned on us. We assumed that we could simply sing songs of praise to God in our nicely appointed sanctuaries and get by with it. The

Psalms 107:1–7, 33–37

Theological Perspective

of creation that it will be preserved, accompanied, guided, and empowered until its fulfillment. Seen through an organic-ecological lens, in loving creation God preserves, accompanies, and governs not externally but internally. When something thwarts creation's fulfillment, God moves with compassion, because the pain of creation is God's very own pain. When systemic forces inflict hurt, God's steadfast love takes the form of empowering the vulnerable to resist dehumanization.

For Christians, the crucified Jesus reveals the supreme embodiment of God's steadfast and liberating love. Through the lens of the Crucified One, Christians are at the outset warned away from equating the doctrine of divine providence with worldly success and security, or from the belief that nothing will harm them or their nation. God's steadfast love is not a talisman, but an assurance that, even in the midst of daily adversities and crucifixions, God's power is at work in the form of liberating love. If we are waiting for a grand denouement in which all destructive powers are banished from our sight, we may miss seeing the work of God's steadfast love. God's providence is not about manifest destiny and entitlements, but about trust and faithfulness, costly discipleship, gratitude, and thankfulness.

Blessed are those who have the eyes to see God's steadfast love at work, for they are the ones who truly can be grateful. Blessed are those who have the heart to feel God's work in the ordinary and the minute, for they are the ones who truly can sing praises to God. Our lectionary reading calls us to live lives of deep gratitude and overflowing thankfulness for God's steadfast love. If life is a gift and if all that we are and all that we have are from God, the source of life, then our primary posture in life must be one of gratefulness and thankfulness. Gratitude and thanksgiving must be our response.

ELEAZAR S. FERNANDEZ

Pastoral Perspective

northern Canada. He sits down next to a rough-looking character, who turns on the priest and says, "You're a priest, huh? Well, I don't believe in God!" The priest says, "Why is that, my son?" "Because I got lost in a snowstorm and I prayed for God to save me. I prayed and prayed and prayed, but God never did anything!" declares the man. "But my son," says the priest, "You were saved, weren't you?" "Yeah, but it was some darn Eskimo who found me." Sometimes God's redemption wears a parka.

How do we convince people that crying out to the Lord in times of distress is a sign of spiritual maturity and not weakness? The truth is that we are all suffering, because we are all sinners. Every day, we make choices that turn us away from God, which is the worst kind of suffering. No matter how hard we try, no matter how carefully we plan, no matter how capable we feel, we will all suffer. Yet once we stop pretending everything is perfect, we begin to comprehend the power of God's redeeming love. As Paul writes in Romans 8, neither storms nor prison, neither hunger nor sickness will separate us from the love of God. That is what the Bobs of the world know. When the world brings you to your knees, that is when the Lord shows up.

Indeed, God's steadfast love endures forever! Let all the redeemed say so!

SHAWNTEA MONROE

Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37

Exegetical Perspective

answered their cries (e.g., Exod. 2:23; 14:10; Num. 20:16; Deut. 26:7; Judg. 4:3; 6:6–7; 1 Sam. 12:10). One of the central themes of Psalm 107 is God's responding positively to the cries of the Israelites (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28). For Israel, God is the one who hears and answers the cries of the afflicted; God is the one who redeems. Israel's theology of God is based, more often than not, on the people's lived experience of the living God.

In verses 33–37 the psalmist extols the power of God, who exercises this divine power either to chastise the wicked (v. 34) or to assist the just in their time of need (vv. 35–37). These verses feature a series of reversals: fertile terrain becomes a wasteland, while the desert becomes a wetland (vv. 33–35); the hungry become prosperous (vv. 36–37); and the wicked are made to suffer (v. 34). The reversal of the fruitful land into a "salty waste" is a direct allusion to Sodom (Gen. 19:1–29, esp. v. 26). Oftentimes in biblical literature, the natural world plays a key role in the divine distribution of justice. When the people act wickedly, the natural world is made to suffer and cut off the people's food supply and cause them pain (e.g., Amos 4:6–10). When the people are redeemed of their unjust ways, the natural world flourishes (e.g., Isa. 35:1–4); and so do the people, who will become like a watered garden and a spring whose waters never fail (Isa. 58:11). Hence, the unjust will go hungry, and the hungry who are just will have their needs satisfied (Ps. 107:33–37).

In sum, Psalm 107:1–7, 33–37 makes clear that God hears and answers the cry of the needy and, in the course of doing so, metes out justice to those who cause affliction. For Israel, God was Lord of creation and Lord of history.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

singer reminds us that our God is the God who feeds the hungry and hears the cry of all those who are bereft.

This is the God who seeks the good of all people, not just those we define as acceptable or deserving. Verses 33–37 provide a litany of the things that God does for the earth and all who inhabit it. God has the power to do good or harm: the desert can flow with water; fertile land can become a salt marsh. Fortunately God chooses to do good, especially for those who have suffered from want or harm. The land is watered, crops grow, and those who have been cast out to wander the wastelands of the world will be drawn together in community. These sojourners will found their own village and establish farms and vineyards surrounding it.

Songs like this psalm challenge the xenophobic tendencies in every society. We fear and despise the other, simply because he or she is other. We generate numerous reasons why such fear is justified, but these reasons hold no sway with God. Among the 613 commandments of the Torah that the ancient rabbis enumerated is that we shall welcome the stranger (NRSV) and alien (NIV), because we were once strangers and aliens (Deut 10:19). We are supposed to identify with the suffering of the outsider and alleviate that suffering, rather than adding to it. Even if we do not know what it is like to wander aimlessly, to go hungry, or to be despised and rejected, at least our ancestors knew such privations.

Psalm 107 gives us one more reason to care for the dispossessed: because God hears their cry and loves them in exactly the same way God heard our ancestors' cries and loved them.

MICHAEL E. WILLIAMS

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**PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6
AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)**

Joshua 24:1–3a, 14–25

¹Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. . . .

¹⁴“Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our

Theological Perspective

In Joshua 24 the people who are becoming *yisrael*, “God-wrestlers,” make a commitment to the God of their ancestors, whom their parents have just experienced as the God of Sinai. The context for this commitment is articulated in verse 2: “Beyond the river your ancestors dwelled, from before time, Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor; they served other gods” (my trans.). Verse 2 reveals two important aspects of Israel’s identity: they are heterogeneous, and they were not always monotheists (if they are at all by this time; see v. 14).

In verse 2 God through Joshua is reminding the people whence they have come: specifically, from beyond the river Euphrates, in the Mesopotamian city of Ur in the Chaldean region. Abram/Abraham may be the ancestral father of the Israelites, but he is not an Israelite. In addition, Sarah is Abraham’s non-uterine sister; they share a father (Gen. 20:12). They are from the people whose descendants, the Babylonians, destroyed the last vestige of Abraham’s descendants’ monarchy. So then, if Abraham and Sarah are not Israelites, who is?

Verse 2 reminds the reader that Israelite identity is a constructed identity, as are all identities. This idea would become so important to successive generations that it is evoked in Passover haggadot—in the ritual telling of the

Pastoral Perspective

Today’s pericope represents a hinge between two periods of Israel’s history. The period prior to this, the period of Moses and Joshua, has been marked by liberation, wandering, and eventual conquest and occupation of the promised land. Following today’s story is Joshua’s death and its aftermath. We are told twice (at the end of Joshua [24:31] and in Judges [2:7]) that the people continue in faithfulness to the Lord throughout the time of Joshua and the time of those elders who knew Joshua. Eventually, however, the so-called chosen ones drift away from God’s covenant and do “what is evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judg. 2:11). Like a sad game of telephone, the covenant message gets more and more distorted as it gets passed from person to person, generation to generation. One is reminded of the narrative in the beginning of Exodus, in which the family of Jacob is cared for in Egypt . . . until the day inevitably comes when a pharaoh ascends to power who does not know Joseph (Exod. 1:8). The enslavement of the Hebrew people quickly follows. Taken together, Exodus 1 and Judges 2 attest that over time, people can be both victims and perpetrators of this fading of memory and its unfortunate consequences.

However, in this text, for one shining moment, the people seem to get it right. Joshua presses

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ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” ²²Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” ²⁴The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.”

²⁵So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Exegetical Perspective

The heart of the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem rests in Joshua’s demand in verse 15: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” The repeated declaration “We will serve [*na’abad*]” acts as a kind of poetic refrain (vv. 18, 21, 24), increasing in rhetorical intensity as the people respond to each of Joshua’s challenges (vv. 14–15, 19–20, 22–23). Joshua himself models their response by declaring in verse 15, “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” The repetition emphasizes the gravity and urgency of this choice and suggests a liturgical setting for the text. The verb “to serve” (*abad*) occurs fourteen times in verses 1–28, pointing to the main theme of Joshua 24: exclusive loyalty and devotion to Israel’s God. Such loyalty demands that Israel “put away” other gods (vv. 14, 23). Israel will be faced with this choice many times in the land of Canaan (e.g., Elijah at Mt. Carmel, 1 Kgs. 18:21).

However inspiring the rhetoric, these declarations of loyalty must be evaluated against the backdrop of the entire textual unit. Key verses have been omitted from this lectionary text, particularly verses 13 and 28. Verse 13 caps a historical overview of God’s dealings with Israel. This verse serves as a chilling reminder that God’s initiatives, to which the Israelites respond in loyalty, result in dispossession for the indigenous Canaanites: “I gave you a land

Homiletical Perspective

When approaching a text as familiar to Christians as this one, one may anticipate a daunting task to determine a fresh approach to preaching. However, this passage actually begs us not to pursue novelty but to embrace its familiar themes. There are several approaches one might take. I will explore two of these: radical choices and the character of God.

Radical Choices. While growing up in West Texas I spent quite a bit of time with my paternal grandparents at their farm. My grandfather was exceptionally soft spoken. On one visit, I was sharing with him that I was having a difficult time in my life and wanting to be in control. He listened as I rambled on; then he took a deep breath and simply said, “Kid, all you can control in life is your own choices.” That was all he said. He never spoke of it again, and to this day that conversation resonates clearly in my memory.

Choices are important in our lives. Our choices impact the friends we have, the careers we enter, the spouses we marry, and the places we live, among many other things. This passage is about the ultimate choice of faith and life: determining whom we will serve and whether to submit to God. The people following Joshua are serving two masters. They are clinging to the gods of old, while not fully

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exodus story to this day, quoting Deuteronomy 26:5, “A sojourning Syrian was my father . . .” (my trans.). These texts join others that articulate the complexities of Israelite identity.

The Joseph story provides genealogical history for the final two (sub)tribes counted among the twelve, Ephraim and Manasseh (see Gen. 41:50–52). Ephraim and Manasseh are Joseph’s sons, whom he fathers and raises with an Egyptian woman, Asenat. This means that two of the twelve tribes of Israel have African ancestry. In addition, the exodus narrative speaks of a large group of people other than the enslaved descendants of Joseph who leave Egypt with them and eventually become subsumed in Israel (Exod. 12:38; Num. 11:4).

The recitation of Abraham’s family history at the beginning of the story of the Shechem covenant or commitment ceremony in Joshua 24:2, in the context of the other biblical accounts of Israel’s formation, demonstrates that Israelite identity is not primarily biological, genetic, or ethnic; rather, it is chosen. Other texts speak of God’s choosing Israel, for example Ezekiel 20:5: “So says the Sovereign God, ‘In the day that I chose Israel, I raised my hand to swear to the offspring of the house of Jacob, now, I had made myself known to them in the land of Egypt, I raised my hand to swear to them, saying, I am the SOVEREIGN your God’” (my trans.). Joshua 24 speaks not of a chosen people but, rather, of the people choosing God.

The choice of the people to commit themselves to the God of Sinai is necessary because of the variety and, quite frankly, the desirability of other gods. While Jewish and Christian teaching has tended to emphasize ancient Israelite monotheism, the reality is that the Israelites were initially polytheistic, as was their founding father Abram/Abraham (Josh. 24:2, 14). The Israelites become henotheistic, choosing one god to worship without denying the existence of other gods (vv. 14–16).

While Deuteronomy 4:35 professes, “YHWH is God; there is no other,” the dominant position in the Scriptures, until the time of Isaiah’s disciples, is that there are other gods. These other gods are tempting, and the God of Israel is “jealous” of them (Josh. 24:19). (Second and Third Isaiah contain a number of classical monotheistic formulations, e.g., Isa. 44:6 NRSV: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.”) Many voices in the Scriptures of Israel repeatedly exhort the Israelites not to worship other gods. It can be reasonably inferred from these repeated instructions that heterodoxy was a real

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them repeatedly to make a commitment to fidelity and service. “*What will it be?*” asks Joshua. “*The outmoded gods of the past, or the God who holds our future?*” The people make their choice, and for a short time, everything can still seem perfect. The future is all potential; the commitments they make here can still be fulfilled. This is New Year’s Day, when the resolutions come out in full force. This is the wedding day, when the vows are lofty and heartfelt, but the hard work of marriage has yet to begin.

There are a few threads of inquiry in this story, each worth weaving into a sermon.

The Nature of Leadership. Preachers might consider the example set by Joshua in terms of leadership. First, Joshua is a living testimony that leaders can lead only as far as they themselves have been led. Leaders cannot demand action that they are not willing to take. “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (v. 15), declares Joshua, in one of the shining verses in all of Scripture. Joshua is inviting the people to participate along with him in a relationship of trust and worship of God.

Good leaders also know how to let situations ripen until just the right moment. Push the people too fast, and the resulting action will be superficial and easily forgotten. Wait too long, and the momentum dies. Joshua’s example is one of letting the tension build. Not content with a quick and easy answer, Joshua pushes back: “*Are you sure you want to do this? Are you really capable of it?*” The narrative and liturgical pressure develop until the people are almost desperate to sign on.

Hypocrisy and Integrity. Joshua tells the people, “Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve” (v. 15). In the verse that follows, Joshua presents two options: the gods beyond the River and the gods of the Amorites. Is Joshua really giving the people a choice to turn from the God of Israel? Is serving other gods an acceptable choice?

Given what follows, this seems likely a rhetorical device on the part of Joshua. He trusts that the people, not content with inferior gods, will choose Door Number One. Yet it is intriguing to reflect on Joshua’s line in the sand, especially given his later statement, “You cannot serve the LORD.” Does Joshua know what is to come—the disobedience, the prophetic calls to repentance, the exile? If so, maybe now is the time to turn back, to embrace other gods,

*Joshua 24:1–3a, 14–25***Exegetical Perspective**

on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them . . .” Covenant renewal takes place after the violent conquest (chaps. 1–12) and redistribution of Canaanite land to the Israelite tribes (chaps. 13–22). At the conclusion of the covenant ceremony (v. 28), “Joshua sent the people away, each to his inheritance” (*nachalah*; my trans.), that is, to the land acquired by conquest that had been parceled out to each tribe (13:7; 19:49). Ignoring these verses minimizes and sanitizes the displacement of the Canaanites.

Too much has been made of parallels between covenant in Joshua 24 and ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties, in which a powerful ruler promises protection to a weaker group in exchange for loyalty. Most of the parts of the treaty form are missing in Joshua 24, including an oath, God’s obligations, and specific stipulations for Israel. Though verse 25 notes that Joshua “made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem,” these ordinances are not listed in the text. The review of God’s actions in the past in verses 3a–13 (note that vv. 3b–13 are missing in the lectionary text) corresponds to the historical overview of the ruler’s dealings with the vassal in ancient treaties, but does not list God’s obligations to Israel in the present. The divine “I” occurs repeatedly—“I took,” “I gave,” “I brought,” “I sent”—making it clear that the only sensible response to such past initiatives is to choose the Lord (cf. Exod. 19:4–6). This is a trustworthy God who has repeatedly acted on Israel’s behalf (cf. Deut. 26:5–9; Pss. 78; 136).

Given both the absence of treaty elements and the centrality of dialogue in Joshua 24:1–28, it may better be viewed as a kind of public “self-obligation” prompted by Joshua’s impending death (23:1–2; 24:29–30) and Israel’s transition to life on the land. Accordingly, Joshua reminds the Israelites: “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD” (v. 22). This “covenant” (v. 25) challenges Israel with rhetorical urgency rather than with the natural phenomena of Mount Sinai (Exod. 19–24). It is not formally bilateral in nature.

Joshua presides over a more formal covenant ceremony at Mount Ebal just north of Shechem (Josh. 8:30–35), complete with an altar, the ark of the covenant (representing God’s presence), sacrifice, blessings and curses, and a public reading. This account lacks the rhetorical power of Joshua 24. Yet what Joshua writes in 24:25b (“statues and ordinances”) and in 8:32 (“a copy of the torah of Moses,” my trans.; probably the book of Deuteronomy) transcends both Moses and Joshua

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committing to YHWH (vv. 14–15). Joshua confronts the people and speaks to them plainly in verse 23: “Now then, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel” (NIV). The message for the church is clear: we cannot be wishy-washy Christians.

The 2001 movie *The Family Man* told the story of a high-powered businessman who had everything he wanted—a penthouse apartment, money to burn, models as girlfriends, and a killer car. In a movie twist, he is given a glimpse of how things would have been, had he chosen to marry his true love years earlier. In this glimpse he drives a minivan, works for his father-in-law, has several kids, and struggles to pay his mortgage. In typical Hollywood fashion, he bumbles through this alternate life until it is taken from him when the glimpse is over. What is he to do now? He can return to the wild and wonderful days of the past, or move heaven and earth to embrace a new reality by tracking down his true love to try again. Unlike other choices in life, he has empirical experience on which to base his decision. In a predictable ending, he chooses Door Number Two and takes his life down a new and unfamiliar path.

Joshua is talking about a decision that is much more important to the people of God—a radical decision that will impact their lives in ways they cannot imagine. He has already made that decision for himself and for his own household (v. 15), which is problematic for some. Making a decision for oneself is one thing, but making the decision for others, even if only for one’s household, is not something most Christians are comfortable with.¹

The key point is that Joshua has made the decision for himself—a decision based on evidence of God’s faithfulness. Now he asks for a choice to be made by others. The people respond with their own witness to God’s faithfulness (vv. 16–18). It is time to declare: Whom will you serve? Will you be people of the past, or will you embrace all that God offers in this new and glorious future? What a gift to have the freedom to choose! What a profoundly important impact that decision will have on our lives! For Israel, radical discipleship required a radical choice: to serve God, and only God, faithfully. It still does.

Who God Is. This passage offers an OT examination of the God many in today’s church are uncomfortable with—a God described as jealous and unforgiving (vv. 19–20). Most of us prefer the

1. Michael E. Williams, “The Choice,” in *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 3:195.

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problem for the framers of the Scriptures, in terms of both perception and reality.

The form of the people's confession at the end of Joshua 24:18—"YHWH . . . is our God"—demonstrates the people's commitment to the god of their choosing, as the other nations are free to make their own choices. In this narrative the notion of choosing a God among gods is not questioned, but is accepted as normative and necessary. This confession and its concomitant choice make a useful starting place for ecumenical and interreligious conversations.

In a nation that arguably no longer understands itself as a "Christian nation," and in a world in which neither Judaism nor Christianity, separately or together, accounts for the majority of religious persons, it may be good to remember the Shechem paradigm, in which a community's commitment to their God does not negate the religious identity of other believers (or, by extending the text, the rights of nonbelievers).

While there are texts in the Scriptures of Israel that denigrate the religions of other peoples, or even the religion(s) of their own ancestors (v. 14), this passage in Joshua 24 is not one of them. The choice to affirm the God of Sinai as the people's God is based on the experiences of this people and their ancestors with their God. Specifically, the God with whom Moses communed, the God who now guides Joshua, is the one who delivered the people from slavery and protected them on every step of their perilous journey. (The "great signs" that God performed on the way likely include the often-lethal punishments dispensed by God in the wilderness.)

Joshua 24 makes it clear that one does not have to belittle or demonize people (or their religions) who do not receive the book of Joshua as sacred Scripture or who receive it differently. This has implications for relationships among the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This text also has implications for relationships between religions that do not claim a common ancestry.

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and to let the chips fall where they may. This is the "Speak now, or forever hold your peace" moment.

It is not altogether clear whether God would really let them get away that easily. One would hope not. We might consider these verses a call to integrity. As the church becomes further disestablished in the culture, being Christian is no longer a requirement to be considered a respectable member of society. Joshua may be inviting us to let our Yes be Yes and our No be No. Lukewarm pew sitters, who are there because "that's just what you do," are free to go their own way.

The Power of Covenantal Identity and Baptism.

Some commentators have highlighted the call-and-response, question-and-answer structure of Joshua 24. The exchange between Joshua and the congregation has a liturgical flavor and brings to mind the questions of baptism. Joshua asks if the people are willing to renounce other gods, while we ask whether the person presented for baptism turns from sin and renounces evil and its power in the world. Joshua also makes the affirmative move, as do we: "Choose this day whom you will serve." His pronouncement, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD" (v. 22), parallels the communal nature of the baptismal questions.

Many congregations renew baptismal vows on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, still months away. There is no reason why a congregation needs to wait to restate its commitment to God. Joshua 24 provides a template for this liturgical action.

In the last verse we read, "So Joshua made a covenant with the people" (v. 25). The adverb is ambiguous. Is the covenant contingent on the people's affirmative response? Is God's favor dependent on our getting the answers right? More likely the covenant is the tangible expression of God's grace that undergirds the people as they strive, as best they can, to fulfill the commitment they have made. The covenant is not the reward, but is an assurance of the presence of God that strengthens the people for the journey ahead.

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and becomes a memorial for public memory and a touchstone for survival.

