

DAY OF PENTECOST

Ezekiel 37:1–14

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me,

Theological Perspective

Like many of Israel’s prophets, Ezekiel experiences an extraordinary vision (cf. Isa. 1:1) that serves as a source of hope for a community exiled to Egypt and Babylon after the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. With great detail, Ezekiel gives a report of his vision. He makes clear that his experience is divinely initiated: God’s hand came upon him, he was led out by God’s Spirit, and then he was set down in the midst of a valley of dry bones (vv. 1–2). These bones were lifeless. Ezekiel’s first task among them was to proclaim God’s word to them, namely, that they were going to have a second chance at life because God was not only going to cover them with sinews, flesh, and skin but was also going to breathe new life into them (vv. 3–6).

Ezekiel delivers God’s prophecy to the bones, and lo and behold, the bones begin to come together. He then is told by God to prophecy to the breath. He follows the divine command, and immediately the breath comes into the bones and they stand up (vv. 9–10). The punch line of the report comes in verses 11–14, where Ezekiel learns from God that the bones represent the whole house of Israel.

Visions are part of the prophetic experience (cf. Isa. 6:1–13; Jer. 1:11–19; Zech. 1:7–6:8). Prophetic visions are intuitive experiences, that is, something

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Ezekiel’s graphic imagery of a valley littered with dry bones evokes conflicting feelings. The story is at once startling and depressingly familiar. Even as we draw back in horror at this gruesome scene that could have come straight out of news footage of mass graves left behind by genocidal armies, we despair at all-too-familiar imagery of violence, death, and decay. Who among us has not felt this mixture of horror and hopelessness as we learn of refugees fleeing the ravages of war and famine, lives lost in battle, terrorist attacks, and gang fights, and as we contemplate the devastation of domestic abuse, disease, addiction, and natural disaster? Who among us has not felt despair when confronted by some of the wasted lives all around us and the dead, empty places in our own hearts? Who has not wondered, “What is God going to do about this?”

We wander in valleys of dry bones every day, so often, in fact, that sometimes we succumb to a sense of powerlessness and loss of hope. Loss of hope is one of the most debilitating feelings a person—and a people—can experience. At the time Ezekiel was prophesying, the Israelites had endured the destruction of the temple and the forced removal of their people from the land. They must have thought that God had abandoned them, and they lamented: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we

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“Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

Exegetical Perspective

On Pentecost Sunday, Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones coming to life is offered as an alternate reading to (or alongside) the story of the Holy Spirit’s outpouring in Acts 2. The passage also occurs in the lectionary at two other times: during Lent and as part of the Easter Vigil. In each setting, a different dimension of Ezekiel 37 is foregrounded. What stands out most at Pentecost is the role of God’s spirit. The Hebrew word *ruach*, meaning “breath” and “wind” as well as “spirit,” is repeated ten times in these fourteen verses—four times in the climactic verse 9 alone:

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath [*ruach*], prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath [*ruach*]: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds [*ruach* plural], O breath [*ruach*], and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

What is this *ruach* that brings the dead to life?

Ezekiel speaks from Babylon as an exile, knowing that Judah’s temple and city are destroyed. Like earlier prophets, Ezekiel understands this disaster not simply as the unfortunate result of Babylon’s empire building. To him, since nothing can happen unless God allows it, Judah’s people and especially their leaders brought this devastation upon themselves by their disobedience to God.

Homiletical Perspective

Because it is one of only a few passages from Ezekiel with which preachers and congregations are on friendly terms, we may be tempted to barge into the conversation about the valley of the dry bones without appreciating the context in which the prophet was preaching. Although the sermon may not directly address this historic situation, the preacher should not forget that this vision is a gift to an exiled people. Hopeless people separated from every mooring, dislocated in a contemptuous foreign civilization: these are the ones saying, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (v. 11). The valley of the dry bones is one of several visions promising God’s renewal of exiled Israel. That it is the most evocative of these visions is attested by the ways it has fed both Jews and Christians, generated fresh visions to sustain faith in seasons of trial and exile, and thereby become a familiar metaphor for the people of God.

Ezekiel’s telling of the vision provides a recognizable and usable structure for a sermon, perhaps even an inescapable one: the movement from death to life and, once alive, to a life knowing God and God’s power to act. Unlike other visionaries, Ezekiel claims nothing for himself as he recounts the vision. “The hand of the Lord” grasped him and “the spirit of the Lord” brought him out

*Ezekiel 37:1–14***Theological Perspective**

that is seen “in the mind’s eye.” These visions are sheer gifts meant for the sake of the community and the common good. They help define and clarify the prophet’s mission, and in the case of Ezekiel, they reveal the steadfast and faithful love of God to a people who fear that they have been abandoned (v. 11).

Ezekiel is brought out by the Spirit of God to the valley of dry bones. This reference to the Spirit of God introduces into the story the term *ruach*, which occurs ten times in verses 1–14. *Ruach* means “spirit,” “breath,” “wind.” In this particular narrative, *ruach* has three nuances: an agency of conveyance (v. 1), direction (v. 9c), and animation (vv. 5–6). In the Ezekiel narrative, God’s Spirit is one that not only initiates but also leads and sends (cf. Isa. 61:1). This Spirit inspires and communicates God’s word to be proclaimed (Joel 2:28).

This Spirit empowers human beings to speak out and to act on behalf of the Divine (cf. Mic. 3:8). Throughout Israel’s history, God’s Spirit raised up and worked through Israel’s leaders. Moses led by God’s Spirit (Num. 11:17, 25), and the Spirit raised up judges: Othniel (Judg. 3:9–10), Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Samson (Judg. 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14), and Jephthah (Judg. 11:29). The Spirit rushed upon Israel’s kings: Saul (1 Sam. 11:6) and David (1 Sam. 16:13). God’s Spirit was also associated with an anticipated messianic king (Isa. 11:2; 42:1). This Spirit was often passed from one leader to another. For example, at Moses’ request God took some of the Spirit that was on him and bestowed it on seventy elders (Num. 11:25). When Moses died, Joshua was filled with the Spirit (Deut. 34:9). The Spirit departed from Saul and came to rest on the newly anointed David (1 Sam. 16:13–14). At Elijah’s request, Elisha received a double portion of God’s Spirit (2 Kgs. 2:9). Lastly, God’s Spirit is an agent of renewal (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26).

God’s Spirit, translated “breath” in Ezekiel 37:5, 6, 8, 9, 10, is the same Spirit that swept over the waters and initiated the divine creative action in Genesis 1 and 2. This Spirit brought all of life and all of creation into being. This “breath” of God is what animated the human being in the garden in Genesis 2:7, transforming that first being into a living being. The animals also have the “breath” of life within them (see Gen. 6:17; 7:15, 22). The divine breath also sustains and renews creation (Ps. 104:29–30).

In Ezekiel 37:10–14, God’s “breath” (v. 10)—God’s Spirit (v. 14)—is associated with the resuscitation of the bones, and the reference to the opening of the graves has led some of the early church fathers

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are cut off completely” (v. 11). From their place of exile, they must have wondered, “Why did God let this happen?” and “Is God going to do anything about it?”

Surely Ezekiel shared the people’s horror and despair at the parched killing fields, the destruction and exile, but he knew this was not the first time Israel had lost hope in God, and that God remained faithful. Ezekiel had hope. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Ezekiel still believed that God one day would restore Israel to new life and land. The people desperately needed his visionary hopefulness, but they also needed his tough-love challenge to take responsibility.

Ezekiel was not a starry-eyed idealist. He did not say that restoration would be easy; he did not try to sell the people feel-good philosophies, nor did he make empty promises. No, in chapters leading up to today’s lectionary reading, Ezekiel consistently tells the people that their situation is their own fault (see 36:16–21). Commissioned to show God’s holiness to the nations, they instead profaned God’s name by living a lifestyle no different than that of the idol worshipers. In effect, they expected so little of themselves and had so little faith in God’s goodness that they reduced the God of life to the same status as their neighbors’ lifeless idols, or abandoned God to worship other gods. Having forgotten the living God, the nation itself became lifeless and dead.

Pastors may hear warning bells as they hear that the people brought the calamity upon themselves, but we do not need to translate this into blaming victims for their suffering. Heaven knows there is enough inexplicable grief and suffering to go around, and much of it cannot be attributed to alleged misdeeds. In addition, we know of people who suffer because of the mistakes of others; they are the “collateral damage” of the reality we have created. Perhaps a better approach is to follow Ezekiel’s challenge to take responsibility, to not play the victim. Certainly there are things we cannot control, but there are many things we do have the power to influence. We also need to keep in mind that Ezekiel is looking at the bigger picture, not so much at individual actions and results, but at the consequences of a people’s loss of focus. There were no doubt a number of righteous individuals among the people of Israel before, during, and after the exile, but they suffered the same losses as everyone else, precisely because Israel’s suffering is corporate suffering. The Israelites did not have the same sense of individuality that we do. They prospered or failed

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Exegetical Perspective

In this moment of crisis, as Jacqueline Lapsley points out, the prophet shows himself to be understandably pessimistic about human capacity for goodness.¹ He insists that individuals are utterly free to make moral choices and utterly responsible for the consequences. Each individual has the opportunity to make decisions that will be life giving or death dealing (Ezek. 18). Yet Ezekiel sees little evidence that Judeans will choose more wisely in the future than they have in the past. Though blessed with moral agency, they are no more able to use this faculty well than lifeless bones are able to get up and walk. This conundrum in Ezekiel's theology could have led to an unspeakable impasse.

However, Ezekiel finds God in the gap. God initiated the whole human enterprise by making humans from dust and breathing into them the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). God likewise initiated the entire project that became Israel, choosing to take slaves from Egypt, giving them God's own law, and bringing them to a good land—and doing this with minimal cooperation (Ezek. 20:5–14). Now, Ezekiel says, God will take the initiative yet again: God's spirit will bring new life to a people dead as stone, dead as bones.

This vision of dry bones coming to life is closely related to a saying that has already appeared twice. In chapter 11, speaking for God, the prophet has already said of the exiles:

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Ezek. 11:19–20)

Again in chapter 36 the prophet says:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek. 36:26–28)

This new heart is nothing the people can obtain for themselves. The new spirit is not their own, but God's, a spirit enabling them to do what they could not before, to live as holy people before holy God.

1. Jacqueline Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live? The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 4.

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and set him down among the bones. Just as the spirit would later take Jesus into the wilderness (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1–2), the spirit powers this vision.

The hand and spirit of the Lord place Ezekiel in a valley filled with bones and death. This is an uncomfortable place, but it is a place to begin: we can place ourselves and our listeners in this valley. We may recall a line in the King James Version's translation of the Twenty-third Psalm, "the valley of the shadow of death," but in this valley there is no shadow at all—only death glowing bright on bleached bones. Who these bones once were is not made clear until verse 11, but this much is clear: these bones do not lie in the valley by accident; they have not arrived by "natural causes." Here lies death by public policy.

Ezekiel says, "The LORD . . . led me all around them," so there would be no mistaking what has happened. The bones evidence a dead army, a dead people, a dead nation. Go "all around them" and look carefully. Remember the film *The Killing Fields*, as Haing Ngor trudged through acres of skulls and shining ribs. Remember black-and-white U.S. Army documentaries flickering with the bone piles at Dachau and dozens of other death camps. History has a grim way of repeating itself, so the morning paper should provide more contemporary venues for strolls with death.

Some might protest that the dry bones are a mere metaphor of death. Death, however, is never content to be a "mere metaphor." Even the most figurative use of death will, given enough time, become quite literal. Ezekiel is made to walk "all around" the bones; all too often death is precisely what we "walk around," in order to avoid seeing it.

There is no "mere metaphor" here. The power of God's word is demonstrated in Ezekiel's preaching. Ezekiel readily admits that he knows nothing of the mysteries of life and death and new life; he has no power. God's power to act is crucial; knowledge of God's action completes the restoration. Trusting that God knows, meaning that God will act, Ezekiel preaches to dry, hopeless bones. This image of preaching to the dead provides fertile ground for all manner of wisecracks and asides, which wise preachers will forgo. The emphasis is on the power and sovereignty of God.

Ezekiel's vivid description, "As I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone" (v. 7), invites us to see the gradual reintegration of bones, then sinew, then flesh. The dramatic vision recapitulates the

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to associate this Ezekiel narrative with the Christian doctrine of resurrection. Origen sees the resurrection as a great mystery, yet no less proclaimed through the words of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 37:1–14. Paulinus of Nola sees Ezekiel as an answer to skeptics who question the resurrection: from the ancient dust, people will rise and stand anew. Finally, Jerome interprets Ezekiel 37:5 as a definitive statement that the Spirit gives life to human bodies, which immediately respond by standing up. While these precritical understandings of Ezekiel 37:1–14 are part of the Christian tradition and have an important place in the history of interpretation, caution needs to be exercised to understand the text in its own historical and literary contexts. Much of Ezekiel's language is metaphorical and points to the time when Israel will be restored to its land and to God.

For communities of faith today, Ezekiel's proclamations serve as a reminder that God's breath, God's Spirit, is transformative. A people once exiled and estranged from God will be changed from a heap of dry bones into the living people of God who, in turn, will become a sign that God is renewing the face of the earth.

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as a people, and Ezekiel addressed them as a people. Reading Ezekiel today, we need to examine what responsibility we have as the whole people of God, not just as individuals. We need to ask how our beliefs and actions—as a people—affect the world. We need to take responsibility and discern if we are fulfilling the desires of a life-giving God, or if we are contributing to the piles of dry bones.

A pastor might consider these examples: As a people called to be the body of Christ, we profane the name of God as we contribute daily to the ruination of the ecosystem that supports all of creation. We consume disproportionate amounts of food, luxury commodities, and fuel, while millions of people starve, and we ourselves suffer from diseases that result from our rich diet. Though we work at eradicating prejudices that divide us along lines of power and wealth, our overall track record in pursuit of true equality is poor. Caught up in our own particular lives, we lose our sense of God's life-giving power, God's creative activity on behalf of the whole world.

The good news is that even though we have a tendency as a people to lead boneyard lives, God continues to bring life out of death. Such restoration is not a reward. Ezekiel makes clear that God does not restore the people for their sake, but for the sake of God's own holy name, so that the nations will know God's holiness (Ezek. 36:22).

Would the nations know of God's holiness by looking at us? If not, can we allow God to remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh (36:26)? On Pentecost, we remember that God freely breathes God's life-giving spirit into us again and again, no matter how dry and desolate we have become, so that we truly can be God's people and a blessing to the world.

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Exegetical Perspective

The prophet spells out the divine intent in these two sayings, and in the story of the dry bones he shows it.

Divine initiative and human action are interwoven throughout this passage. It is God who leads Ezekiel to the valley and directs his attention and speech. It is the prophet who sees and describes the utterly dry bones, and responds by doing as he is asked, telling the desiccated bones to hear God's word. As he does so, with no help from the bones themselves (what could the dead possibly do?), God brings them together. God adds sinews, tendons to attach them; flesh, muscles to make them strong; and skin to give them form. Still they lie lifeless. It is only when God tells the prophet to speak to the *ruach*, and Ezekiel does so, that the spirit-breath blows from the four winds and the bodies live and stand. Divine agency and human response appear interwoven, if not inextricable. Initiative comes from God, who makes sure the prophet participates. Ezekiel calls to the spirit; the spirit enters the people; they come to life, a vast multitude.

Ezekiel's vision leads us to Pentecost. Back in the wilderness, in Numbers 11 (another Pentecost reading for another lectionary year), Moses complained that the people were too much to carry alone. In response God took some of the divine spirit that was in Moses and gave it to seventy elders, and they began to prophesy. When someone complained, Moses responded, "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" (Num. 11:29). Ezekiel echoes this theme when he claims that God's empowering spirit will re-create the people, making them able to do what they could not do before. Luke likewise echoes the theme in Acts with the disciples, who, like the exiles before them, thought all hope was lost. To their surprise, they find themselves empowered by God's Spirit to do what they could not do before. Only grace fills the gap between what we are made for and what we ourselves can manage.

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Homiletical Perspective

creation (Gen. 1–2). Only one final ingredient is lacking: spirit, breath, wind. In this case, however, the spirit/wind/breath that brought Ezekiel to the wilderness has become busy elsewhere, blowing where it chooses (cf. John 3:8), and must be summoned by the prophet "from the four winds." The spirit/wind/breath comes upon the inert creatures of flesh and "they lived, and stood on their feet."

It is a nation that is lifted from dust of the valley; now alive, they can be named: "These bones are the whole house of Israel" (v. 11). That life is given so unconditionally to all, and that individual merit has no place in God's calculations, may be something of an embarrassment to preachers. It is the resurrection of the whole people of God, not isolated worthy individuals. Although innumerable volumes tell us this text is not about resurrection, Jon D. Levenson, a professor of Jewish studies at Harvard, has written most convincingly of the resurrection and restoration of the whole people. Levenson explains that this new life is not a reward, and God does not discriminate between classes of Israelites. "The entire nation rises, just as the entire nation fell."¹

The act of restoring life belongs to God. Neither Christians nor Jews have been able to read these verses without hearing echoes of that hope. Reading the lesson in the days after Easter and on Pentecost, we cannot help but hear this hope. For Ezekiel and for the Gospel as good news of Jesus, God is the one who enters the human fray to destroy death and renew human life.

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1. Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 163.

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**PROPER 5 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 5
AND JUNE 11 INCLUSIVE)**

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

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

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

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The story opens with the people requesting a king, just as the other nations have kings (8:4–6a). Because such a request unsettles Samuel, he prays to God who, in turn, informs Samuel that the people can have a king (8:6b–9). Against his own better judgment, but with God’s consent, Samuel agrees, but true to his prophetic vocation, Samuel warns the people of the inevitable abuse of power that will occur once a king governs the land of Israel (8:10–18). Despite Samuel’s efforts at trying to dissuade the people against selecting a king, the people continue to cry out (8:19–22), and eventually Samuel anoints Saul as Israel’s first king (11:14–15).

This narrative sets the stage for the beginning of the monarchical period in Israel’s history. The narrative also highlights how the abuse of power can corrupt a person and a community. Theologically, a major shift now occurs in the life of Israel. The people have decided, for the first time in their history, to have an earthly king govern them, as opposed to God alone, whose ways were made known through the judges, elders, priests, and prophets of the day. Granted, the king was expected also to follow God’s will, but the paradigm of absolute rule had shifted radically.

While the Israelites never saw God, except as a pillar of fire or cloud or in rumblings from the

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Since the time when Israel first became a nation, Israel had been a theocracy, a community guided and protected by YHWH. They were set apart, distinctive from other nations, and they had no king as other nations did. Israel was led by various judges whom God raised up in times of need. These leaders included, among others, Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Deborah, Samson, Gideon, and Samuel, who served not as kings or queens but as mouthpieces for God as they arbitrated disputes, saw that justice was done, or led the people to victory over a threatening enemy.

As the narrative in today’s lection opens, Samuel had given many years of service as a prophet and judge, and he was growing old. But like Eli’s sons before him, his sons were not fit to be judges, because “they took bribes and perverted justice” (8:3). The elders of Israel feared that there was no one to replace Samuel, so they asked Samuel to give them a king.

No doubt the debate over the relative merits of theocratic and monarchic rule had been going on for some time among the Israelites, and the narrative of 1 Samuel 8 seems to have been written from the perspective of someone who saw the monarchy as inevitable but unnecessary. In the story leading up to the demand for a king, the narrator tells us that the Israelites rededicated themselves to God, and God

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

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

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

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

Exegetical Perspective

Semicontinuous reading of 1–2 Samuel begins after Pentecost with 1 Samuel 2:1–10, the hymn of Samuel's pregnant mother Hannah, who celebrates divine justice in which "the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength" (1 Sam. 2:4). Today's Old Testament text marks the first time we meet Samuel as an adult, and next week's reading skips ahead to his secret anointing of David as a rival to Saul. When taken in the context of the overall narrative, this passage and its underlying assumptions turn out to be more complex than they appear. Even in this complexity, or perhaps because of it, they turn out to reveal much about the ambiguities of power and power seeking.

A question explored throughout 1–2 Samuel, and throughout Judges and 1–2 Kings as well, is what kind of human leadership best serves a nation that is ultimately ruled by God. Since these books are redacted from a community of authors living in diverse times and holding diverse opinions, the answer is by no means unanimous. In fact, the last few chapters of Judges stand in considerable tension with this one, repeating the refrain, "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; see Judg. 18:1; 19:1). The narratives of limitless lawlessness and foolish mayhem framed by these

Homiletical Perspective

If there is disappointment in not getting what we want, there is quite another and perhaps even sharper disappointment in receiving what we ask for. Such is the situation enacted in 1 Samuel 8. Everything seems so reasonable and so innocent, but the preacher harbors the guilty knowledge of how this tale of kings turns out. Samuel is getting on in years and his sons' corruption disqualifies them to fill his sandals as judge over Israel, so the people ask for a king. It seems a reasonable request. All the other countries have a king! Samuel does not have an alternative solution to the leadership dilemma and even seems to disqualify himself by sounding downright pouty: "the thing displeased Samuel" (8:6).

The people cannot imagine the dangers of what they are asking and sound like giddy preadolescents: "Gee, Samuel, all the really neat nations have kings! Why can't we have a king too?" The naiveté of their request finally becomes achingly apparent as they hopefully imagine a king who will "go out before us and fight our battles" (8:20). They do not understand that kings do not "go out before" their armies. Kings stay safe behind the lines and send their armies into the battle. Political leaders do not send their sons and daughters to bleed and die for their country; they send other people's sons and daughters into danger. In a word wisely mixing

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

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mountaintop, the king was highly visible. In ancient Israel and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the image of the king is grand. The king might be impressive in physical appearance, as in the case of Saul, Israel's first king (9:2). In ancient biblical times, the personal symbols of royalty were ostentatious, including royal robes (1 Kgs. 22:10, 30; 1 Chr. 15:27), a scepter (Gen. 49:10), a throne (1 Kgs. 10:18–20), a crown (2 Sam. 1:10; 2 Kgs. 11:12), extraordinary wealth (1 Kgs. 10:14–29; 2 Chr. 32:27–30), a personal army of troops (2 Sam. 23:8–39), and a burial in one of the royal tombs located in either Samaria (2 Kgs. 13:13) or Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 9:28; 2 Chr. 32:33).