Israel pledges to serve God “in sincerity and in faithfulness” (24:14) or, more pointedly, with complete, undivided attention/integrity (*betammim*) and reliability (*‘emeth*). The character of this focused commitment (cf. Deut. 6:5; 10:12; Judg. 9:16, 19) matches the character of God in verse 19: God “is a passionate [*qana*] God” (my trans.). The emotional intensity of relationship with this God for Israel is an expression of “love” that results in obedience (Deut. 6:4–9; cf. John 14:15). God is also “holy” (*qadosh*, v. 19), concerned not only with worship but with the ethics of daily life (Exod. 20:1–23:32). Thus Israel is to “fear God” (*yare*, v. 14); the translation “revere” waters down the passionate, all-encompassing nature of the God/Israel relationship.

Joshua traces God’s actions on Israel’s behalf all the way back to Abraham (v. 3a), suggesting that the land the Israelites now possess is the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel’s ancestors, through Joshua’s own leadership (1:6). It is no coincidence that God promises land to Abraham’s offspring at Shechem (Gen. 12:7), the place to which Joshua twice calls the people for covenant renewal (8:30–35; 24:1–28). Joshua’s ancestor, Jacob, commanded his household in Shechem to “put away the foreign gods that are among you” (Gen. 35:2–4). Shechem thus functions in Israelite memory as a symbol of decision and future possibilities. The continuity between the ancestors and Joshua’s generation is strengthened by the alternation of “your ancestors” with the plural “you” (vv. 5–7; cf. Deut. 5:1–3).

The book of Joshua forms part of the Deuteronomistic History (DH) that includes the books of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings. The specific context of Joshua 24, however, is hotly debated. Edited during the Babylonian exile, DH addresses the reasons for Israel’s exile: violation of the covenant and the challenge to Davidic kingship by the northern kingdom of Israel. DH is shaped by the book of Deuteronomy, which was “found” in the temple by King Josiah in 621 BCE (2 Kgs. 22) and used to support his own territorial expansion and centralization programs. Joshua both prefigures the ideal Davidic king, Josiah, and serves as a model for him. Josiah’s political agenda was to recover Davidic lands that Israel had lost. In this light, covenant renewal becomes a highly political act.

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prettied-up version of the all-loving, all-forgiving God depicted in the responsive praise heard in churches around the globe: “God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.”

That image and the image heard in the reading of this passage are often at odds. We do not want to be confronted by a jealous or angry God. We get enough of that in our own lives. We do not want to hear that kind of imagery related to the Creator when we come into the presence of God in worship. However, this limited reading of who God was, is, and will be is about our comfort levels; it is not about the reality of God.

Importantly, the language about God being a jealous God is not referring to pettiness. Rather, it refers to God’s reaction to the people’s hatred, when what is expected of them is love and faithfulness.² The question for me and other preachers approaching this and similar texts is this: Do we preach a message about a God who is all love and goodness to help the people in the pews feel more comfortable? Or do we proclaim the clear and distinct expectations of the Lord?

I believe that preaching the truth is more important than helping people perpetuate a weakened image of God. God expects the best from humanity, as any parent does of his or her beloved offspring. Our own children need to know that they are loved and supported, but they also need to have limitations and expectations set. If there are none, how can they evaluate their behavior, choices, and life? What better story can we possibly tell than a story of high expectations *and* abundant love?

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2. A. Graeme Auld, “Holy and Jealous God,” in *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 129.

**PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6
AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalms 78:1–7

¹Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
²I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
³things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
⁴We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

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The seven verses of this reading constitute the beginning of the second longest psalm in the Psalter, shorter only than the famously long Psalm 119. While the congregation may be relieved that this psalm is not assigned to the lectionary in its entirety, the remaining verses of the psalm (vv. 8–72) provide content and context for the introductory verses that will be read. The overall theme of Psalm 78 is the faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of Israel. This psalm is commonly classified as a historical psalm; it recounts the story of God's interactions with Israel in the exodus, the wilderness wandering, the journey to the promised land, and the selection of David and the southern kingdom (Judah). We must remember, however, that the purpose of historical psalms is not simply the recitation of the past but a call to faithfulness and trust in the present. Indeed, the overarching goal of this psalm is that those who listen to it "should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God" (v. 7).

This goal is held with the hope that those who recite these verses will not have the same response as the early Israelites, who "had no faith in God, and did not trust his saving power" (v. 22), despite having witnessed God's saving power and provision. As the introduction to the psalm suggests, "the glorious deeds of the LORD" (v. 4) are to be shared

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"Hear ye, hear ye," begins the psalmist, trying to get our attention. "Quiet down!" "Listen up!" One gets the sense the writer has a difficult task to get the people to pay any attention. Many a preacher feels that way too, no doubt. In today's world people are bombarded by data points, more than our brains can possibly take in, not to mention synthesize. The culture is dominated by images, by text and Twitter sentence fragments, and yet at church the primary mode of communication and learning is still through the recounting of story.

The trick, however, in gaining attention for this story is that nothing new is going to be presented. There will not be any wild plot twists or unbelievable cliff-hangers. It is the same old story passed down from the ancestors. Because of this, it is tempting to skim on through this psalm, since we know what it says: Listen to the stories passed down by the ancestors. Listen as the mighty acts of God are retold. Listen to the giving of the law. Listen and *teach* these things to the children. Teach *them* to tell these things to the next generation.

The psalm shifts, though, telling not only *what* to do, but telling *why* people need to listen again to these well-known stories. It shifts to an explanation of why the mighty acts and the law should be rehearsed again and why our children need to be

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⁵He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
⁶that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
⁷so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments.

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The lectionary selection for this week serves as an introduction to a historical psalm that offers readers lessons from the lives of their ancestors; hence it points to the vital importance of history in shaping people's lives in the present and the future. An old Yiddish saying states, "Only the wanderer who knows where he comes from will finally know where he finds himself now and where he is going."

Within the context of worship, the psalmist calls upon the community to teach the events of the past so that the next generation, the children yet unborn, may rise up and tell these traditions to their children (v. 6). The content of this instruction is God's glorious deeds, the wonders God has done in the lives of their ancestors (v. 4). The traditions transmitted to the psalmist's generation form the basis of what needs to be taught to the next generation. Each generation thus forms part of this chain of transmission and has the obligation to pass on to the next generation the traditions of the past. Failing to do so will lead to lost traditions and inevitably an extinct religion.

As in the Deuteronomistic tradition, the ultimate purpose of God's decree and law is education. In verse 6 the next generation is to be taught so that they "might know them" (these decrees and laws of v. 5) and in turn teach their children. The

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The psalmist's references to teaching children and "generations to come" (vv. 3, 4, 5, and 6) may be the most accessible images for many churchgoers—children, parents, and grandparents. These approachable images describe a process for passing on a history whose instrumental value is to shape theological understanding and community identity. As such a description, these opening verses invite reflection on churchgoers' experiences and understanding of history. These may be organized around the relationship between a pop-cultural use of history and a scriptural conception of salvation history. They may also be organized around consideration of the roles history may play in particular congregations.

History in Popular Culture and Scripture. The psalmist implies a conception of history that may be increasingly distant from day-to-day life for many churchgoers. If history is recounting events, verses 1–7 are not themselves a history. Rather, these opening verses describe a process by which history is transmitted. With their focus on the shaping of generations, verses 1–7 also allude to the instrumental value of history: creating a particular understanding of God and a group identity in light of that understanding. Implicit in this description of process and instrumental value is the assumption that the content

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with the coming generation, with the hope that they, unlike their ancestors, will put their trust in God and remember what God has done.

Remembering, in this biblical sense, has a stronger meaning than we usually associate with it; it calls for a response in the form of concrete action. When Hannah, for example, asks God to remember her, she is asking that God not just think of her but also help her to conceive a child; when the Lord does remember her, the tangible result is the conception and birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11, 19–20). The book of Deuteronomy is full of admonitions to the people to remember the covenant God has made with them and to remember that they were once slaves themselves, the assumption being that this remembering will manifest itself as faithfulness to God and graciousness to others.

In the Lukan account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus, after giving thanks and breaking the bread, tells his disciples, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Partaking of the Eucharist is a call, not simply to think about God, but to be actively and concretely shaped and formed by the remembrance of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Biblically, remembering is supposed to be manifested in particular, tangible ways. These manifestations are a response to the graciousness and the power of God. In short, grateful obedience, or trusting steadfastness, is the response God hopes will accompany the people's remembrance of the works of God.

The centrality of the call to remember the works of God, throughout the biblical narrative and more specifically within Psalm 78, reminds us that our God is a God who acts in history. The God who is worshiped through this psalm is not simply a distant divine being or an abstract spiritual concept, but a particular God who is known through concrete, historical works and in relationship with the people to whom this God has remained faithful. As theologian and professor of music and worship John D. Witvliet writes, psalms that recount God's historical actions give "identity and specificity to the God who is addressed in prayer, and correspondingly, to the people who pray."¹ Witvliet links this to Christian worship more broadly, noting that Christian liturgy is often shaped by the rehearsing of God's actions in history.

This can be extended to the Christian life, as well, as our faith is to be rooted in the God who has made

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taught all these things. The psalmist's reasoning is simple: we do this so that we set the hope of our children in God, so that they remember God's works, so that they keep God's law in a confusing world.

The psalmist presumes the adults in the community already set their hope in God, already remember God's works, and already keep God's law. One certainly hopes so. It seems, though, that the church is at an interesting point in its history when kids know more about the stories of faith than their parents. Many a child is dropped off for Sunday school while parents schmooze around the coffeepot. Many a youth heads to youth group with her friends while her parents never set foot in the building. Many adolescents go through semester or yearlong classes of confirmation to join the church while their parents attend a one-hour new-member class.

The psalmist seems to assume the adults in the community already do those things that the psalm instructs. The psalmist assumes the adults know the wonders, glorious acts, and laws of God. Perhaps the message is focused on the children because everyone recognizes that they need instruction. Everyone gets a little more squeamish when the finger is pointed at adults who need direction. Despite any discomfort, the psalmist's agenda works only if the audience is much broader than the children. In order for faith to be passed down, the entire community needs to know the stories, to be fluent in the language, and to live in faith.

The adults and parents in the community also need to listen to the mighty acts of God, to the law, and to the wonders of God. If they are to teach them, they must first know and live them. As any good teacher can tell you, teaching someone else a concept or a story is the best way to learn it. Teaching something means that the learning of it cannot be superficial. Rather, to teach requires a very active learning, hearing again the mighty acts of God, being reminded again of the commandments for our lives, and being challenged to share these cornerstones of our faith with others, particularly the children who watch the adults as their models for how to be faithful.

As people of faith, all of us need to hear again these things, these stories from our ancestors. We need to hear them over and over until they become part of us. For there will surely be moments in our lives when we will draw upon them. They will be needed in times of trial, when the stanzas of a hymn or a well-worn Bible verse can offer some measure of comfort. They will offer moments of respite in

1. John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 20.

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ultimate goal of this educational process is that all (our generation as well as the next generation) may respond in obedience—setting our hope in God, not forgetting God’s works, and keeping God’s commandments (v. 7).

However, Psalm 78 has no qualms about reminding us that this educational task is by no means simple and straightforward. In verse 2, the content of the traditions to be taught is called a “parable” and “riddles,” which the NRSV translates “dark sayings.” It seems that the events of the past are often found to be perplexing and confusing, something to be wrestled with and figured out, as part of the act of teaching the next generation.

In fact, the historical events of the past are in need of interpretation. It is significant how the rest of Psalm 78 carefully selects events from Israel’s history that draw upon instances of God’s involvement in the lives of their ancestors, namely, God’s glorious acts of liberation, God’s provision in the wilderness, and God’s guidance through the wilderness into the promised land. Beyond the weighty decision about what one includes and what one leaves out when one turns to history, it seems that the introduction to the psalm suggests that one must also contemplate the significance of these events that have taken place in the past.

In this regard, it is significant that the content of this teaching of the next generation does not offer a romanticized view of history. The rest of Psalm 78 serves as an illustration of where people did *not* remember God’s goodness, where they did *not* set their hope in God, where they did *not* keep God’s commandments. So we see instances where the ancestors failed: the failures of the wilderness generation (vv. 12–39) and the failures of the ancestors in the Ephraimite territory (vv. 40–72).

The complexity and ambiguity embedded in history demonstrates the need for interpretation in at least two instances. First, one should keep in mind that the glorious deeds of God’s liberating the ancestors from Egypt and leading the way into the promised land are responsible for scores of dead bodies (the Egyptians, as well as the first inhabitants of the land of Canaan). The call to remember the past compels the reader also to rethink history from the other side, from the perspective of the colonized. Second, in Psalm 78 one encounters some shocking instances of God’s anger. Natural and national calamities are construed as God’s punishment, standing in sharp tension with God’s love and mercy that has found expression in God’s wondrous deeds

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passed on—the history—is composed of events and ideas that are largely independent of the preferences and perceptions of those who transmit and receive it.

In contrast, many people encounter history day to day as a subjective experience of their own creation, whose instrumental value is to satisfy a personal need, such as nostalgia. Although the possibility of mythologizing one’s individual past is perennial, two aspects of current popular culture in particular facilitate churchgoers’ experience of history as a means of self-expression: the public spaces we inhabit, and interactions with the Internet. Post-modernism as an aesthetic movement has resulted in neighborhoods, shopping centers, and downtown revitalization projects that are “a collage of vernacular traditions, local histories, particular wants, needs, fancies . . . an eclectic mix of styles and historical references.”¹ This historically eclectic style is often the backdrop for highly individualistic activities, such as shopping and being entertained. The visual and experiential message of public spaces suggests that history is a palette of references for expressing personal preferences.

Paralleling this, Internet social networking programs allow us to connect with old friends as we choose (we can block or admit them, even when they seek us out). Web sites with clips of old movies, TV shows, and commercials allow us to revisit parts of our individual pasts in a stream-of-conscious way. Like many public spaces from the past quarter century, a message of these Internet services is that history is a repository of items we can draw from for self-expression.

One way to bridge the gap between a day-to-day pop-cultural encounter with history and the conception of history implied by Psalm 78 is to draw a parallel with recurrent concerns about who tells the history of the United States, the Native Americans or the colonists’ descendants; slaves’ descendants or slave owners’ descendants. These concerns demonstrate awareness that there is content beyond preferences; awareness that history has the power to shape community identity; and awareness that history’s instrumental value is not simply personal expression, but ethical reflection.

Who tells the story can affect the extent to which we examine patterns of oppression and injustice. The conception of history the psalmist conveys works similarly. The narrative of God’s saving works, perhaps more than a civic narrative, should

1. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 67, 93.

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Godself known in particular ways and in concrete acts: the act of creation, the making of a covenant people through Abraham and his descendants, the delivery of that people in the exodus, the incarnation and inauguration of a new covenant through Jesus Christ, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the promise of Christ's return. Knowing the particular history of this particular God is vitally important for all Christians, shaping their identity as the people of God and enabling them to know and worship the God who actually is (rather than the god they might create or imagine).

Psalm 78, which depicts the God who is consistently and repeatedly faithful to God's covenant promises—despite the inconsistency and repeated failure of God's people to keep the covenant—reminds us that we worship a God who is compassionate and forgiving (v. 38a). The stories of God's interactions with creation and humanity all witness to a God who has remained faithful and loving despite our lack of faith and trust. Our rebellion was not without consequences, as the narrative of Psalm 78 indicates. Ultimately even God's choice of Jerusalem and of King David were, according to the end of this psalm, a result of Israel's faithlessness. Yet these actions indicate that even while God responded to the people's lack of trust, God did not forget God's people. Instead, God responded creatively and faithfully, as evidenced most concretely and significantly in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

As we ponder the opening words of Psalm 78 and contemplate "the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done" (v. 4), we think of God's faithful actions toward all of God's covenant people throughout history. We remember the first exodus, which brought freedom to Israel, and the second exodus, which brought freedom to all who call upon the name of Jesus Christ. We pray that all who hear this good news "should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments" (v. 7).

KRISTEN DEEDE JOHNSON

Pastoral Perspective

relationships with people suffering from Alzheimer's who cannot recall the year or their own name but who can pray the Lord's Prayer or hum "Amazing Grace." These stories and recollections are important so that our lives become populated with the images of our faith; so that when we look out over a magnificent view, our gut response is, "Thanks be to God"; so that as children share the goodies from their lunch boxes, it is not just an exercise in sharing, it is communion.

All too often, good churchgoing folks attend church out of habit. By and large we have forgotten that we come to worship *expecting* something. It is reasonable to expect hope in God to be renewed in the telling and retelling of the faith story. It is appropriate to expect recognition of how God is working now in our lives to be made clear, as the ways God has worked in the past are remembered. It is good to expect support in keeping God's commandments in a very confusing world, as God's law and deed are recounted.

What might it look like for the church family as a whole to gather with this expectation? For the children and adults to grow in faith together? What would a worship service be like that was truly welcoming of the faith of the youngest child and the eldest church member? It would not include a sermon for adults chock-full of important words. It could not include a conversation with children for the kids where the adults listen in and laugh at the funny things the children say. Perhaps the psalmist gives us a clue: tell the story of the faith. Tell the glorious acts of God, tell of God's wonders, tell of God's law. Tell the story of the faith, for everyone—young, old, and in between. Everyone loves a good story. God's Story—the one that is recounted in the glorious deeds, the wonders, the law and decrees—this is a Story we want to live.

JESSICA TATE

Psalm 78:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

of the past. Once again this tension points to the need for interpretation. A key part of education is thus to wrestle with the past in all of its complexity. In this regard it is important to note that remembering the past does not mean that one only rehashes or recites verbatim the traditions of the past. Rather, the interpretative process calls us to wrestle with these living traditions in all of their complexity and mindfully to consider these traditions in light of the challenges they continue to present.

In addition, even though Psalm 78 reveals a keen understanding of the human condition (expressed centuries later by the apostle Paul in Rom. 7:19: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”), God’s faithfulness nevertheless is said to endure and withstand the most grievous instances of the ancestors’ unfaithfulness. By its call to learn from the lessons of the past, Psalm 78 invites the reader to do better and to place his/her hope in a God who will stick with people despite their failures. Importantly, the reference at the end of this long psalm points to the promise of the enduring covenant with King David and Mount Zion (vv. 69–70).

Finally, deeply embedded in Psalm 78 are the intertwined structures of memory and hope; the hope for the future is rooted in the memory of past. It is significant that this creative actualization of history takes place in the context of worship. Offering a link with generations past, people to this day gather together in worship to remember God’s continuing involvement in their lives. This communal act of remembering forms the basis for the community’s hope in a God who has proven faithful in the past and who continues to be faithful.

L. JULIANA CLAASSENS

Homiletical Perspective

inform and shape community identity and be the occasion for ethical reflection.

The Value of History in Particular Congregations.

The psalmist suggests that transmitting history shapes theological understanding, forms communal identity, and invites reflection on the differing roles history can play in a particular congregation, depending on its age (was it founded in 1670 or 1970?), as well as the ages and lifestyles of those who compose it.

For a long-established congregation—whether its members are old or young, transient or longtime community members—the psalmist’s attention to the process of transmitting salvation history can be a reminder of the importance of evangelism and teaching. Established congregations sometimes give most of their attention to endowments and antique properties. Psalm 78 indicates that a congregation’s continued life is not based on beautifully maintained historical buildings. It continues to live because its members tell the story of God’s saving works to other people.

Many congregations face the tension between maintaining beloved community customs and updating practices to attract new (often younger) members. The psalmist’s words are relevant to this tension: “I will open my mouth in a parable” (v. 2). A parable teaches something, such as a change in behavior. The psalmist makes clear that recalling God’s works is not simply “going down memory lane.” Recalling God’s works informs and transforms. Similarly, a congregation’s reflection on its own history cannot simply be an effort to relive or reproduce the past. Psalm 78 suggests that a congregation’s reflections on its own particular story should be a learning experience whose goal is not recapitulation, but transformation.

Examining the value of shared story is also important for newer congregations with many young members, or congregations whose members frequently transition in and out. Psalm 78 can be the occasion to focus on the importance of tradition for shaping self-identity in relation to God. The Christian community narrative is both universal and portable. It can be a constant in the otherwise changing life patterns of churchgoers. This psalm also invites reflection on the need for intergenerational dialogue within congregations. In the effort continually to attract “young families,” congregations may lose sight of the important evangelical role older members can play. Their experiences allow them powerfully to relay the story of God’s saving works.

HAYWOOD SPANGLER

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**PROPER 28 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 13
AND NOVEMBER 19 INCLUSIVE)**

Judges 4:1–7

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died.

²So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim.

³Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

⁴At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.

⁵She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. ⁶She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

Theological Perspective

This passage represents the only pericope from Judges included in the Revised Common Lectionary. During the Sundays after Pentecost in Year A, the lectionary gives the option of semicontinuous readings from Genesis through Judges, ending with this selection, which is the last proper before Christ the King. The lectionary cycle thus creates a particular interpretive context for the story of Deborah, Barak, and the Canaanites. Specifically, having traced the biblical story from creation through sin, election, enslavement, exodus, Sinai, and conquest, the Deborah narrative closes out this lectionary cycle by giving us a glimpse of the period of the judges, a time marked by persistent cycles of disobedience and deliverance.

While many of the stories in Judges emphasize the raising up of a strong and faithful leader to deliver the people, the overall effect of the book is to display a futile cycle in which every deliverance is followed by a return to idolatry, sin, and injustice (see 2:11–19). The book presents us with a downward spiral into moral anarchy, ending with the horrific tale of the Levite's concubine. It is a sobering end to this Year A cycle, precisely because, having traced Israel's journey to the land, we now see their inability to inhabit the land in faithful ways that exhibit the social vision of Torah.

Pastoral Perspective

The period of the judges takes place after the death of Moses and Joshua, and before Saul is anointed the first king. Even when the Israelites had Moses to lead them, they continually forgot the Lord; perhaps we should not be surprised when we encounter this repetitious formula in Judges: "The Israelites [again] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD . . . and the LORD [gave, sold] them into the hand of . . ." (e.g., 3:7–8; 4:1–2; 6:1; 10:6–7; 13:1). Like the stories of "murmuring" in the wilderness, this refrain may cause listeners to wonder, *will they never learn?* The task of the pastor is to help members of the present-day congregation recognize themselves in this wayward people.

If we use our imagination, we can see how tempting it would have been for the Israelites to assimilate to the culture of the people who lived in the land. After all, Israel had been journeying for a long time in the barren wilderness, and here they were, finally, in a land of milk and honey. Life was good. So, they made love, not war; they intermarried with the indigenous people and adopted their ways. A nomadic people settling in a rich agricultural land needed to learn how to make a living; and along with these skills, they learned to worship the Baals and Astartes, the gods of rain and storm, fertility and harvest, that were so much a part of the agricultural

Judges 4:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

Today's lectionary passage introduces Deborah, who was a prophetess and a judge. The period of the judges was the time after the death of Moses and Joshua and before there was a king over Israel. During this time in Israel's life as a new nation, chaos reigned. We can imagine how tempting it would be for the Israelites, who are new to this land, to assimilate to the culture of the people who lived there. Over the generations, they intermarried with the indigenous people and adopted their ways. As the book of Judges tells it, the Israelites abandoned the Lord and began to worship other gods, the Baals and Astartes of the Canaanites. Judges explains that because of this apostasy, the Lord allowed their enemies to defeat them again and again (2:11–15). However, the Lord also raised up leaders, called judges, to deliver the people from those who subdued them; but when each judge died, the Israelites would "relapse and behave worse than their ancestors" (2:19), worshiping other gods (2:12–23). Each time, God would raise up another leader: Othniel (3:7–11), Ehud (3:12–30), Shamgar (3:31), and now Deborah (4:4).

In Judges 4:1–7, the biblical narrator begins Deborah's story with the statement "the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died" (v. 1). Ehud, the son of Gera, a

Homiletical Perspective

The homilist who chooses to address this passage in relation to the assigned reading from Matthew (25:14–30), the parable of the Talents, will most likely want to focus on the role of a judge or the relationship of judgment to discernment. The homilist might instead want to address this passage in its own right, which would mean seeing it as prefatory to the battle of Megiddo and as descriptive of the relationship of YHWH to the tribes of Israel. A third possibility for the preacher lies in starting with this passage for a reflection on changing social norms or mores, with the changing societal roles of women as example and exhibit.

Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel (v. 4). Deborah is listed as the fourth judge of Israel. In common with other judges, she was a charismatic rather than dynastic leader, meaning she did not inherit her position but emerged as a leader. A judge was certainly a person who made decisions in legal disputes, and Deborah did this, the story goes, from under her palm tree. However, a judge was more than an arbiter of disputes. A judge would call the people to military action and would frequently lead them into battle, as Deborah was to do at Megiddo. It is possible that a judge's role in arbitration flowed from her wisdom and prowess in battle. A judge was more like a ruler

Judges 4:1–7

Theological Perspective

Alongside this narrative cycle of sin and deliverance, there is a central theme that weaves its way through Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). The moral chaos of this period in Israel’s life is attributed to the lack of a strong leader; thus the book of Judges provides a kind of apology for the rise of kingship in 1 Samuel. The justification for centralized rule comes from the observation that doing “what was right in their own eyes” led the Israelites into habits of unfaithfulness and political instability.

Of course, we today might be inclined to think that “doing what is right in one’s own eyes” is a recipe for a healthy, democratic, laissez-faire society. Having given up on adjudicating a common good, we settle for a politics in which each person chooses his or her own good, leaving moral discourse effectively privatized. If the book of Judges has a warning for us, it is that “right in one’s own eyes” is a recipe for anarchy, survival of the fittest, a moral free-for-all.

What is interesting is that the Deuteronomistic tradition suggests that the solution to the moral chaos of Judges is a king, someone to enforce moral norms. However, as we see in the Year B cycle of the Old Testament readings, the monarchy proves to be equally unable to lead the people to faithful living. Rather, giving the king absolute power of moral and political judgment amounts to doing what is right in *someone else’s* eyes. The king’s eyes prove just as fallible as those of the average Israelite, and so the kingship ultimately fails, resulting in exile.

The overall narrative makes clear that what is needed is not just the *singular* vision of the king but the *transformed* vision of the entire community. The Israelites need eyes that can see. They need a vision transformed by God’s vision, conformed to the justice of Torah. Like them, we need eyes to see what “right” looks like, so that seeing what is right we may pursue what is good. The problem in Judges, it turns out, is really not that they do “what was right in their own eyes” but that their own eyes cannot see what is right.

In the particular story of Deborah and Barak we see one moment in that overarching narrative. The passage begins in the typical Judges pattern; the Israelites do what is wrong “in the sight of the LORD” (v. 1). Note again the image of sight; it is “the sight of the LORD” that matters and judges. Having done evil, the Israelites are handed over to their enemies. Throughout the stories of Israel’s history, divine judgment often takes the form of “handing

Pastoral Perspective

life (Judg. 2:11–15). For some, the thundering God of Sinai became somewhat remote in comparison to the storm god Baal.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can admit that we too live by the values of the culture in which we live. We are a tolerant people. We want to fit in. The “other gods” we worship are metaphorical: we are persuaded that we are *entitled* to increasing wealth, true love, perfect health, beauty, success, and happiness, and we pursue those goals single-mindedly. What is so wrong about wanting to take part in “the good life” all around us?

After helping the congregation come to terms with its similarities to the Israelites, the pastor will need to tread lightly when interpreting the consequences. The book of Judges explains that because of Israel’s apostasy, the Lord allowed their enemies to defeat them again and again (Judg. 2:11–15). How often do suffering people in our congregations wonder, “What have I done to deserve this?” The pastor needs to be sensitive to the issues of theodicy in this story; perhaps the calamities that befall Israel are the narrator’s means of explaining why bad things happen, while maintaining God’s superiority over other gods; it must be Israel’s punishment. The pastor might explore these questions: Is suffering divine punishment? What are the consequences of our sin? How do we bring suffering upon ourselves?

Fortunately, just as God did in Egypt and in the wilderness, God hears the people and redeems them. Each time the people cry out, God raises up leaders to deliver them: Othniel (3:7–11), Ehud (3:12–30), Shamgar (3:31), and, in today’s narrative, Deborah (4:4). Deborah is portrayed as a woman of great wisdom and leadership, a prophet *and* a judge. The story of Deborah is an opportunity for extolling the leadership of both women and men in the church. We might think particularly of women throughout history who have had vision and courage. God raises up leaders in our time and place as well. Our task is to listen to the myriad voices trying to get our attention and discern which we will follow, then pray for them and support their efforts.

As today’s passage concludes, Deborah summons Barak and tells him that the Lord will give them victory over Jabon and Sisera. The story is much richer if we continue past the assigned passage, to 4:8 and following. Barak says he will go only if Deborah will go with him. Deborah agrees, but tells him that the credit for the victory will go to a woman (4:8–10). The hearers likely will assume that

Judges 4:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

Benjaminite, was the second judge of Israel. He is noted for tricking the Moabite king Eglon and then assassinating Eglon in his own chamber. Ehud managed to escape the crime scene and then, having ended the life the Moabite king, raised up an army in Israel that, under his command, attacked and annihilated the Moabite troops at the Jordan River. Such a deed brought eighty years of peace to the people in the region. The Israelites fell prey to transgression after Ehud died, and the stage was set for Deborah.

The biblical narrator provides a simple yet rich description of Deborah. She is a prophetess, one chosen by God to make known God's thoughts and ways to the people, to expose injustice, and to offer words of comfort and hope to those suffering from injustice. In addition to being a prophetess, Deborah is also a judge. Her duty is to save the Israelites from their enemies and to preserve domestic relationships and peace. As a judge, Deborah is responsible for dispensing impartial justice, for protecting the widow, orphan, and stranger (Deut. 24:17), and for maintaining a certain sense of objectivity (Exod. 23:2–3). In her position, she is forbidden to take bribes (Deut. 16:19). Thus Deborah is a charismatic person, gifted and wise. She practices her vocation in the hill country of Ephraim between Ramah and Bethel (v. 5).

Because of the Israelites' transgression, God chastises the people by selling them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigns in Hazor (v. 2). Hazor was an ancient Canaanite city located at the southwest corner of the Huleh Plain, just north of the Sea of Galilee. Under the hand of King Jabin, the Israelites are oppressed for some twenty years. The Israelites live in fear because the Canaanites, under the command of Sisera, have nine hundred chariots of iron (4:13). Not until the late eleventh century BCE, around the time of King David, do the Israelites begin to use chariots. Like their ancestors who cried out to God from the midst of slavery (Exod. 2:23–25), the Israelites cry aloud to God. Even though they have transgressed, God remains compassionate toward the wayward Israelites.

God raises up Deborah, who with the help of Barak (and later a woman named Jael) successfully subdues Jabin's forces (Judg. 4:12–24). These characters will put an end to Sisera and King Jabin, and by doing so, they will set God's people free once again. Sisera in particular embodies for the Israelites the hated Canaanite forces; his defeat and death will bring a welcomed respite.

Homiletical Perspective

than the modern word implies, and was generally a person of authority recognized beyond the limits of any particular tribe. There is, nonetheless, a connection between this ancient judgment and the kind of discernment called for in the parable of the Talents, where judgment requires both imagination and courage, a certain capacity to be shrewd (Luke 14:31–33), and a willingness to risk.

A second option for the preacher is to address the specific story of Deborah. It is told in two forms: a poetic version, the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5), thought to be close to contemporaneous with the events described, and a Deuteronomic prose version, composed much later (Judg. 4), which appears to conflate some of the events of Megiddo with another, later story. The preacher would do well to avoid addressing the textual confusions and conflations (such as whether or not palm trees grew in the region in which Deborah called the people to battle) and focus instead on her proclamation of God's promise to be with Barak in battle against Sisera and the Canaanite army.

The significance of their victory is seen in the might of YHWH, who will allow no enemies to stand against Israel. A raging storm turned the ground to mud, and the immobilized Canaanites were defeated in the mire. This same religious imagination gave rise to the picture of a final decisive battle at the end of history, which we know as the Hill of Megiddo or Armageddon. While the Song of Deborah and the whole period of the judges reflect YHWH as a thoroughly tribal deity, the preacher can enjoy the themes of God's covenant fidelity to Israel, especially to the tribes who heard Deborah's call and joined battle, and God's hand at work in the events of history. Clearly, the significance of the story for the original composer of Deborah's song and for the Deuteronomist raises questions about whether and how God is perceived to be at work in history, as well as the morality of war, issues the preacher may need to tackle.

Third, the homilist might legitimately take the tack of noting that the leadership of a woman as prophetess and judge was not considered remarkable in itself, nor was the reality of women playing a role in battle. Over the course of history, attitudes toward the roles of women have varied greatly, with change in any direction leading to significant resistance. Social change might be related homiletically to a changing understanding of God and the particular relationship Israel enjoys with YHWH, along with an expanding understanding of the role of Israel in history.

Judges 4:1–7

Theological Perspective

over,” withdrawing protection in the face of Israel’s unfaithfulness. It is as if God determines not to continue to maintain a safe space for evil by handing the people over to the consequence of sin.

The story reiterates the formulaic pattern of Judges when the Israelites cry out for help. God hears their cry and raises up Deborah to judge and save them. It is worth noting that Israel’s deliverance comes not simply through raising up a strong warrior, but through raising up a judge. It is in the truth telling of judgment that Israel is made able to “see” itself rightly. Of course, there is also political, military deliverance, but even here the deliverance comes in a way that is not foreseen, and requires a transformed sight. Deborah tells Barak that God will deliver Sisera, a Canaanite general, into his hand. What we do not know at this point is that it will not be Barak who slays Sisera, but rather Jael, a Kenite. Despite all the thousands of troops arrayed for Israel’s deliverance, it is the hand of a foreign woman that delivers God’s people.

Precisely because God’s deliverance is often surprising, we need eyes to see where God is at work. As our eyes are transformed and as our judgments are honed, we come closer to the place where there is no longer a gap between “doing what is right in our own eyes” (Judg. 17:6; 21:25) and doing what is good “in the sight of the LORD” (v. 1).

SCOTT BADER-SAYE

Pastoral Perspective

Deborah is speaking of herself. God throws Sisera’s army into a panic, and the Israelites are victorious (4:11–16). Once again, the narrator is expressing God’s sovereignty over all other gods, but it is not necessary for us to interpret this victory to mean that God always is on our side, that God always gives us what we want, or that we are capable of discerning what “victory” may mean in a given situation.

The battle is over, but the story is not yet finished. General Sisera escapes the slaughter and is on the lam (4:17). A woman named Jael persuades Sisera to come into her tent, where she presumably will hide him from his pursuers. She gives him milk to drink and covers him, actions that connote a protective, almost motherly touch (some interpreters, reading Judg. 5:24–27, also see seduction). When he is soundly asleep, Jael takes a tent stake and drives it through his temple, crushing his skull (4:17–21; 5:24–27). Deborah’s prophecy is fulfilled: a woman gets the credit for defeating Sisera, but it is Jael, not Deborah, who is celebrated in the victory song that Deborah sings. Deborah, respected prophet and judge, sets things in motion, but an unknown, and probably non-Israelite, woman finishes the job.

Jael’s obscurity and gender are the very reasons she succeeds; Sisera does not suspect her. While some hearers may be uncomfortable with Jael’s deceit (and grisly violence committed by a woman¹), Jael reminds us that in the biblical tradition it is often the weak and cunning who prevail over the strong (e.g., the story of Jacob), and that unlikely people can be empowered with the courage, passion, conviction, and strength to make a difference.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

1. See also Judith’s beheading of Holofernes (Jdt. 13:1–10). We are not so alarmed when David sinks a stone into Goliath’s forehead (like Jael’s tent peg) and then beheads him with his own sword (like Judith) in 1 Sam. 17:49–51.

Judges 4:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

In verses 6–7 the divine plan to assist the oppressed Israelites unfolds. Deborah sends for Barak, son of Abinoam from Kadesh in Naphtali. Barak says he will not go unless she accompanies him, and she agrees to do so (vv. 8–9). Deborah delivers a divine proclamation that Barak is to take position at Mount Tabor and bring with him ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun (v. 6). (The tribe of Naphtali was known for its military and leadership capabilities, and Zebulun was hailed for its military strength and for its exceptional courage.) Mount Tabor, an isolated mountain with steep slopes, was located in the northeast part of the plain of Esdraelon. The men recruited by Barak meet at Mount Tabor, which provides an excellent view of the valley.

Barak is to meet Sisera by the Wadi Kishon, and there Sisera will be delivered into Barak's hand (v. 7)—although later in the narrative (which this lectionary passage does not cover), it will not be Barak but a woman named Jael who will actually defeat Sisera (4:17–22), fulfilling Deborah's words that the victory will belong not to Barak but to a woman (4:9). Even though the lectionary passage ends before the defeat of Sisera is narrated, this second section of Judges 4:1–7 prepares readers and listeners for the battle to be waged, a victory to be won, and freedom to be achieved. Thus the God of Israel continues to be "Lord of history," whose Spirit works through humanity and the human condition to bring forth justice and to establish peace in the land.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

The story of Deborah need not point only toward changes in the status of women over time, but could also lead to a sermon about how we address other changes, such as race and racial politics, our responses to the claims of GLBTQ communities, and our attitudes toward Muslims. Two caveats for preachers who choose this path: First, beware of lumping all such issues together in one sermon. An attempt, for example, to deal with both racial change and the role of women will tend to undermine what we say about either, by deflecting the attention of the congregation. This is not unlike what can happen when we address the stewardship of time alongside the stewardship of money, where some will grasp at the emphasis on time as a way of avoiding whatever issues they may have in being faithful with the money that is entrusted to their care.

Second, harrumphing about issues without raising the existential and spiritual challenges inherent in them for a congregation may be cathartic in some way for the preacher, but will rarely serve that function for a congregation. Following Deborah, as we navigate societal change or otherwise do battle with the demons of the day, we are more likely to be heard if we can point to God's fidelity in the past as token and assurance of God's fidelity in the future and ultimate victory over evil in all its forms.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

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PROPER 29 (REIGN OF CHRIST)

Psalms 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the LORD is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵For the LORD is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Theological Perspective

The structure of this classic psalm of praise suggests a back-and-forth reciprocity between God's blessing and our response. The psalm opens in verses 1–2 by telling us *that* we should praise: “make a joyful noise . . . worship the LORD . . . come . . . with singing.” Verse 3, in turn, tells us *why* we should praise: “the LORD is God,” that is, the Lord created us and we belong to God. Verse 4 again calls us to praise: “enter his gates . . . praise . . . give thanks . . . bless his name.” Again, verse 5 tells us *why*: “the LORD is good,” that is, the God who created us also loves and remains faithful to us. The parallelism of the psalm makes for compelling poetry. The movement from verses 1–2 to verse 3 is paralleled in the movement between verses 4 and 5.

The movement of the psalm, moreover, invites theological reflection on the nature of praise, the goodness of God, and the ways in which our praise draws us into reciprocal blessing. In other words, certain key questions emerge: What is praise? Why should we praise? What constitutes the nature and goodness of God that makes God praiseworthy?

The call to praise may seem at first odd or even troubling. Does God really need our praise? Why should we praise someone who commands it of us? In answer, we might say that to praise God is not to capitulate to an external demand for acclaim

Pastoral Perspective

Traditional or contemporary praise is central to both Jewish and Christian worship. The word “praise” has become very popular in Christian circles in recent years. In many congregations there is Praise Worship planned by a Praise Team and featuring a Praise Band. In more formal worship settings we hear the strains of a doxology, sung to either “Old Hundredth” or some more recent tune.

Yet when congregation members leave the church, the word “praise” takes on a different, less religious connotation. We are counseled to praise our children, to give them positive reinforcement. Some think that this technique is overused, that praise used extravagantly and unrelated to actual achievement leads to low self-esteem. Others suggest that an overemphasis on praise is insufficient to help people navigate a life filled with illness, death, broken relationships, and loss of jobs—not to mention earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, robbery, rape, personal violence, and war. What we really need, some would say, is a language with which to mourn, to grieve, to lament. The pain that runs rampant through the world calls for an idiom more brutally honest about the ways of the world than praise. At the very least, there needs to be a way to cry out to God about the injustice that seems to be woven into the very fabric of the powers and principalities of this world.

Psalm 100

Exegetical Perspective

This liturgical poem is constructed as a song of thanksgiving that draws the believing community to God in faith. The psalm seems simple enough: believers are to worship the God who made them, but it is artistically wrought to invite worshipers into the deep interrelations among Israel's praise, the response of creation, and God's covenant goodness for all generations.

The psalm opens with a command to "all the earth" to praise YHWH. It is chiefly Judeans who would enter the gates of the Jerusalem temple to praise the Lord (v. 4), but inhabitants of the whole earth are in view here. Worshipers are invited to conceive of God's praiseworthiness along two axes simultaneously: the Lord whose name was revealed to Moses at the burning bush merits Israel's praise, but this same Lord is the God to whom all peoples should sing praises. The Temple Mount is envisioned as a sacred place to which will stream worshipers from all nations (Isa. 2:1–4//Mic. 4:1–4; Ps. 96:7–8). From the very first line of Psalm 100, Israel is invited to see its particular acts of praise as witness and invitation to all peoples.

A yet more expansive meaning to "all the earth" may resonate here. Israel's hymnic tradition offers that the presence of God causes creation to convulse with fear and joy: the earth quakes and the clouds

Homiletical Perspective

It is unlikely that a preacher will elect to make Psalm 100 or *Jubilate Deo* the centerpiece of a sermon on the last Sunday of the Christian year, which is increasingly marked as a celebration of the reign of Christ and recognized as such in the Revised Common Lectionary. Nevertheless this psalm is associated with times of celebration and thanksgiving, including coronations. It is a reminder of the steadfast love that endures forever and is the source of our life. It is also related in some traditions to daily prayer and the sanctification of time. Last, in a reflection on the nature of Christ's reign, a consideration of the shepherd-king image might be in order. Any of these themes can be of service to a preacher on this occasion.

From its origins as a psalm, particularly associated with thank offerings in the worship of the temple, to its familiarity from the sixteenth-century hymn tune known as "Old Hundredth," first used in an early edition of the *Genevan Psalter*, Psalm 100 has been associated with times of great joy. The now-familiar setting arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams was a key element in the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953. The thanksgiving of the temple liturgy is thought to have been especially associated with thanking God for deliverance from danger of death. In a similar spirit, by custom many

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Theological Perspective

but, rather, to find our true delight in voicing our appreciation of divine beauty. C. S. Lewis gives us some helpful insight when he writes, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”¹ In other words, it belongs to the nature of enjoyment that we speak and share our delight. To refrain from praising God would be like refraining from applause after a magnificent concert or like withholding adoration from one’s beloved.

The impulse to praise finds expression in pop culture through the monologues that constitute the turning point in many a romantic comedy. For instance, in the closing moments of *When Harry Met Sally*, Harry finally voices his love for Sally, which has been building throughout the film. He loves that she gets cold when it is seventy degrees outside. He loves that it takes her an hour and half to order a sandwich. He loves how she gets a little crinkle over her nose when she is looking at him as if he is nuts. He loves that after spending a day with her, he can still smell her perfume on his clothes, and that she is the last person he wants to talk to before he goes to sleep.² While Harry’s “I-love-the-following-quirky-things-about-you” speech is now a standard part of the romantic comedy genre, its appeal lies in the fact that he is saying, in essence, “I see you, I notice you, I am captivated by the many small ways you are lovable, and I cannot but praise you.” Praise is the natural consummation of delight; it is the natural human response to the presence of beauty.