The king was honored and respected by the people and was responsible not only for protecting them (8:20), but also for dispensing justice and mercy to foster right relationships among all the people. The king was to hold fast to covenant law while encouraging the people to do likewise. Israel's kings were anointed before God to fulfill this particular role (cf. 1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13; 1 Kgs. 1:39; 2 Kgs. 9:1–13).

Israel's kings were supposed to stand in contrast with kings of other nations. Unlike kings of other nations, Israel's king was chosen by God, and the king's major function was to be a servant of God, to lead and govern the people with humility and equity. To keep the king's power in check, prophets oftentimes advised and also confronted the king when he was not living up to his responsibilities (e.g., Nathan confronted King David after David took Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, into his bed and arranged for her husband to be killed [2 Sam. 12:1–14]).

The special relationship that the king shared with God is best described in 2 Samuel 7:1–17, which records the covenant that God made with David. Here the biblical writer portrays God entering into covenant with David and promising to be like a father to him. Through the king, the reign of God was to be made manifest. Additionally, Israel's leaders were called to be people of profound prayer, as exemplified by David (2 Sam. 7:19–29) and Solomon (1 Kgs. 3:1–15).

These kingly attributes illustrate the ideal; however, in 1 Samuel 8:10–18, the biblical writer features the prophet Samuel forewarning the people about the pitfalls of power. The forewarning betrays how power can corrupt, how easily it can cause a person to fall out of right relationship with God, which in turn leads to the loss of right relationship

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intervened to spare them (7:5–14). The storyteller seems to be framing an unspoken question: "God's rule is more than sufficient, so why would Israel need a human king?"

Israel's desire to be like other nations is a clue to the rationale behind the request. Israel was constantly under threat of attack from other nations and had seen the advantages of having a centralized government to coordinate defense efforts and a permanent leader around whom they could rally (8:20).

Trusting God is difficult and, we must admit, impractical. Though we profess to be God-fearing people, only the most idealistic among us think it would be a good idea for our nation to lay down arms and trust that God will protect us. A pastor might want to explore these questions with the congregation: What does it mean to trust God? Is human government necessary? How do we balance divine providence and self-sufficiency? In a nation that separates church and state, what accountability do our leaders have to God, and what accountability do Christians have to secular society and government?

H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* explores the relationship between church and society, the peculiar conundrum that the church is called to be *in* but not *of* the world. To what degree should Christians settle in and conform to society, and to what extent should we stand apart and critique it? How do we balance these conflicting roles?

Being in an "already—not yet" situation is not easy. We are much more comfortable with absolutes. We want to be either here or there, not straddling the gulf. This must be the way the Israelites felt when they demanded a king to lead them. They were weary of their precarious position. They found it difficult to trust that God always would raise up a judge to lead them in their times of great need, especially since such protection depended on the people's faithfulness to the covenant, a very dubious guarantee. They thought it would be more practical to rely on the security of a king and a standing army ready to defend them. Who among us can blame them?

This certainly was not the first time Israel had questioned God, and it would not be the last. God tells Samuel to grant the people what they ask, but first to warn them: be careful what you wish for. Samuel describes how a human king will draft their sons and conscript their daughters for service in the palace. He will tax the people in the form of produce and livestock and give the best to his own

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

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remarks demonstrate that, as far as that particular writer is concerned, when there is no monarchy it is not the Deity but anarchy that reigns.

Samuel's is the third attempt to start a family dynasty. First, Abimelech son of Gideon (i.e., Jerubbaal) had tried to succeed his father as Israel's judge (Judg. 9:1–57). He began with mass murder and ended in violent death himself. Second, both humans and God rejected Eli's bid to perpetuate the priesthood in Shiloh through his two scoundrel sons (1 Sam. 2:12–4:14), and they likewise died violently. Samuel's attempt echoes Eli's: like his predecessor, he is blind to the character flaws of his two corrupt sons, even after the elders call them to his attention (see 1 Sam. 12:2). The people who approach Samuel do not merely reprove. They ask for a structural change to eliminate the sons' jobs. To do so, they cite as precedent the governance of other nations (8:5, 20).

Being like other nations is not what many biblical writers have envisioned for Israel (Deut. 8:20; 2 Sam. 7:23; Ezek. 20:32). Samuel is quite distressed over the people's request—after all, it is his beloved sons they are criticizing. But before answering the elders, he prays. God responds kindly, gently reframing things for Samuel, intervening between the fiery prophet and the frustrated elders, saying in effect that this is not rejection of Samuel but rejection of God—disappointing but manageable. In fact, God makes it sound to Samuel as if the people have fundamentally changed their mind over divine rule, and perhaps this is how the author of this account sees it. But as the biblical story overall is constructed, the idea of God as king has not actually been a major topic of discussion before; it has come up only briefly (Exod. 15:18; Num. 23:21). Indeed, appointing a human king has already been approved, though with reservations (Deut. 17:14–20), and during the Davidic monarchy human kingship will be imagined as representing, rather than replacing, God's rule (Ps. 72).

Having no king may mean anarchy, but the author of 1 Samuel 8 describes kings as inevitably creating bureaucracies to serve their own interests. The bleak picture of kingship that God tells Samuel to convey to the people will in fact materialize as the account of Israel's history unfolds. Kingship will turn out to be both unifying and problematic, both ennobling and corrupt. Ironically, it is not Saul, the one who endures Samuel's resentment, who will fit the negative description conveyed here. Saul is not described as conscripting sons and daughters and demanding fields and grain, slaves and farm animals. Rather, it will be David and his

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grace and judgment, the Lord commands Samuel to “listen” to the people but also to “warn them, and show them the ways of the king.”

As Samuel explains to the naive Israelites “the ways of the king,” listen to the repetition of “he will take” and “his”—because it will all be about the king: “*he will take* your sons and appoint them to *his* chariots . . . to be *his* horsemen . . . to run before *his* chariots . . . to plow *his* ground and to reap *his* harvest . . . to make *his* implements of war . . . the equipment of *his* chariots. *He will take* your daughters. . . . *He will take* the best of your fields and . . . give them to *his* courtiers. . . . *He will take* . . . you shall be *his* slaves.”

A king who takes our sons to fight his wars and our daughters to his palace? A king who takes our harvest for his own? A king who leads us to slavery? No one wants that kind of king! It is a funny thing, however; that is exactly the kind of kings Israel and Judah wound up having. Read through the books of Chronicles and 1 and 2 Kings; we find that the kings did everything Samuel said, and worse. Sour, pessimistic old Samuel was right. The sad history of the kings of Israel and Judah tell us as much.

Samuel's words are tragic and are no less true for our own time. Presidents, premiers, and politicians preach patriotic paeans about the necessity of wars and the importance of supporting their troops, but few of their children will be in uniform or near harm's way. Samuel may be cynical in his old age and he may be disillusioned, but he is not blind, as Eli was before him (1 Sam. 3:2). Samuel sees the situation clearly, and the official Deuteronomistic History confirms he was right. Six times Samuel tells them, “He will take.” The kings took it all: sons, daughters, flocks, harvests—until there was no more to take and the nation crumbled into history.

Excavating the sad history of the Israelite monarchy uncovers not a shard of hope, and Samuel's judgment forecloses any expectation of hope from the Lord: “you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (8:18). Jeremiah echoes this desolation as he hears the Lord telling him, “As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you” (Jer. 7:16). The text refuses the possibility of hope.

What pure exegesis declines to provide, homiletics must offer. Augustine taught us that exegesis that “does not build the double love of

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

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among one's own community. Samuel's description of royal corruption becomes a timeless lesson for those in leadership today.

The early church fathers took this reading from 1 Samuel and applied it to the leadership of the church, in particular to the bishops, who they believed bore even greater responsibilities than those of a king (see, e.g., *The Apostolic Constitutions*, specifically the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 2.4.34). John Chrysostom encourages people to follow in the footsteps of the prophet Samuel, who tried to turn the people away from their own desires and thus spare them from future corruption. Clement of Alexandria observes that Samuel was warning the people that the king will abuse power and rule by the law of war and not be zealous for the administration of peace.

In the context of the larger tradition of Israel's kings, this passage from 1 Samuel calls communities of faith today to reassess how present and future leaders, whether political or religious, embody those qualities necessary for establishing right relationship to the common good. A leader's commitment to right relationship can set the stage for peace. Finally, one cannot forget that Israel's leadership would develop a messianic dimension to it, exemplified in Isaiah 11:1–9.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Pastoral Perspective

courtiers and officers. Samuel warns, "You will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves" (8:11–18). This scenario may sound familiar in our own day and age in criticisms of our leaders' alleged excesses, privileges, and abuses of power.

Though the Bible recounts how Israel flourished under the reign of David, Samuel's warnings were proven correct, especially during the reign of Solomon, with his hundreds of wives and concubines, luxury imports, and building projects. The goods this kingly lifestyle required must have been a huge burden on the people.

In the end, the monarchy failed to bring long-lasting stability to the nation. After the glory days of David and Solomon, the monarchy began to disintegrate until the nation was split in two parts. Both Israel and Judah eventually would fall to foreign powers. The Israelites were scattered all over the world, and for centuries after, with brief respites, Israel was ruled by foreign kings. Even so, many of the exiled people still pinned their hopes on a king, someone in the line of David who would unite the people, overthrow foreign rulers, restore the land, and reestablish justice and righteousness. In the first century, many Jews believed they had found this messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus' followers still today profess his kingship. But Jesus did not bring an end to worldly injustice; Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

We are called to minister to the world and yet, at the same time, to be removed from the world. The pastor's role is to help God's people negotiate that liminal place of "already but not yet," somewhere between the secular and sacred, and to do so faithfully and with integrity.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

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

Exegetical Perspective

descendants who do so. In fact, David does far worse than Samuel describes, not only raising an army to fight his battles while he stays home, but taking a daughter—a wife, in fact, the wife of one of his loyal soldiers, who is at war for his king—not for perfuming, cooking, and baking (8:13), but for sexual pleasure (2 Sam. 11).

Monarchical bureaucracy will roll out in grand style with David's son Solomon. With admiration rather than irony, his memoirist will list the king's daily inputs of flour, meal, oxen, cattle, sheep, deer, gazelle, roebucks, and fatted fowl (1 Kgs. 4:22–23), as well as barley and straw for 40,000 royal horses, annual donations of wheat and fine oil for his wood supplier King Hiram (1 Kgs. 5:11), 70,000 laborers, 80,000 stonemasons, and 3,300 supervisors (1 Kgs. 5:15–16), building not only the temple, but the king's palace, civic improvements in Jerusalem and in far-flung regions, "storage cities, the cities for his chariots, the cities for his cavalry, and whatever Solomon desired to build, in Jerusalem, in Lebanon, and in all the land of his dominion" (1 Kgs. 9:19).

Compared with the bureaucracies of Egypt before him and Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome after him, Solomon's kingdom is rather small. He aspires nevertheless to emulate the power and wealth of mighty nations, and his biographer aspires to memorialize him so. But this system will break Israel apart when, after Solomon's death, ten of the twelve tribes secede, refusing to participate further in Solomon's unsustainable fiefdom (1 Kgs. 12:1–19).

In 1 Samuel 8 and at other points in the larger narrative, power is readily criticized when it belongs to someone else. Samuel wants his own dynasty, not a king's. David and his supporters vote for kingship—David's, that is, not Saul's. The Israelites who reject Davidic rule after Solomon's death still want a king, just not Rehoboam. This is a pattern we still know only too well. On both the smallest and the largest scale, and everywhere in between, critique of power is most incisive when it criticizes someone else, and love of our own kin and kind is inevitably somewhat blind.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

God and neighbor"¹ is ultimately bankrupt; so also an understanding of Scripture that does not tender hope is incomplete. By no means does this call for the preacher to decorate the grim text with a homiletical happy face. The canon insists that although Samuel was historically correct, his words were not the last word to be heard. The poetry of David's words fed the people's hope that their story would not end in destruction and despair. The people sang their hope in the words of David and yearned for another kind of king, "One who rules over people justly," and who "is like the light of morning" (2 Sam. 23:3, 4). They sang of a king who would not simply "go out before us and fight our battles," and they prayed instead, "May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy," and "In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more" (Ps. 72:4, 7).

Samuel's word that "the LORD will not answer you" is by no means the final word from the Lord. After the monarchy slipped into history, the Lord summons Ezekiel to "prophesy against the shepherds"—the kings—"of Israel" (Ezek. 34:2) and excoriates the shepherds/kings for "feeding themselves" and harvesting the flocks for their own use and benefit (Ezek. 34:2–3)—in other words, doing exactly what Samuel said they would do—but Ezekiel goes on to announce that the Lord would accept the responsibilities of the failed monarchy: "thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out" (Ezek. 34:11).

The future of God's people is not foreclosed by their careless choices but belongs to God and to the scion of the Davidic king (Rev. 5:5) who at the conclusion of story, at the end of history, identifies himself as "the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star" (Rev. 22:16) and who heralds a new day of hope.

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1. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* I:XXXVI, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 30.

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PROPER 6 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 12 AND JUNE 18 INCLUSIVE)

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

³⁴Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

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

Theological Perspective

In this passage a grieving Samuel is sent by God to locate and anoint a new king for Israel. Samuel is grieving the fact that King Saul has disobeyed God's command and is therefore being replaced. Saul had been instructed by God to destroy the Amalekites and "all that they had" (15:3). Instead, Saul instructed his soldiers to save "the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable" (15:9). Because Saul's transgression involved saving animal life and valuable resources, it is hard to understand why his punishment is so severe. Perhaps we are meant to sympathize with Samuel's grief.

We might sympathize with Samuel, but God does not. God's reaction to Samuel's grief is, in fact, quite jarring: "How long will you grieve over Saul?" God instructs Samuel to fill his horn with oil and travel to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the new king.

Theologically speaking, this interaction between God and God's prophet, Samuel, reminds us that our God is a God who meets us in our brokenness but does not allow it to become the end of our story. The sense of the text is that Samuel has been grieving for a while, and that God is pulling him out of it and into the brighter future God intends. God is, in one sense, reminding Samuel of what

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God's selection of the youngest son from among his older brothers is typical of Israel's tradition and a hopeful story for anyone who serves or has served as a leader. Israel's history includes other instances when an unlikely person is chosen to lead, as in the case of Moses, the reluctant prophet. It also echoes other stories of younger brothers who turn the tables on their elder siblings: Jacob receives Esau's blessing, Joseph becomes a powerful ruler over his brothers. Now we have the youngest son David chosen by God to be king. This is Israel's self-definition: the younger son, an upstart people who seem insignificant among the nations, but whose covenant with YHWH sets them apart for service to God to show God's holiness to the nations.

Like Samuel and David, and like Israel, pastors and church leaders have sensed God's call, separating them out for special service to God's people. Many of these leaders have doubted their abilities and calling from time to time. The story of David's selection as king from among seemingly more qualified candidates is good news: God chooses whom God chooses, and once chosen, God's Spirit comes down mightily on that person (16:13). The choosing and giving of the Spirit are not our actions, but God's. We can prepare ourselves as best we can with education, experience, and prayer, but

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

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

Exegetical Perspective

The Lord initiates regime change! This poignant, carefully crafted narrative teaches the contemporary communities of faith about leadership, the divine nature, and those called to speak for God. A look at the major characters in the narrative opens up the insights of the passage.

This narrative presents a complex picture of the Lord. On the one hand, the Lord acts decisively, choosing David in the end despite human objections and assessments of the wisdom of such a choice. On the other hand, the Lord is sorry to have chosen Saul in the first place. The motif of the Lord regretting or rueing a decision recalls the Noah story, where the Lord is sorry for the creation of humankind altogether (Gen. 6:6). The golden calf story carries a similar idea, when Moses pleads with God to change the divine mind concerning punishment (Exod. 32:12, 14). These verses portray a passionate, fully engaged deity, willing to take risks and even expose some vulnerability in order to continue the relationship with the people. Creating humankind, sustaining the relationship with recalcitrant Israel, and choosing Saul as king all involved risk. This anthropomorphic view of the Lord presents a deity affected by human actions and emotionally committed to Israel as a means of blessing. The divine regret suggests a kind of vulnerability within

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This is not the easiest biblical text for use in preaching! For one thing, it comes shortly after passages in which God is pictured as ordering the utter destruction of the Amalekites. God has commanded Saul to kill them all: men, women, and children, and all the sheep and cattle as well. Saul has sinned by capturing, not killing, the Amalekite king and by taking the sheep and cattle as spoil, thus not killing them as well. Is this portrait of God consistent with the loving, gracious God whom we worship? Moreover, in the passage before us we read that “the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.” What! God’s mind has *changed*? Such difficulties need not detain us if we are willing to acknowledge that the biblical understanding of the nature and purposes of God is not fixed and uniform, that it reflects time-bound cultural perceptions as well as deeper theological truth.

Is there, then, any deeper truth in the 1 Samuel passage? I believe there is. Notice that in the account of the selection of David to be Saul’s successor as king, the Lord has commanded Samuel to go to Jesse and that one of Jesse’s sons is the Lord’s choice. Samuel obeys the order. There follows a review of Jesse’s sons, beginning with Eliab, who immediately impresses Samuel as being the right choice because of his commanding appearance. However, in 16:7

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Samuel already believes: that God is sovereign, and that God's plan for Israel will be realized regardless of Saul's disobedience. Samuel is called actively to participate in the unfolding of this plan, as he rises out of his despair to claim God's future.

We remember that Samuel was literally called by God when he was a small boy (1 Sam. 3). By the time this story is told in 1 Samuel 16, Samuel has experienced a lifetime of listening to and having intimate conversation with God. So it is not that surprising, perhaps, that God is very direct in challenging Samuel, and that Samuel is candid about expressing his fear at carrying out God's assignment. Saul is going to kill me, Samuel says, if I go to Bethlehem to anoint a new king (16:2). God advises him to carry out his mission by framing it in a worship experience. "Say," God tells him, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD" (16:5).

Interestingly, the suggestion that worship somehow transcends fear and conflict occurs also in chapter 15. Saul, rejected by God as king, nonetheless wants to worship God. At first his request is denied by Samuel, but Saul is persistent—grabbing and tearing Samuel's robe—and Samuel finally relents (see 15:24–31). Here in chapter 16, worship again provides a context for those who are estranged and fearful to come together. "Do you come peaceably?" the trembling elders of Bethlehem ask Samuel. Samuel does better than simply saying yes. He invites them to join him in offering sacrifice to God.

Traditionally, worship spaces have been places of sanctuary for warring factions. In this day and age, however, safety cannot be assumed. People have been assassinated in worship spaces, and churches deliberate over whether or not undocumented immigrants who have joined the community should be reported to officials. We cannot always assume that those with whom we offer sacrifices have come peaceably. What does this say about our understanding of church, when safety in worship cannot be promised, ensured, or even expected?

In the story of 1 Samuel 16, shared worship provides a context in which Samuel and the elders can put aside their fear and attend to the task of identifying the new king of Israel. Samuel meets the sons of Jesse, one by one. When he meets the first, Eliab, Samuel is impressed by his appearance and thinks he has found the one God has selected. But God immediately redirects Samuel, reminding him of what he certainly knows from his own experience of God's call. "The LORD does not see as mortals see," God explains. "They look on the outward

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in the end, if the Spirit of God is not with us, we fail as leaders of God's people. Being reminded of God's initiative in choosing and empowering can restore a leader's sense of purpose. When a leader feels burned out, perhaps this is a sign that he or she somehow has lost, or lost sight of, the Spirit of God.

Perhaps such "burnout" is what happened to Saul, who was anointed the first king of Israel with high expectations. Though at the time the Spirit of God "possessed" him (1 Sam. 10:6, 10), by the time today's lectionary passage opens, "the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (15:35).

Rather touching is the narrator's description of Samuel grieving for Saul (15:35; 16:1). No matter how flawed our leaders are, they can become beloved, and it is difficult to let them go. Samuel had agreed, against his better judgment, to find a king for Israel (1 Sam. 8:6–18), and he was the one to anoint Saul, God's choice (1 Sam 10:1; 11:14–15). Now he grieves at Saul's failure. This detail in the story is easy to overlook but rings true: it can be very difficult to give up something into which a person has poured a great deal of his or her life, even when clearly a change must be made. God's question to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul?" is a question we need to hear from time to time, when God is moving us to the next step.

God tells Samuel to get up and go to the father of the new king God has chosen. Now Samuel's grief turns to fear: "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me!" (16:2). Samuel is no fool. He knows that Saul is a paranoid and jealous person who does not hesitate to kill perceived enemies. This part of the story is somewhat disturbing for its seeming underhandedness. Samuel colludes with God to anoint a new king before the old king is dead. God even appears to help Samuel create a ruse that will hide his true purpose, a sacrifice to which Jesse (and his sons) will be invited (16:3–4). The pastor might help the congregation examine this subterfuge in light of the whole story of Israel, as God directs the selection of unlikely people to fulfill God's purposes, while those who uphold the status quo strenuously object. A change in leadership does not always happen swiftly and smoothly.

One by one, the sons of Jesse come before Samuel. In good storytelling fashion, suspense builds as each one is rejected. Finally (perhaps in desperation), Samuel asks Jesse if he has any other sons. This youngest son (whom the audience already knows is David) is a Cinderella-like figure working

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

Exegetical Perspective

the Lord, but does not negate divine insight (into David's leadership potential) or divine ability to shape events.

Samuel embodies the role of divine/human intermediary, but often seems out of harmony with the divine perspective on events. In a dialogue with Saul just before this incident, Samuel declares forthrightly that the Lord will not change the divine mind. The text uses the same Hebrew root in 15:29 and 35, so that the Lord does just what Samuel says the Lord will never do (be sorry or change the divine mind, and see 15:11). Samuel experiences a different emotional reaction to Saul's rejection than the Lord does. Samuel grieves about Saul, drawing divine impatience (16:1). The text suggests that Samuel desires time to deal with his emotional reaction to Saul's failure, while the Lord wants him to act immediately. Samuel protests the divine assignment to anoint David, fearing Saul's wrath. Samuel assumes that the first son who arrives would receive the anointing (16:6). At nearly every point along the way, Samuel draws the wrong conclusion, from the divine perspective; yet Samuel represents the one called to speak the divine word and carry out the divine will. The dialogue between Samuel and the Lord suggests direct communication, in which Samuel hears the divine words clearly and unambiguously. Samuel does not himself have insight into the divine will, suggesting that the communication comes from the Lord's initiative and not Samuel's skill. The Lord allows freedom to accept or reject the responsibilities of leadership and uses latent talent, but does not depend on human ability. Samuel serves the divine purpose despite his inability to discern the right course of action on his own.

Saul plays no major role in this narrative, but his actions have set the course of events. The other characters here react to what he has done. Saul arose to the position of king without campaigning or seeking it, perhaps even avoiding it (10:22). He seems to have arisen to the office of king by stages. Despite his potential, he makes "rash" decisions (14:24) and usurps the role of priest, failing to appreciate holy things (13:8–11). Even with his faults, he appears to show genuine repentance just before this incident (15:30). The reader does not know if the Lord considers Saul's repentance insincere, or believes that Saul lacks the capacity to grow into the office. In this passage, Samuel believes that Saul would resort to murder to hold on to power. Saul becomes a case study of the temptations and potential for abuse of leadership, and of divine

Homiletical Perspective

the Lord says, no, this is not the right one: "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Then Samuel reviews seven other sons, each of whom is also rejected. Finally, the young son David is brought forth. He is the one to be anointed king.

We pause over the words: "for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." We can be so easily misled by outward appearances! Advertisers cultivate that as a high art. What counts is the *impression*. Advertisers put their products in the most favorable light, surrounding them with already well-received cultural symbols. So a soft drink is associated with a young generation, trading on the cultural value of youthfulness. A new car may be pictured on television with a beautiful young woman. A tobacco product was (a few years ago) pictured with a rugged cowboy mounted on a horse—quite overlooking the probability that, if real, the cowboy would be subject to cancer or emphysema. Medicinal products are hawked with minor reference to side effects. Children are especially targeted with advertisements for sugar-laden cereal products or attractive toys of doubtful durability. As we grow older we become more skeptical, but we probably never outgrow a tendency to be taken in by appearances.

Perhaps that is most evident in politics. A candidate will be groomed with exquisite care, hairstyle just so, clothing carefully chosen for an intended audience. When speaking to a television audience, a politician may well use a teleprompter, an artful device enabling the speaker to be looking right at the viewer while seeing the words of the speech on a transparent screen that is invisible to the audience. Such devices may be innocent enough. But political demagoguery is not. That involves appeal to popular prejudices, making use of symbolic language that does not conform to the politician's actual views.

When running for student government office in my college years, I was advised that a successful politician must be "strongly wishy-washy"—that is, speaking with full-throated conviction about nothing in particular, above all, avoiding potentially controversial issues. In our time—and perhaps in all times—public figures have made such use of religion. The Renaissance figure Machiavelli cynically advised the Prince that he should above everything else "appear" to be religious "so that

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

Theological Perspective

appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (16:7). Six more of Jesse’s sons are then presented to Samuel, but none of these is the chosen one. The one who is finally chosen is the youngest and the shepherd, the one whom they did not expect to get the job. Most importantly, he is the one who has the right heart. This one—the next king of Israel—is Jesse’s son David.

Why is it that even we who testify God has brought us out of insignificance and to a high calling continue to imagine that God’s leaders will come from among those who “look like” they could be “king” (or future pastor, or head of staff, or seminary president)? Perhaps we should be encouraged by the fact that Samuel (like us) is initially drawn to Eliab. David is not even on his radar, until God helps him see. As God helped Samuel, God can help us too to see.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves, always: Who is *not* in the lineup of candidates? Who is out taking care of the sheep (or typing up the bulletin) who should be considered? Whom do we need to seek out and bring into this conversation, into this possibility, into consideration for this leadership?

Finally—still in the context of worship—Samuel anoints David, and the spirit “comes mightily” upon him (16:13). We are reminded again, here, that the God who calls unlikely ones to service does not merely wish them success and send them on their way. Rather, God empowers them to accomplish precisely that to which they are called. God will walk with David, as God walked with Samuel, as God promises to walk with us, correcting us, forgiving us, protecting us, and directing us ever again to see what God sees.

CYNTHIA L. RIGBY

Pastoral Perspective

at a grubby job while being overlooked in the invitation to the auspicious gathering. His absence adds to the sense of his being a completely unlikely choice for king of Israel. Saving the best for last makes a satisfying conclusion and fulfills the biblical theme of the younger one’s triumph.

Why David? God’s criteria are not necessarily human criteria: “the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (16:7). The story seems to contradict itself when the narrator tells us, “Now he [David] was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (16:12). We can surmise that the Lord chose David for what was in his heart, but he was also very handsome, and he appealed also to the people.

God selected and empowered David with his Spirit, which came “mightily” upon him from that day forward (16:13). We know that David was flawed and his reign was complicated. Yet David never lost God’s Spirit, and so he has been hailed ever since as Israel’s greatest king.

When Jesus comes along many years later, the Gospel narrators are careful to point out that his birthplace was Bethlehem, the city of David (Matt. 2:1–2; Luke 2:1–7). One of his many titles is “Son of David” (e.g., Matt. 1:1; Mark 10:47–48; Luke 3:31). Like David, Jesus came from an obscure background, and he was filled with the Spirit of God (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). In this way, the New Testament portrays David as a forerunner for Jesus, King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1–2; 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:37–38; John 19:19–21), who comes to save his people (Matt. 1:21).

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

Exegetical Perspective

judgment on leaders who do not see power as a responsibility.

David plays a minor role in this passage, appearing only at the end. The narrator does not say why the Lord chooses David (but see 16:7), or why the other brothers lack the potential for leadership. Throughout the narrative the Lord has known what no person, even Samuel, has known. David rises to become the great king, even despite his flaws, yet only the Lord knows his potential. Despite David's age, he receives anointing and the "spirit of the LORD" (16:13). Typically, this bestowal endows the recipient with military and administrative skill and power (Judg. 3:10; 1 Sam. 11:6, where Saul receives it). The OT never explains the relationship between inherent leadership ability and the influence of the spirit, but leaders become ineffective without the spirit. The text does not explicitly say that only one leader can have the spirit, but the spirit leaves Saul at the same time David receives it. An evil spirit comes also from the Lord.

This narrative raises important issues about the role of leadership, both political and religious. The passage encourages humility both for leaders and for those who choose leaders. In the absence of direct communication such as Samuel enjoyed, contemporary clergy rely on their own discernment. The passage reminds that human perception often focuses on surface details, failing to value inner qualities. Saul's failures highlight the problems caused by poor leadership. The people and the religious communities suffer under poor leaders. The passage prompts reflection on God's nature, as wise and discerning, but also willing to take risks, allowing human freedom to make mistakes. That tension deserves preaching attention. The text reveals an early, but important understanding of the spirit. The OT suggests that the spirit fell upon certain leaders. The contemporary church affirms a Spirit of power available to all. The reader should not equate the spirit of the Lord in the OT with the Holy Spirit in the NT, but the earlier understanding helps the church reflect on the role of the Holy Spirit in leadership, wisdom, and strength. The spirit of the Lord comes by divine conferral and influences the individual, equipping that person for leadership within the community. The Holy Spirit is available to the church and individuals, empowering ministry and sustaining the community.

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

to see and hear him, one would think him the embodiment of mercy, good faith, integrity, humanity, and religion"¹—with special emphasis on religion. When politically necessary, however, Machiavelli counseled the Prince to set that aside. Machiavelli's words ought to be fair warning to all of us in our sacred calling as citizens. We must sift through the appearances, focus on the important issues, be willing to compromise for the sake of the best possible achievement of goals in harmony with our deepest values.

Would that trading on appearances were limited to politics! Is that not also true of a fair amount of popular religion? In light of the Samuel passage, should we be surprised when a charismatic religious leader is exposed as a scandalous fraud?

I do not think, however, that the Samuel passage should be taken as reason to go around judging everybody. To some extent we must; but then, who is to cast the first stone? Better to make our assessments of appearances soberly, while leaving the ultimate judgments of the human heart to God.

Basically, the import of this passage is to focus on what is in the heart—not just the hearts of other people but of ourselves. We are invited to live with integrity, speaking what we truly believe and, above all, grounding what we believe in God-inspired love. Are we not all greatly moved when we see people who combine deep integrity with outgoing love? Such examples are not so rare, despite the superficiality and cynicism of so much popular culture. Indeed, people of loving integrity are to be found in our churches, quietly bearing their witness and doing good. None is perfect. Indeed, the David portrayed in this passage from 1 Samuel did not turn out to be perfect. But in the power of God's grace we can grow and grow. In the fullness of time we can be among those whose hearts are attuned to the great heart of God.

J. PHILIP WOGAMAN

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* XVIII.8.

PROPER 6 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 12 AND JUNE 18 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 20

¹The LORD answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!

²May he send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion.

³May he remember all your offerings,
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices.

Selah

⁴May he grant you your heart's desire,
and fulfill all your plans.

⁵May we shout for joy over your victory,
and in the name of our God set up our banners.

Theological Perspective

My six-year-old daughter has a book about princesses where you press buttons to hear sound effects. One of her favorite buttons trips the voice of Cinderella, claiming (in a syrupy voice), "Dreams really *do* come true!"

Do they really?

Last week, I heard a well-known Presbyterian minister say we should stop telling kids this. Instead, they need to know that they have limits and strengths. They need to figure out what they can do well and work hard at doing it, rather than putting great stock in their dreams. What this minister said makes good, hard sense, especially in these days of economic challenge. Encouraging others, in relation to their dreams, may actually be doing them a disservice, when it comes to their actual success.

With this more realistic mind-set in place, the words of the psalmist raise significant concern. Should we really be hoping—for our children, or for anyone?—that their "hearts' desires" will be "granted" or that their "plans" will be "fulfilled" (v. 4)? Should we speak with such certainty about the "victory" of "the anointed" over their enemies? (vv. 6–8). Do such hopes get in the way of what can realistically be accomplished?

The psalm starts off reasonably enough. With a warm and generous heart the speaker directs

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This psalm is rather like a cheer that fans chant from the bleachers as their team takes the field. If this psalm is a prayer on behalf of the king, who is preparing for battle (v. 6 refers to "his anointed," and v. 10 mentions the "king"), it serves as the people's send-off. Among the expected petitions for victory, the psalm asks that God give the king his heart's desire and fulfill all his plans (v. 4). In context, it would seem that the king's "heart's desire" has to do with victory over an enemy.

We may be uncomfortable praying for the decimation of others, when we believe that all people are God's children. How do we interpret this psalm for our own lives, our congregations, and the world today? Should we call on God to make us "victorious"? Is it wise to ask God to grant our heart's desire and to fulfill all our plans? Do we really know what's best?

When it comes to pondering the heart's desire, I have found the Jesuits' Ignatian spirituality to be helpful. Basically, Ignatius taught that God's desire and our desire meet in the deepest places of our heart. If we can discern what it is we truly desire, God will meet us there. This sounds rather straightforward until one stops to think about it. What do we desire, really? We have many practical desires, including the need for nourishment

Psalm 20

May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.

⁶Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with mighty victories by his right hand.

⁷Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God.

⁸They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright.

⁹Give victory to the king, O LORD;
answer us when we call.

Exegetical Perspective

This royal psalm overflows with good wishes for the king. It divides easily into two sections: verses 1–5, addressed to the king in second person, and verses 6–9, consisting of affirmations in first person. One can speculate about how the two sections relate, and whether a ceremony took place between the two sections. In the absence of historical data, the contemporary reader has only the psalm in this form, even with all the questions that remain. The exact contours of the service in which it was used, the role of the speaker for the sections, and the exact occasion that prompted the psalm remain unknown. Nevertheless, the psalm provides much material for reflection on the role of leaders, the relationship between leaders and the people, and the purpose of praying for leaders.

Commentators typically assume that the psalm played a part in a ceremony during a war, offering petitions for the king's victory. Certainly, verse 5 expresses hope for victory in a battle. One could argue, however, that only verses 5–9 explicitly mention battle and that the psalm might invoke divine intervention for all of the things a king does. This plausible interpretation makes the psalm more comprehensive. The term "day of trouble" in verse 1 can refer to military trouble (2 Kgs. 19:3), but it can refer to other kinds of trouble as well (Ps. 77:2).

Homiletical Perspective

Two themes in this psalm grip our attention. The first is the incredible petition that all of our desires should be fulfilled. Do we really want *all* of our desires and plans to be fulfilled? Is this a proper petition to be addressed to God? Some of our hopes and plans may hardly be worthy of God's attention; some may even be evil. Recall the lines in the evening hymn "Now the Day Is Over," which goes like this: "Comfort all who suffer, watching late in pain; *those who plan some evil, from their sins restrain*" (my emphasis). Should we not be praying that all of our unworthy desires and plans be thwarted, not fulfilled? Is it not true that we have often been blessed by *not* getting what we thought we wanted? I can think of several career objectives I have had that did not get realized—and thank my lucky stars! For instance, at one point I sincerely wanted to be elected bishop of my church, but that would have stood in the way of later opportunities that, for me, were much to be preferred. It was not my real calling and, besides, it would also have been a mistake for the church, which has been better served by others. We can all think of things we really wanted that would not have been good for us.

So is there any positive meaning to the lines from verses 4 and 5: "May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill all your plans. . . . May the LORD

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his comments to his brothers and sisters, offering blessing. He hopes that the Lord will answer in time of trouble, offering protection, help, and support (vv. 1–3). So far, so good. The psalmist clearly has God’s promises to care for God’s people in mind, and is invoking them on behalf of the community.

In verse 3 we see a bit of a shift. Not only is the psalmist here reminding us of who God is and what God has promised. Here we learn something about the people the psalmist is blessing. They are a faithful people; a people that honors God with gifts and burnt sacrifices. This verse affirms who they are as a people whom God *ought* to answer, protect, help, and support. It functions as a kind of “reminder” to God of this people’s faithfulness.

Moving from invoking God’s promise (vv. 1–2), to remembering the faithfulness of God’s people (v. 3), the psalmist’s blessing unfolds in the fullness of his hope: that the desires and plans of the people be fulfilled (v. 4). Is it *because* they have been so faithful that the psalmist asks for this blessing? Does the psalmist think that the people he is blessing somehow *deserve* to get what they want? If this were the case, the psalm would rub against the idea, central to the Christian faith, that God is not in the business of doling out what is deserved and withholding what is not deserved. Our compassionate God forgives the undeserving; the God of grace blesses us, not because we are worthy, but because we are God’s beloved children.

A better theological read on verse 4 and how it is related to verse 3 might run along these lines: The psalmist has witnessed the faithfulness of the people, and on this basis assumes that their “hearts’ desires” and “plans” participate in the desires and plans of God. They are “in sync” with what God is up to in the world. For the psalmist to hope that what the people want will come to be, then, is not to suggest God should somehow intervene to endorse, notarize, or facilitate dreams of solely human making. Dreams generated by humans unformed by the desires of God are, of course, liable to inspire idolatrous, Tower of Babel–type projects. When our desires are not also God’s, they are the wrong desires. The desires and plans the psalmist hopes will be fulfilled are, it seems, the right desires; they are right because they have been shaped by the participation in God that comes with making multiple offerings, including burnt sacrifices (v. 3).

It might seem silly to express hope that God will give us the things we desire, if what we desire is something God already desires. After all, what God

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and shelter. We have psychological desires for companionship, love, and meaningful work. We desire certain possessions or accomplishments. On a more sophisticated level, we desire beauty, freedom, goodness, or any number of intangibles. We become frustrated, sad, or even depressed when our desires are not met.

What, deep down, is at the root of all these desires? Why do we love? Why do we want to lead meaningful lives? Why do we strive after things? Why do we believe in certain ideals? If we dig deep enough, we find that everything good and worthwhile stems from one source: God. No matter what we imagine we desire, what we truly long for is God—and God desires us. That is why God’s desire and our desire meet in the depths of our heart.

“Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). This familiar phrase suggests a straightforward solution: if what we desire is God, God will give us what we desire. How does one take delight in God? How do we get in touch with our longing for God? The psalms are a good place to start, because they express a wide range of human emotions: fear, anger, joy, grief, and wonder. The psalms reveal that even rage and despair are part of our longing for God. The psalms cry out, sing, weep, shout, and groan. They help us get in touch with what is really real inside us.

The inspiration of the psalms is all well and good, but there is something even more basic: we can simply ask God for this meeting in the heart. After all, it is not anything we ourselves do that can accomplish this meeting. God freely gives this to us, if only we would accept it.

So here we sit, trying to get up enough nerve to ask God to meet us in our heart’s desire. There are many things that might hold us back. Desiring God sounds pretentious, an experience reserved for mystics and saints, not something that normal everyday people should expect. Really, who do we think we are, desiring God? Do we sound like spoiled children, expressing our longings? Are these longings even worthy of presenting to God? Besides, are we not supposed to be self-sacrificing, serving others, instead of dwelling on our own longings? Desiring makes us uncomfortable; it sounds as if it might require embarrassing expressions of zeal that belong in a revivalist’s tent meeting. Desire has overtones of sexuality, and how does one think about God and that at the same time?

We all long for this union with God, but at the same time we fear it more than we fear anything else.

Psalm 20

Exegetical Perspective

The first line of the poem could ask divine guidance for the various crises that arise for a king. The wish in verse 4 about granting the king's "heart's desire" (literally "according to your heart") could refer to military strategy, but might also suggest the king's overall goals for the kingdom. If battle provides the context for the whole psalm, then should one interpret the petitions about worship in verse 3 as meaning that divine acceptance of burnt sacrifices will result in victory in war? Does the psalmist believe that worship secures military success? Do the first few verses of the psalm cover other areas of the role of the king, including handling crises (v. 1), administration of the kingdom (v. 4), and worship, as an end in itself (v. 3)? Does the psalm then end in petitions for general military success? The heavy emphasis on battle might push the interpreter to the conclusion that the whole psalm invokes divine assistance in battle, but other possibilities exist. One's decision about whether the psalm prays for several aspects of the role of the king will affect how one reflects on the psalm for contemporary use. As the penultimate paragraph of this essay will discuss, if war dominates the psalm, then the psalmist may have had a self-serving understanding of worship and the uses of the talents of the king.

At verse 6, the psalm changes from petitions directed at the king to declarations in first person, with an uncertain audience. The change in tone suggests that in some sense the psalmist believes that the petitions have been heard and will be fulfilled. The Lord will help, answer, and give victory to the king (the term "his anointed" in v. 6 is the word from which the title "messiah" comes, a common term for the king of Israel). Verse 7 compares Israel to other countries that depend on their military weapons for victory (see 2 Chr. 20:13–17 and Isa. 31:1). The term translated "take pride in" can mean "boast," but can also mean "call on," suggesting that other countries invoke their weapons, while Israel invokes the Lord. This section of the psalm anticipates a victory celebration. The psalmist triumphantly declares that Israel will be the last nation standing after the battle. The final verse of the psalm proves difficult to translate. The NRSV implores the Lord to answer the call of the people. The Hebrew suggests that the king will answer, so that the king will protect the people in case of invasion.

Poetry typically sacrifices precision for beauty and elegance of expression. The contemporary reader understandably finds much of this psalm confusing. If the psalm offers prayer for the king

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fulfill all your petitions"? It depends on what we mean by "heart's desire." Our deep desire may not be what we think we want. Perhaps we want to succeed in business or be recognized in our profession. Success and recognition can be expressed in very tangible ways, such as monetary rewards and promotions. It may come as fame, recognition in the media. The tangible rewards may pale; we find we want even more to be satisfied. A *Washington Post* survey of attitudes among different economic classes discovered that people always seemed to compare themselves with those *above* them in the status pyramid. It was as if people in the top 10 percent income category were dissatisfied at not being in the top 5 percent, rather than grateful for being above the other 90 percent. Even a billionaire might be unhappy that there were several multibillionaires. Observers of the attitudes of politicians can note that some, fortunately not all, thrive on the adulation of large numbers of people. Loss of an election can be terribly deflating, even if one has received the votes of tens of thousands, or even millions, of people. The loss comes across in personal terms. So there are people in public life who are so attached to the personal affirmation that comes with winning that they are willing to pay whatever price, in terms of demagoguery or backing away from important social justice causes. The late Brooks Hays, long-time congressman from Arkansas, was unwilling to support the racist policies of then-Governor Orval Faubus, so he was defeated in the next election by an unknown write-in candidate. Faubus, on the other hand, catered to the popular prejudices of the time. He won electoral victories, but Hays's historical legacy is vastly preferable. If our "heart's desire" is love and respect, then that is there to be claimed by all of us. We petition God for the grace freely given. We seek to be a part of a community of mutual love and respect. These are what can be granted.

The other theme is in verses 7 and 8: "Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God. They will collapse and fail, but we shall rise and stand upright." Chariots and horses were, in that era, implements of war. These verses are a reminder that in the long run military power is less important than being aligned to God's deeper purposes. The French premier Georges Clemenceau is alleged to have ridiculed U.S. President Woodrow Wilson during the Versailles Conference at the conclusion of World War I by saying, "Wilson talks like Jesus Christ." That may not characterize Wilson, but the

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wants God will eventually get anyway—so why the need to ask? The implicit reason to set our petitions before God, offered with stark honesty by the psalmist, is that what we see happening in our actual, day-to-day lives does not always mesh with who we believe God is and what we believe God has promised.