We praise God because of who God is (“Know that the LORD is God,” says the psalmist). To praise God as God is not simply to acknowledge that God is powerful, sovereign, or omnipotent, but to acknowledge that God cares for us as a shepherd for his or her sheep. Praise does not follow from divine power but from divine love, which, importantly, suggests that our praise is in no way coerced. To praise God is more like catching one’s breath at the visage of a beautiful sunset than like bowing before one who demands submission. It is a response to love.

We praise God because of what God does (“For the LORD is good,” says the psalmist). To know that God is good is to know that all the good we detect in this world has its source and destiny in God. To know this means that we praise God whenever we

Pastoral Perspective

Yet here we have Psalm 100, as pure a song of praise as has ever been sung. It is a call for praise from the entire community of nations, from all the earth. The words “gladness,” “singing,” “thanksgiving,” and “praise” lead all the people and creatures of the earth in this hymn of gratitude. This call to speak from grateful hearts is never linked with abundant crops, or numerous children, or victory in battle, or good health. The source of praise in Psalm 100 is not anything God had done; rather, it is rooted in who God is and who we are in relationship to God.

Too often in worship, songs of praise are specifically linked to some benefit that the person or congregation has received from God—especially the results that are most appreciated by church judicatories, such as membership, worship attendance, and giving. We praise God because of the beneficial circumstances of our lives, at least those circumstances we are willing to attribute to God’s favor. When things go well, we praise. When things do not go so well, we lament—or, more often, complain.

Psalm 100 shifts the ground on praise by rooting it in the nature of God, rather than in the circumstances of our lives. The rationale for praise in verse 3 hearkens back to creation. We praise God because we were created by God. The second line of verse 3 has two possible interpretations. One (“and not we ourselves”) provides a contrast, by reminding us that we are not self-made people, no matter how desperately we cling to that fiction. We did not make ourselves; we are a creation of divine speech and a divine hand. The other parallel statement (“and we are his”) provides a confirmation that, since God made us, we belong to God. Though the rabbis and the translators of the NRSV chose the latter of the two, both provide a much needed corrective to the idea that our praise depends on our circumstances.

The third line of verse 3 specifies the relationship between those who are called to praise and God by employing a common metaphor. God is a shepherd, and we are the sheep entrusted to that shepherd’s care. While this same shepherd metaphor was also sometimes applied biblically to political leaders, in those cases there were clearly mixed results. Some of those leaders were good shepherds and others cared only for themselves and their own power and prosperity while they neglected the welfare of the sheep. With God, however, there is no question that the shepherd has the best interests of the sheep at heart, even when the circumstances of their lives seem to indicate otherwise.

1. C. S. Lewis, “A Word about Praising,” in *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 95.

2. *When Harry Met Sally*, DVD, directed by Rob Reiner (Hollywood, CA: MGM, 1989).

Psalm 100

Exegetical Perspective

pour down water (Ps. 68:8), the trees of the forest whirl (Ps. 29:9), the ocean waves clap their hands (Ps. 98:8). So the opening imperative of Psalm 100 may be heard as an invitation to all nations, but further, this psalm may encourage Israel to understand its worship as participation in the joyful response of all creation to YHWH.

In verse 2, the language of “serving” and “coming before his presence” commands Israel to enact its praise liturgically. Believers are brought into the sanctuary of God to “know,” to recognize and affirm, that YHWH is God (v. 3). The emphatic Hebrew syntax—“know that as for YHWH, *He* is God”—dismisses any misunderstanding: the true Sovereign is the Lord who has called Israel and who reigns over all (Pss. 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1).

The next phrase enjoys a fascinating double meaning in interpretive tradition, reflecting scribal variation of a single consonant in the Hebrew text. “It is he who has made us” is clear, but what follows may be rendered either as “and not we ourselves” (so the Septuagint, following the original Hebrew consonantal text) or “and we are his” (so ancient Aramaic tradition, following a very old correction of the Hebrew). While the reading “and not we ourselves” deepens the psalmist’s assent to God as Creator, it is problematic: nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures is it suggested that people might think they had created themselves. Scripture inveighs against idolatry (worship of another god), syncretism (any illegitimate blending of disparate traditions that blurs the distinctiveness of YHWH), cynicism (“the LORD does not see,” Ps. 94:7), and lack of belief (“Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God,’” Pss. 14:1; 53:1).

For Psalm 100 to suggest that people acclaim God as Creator, over against themselves as putative creators, is just odd. In light of Psalm 95:6–7, many interpreters argue that the corrected version is the better text: “It is he who has made us, and we are his.” Nevertheless, the original consonantal reading, “and not we ourselves,” is preserved in ancient tradition and in translations that still have currency in some worshiping communities today. We may allow that it speaks an incisive word to those who are tempted to make an idol out of their own economic power, social status, or autonomy.

The “sheep” metaphor in the last line of verse 3 underlines that believers are God’s own flock, something claimed by king and prophet alike (Ps. 23; Ezek. 34). We may discern a subtle resonance with “all the earth” from the psalm’s opening line:

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monarchs are neither crowned nor enthroned for some time following the death of their predecessor, for such joy is considered inappropriate to the proper observance of mourning.

A consideration of the reign of Christ might well lead to a consideration of holy joy, particularly in relation to the role of Christ in protecting us from danger. The dangers from which we are properly protected, of course, are not the evident dangers of earthquake and flood, plague, pestilence, and famine. If we expect God to protect us from such things and give thanks for that protection, then we must also acknowledge that we worship a capricious God who does not offer such protection to everybody. The dangers from which we are protected—and protection from which is the source of our joy under the reign of Christ—are the real dangers of breaking faith with the ground and source of our being, the Love that made us for Love.

That Love is the “steadfast love” of our psalm (v. 5), the love that endures forever as God’s faithfulness to all generations. This is the love first revealed in creation, for it is God who made us and we belong to God (v. 3). Whether a preacher tends to ground her or his theology of creation in its “givenness”—such as we find in most Wisdom literature, including the Psalms—or in the original blessing of Eden before the fall, or in both, it is this creation that has, in the words of Paul, been “groaning in labor pains” (Rom. 8:22) and is being brought to its fulfillment under the reign of Christ. In this connection a preacher may wish to consider themes of the stewardship of creation or the content of our reasonable and holy hope of a kind that does not disappoint us (Rom. 5:5).

A celebration of the reign of Christ necessarily raises the question of linear time or history. If a preacher decides to address whether and to what extent our future hope is already accessible in the present and revealed in the past, Psalm 100 can be of service. In the Gospels the reign of Christ (the kingdom of God) is regularly affirmed as near (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15) and declared to be within or among us (Luke 17:21). Our psalm not only points to the fidelity of God in past, present, and future (v. 5), but also suggests linear time in the image of a journey as we enter into the presence of God with singing (v. 2) and enter the gates of God with thanksgiving and the courts of God with praise (v. 4). This aspect of the psalm has led it to be used as an invitational song in Morning Prayer of the Anglican tradition, as part of many entrance rites in

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rejoice in the good. Seen in this way, the moral life—our attempt to live the good—is simply an extended act of praise, conforming our lives to the beauty of goodness. Our lives answer to God’s goodness just as our praise answers to God’s glory. In worship we learn to bend our praise toward its true object and so bend our lives toward their true goal.

The Westminster Confession tells us that the chief goal of humankind is to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” If what we have said about praise is right, glorifying and enjoying are the same thing. Giving glory and praise to God is precisely to enjoy God fully. Understood in this way, the Reformed theology of the Westminster Catechism seems not so far from the Catholic theology of Thomas Aquinas, who asks us to imagine “beatific vision” as the consummation of all things. In each case, praise, beauty, and enjoyment combine to suggest a glimpse of our highest good, our participation in God. When we praise and enjoy the supremely beautiful, we are not content simply to remain spectators. We wish, ultimately, to participate in the beauty. We wish not just to hear the beautiful music but to play it or somehow to enter into it, so that the music pulses through us. We desire to unite with what we love and to become one with what we praise. We praise God so that finally, at our end, we might melt into the object of our delight, entering into the eternal dance of love that is the life of the Trinity.

SCOTT BADER-SAYE

Pastoral Perspective

The final verse of the psalm completes the call to praise. The very nature of God calls forth songs of thanksgiving from our lips. The reason is stated boldly: “God is good,” Even when the worst happens, that does not change the goodness of God. How can the psalmist be so sure? It is because God’s love is steadfast and does not depend on circumstances, or even our response to God’s overture of love. When all else fails us, God’s love remains. That is true not only for this life or this generation; it lasts always and forever, “to all generations.”

Paul draws from this understanding of praise as presented by Psalm 100 in 1 Thessalonians when, in a list of instruction for living in community, he includes “Rejoice always” (5:16) and “give thanks in all circumstances” (5:18). The life of faith is not defined by what happens to us but by our deep knowledge of and appreciation for the one to whom we belong.

So, why would this psalm be among the readings for Christ the King Sunday? Only a few centuries into the church’s existence, Jesus, the itinerant rabbi from Galilee, began to look a lot like the Roman emperor. The emperor’s subjects praised the emperor like a god and feared him because of the harm he could do. If Jesus was now called “Christ” and “King” in one breath, was Jesus like the Roman emperor? Would Jesus, as the embodiment of God’s steadfast love, be a different sort of king?

Psalm 100 serves as a reminder that God is unlike any political leader humankind has ever followed. We praise God because all that we have and all that we are comes as a gift from a generous divine hand. On Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday, we are reminded that this God of love is the only God worthy of praise.

MICHAEL E. WILLIAMS

Psalm 100

Exegetical Perspective

all living things, from Israel as metaphorical sheep to actual sheep of countless pastures, belong to God. Psalm 50 brings this motif to forceful expression: God thunders, “Every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine” (Ps. 50:10–11). Psalm 148’s imperative to praise is directed not only to Israel but to every living creature: “Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps! . . . Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!” (Ps. 148:7, 10). Here in Psalm 100:3, the worshiper may experience once again a richly subtle interplay between the particular and the expansive.

The command to enter God’s gates (v. 4) may be heard as a reference not only to worshipers streaming into the temple but also to sheep coming home to their Shepherd. Verse 4 brims with words of doxology: “thanksgiving” (*todah*), “praise” (*tehillah*), “give thanks” (*hodu*), and “bless” (*barachu*). The doxology spilling from these lines evokes the flood of divine goodness and the fullness of joy that believers know in covenant with God. A larger chiasmic structure is felt here: verse 2’s imperative to “come” into God’s presence is mirrored in verse 4’s imperative to “enter” God’s gates (these representing a single word in Hebrew, *bo’u*), and the syntax of those lines is identical. This mirroring structure draws attention to the center of the chiasm, verse 3’s claim that YHWH is God and that believers belong to God. Thus relationship is envisioned as the center of worship. We praise because we have been formed in covenant with our Creator.

Verse 5 begins with a word (*ki*) that may represent logical connection (“praise, *for* God is good!”) or may function to emphasize the robustness of faith (“Praise! *Indeed* God is good!”). God’s faithfulness and trustworthiness are affirmed in all their mystery, available for all generations to come. The powerful sequence of imperatives driving verses 1–4 (“Make a joyful noise!” “Worship!” “Come!” “Know!” “Enter!” “Give thanks!” “Bless!”) yields in verse 5 to rest in the loving faithfulness of God. The liturgical drama of this psalm has drawn us to the altar, where we find the peace of God that passes all understanding. Jubilation leaves us and all of creation joyfully resting in the presence of the Holy One.

CAROLYN J. SHARP

Homiletical Perspective

other areas of worship, and as the first movement in Leonard Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms*.

With this in mind, the preacher might reflect on worship as the sanctification of time, through the procession of the day, the year, and the cycles of our lives. Alternatively, a homilist could point to this psalm as a form of remembrance as the basis for our reasonable and holy hope in a future manifestation of the reign of Christ, based on our telling the story of our faith in past and present. The concept or idea of remembrance (*anamnesis*), by which past events with future dimensions are made real and effective in the present, is at the heart of both Jewish and Christian worship, allowing us to recognize, appreciate, and enjoy the firstfruits of the promised and future reign of Christ in the present.

Finally, should the preacher choose to reflect on the nature of Christ’s reign, she or he might discuss the image of the shepherd-king and the psalmist’s reflection that we are not only God’s people but also the sheep of God’s pasture. In this, we are back to a role of the monarch as protector and the source of all thanksgiving.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

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PROPER 7

Genesis 21:8–21

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

Theological Perspective

The story of Hagar and Ishmael being sent away is another step along the way in the stories of Abraham and Sarah and the unfolding of the covenant promises made in Genesis 17. Two further dimensions are also important in relation to the story.

First, the place of Ishmael developed in Islam and his connection with Arab people began to be stressed in that religion, setting Islam apart from Judaism and Christianity (see Gen. 25:12–18). Ishmael became seen as an ancestor of the prophet Muhammad. So Ishmael became an important figure in one of the world’s major religions.

Second, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul presents an extended allegorical interpretation of Ishmael and Isaac, relating to God’s covenant promises to Isaac as the offspring through whom God’s free promises are given (Gal. 4:21–31). This interpretation often colors and shapes the reading of the Genesis 21 account.

Ishmael was the son of Abram and Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl who was given by Abraham’s wife, Sarai, as a wife to him (Gen. 16:3). Ishmael (Heb. “God hears”) was Abraham’s firstborn son.

The son born to Abram and Sarai, as a result of the covenant promises God made (Gen. 17), was

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“Used. Abused. Thrown away.” That was the response I got from my minister spouse, Caroline Leach, when I asked her for her gut reaction to this Hagar story. She indicated that she felt that many women around the world today have this same experience, whatever their economic class—though, of course, women who are poor have a much worse time. Delores Williams, in her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, firmly and convincingly connects this Hagar saga in Genesis with the experience of black women in the United States. In approaching this passage, these contexts of exploitation must always be kept before us.

I am asked to address the pastoral perspective of this passage, but I must emphasize initially how deeply this passage speaks to women’s experience of oppression. The preacher who ignores this dimension does an injustice to the passage, to the human experience, and to God’s call for justice. Having said that, we should note that the driving pastoral dynamics of this passage are struggle, abandonment, and rescue. In our congregation, we have heard stories of abandonment of the children of slave masters and slaves. In a few cases, the slave master would claim the child of this union, but the vast majority

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¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Exegetical Perspective

Genesis 21:8–21 is a distinct narrative unit in the book of Genesis. While there is some question whether to begin the section at verse 8 (Septuagint, *Jerusalem Bible*, NRSV) or verse 9 (KJV, TEV, *Jewish Study Bible*), the unit clearly ends at verse 21, with a summary statement concerning the status of Ishmael. The structure of the narrative follows a typical dramatic pattern, moving from a relatively tranquil family celebration (v. 8), through scenes of dissension (vv. 9–10), pain (vv. 11–14), and resolution (vv. 15–19), concluding with a return to relative tranquility and normalcy (vv. 20–21). There is a little confusion as to whether God or God’s angel addresses Hagar (vv. 17–18), but this does not disrupt the flow of the narrative too much. This story, along with the announcement of the birth of Isaac (21:1–7), is situated between two accounts concerning Abraham’s relationship with Abimelech (20:11–18; 21:22–34.).

A number of textual issues are signaled in the apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica*, but only three need consideration here. The first is in verse 9, where Sarah saw the “son of Hagar the Egyptian . . . playing.” The Septuagint (like the NRSV and others) “clarifies” the Masoretic Text by adding “with her son Isaac” after “playing.” If the Hebrew text is followed,

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This story offers an unusually large number of possibilities for preaching. I begin with some that move in directions that are generally uplifting and upbuilding. However, the story raises searching theological and moral questions. These latter could be worked into sermons with larger positive theological arcs, or they could become sources for particular sermons.

The priestly theologians gave Genesis its present shape during and after the exile. The priestly thinkers sought to assure the community that the God of Israel is the universal God who is sovereign over all things. Indeed, this God could use even the Persian Cyrus as God’s instrument in liberating the Jewish people from Babylonian exile.

In the events leading to the exile and in the exile itself, the Jewish people experienced structures of life on which they had counted for generations turning to chaos. When they returned to the land, they did not simply rebuild what they had before. Different structures of life emerged amid considerable controversy. Today’s text puts forward a theological idea that is especially timely in the early twenty-first century, when so many familiar things are disappearing and strange new forms of life are emerging: God can be trusted to provide, even when significant life

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named Isaac (Heb. “he laughs”). God promised: “I will establish my covenant with him [Isaac] as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him” (Gen. 17:19). The promise spoke of both: “I will make him [Ishmael] a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac” (Gen. 17:20–21).

Sarah instigated the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, saying that “the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac” (v. 10). Despite Abraham’s reluctance and distress (v. 11), God ordered him to obey Sarah’s wish and reiterated that “it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you” (v. 12). God also made a promise for Ishmael: “I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring” (v. 13; cf. v. 18).

Without delving into the intricacies of Paul’s allegorical interpretation, what theological realities do we find in the story of Hagar and Ishmael as it stands?

Mystery of God’s Work. The story may initially go against expectations, when we find that the “firstborn,” Ishmael, was turned away so that Isaac might be the child of promise. Later, Isaac was to have two sons, Esau and Jacob. The elder son, Esau, lost his birthright (Gen. 27:31–40), even though Isaac was tricked by the younger son, Jacob. Jesus’ parable of the Two Sons (Luke 15:11–32) portrays the younger son, who misspent his father’s wealth, as the one who returned and was blessed. So our “expectations” may be upset by the work of God.

We have encountered this many times in our own lives. Things that apparently should “work”—like a sought-after promotion in our job, or a political election that seems secure, or a relationship that appears to be headed toward marriage—do not “work,” and these “expected results” do not materialize. In it all, we have to say that God’s work is mysterious. We do not know “why” things happen that way, but they do. We can never dictate to God or be self-assured in asserting “God’s will.” For God is free, and the works of God will surprise us. As the hymn puts it: “O God, in a mysterious way / Great wonders You perform.”¹ God’s work is mysterious to us. We cannot prescribe it; we can only follow it in faith and seek to do God’s will, no matter where it leads us.

God’s Freedom Is Primary. God’s will is related to God’s freedom. God is free to will whatever God desires. This freedom is not subject to any external

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of masters cast them back out into the wilderness, as Abraham does with Hagar and Ishmael.

Before pounding on the masters too much here, we should note that in verse 11 Abraham is in distress over Sarah’s request to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, and in an earlier story Abraham pleads with God: “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” (Gen. 17:18). We cannot dismiss Abraham the master as only an oppressive clod; here we see a real person, wanting his first son to fulfill God’s promise, yet also yielding to the complex realities of his family and societal life.

In a similar manner, we must take care with Sarah, who so jealously guards her husband and her son against Hagar and Ishmael. Since Abraham is the boss in a patriarchal system, Sarah must scramble, because she is the property of her husband. The political reality for her is that her redemption can be found only in producing children, especially sons, for that husband. Sarah’s choices are very limited, and she scratches and claws to maintain her place and to save herself and her son. We must also keep her humanity before us, lest we lose sight of the depth and pain of this story.

Of course, the power and the point and poignancy of this passage are focused on the human beings at the bottom of this system of dominance: the slave Hagar and the son, Ishmael, born to her by her master Abraham. Whereas Paul uses Hagar and Sarah as prototypes in Galatians 4 to make his powerful point about freedom, we must also take care here to stay with the humanity of Hagar. What a wrenching humanity it is! Abraham and Sarah use Hagar’s womb as an insurance policy, in case God’s promise of an heir born to Sarah and Abraham fails. Hagar and her son Ishmael were used as an alternative to the promise, and now they are seen as a threat to that very promise. The person who was used is now abused and abandoned.

It is a horrible scene. Abraham banishes them to the wilderness with very few provisions, essentially giving them the death penalty. When these provisions run out and death seems imminent, Hagar weeps and distances herself from her son, so that she will not have to see him die. We can only guess at the depth of pain in her heart at this juncture. It is a lament deep in the human soul, a lament that results from the systems of using and abusing and domination and exploitation. The preacher must allow and indeed encourage this lament to touch the souls of the congregation. If not, this passage can easily be sentimentalized into an individualistic

1. William Cowper, “O God, in a Mysterious Way,” *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, ed. David Eicher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #30.

Genesis 21:8–21

Exegetical Perspective

the verse ends with the term “playing,” which is in the form of a *Pi’el* participle from the term *tsachaq*, “to laugh,” which is the basis of Isaac’s name. The term can be interpreted as “mocking” or “jesting” (19:14) or even “playing with” or “fondling” (26:8). Staying with the Hebrew text does provide an interesting interpretive option. What was Ishmael in fact doing? Was he “*Isaacing*,” acting as if he were Isaac, flaunting his firstborn status?

A second difficulty is encountered in verse 14. The Hebrew is not clear concerning whether Abraham placed the water skin on the child Ishmael on Hagar’s shoulders. As in verse 13 (cf. v. 18), where the Septuagint seems to have added the term “great” to bring the verse in harmony with verse 18, here at verse 14 it seems that the Septuagint sought to clarify the sentence by rearranging the terms. Abraham placed the wine skin on Hagar’s shoulders, not the boy (so with the NRSV and the *Jewish Study Bible*). Whether such a change is necessary is debatable, but clearly Ishmael was not a “baby” who could be easily carried on a mother’s shoulder. That he is called a *yeled* (vv. 8, 14, 15, 16) only emphasizes that he is the child of Abraham and Hagar and says nothing necessarily about his age.