I have a number of friends and former students who changed their entire lives and uprooted their families in order to follow their perceived call to ministry. They offered any number of gifts and sacrifices in the course of their journeys, desiring nothing more than to participate in God's will for their lives (even if it meant studying Hebrew and systematic theology!). Yet, after graduation, they still cannot find a call to the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament. When I think of them, I appreciate the fact that the psalmist speaks directly to the rift between what we believe (that God will answer us) and what we experience (that God has not answered, yet). May God grant these faithful ones their hearts' desire!

The imagery of victory comes more clearly into play in the second half of this psalm. There is apparently a battle ensuing, with chariots and horses in evidence. It would not be surprising if it were only the enemy who had these resources, given Israel's lack of material possessions, but the Israelites have put their trust, time and again, in the One who ensures victory. It is with the help of the Lord, not military vehicles, that the Egyptian chariots, horses, and soldiers were drowned in the Red Sea (see Exod. 14). It is with the help of the Lord that David, wearing no armor, slew Goliath (see 1 Sam. 17). It is in the name of the Lord, according to the psalmist, that victory for God's "anointed" may rightfully be claimed.

Interestingly, the psalm moves from offering a blessing to the people (vv. 1–5), to claiming victory in the name of the Lord (vv. 6–8), to making a request of God (v. 9). Verses 6–8 seem to offer a justification for the very pointed blessing of the earlier section. Verse 9 seems to perform exactly what the blessing requires; that is, the people of God in fact ask for exactly what they want. I imagine this verse spoken by the people in response to the blessing and confession the psalmist has made in verses 1–8. "May God answer your prayers!" says the speaker, adding, "And I think God will!" The people respond by actually praying, asking God for what they need.

Perhaps Psalm 20 reminds people of faith that dreams really do come true when we participate in the will of the God in whom we put our trust.

CYNTHIA L. RIGBY

Pastoral Perspective

Intellectually, we know that God is "everywhere," and that God already knows what is in our hearts. Even so, we resist becoming vulnerable enough to allow God into our deepest longing. What will happen, once God is in there? Will we burst? Will we lose our mind or our control? Will God find out things God does not already know? Will we find out things about ourselves we really do not want to know? Will the experience require us to change in some radical way?

Perhaps our greatest fear is that we will be disappointed. What if God does not show up? What if God ultimately rejects us? These are reasonable human fears, based on our experience of imperfect human relationships. But God is not human, and in many ways God is not particularly reasonable, either. God waits to embrace us, if only we will admit our longing. God will answer us when we call (v. 9) and give us our heart's desire, if we can discern that our longing is, ultimately, for God.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

Psalm 20

Exegetical Perspective

on behalf of a number of royal functions, such as responding to crisis and participating in worship, then that interpretation opens more possibilities for theological reflection. If the military themes dominate the entire poem, then much of the psalm presents theological difficulty for the reader. How does the psalmist understand the role of worship in preparing for battle? Does the king (or anyone else) offer worship only for the purpose of securing divine intervention in battle? The psalmist may not have been that crass, but the psalm itself does not explore the role of sacrifices and worship. Do they have a deeper significance than securing favor for victory? The psalm does not suggest a larger purpose for the battle itself other than victory. Does war or battle serve to ensure justice? Should not contemporary people of faith pray for a minimal loss of life in battle? Does the psalmist display such exuberance over the coming battle that he does not stop to reflect on the divine love for all people?

The contemporary reader can affirm the psalm's stance that weapons alone do not provide security (v. 7), yet the psalm clearly anticipates a victory in battle. The psalmist prays for divine fulfillment of the king's desires and plans, but shows no understanding that the king should seek to discern divine plans and intentions. The Christian community of faith affirms the roles of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. On one level, the church reads this psalm in light of Jesus' assuming the role of king. Jesus then becomes the fulfillment of the psalm's petitions for security, true worship, and help in crisis. The psalm pushes the contemporary reader (both Jewish and Christian) toward affirmation of divine defeat of evil itself, not just one's human enemies.

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

American president's vision of a new world order, centering on the League of Nations, represented a deep commitment to peace. Clemenceau was one of the architects of political "realism" that saddled the defeated Germany with disgrace and huge economic burdens that paved the way for the rise of Nazism and World War II. Both Clemenceau and, later, Hitler failed to see the limits of brute military force. Following World War II, the victorious allied countries were wiser in helping Germany and Japan get on their feet again. One does not have to be a pacifist to perceive the importance of spiritual force, such as expressed by a Mohandas Gandhi, a Martin Luther King Jr., or a Nelson Mandela.

The contrast between physical force and spiritual power is also illustrated in the home. Parents are often tempted to rely primarily on physical force, but it is wise to show great restraint. Children need their parents' love more than anything else. Somehow that has to come through, even when disciplining an unruly child. To have children is to hold a very precious gift in trust, focusing on the child's unique potentialities. If the child's behavior is governed by fear of physical abuse or anxiety over possibly losing parental love, she or he may conform, but without growing in maturity. Of course, parents are quite human. Acting with restraint can be very difficult. Most parents, including those in a typical Christian congregation, carry a burden of guilt about their failings. But the gospel, including these words from Psalm 20, can bring us back to the fundamental reality: When "our pride is in the name of the LORD our God," we understand that name to be love. Love is the basic reality.

J. PHILIP WOGAMAN

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**PROPER 7 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 19
AND JUNE 25 INCLUSIVE)**

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4–11, 19–23) 32–49

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

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

³²David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." ³³Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." ³⁴But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth;

Theological Perspective

The story of the boy David defeating the giant Goliath with a well-aimed stone to the forehead is a favorite, especially among children, because it shows that God is on the side of the small and least powerful, and the unexpected triumphs over the conventional.

David, the youngest of eight brothers, is not even a soldier in the Israelite army when he volunteers to be the champion who will meet the Philistine Goliath in single combat. He hears Goliath's challenge only because he is running an errand; he is bringing food to his older brothers in the ranks. This youngster, the "stripling" David (1 Sam. 17:56), steps forward as the only Israelite with enough faith in God and confidence of purpose to take on the heavily armed and experienced warrior.

Pastoral Perspective

Listeners bring to the text memories of hearing this story as children. It is a dramatic story of conflict in which the young, faithful hero triumphs over the arrogant, profane giant. What child facing a world peopled with powerful giants does not identify with David? However, listeners also bring to this text their discomfort with bloody violence, war in the name of God, and killing the enemy. How do we read this story in the face of the struggles of the Christian life and in the life of the church?

It is a story of a community under threat, a community whose fragile existence is challenged by forces beyond itself. The armies of Israel are lined up against the Philistines, but they are stalled. If no champion who can defeat Goliath appears, then Israel will lose its freedom as a people and become

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and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it.

³⁶Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God."

³⁷David said, "The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine." So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the LORD be with you!"

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

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

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

Exegetical Perspective

Perhaps the most famous story about David's exploits (other than his affair with Bathsheba) is this tale of suspense, irony, and triumph. David, a mere boy, slays the mighty Goliath. This is the boy who would be Israel's most beloved king.

Tension mounts prior to our story with David's anointing as king to replace Saul (1 Sam. 15:10–23). Saul's rejection by God leads directly to David's election. David's story begins, in fact, as a series of rejections, of all of Jesse's sons except the last, who happens to be absent from the proceedings. By all appearances, David is the most unlikely candidate for kingship. He is the youngest and, thus, the least developed physically, but God prefers strength of character over sheer physicality (1 Sam. 16:7). In a twist of irony, David is admirably described

Homiletical Perspective

This story is the work of a masterful narrator. It is so well developed that the preacher may have difficulty deciding on a focus. You will see that the selection that the lectionary makes is helpful for making that decision—but first enjoy the story!

The narrator sets the stage for a great battle. Two armies have lined up against each other on an ancient landscape. A dry river bed is not the only thing that separates them. Between lies a chasm of fear. On the one side, the invading army of the Philistines stands secure and confident in its military power. Their iron weapons glisten in the sunlight, and their armor gives them the appearance of gods. On the other side, there is a very different picture. The army of the Israelites is less intimidating. Since "there was no smith to be found throughout all

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Theological Perspective

If we read the story in the context of 1 Samuel, we already know that God's spirit is with David. Just before today's lectionary passage, Samuel secretly anoints David king of Israel, and "the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13; see also 1 Sam. 2:10). Though the narrative in chapter 17 seems to be unaware of David's status as king, the story proves David's ability to protect and lead the nation. Just as God bypasses all David's older brothers to select him for kingship, so David is the only one of his brothers—and all the Israelites—who will meet Goliath's challenge, in order to demonstrate that "there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear" (v. 46).

This story encapsulates the Israelites' ongoing saga as a nation, the triumph of the wily and quick over the more powerful. For example, Jacob, the younger brother, outwitted Esau and gained his birthright (Gen. 25:29–34). Jacob, whose name means "the supplanter," tricked his brother a second time to gain his father's blessing (Gen. 27:1–36). Moses outwitted Pharaoh and the mighty Egyptian empire to lead his people out of slavery (Exod. 5–15). The story of David and Goliath fits the same pattern: Goliath and the Philistines intimidate the Israelites with their show of strength, but they are unaware that there is a much larger plan and destiny for Israel at stake, one that was set in motion when God caused Jacob to become Israel and empowered Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to Sinai. The Israelites themselves have a tendency to forget that destiny, as this story shows; though they amass for battle, only David hears the Philistines' mockery as an affront to the living God (vv. 26, 36).

The story portrays the "uncircumcised Philistine" Goliath as a classic bully. We may imagine him as a stock character: big, a bit stupid, and somewhat bestial in manner. He towers over other men, and he fairly bristles with weapons of massive dimensions. He is a deadly predator comparable to the bears and lions David has encountered (v. 36). David is outmatched by the giant's sheer size and brute strength, but David is much faster and far more clever. Goliath is weighed down by armor and weaponry. He is also hindered by his own expectations of how the duel will be fought, but he is in for some surprises. His first surprise comes after he calls for a "man" to come out and fight him, but instead, here comes a boy. His second surprise is that this boy does not even have a sword with which to defend himself. Goliath asks "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" (v. 43).

Pastoral Perspective

slaves to the Philistines. The outcome is uncertain. There are also forces within Israel that threaten its existence. Forty days of Goliath's relentless taunting have drained Israel's courage, broken its will, and sapped its strength. Divided opinions, flaring tempers, and pervasive uncertainty dominate the mood of the community.

What community of faith has not known such moments of threat from within and without? Changing demographics, theological controversies, worship wars, deteriorating neighborhoods, economic slumps, and leadership conflicts can exhaust a church's resources, overwhelm its vision, and deplete its energy. Many congregations can no longer afford a full-time pastor, provide church school for children, or support outreach ministries. When a community experiences stress, the level of conflict within the community rises. How a community of faith addresses these challenges will either foster its spiritual growth or ensure its dysfunction and decline.

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky have noted that when communities experience new challenges, simple technical fixes are not adequate to address the problems. Situations for which there are no ready-made solutions require a new kind of thinking and leadership. They write, "Without learning new ways—changing their attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment."¹ Neither Israel's might nor Saul's heavy bronze armor will overcome the threat that Goliath and the Philistines pose to the community. For Israel to survive, a new, creative, and adaptive solution must emerge.

David arises unexpectedly from within the community to respond to the threat to the community. David is not old enough or qualified to be in the army; he has been at home tending his father's "few sheep." Eliab, David's oldest brother, is angered by David's bold words and dismisses him. Eliab sees David as a wild-eyed, presumptuous, thrill-seeking, boastful teenager who is enamored by the romance of war. David brings personal resources and gifts for leadership that are desperately needed by the community. He has a strong sense of self. What Eliab sees as braggadocio, David sees as well-founded confidence in his own abilities. He has defeated bears and lions who tried to devour his father's sheep; he believes he can defeat this Philistine who is destroying God's flock, the people of Israel. He knows his gifts and his limitations.

1. Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 13.

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by his outward appearance only five verses later: “Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (literally, “good looking”). This description will reappear in abbreviated form in 17:42. Once anointed, David gains his strength from “the spirit of the LORD” (1 Sam. 16:13).

The stage is now set for a most gripping confrontation, but not between Saul and David. That will have to wait. Indeed, 1 Samuel 17 seems unaware of the earlier proceedings that brought Saul and David together in the first place (16:14–23). Saul is unaware of David’s identity in chapter 17. Nevertheless, the battle between David and Goliath serves to illustrate a prominent theme of the previous chapter: David’s strength is not his own.

The chapter opens with the Philistines amassing their armies for battle. Historically, the Philistines and the Israelites were cultural contemporaries. Beginning around 1200 BCE, the Philistines, otherwise known as the “Sea Peoples” in Egyptian records, with strong ties to Mycenaean culture, settled along the southern coast of Canaan and established five major cities: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath. All the while, the Israelites settled inland, initially in the highlands of Canaan. As both peoples grew to be full-fledged kingdoms, clashes were inevitable. Enter Goliath.

The impending battle takes place in the lowlands of the Shephelah. Only a valley separates the two armies (v. 3). The Philistine champion, Goliath, is said to be “six cubits and a span,” which measures to be roughly nine and a half feet. (The Septuagint more realistically puts him at “four cubits and a span.”) The text describes his armor in some detail. His weapons include a bronze javelin (or scimitar), his heavy spear, and a sword. Goliath is heavily armed, with an emphasis on heavy. Then there are his stinging words, taunting Saul and his army to select their champion to engage in a duel that will determine who will serve whom.

The narrator introduces David’s pedigree as if the previous chapter did not exist. He is still a shepherd boy who is now ferrying supplies from his father to his three oldest brothers on the battlefield, the same ones who were rejected by God for kingship in the previous chapter (17:13; 16:6–9). When he is delivering food, David witnesses firsthand Goliath’s challenge to Saul’s army. Their reaction is fear (v. 24) as Goliath “defies” (or better “insults”) “the armies of Israel.” The situation is so urgent that Saul offers freedom, riches, and even his daughter to the one who can prevail against Goliath. David’s reaction

Homiletical Perspective

the land of Israel” (1 Sam. 13:19), one wonders how many of them carry swords and spears. Their “armor” is only the ordinary clothing they wear. Since theirs is an impoverished monarchy, the army subsists on what their friends and family send them (1 Sam. 17:17–18). King Saul is desperate for a way to outmaneuver this imposing enemy and defend his charges. How? The Israelites are clearly outmatched. Why is it taking so long for the superior Philistines to dispatch their weaker adversaries?

Out comes the Philistines’ champion, Goliath of Gath. His appearance is so overwhelming that the Hebrew narrator describes him as being more than nine feet tall! (17:4). He seems to have stepped right out of Hebrew lore. There were stories of the Nephilim—legendary “sons of God”—who mated with “the daughters of humans” and formed a fearsome warrior class (Gen. 6:1–4). They were the harbingers of an evil time. It would seem by the way he is decked out that Goliath is a direct descendant of these mythic figures. A bronze helmet sits upon his head and a massive coat of mail—weighing 126 pounds—covers his body. His legs are protected by “greaves of bronze”; a curved sword made of bronze is slung over his shoulder (v. 6). The shaft of the spear that Goliath carries is as large as the barrel of a baseball bat, and its iron head weighs fifteen pounds.

Goliath’s is the booming voice of the invading army. He wonders if the timid Israelites are even able to defend themselves, so he introduces a new set of rules for warfare: “Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us” (vv. 8–9). The Hebrew narrator has gone to great lengths to create the picture of an invincible enemy; Goliath’s is the very face of impending chaos and destruction. The Israelites in the story await the arrival of a champion of their own. Unlike Goliath, theirs will not be a champion distinguished by “height of his stature” or “outward appearance” but one whose heart is known to God (16:7).

This is the third time that David, the eighth of Jesse’s sons, is introduced into Samuel’s narrative. He arrives in the encampment as the secretly anointed shepherd of Israel (16:13). David has been introduced to Saul as “skillful in playing [the lyre], a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, a man of good presence”; most importantly, “the LORD is with him” (16:18). By soothing the tormented soul of a rejected king, young David demonstrates his

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Theological Perspective

The third surprise is Goliath's undoing. As Goliath gloatingly calls his opponent forward to face off, David suddenly runs forward, whirls his sling, and buries a stone in Goliath's head. The Philistine champion falls, and David beheads him with his own sword. The contest is over almost before it started. The abrupt and unexpected defeat of their giant causes the Philistines to run in terror from the pursuing Israelites.

Theologically, this story reinforces the biblical message that God can be found on the side of the weak, and that God often surprises us by favoring the unconventional: "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength," Samuel's mother proclaimed (1 Sam. 2:4). Mary would echo these words in the Magnificat: "[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:51b–52).

We love stories that feature a reversal of fortune, the victory of a puny shepherd kid facing a muscled Schwarzenegger. We know what it feels like to face overwhelming odds and almost certain defeat—personally, institutionally, and communally. The David and Goliath story is uplifting and empowering because David is so resourceful, and he acts on behalf of God and his people. He does not let others' expectations impede his success. Saul tries to equip him with armor and a sword, but David relies instead on the strategies and strengths he has mastered as a shepherd protecting his father's flocks. David's action reminds us that God may already have empowered us for a task, if we have the courage to draw on those skills and resources.

We never know whom God is going to call to lead God's people, or by what unconventional ways God will empower them, and us. We complain about the need for change, but we often resist the ideas and actions of the foolhardy person who steps forward in faith. Perhaps we need to lose the armor and remain light on our feet. Perhaps we need to listen with discernment for the voices of those who walk among us, led by the spirit of the Lord.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

Pastoral Perspective

This agile and resourceful youth will face the giant in his own unconventional way. David knows that the skills he developed as a shepherd can be adapted and can be useful in a new situation. He cannot move under the weight of the king's bronze armor and weapons. He will defeat Goliath not with armor, but with a sling and five smooth stones.

From the outside the contest looks unequal, mismatched, and impossible. David has faith that the Lord will protect him and deliver Israel. As the story reveals, this faith in God is the most significant element of all. He declares that "the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's" (v. 47). His words remind us of the Lord's word through the prophet Zechariah: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).

Our discomfort with the violent imagery of this war story gives way to a new understanding of God's way in the world. Redemption and transformation do not come through "sword and spear," but through the power of God's Spirit working through those whose minds and hearts are tuned to God. When communities of faith face seemingly insurmountable problems, the task of leadership is to discern what resources, gifts, and new directions may emerge from within the community. Prayerful discernment and confident faith in the midst of crisis may foster new acts of courage, risk, sacrifice, and generosity from surprising people. There will always be voices that disparage bold vision and fresh leadership.

Youth with a passion for God's mission in the world have often rekindled a congregation's flickering vision. Ruby Bridges in 1960 New Orleans broke down the barriers of a segregated educational system through courage and prayer. A major factor in the success of the 1986 People's Power Revolution in the Philippines was the nuns, priests, and laypeople who were willing to kneel unmoved in prayer in front of military tanks. A changing neighborhood may lead a once-dying congregation to prayerfully and boldly reimagine its ministry to and with the neighborhood.

In times of crisis, many people tend to dwell on what resources they appear to lack rather than to focus on what resources they have. In the face of giant threats to its life and mission, the church easily forgets the One who is in charge. The church forgets that God uses what the world considers to be low and weak to bring down the proud and powerful. The church is given the greatest gifts of the Spirit—faith, hope, and love—to walk this path with courage. A pastoral task is to guide the community in discerning the movement of God's Spirit and then stepping forward in faith to embrace the new thing God is doing.

LEWIS F. GALLOWAY

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Exegetical Perspective

to Goliath's insults is one of indignation (v. 26). He accuses Goliath of defying "the armies of the living God" no less! David has taken Goliath's challenge theologically and, consequently, personally.

When David volunteers to kill Goliath, Saul notes an obvious disparity: David has had no experience in battle, whereas Goliath has been a warrior from the get-go. David insists that his prowess in the wilderness gives him an advantage: he has been the protector of his father's sheep. David has waged his own battles, and the Philistine is no different from the lions and bears he has killed in the wilderness (v. 36). David's testimony climactically concludes in verse 37: God has saved him from the predator's "paw," and God will save him from the Philistine's "hand."

The following scene is as comical as it is critical for the plot. Saul tries to make David fit for battle and turn him into a little Goliath. David is no Goliath; he is no conventional soldier like his older brothers; and he is certainly no Philistine! David cannot even walk with such battle-tested armor. David strips down to who he is: a staff-carrying, sling-wielding shepherd boy who is out to protect the "armies of the living God." Now Israel has become his flock.

Armed with five stones, David charges the giant. Goliath's disdainful response echoes David's appearance as described in the previous chapter: David is "handsome," but that will not do him any good on the battlefield (v. 42). The Philistine warrior raises the stakes by "cursing" David by his own gods (e.g., Baal, Astarte, and Dagon). David's response is defiantly faithful. He declares himself armed only with "the name of the LORD of hosts." Goliath's weapons will do him no good, for "the LORD does not save by sword and spear" (v. 47). Only the simplest and most natural of weapons, a flung stone, fells the mighty warrior, to prove that "the battle is the LORD's" (v. 47). Put another way: "Deliverance belongs to the LORD" (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9). The final irony is that Goliath is killed by his own sword! The outcome illustrates a common theological point made, for example, in the Psalms (37:14–15). Violence deployed to destroy others will ultimately turn upon the perpetrator. Put proverbially: Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.

Saul has to ask about the identity of this "stripling" (vv. 55–56). Israel's new champion gives a simple, if not humble, answer: "son of your servant Jesse." David remains unadorned in the eyes of the world precisely because he is anointed as God's chosen.

WILLIAM P. BROWN

Homiletical Perspective

ability to soothe the tormented soul of God's people. Now David arrives to relieve the soul of an army tormented by fear.

The lectionary takes David right into the action as God's agent of justice as he says, "Let no one's heart fail because of [Goliath]; your servant will go and fight this Philistine" (v. 32). Saul points out how young and inexperienced David is in contrast to their foe. How can this fellow carry out God's justice? This is a good place for the preacher to explore the situation of her congregation. How can we stand up to the injustices we face? Opposition to God's gospel and to God's agents often appears as formidable as Goliath appeared to that fearful army of the Israelites. The gigantic forces of evil in our time seem to be better equipped, indifferent and even hostile to God's purposes, and capable of wreaking havoc. The faith community may feel paralyzed and helpless as evil encroaches. The preacher can remind them of what David knows from experience in this story: God is committed to the preservation of God's faithful and is prepared to stand with those who cannot defend themselves.

The faithful shepherd king knows that he cannot go up against the enemy using the enemy's kind of equipment. He knows, before he even tries it on, that Saul's armor will not fit and that Saul's weapons will not work to bring down the giant. To protect the "flock" entrusted to him, David will have to trust the One to whom the flock belongs. He knows from his experience that God is much stronger than he is and more resourceful (vv. 34–37). God works with what David has a facility for—the unconventional weapons of a sling and stone. What is unconventional about the ways congregations resist social evil?

When God's agent goes out to meet God's foe, the expected taunts and insults come his way. David does not back down. The enemy is not prepared for one so vulnerable coming out with such confidence in his God. A stone flies, a giant falls, and an enemy scatters before God's justice. What wins the day is not David's strength but the truth about the God David serves. Even though injustice against God's poor and vulnerable presents itself in arrogance and parades about for a time in majesty, God will not let it stand. God's unlikely champions arrive to claim the day.

RICHARD F. WARD

PROPER 7 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 19 AND JUNE 25 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 9:9–20

- ⁹The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.
- ¹⁰And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.
- ¹¹Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion.
Declare his deeds among the peoples.
- ¹²For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;
he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.
- ¹³Be gracious to me, O LORD.
See what I suffer from those who hate me;
you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death,
- ¹⁴so that I may recount all your praises,
and, in the gates of daughter Zion,
rejoice in your deliverance.

Theological Perspective

Though printed separately in our English Bibles, Psalms 9 and 10 are combined as one psalm in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. These psalms form two halves of an acrostic poem, and we can find many thematic similarities between them. Both describe God's concern for the poor and oppressed and ask for deliverance from the wicked. Both hope for God's intervention in times of trouble (9:9; 10:1, 14), and both include the request, "Rise up, O LORD!" (9:19; 10:12). However, their tone is not quite the same; they offer different views of the human experience of God's providence, and this is perhaps why they eventually were divided into two psalms. That they have a close relationship suggests that Psalms 9 and 10 can interpret each other theologically.

Both psalms contain praise and lament, but Psalm 9 is the more exultant, praising God for vanquishing enemies and for not forgetting the poor. Conversely, Psalm 10 begins with lament, "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?" (10:1), and goes on to recount how the wicked persecute the poor. Both psalms express hope in God's intervention on behalf of the oppressed, but they do so from somewhat different points of view. Together, they reflect our human experience of God's presence and action in the world. This balance between hope and doubt is

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 9 is a prayer that captures many dimensions of our experience of faith. It moves between praise and petition and between thanksgiving and lament. It looks at Israel's faith from the perspective of the community and from the experience of the individual believer. Underneath these various dimensions of faith are strong affirmations about the character and action of God.

The psalmist's declarations about the nature and ways of God are like the ocean floor underneath the shifting tides of our spiritual experience. The psalmist portrays God as the everlasting ruler who sits on the throne as the fair and righteous judge of nations. God destroys the wicked and redeems the oppressed and afflicted. God has made the world in such a way that evil schemers get caught in the traps laid by their own unholy plans. Evildoers will be forgotten on the earth, but God does not forget the needy who look to God for deliverance. When mortals presume too much about their own power or place, God's judgments remind them of their finite and limited existence. As God has delivered the faithful people from their enemies in the past, God will act again to save the suffering from their oppressors. When the community of faith gathers to worship, the people gather to worship this God, whose being, nature, and actions are the secure foundation of human life.

Psalm 9:9–20

¹⁵The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;
in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.

¹⁶The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment;
the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.

Selah

¹⁷The wicked shall depart to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God.

¹⁸For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor perish forever.

¹⁹Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail;
let the nations be judged before you.

²⁰Put them in fear, O LORD;
let the nations know that they are only human.

Selah

Exegetical Perspective

Structurally, Psalm 9 is a jumble. It opens with an expression of thanksgiving (vv. 1–2), followed by reasons for such thanksgiving (vv. 3–6) and an affirmation of God’s royal stature (vv. 7–8). What follows, however, breaks the mold: praise turns to complaint and petition (vv. 13–14). An urgent plea, rather than ringing praise, concludes the psalm (vv. 19–20). The psalm oscillates between praise and thanksgiving, on the one hand, and petition and complaint, on the other. Its circular sequence testifies theologically to the effective but incomplete work of divine justice on earth. God’s reign is yet to be fully established. Another striking feature of this psalm is the audacity of the speaker’s rhetoric. In this psalm, an individual cries out to God for justice, and all the nations are expected to be sent reeling. It is no coincidence, then, that this psalm is attributed to David, Israel’s paradigmatic king and petitioner.

The lectionary reading covers only part of the psalm. Perhaps the harsh rhetoric of retribution found in the first eight verses was found to be too offensive: enemies perish, the wicked are destroyed, the nations are “rebuked” (vv. 3–6). These all represent, in the psalm’s opening words, God’s “wonderful deeds,” for which the psalmist gives full-throated thanks (v. 1). The demise of his enemies is conclusive evidence of God’s irrevocable judgment,

Homiletical Perspective

This psalm slides nicely into the slot the lectionary provides between today’s stories from 1 Samuel 17 and the Gospel of Mark (4:35–41). It offers words to those who are rendered speechless by fear and promises God’s advocacy to those who are oppressed and afflicted within the social order. The two narrative texts offer good examples of how God fulfills this promise. One can imagine the words of the psalm being on the lips of Saul or even of a common soldier in the Israelites’ army as they face an intimidating enemy force. As the Philistines’ champion Goliath struts to and fro in their front, shouting at them and daring them to send him a worthy opponent (1 Sam. 17:8–11), someone among the Israelites may be singing, “Be gracious to me, O LORD. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death” (Ps. 9:13). When victory comes at the hands of their unlikely deliverer David, Goliath is killed, and their enemy is scattered, the psalmist in their midst sings, “The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment” (v. 16).

Imagine the disciples trying to navigate through a “great windstorm,” with waves beating on the boat and nearly swamping it (Mark 4:37). Perhaps one disciple remembers that “those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have

Psalm 9:9–20

Theological Perspective

helpful, because even the most faithful and trusting among us have moments of doubt and despair, and even the most downtrodden manage to keep going because of some small glimmer of hope. These psalms allow us to explore a spectrum of faith and doubt, a range of ways to help others through times of despair.

Psalm 9 is paired with the story of David and Goliath from 1 Samuel 17 for this lectionary day; this association actually is a centuries-old tradition. The Psalms Targum (an ancient Aramaic translation and commentary) interprets Psalm 9:5 as a reference to Goliath and the Philistines: “You have rebuked the nations; you have destroyed the wicked.”¹ With God’s leading, David famously won that battle. An exultant psalm like Psalm 9 is appropriate.

What about the times people do *not* win their battle with the metaphorical giants that threaten them? The example of young David and his sling is all well and good, but that story, and Psalm 9, can ring false to people who have, like David, stood up in faith, only to be beaten back down. Psalm 10, as the second half of the poem, speaks to that sense of despair; yet, even so, Psalm 10 asserts the hope: “O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek, you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear” (10:17). In the midst of lament, the psalmist expresses the belief that God is in control of the big picture, and God’s justice will reign in the end.

Though they differ in their approach, Psalms 9 and 10 agree theologically that no matter what our human experience, God is sovereign over us. “Do not let mortals prevail. . . . Let the nations know that they are only human,” says the psalmist in Psalm 9:19–20. “Do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more,” Psalm 10:18 pleads. Theologically, these psalms assert that all humans are subject to God, even when things do not seem to be working out that way. Even if David had not managed to kill Goliath, God is still sovereign. Even if the Philistines had won, God is still sovereign. Time and again, as foreign nations crushed them, Israel continued to pass down these stories of faith. Generation after generation continues to assert the claim that God is sovereign, no matter what.

What keeps us going when we see what a mess the world is in? Do we believe the Lord’s ultimate concern for the oppressed always will prevail, in the end, over the actions of the wicked? The psalmist

1. Ernest G. Clarke and Paul V. M. Flesher, *Targum and Scripture: Studies in Aramaic Translations and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 194.

Pastoral Perspective

Like the restless tide, human faith ebbs and flows. Faith changes with the forces that press upon life; the experiences that mark the days, weeks, and years; and the longing and dreams that lie deep within the human heart. Although the reading begins with verse 9, the psalm itself begins with the psalmist’s declaration of thanksgiving, exultation, proclamation, gladness, and praise. Corporate worship and much individual prayer open with such joyful praise for God’s mighty deeds of deliverance. Speaking as an individual or perhaps for the whole community, the psalmist gives thanks to God for divine justice and protection in the past. In our worship today, the people give testimony in words, prayers, song, preaching, and personal witness to the ways in which individuals and the whole community have experienced God’s redemptive and saving work. This testimony serves as the foundation for discerning what God is doing in the present and as the ground for future hope.

Even as the psalmist expresses gratitude for God’s deliverance in the past, the psalmist lifts up a lament for the present situation of distress and suffering. The enemy appears to have the upper hand, and life itself is under threat. Again the psalmist speaks, not only as an individual, but also as the representative of the needy and the poor who are in mortal danger. What does the believer do when God seems absent from human suffering and does not hear the human cry of pain? The believer follows the lead of the psalmist in expressing both praise and lament. It is the praise of God that grounds the believer and allows the person of faith to stand in the fray; it is the lament poured out to God that keeps faith authentic and opens the heart to deeper insight, greater trust, and more bountiful healing. There is always a temptation to overlook the good and not to take the time to praise God as the source of this goodness.

There is another, perhaps greater temptation. It is to minimize or suppress the painful disappointments, real struggles, and serious threats in a life of faith. Pastors and spiritual leaders are particularly prone to this second temptation, because it is hard to acknowledge problems for which there are no easy answers. Trying to avoid anxiety by denying ambiguity or by offering simplistic, pat answers to serious and complex questions does not increase faith or nurture the spiritual life. It destroys it. When once-good marriages fall apart, neighborhood violence threatens children, urban schools decline, hunger

Psalm 9:9–20

Exegetical Perspective

executed on behalf of the speaker’s “just cause,” or better “right” (*mishpat*, v. 4). Verses 7–8 provide the theological center of the psalm by depicting God enthroned to judge the earth and all its peoples. God’s enthronement is established for the sake of justice. At the level of the divine, the royal and the judicial merge together. As another psalm declares, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne” (Ps. 89:14a). For the psalmist, executing divine justice means executing the wicked.

The verses that begin the lectionary reading disclose the flipside of God’s righteous judgment, namely, justice *for* the “oppressed” and the “afflicted.” God is a “stronghold” for them (v. 9). “A mighty fortress is our God,” to be sure—but especially for the poor and needy, the psalmist would point out. God’s “stronghold” is all about God’s preferential option for the poor. The connection between the first section, with its references to the downfall of the nations and powerful enemies, and the second section, which highlights the deliverance for the oppressed (v. 12), resembles the contrasting destinies of the powerful and the poor in Mary’s Magnificat (see esp. Luke 1:51–53).

Verses 9–10 of the psalm convey God’s justice from the underside as much as the previous verses do so from the top down. The “oppressed,” the “afflicted,” and those who “seek” God are the ones who are to receive deliverance from God. God is their blood avenger: they have suffered injustice and now seek vindication. A telling wordplay is found in the Hebrew of verses 10 and 12. There are those who “seek” God for their deliverance, and there is the God who “seeks blood” (NRSV “avenges blood”) on their behalf, the God who responds to the “cry of the afflicted” by breaking the bonds of oppression (v. 12b). This God is enthroned over all the world, but this is also the God who “dwells in Zion,” the domain of God’s residence on earth (v. 11).

The “cry of the afflicted” in verse 12 becomes personal in the following verse. The psalmist identifies himself as one who has experienced injustice and been on the brink of death, but has also experienced deliverance. For what purpose? The purpose of God’s salvific work, according to the psalm, is so that the delivered can deliver praise. The movement is unmistakably dramatic: the one “lift[ed] up from the gates of death” is now set “in the gates of daughter Zion.” Such is the movement of praise, the journey from death to life, from lament to praise.

In stark contrast to the individual’s elevation is the descent of the nations into “the pit” of their

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not forsaken those who seek you” (Ps. 9:10). Jesus, sleeping on a cushion in the stern, is the picture of that trust. The panicked disciples are not and call out in desperation to Jesus. They might as well have said, “Rise up, O LORD!” (v. 19), to stir Jesus to action. Jesus does indeed “rise up” on their behalf and stills the storm, the agent of chaos in this story.

Imagine someone in your hearing who is caught up in the vortex of economic chaos or the dynamics of a failed relationship, or standing speechless in the debris of a devastating storm. The psalm offers a gift of verse: “The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble” (v. 9). Whether it is a narrative from Scripture or an incident from one’s life, psalms can become the subtext of characters in distress. This is an example of a psalm that manages to speak when one’s own words fail.

In any case, the psalm speaks on behalf of those who feel confounded by a formidable adversary and who cry out to God for a change in the situation. The selection from the lectionary interrupts the psalmist in the middle of exultation in and narration of God’s wonderful deeds. The speaker declares that God has turned back enemies (v. 3), rebuked the arrogance of nations (v. 5), and “judged the peoples with equity” (v. 8). One way to preach from this psalm is to follow the lead of the psalmist in the first section of the sermon and name the wonderful deeds that God has done to correct imbalance and restore equity in the social order. Think of times in our own history and experience when God acted on behalf of the weak and brought about a change in the situation. Deeds like this have inspired the psalmist to praise and declare that God “does not forget the cry of the afflicted” (v. 12).

The sermon can follow the shift in the movement of the psalmist from praise to petition. Because you have done this before, God, why not do so again! The speaker numbers himself or herself among those who are in fact oppressed (v. 9), afflicted (v. 12), suffering (v. 13), needy (v. 18), and poor (v. 18). Who are those in the preacher’s midst who may be in the psalmist’s company? Whose voices of praise and affirmation are silenced by the adversaries of fear or social circumstance? The psalmist wants to move the afflicted into the assembly of all those who give thanks for deliverance (v. 14). The prayer of the psalmist weaves their stories and situations into God’s grand design of salvation, over against the “wicked,” who resist God’s purpose. The predicament of the “wicked” is of their own making.

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Theological Perspective

uses the word “forget” to contrast human and divine prerogatives in this regard. The wicked return to Sheol because they have “forgotten” God (9:17), but God never “forgets” the poor and oppressed (9:18; 10:18). Even when we doubt God’s sovereignty, even when we forget God, God never forgets us.

How do we praise God and celebrate when the good does prevail? How do we affirm that we remember God? Today’s lectionary passage is a prayer of exaltation and praise. We easily can imagine David and the Israelites singing these words as Goliath lies dead and the Philistines flee: “The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands!” (9:16). We can apply these words metaphorically to the victories we celebrate.

The psalmist’s plea to the Lord, “Rise up!” (9:19–20; cf. 10:12), echoes the words Moses said every time the Israelites set out with the ark of the Lord before them (Num. 10:35). As they traveled through the wilderness, they were confronted by many enemies in their journey toward the promised land. Of course, there was no need for Moses to tell God to rise up and lead the people. The whole journey was God’s idea in the first place, and the Israelites spent plenty of time doubting that God was really with them. Calling upon God to rise up met Moses’ and the people’s own need to be reminded of God’s presence. “Rise up!” is a prayer of confidence, a reminder to the people of who leads them, and who it is that leads *us*.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

Pastoral Perspective

and homelessness rise, and political oppression continues, it is time to offer laments and petitions to God. The power of the psalm is found in the way it fearlessly expresses anguish, frustration, and pain, but the psalm never lets go of a confident faith that the God who has delivered Israel in the past will act again to save the people.

A part of what it means to be the church is to be a community of hope. The community of faith is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. He is the incarnation of this God who redeems and saves. When the church acknowledges in worship and in its daily life the God who is the foundation of life, then there is room within the church for the praise, laments, and petitions of the people. With God as the ocean floor, the tide of faith can ebb and flow and be ever renewed by the Spirit of God.

A healthy congregation is one that encourages both praise and lament, not only in corporate worship, but also in small groups, Bible studies, ministry teams, and spiritual retreats. It finds ways to equip the people to be open, vulnerable, and honest in sharing their faith. Such a congregation extends itself in ministry with the oppressed, afflicted, poor, and needy, not only within the community of faith, but also beyond the community. By giving its life for others, the community of faith advocates for the vulnerable in the society and world. It offers petitions to God on behalf of others and stands as a witness to the God of compassion and justice in a world that seeks to ignore, defy, and even usurp God’s holy reign.

The church always lives in anticipation of what God is doing next. Even when we cannot see how or when God’s action will come, we trust with the psalmist that God will not forget the poor, the afflicted, and the vulnerable. God who will act is the same God who has acted. God’s actions will always be to overcome evil, redeem the earth, and establish justice among all people.

LEWIS F. GALLOWAY

Psalm 9:9–20

Exegetical Perspective

own making. Such is the inverse movement of God’s justice. God’s judgment is, moreover, not a sudden intervention. Here there is no swift bolt of lightning striking down the nations. That is not God’s way. Rather, God’s justice manifests itself when nations and individuals reap what they sow. Verses 15–16 depict the tightly wrought relationship between deed and consequence. *God’s* judgment is executed when the wicked are caught by *their own* devices, snared in their own nets (v. 16). Call it God’s poetic justice (see also Ps. 37:14–15). Divine judgment from on high is executed when the destructive force of sin turns against the agent of sin. The target of sin is inevitably the perpetrator. Schemes and hidden plans designed to destroy others ultimately destroy the self. Neither individuals nor nations are exempt. The psalmist dares to speak about this theologically: God is revealed, no less, when justice is served, when sin circles back upon the perpetrator, when the chickens come home to roost.

The psalm concludes with an affirmation and a petition (vv. 18–20). The affirmation is presented negatively: the psalm does not say that God will always remember the needy but that the needy “shall not always be forgotten.” It is not that the “hope of the poor” will endure forever, but that such hope will not “perish forever.” The negative cast betrays the critical realism of the psalmist’s perspective; it is an affirmation that emerges from the darkness below, from the despair of those most crushed in this world of lorded power.

The final petition exposes the problem with “the nations.” They consider themselves above the level of mere mortality, above justice, even above the Lord. Their hubris has taken them into the dark fancies of impunity. The “fear” of God, the psalmist implores, must teach them about what they really are. They are only human, and if the nations were to understand that, God’s justice would indeed be complete.

WILLIAM P. BROWN

Homiletical Perspective

In contrast to the ones that God “lifts up from the gates of death” (v. 13), the wicked “sink in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught” (v. 15).

Preacher, take care not to get “snared in the work of [your] own hands” here (v. 16). Naming “wickedness” in a sermon is not a license to tar some persons, groups, or communities that the preacher disagrees with or does not particularly like. The psalm identifies the wicked as “nations that forget God” (v. 17). What nation has not? What nation in our experience has not at times worked at cross purposes to God’s justice and redemption? We have all been complicit in the kind of wickedness that the psalmist describes! Rather than singling anyone out for special condemnation, how might you speak of the God praised in this psalm and how God turns the tables on those who turn against the poor, the afflicted, and the oppressed? How might the church align itself *with* God’s program rather than *against* it?

The text interweaves praise and petition with promise, and promise with action. God has the authority and the power, claims the psalmist, to act decisively on behalf of those who are forgotten or forced by the powerful to sit in silence on the sidelines. The way that the psalmist sees it, those who actively resist God’s plan to judge the peoples with equity and attempt to entrap the poor in unjust systems of oppression will get ensnared by their own devices. The promise is that God confronts human pretentiousness of this sort (v. 20) in the manner that God’s agent David confronted Goliath. It is a promise that even as an angry storm rages, David’s descendant Jesus rebukes the fear and disorder that threatens to consume his disciples and restore stillness. God does not sleep as God’s adversaries rage, but does “rise up” (v. 19) to act on behalf of God’s beloved.

RICHARD F. WARD

PROPER 7 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 19 AND JUNE 25 INCLUSIVE)

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16

⁵⁷On David's return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. ⁵⁸Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

^{18:1}When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ²Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. ³Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. ⁵David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved. . . .

Theological Perspective

In this short text, many of the key elements of David's extraordinary life are present, even the head of the newly killed Goliath. In a sight that strikes us as grisly, the young hero bows before King Saul to present his trophy and swear his allegiance. Today we prefer more sanitized and sophisticated ways of war. We would rather "neutralize" the likes of Goliath with a smart bomb from a robotic drone than stand there like David in the sweaty aftermath of battle with real blood dripping from a real head. As much as we human beings have "advanced" from Goliath's bronze and David's stones to today's digital battlefield, human emotions are remarkably unchanged. Young David is the celebrity of the moment, the one to whom Saul opens the palace and Jonathan opens his heart. If Saul's loyalty is transient and calculating, Jonathan's is deep and enduring. Jonathan's fondness for David is soon shared by the general public throughout Israel and Judah. The contrast between the fawning crowd and the fearful king drives the action in this text.

Saul is in a quandary. He cannot deny David's popularity or his usefulness. He needs David, yet he is beset by a case of political envy so intense that it can be described only as an "evil spirit" sent by none other than the very same God who anointed Saul king in the first place. It is one thing to have the

Pastoral Perspective

Today's text moves quickly through several scenes that form part of a larger unfolding drama of David's unexpected rise to the monarchy. The background lesson in all these stories is that God has a plan and is in control. We are to listen for cues and find our place in that plan.