According to the wider context, Ishmael had been born when Abraham was eighty-six (16:16). The announcement of Isaac’s conception came when Abraham was ninety-nine (17:1), thirteen years later. Moreover, Ishmael was said to have been circumcised when he was thirteen (17:25). Some have explained these details by assigning the stories to different sources, but even if that were so, that does not settle the matter. The text at hand notes that Ishmael was at least three years older than Isaac (that is the usual time taken to wean a child in antiquity; v. 8) and was old enough to be called a *na’ar* (vv. 12, 17, 18, 19, 20). While *na’ar* might be used of an infant, “in Genesis it usually refers to young men capable of taking care of themselves, such as the seventeen-year-old Joseph (37:2), servants (18:7), and those old enough to be morally responsible (19:4).”¹ Our text assumes Ishmael was at least old enough for Hagar to lift him up and hold him by his hand (v. 18).

The final difficulty to be considered is found in verse 16, where the Septuagint seems to have sought again to clarify the Hebrew. A slight change in the verbal form of the last term in the verse renders “he wept” or “he cried,” rather than the “she wept” or “she cried” found in the Hebrew. This

1. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 2:83.

Homiletical Perspective

changes take place. God provides both for Sarah and Isaac and for Hagar and Ishmael. The preacher can point to resources that encourage the congregation amid the powerful forces of cultural and ecclesial change now at play.

Some preachers will take theological exception to part of the text. The passage assumes that God is responsible for the significant life changes that take place between the two mothers and their children. I do not believe God orchestrates events in history in this straightforward way. Nevertheless, an underlying motif does ring theologically true: no matter what happens, God is always present to offer encouragement and provision.

From the point of view of the contemporary yearning to find patterns of community that honor the particularity of communities and cultures while affirming their mutual respect and otherness, the story of Sarah and Hagar speaks of three things that are significant to both ancient and contemporary congregations. First, it assures the community that diversity within the family of God is divinely ordained. This is a forceful perspective in a day in which many communities continue to want to enforce sameness and uniformity. Second, while the peoples who descend from Ishmael and Isaac develop their own cultures and practices, they are essentially related. They are family. Disagreements among them are family disagreements. Third, the point above prevails: the story shows that God does not withhold provision but intends to provide for all in the human family, including those with whom we disagree.

In today’s setting, these perspectives apply immediately to relationships among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim houses.¹ In my range of acquaintance, a fair number of Christians are uncertain about both how these religious groups are historically related to one another and how they might relate to one another today. Indeed, I am surprised to find that it is still news to some Christians that these religious communities come from a common root (according to this text).

At the simplest level, then, the preacher might provide basic information to help the congregation understand the perspective of the text on the origins and familial relationship of these religious groups. Beyond that, the sermon could explore similarities and differences in how the groups might relate with one another. On the one hand, we share a common core theological vision: the world is the gift of a

1. While the text, obviously, does not mention the Christian family, we can regard the Christian family as included in this family tree by virtue of its Jewish origins.

Genesis 21:8–21

Theological Perspective

power or process—not even to our human dictates! God’s freedom can overcome all apparent human obstacles in order to accomplish what God freely desires to do.

We see this throughout the Scriptures. When it was announced to Abraham and Sarah by three visitors that Sarah would have a son when they were old (Gen. 18:1–15), Sarah’s response was to laugh (v. 12). Then God said to Abraham: “Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?” (“too hard,” v. 14 RSV). Old age, barrenness, and incredulity were no obstacles to God’s free purposes—which were for Isaac to be born. Throughout the Bible, God specializes in doing the seemingly impossible. The baby Moses was saved and became a leader; Elijah stood against the prophets of Baal; Saul’s life was turned around so that he became Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was crucified—and raised from the dead! Nothing is too hard for God to accomplish in the divine freedom. We should never despair!

God Is with Us. Ishmael’s name was well given: “God hears.” When Hagar and Ishmael were wandering around in the wilderness, when their water had been used up, at the point of their greatest need “God heard the voice of the boy” (v. 17). Hagar wept (v. 16). She thought her life and the life of her son were over; but God said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is” (v. 17). Then followed a repeat of the promise: “I will make a great nation of him” (v. 18). “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water . . . and gave the boy a drink” (v. 19). Even more, “God was with the boy,” who became an “expert with the bow” (v. 20).

God provided for this mother and son in need. God was with them, protecting, providing, and proving that they were precious in God’s sight and that their needs would be met.

This sounds familiar too. When we are at our most vulnerable point, God protects us. When things are at their darkest, God provides what is most needed. When despair reigns, we hear and experience again that we are precious in God’s sight and that God is with us. How? We look at Immanuel (Matt. 1:23): Jesus Christ!

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

view of the faith, where God saves Hagar and Ishmael, and all is well.

God does rescue them! In the midst of her tears, Hagar is able to see God’s redemption. In the midst of the wailing and lamentation, she is able to hear God’s voice. This story affirms that God is able to pick us up in the midst of abandonment, abuse, and oppression, even when the world tells itself (and those who are abandoned tell themselves) that such abuse is God’s will. We must acknowledge that there are many people in our midst, especially women, who resonate with Hagar’s abandonment and who hope and plead with God for redemption.

We should offer opportunities for healing and new life, centered not in abandonment but in God’s redeeming power. Many of us are in affluent churches and should acknowledge our captivity and our participation in the oppression seen in this passage. Then, to draw on Paul’s use of this story in Galatians 4 to emphasize freedom over slavery, we should work to hear and see God’s Spirit calling us into liberation, and use these newfound energies and visions to be vessels of that healing and liberating Spirit for all the Hagars of this world.

Hagar is enabled to hear God’s voice in a barren wilderness, even in the midst of great oppression. Though Abraham and Sarah struggle with their decisions, ultimately their message to Hagar is that she is a slave not worth saving. These systems of domination continue in our midst, whether it is a twelve-year-old girl sold into prostitution or mammoth cuts in the food stamp program that consign women and children to the wilderness with little provisions. Earthen vessels that we are—like Abraham and Sarah and Hagar caught by systems of domination—we are called by this story to join God’s work of redemption, which moves Hagar from death to life, from slave to child of God.

NIBS STROUPE

Genesis 21:8–21

Exegetical Perspective

certainly brings the verse into harmony with verse 17, where God is said to have heard the boy's voice, not Hagar's. However, a change in the text would unnecessarily remove a rather poignant note from the narrative: the desperate cry of anguish of a brokenhearted mother.

Earlier source critics generally assigned 21:8–21 to the Elohist, because the divine name "Elohim" was used rather than "YHWH," as in 21:1–7, and because this seemed to be a duplicate of the Yahwist account found in 16:1–15. Today such distinctions of source are not emphasized, but it is still important to consider how the accounts in chapters 16 and 21 are similar but importantly dissimilar. First, in 16:5–6 Sarai, because she believed that her slave-girl Hagar acted with contempt, dealt "harshly" with her. In turn Hagar "ran away." This is different from Sarah's demand that Hagar be "cast out" to ensure that Ishmael would "not inherit along with my son Isaac" (vv. 9–10). Further, in 16:7–12 an angel appeared to Hagar, instructed her to return to her mistress, and assured her that YHWH intended great things for her son. In 21:12–13 the divine promise regarding Ishmael was first given to Abraham. Then, later, an angel of Elohim declared the promise to Hagar (vv. 18–19). Finally, in chapter 16 Hagar returned to Sarai, but in chapter 21 Hagar and Ishmael did not return to Sarah and Abraham. Rather, they moved away from the area of Beer-sheba, where Hagar first had wandered (v. 14), and went southeast to live in the "wilderness of Paran" (v. 21). There Ishmael became "an expert with the bow," a term whose meaning is not certain. He also was given an Egyptian wife by Hagar, his Egyptian mother (vv. 20–21).

One last comment is in order here. The divine promise concerning Ishmael (vv. 13, 18; cf. 17:20) is very similar in content to that given concerning Isaac (17:15–16). Both of Abraham's sons are to be greatly blessed by God, but there is no question that it is through Isaac that Abraham's lineage will be traced (v. 12; cf. 17:19, 21).²

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

loving God, who wishes for the whole human family to live together in life. To be sure, these houses cannot be boiled down to the same religion; each has its own distinctiveness. One challenge for the preacher is how to honor both the common and the different elements. This challenge is at its height in regard to extremist groups. How should a congregation respond to theological and political fundamentalism and other forms of extremism, whether they are Jewish, Christian, or Islam?

We come now to what is to me the most troubling part of the text: its approval of casting Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. God promises that both Isaac and Ishmael will become the progenitors of great peoples. Yet Sarah beseeches Abraham to cast out the handmaid. Abraham is distressed, but God steps in and pushes Abraham to do what Sarah requests. While God later rescues the handmaid and her child in the wilderness, God is directly culpable in the decision to put them in that risk in the wilderness. While I understand that the purpose of the text is to confirm for readers that these developments are of God, this action seems indefensible.²

Moreover, by conspiring to send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, Sarah, Abraham, and God put at risk not only Hagar and Ishmael, but also the promise to Ishmael. Indeed, Sarah and Abraham make little provision for Hagar and Ishmael: some bread and water for a new start in life that begins in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. Relying on those provisions alone, the traveling mother and child would have perished.

The preacher could explore ways that today's congregation is similar to Sarah and Abraham in choosing against today's Hagars and Ishmaels. How do we place them, and God's promises to them, in danger? Furthermore, how could we avoid the mistake of Sarah and Abraham and, instead, find ways of supporting Hagar, Ishmael, and the promises of God to and through them?

In a contemporary classic, Phyllis Trible helps the preacher focus on Hagar as a figure for women who are on the margins, especially women who are exploited and even rejected by males. The sermon can help the congregation recognize such women in its world and explore how to enter into solidarity with them, with an eye toward repairing or preventing the kinds of dislocation represented in the story.

RONALD J. ALLEN

2. See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 184–85, for consideration of Paul's use of this material in Gal. 4:21–31.

2. To be sure, God rescues Hagar and Ishmael when they are in danger of dying (Gen. 21:17–19). However, to put them in the position of needing rescue is itself problematic.

PROPER 7

Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17

- ¹ Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.
² Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; ³be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all day long.
⁴ Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
⁵ For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
⁶ Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
listen to my cry of supplication.
⁷ In the day of my trouble I call on you,
for you will answer me.

Theological Perspective

This psalm is a prayer for help. It is an individual lament for God's assistance when things are difficult for the psalmist. The psalmist is "poor and needy" (v. 1), acquainted with trouble (v. 7), feeling he is in "the depths of Sheol" (v. 13). The psalmist is devoted to God (v. 2) and prays to God to "preserve my life" and "save your servant who trusts in you" (v. 2).

The three parts of the psalm are the prayer for help (vv. 1–7), the God who helps (vv. 8–10), and praise and petitions (vv. 11–17). The language of the psalm is rich with portrayals of the psalmist's condition, but more, with descriptors of the God who helps those in need. Praise and petition mark the closing part of the psalm, since they are intimately related. The psalmist praises the God who helps and prays for God's ongoing help, on the basis of the help and comfort God has already rendered.

This psalm is characteristic of psalms of lament, which intimately connect lamentation and thanks, petition and praise. These elements stand in contrast or in tension with each other. When one laments, how can one give thanks? When one is petitioning, how can there be praise? Yet these sets of actions

Pastoral Perspective

"Where is God in this?" One of our church members recently asked me this in our talking together about recent struggles in his life, in which our member was deeply wounded by a close friend. This wounding in his life also touched a much deeper wound in his life, a story of self-interpretation in which he had for many years carried an image of himself as incompetent and unworthy. My own perception of him is that he is highly competent and accomplished.

As I read over Psalm 86, I was reminded of his story. The first three verses of the psalm are a plea for God's help and also a reminder of the psalmist's devotion to God. The psalmist's assertion in verse 2 of his "godliness" or "holiness" or "devotion," depending on the translation, is found nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures. On one level, his assertion of his godliness sounds arrogant, especially to Presbyterian ears! Yet my interpretation is that he is asking the same question many people ask: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Our church member posed the same question in another way: "Where is God in this?" This psalm never mentions the specific issue for the author, although in verses not covered in this

Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17

- ⁸ There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.
- ⁹ All the nations you have made shall come
and bow down before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.
- ¹⁰ For you are great and do wondrous things;
you alone are God.
-
- ¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant;
save the child of your serving girl.
- ¹⁷ Show me a sign of your favor,
so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,
because you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 86 is one of the many Psalms of Individual Distress (sometimes called psalms of lament or complaint, or prayers for help) found in the book of Psalms. While these psalms share a basic format, they can, to a degree, be divided into subgroups on the basis of the type of distress that has prompted the psalm. On the basis of verses 1, 14, 16–17, where the psalmist self-identifies as “poor and needy,” under attack from a “band of ruffians,” and hated, Psalm 86 can be classified as a Lament of the Oppressed (cf. Pss. 3, 9, 10, 13, 35, 52, 55, 56, 57, 62, 69, 70, 109, 120, 139, 140, 141, 143).¹

The title of the psalm (not printed above), “A Prayer of David” (rather than the more frequent “A Psalm of David”), is more honorific than biographical. While there are clearly times in David’s life when the words might have been appropriate, there is almost unanimous scholarly opinion that the psalm was composed in the postexilic period. That the specific identity of the oppressors was not revealed has enabled the psalm to be used by countless people across the ages who have had strong feelings of apprehension.

1. John H. Hayes, *Understanding the Psalms* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1076), 74. Hayes also identifies Laments of the Sick, Laments of the Accused, and Laments of the Penitent.

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 86 is an individual lament. This psalm offers the preacher an opportunity to work with feelings that, at one time or another, touch every human life, every household, every congregation, and, indeed, every community and corner of the world: lamenting difficult life circumstances. The lament often includes intermingled degrees of grief, fear, loss, sorrow, threat, and similar feelings.

Many individual laments follow a pattern that the preacher can use as the pattern for the movement of the sermon, as the psalm moves from pouring out lament through trust and petition to assurance and a vow of praise. The elements of the individual lament appear in Psalm 86, though not in the simple pattern just described. The preacher could gather the elements from the psalm into blocks of material that do follow the form, as in the following paragraphs.

The preacher might begin the sermon by naming and describing reasons for lamentation in the congregation. Psalm 86 presupposes that the psalmist is threatened by other people, but the preacher could turn to many other threats that prompt lamentation, for example, illness, job loss, natural disaster (such as a hurricane or tornado), rape, racial injustice, and violence. In our world who cries out “all day long” (v. 3)?

Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17

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are brought together by the God to whom one is lamenting and thanking, petitioning and praising. Because of who God is, in the midst of sorrows there can be joys; as one pleads, one can also praise. Faith that this God is the God of all life, of all feelings and emotions, means that all these moods can coexist and be blended together. God hears and answers. God is thanked and praised. A psalmist addresses all prayer to “the God of my life” (Ps. 42:8).

Prayers in Need. We can identify with the psalmist, though we do not know specifically what difficulties and troubles he is experiencing. He likely has enemies (v. 17). He sees himself as “poor and needy” (v. 1), as one who is a sinner (see v. 5). He wants God to “answer” him, not in the sense of replying to a question, but with the sense of pleading for God to respond to his prayer. He wants God to “give ear” to his prayer and “listen to my cry of supplication” (v. 6). He cries to God “all day long” (v. 3). In short, “I call on you, for you will answer me” (v. 7). The psalmist makes brave to pray because he is “devoted to you,” a “servant who trusts in you” (v. 2). God is his God and he pleads: “Be gracious to me, O Lord” (v. 3).

The comprehensiveness of the psalmist’s needs is indicated by the varieties and intensities of his pleas. He needs divine help for great needs. In this way, we stand with the psalmist. No matter what our needs, no matter how deep they go, we can approach God through prayer in times of need. This is the biblical experience and the practice of people of faith ever since. We turn to the God who helps in times of need. We have no resources within ourselves to meet our needs or answer our own prayers. We must turn to “the rock that is higher than I” (Ps. 61:2). So the psalmist is a model for us. In prayer we can “let it all hang out,” as the expression goes. All our needs can be presented to God.

The God Who Helps. We pray to God because we believe in the God who helps. This is the God of the psalmist, the one in whom he trusts, the one who can be gracious to him and who can gladden his soul (vv. 2–4). This God is “good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love” to all who call on God (v. 5). This is the God in whom the psalmist trusts, the one who can do for the psalmist what the psalmist cannot do for himself. As John Calvin put it, “Nothing is more suitable to the nature of God than to succor the afflicted: and the more severely any one is oppressed, and the more destitute he is of the resources of

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lectionary text, we hear that “insolent” people have risen up against him (v. 14).

Since the psalmist’s troubles are not specific, his plea offers us at least two pastoral paths to take in engagement with this psalm. The first is an acknowledgment of our experience of a general anxiety in our lives as individuals. For some of us, it comes when we are weaned and begin to discover that we are separate from our parents. For some of us, it hits at adolescence, when the hormones kick in, and we run from our parental figures, all the while having a sense of loss and a longing for home. At some point we discover that we are mortal, that we are individuated, and that there are forces in our lives, both internal and external, beyond our control. Whether we have done heinous things or are just trying to muddle through life—we all still seem to have this floating anxiety about not being loved, not being lovely. Like our church member, we cannot seem to find our footing, cannot seem to find our home, and the slings and arrows of life wound us and cause us to fall back on what seems to be at best an empty nothingness and at worst our own fault. Why are we wounded? Why do these wounds have such power in our lives? Because we are terrible people and deserve to be wounded? Those tapes seem to keep playing in the hearts and minds of many of us.

The book of Job asserts that this journey is part of human life: we “are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). Many of us seek a religious answer to this issue—like the psalmist, who begins: “Listen to me, God! Answer me, for I am overwhelmed by forces beyond my command!” That takes us onto the second path of engagement with this psalm: we long to believe in a loving and just power who is at the center of life and the center of the universe. The biblical narrative is basically the story of lost human beings trying to find our way to touch this power, and the story of that power, whom we call God, seeking to reach out and touch us.

We have such high hopes for God and for ourselves, and much of our life experience causes us to be disappointed in both! The first path of engagement with this psalm takes us down into ourselves; the second path of engagement takes us out of ourselves into the nature of God and of life itself. The book of Psalms is full of this kind of dialogue between human beings who discover our caughtness and dependence and the God who we hope will rescue us and help us to feel at home again, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Some psalms, like Psalm 13, are a plaintive plea and accusing call

*Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17***Exegetical Perspective**

The Psalms of Individual Distress share many of the same themes and vocabulary. They were designed for use by individuals in the midst of corporate worship. They plead for God's assistance amid whatever trouble is being encountered. Some consider Psalm 86 somewhat "inferior" because of the reuse of the terminology and the style of other psalms. This would be a mistake, however, for this psalm represents a form of liturgical writing that can be very effective.² The terminology in the Lord's Prayer, for instance, is "borrowed" from other prayers, and the language in many hymns is drawn from and serves to reinforce our knowledge of the Bible and articulate our feelings and convictions in a company of God's people.

While the lectionary designates only verses 1–10 and 16–17 as the appointed text, the overall structure of Psalm 86 is interesting and should be considered in the study of this psalm. In verses 1–7 the often-encountered themes of the psalms of distress are reflected. God is addressed. There is a statement of need or distress. God is called upon to respond to the supplicant's prayer and bring relief. Devotion and commitment to God are usually declared. Sometimes there is a vow.

Verses 8–10 set a different tone. They are cast in the language of hymnic praise and followed in verse 11 by a request for God to provide the supplicant with instruction ("teach" is from the same root as Torah). Verses 12–13 express thanksgiving for deliverance "from the depths of Sheol," brought about by God's steadfast love.

After this outburst of praise, verses 14–17 return to the more typical lament structure. The difficulty first mentioned in verse 7 is once again addressed with a request to God, who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (v. 15). The psalm concludes with an appeal to God to "save the child of your serving girl" (an expression of the humility and lifelong relationship of the supplicant with God) and to turn to the supplicant with a sign of divine favor (vv. 16–17).

There are no particular textual problems that require consideration. Most variations noted in the apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica* have been prompted, apparently, by efforts to "correct" repetitions of the term *'adonay* (vv. 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15) by deleting it or replacing it with YHWH. This is not necessary and obscures a very interesting rhetorical matter to be noted.

2. James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 278.

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Yet the laments go beyond sorrow, by assuring the congregation that God is present and active in their behalf. Echoing other writers, Psalm 86 makes some evocative theological assurances. God is good, forgiving, unique among the gods, great, doing wondrous things, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and saving (vv. 5, 8, 10, 15, 16).

The preacher could use the ancient function of these affirmations: to help the congregation believe that despite their immediate difficulties, they can count on God to be present and to work in their behalf. Given the theological illiteracy plaguing many congregations today, the preacher might do word studies that help the congregation grasp the nuances of these key affirmations.

The lament leads the congregation to petition God for help. Here the preacher needs to be theologically precise with respect to what the congregation can expect from God. Psalm 86 assumes that the congregation can expect God to intervene. The singer petitions God to preserve her or his life, to save, to answer, to deliver from Sheol, to give a sign of favor (vv. 2, 6, 7, 13, 16, 17).

If the preacher believes that God can intervene in this direct way, the preacher can help the congregation formulate its own prayers of petition. If the community offers such prayers, and the circumstance does not change, the preacher needs to answer the question, "Why did God not act?" Frankly, I do not believe that God can act in this direct way. Nevertheless, a hopeful prayer is for the congregation to become more cognizant and responsive to God's presence. Psalm 86 offers language that can help: "Give your strength to your servant" (v. 16). While the circumstance may not change, awareness of God's presence can give us courage to live through it.

The laments include a vow: the psalmist will give praise and thanks to God (v. 12). Psalm 86 goes farther than the typical lament in hoping the psalmist can walk in God's truth and serve God with "an undivided heart" (v. 11). The sermon could help the congregation imagine how to live in response to God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Indeed, how do we live in such love and faithfulness to one another and the wider human community?