The stories of the rise of David take place in a context of war. The loosely organized tribes of Israel were unsuccessful at protecting themselves against invaders. The most compelling option was to imitate the invaders' organizational methods and centralize power under a king with a professional army. The stories of the first three kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—reflect the mixed feelings of those wanting protection but fearing this might violate the covenant with God (1 Sam. 8). Israel was founded on a covenant with God that required care of the weakest, but God did not provide a recognizable blueprint for how to organize the project politically. The Israelites are searching for a model while under attack.

Today's story begins with David in a most awkward position. He has just unintentionally upstaged and surely embarrassed the king. Readers know already that Saul has lost favor with God and is on his way out (1 Sam. 15:10). Saul and his army, clothed in new shiny military armor, are frozen stiff by just one Philistine, Goliath. Insignificant David,

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16

¹⁰The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; ¹¹and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David eluded him twice.

¹²Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul. ¹³So Saul removed him from his presence, and made him a commander of a thousand; and David marched out and came in, leading the army. ¹⁴David had success in all his undertakings; for the LORD was with him. ¹⁵When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him. ¹⁶But all Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them.

Exegetical Perspective

This lectionary entry offers an alternative to 1 Samuel 17:1–49 (selected verses), the story of David’s contest with the giant Goliath. This reading portrays David’s early relationships with Saul, Saul’s son Jonathan, and Saul’s subjects, and provides a fuller background to next week’s passage from 2 Samuel 1.

In the 1 Samuel narratives, many redundancies retard the story’s telling, allowing readers time to ponder the predicaments of David, a young man who stumbles into dangerous political intrigue, and of Saul, whose life is overturned by power he does not seek and cannot manage. The prophet Samuel sets off the redundancies by anointing two rival kings (1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13). David is introduced to Saul for the first time twice (16:14–22; 17:31–37, 55–58). Saul soon attempts to kill David, twice with a spear (18:11; 19:10) and twice through matrimony (18:17, 21–25). Saul falls into prophetic frenzies twice (10:10; 19:20–23), prompting the same saying twice (10:11; 19:24). Two of Saul’s children love David and rescue him from their father; Jonathan does it twice (19:1–7; 20:1–42). David flees the palace twice (19:2, 18), and twice seeks refuge with the Philistines (21:10; 27:1–3), who twice repeat the same saying about him (21:11; 29:5). Twice he declines opportunities to kill Saul (24:3–7; 26:5–11),

Homiletical Perspective

First Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16 offers the preacher a long narrative passage, awkwardly edited with multiple plots and subplots. These few verses suggest the inner workings of political and military power in the context of complex, intense relationships. A quick reading of the immediate context provides some necessary background while also revealing some of the complications of an editor’s conflation of more than one version of the traditions of the beginnings of David’s rise to power. As a preacher, be aware of the dangers of trying to accomplish too much with this selected reading. The challenge may be finding a focus that carries the power of good news to those who listen for God’s word as you preach. An attempt to address all of the plots and subplots in the story may result in a fragmented sermon with dissipated power.

Read the text aloud while walking around, in order to experience the narrative movement. Then reread the passage aloud slowly, allowing yourself the opportunity to embrace and feel the many different emotions that move the story forward. Though 1 Samuel 18:6–9 is not included in the appointed reading, the narrative flow and emotional drive of the story almost require that these verses be considered also.

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16

Theological Perspective

adoring crowds and then lose them, something Saul is learning all too quickly. It something utterly more fearful to be the Lord's anointed and then outlive the blessing, to fade from anointed to accursed. Is God disloyal? Crowds switch sides, but does God?

In despair, Saul hurls a spear at David, not once but twice, in a futile effort to "pin him to the wall" like some annoying bug. The blessing that once protected Saul now becomes a protective shield around David. Is Saul's aim bad? Not very likely. The text says that David evades him. The mechanics of God's blessing and curse are not clear. We do wonder, however, why others do not intervene between Saul's first and second attempt. Were Saul and David alone, and did David not report the first incident?

No wonder Saul is afraid of David. An obvious solution is to send this young hero into the thick of battle where he will either kill a lot of Philistines (good, right?) or die trying (even better, of course). So David marches to the front, the head of a thousand. Not surprisingly, he comes back in great victory. His fame is greater than ever, his favor so much greater than Saul's, who looks on with growing hatred and envy and awe.

As Saul's desperation grows, so does the crowd's adoration of David. If Saul is in a quandary, so now is David too. He has been anointed in a secret ceremony by Samuel. He is proven in battle. He has the blessing of God upon him. The population is clearly behind him, which means that he can unite the diverse elements north and south into a coherent political and military force. Even though he is still young, he should be king. At least that is what he might be expected to tell himself. He knows that if the thought has crossed his mind, it has surely crossed Saul's. The danger grows each day.

Saul—even without the promptings of the evil spirit that distresses him—has to be considering the possibility that David is getting too big to handle. Why would David remain loyal to Saul? How many spears will he dodge? How long will he be content to shrug off the adulation of the crowds? If only for the good of the nation, David is perfectly justified in thinking that he would make the better king. Meanwhile Saul knows that even a virtuous David is not to be trusted. Even Saul can see that for morally defensible reasons, David should oppose Saul and force the issue of succession. It is possible that David considers killing Saul. It is not clear why he does not. Does he really think that Saul's anointing is still valid? Maybe. Maybe he does not relish the idea of

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too young to fight, successfully kills Goliath with a rock. David claims that the *living* God, rather than shiny weapons, will protect Israel against any invader, no matter their size. Even a slingshot will do. Saul looks silly. Everyone is stunned. David is clearly our man, but Saul is still king.

David enters the palace carrying the bloody head of Goliath. Jonathan throws himself at David, declaring his love and devotion. Saul invites David to live with them and sets him over the army. The lectionary jumps over the explanation for Saul's sudden change of mood (people in the streets are laughing because the king is so outdone by this young boy). After dodging Saul's spear thrown twice in a jealous fit, David is sent off to continue successfully commanding the army. They are at war after all, and Saul needs help.

Saul had not chosen to be king, but he accepted the job. Things are now falling apart quickly. David's youthful courage, enthusiasm, blind faith, and talk about a *living* God uncover for Saul cynicism and fear he had not realized he held. He is jealous of David. Saul's son Jonathan betrays him and gives his right to the throne to David. Saul tries to be gracious and invite David in, but when the crowds make fun of him (v. 7), he explodes in rage.

Many of us who are leaders through the years slowly lose vision, energy, and passion and grow cynical, to the point of being ineffective. A new "unqualified" young leader shows up and does something that shows us for the stodgy curmudgeons we have become. Family members switch loyalties. We need to recognize when it is time to step aside and usher in a peaceful transition.

The contrast between Saul and David shows Israel the model of king they prefer. Saul is from the more prestigious northern tribe of Benjamin. David is from the poor, dirty, unclaimed little town of Bethlehem. His great-grandmother is Ruth, a Moabite immigrant woman who married into Israel. A thousand years later, early Christians traced Jesus' lineage back to David and Ruth and Bethlehem (Matt. 1), highlighting God's preference for the unwanted, the poor, and outsiders. David and Jesus are descendants of a mixed marriage involving a foreigner. David assures Israel that protection against invaders will not require a huge military-industrial complex. As long as people are faithful to the living covenant, even sticks and stones will protect them.

Here, David simply needs to be gracious and let the transition occur. We can imagine him with Goliath's bloody head in hand, being hugged by an

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16

Exegetical Perspective

upbraiding him both times (24:8–15; 26:12–16), and eliciting two remorseful speeches (24:16–22; 26:17–25). So on it goes: Saul sees Samuel for the last time twice (15:35; 19:24), and once more, for good measure, after Samuel’s death (28:11–15). Finally we hear two conflicting accounts of Saul’s own death (1 Sam. 31:4–5; 2 Sam. 1:6–10).

All these redundancies repeatedly loop and fold the story back against itself. They interlace two inseparable tales—David’s early rise to power and Saul’s accelerated fall from grace. The one narrative probes the mysteries of a human heart, prompting readers to wonder over the intentions of the brave shepherd who is transformed into warrior, hero, calculating prince, and finally cynical ruler. The other searches the mysteries of divine choice, raising uneasy questions: How can God reject someone God once chose? Did God’s rejection precede, follow, or coincide with Saul’s psychological and moral disintegration? When a person such as Saul tries in vain to seek God, and finds himself alone and abandoned, to what extent is he rightly held responsible for his life’s failure? What are the limits of moral freedom, and within what strictures are critical choices made?

Other traditions—notably 1 Chronicles—guide readers to admire Israel’s shepherd king and despise his predecessor, but 1–2 Samuel allows such a simplistic view only to those who ignore the shades of gray coloring every episode. All these gray hues reflect life as we know it, life where the returns are never finally in, objectivity is elusive and illusory, and the only truths available are multiple, discordant refractions.

Saul first meets David as a musician brought to calm the king’s frazzled nerves (16:14–23)—frazzled because the same divine spirit that has once been Saul’s (11:6) later deserts him for David (16:13–14). So it is cruelly ironic that the cure proposed for Saul’s condition is to hire the man for whom God has left him. In good faith Saul does so. Saul, as that story goes, is the first to fall in love with David (16:21). The episode at hand, however, sits uneasily with this previous telling. Here Saul knows David first, not as the soothing musician, but as the undaunted giant slayer. (Ominously, the one physical detail given of Saul is that he, like Goliath, towers head and shoulders above others [9:2; 10:23].)

Whereas in the first story it was Saul who loved David and made him his armor bearer, in this story it is Saul’s son Jonathan who loves David, and gives him his armor, and his robe, sword, bow, and

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Some preachers will allow the narrative movement to provide shape to the sermon. Others may dare to ride the emotional waves of the text and invite the listeners to explore the wide diversity of their own emotional landscapes. Which emotions in the text stop you or challenge you or draw you into new levels of prayer and listening to God’s Spirit?

- a. The soul-deep love and affection between Jonathan and David that lead to ritual covenant between them?
- b. The celebration, joy, singing, and dancing of the women?
- c. The anger of Saul, fueled by jealousy?
- d. The rage of Saul because of an “evil spirit from God”?
- e. The fear of David experienced by Saul?
- f. The emotions of war (ask any veteran)?
- g. Awe like that experienced by Saul as he observes David’s success?

The preacher willing to be challenged most fully by this text may want to invite a youth group to create a dramatic presentation of this reading. Weeks ahead of the sermon, allow them to study the text, and then write and present the play. Be sure to allow time to listen to their presentation, their discussion of the text, and their feelings about it. Note what issues the story raises for them. Expect questions such as: Why is it important whose son David is? What is our relationship as people of faith to war and the military? Were Jonathan and David gay? Are evil spirits from God? What is the significance of a covenant? Why do we not have more parades for soldiers coming home from war? When does one stay in abusive relationships that threaten one’s life? When does one leave? Some of these hard questions can lead to helpful discussions and powerful sermons.

A few potential sermon themes call out to be addressed in almost any congregation:

1. Only at one’s homiletical peril can the preacher ignore the relationship between Jonathan and David introduced in 1 Samuel 18:1–4. The political implications of this covenant between Jonathan and David are important. At the same time, remember that erotic friendships between hero warriors were a familiar theme in antiquity (e.g., Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Achilles and Patrochus, Alexander the Great and Hephaestion). This relationship in which Jonathan loved David “as his own soul” provides one biblical model for a loving same-sex relationship. Many lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16

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becoming king in a country where kings are killed. Maybe he thinks these are matters for God to decide.

As we know, David bides his time. Whatever flaws in his character will be revealed over his career, he does seem to have a clear sense of God's ordering of human life. He is content to wait. Does he believe that God has chosen him to replace Saul? It is hard to think otherwise. Does he think God intends to put him on Saul's throne? Probably so. Does he believe that God wants him to act on that replacement plan? Clearly not.

So our text ends in a kind of stalemate, not one that lasts forever, but one that must have seemed to David to go on for a dangerously long time. For Saul, David personifies what Saul used to be: young, valiant, and favored. For David, however, Saul is still king, always remaining what he was. Saul may have thought that God is disloyal. Quite remarkably, David never does. For David, Saul was and is the king, God's anointed who may be ineffective but who still holds the commission to lead. If God anoints, only God can do the work of un-anointing and de-commissioning. God is the one who calls, and only God can set aside the calling. For David to force God's hand would be to undo the very foundation of his future reign. He cannot disregard Saul's anointing without discrediting his own. As mysterious as these events must have seemed, David seems to understand as clearly as anyone that his duty is not to manipulate the outcome but to trust and wait and serve.

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emotional Jonathan in front of Saul. Perhaps he is stiffly receiving Jonathan's warmth while glancing over at Saul, knowing how upset this makes him. David's reaction to Saul throughout the transition is a model for young leaders. In David's behavior, there is never a hint of power seeking or discrediting of Saul. Later, David even has the chance to kill Saul, who is pursuing him ruthlessly. He refuses.

The pivotal character in this text is Jonathan. That Jonathan gives away his right to the throne and pledges loyalty to David means that future generations can never accuse David of stealing the throne. There is more. Jonathan risks comfort and a powerful future to follow God's obvious choice, the poor young boy of mixed heritage from Judah. Will we?

Some readers have wondered if perhaps Jonathan and David were homosexual lovers. The argument does seem feasible. Their souls are "bound" (18:1 NRSV; RSV "knit") together. They make a covenant together. Jonathan loves David as his own soul. David later admits that his love for Jonathan is more than his love for women (2 Sam. 1:26). Walter Brueggemann points out that the verb for "bound" or "knit" can also suggest conspiracy, and the verb for "love" can signify emotional love but also political commitment. Taken in context, it would make sense that Jonathan sees in David the future of Israel and conspires with him, pledging his emotional and political commitment.¹

Whether the relationship is sexual or not, Jonathan realizes that David is God's preferred leader and immediately risks all to support him. Jonathan does what the author wants the reader to do: Risk it all, even if it means betraying family. Give up privilege. Follow the *living* God. Jesus later takes up this theme when he asks disciples to leave their nets to follow him and redefines family as those who *do* the will of God.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 136.

1 Samuel 17:57–18:5; 18:10–16

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belt—symbolically bequeathing to him the symbols of royal office. No reason is given for this adoration. Before the chapter is over, not only Jonathan but “all Israel and Judah” (v. 16), Jonathan’s sister Michal (v. 20), and Saul’s own servants (v. 22) will love David. Saul will try to kill him.

What conclusion can we draw from this potent mix of details? Is it a tale of irrepressible love? Possibly. Like David the giant slayer, Jonathan is himself introduced as a zealous daredevil, taking on a whole Philistine garrison with only one assistant (14:6–14). Perhaps Jonathan sees in David a kindred spirit. Perhaps he who has nearly been slain by his own father (14:37–45) cannot help but love the other target of Saul’s mad mismanagements.

Is it a tale of jealousy? Saul’s own kingship has been born, and will meet its demise, through Samuel’s vindictive envy. Now, through Samuel’s doing, Saul too has a rival, one he cannot decide whether to keep under his eye or at arm’s length. No matter which he does, he loses, as much from his own insecurity as from other factors. The women who celebrate his victories may have thought they were honoring him by naming him first in their song and ascribing to his general magnificent success. In Hebrew poetry it matters little who gets credited with thousands and who with ten thousands—except that alliteration suggests “*alafav*” for “*Sha’ul*” and “*rivevotav*” for “*David*.” Saul’s jealous mind transforms a parallelism into a contrast, an alliance into a popularity contest.

Is it a tale about acceptance? What if Saul were, like Eli before him, willing to bow to the ineluctable, arbitrary choices of God? What if he would relinquish the responsibility he took only reluctantly, and go home with dignity when he realizes that Samuel and God are aligned against him? How many times do people wreck their own lives, and the lives of others, by failing to accept with grace the unjust limitations imposed by circumstances? How much greater contentment lies in holding only lightly to ambition? No matter how we read the story, Saul’s fate leaves us with dramatically difficult questions.

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gratefully find themselves named and celebrated in this text. Most congregations are more diverse than preachers imagine. Within the congregation will be lesbian, gay, and bisexual Christians longing to hear their lives affirmed in the proclamation of God’s good news. In the pews will be persons who have been abused and despised for their sexual orientation. Beside them may be persons who have abused others whom they think might be gay. Thoughtful engagement with this text can bring hope and healing to persons and to congregations. A preacher might focus on the rituals and covenants that shape our lives, claiming the covenant between Jonathan and David, along with the ritual exchange of clothing and armor, as an example of such covenants and rituals.

2. In these few verses we meet David, slayer of Goliath, carrying Goliath’s head in his hand; David in loving covenant relationship with Jonathan; David as warrior and army commander; David the musician; David as successful leader of the army; David loved by the people. The rich and diverse presentation of David invites reflection on the complicated mosaic that defines each of us, all held together by God’s love and plan for our lives. Celebrating the full range of who we are as beloved of God may indeed be a sermon theme worth pursuing.

3. Very few contemporary theologies will embrace the assertion that “an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul,” found in 1 Samuel 18:10–11 (cf. 1 Sam. 16:14–15; 19:9–10). This kind of cognitive disconnect can stop listeners in their tracks and make it difficult for them to hear other parts of the sermon. Address the issue. Clearly, the writer of this account understood God in ways similar to the understanding of Second Isaiah, who reports these words from God: “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things” (Isa. 45:7). Making sense of the evil that humans do is an ongoing challenge. Recognizing the spiritual dynamics at work in our lives, for good and for ill, can lead to a helpful, healing word. Some will understand these accounts in the light of mental illness. Others will recognize spiritual possession and may want to explain Saul’s behavior within that matrix. Each of these various perspectives can invite the question, “Where is God in all of this?” Beware of offering too simple an answer, for this text does not allow for simplistic treatments of God’s work in our lives.

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

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

¹After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. . . .

¹⁷David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. ¹⁸(He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said:

¹⁹Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places!
How the mighty have fallen!

²⁰Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice,
the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

²¹You mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no dew or rain upon you,
nor bounteous fields!
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

²²From the blood of the slain,
from the fat of the mighty,

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The author of our text seems eager to point out that when Saul is killed, David is miles away. Does David want Saul dead? If so, who would blame him? In these texts, however, David is presented as believing that it is not merely imprudent but immoral to lift a hand against “the LORD’s anointed” (1:14). Even if the blessing of Saul’s anointing is long worn off, it is not for David or anyone else to do what God alone may do. Only God can revoke God’s anointing.

Whatever David’s personal feelings might be when he hears of the death of Saul, he expresses himself with poetry almost unequalled in all literature. In Homer and Shakespeare, we find speeches that combine emotion and eloquence so profoundly, but almost nowhere else. In equal parts the lament is personal and public and poetic.

David’s outcry begins by lamenting the corporate nature of the loss. It is not the king alone who is dead, not even the king together with the heir apparent, but the country itself whose glory is slain. The survivors grieve for those who have died but also for themselves, for in a profound sense all are slain.

Then follows the cry of lament itself: How? How can such a thing happen? How can heroes fall vanquished and strong warriors lie weak and lifeless? On the day that David killed Goliath of Gath, the

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The Song of the Bow (1:17–27) is a song of mourning written by David after hearing of the tragic death of King Saul and Saul’s son Jonathan. “How the mighty have fallen!” is the threefold refrain reminding all Israel that their commander in chief and his son, the rightful successor to the throne, have both been killed in battle. David insists the song be sung by all the people of Israel, including the southern tribes of Judah, where David is from. The south was not particularly fond of Saul, and teaching this song to them was one more way of David attempting to unify the north and unclaimed south into one Israeli force—something Saul had not done.

The lamentation lacks two themes we expect after a disastrous defeat such as this: revenge and hope. The Philistine army continues to advance. Should David not hide the coffins of the slain leaders and rattle his sword, demanding an increase in military spending? Should he not be assuring the people that YHWH will somehow avenge this loss and crush the enemy?

Apparently not. For David, there is a time for all-out grief after overwhelming loss such as this. The Philistines may be advancing, but time is spent doing nothing but grieving the country’s loss. Today, whether it be a national attack such as September 11

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
nor the sword of Saul return empty.

²³Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
In life and in death they were not divided;
they were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.

²⁴O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
who clothed you with crimson, in luxury,
who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

²⁵How the mighty have fallen
in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.

²⁶I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

²⁷How the mighty have fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!

Exegetical Perspective

The selected text for Proper 8, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, concerns David's response to the deaths of his nemesis King Saul and his friend Jonathan, Saul's son. It follows two weeks in which David is introduced: Proper 6's story of David's anointing by the prophet Samuel, and the two alternatives for Proper 7, the story of his killing of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 and the aftermath of that battle in his early relations with Saul and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18.

The story of conflict between David and Saul that extends through the second half of 1 Samuel is missing from the lectionary readings, which jump immediately from David's introduction to the king and prince to their demise. For more information on the contents of that story, see the exegetical perspective on 2 Samuel 17:57–18:16 for Proper 7. In brief, even though Saul has chosen David, he quickly becomes as unexplainably hostile to David as Jonathan is unexplainably drawn to him. The rest of Saul's story moves gradually but inexorably to his tragic death. Saul's attempt to kill David with his spear in 18:11 is only the first of many attempts, from putting him in harm's way against the Philistines to pursuing him personally in the wilderness of Judah. David flees the royal palace, leaving his wife Michal and friend Jonathan behind,

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Read 2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27 aloud. Then read aloud David's lamentation (1:19–27) two more times, at least once while walking or moving around the room to get a better sense of the movement of the text.

Place yourself in David's presence as he laments the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. What do you notice about David? What emotions are expressed in David's lament? What do you notice about your own feelings? What do you want to do in response? Make notes about this experience.

What prayers come to your heart and to your lips? Write those prayers down and listen for God's response to your prayer. Write down the dialogue with God that follows. Note what insights you gain and what challenges you receive during this prayer experience.

How might your own experiences intersect with or diverge from the experiences of those who will be listening to your sermon? How does this interaction with the text suggest ways to help the listeners experience the passage?

What are your personal feelings about war-related deaths of young (and old) men and women whom you have known and loved? How do parents and families of soldiers hear these verses? Address these concerns and feelings—no matter where the

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

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people of Gath mourned while Israel rejoiced. Now the situation is reversed. The people of Gath must not hear the news of Israel's loss, lest their joy make Israel's grief even more unbearable. Twice more in the lament, the unanswerable question goes up like a howl in the night: How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle? Our heroes were as weapons in God's hands, and now—how can it be?—they have perished, God is disarmed, and we are completely unprotected.

The cry continues. In life and in death, Saul and Jonathan belong to each other, and so it is tragic, yet fitting, that they die at the same time. "In life and in death" is a phrase repeated throughout Scripture and literature of almost every sort. Here it describes the unity or the singularity of the loss: not just the king but the dynasty, in fact not just the dynasty but the people, all one in unity that transcends the limits of life.

Of course, we wonder whether anyone could think that the character of David really feels such emotions. At this point in the story, David is not exactly Saul's best friend. Is David really sad? How can he not also be secretly happy? Is he merely offering an intensely emotional speech to mask his personal feelings? For such questions there are no answers, even though the text of the lament itself seems to recognize the problem and offer a partial solution. If not for Saul, then surely David really grieves for his friend Jonathan. If Saul was not loved much, Jonathan is loved dearly. Speaking of Jonathan, David proclaims in language both intense and enigmatic: "your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." His grief is intimate and personal. Even though it was Jonathan more than Saul who stood between David and the crown, David's grief seems sincere.

This text is full of emotion, but what makes it so interesting is not its intensity but its complexity. In one explosive moment, David feels the simultaneity of conflicting feelings. His grief is real, but so must be his self-interested desire for kingly succession. How else can we read this text in its broader context of the story of David, Saul, and Jonathan? All this is made more complex by the fact that here in our text David's lament is presented as a public statement. Just before the lament itself, the narrator tells us that David gives orders that his poem should "be taught to the people of Judah."

David's lament is not a spur-of-the-moment outpouring of grief but a carefully crafted poem. It is written to be performed, heard, quoted,

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or a local school shooting, a time of doing nothing but tending to very fresh wounds is appropriate.

The first verses (vv. 19–20) suggest to the Israelites that this is their song of mourning and should remain with them. Of course the enemy is happy at their loss. When the mighty fall in war, it is bad news for some and cause for rejoicing for others. After 9/11 many Americans were outraged to see some people in other countries rejoicing. Likewise, when Osama bin Laden was finally captured and killed by the Americans, many were appalled to see some Americans dancing for joy. Grieving a loss is intensely personal.

Verse 21 curses the ground where both men were killed. It is not a call for revenge, but a recognition that two mighty heroes fell and the place where they were killed should be remembered.

The next three verses (vv. 22–24) honor Saul and Jonathan and call upon Israel to recognize their sacrifice. Verse 22 reminds people of the brutality of their death, their courage in battle, and the fact that they were killing the enemy when they themselves were killed.

Verse 23 lifts up Saul and Jonathan as united superheroes, when the reader knows that is simply not true. In 1 Samuel 18:3–4 Jonathan betrayed his father and gave up his claim to the throne by declaring his love (loyalty) for David. The verb for "love" also means "conspire," and taken in context probably meant both. Jonathan, and later his sister Michal who married David, both loved and conspired with David to support a different sort of leadership for Israel. Saul has been chasing David, seeking to kill him ever since, while at the same time working with both of them to defend against the greater Philistine threat. Jonathan helped David escape a few times from the assassination attempts of his father Saul. It was hardly a father-son united duo, as the song claims. Our dead are often transformed and lose their less appealing characteristics as their strengths are magnified. Aunt Susan's alcoholism is forgotten as her volunteer efforts are praised. Despite his being hounded by Saul, David gives him the respect due.

Verse 24 calls on the people to recognize their gains made by Saul's public service as king. Saul had not chosen to be king, yet his leadership and military skills were noticed and he accepted the job reluctantly. The only reason to appoint a king was to defeat the Philistines, and there had been some successes. Some had prospered from the spoils of the enemy.

David's final words to Jonathan in verse 26 may be understood on several different levels that are not

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

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and seeks refuge for his parents in the foreign country of Moab and asylum for himself among the enemy Philistines. For an unnamed number of years, in short, David becomes a renegade in (and out of) his own country, surviving by his wits and the kindness of others.

David twice finds himself in a position to kill his pursuer—first in En-gedi, when Saul goes into a cave without knowing that David and his men are already there (1 Sam. 24:3), and second in the Wilderness of Ziph, when David finds Saul and his entire army asleep (1 Sam. 26:7). He resists killing him, however, on the grounds that no one should harm “the LORD’s anointed” (1 Sam. 24:6; 26:9)—a point he makes to Saul both times (1 Sam. 24:10; 26:23). Such an understanding is not free of self-interest, or at least royal interest, since David himself had likewise been anointed. It does not mean that David opposes killing others, as his intended attack against Nabal in the story interposed between the two instances of sparing Saul demonstrates (1 Sam. 25:21–22). He does not even mind massacring unarmed settlements, including women (1 Sam. 27:9–11), while lying to his protectors about his activities.

The verses in 2 Samuel 1 that today’s reading skips over testify that David does not mind slaying the young man who claims to have assisted Saul’s suicide (2 Sam. 1:2–16). The fact that David is unaware that the man is lying (if we believe 1 Sam. 31:4) does not remove the shock of his action. We might judge the Amalekite to have carefully weighed his options and measured his story, hoping with his signs of mourning and his tale of deference to the king’s wishes to appear loyal to Saul but, with his offer of Saul’s crown and armlet, to appear loyal to David. Like David himself, he is doing his best to stay alive—and even to benefit—in a politically precarious world. However, he has not reckoned with the lopsidedness of David’s scruples.

This narrative casts a shadow on David’s lament over Saul, underscoring his zealous maintenance of his own innocence in relation to the king. He is not above a public relations campaign, as his message to the people of Jabesh-gilead shows (2 Sam. 2:5–7). When Abner, the disloyal general of Saul’s son Ishbaal (Ishbosheth), offers to switch sides, David receives him gladly (3:17–21) and objects—once again, violently—only after two men actually carry out Ishbaal’s assassination (4:5–12). Whatever we can say in David’s favor about his scruples regarding Saul, we cannot deny that he is, as the unfortunate Shimei will later announce, “a man of blood”

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sermon may go—because such an emotional issue, left unaddressed, may distract the listeners from hearing anything else that is said.

Sometimes texts like these do not easily give up good news. Helping others to live into the anguish of this text can bring forth healing in many ways. Identify a local, regional, national, or international traumatic event. Then invite a small group of persons affected by that loss to write a lament that follows the form of David’s lament in 2 Samuel 1:19–27. Let them create a responsive reading that follows the model provided by David’s lament, for use during a service of worship, or write a prayer that flows from their experience of loss.

Depending on the needs of the congregation and the intersection of contemporary events, this text can evoke various sermon responses, each of which offers good news and challenges to those who listen. Among other options, consider these themes:

- a. a model for grieving in time of traumatic loss
- b. a funeral sermon or model for a eulogy
- c. a sermon that speaks truth about the loss of beloved lives in war
- d. a biblical affirmation of committed same-sex relationships

Traumatic Loss. Traumatic loss, either personal or national, can leave long-lasting emotional and spiritual scars. After the tragic losses suffered in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and airlines on September 11, 2001, many individuals and congregations found healing through revisiting lament psalms and learning to write laments of their own. Lamentations can be cathartic prayers, cries for help, songs of remembrance, grief, anger, and hope. David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan provides one example. Providing listeners a model and permission to lament can become good news to those who have lived with loss without a way to grieve that loss.

Eulogy. Second Samuel 1:19–27 offers a model for an effective eulogy, especially for one lost to war or violence. These few verses provide direction to the preacher:

1. Focus on the deceased.
2. Avoid blame; even the command to tell not the news in the lands of the enemies (so that the daughters of the enemy will not rejoice) does not waste energy blaming those who caused the deaths of Saul and Jonathan.

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

Theological Perspective

and dissected. It is a political comment on a common tragedy, designed to influence the public's interpretation of the event, even as it is being actively mourned. That David stood to gain by the news is obvious and, not surprisingly, unacknowledged. That he shares the grief of the nation is the only sentiment that can be spoken. That he articulates this grief with poetic power, in effect telling the nation what to feel, is an entirely fitting exercise of his new role as the political leader of his people. He seems to recognize instinctively that one of the duties of a true leader is to perform the emotional work of the people, to act out joy or grief as if performing a role on a stage.

Whatever conflicts David may feel inside, in public he is pure grief, profound, heartfelt, and magnanimous. For many throughout history, David serves as a model in so many ways for military and political leadership. He is not without his sins, but over and over he rises to greatness on great occasions. He shows utter fearlessness when he charges Goliath and when he leads his small band into battle. Here in our text, as he wades into the even more treacherous waters of political leadership, his audacity and skill combine to match the challenge of the moment. What he does now with words rather than weapons seems equally extraordinary, perfectly planned, carefully calculated, not just to fit but to define the occasion, all the while seeming to be completely spontaneous.

If there is a secret to David's greatness—a secret beyond his amazing gifts from poetry to military tactics—it seems to lie in his confidence that he is truly being used by God. He gives the outcome over to the one he serves, and so he is fearless, a natural and an inspiration.

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necessarily incompatible. First and foremost, both David and Jonathan are valiant heroes in Israel's history, courageously fighting to protect the fragile, forming, covenantal project. David's expression of love and loss of his fallen comrade in arms is not unlike many military memorials today. Men and women who courageously fight an enemy and watch each other's back often experience an added dimension to their relationship that differs slightly from regular friendships or romantic relations. It may not have seemed odd to his comrades that David expressed his love for Jonathan this way. Jonathan had saved David's life multiple times. In a culture where women were property and valued for their procreative capacity, it would have been unusual but not impossible to elevate same-sex loyal friendship over heterosexual erotic love.

There is, however, something extra special about David and Jonathan's relationship that does not necessarily rule out a more intimate and possibly sexual aspect. The author repeatedly describes both as handsome, and they profess their loyal love to one another often. Three times Jonathan has told David he loved him more than his own life (1 Sam. 18:1, 3; 20:17). Same-sex relations did exist in some cultures back then, and the author of 1 and 2 Samuel (based on other passages in these books) was apparently unaware of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which prohibit men sleeping with one another.¹ It is conjecture, but not out of the question, to imagine a romantic aspect to their relationship. We can say theirs was a very special relationship that enabled God's plan to be furthered.

To include this song in the Hebrew Scriptures was a very bold thing to do. Where else do we find, whether in the Psalms or Lamentations or a modern-day hymn, a song about total grief with no sign of hope? Even when walking in the shadow of death, we trust God is there, but perhaps there is a place for pure sadness and grief. The Song of the Bow reminds us that the night can be very dark indeed.

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1. *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 207.

2 Samuel 1:1, 17–27

Exegetical Perspective

(16:7–8). Even 1 Chronicles, whose portrait of David is almost invariably favorable, attributes his inability to build the temple to his bloodshed (1 Chr. 28:3).

However, besides bloodshed, David's other talent is statesmanship. For striking just the right tone at the necessary moment he has perfect pitch. In his lament he expresses not his personal feelings toward Saul, whatever they may have been, but the appropriate farewell for a king who has, after all, died defending his country from foreign attack, for a king who has, after all, provided a measure of stability and prosperity to his subjects. Like a talented statesman, David marks the tragedy with words that ennoble its meaning. He resists sentimentally making more of his own ties with Saul than they were.

When it comes to Jonathan, though, David is more qualified to speak from somewhere closer to his heart, since no rupture ever occurred with his friend. In fact, the pathos of Jonathan's life was to remain staunchly loyal not only to his father, fighting the Philistines alongside him, but also to his friend, advocating David's innocence to his father on numerous occasions and never, so far as we know, letting himself be drawn into Saul's campaign against David. David acknowledges the love Jonathan has for him and the joy this love has brought him, and we have no reason to doubt his sincerity.

The first human being God made was of both dust and spirit—dust of earth and spirit of God (Gen. 2:7). If we expect of any human that they somehow supersede this mix of mortality and divinity, we expect too much. We know from our contemporary heroes that the more soaring are their talents, the more stunning are their flaws. The fissures in David's character were present from birth, but they became far more pronounced the longer he lived. One of the lessons of his story, as many readers have noted, is that if God could love and prosper David, there is saving hope also for the rest of mortally flawed humanity.

PATRICIA K. TULL

Homiletical Perspective

3. Celebrate the deceased; even the curse of no dew and rain on the land where Saul died morphs into a celebration of who Saul was—mighty, anointed, never turning back.
4. Acknowledge important relationships in the life of the deceased.
5. Name and give thanks for the gifts received from the one who has died.
6. Allow for deep expression of grief, born out of even deeper love for the one now lost.
7. Include a prayer for a positive outcome from this grievous loss.

Loss of Lives in War. “How the mighty have fallen,” a refrain that shapes this lament, can be used to shape a sermon. Note the progressive modification of the refrain:

- 1:19 How the mighty have fallen!
 1:25 How the mighty have fallen in the midst of battle!
 1:27 How the mighty have fallen and the weapons of war perished!

How one understands the last version of the refrain will shape the goal of your sermon. Are the mighty (Saul and Jonathan) defined here as “the weapons of war”? That analysis is consistent with Hebrew poetic parallelism. Were their weapons taken or destroyed by the enemy? Can the refrain be moving toward a prayer that the weapons of war may perish? This progression might shape a sermon that moves from the deaths of beloved soldiers to the naming of war as the cause of those deaths to a prayer that the weapons of war will perish.

Same-Sex Relationships. Second Samuel 1:26 stands as an extraordinary epitaph written by David for Jonathan: “Greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” These words provide a powerful ending to a unique love story that begins in 1 Samuel 18:1–4. (Chapters 19 and 20 of 1 Samuel narrate more details of this amazing friendship.)

While most of this account of love between Jonathan and David can be read as political intrigue, many lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons have found in this story a complicated, yet committed same-sex relationship that affirms their personhood and relationships. This reading opens up the possibility of a different kind of Bible-based discussion of same-sex relationships than most congregations have encountered. What makes a covenantal relationship holy? David and Jonathan have shown us one example. This is good news indeed!

JUDITH HOCH WRAY

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

Lamentations 3:22–33

²²The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;

²³they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

²⁴"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

²⁶It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD.

²⁷It is good for one to bear
the yoke in youth,

Theological Perspective

The third chapter of Lamentations gives full expression to the bitterness of the poet and then the hope that is found in God. This central chapter turns on the pivot of verses 19–24, which in two stanzas brings the most agonizing pain to the threshold of a hope that is anchored in the character and actions of God as "love" (v. 22) and "faithfulness" (v. 23).

The thoroughgoing destruction of all hope into agony and pain is forcefully expressed through the first twenty verses of the chapter. As one who has "seen affliction" (v. 1), the lamenter feels God has chosen to drive him into darkness (v. 2) and "made my flesh and my skin waste away" (v. 4). In graphic images throughout the rest of this litany, the writer experiences absolute desolation in how God is perceived and how the poet is perceived by the community (vv. 13–14). The misery is complete: "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the LORD" (v. 18).

Whatever personal circumstances led to the poet's abject despair, the words have universal import. The descent into the abyss of misery, desolation, pain, and anguish is a human cry from across the centuries. Situations vary; but the worst that can happen to someone is captured here. The intensity is heightened by the feeling that all this is an expression of "the rod of God's wrath" (v. 1). For someone who is part of

Pastoral Perspective

In a world that thrives on change and transition, one thing remains constant: God's unending love and fidelity. This poem in the book of Lamentations is a prayer of praise expressing a deep faith in God, despite past hardships. The poet's words are quite remarkable, because the backdrop to this prayer is the experience, of the poet and of the Israelite people, of traumatic suffering that stemmed from the Babylonian invasion into the Israelites' land. This invasion caused the destruction of their holy city Jerusalem, the collapse of their monarchy, the loss of their land, and the exile of innocent survivors. By the waters of Babylon, there they did indeed sit and weep, remembering Zion and how life used to be, before the tragic course of events that changed their lives forever.

Given these circumstances, the Israelites' natural question may well have been, "Where is our God? Does our God not care about us anymore?" Even in the aftermath of such calamity, such searing tragedy of loss and exile, the poet finds the ability to affirm the presence and goodness of God, even when the belief of the day is that God has caused and allowed such trials and tribulations, such horrendous pain and suffering.

In relatively few verses, the poet reaches deep down into the heart to pray words meant to bolster

Lamentations 3:22–33

²⁸to sit alone in silence
when the Lord has imposed it,
²⁹to put one's mouth to the dust
(there may yet be hope),
³⁰to give one's cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.

³¹For the Lord will not
reject forever.

³²Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;

³³for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone.

Exegetical Perspective

These verses are taken from the centerpiece of a five-unit liturgical composition composed for recital on the anniversary of the fall of Jerusalem to the Neo-Babylonians in 586 BCE. Writing in 516 BCE, Zechariah reports that two days of annual mourning and fasting had been observed “for these seventy years” in the homeland of Judah (Zech. 7:2–5). The four outer laments (chaps. 1–2 and 4–5) describe the terrible calamity of the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath: the loss of innocent life, starvation and cannibalism, failure of national leadership (priests, prophets, officers of state, and the king), destruction of the temple, collapse of institutions of government and religion, hardship of occupation by a foreign army and regime.

Each of the five poems is artfully composed as an acrostic, in which the first words of successive lines or strophes begin with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, for which a comparable pattern in English would be successive lines beginning with A, B, C, D, and so on. It is probable that the acrostic form was chosen because it both compresses and intensifies the otherwise boundless emotions of protest and grief. Moreover, the acrostic structure gives voice to the sheer magnitude of suffering (from A to Z, so to speak). The regularity of the alphabetic form divides each of the poems

Homiletical Perspective

In these verses we have a hymn of love to the eternally merciful character of God and something of a path of stepping stones laid out for those who wish to deepen their faith and draw closer to that mercy. The passage opens with a ringing assertion that “the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (vv. 22–23). One of the most beloved hymns of all time, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” has its origins in the book of Lamentations. That song of praise is difficult to utter for those who are mired in the swamp of sorrow, or those who are lacking the barest essentials for living, but the writer of this passage is giving voice to the faith in his soul, not the current context of his surroundings. “‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’” (v. 24). We are hearing from one who is concerned not with outward circumstances but with inward realities, and who has cultivated a lifelong relationship with the living God. In the verses that follow, the writer gives us a glimpse at how a seeker may arrive at such faith.

There is no denial of hardship or suffering in this passage; rather, we see a way forward when that season dawns on each of us, as it is bound to happen. The first words of counsel that are offered are that there is a blessing to be had by waiting and

Lamentations 3:22–33

Theological Perspective

the covenant community of faith, Israel, whose God has reached out in choosing this nation to be God's people in this world, the pain is unbearable. This God seems now to be the enemy, carrying out punishment and "wrath."

Then a reversal occurs. When the poet begins to "call to mind" what is known to be true, the experiences of despair give way to hope: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope" (v. 21). What follows is a handbook for hope that is grounded in who God is and what God has done. This hope does not downplay or negate the temporal experience of suffering, but it lifts the vision and impacts the poet by focusing on the realities that endure and enable the pains of the past and present to be withstood in light of an even greater presence—the presence of God.

Hope Is Grounded in the Character of God. The elements of hope that bring immense comfort to the poet begin with who God is. The God who has seemed remote and wrathful is now recognized as the source of a hope that enables all the poet has endured to be swept up into a new vision.

The hope expressed by the poet is not simply bleary-eyed optimism, a "positive thinking" or "possibility thinking." Rather, it emerges from the deepest reality known in life: the character of the God who created all things and called Israel into covenant relationship. The "steadfast love of the LORD" that "never ceases" (v. 22; Heb. *hesed*) is another way of expressing the "covenant loyalty" that is of the nature of God. This is known from God's covenants with divine promises. God's nature is to be merciful, extending mercies (Heb., *rahamim* "compassion") that "never come to an end," being "new every morning" (vv. 22, 23). The poet proclaims: "Great is your faithfulness" (Heb. *'emunah*; cf. Exod. 34:6). This is the basis for focusing on a new reality of hope. "God's loyalty and mercy are infinite, and therefore hope never ends (vv. 22–24, 32)."¹

Hope Is Grounded in the Actions of God. God is loving, merciful, and faithful to covenants: this is the way God's character has been known to Israel and to this poet. In the background here may be the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:15; 1 Kgs. 8:23; Ps. 89:3, etc.). This covenant with David is full of promises from God: "Forever I will keep my steadfast love for

1. Adele Berlin, *Lamentations*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 92.

Pastoral Perspective

the faith of a suffering community that questions God and God's ways: "Look, O LORD, and consider! To whom have you done this?" (2:20a). In and through his prayer, the poet affirms God's presence even in the midst of great pain, when the one suffering wonders if God is near at all. The poet reminds listeners that God's steadfast love endures forever; God's mercy is unending (cf. Pss. 100:5; 103:17; 136:1–26). Such wonderful compassion is renewed daily, for God is a God of fidelity. Because of God's goodness, the poet is able to state boldly that God has become "my portion" (3:24) and the root of hope.

For those of us today experiencing any sort of hardship in our lives, the poet's words are a source of consolation, reminding us that God is in the midst of the suffering, if only we can believe and hope in this God. How easy it is for us to despair, thinking either that God is the cause of our pain and suffering or that God has no awareness of our hardship. When personal faith dims or fails, the faith of the community, expressed here through a poet, takes over and is meant to ground and comfort those of us wondering, "Where is God?" Faith and hope in God is meant to be both a personal and a communal experience. The poet's prayer calls us to remember that as a people of faith, we have a responsibility not only to pray on our own behalf but also to become people of prayer, people of faith, and people of hope for the sake of the community at large, so that we can become a sign of God's presence in the midst of hardship, struggle, and pain.