A sermon on Psalm 86 could explore the values of the lament as a genre that provides a ritualized form that serves the community. When confronted with situations that prompt lament, ancient people turned to the lament to name and express their feelings and to place those feelings in a frame of theological

Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17

Theological Perspective

human aid, the more inclined is God graciously to help him.”¹ We are saved from despair when we realize God helps the poor and needy.

The most comprehensive claim of this help is the psalm statement with which Calvin often began the worship service: “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 124:8). Throughout Scripture, God is the one who helps. The prophet Samuel “took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us’” (1 Sam. 7:12). The character of God, in all its biblical descriptions, is the God who helps people. So our psalmist prays, “In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me” (v. 7).

Petition. The psalm closes with a petition for God to “turn” and “be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant” (v. 16). The God who hears prayers and helps those in need is appealed to for God’s presence and power to be given to God’s servant. A request for a “sign of your favor”—probably the psalmist’s deliverance—is made so that the psalmist’s enemies will see who God is through the divine help given to the psalmist. Enemies will be “put to shame” because God has “helped me and comforted me” (v. 17).

We who know Jesus Christ have even more reason to petition God for help and comfort. For in Jesus Christ, God has decisively turned toward us and been gracious to us in ways that are unsurpassed. To bring the psalmist’s petition into our context, “signs” of God’s “favor” are found specifically in the sacraments of the church, where we see the promises of God made visible. In them we receive the help and comfort of Jesus Christ.

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

to God to show herself and get the existential issues resolved.

Here the psalmist reminds God of the attributes that God should be demonstrating: goodness, forgiveness, grace, mercy, love. We so long for these attributes to be at the center of our lives and at the center of life itself, but some of our life experiences make us question whether they are the center of life. What we sometimes experience is the absence of these attributes, and the questions become profoundly pastoral and existential: “Who are you, God? Who am I?” In verse 17, the author pleads with God to help him understand how life works and how God works—not just in a theoretical sense, but also in strong, concrete signs that will enable both the psalmist and his adversaries to see that God is the center of his life and the center of all of life.

This is not so much a selfish desire to be proven right, as it is recognition of the danger in which the psalmist finds himself. It is not only the adversaries who need to be taught. It is the psalmist himself, who needs reinforcement from God that the bet he has made about his life—that life is centered on love and justice and compassion—is true. The psalmist assumes the role of the least able (“the child of your serving girl,” v. 16) in his society, and that small child inside the psalmist longs for God’s presence and God’s answer to the profound question that began this meditation: “Where is God in this?” Let us be grateful for this invitation into the story of our lives.

NIBS STROUPE

1. John Calvin, commentary on Psalm 86:1, from *Commentary on Psalms* (originally published for the Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, Scotland; repr., Riverside, CA: Ulan Press, 2012), 3:329.

Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17

Exegetical Perspective

The psalm is beautifully and ingeniously constructed around the distinctive use of the personal pronoun *'attah* (you). When it is used with a verb where it would not normally be required, it is quite emphatic. A simple “you” becomes “*you*.” The pronoun occurs six times in reference to God (vv. 2, 5, 10 [2x], 15, 17). The divine name YHWH occurs four times (vv. 1, 6, 11, 17). The term *'adoni* (“my LORD”), which occurs seven times as noted above, becomes all the more forceful and personal. This is not a throwaway expression, but a statement of relationship and dedication. The one addressed—repeatedly—is *my Lord*. In addition to the various emphatic expressions used in the first six verses, the imperative form of the verb occurs nine times. The repetitions and emphatic forms serve to create a strong appeal.

The pronouns are the clue to the structure. A careful reading of the text, using the pronouns for God as pointers, leads to the recognition that verses 2 and 17 are parallels, as are verses 5 and 15. These parallel verses direct attention to verse 10 (see also v. 8), which serves as the climactic and most important affirmation. In verse 10 the psalmist in effect declares: “*You* (God) alone are great and capable of working wonders. In doing so, *you* (God) confirm that you are singularly divine!” This then becomes the basis of the psalmist’s firm confidence that God can and will strengthen, save, help, and comfort the supplicant (vv. 16–17).

An ancient creedal formulation (see Exod. 33:19; 34:6; Num. 14:18; Jer. 32:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8) is used as the theological foundation of the psalm. In verses 5 and 15 terms of the creedal affirmation are employed as the basis for the call for assistance that follows in verses 6–7 and 16–17. In verse 2 (divine graciousness) and verse 13 (God’s steadfast love—a covenantal term) there are also echoes of the creed. The use of the creed is well designed and quite appropriate in a prayer for help in the midst of oppressive hostility. The opening line of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) A Brief Statement of Faith reads: “In life and in death we belong to God.” Such words are similar in kind to the creedal affirmation in this psalm.

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

interpretation that respected their rawness while offering assurance. The community could then make its way forward with some degree of emotional, theological, and ethical consciousness about what things to give attention to, in order to move toward as much restoration as possible in the circumstances.

Aside from the blues, the sorrow songs of the African American community, and a few similar expressions, people in the United States today have few forms in our culture comparable to this psalm. When lamentable things occur, we often attempt to continue living as though nothing has happened. Indeed, we often promote attitudes that minimize or deny grief. For example, when someone has died I continue to hear people say, “We should not be sad. She’s in a better place.” When we do not name and deal with the complex of emotions aroused by situations of lament, those feelings can become hidden force fields with unrecognized effects on feelings, thoughts, and actions.

The preacher could use Psalm 86 to highlight the importance of lamentation. The sermon itself might have the character of a lament. Moreover, the preacher might encourage the congregation to develop its own rituals of lament.

The preacher could use Psalm 86 as the starting point for a sermon on the doctrine of God.¹ In the typical sermon whose origin is a biblical text, the sermon is controlled by the exegesis of the text. In the type of doctrinal sermon I have in mind, the preacher would give cursory attention to Psalm 86, by pointing out that the psalm implicitly raises the question of what we most deeply believe about God, especially about how God acts in the world. The sermon would draw upon doctrinal convictions in Christian history, in the theology of the denomination or movement to which the congregation belongs, in the preacher’s own systematic or constructive theology, and in wider contemporary theological reflection. The congregation can move toward a clearer understanding of what it most deeply believes about God. Such understanding usually transcends any one biblical text.

RONALD J. ALLEN

1. Every sermon, of course, is either explicitly or implicitly informed by Christian doctrine. Doctrinal preaching of the kind proposed here is explained further in Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching Is Believing: The Sermon as Theological Reflection* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). An overview of doctrinal positions written for a lay audience is Ronald J. Allen, *A Faith of Your Own: Naming What You Really Believe* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

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PROPER 11

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19

- ¹³ For neither is there any god besides you, whose care is for all people,
to whom you should prove that you have not judged unjustly;
.....
- ¹⁶ For your strength is the source of righteousness,
and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.
- ¹⁷ For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your
power,
and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.
- ¹⁸ Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness,
and with great forbearance you govern us;
for you have power to act whenever you choose.
- ¹⁹ Through such works you have taught your people
that the righteous must be kind,
and you have filled your children with good hope,
because you give repentance for sins.

Theological Perspective

While this book from the “apocryphal” writings of the Old Testament is not considered canonical by most Protestant churches, it can provide insights and expression for themes found in the Old Testament and later in Christian theology. The book combines elements of traditional Judaism and Hellenism, presented in various philosophical forms of argumentation. If the book was written in the first century BCE in Alexandria, to strengthen the faith of Jews in the Diaspora, its Hellenistic form was a way of arguing against the various appeals of Hellenism that could turn Jews away from their faith. It defends Israel’s faith. Israel’s traditions are upheld in appeals to faithfulness to the Mosaic covenant. Scholars consider its form to be “protreptic,” a “genre of rhetorical exhortation in Greek philosophy.” The book was written to “justify God’s actions toward the Israelites.”¹

Chapter 12 contains warnings not to abandon divine wisdom for human foolishness. God is presented as the exalted source of power who is active in the world. This is a type of “providence” that in Christian doctrine describes God’s interactions with the creation in terms of sustaining, cooperating,

1. James M. Reese, “Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 820.

Pastoral Perspective

In a season when my state legislature is giving serious consideration to allowing people to bring guns into places of worship—in order to protect those avenging and anxious voices inside us—here comes a word of Wisdom that extols God for refraining from destroying the wicked. The context for these verses in chapter 12 is an inquiry about God’s purpose in not destroying the people of Canaan upon the invasion of the Israelites after their escape from Egypt.

From the author’s point of view, the “natives” of Canaan were detestable and should have been destroyed because of their abominable practices, such as human sacrifice, killing of children, and cannibalism. It is difficult to determine the accuracy of this claim. We should note, however, that these claims sound similar to those made by all conquering peoples in regard to the people who are defeated. Conquerors rarely say that the people who were beaten down were good and decent people; to make such a claim would tend to undercut the rationale for conquest.

The Wisdom of Solomon shows us a different face of God. Here we see the tender, nurturing side of God. In our culture of guns and glory and

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19

Exegetical Perspective

Members of the community of faith would affirm both God's power and God's mercy. The Old Testament often portrays God's power as the ability to defeat enemies. Exodus 15:1–3 celebrates the Lord's victory over the Egyptian forces chasing the escaping Israelite slaves. God demonstrates power also in the act of creation (Isa. 40:21–26). God shows mercy in forgiveness, healing, provision, and reconciliation (Ps. 103:3–5; Isa. 35). God's work to bring vindication to the oppressed often combines power and mercy (Isa. 58:8–9). Some passages in the Old Testament present a God who struggles with mercy (Exod. 33:12–23; Hos. 11).

The repeated affirmation of the Old Testament, however, is that God's very nature is loving and forgiving (Exod. 34:6–7; see Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17). This passage from Wisdom of Solomon provides a careful reflection on the relationship between God's strength and God's mercy. This passage forms part of a larger section, starting at 10:1, that reviews and interprets theologically Israel's history, starting with creation. Chapter 12 covers the incursion into the land of the Canaanites. This section makes the primary assertion that the Canaanites engaged in such repulsive behavior, because of their intrinsically evil

Homiletical Perspective

Occasional readers may be surprised to learn that some churches, for example, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches, include the Wisdom of Solomon (and other apocryphal books) in the canon. While Protestants do not usually preach from Wisdom as Scripture, the occurrence of Wisdom in the lectionary could prompt a topical sermon on the nature and function of the canon, including the question of whether the canon should be open or closed.¹

Further, a Protestant minister could help the congregation recognize the value of reading the apocryphal books for a better understanding of biblical backgrounds. For instance, Wisdom's extensive discussions of idolatry and its effects (13:1–14:31) are important for understanding Paul's similar treatise in Romans 1:18–32. The personification of wisdom in Wisdom 7:22–8:1 illumines the Christology of the Fourth Gospel, the hymn in Colossians 1:15–20, and many other passages.

All congregations would likely benefit from background on Wisdom, especially since the community for whom Wisdom was written struggled with issues similar to those facing the church today. Wisdom

1. On topical preaching: Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19

Theological Perspective

and guiding human history and individual lives. In Christian theology, the God who sustains and guides does so as an expression of the divine character, which is that of a loving and just God. This love and justice is seen most clearly in God's revelation as a human person in Jesus Christ.

The portrait of God in these selected verses in chapter 12 looks to important biblical images and themes found in other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures and later in the New Testament.

God's Care Is for All. The history of Israel is the story of the God who acts, especially in establishing a covenant people who by God's mighty hand are liberated from slavery in Egypt. God displays love for the people by acting to save them. The Ten Commandments convey the way God wants the people of God to live. A beginning feature of the commandments is Israel's exclusive worship of this God, who had brought the nation into existence: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7).

In Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, the text appeals to the biblical tradition by saying of God, "For neither is there any god besides you, whose care is for all people." God as the singular God—the only one who is to be worshiped and served—is the prescription behind the declaration in this verse. We hear echoes of Israel's confessional Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (Deut. 6:4). This was the anchor of Israel's faith, in the midst of the various "gods" worshiped by neighboring nations in the ancient Near Eastern world.

Verse 13 extends its description of God, not only to encompass God's position as the sole "god," but to describe God's nature as a God "whose care is for all people." The widening circle of God's love from a covenant people (Israel) to "all people" is a movement consistent with the message of Jesus, who is the "light of all people" (John 1:4). Parables such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46) point to a love that followers of Jesus are to extend to all people, regardless of who they are. This reflects the nature of Jesus' love—and God's love.

God Is Sovereign over All. The God who cares for all is also the God who is sovereign over all. God's ways are righteous and just: "You are righteous and you rule all things righteously" (v. 15). It is God's "strength" that is "the source of righteousness" (v. 16). God could "bring the hammer down" on all

Pastoral Perspective

conquest, we tend to dismiss this side of God as soft, even cowering. Here the author asserts as strongly as possible that God is sovereign over all; if we are wondering if this God of Wisdom can "pull the trigger," verses 23–27 remind us of God's annihilation of the Egyptians. Our need to control and even dominate is reflected in the author's queries here: why did God not destroy the wicked?

The answer is remarkable and striking and even modern! If God is God, and if there is no other God—both strong hallmarks of Judaism—then God is God of all people, not just the Jewish people. The author makes the astonishing claim that God is not only choosing to refrain from obliterating the "bad" people, but also may even be moving toward loving those who have been portrayed as such evil people. The fierce protector of the Hebrews may also have an eye on the Gentiles.

It is a voice that resonates through Jewish history so that Jesus draws upon it. It is a glimpse of that thread of Judaism that bends toward loving and universalism, a thread that fires Jesus the Jew so much. It led him to the Sermon on the Mount, to the outcasts, even to the Gentiles. From "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44) to "he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24), Jesus uses this Wisdom side of God to urge us to put love at the center of our lives, rather than fear or resentment or revenge. Indeed, as after his resurrection he closes his ministry in Matthew 28:18–20, where he gives the Great Commission, he commands his followers to go beyond the borders of the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24) and make disciples of all nations.

These words in chapter 12 of the Wisdom of Solomon are set in the context of cultural and theological questions about God, but they offer wisdom for us also: let love be our guide, not fear or resentment. If the sovereign and conquering God can act with mercy toward the abominable "other," why can't we? The love that undergirds this mercy is not a mushy sentiment that sells Valentine products but, rather, a love that recognizes hurt and grievance and struggle. It is the love lifted up by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, a love that is tough and acknowledges the need for engagement and endurance with the other.

Let no one misunderstand and believe that this is a calling for a world where everyone is nice and civil. These are words of wisdom for the kind of world we live in. If someone killed or threatened any of my loved ones, I would want an eye for an eye. Part of my loving is to engage deeply with those in my inner circle, and I hurt when they hurt. The author

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19

Exegetical Perspective

nature, that God's unwillingness utterly to destroy them constituted a great display of mercy (vv. 3–11)

The verses in this pericope are in the form of a direct address to God, but they seem to have more the quality of theological reflection than prayer. Verse 13 acknowledges the uniqueness of God and states that no other deity can hold God accountable. God stands out from other deities (or conceptions of deities) because of God's "care" for all. In the NRSV, the translators have supplied the word "people," but the Greek has only the substantive for "all"; as the footnote suggests, this could imply that God cares for all things. This concern for all sets God apart (for a similar use of this verb, see John 10:13, where the good shepherd cares for the sheep). That God does not answer to any other being indicates that the care comes from God's very nature, not from compulsion to live up to expectations.

Verse 16 begins the author's deep reflection on the relationship between God's strength and God's mercy. Rather than see strength and mercy as either competing or complementary aspects of the divine nature, the author sees God's mercy deriving from strength ("for your strength is the source [or beginning] of righteousness"). If one can broadly understand "righteousness" as relationship—between God and people, and among people—then the author affirms that strength and power form the foundation for God's mercy and care. God does not show mercy out of weakness or softness, but because of divine strength and power. God's unchallenged authority enables God to show mercy and forgiveness.

Verse 17 presents translation difficulties. The first part of the verse affirms that God gives displays of power to help dispel doubt. Chapter 11 suggests that the water from the rock in Exodus 17 manifested God's power in response to doubt and the earlier rejection of Moses (11:14). Although the second part of the verse is hard to translate exactly, the general sense is that when people know of God's strength, yet still act arrogantly, God convicts or rebukes that insolence.

More translation problems emerge in verse 18. The NRSV renders the first few words of this verse "although you are sovereign in strength." This represents a rather safe approach to the text. The Greek carries more the sense that God controls or masters the divine strength. God is sovereign over the divine strength and power. If this understanding is correct, the verse attempts a kind of psychology of God. When God properly harnesses the divine power, God becomes able to "judge with mildness" (the Greek

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was written (perhaps in the first century BCE) when the Jewish community had to respond to hellenization, the attempt, begun by Alexander the Great, to bring Greek influence into communities around the Mediterranean basin. The Romans compounded such pressures through Roman ideology, culture, and practice. Wisdom seeks to reinforce Jewish identity by calling attention to distinctive and essential qualities of Jewish theology and ways of life, especially in contrast to idolatry and its consequences.

The preacher might help the congregation today consider parallels between the setting of Wisdom and our own context. The contemporary church is threatened with losing its distinct identity, message, and mission in the face of pressures such as secularism, consumerism, individualism, the prosperity gospel, and partisan and national ideologies. Indeed, such things often function as idols. The preacher could point to the strategy of Wisdom to help maintain Christian identity. Wisdom names the characteristics necessary to Jewish life, compares them to qualities of life in the broader culture, and calls attention to the consequences of giving up Jewish distinctiveness. A church that succumbs to idolatry will become like the idols. Indeed, idolatry leads communities to chaos and collapse (11:15–12:2).

Today's passage is a good starting point for such a sermon. Beginning in 12:2, the writer uses the Canaanites as a case study in sin and its consequences. The community that follows wisdom can avoid the consequences that befell the Canaanites.

The Canaanites engaged in sorcery and in "unholy rites," including child sacrifice and sacrificial feasting on human flesh and blood (12:3–5). Such practices violate the purposes of the God of life. Indeed, child sacrifice is murder of the helpless (12:6). As a consequence, God ended the Canaanite occupation of the land. The preacher might encourage the congregation to consider ways that our culture tolerates not only violence against children and adults, but also conditions that nurture and even glorify the violent spirit. For example, the practice of capital punishment institutionalizes death at the center of our culture.

Elsewhere, Wisdom asserts that the means of sin become the means whereby God's punishment is visited on a people (11:15–16). From this point of view, a community that tolerates violence and the conditions that lead to it can expect violence to undermine its quality of life and even to lead to its collapse.

From my theological perspective, it is inconsistent to think that the God who condemns violence in human community would actively punish a people

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19

Theological Perspective

those who are themselves unrighteous and unjust. However, God's strength—and God's character—enables God to act in ways that are sovereign. That is, God's actions are the supreme actions because they are expressions of the "Supreme Being."

What we find in verse 16 is the affirmation that "your strength is the source of righteousness, and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all." The character of the God of Israel here may move against the grain of natural expectations. It might be assumed that the sovereign Lord of all could rightly act in all vengeance and retribution against those who are unrighteous or unjust. Instead, God's "sovereignty" enables God to act in sovereign love, sovereign care, sovereign grace—to "spare all." God's sovereignty means God can "judge with mildness" and govern with "great forbearance" (v. 18). God's sovereignty is expressed in benevolence because this is who God is.

Be Kind to All. The people are then instructed that "through such works you [God] have taught your people that the righteous must be kind." God has "filled your children with good hope, because you give repentance for sins" (v. 19). The people are to look to the character of this sovereign God of Israel to gain guidance on how they should live. To be "righteous" is to be "kind"—because this is who God is. The people of God are to reflect the divine character. When they fail, the people still have "good hope," because God gives "repentance for sins" (v. 19). Repentance for sins is a gift from God, to enable the divine relationship of righteousness and justice to continue in the community. Repentance means turning from sin, walking in a new direction, and living a new life. This is possible by God's gracious gift of repentance.

In Jesus Christ, we see the same responsiveness. In gratitude to God for God's love in Christ, the followers of Christ show kindness and love to others. We too repent—because God's love for us in Christ draws us to the new directions. As Paul put it, "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). We see God's kindness supremely in Jesus Christ, who lived and died for us (Rom. 5:8). "So then, . . . be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:25, 32).

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

here is asking us to consider a larger circle of love, where the other is seen as connected to us, no matter how detestable we believe them to be. As the non-Christian Hindu Mahatma Gandhi put it, "An eye for an eye only leads to the whole world being blind." In this sense Wisdom is calling for us not to make the world nice but, rather, to make the mercy that God gives to the enemy (and to us) the guiding principle of our lives in a not-so-nice world.

One of my heroes was Charles (Buddy) Hughes, a Presbyterian minister who, along with his spouse, Anne, was a longtime missionary in several countries. When he and Anne retired, they came to Georgia and became part of our church. In one of Buddy's sermons at Oakhurst, he told the story of walking with his young granddaughter through their comfortable neighborhood. They passed the men collecting the garbage for the city, and Buddy and one of the men said hello to each other. Buddy's granddaughter admonished him for this, saying, "Grandpa, don't do that—don't ever speak to strangers." In his sermon, Buddy indicated that he knew what she meant, but his heart also sank because of the distance that her statements indicated. He lamented the wide gap between "us" and "them" that he had noticed since returning to the States, and he was grieved that it was reflected in her language. His observations about American cultural life over fifteen years ago have proved correct in our growing polarization.

The author of Wisdom asks us to consider another way, a way that a later Jew named Jesus would also ask us to consider. We should consider this not only because in the long run it is the most practical, but because mercy and love are in the very nature of God, a nature toward which we are asked to shape and move ourselves.

NIBS STROUPE

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16–19

Exegetical Perspective

carries the sense of forbearance). Although the Old Testament presents narratives of God contending with anger, with a human talking God down from wrath (Gen. 18:23–33), this passage does not give any information on how God controls the divine anger or strength.

The Old Testament offers examples of foreign leaders who display a poor psychology for leadership, either irrationally angry or easily flattered and manipulated (Dan. 3 and 6). This poor leadership results in suffering and disorder. God's measured strength leads to mercy and harmony. Within the deuterocanonical material, Sirach 16:11 also reflects on the relationship between divine strength and mercy, but the two seem to constitute different aspects of God's nature. This Sirach verse does, however, contain the phrase that God is "mighty to forgive."

The human response to God's strong mercy comes in two forms in verse 19: modeling the kindness shown by God, and drawing hope from the offer of repentance. Even the hope takes the form of gift rather than exhortation. God has taught kindness and enabled hope.

This passage offers much material for reflection to the contemporary community of faith. This community finds much discomfort in the biblical narratives about the conquest of other peoples and the wrath of God, especially in the Old Testament, but even in the New. The author of this book may take too easy a path to resolving the difficulties of the conquest narratives. His assumption that the evil of the Canaanites was "inborn" (12:10) seems too sharp a division between the people of Israel and other nations.

Nevertheless, this author pushes the contemporary community of faith to ask about the nature of divine strength, punishment, and forgiveness. His insights that mercy derives from divine strength and that God shows mercy by free choice help to enrich the biblical understanding of God's nature. Within Israel's wisdom tradition one finds the assertion that mercy and forgiveness constitute acts of strength and power. God's wrath originates from God's concern for those hurt by injustice, oppression, and sin. Yet God channels that wrath by mastering strength that becomes the source of forgiveness. This passage gives insight into some of the most troubling texts in the Bible. Even with continuing problems, that insight is a gift.

CHARLES L. AARON

Homiletical Perspective

with violence such as the Canaanites suffered. A better theological perspective is to think that communities bring such consequences on themselves. Patterns of violence in a culture work against the stability of that culture. Violence begets violence to the point that all can be destroyed by it.

In 12:8–11, the author lays a foundation important to the assigned reading and to the church today. God did not punish the Canaanites in a single dramatic blow, but did so "little by little" (12:8). At one level, this assertion illustrates how corruption often works in a community: little by little until the consequences are irreversible. From day to day and year to year, we may not be aware of how idolatry and covenantal unfaithfulness are eating away at community, but over time, such things add up to bring a community down. On the other hand, this assertion demonstrates God's patience. God wanted the Canaanites to repent and gave them many opportunities.

In 12:12–15, the writer makes the case that God is fair in punishing the unrighteous. The underlying assumption is that wisdom makes the knowledge of God available to all people through creation. Indeed, God cares for all people (v. 13). However, any person or community who does not follow the way of wisdom deserves to be punished. God never judges unjustly.

Even so, Wisdom admonishes the reader to believe that God acts with "mildness" and "forbearance" (vv. 16–18). Wisdom assumes that God has absolute power and could unleash it whenever and however God chooses. This assertion could spark the preacher to think with the congregation about what they really believe concerning the extent of God's power. Process (relational) theologians today, for instance, argue that God's power is not absolute but limited.

According to 12:16, Israel should learn from the Canaanites to be kind, that is, to live in covenantal ways that affirm life, in contrast to the Canaanites and their culture of violence, epitomized by child sacrifice and feasting on flesh and blood. When Israel leans into violation of God's purposes, God provides repentance as a gift. Repentance involves both turning away and turning toward: the community can turn away from the things that destroy community and turn toward things that encourage covenantal qualities of life. The preacher could help the congregation recognize specific actions of repentance. For example, the congregation could take a stand against capital punishment. Are there points at which the congregation's internal life or its external behavior fall short of God's purposes? What practical steps of repentance can the preacher identify?

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**PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6
AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)**

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16

- ¹² Wisdom is radiant and unfading,
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,
and is found by those who seek her.
- ¹³ She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.
- ¹⁴ One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty,
for she will be found sitting at the gate.
- ¹⁵ To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,
and one who is vigilant on her account will soon be free from care,
- ¹⁶ because she goes about seeking those worthy of her,
and she graciously appears to them in their paths,
and meets them in every thought.

Theological Perspective

The book of the Wisdom of Solomon is one of the most important deuterocanonical wisdom writings. The Greek tradition (LXX) attributes the book to Solomon, the wise king in 1 Kings 2–11, and the author of the book assumes the persona of this king, though no specific author can be determined definitively. Internal evidence, however, indicates that the author was probably a Jew who was acquainted with the traditions of his people. The dating of the book is also uncertain, though most scholars situate it somewhere between 220 BCE and 50 CE. The book as a whole presents a dynamic example of the development of Jewish thought during the final decades of the Second Temple period. One particular passage rich in theological content is Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16. In this passage, the biblical writer presents a lively portrait of wisdom, personified as a woman. Wisdom in Hebrew is *hokmah*, and in Greek, *sophia*. To become intimate with wisdom is to become intimate with God.

The biblical writer begins the description of wisdom with two simple adjectives: radiant and unfading. Wisdom has an enduring presence. Immediately following this initial description, the author begins

Pastoral Perspective

This passage occupies an important place in the structure of the Wisdom of Solomon. Up to this point, wisdom appears within the contrast that the author explores between the wicked and the righteous. Rulers must love righteousness, therefore, because wisdom passes by the deceitful and refuses to “dwell in a body enslaved to sin” (1:4). In 6:12, however, wisdom emerges center stage as the female figure of Wisdom personified. The author, who ventriloquizes his teaching through the voice of King Solomon, praises and celebrates her. Solomon then narrates his own history under the tutelage and guidance of Wisdom until, at the beginning of chapter 11, this panegyric to divine wisdom modulates into an extended reflection on God's providence. The author describes how God's providence, the intelligence of which is wisdom, reveals itself in Israel's dealings with the Canaanites and the Egyptians, an account that also reprises, in terms of salvation history, the earlier contrast of the righteous and the wicked.

A marked shift in tone also occurs in 6:12–17. The preceding verses have launched a furious warning against the world's rulers, the author probably aiming his polemic against the Romans and the

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16

Exegetical Perspective

How does one attain wisdom? Do we climb the mountain to ask the clichéd guru at the top? Can one rise to leadership without wisdom, so that the powerful need lessons in acquiring it? The sages of Israel spent much time praising and describing wisdom and ruminating on how one becomes wise. Drawing on the biblical tradition of Solomon, this book offers reflections on wisdom, using both Hebrew and Greek thought.

These verses appear in the midst of a chapter addressed to those in leadership (“kings” and “judges,” 6:1). The beginning of the chapter (6:3) exhorts leaders to recognize that their power derives from God (“the Most High”). God shows no deference to human leaders (6:7). God judges the fitness of their leadership and holds them accountable; this first part of the chapter does not specify the exact standards by which God judges leaders, but invokes the “law” and the “purpose of God” (6:4). In 8:15 and 9:12 the book talks about “capable” and “just” leadership.

Wisdom enables leaders to govern effectively and appropriately, and the author offers instruction about the acquisition of wisdom. One of the connections between Solomon and the first-century-CE

Homiletical Perspective

What do you say when you find yourself surrounded by voices insisting that human life is nothing more than a cosmic accident, that our existence is as evanescent and insignificant as fog, and that what we do does not matter except to ourselves? Furthermore, these voices argue, since what we do does not matter, we should find whatever satisfies us and enjoy the brief time we are given with such sundry opportunities as life may afford?

We hear the clamor of this message from Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and other aggressive prophets of “the new atheism,” even as the teacher of the *Wisdom of Solomon* heard it in first-century-BCE Alexandria (2:2–5). Their estimation of our situation sounds so worldly wise; in our day, it even sounds sort of scientific. There is only one problem: it is not true. The teacher discerns “the secret purposes of God” (2:22) and understands we are created not by happenstance but in the image of God, to live everlastingly (2:23).

The psalms sing with some confidence that God will not abandon us to death: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for [God] will receive me” (Ps. 49:15), and the New Testament voices confidence that God will overcome

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16

Theological Perspective

to personify wisdom as a woman, signaled by the use of the feminine pronoun “she.”

Theologically “woman wisdom” or “wisdom woman” must be prayed for (7:7). She is more priceless than any human possession. With her come lessons in all the mysteries of the physical works, for she is the “fashioner of all things” (7:22; cf. Prov. 8:30). Woman wisdom knows all things (7:15–21) because she pervades all things (7:24; 8:1). She is intimately related to God (7:25–26), and she has many extraordinary qualities (7:22–8:1). Elsewhere in Wisdom literature we hear that woman wisdom has a divine origin and was brought forth by God before the creation of the world (Prov. 8:22–26). She was present at the creation of the earth (Prov. 8:27–30a), has an intimate, joyous relationship with God (Prov. 8:30), and expresses delight and interest in the world and its human inhabitants (Prov. 8:31). Woman wisdom calls on human beings to listen to her and to heed her instruction, because it will give them “life” (Prov. 8:32–36).

This wisdom that the author describes in verses 12–16 is not obscure. She is easily discerned by those who love her, and she is found by those who seek her (v. 12). Thus wisdom is relational; having such a nature, she hastens to make herself known to those who desire her (v. 13). She can easily be found sitting at the gate (v. 14). She gives people understanding and frees them from care (v. 15). Wisdom herself takes the initiative to seek out those worthy of her; she appears in their paths (v. 16). To become acquainted and intimate with wisdom is to become acquainted and intimate with God; to search for wisdom is to search for God.

The fact that wisdom is easy to see (v. 12) implies that, since this is so, the foolish and wicked should have chosen her. Instead, they looked away and did not choose her. Additionally, the point that wisdom will be present and make herself known when someone begins to seek her (vv. 13–14) implies that the wicked had the same opportunity; but they chose to ignore wisdom sitting at the gate. Verse 15 adds an explanatory comment: wise planning will include a search for wisdom. Finally, the image of wisdom woman going about, seeking those worthy of her, and making herself known to those sought after, reflects the picture of woman wisdom presented in Proverbs 8.

Interestingly, wisdom is not discernible by reason. Knowledge of wisdom begins with love (v. 12). For the ancient biblical people, love is foundational to relationship. Love is the bond between parent and

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Gentile authorities in Alexandria. God, whom no power in heaven or earth intimidates or awes, will hold accountable those who “boast of many nations” but work wickedness and misrule. This admonition ends with an appeal to the powerful that they turn and seek wisdom. Now the tone changes quite dramatically and in a way crucial for understanding the character of Wisdom. The author begins his celebration of Wisdom’s beneficent presence by declaring her ways as good and joyful news. The world of the great lords recedes from view—though it returns later—and the reader contemplates Wisdom in her universal availability, a ready guide for any and all who seek and love her. The context of the nations thus opens out to an implicit inclusion of all communities and individuals, for whom Wisdom waits, as close as the town’s gate (v. 14).

How, though, does the author understand this universal Wisdom, to which he summons the regard and efforts of all and sundry? Certainly, Wisdom includes the knowledge and know-how by which human beings negotiate the world and their lives within it for the ensuring of security and happiness. Thus, Wisdom consists in knowing the movements of the stars, the behavior of animals, the character of the seasons, and the uses of plants (7:16–20). Perspicacity and sound judgment also come to those who pursue wisdom, as do insight into meaning and the gift of prophecy (8:8; 7:27). Wisdom, however, defines the author’s root contrast between the righteous and the evildoer, since she nurtures virtue, renews the understanding, exposes evil, and makes men and women “friends of God” (7:27). Since Wisdom is “radiant and unfading,” she may be “easily discerned” (v. 12).

This radiance, though, has a double aspect. As present within the ways of human beings, Wisdom’s light discloses God’s will, illuminates the working of God’s creation, and guides the righteous in good deeds. Wisdom’s radiance, though, is also the radiance of the divine glory, its beaming forth. She personifies, therefore, God’s mind, God’s creative, providential, and salvific intelligence. Given this double aspect, the author’s account of Wisdom oscillates between Wisdom as personification, and wisdom as concept.

When the author launches his full personification of Wisdom in 6:12–17, he celebrates her universal presence, focusing upon the readiness with which those who seek wisdom may find it. Though Wisdom reveals mysteries and illumines what otherwise would remain unyieldingly dark, Wisdom

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16

Exegetical Perspective

author of this book is the prayer for wisdom that each makes (cf. 7:7–22 and 1 Kgs. 3:6–9). In general, a wise leader governs with the dual aims of respecting divine priority and establishing the welfare of the people. God judges rulers who do not seek these ideals. Chapter 7 suggests that all can attain wisdom, as the author is “mortal, like everyone else” (7:1).

Today’s reading presents intriguing, if elusive and perhaps inconsistent, metaphors to describe wisdom and evoke reflection. Verse 12 employs two adjectives with layers of possible connotations. By describing wisdom as “radiant” (v. 12) the verse conjures a variety of possible images, no one of which exhausts the imaginative power of the term. “Radiant” can imply simply that wisdom shines with an eye-catching gleam. Wisdom does not lie on the ground as a dull thing, but attracts with its appearance. As a second possibility the New Testament writers used the adjective “radiant” to describe splendor, which a wealthy or powerful person might desire (Rev. 18:14). On a third level, radiance suggests a spiritual brilliance. Acts 10:30 (using the same root) describes the “dazzling” clothes of a heavenly messenger. The verse may wish to convey all three of these layers of meaning for “radiant.” Wisdom is attractive, desirable, and spiritual. The adjective “unfading” (v. 12) carries at least the meaning that wisdom does not diminish the way human glory and power do. More importantly, the adjective “unfading” connects with the eternal and immortal (1 Pet. 1:4). These adjectives might appeal to people in leadership, who value radiance and feel anxiety about the precarious nature of power.

Although one can talk about a person having a “radiant” face or personality, verse 12 seems to describe wisdom as an inanimate object. The image sounds perhaps like a jewel that one seeks to find. The radiance of the jewel makes it easy to locate. If so, the metaphor changes in verse 13 as the poet portrays a female character who meets the seeker halfway. She places herself in locations where the seeker likely will discover her.

The poem strikes a balance between the effort required to obtain wisdom and the active role wisdom itself (herself) takes to enable the connection. The seeker finds wisdom by fixing thought on her, and looking with vigilance. That wisdom meets the seeker at the gate and the path suggests that one finds wisdom in everyday life. Traveling the usual journey of life leads to wisdom (see Prov. 1:20–33, where wisdom not only appears in the important parts of the city, but cries out). Wisdom even enters

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death (1 Cor. 15:12–58). However, the teacher of the Wisdom of Solomon borrows the Greek philosophy dominant in Roman Alexandria to speak of hope in God in terms of immortality. The faith of Israel has never been a static and settled matter. Walter Brueggemann explains that the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon stretches “beyond what was characteristic of the Old Testament itself and takes full advantage of the religious development of subsequent Judaism in terms of immortality and the ongoing life of the righteous who are kept safe by God.”¹ Here immortality is the work of Wisdom, not merely a quality innate in human life.

Faithful people are prepared for immortality by Wisdom, God’s best gift. Could anything appear less attractive and more tedious, indeed terrifying, than existing in eternal stupidity? Ponder the Sisyphean repetition of neither forgiving nor learning how to forgive, of shopping and shopping and never finding the purchase that will make us happy and whole. How much more time do we need to discover the foolishness of our assumption that we are the center of the universe (and, therefore, of everyone else’s attention)? Only Wisdom can rescue us from the paltry damnations we condemn ourselves to endure. Wisdom is personified as a woman who is neither another deity nor a subdeity, but the very “breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (7:25). Wisdom saves us because Wisdom is “a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of [God’s] goodness” (7:26). Like God, “Wisdom is radiant and unfading”; the KJV translates, “Wisdom is glorious, and never fadeth away” (6:12).

The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon teaches students who have choices to make. At the beginning of this section he speaks of them as “kings” and “judges of the ends of the earth” (6:1) and addresses them, “O monarchs” (6:9), but the language is figurative. Then as now, there were not enough such rulers to provide a readership, and not everyone in that society had the capacity to make decisions about how they live, but the teacher understands that these students already have some control and the means to choose. If they want power they will have power; if they seek wealth they will find wealth; but the teacher invites them first to discover Wisdom. The teacher seeks to make Wisdom the ultimate object of desire, while at the same time pointing to her complete attainability. Wealth and power can be elusive

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel’s Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 228.

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child (Gen. 22:2; 44:20) and the mutual devotion and commitment expressed in close friendships (1 Sam. 18:1–4; 20:17; 2 Sam. 1:26; Ruth 4:15).

Woman wisdom's place at the gate is significant. In ancient times the gate was an entrance to a city (1 Kgs. 22:10), a camp (Exod. 32:26), the tabernacle (Exod. 27:16), and the temple (Ezek. 40–48). The gate included a complex of two, four, or six rooms on both sides of the passage into the city. Each pair of rooms could have contained guards or soldiers to help prevent an enemy's passage into the city. For added protection, the main gate was built inside an outer gate and a second set of city walls. In times of peace, the gate complex was the center of city life. Elders administered justice at the gate (Deut. 21:19; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:1). Kings sat at the gate to meet their subjects and administer justice (2 Sam. 19:8; 1 Kgs. 22:10). Priests and prophets delivered discourses and prophecies at the gate (Neh. 8:1, 3; Jer. 17:19–20; 36:10). Merchants conducted business at or near the gate (Neh. 13:15–22). Thus, woman wisdom presides at the gate so that she can inspire political and religious leaders of her day. Her mission is to impart her spirit—her “wisdom”—to all in leadership positions.

Contrary to the Greek tradition, the church fathers and medieval rabbis considered the Wisdom of Solomon to have been composed originally in Hebrew, since the text was so closely associated with Solomon. In one of his sermons on Wisdom 6:12–16, Pseudo-Augustine tells his listeners that if they want love, then they must love wisdom and desire fervently to acquire it. He speaks of the reciprocal relationship that can exist between wisdom and the one seeking wisdom. Those who love wisdom will be cared for beneficently by her.

In sum, wisdom, like its source—God—is relational, ready to respond to seekers, ready to initiate a relationship with humankind, and it waits to inspire those entrusted with leadership and public service. Wisdom, God's servant, is ready to serve all.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

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herself does not hide from those who seek. She does not trade in enigmas and riddles; rather she solves them, approaching her seekers eagerly, just as they approach her (vv. 13, 16), an image that nicely conveys the experience of how understanding generates its own increase in further understanding.

This author, therefore, encourages his readers to a buoyant confidence in learning and in that enquiry into the Torah that yields knowledge of the way of righteousness. To be sure, the God-fearing community must commit itself to pursuing Wisdom, and the righteous person must get up early to study (v. 14). Wisdom, though, will always arrive there before them, putting herself in the way of finding. Learning comes naturally to human beings, God has made them thus.

Folly, however, deliberately turning from sound reasoning and from the laws that God has made known, turns nature unnatural, corrupts mind and heart. No one, then, the author urges, should fear knowledge. The truth is friendly, and whoever persists in searching for it “will soon be free from care” (v. 15). Wisdom leads to good and away from evil.

These assurances as to the possibility and worth of knowledge, and of the studies that lead to it, have their root in God's goodness and God's ordering of creation as good, as a home for the righteous. The figure of Wisdom in this passage stands at the opposite pole to a gnostic appeal to seek wisdom. Wisdom, radiantly visible to any who look for her, mediates God's goodness as the goodness of creation and of the human mind. Unlike the gnostic spirits, trapped in a corrupt world and lost in the deepest obscurities, the wicked, in this author's vision, alienate themselves. Eager to guide them, Wisdom sets out to cross their paths (vv. 12–13, 16). The Wisdom of Solomon does not, though, proceed from naïveté; it exhorts the readers to hold to their trust in wisdom under the grim reality of Jewish persecution in the Roman Empire.¹ This trust, maintained in dangerous times, has, like Wisdom herself, a double aspect: confidence in the universal order of God's creating, against which tyrants prove themselves fools, and confidence in the particular providence that guides and shelters the people of God, before which the wicked shall rage and fall.

ALAN GREGORY

1. For the political and social context, see David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 20–24.

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12–16

Exegetical Perspective

the seeker's head, meeting the seeker in his or her thoughts.

If scholars are correct that the author of the work is an Alexandrian Jew, might one suggest that wisdom transcends the debate between empiricism and rationalism? Without trying to argue about direct influence from Greek philosophy, one can note that the seeker finds wisdom in both observation (empiricism) and in reflection (rationalism).

This part of the poem puts all of its effort into making wisdom seem attractive, worth the effort to find, and approachable. Wisdom takes the initiative to find the seeker. The poem does not give advice about how to use wisdom, once the leaders have found it. As the sages of Israel sometimes do, the author of this poem overstates the benefits of wisdom (cf. Prov. 3:16, which promises “long life”). In the verses just after the reading, the poet associates the love of wisdom with keeping her laws, with the promise of immortality (6:18–19). The poem suggests that the love of wisdom will allow kings to continue in leadership even in the afterlife (6:21). Taken as a whole, the poem offers both threat (6:5) and promise as motivation to seek wisdom.

The contemporary reader can draw abundant and obvious conclusions about the benefit of reflection on this poem. Politicians too often display a distinct lack of wisdom with their oversimplification, exaggeration, mendacity, and verbal attacks. Power becomes an end in itself without genuine acknowledgment of the responsibility given by God for leadership. Politicians put party loyalty over the good of the people. They seem to value strategy over genuine wisdom. Might the church, in its teaching and proclamation, hold out this vision of wisdom for leaders? The poem does not interpret wisdom as a way to attain power, but as a necessary trait for the proper use of power.

Reflection on contemporary understandings of the poem would prove most useful for the community of faith and the culture. This poem makes a case for those Christian denominations that do not regularly read this part of Israel's tradition to reflect on what this book might teach persons in power about the role of wisdom in leadership and the deference leaders should show to the Deity.

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

as well as delusive. Wisdom, on the other hand, contains no disappointments and is perfectly obtainable. Those who seek wisdom will find her (v. 12). Their search will by no means be in vain. Wisdom will appear wherever they go and greet “them in every thought” (v. 16). She is utterly desirable but not at all unreachable. The text for the day hymns her unqualified accessibility: “She is easily discerned by those who love her. . . . She hastens to make herself know to those who desire her” (vv. 12–13).

The teacher does not howl like the author of the book of Job, wondering, “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” (Job 28:12). Instead, he invites his readers simply to long for Wisdom above all things. With the seeking will come finding. Wisdom is no stranger to human life. David Winston, perhaps the premier scholar of this document, translates 6:14, “Who anticipates the dawn on her behalf will not grow weary, for he will find her seated before his door.”²

Wisdom arrives each day as regularly as the morning paper and is even more reliable. So often the search for Wisdom is depicted as a long, arduous journey or a series of grim tasks to be undertaken. Think of those cartoons with characters scaling the mountain to reach the wise but remote sage at the pinnacle who can finally offer enlightenment. It is nothing like that, teaches the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon. If you would seek Wisdom, first understand that Wisdom seeks you (v. 16). As in classical theology each step of the *ordo salutis* that leads to God is powered and directed by the Holy Spirit, so also Wisdom guides those who seek her. We are meant to live with Wisdom by Wisdom seeking Wisdom, for Wisdom “pervades and penetrates all things” (Wis. 7:24).

PATRICK J. WILLSON

2. David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 152.

PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6 AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17–20

- ¹⁷ The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction,
and concern for instruction is love of her,
¹⁸ and love of her is the keeping of her laws,
and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality,
¹⁹ and immortality brings one near to God;
²⁰ so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom.

Theological Perspective

In Wisdom 6:17–20 the poet lists a series of inter-related ideas that pertain to wisdom: the beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction; concern for instruction is love of wisdom; love of wisdom is the keeping of her laws; the giving heed to wisdom's laws is assurance of immortality; immortality brings one closer to God; thus, the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom. This chain of events is called a *sorites* or chain syllogism, a type of Greek logical thinking in which one part of a preceding statement is picked up in the next statement. Embedded in these verses are three specific points for theological reflection: instruction, law, and immortality.

In verse 17 the poet makes clear that the beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction. Instruction is a willingness to be taught. It presumes a certain degree of humility and docility and the ability to listen. In ancient biblical times, parents instructed their children in the ways of justice and righteousness (Prov. 1:8; 4:1; 13:1). Instruction is far more precious than silver and choice gold (Prov. 8:10). God is the one who opens ears to instruction (Job 36:10), and by listening to instruction, one gains wisdom (Prov. 19:20). Instruction, then, is a gift, and the willingness to be instructed is

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This passage provides a striking conclusion to the author's praise of Wisdom, begun in verse 16, and to his exhortation to seek her "radiant and unfading" goodness. In verse 21, Solomon returns to address his fellow rulers, applying his advocacy of Wisdom directly to their ambitions. "Honor wisdom," he urges, "if you delight in thrones and scepters." Verses 17–20 form a single though multipart affirmation constructed according to a rhetorical device known as "climax," after the Greek word for "ladder." Using this device, ideas are linked in phrases, one leading to another in a progression that is formed as a term in one phrase is picked up in the next. Here the author articulates the climax on the words "instruction," "love of her" (i.e., Wisdom), "laws," and "immortality." Together, they form a progress from wisdom to sovereignty.

Despite the reference to instruction as "the beginning of wisdom" (v. 17), however, this progress is more analytic than sequential. Instruction, love of wisdom, the keeping of laws, and immortality unfold as the essentially connected elements of mastery over self and, therefore, of the freedom and integrity necessary for the exercise of responsible rule. Rhetoricians have also used the term "*sorites*," from the

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17–20

Exegetical Perspective

The Wisdom of Solomon is one of the fifteen apocryphal books or portions of books preserved in the Latin Vulgate but not found in the Hebrew Bible. Its provenance is most likely Alexandria, Egypt, early in the first century CE. Some have suggested that Philo might have been the author, but contemporary scholarship does not support that view, preferring rather to suggest that the writer of Wisdom may have been a contemporary of Philo. Certainly the audience of each was quite similar if not identical, namely, educated Jews living in Alexandria, who had to deal with oppressive political policy and perhaps actually physical oppression.

The book can be outlined in three sections:

1. An exhortation to justice (1:1–6:21)
2. In praise of Wisdom (6:22–10:21)
3. God's justice shown in the exodus (11:1–19:22)¹

The unit under consideration, 6:17–20, is in the form of what is called in Greek rhetoric a sorites, which is a chain syllogism with one proposition leading to

1. James M. Reese, "Wisdom of Solomon," in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 750, 753–54, separates 6:12–16 from the first section, placing it with 6:22–10:21. He further divides Wisdom into four, rather than three, sections. While his divisions are understandable, they do not seem to be crucial overall, and certainly not for understanding 6:17–20.

Homiletical Perspective

Browsing the shelves of a bookstore you will notice a section named Self Help or Personal Advancement, where you will find volumes offering counsel on taking control of your life with titles like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The Five Love Languages*, and *The 4 Disciplines of Execution: The Secret to Getting Things Done*. The sage who wrote the Wisdom of Solomon would recognize the strategy and understand. His words were written for people seeking power and control in the almost overwhelming circumstances of being aliens in a sometimes hostile culture.

Wrapping himself in King Solomon's royal robes to enhance his authority, the sage addresses his audience as "kings" and "judges of the ends of the earth" (6:1), but his instruction assumes his audience has lessons to learn before attaining either "a kingdom" (v. 20 NRSV) or "kingly stature" (v. 20 NEB). The writer assumes that his readers have decisions to make and are able to choose how they live. Not everyone could make the choices the sage counsels. Perhaps 30–40 percent of the population were slaves with severely restricted choices. For students who can act on their desires, the teacher provides a memorable rhetorical form they may carry with them to be prepared for whatever may happen.

Wisdom of Solomon 6:17–20

Theological Perspective

a virtue that leads to a fruitful life. To be willing to be instructed is to be a lover of wisdom (Prov. 9:9; Wis. 6:17).

To love wisdom is to keep wisdom's laws (v. 18). A righteous life must go beyond the mere adherence to the law. A righteous life is not solely an obedient life. To live righteously requires the addition of wisdom, which includes a range of virtues, such as diligence (Prov. 6:6–11; 10:4), generosity (Prov. 14:31; 22:9), humility (Prov. 18:12; 22:4), judicious speech (Prov. 17:28; 21:23), and fidelity (Prov. 5:18–20).

The relationship between wisdom and law has raised questions in recent scholarship. One view maintains that wisdom gave birth to law. Another view holds that wisdom derives from law. No consensus exists as to which view may be more accurate. For Israel, the law of the Lord is perfect (Ps. 19:7); it is a delight (Ps. 119:77) and a source of peace (Ps. 119:165). The law is written on the heart (Jer. 31:33), and its essence is love (Deut. 10:12–22).

Those who heed wisdom's laws are assured of immortality or "incorruptibility." The noun "immortality" (*athanasia*) occurs five times in Wisdom (3:4; 4:1; 8:13, 17; 15:3). The related term is "incorruption" (*aphtharsia*; 2:23; 6:18, 19). In Wisdom, these two terms are interchangeable. Here immortality is not just the natural endowment of the soul; it is specifically associated with righteousness and wisdom. The Wisdom of Solomon seems to ground its doctrine of immortality in the Genesis creation story: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Gen. 1:27). Likewise, the poet of the Wisdom of Solomon proclaims that "God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity" (2:23). The centrality of Wisdom of Solomon's theory of immortality represents a new emphasis in the history of Jewish tradition. The focus on immortality, however, is part of a continuous development in Jewish Hellenistic thought.

The earliest Israelites believed in somewhat of a collective immortality. They maintained that as long as the nation continued, the deceased members of the community would not completely perish. The earliest belief in personal life after death can be found in the book of Daniel (Dan. 12:1–3). The book reflects the religious oppression of the Israelites inflicted by Antiochus IV Epiphanes around 164 BCE. The indirect reference to the afterlife is linked to God's justice exercised on behalf of the innocent who were made to suffer. The Wisdom of Solomon builds on this early belief in an afterlife. In Wisdom 6:18, the poet makes no mention of a resurrection of

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Greek meaning "a heap," for the "climax" device. They frequently, however, identify the sorites as involving fallacious reasoning, the sequence seducing the hearer into accepting the connections as properly logical.

Clearly, the author of Wisdom intends to convey true relationships here, not spurious ones. His reasoning, though, is the reasoning of experience, not of logic. It reflects, therefore, the extensive testimony he gives elsewhere in the book to the examples of the wise and the righteous, in both contemporary and biblical contexts, in both worldly affairs and the encompassing providence of God.

The ladder of phrases in this passage reaches a double climax that serves to solidify the connection between immortality, drawing close to God, and sovereignty. Wisdom does not provide its readers with a systematic account of human destiny, but the author nevertheless treats death and hope with subtlety and a careful placing of emphases. As is common within the author's hellenized Jewish milieu, biblical inspirations merge with Greek philosophical concepts and arguments, specifically those of a Platonism strongly inflected with Stoic ethics and cosmology. The ideas connected in 6:17–20, though, suggest that the Jewish sensibility controls the Hellenistic philosophy. Though the details are not altogether clear, Wisdom adopts apocalyptic expectations of God's final judgment, in which the wicked will find their due punishment and the righteous will share in God's rule over a new age (3:7–9).

The author also holds a Hellenistic doctrine of the soul as immortal, combining it with the apocalyptic hope via the conviction that the righteous dead rest in the peace of God until the "time of their visitation" on the day of judgment (2:23; 3:7). Significantly, though, and especially evident in verses 17–20, the author does not place his emphasis on immortality as a natural quality of the soul. Rather, he connects immortality with wisdom and keeping God's law.¹ The love of wisdom is the keeping of God's laws, and the keeping of God's laws is "assurance of immortality" (v. 18). "Assurance" translates a legal term for a guarantee or surety.

This sustains the familiar idea of immortality as a reward granted to those who obey God's will, and it may imply the writer's belief that God will ultimately destroy the wicked altogether, despite the tension with the doctrine of an immortal soul,

1. This certainly includes the Torah but "keeping the laws" probably also refers to the natural law available to the Gentiles and their rulers (see David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 42).

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the next (usually there were six), and then concluding with a “surprise” that was not obvious at the beginning. The final verse in Part 1, not part of the lection, offers a challenge to all exercising authority over others to give heed and honor wisdom (6:21; see 6:1 and 1:1–15). This skillful use of Greek rhetoric is noteworthy and indicates the degree of training the writer had in Greek literature. The content of the piece, however, is thoroughly Jewish.

The canonical status of Wisdom of Solomon has long been a matter of dispute among various parts of the Christian family. Early on, Jerome indicated his own hesitancy, preferring the shorter Hebrew canon to the larger collection found in the Septuagint. Martin Luther, centuries later, while agreeing with Jerome, did allow that the apocryphal material could be read as inspirational writing. In recent years these writings are being included in translations of the Bible being produced and are now included, at least as optional readings, in the Revised Common Lectionary widely used among Christians.

In the verses immediately preceding today’s text (6:12–16), Wisdom, Sophia, is personified as a woman in a manner reminiscent of Proverbs 8:22–31, Job 28:12–28, and Sirach 24:1–22. This theme will be expanded in 6:22–25. Wisdom is “easily discerned by those who love her” (6:12). Wisdom “hastens to make herself known to those who desire her” (6:13). She “graciously appears” to all who seek her (6:16). All of this is to prepare for the syllogism that concludes the first part of the book.

Entering into a life-controlling relationship with Wisdom is greatly to be desired. The “first step” (NIV; literally the Greek reads “her beginning,” which is reflected in the NRSV, v. 17) comes with a “sincere” or “earnest” desire for Wisdom that brings “discipline” (NIV) or “instruction” (NRSV). The Greek term *paideias* includes both ideas. Instruction always involves discipline, and discipline is essential for good instruction.

Paideias leads to the love (*agapē*) of Wisdom, a surrender of self to the teacher. This in turn brings about a “keeping of her laws” (v. 18). For Jews reading this syllogism, “laws” could only remind them of the instruction preserved in the Torah and celebrated in Psalm 119 as the means for a complete and satisfying relationship with God. The keeping of the Law is not a burden but flows directly from the love of Wisdom.

Following or giving heed to Wisdom’s “laws” will bring “an assurance of immortality” (v. 18 NRSV; see 3:4; 4:1; 8:17; 15:3) or “the basis for incorruptibility” (v. 18 NIV). There are two Greek terms used

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In preceding verses (6:12–16) Wisdom has been revealed as available and attainable; but how exactly are seekers to engage wisdom? The teacher complicates the quest for Wisdom by mapping the journey: seek wisdom by “desire for instruction,” “love of [Wisdom]” through “keeping her laws,” which provides “assurance of immortality,” which brings the seeker “near to God” and the hoped-for royal sovereignty. Although the teacher moves from one thing to the next, these are not steps to be rigidly followed so much as a collection of dispositions required for the way ahead. Wisdom presents herself everywhere and always to those who will look and listen.

Willingness to learn begins the journey to wisdom and royal control. Though Proverbs and Psalms teach, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10; Ps. 111:10), here Wisdom—nothing less than the “breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (7:25)—graciously becomes the teacher of Wisdom. The first text for this Sunday (6:12–16) emphasizes Wisdom’s availability and attainability, but now the sage invites students to listen. Not everyone will give attention to Wisdom’s lessons. Teachers know the difficulty of teaching those who do not want to learn. Students believe they know it already, or some fleeting thing that seems more interesting distracts them, or the class bores them because they cannot imagine how this lesson will contribute to their advancement.

A retired Army general recalled teaching paratroopers, preparing them for their first jump, and told me that he did not need to tell them to pay attention. By contrast, professors report finding students in class browsing the Internet and checking Facebook. Class is in session; only attention is lacking. Teaching is going on, but absent are the “desire for instruction” and “concern for instruction” (v. 17) that the sage of Wisdom recommends.

“Instruction” here is *paideias*, also translated “discipline” and “learning.” Those who are disciplined in receiving instruction discover love. Love of wisdom characterizes those on their way to ruling royally in their lives. All the mundane lessons to be learned, formulae to be memorized, and verbs to be conjugated may obscure the truth of what is happening: this is ultimately a romance. “I love those who love me,” sings Wisdom, who promises that “those who seek me diligently find me” (Prov. 8:17). Those words finally belong in the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet, not scrawled in a student’s notebook. This text, presented as the Psalm/Canticle

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the body; he merely introduces the Greek notion of immortality. The Wisdom of Solomon also develops this theme of immortality from the wisdom tradition itself, namely, Woman Wisdom (see Prov. 8:22–31). Meditating on the tradition of Solomon's prayer for wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:5–14), the author of Proverbs portrays the king's devotion to Woman Wisdom and the immortality he looks forward to because of his devotion (Wis. 8:13, 17).

Hence, even though the notion of immortality is Greek, in the biblical text the argument proceeds from Jewish theological thought. For the Israelites, righteousness, adherence to the covenant, and right relationship all assure immortality or incorruptibility (4:1; 6:18ff.), not an immaterial soul. Finally, in verse 19 the poet links immortality to coming nearer to God. Wisdom, then, together with the observance of the laws of love, leads one to becoming more closely united with God, while being transformed into that which is "holy."

The poet concludes his poem with the statement that the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom. This kingdom does not refer to an earthly kingdom. It refers to an inner kingdom, one that is characterized by all of wisdom's virtues.

The church fathers offer only two comments on Wisdom 6:17–20. Athanasius discusses immortality in relation to sin and concludes that human beings are mortal by nature because they are made from nothing. Had human beings preserved their likeness to God and not fallen into sin, then they would have diminished their natural corruption and would have become incorruptible. Furthermore, Augustine distinguishes between good and bad desires in his reflection on verse 20. He concludes that to desire wisdom is a positive and good desire, one that is spiritually beneficial, as opposed to a desire of the flesh that rises against the spirit.

In sum, the poet of Wisdom 6:17–20 offers a well-crafted lesson on the value of wisdom and why wisdom should be desired. The text hints at an afterlife and, more importantly, a dynamic relationship with God, who dwells in the midst of all.

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Pastoral Perspective

that human beings, as he puts it, were "made in the image of [God's] own eternity" (2:23; see also the "unsound reasoning" of the ungodly in 2:1–5). Such is the fluidity of the author's thinking, however, that the suggestion of immortality as reward is nudged quickly into the background as the climax connects immortality with drawing near to God.

Wisdom, so to speak, carries immortality with it, since the wise person, by giving life over to learning and living according to God's law, participates in the divine wisdom that "is more mobile than any motion [and] because of her pureness pervades and penetrates all things" (7:24). Living according to the divine order, then, does not so much deserve immortality as it is already a form of immortality. The author recognizes the obedience of the wise as immortality, because such righteousness brings the person and the community near to God, to the eternal Lord and Creator. Righteousness, so to speak, locates the wise in eternity.

Linking wisdom to immortality and then immortality to closeness to God allows the final step of connecting proximity to God with sovereignty. Though in verse 21 Solomon begins once again to address the rulers of the nations, sovereignty in the final phrase of the climax refers more broadly to the sovereignty that belongs to the wise person as such and is the proper issue of instruction and keeping the laws of God.

Hellenistic Judaism appropriated the Stoic insight that wisdom is the true form of sovereignty.² Wisdom unites to God and gives command over the self, and without God's illumination and without mastery over the self, rule descends to chaos and oppression (cf. 2:21). The wise person is not buffeted this way and that, not overwhelmed, deceived, intimidated, or terrorized into rash action, compromise, or abandoning the path of goodness. The wise person, holding fast to God and to the wisdom God has made plain to those who desire it, steadfastly maintains his or her path. Thus the one who enjoys true sovereignty dwells close to God, who does "not stand in awe of anyone" (6:7), and lives in wisdom, the form taken by immortality in the world. Even in their suffering, the wise experience now the assurance of their eternal future.

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2. Winston, *Wisdom of Solomon*, 156.

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in Wisdom to speak of the afterlife of individuals: *aphtharsias* (2:23; 6:18–19) and *athanatos/athanasia* (1:15; 3:4; 4:1; 8:17; 15:3). Each conveys some idea of an everlasting, eternal existence. Usually, the English term “immortal” is used with respect to *athanasia*, and “incorruptible” is employed with *aphtharsias*. This is not an absolute translation convention, however; while it is exercised in NIV, this is not the case with the NRSV, where “immortality” is used in 6:18–19, when “incorruptible” might have been expected.

In the New Testament (1 Cor. 15:52–55) a similar interchangeability of these two terms is found. The meaning of the passage is not altered fundamentally in either instance. The point is that there is some form of afterlife for human beings. This is not something inherent in the individual, as in Greek thought. There is no idea of a “soul” that in itself has an eternal character to it. Rather, this can come about only when God intervenes on the individual’s behalf. The “righteous” (NRSV) or the “just” (NIV) receive eternal life from God, who is committed to take care of them (5:15–16). There is nothing automatic here. As Kolarcik comments, “The author is not positing an inherent immortality that all humans possess. Rather, immortality depends on the inner life of virtue.”² Only God can give “assurance” of this “immortality.” Hebraic faith supersedes Greek philosophical speculation.

Drawing near to God because of the divine assurance of immortality is a consequence of the initial “desire” for wisdom. This in turn brings the reader to the surprising climax of the sorites. Where does that initial “desire” lead? To a “kingdom”! This, of course, is a goal greatly desired by the kings and judges, who are admonished at the very beginning of the book to “love righteousness/justice” (1:1), for “righteousness is immortal” (1:15). It remains to be seen whether the rulers will desire Wisdom and pursue her. Further, it is not clear whether the righteous will exercise dominion over others or only enter a divine realm. In either case, the pursuit of Sophia, Wisdom, leads to an incomparable situation of joy and completion, to a divine dominion.

Throughout the opening section of the book (1:1–6:21) readers have been encouraged to move away from a life of injustice, which will bring death. Only in the desire for Wisdom, which includes a commitment to justice, is “immortality” possible, for only there may one move into a close relationship with God.

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

reading, has its own rhythm and finally proposes to be a love song. People who are deeply happy and who live like royalty know what they love, and they live in the joy of love returned through the choices they have made.

The command to love wisdom (v. 18) is so obvious it is almost platitudinous. How does one do that? We know so well how love and our passions can lead us into all manner of foolishness. Again Wisdom provides for us, here by giving her laws (v. 18). The teacher of the Wisdom of Solomon is certainly thinking of Torah, as his condemnation of idolatry demonstrates. However, he is also a Jew thinking and writing in Greek in a Roman city in Egypt and evidences a cosmopolitan breadth of vision. “Keeping . . . and giving heed” (v. 18) to Wisdom’s laws recognizes that Wisdom “reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well” (8:1). Wisdom has provided an order in which those who are prudent may discern how to behave. It is quite characteristic of Wisdom to delve into the most practical matters of how to succeed in royal quarters (Prov. 25:6–7).

As Wisdom’s law is eternal, so Wisdom outfits her disciples for eternity. In keeping the law there is already the intimation of the richness of life Wisdom intends for us. The teacher speaks of this life everlasting as “immortality,” which employs the language and thought forms of his students. The sage was writing an exhortation to Wisdom, not a treatise on the hereafter. The emphasis, however, is not on our attainment of this immortality, so much as immortality’s purpose of bringing us near to God. This, the sage understands, is Wisdom’s great work: “In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom” (7:27–28). Those who live with Wisdom have lives worth living eternally. Moreover, they know how to live authentically regal lives, recognizing what is enduringly valuable and disdaining those things that finally evaporate away into time.

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2. Michael Kolarcik, “The Book of Wisdom,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5:447.

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