The poet next affirms the need to wait on God, to seek God, and to do so quietly. The person waiting should be expectant of God's salvation. In its historical context, this message of the poet moves from the silence of defeat to the silence of the one soon to be delivered. In the face of suffering and hardship, the poet calls us to be expectant. The God who heard the groans of the Israelites earlier (Exod. 2:24; 3:7–8) will once again hear and act on the groans of people today. The poet calls us to have vigilant hearts. The poet's words also remind us that an engaged relationship with God is desirable: "The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him" (v. 25).

The image of the yoke in verse 27 recalls imagery heard in Lamentations 1:14, where the poet associates a yoke with Jerusalem's transgressions: "My transgressions were bound into a yoke." In Jeremiah 27:2, the prophet puts on an animal yoke. His actions symbolize the people's coming exile and

Lamentations 3:22–33

Exegetical Perspective

into twenty-two self-contained cameos or vignettes. The resulting fragmentation is adroitly offset by dramatic shifts in speaker and point of view, creating continuities of description, emotion, and thought that span and link several acrostic strophes in aesthetically appealing ways.

The attribution of Lamentations to the prophet Jeremiah is not a part of the biblical text. The tradition of prophetic authorship may have arisen from a misunderstanding of 2 Chronicles 35:25, which reports that Jeremiah composed a lament over the death of King Josiah. Since Jeremiah was carried off to Egypt soon after the fall of Jerusalem, he would not have been involved in the fasts observed in Judah in subsequent decades, for which the poems of Lamentation were probably composed. The actual authorship lies in a circle of worship leaders who cultivated the acrostic device and were charged with providing liturgies for public laments on stated occasions. Since the official priestly lines of Judah had been disrupted with the fall of Jerusalem, these liturgists would have belonged to previously disqualified priestly lineages or lay circles in sympathy with the prophets who had announced the destruction of Judah.

The imagery of the laments is as artful as the acrostic form. Jerusalem is represented in poems 1, 2, and 4 by the figure of a grieving and protesting widow who has lost husband and children, and whose voice alternates with that of a poet onlooker. In contrast, a grossly abused male figure personifies Judah in poem 3. Poem 5 and 3:40–47a, abandoning personification, have the surviving people of Judah speak in the collective “we.” The lament images share a common pool with laments in Psalms and in Job. Two scenarios of destruction alternate: one describes realistic scenes of death by sword and starvation at the hands of the Neo-Babylonian victors, touching all categories of the populace, including small children who, when dead, are cannibalized. The other scenario is the figurative representation of the death and destruction as the direct action of the national deity, YHWH, who in anger has physically attacked the widow and the man as personifications of the city. As with laments in the Psalms, the descriptions of affliction and suffering as bodily abuse are shocking and unrelenting.

Unexpectedly, in the verses that we are studying (3:22–24), the lament suddenly breaks into outbursts of confidence in God’s steadfast love and mercies, which are daily renewed and elicit hope for deliverance. This dramatic shift in mood is seen

Homiletical Perspective

seeking God. We are even counseled in this passage to wait “quietly.” In a world in which the speed with which we want our demands met seems to be increasing exponentially, this is a challenging word indeed. One of the gifts God may be offering us as we wait is allowing our hunger for God’s presence to deepen and sharpen. The gift, the meal, the kiss are savored all the more with a season of longing and anticipation. Surrounded as we are by the cacophony of voices calling to us from the market and the arena of competition, if we are to hear God and grow more deeply in relationship with him, it will have to be in quiet. Waiting for God in solitude and quiet is the first stepping stone to a confident faith.

The next bit of wisdom comes in celebrating the gift of labor and service. “It is good for one to bear the yoke in youth” (v. 27). Ask anyone who is involuntarily out of work how they are feeling, and you will hear about the pain of wishing to be valuable and part of a team that is making things happen. Benedict was clear about the value of labor and its relationship to the health of the soul when he wrote in his monastic *Rule* that work and prayer were equal. The path to deepening faith is one that includes service. Bearing the yoke is what oxen and other animals of labor do as they serve their master; so it is with us who have placed our hope in God. The great grace in this is that we discover, as Jesus promises in Matthew 11:30, that we do not labor alone and that his “yoke is easy, and [his] burden is light.”

Taking another step closer and deeper in faith, we learn the value of a posture of profound humility. One’s mouth is “put . . . to the dust” (v. 29) only when one’s face is bowed low. Most of us would rather stand tall and proud, but to kneel in love and surrender is holy. In contemplative worship services in the style of the Taizé community, there comes a moment when petitioners are invited to come forward for a time of prayer at the cross. Usually a large wooden cross has been placed on the floor for just such a purpose. One by one the worshipers come forward and find their way to their knees, placing their foreheads on the cross. Just placing the body in that position unlocks the reality of our vulnerability and need for God’s sustaining power. We embody our faith quite literally in that position, where we bow before our God, who is all in all.

This posture of humility will serve us well when we meet with the rejection and criticism of the world that we are told will come. We are counseled to respond with nonviolence and to offer our “cheek to the smiter” (v. 30). It is a precursor of what will

Lamentations 3:22–33

Theological Perspective

him, and my covenant with him will stand firm” (Ps. 89:28). Even when Judah sins, the covenant stands (Ps. 89:28–37). These promises are valid and vital. They are as sure as God is; they maintain the firmest basis for hope. No harm can ultimately come to David’s descendants, since God will be faithful to Israel. Even out of deepest pain, there is hope grounded in the actions of God. “‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him’” (v. 24). God is the sustenance for life, no matter what befalls. God is faithful, and God expresses covenant faithfulness in protecting and helping.

Hope Waits. The hope grounded in who God is and what God has done, waits. The poet recognizes that “the LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him” (v. 25). It is “good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (v. 26). As John Calvin put it, “God will at length show his kindness to all those who hope in him.”² Forbearance and humility will mark the time when hope waits.

While waiting, there is the assurance that in dealing with God, there is not suffering without also experiencing “compassion,” according to “the abundance of [God’s] steadfast love” (v. 32; “vast loyalty,” Berlin trans.). Again, God’s faithful, covenant loyalty is the basis of hope and enables a “waiting” that believes God “will not reject forever” (v. 31). Hope waits because the promise is sure. The promise is sure because God is God!

In the Christian tradition, we recognize the same God, whose character and actions enable us to hope. In Jesus Christ, our hope is focused and secured. In Jesus Christ, the character and actions of God are present in a person who is God’s “new covenant.” In Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, our hope is secured, both now and forever. This hope in Christ “does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:5). In Jesus Christ, we proclaim anew: “Great is your faithfulness”!

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

servitude in Babylon. When we hear Lamentations 3:26–30, we hear strains of the prophets’ experiences. The prophets, in the face of pain and suffering, wait for God (Mic. 7:7), bear the yoke of suffering that was thought to have been imposed by God (Jer. 27:2), sit alone under the weight of God’s hand (Jer. 15:17), and give their cheeks to those who pull out the beard (Isa. 50:6). The image of putting one’s mouth to the dust is expressive of lamentation, mourning, deep humiliation, and abasement. Here the poet seems to suggest that if we have to bear the pain caused by others’ transgressions and injustices, we should not despair; deliverance will come both for the one suffering and for the one causing the suffering. The weight of the burden will be lifted from the shoulders of the innocent and those guilty of sin. God’s compassion and steadfast love will act to set people free through forgiveness.

These words of the poet of Lamentations offer us hope and comfort, especially in times when we feel that life has not dealt us a fair hand or when we are forced to bear the consequences of another person’s unjust actions. In the face of such difficulties that cause pain, the poet reminds us that God is our portion, and that God’s steadfast love and compassion never cease.

Because God’s love and compassion are unending, however, divine justice will have a different face from human justice: the deepest expression of divine justice will be divine compassion. This concept may be difficult to swallow, especially when we want “just deserts” to be meted out to someone who has wronged us. As God continued to love the Israelites into fuller life, so the poet calls us to hear Lamentations 3:22–32 anew and to act accordingly: to wait in silence, to give our pain to God, to make God our portion, and to be a people of hope and compassion.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

² John Calvin, *Commentary on Lamentations 3:25* (Calvin Translation Society).

Lamentations 3:22–33

Exegetical Perspective

in many psalms that end laments with so-called “certainty of hearing,” in which the deliverance from suffering is anticipated and even described as if it had already occurred. Thereafter, the poem shifts into the mode of didactic generalizations typical of Wisdom literature (3:25–33; see the acrostic Ps. 119). The voice of the poet avers that if a person (or, given the metaphor, a people) who has suffered waits patiently, God will eventually deliver, since it is not God’s nature to cause grief. In the verses that follow our unit (3:34–39), the theological lecturer asserts that God stands for justice and will not wrong anyone. Whatever the suffering, “Why should any who draw breath complain about the punishment of their sins?” (v. 39).

Insofar as the terrible suffering is explained, it is seen as punishment for the “sins” of Judah and, more precisely, the corrupt political and religious leadership of the sort long-condemned by prophets from Amos to Jeremiah. To be sure, it is the enemy army that has destroyed Jerusalem, but it is God who purposefully motivates and empowers the human invaders. In the face of God’s allegedly just punishment, the didactic voice in 3:25–33 advises the sufferers to be submissive and wait for God to be satisfied that Judah has been punished enough or more than enough (see Isa. 40:1–2).

This recommended acceptance of the catastrophe as just punishment is directly challenged by the other four poems, in which Judah protests that the “punishment” has been grossly disproportionate to the crimes and shockingly misdirected against the innocent, “Look, O LORD, and see! To whom have you done this? Should women eat their offspring, the children of their tender care?” (2:20, my trans.). So strained is Judah’s trust that God truly cares for the people that the final poem ends with the mournful query, “Have you utterly rejected us? Are you exceedingly angry with us?” (5:22, my trans.).

The history of Christian interpretation of Lamentations has generally emphasized the positive note of hope and trust in poem 3, often citing Lamentations as a foreshadowing of the submission of Jesus to death as the necessary prelude to resurrection. Such a glib overlooking of meaningless suffering, as also powerfully expressed in the book of Job, is countered in Jewish tradition by a generally clear-eyed communal recognition of much suffering that makes no sense and leads to no good end: “Why do the innocent suffer?”

NORMAN GOTTFWALD

Homiletical Perspective

be taught by Christ as he asks us to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39). Later Paul urges us to “bless those who persecute you” (Rom. 12:14).

It is the final few verses that offer us a window into the heart of God and a way to understand some of the pain we endure, despite the profound love that God bears for each one of us. God is presented as a loving parent who is making decisions and unfolding reality in a way that we as children cannot comprehend. What teenager has not thought his or her parents were the worst in the world when the car keys were not handed over on demand? What toddler has not pitched a fit when bedtime came before she or he was done with the day? What we view as God’s rejection or unwillingness to answer prayers in the way we desire is rather our inability to see the world from God’s view. “For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone” (vv. 31–33).

Step by step, through patient seeking and solitude, through service and humility, and through nonviolence, we are drawn into the presence of the Divine. We encounter the loving God whose mercies are indeed new every morning.

LIZ BARRINGTON FORNEY

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

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

¹Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, “Look, we are your bone and flesh. ²For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” ³So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. ⁵At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. . . .

⁹David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inward. ¹⁰And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.

Theological Perspective

This narrative establishes David as king of all Israel. Earlier, David was anointed king over Judah (2:4a); now he is called to be king over Israel’s northern tribes and those who had been loyal to King Saul. This consolidates David’s rule as king over all the tribes of Israel and joins them together in the person of their leader.

David’s rise and elevation to the throne began improbably. The eighth son of Jesse, a shepherd boy (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:15), he now is to be “shepherd of my people Israel” (2 Sam. 5:2). He comes to this point by the will of the God of Israel, expressed here through the voice of the people. The bond between David and the people is described in images reminiscent of the deep relationship between man and woman in the Genesis creation story (Gen. 2:18–24). The people say, “Look, we are your bone and flesh” (v. 1). This expression also denotes blood kinship (Gen. 29:14; Judg. 9:2). So this establishes David as truly “one of us,” in the eyes of the people he will govern.

The appeal to David to be king, coming from the people (probably through their representatives, the elders [see v. 3]), hearkened to his relation of kinship with the people (v. 1); to what he did for the tribes while Saul was king—leading them and bringing them along as their military leader (v. 2a; 1 Sam.

Pastoral Perspective

As we look back on history and envision possibilities for the future, we recall significant political, religious, social, and economic leaders who have influenced our world and our life on the planet. Some of these leaders have been visionary, creative, and liberating; others have been oppressive, intolerant, and hurtful. One point becomes clear, however: to lead and to lead well are not easy tasks.

In his day, King David governed well, leading his people victoriously through battles, expanding Israel’s borders, developing its infrastructure, and calling the people to remain faithful to covenant and Torah, even though he himself erred yet repented. Despite his human failings, David was considered to be one of Israel’s best-loved kings, and much of David’s success rested on the fact that he had a dynamic relationship with his God (2 Sam. 5:10). David and God were in covenant together (2 Sam. 7:1–17), and David was first and foremost a person of prayer, who sought divine guidance and God’s blessing (2 Sam. 7:18–29).

David was “set up” by God to be a leader, to be king over Israel. The youngest of Jesse’s sons, David was chosen by God, anointed by Samuel (1 Sam. 16:11–13), and according to the biblical story, began leading his people when he was thirty years old (2 Sam. 5:4). Even though Samuel had anointed

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

Exegetical Perspective

The text recounts the installation of David as king over all the tribes of Israel at Hebron after he has reigned six years as king of Judah (vv. 3–4). David's rise to power was a tumultuous time during which David and his followers struggled with the successors of Saul for control over the territory and populace that had formed Saul's kingdom before his premature death in battle. The first four chapters of 2 Samuel describe that diplomatic and military struggle. David prevailed when the weak Saulide ruler, Ishbosheth, was assassinated by courtiers in "an inside job" and leadership of the northern tribes was delivered to David by Abner, Ishbosheth's army commander.

David's first act as head of all the tribes was to capture Jerusalem, previously a Canaanite city, and to make it his headquarters. He undertook extensive rebuilding "all around from the Millo inward" (v. 9). The Millo, meaning "fill," is generally understood as an artificial elevation of land between the old city and the mountain called Zion, where the palace and temple of the kingdom were eventually built. Since Jerusalem had not belonged to any tribe, David shrewdly made it his seat of governance in a move to counter charges of favoritism toward any one tribe and to transcend local and regional tribal politics.

This narrative is part of the so-called Deuteronomistic History, an extended composition

Homiletical Perspective

At first glance, this passage from Samuel seems a bit flat and more like a historical footnote than a text for proclaiming the good news. It sounds like just another crowning of another king, but it is a shift in the tectonic plates of history, particularly for the people of God. It is often easy in our fast-paced world to miss something so significant hidden in a few sentences. Slowing our pace to remember and explore the surrounding events shows us just how important this passage is to the arc of the history of the people of God.

To understand the profound impact of what is being relayed in these brief seven verses, one needs to wade through the brutal tides of tribal warfare and vengeful murders and plots that have preceded this passage. The background context of this little note about David making a covenant with the tribes of Israel is years of bloody battles in which brothers and cousins beheaded and dismembered one another. From the early verses of the biblical narrative we remember that Israel longs to be a united and strong nation and asks God to provide them with a king. The king they are given is Saul, who both fails to be faithful to God and grows paranoid in response to young David's military success and popularity. Saul orders David to be murdered, and David flees for his life, taking some 400 people with him. More battles

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

Theological Perspective

18:13, 16); and then to God’s promise that David will be “shepherd of my people Israel” and “shall be ruler over Israel” (v. 2b). These form the basis for David’s ascension. His first act as king is to establish a covenant with the people at Hebron (v. 3a). Then David is anointed king over Israel (v. 3b).

The new king then makes a military move against the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. The city is taken; and the “stronghold of Zion” is renamed “the city of David” (vv. 7, 9). A theological summary of David’s rise says: “And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him” (v. 10). This designation of God as “the LORD, the God of hosts” (v. 10) looks back to the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11; 4:4) and was also associated with the ark of the covenant and Israel’s hope. New hope now begins with King David; God’s presence is no longer focused in the ark, but in the king. The continuing greatness of David expressed here (v. 10) is later said to be checked by the recognition that David’s greatness and exaltation is “for the sake of his [God’s] people Israel” (v. 12).

A number of theological themes swirl in this account of David’s anointing. David is a key Old Testament figure; his long reign as Israel’s premier king also establishes the lineage through which the even greater king, Jesus Christ, emerges (Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 2:4). David’s anointing is vital to Israel’s hope as a nation and, ultimately, to God’s covenantal purposes in establishing Israel from the initial covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3).

Like David, Jesus is an “improbable” leader, who is indeed “the savior of the world” (John 4:42). He too is from lowly circumstances and not one most would expect to be God incarnate, come to earth for the purposes of salvation.

Both David and Jesus indicate the newness of what God is doing. In David, God is establishing a line to lead the covenant people. In Jesus, God is establishing the relationship of love and grace that reconciles the world to its creator (2 Cor. 5:16–21).

Three theological aspects of this David story stand out.

Shepherd of My People. David is transformed from shepherd boy to shepherd of God’s people, Israel (v. 2). The shepherd image was used for political leaders and kings in the ancient Near East. It connotes the responsibility to care for and protect the people, as a shepherd. Jesus Christ, as incomparably greater than David, is “the good shepherd” who knows and is known by his sheep and who lays

Pastoral Perspective

David, the people had yet to accept him as their leader. In time, they finally did. They acknowledged the fact that even though Saul was king of Israel before David, David was really the one leading the people. The people of Israel also acknowledged that God had chosen David to be their next leader. As a sign of their affirmation of David, they anointed him themselves, but only after he had entered into covenant with Israel’s elders, who represented the tribes at large. Once a shepherd of sheep (1 Sam. 16:11), David had now become a shepherd of God’s people (2 Sam. 5:2). Thus David embodied many of the virtues and qualities we would hope to find in leaders today, as the world community struggles to live in peace with a vision of the common good that is more a hope and a dream than a lived reality.

Throughout Israel’s history, many of its great leaders were shepherds before they became leaders: Rebekah (Gen. 29:9), Joseph, the son of Jacob (Gen. 37:2), Moses (Exod. 3:1), David (1 Sam. 16:11), and Amos (Amos 1:1). One of the metaphors for God is a shepherd (Pss. 23:1; 80:1). When some of Isaiah’s kings—identified as “shepherds”—lead Israel astray (Ezek. 34:1–10), God assumes the role of the shepherd who searches out the lost, brings back the stray, binds up the injured, strengthens the weak, and exercises justice for all (Ezek. 34:11–16). This God is the one who, in turn, sets up a shepherd to govern the people with justice and equity and establish peace and unity in the land (Ezek. 34:23–31). In the early first century CE, a Jewish man named Jesus who saw himself as a shepherd, one like David, was put to death by some of the leaders and people of his day because he lived out God’s vision of justice and compassion in a radical way that challenged the mind-sets, institutions, and structures of his day. We Christians identify this man as the Son of God who is also Son of David (Matt. 1:1). David and many of those who came before him and followed him have given us a vision of leadership and a portrait of right relationship.

As we ponder this image of shepherd in relationship to leadership, what exactly was a shepherd’s “job description” in the ancient world? To begin, a shepherd had the task of caring for the physical needs of the sheep, especially if the sheep were injured in any way. The shepherd had to protect the sheep against predators. As a guide and constant companion of the sheep, a shepherd also had to exert authority and leadership. Inseparable from the flock, the shepherd’s work was often demanding, solitary, rewarding, but also challenging

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

Exegetical Perspective

consisting of seven complete books of the Hebrew Bible, extending from Deuteronomy through 1–2 Kings. It tells the story of Israel from its settlement in the land, through the rise of the monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon, and the split into northern and southern kingdoms, to the demise of both kingdoms at the hands of the Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians. The work was probably composed in two stages, one around 620 BCE, as an aspect of the reforms of King Josiah, and the final edition after 586 CE, attempting to cope with the destruction of the kingdom of Judah.

The Deuteronomistic History draws on older sources that had their origins in royal, priestly, prophetic, and folk circles. The historical credibility of these older sources is a matter of dispute. At a minimum, it appears that DH preserves cultural memories, if not explicit historical data, going back as far as the premonarchic era. Here and there are traditions that are thought to have been written close to the events they describe, such as the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5) and the so-called Court History of David (2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kgs. 1–2). In general, the annals that record social and political data on state administration, military affairs, foreign policy, building operations, and religious measures appear to be reliable enough to construct an outline of Israel's preexilic experience.

Our text is widely regarded as the culmination of a long account of David's rise to power that begins in 1 Samuel 16 and concludes in 2 Samuel 5. The narrative tells of the growth of David's popularity among the people, his rupture with Saul, and his eventual elevation as king following Saul's death. This lively account of David's rise to power has been compared with a type of Hittite writing known as "political apology" (not in the sense of expressing regret, but in the sense of a formal justification or defense). The Hittite apology was composed to defend or justify a king who has usurped the throne. It shares several themes with David's apology: early military successes as a trusted commander of his royal predecessor, great popularity among the people, blamelessness in all his relations with his predecessor, and the favor of the Deity as the reason for his ascent to the throne. Evidence as to whether David had a hand in plotting Saul's demise remains ambiguous, but there is no doubt that both David and the narrator go out of their way to insist on David's guilelessness.

In declaring David to be king, it is said that he "made [literally "cut"] a covenant" with the elders

Homiletical Perspective

ensue. There are battles with neighboring kingdoms, and David is caught in the middle. Throughout the ordeal David continues to show respect for King Saul and honor for God. Imagine decades of civil-war battles or a generation of gang executions finally coming to an end, and you can begin to see the importance of this passage.

Scripture does not tell us exactly what prompts all the tribes to come to David and ask for his leadership. It is logical to surmise that the death of Saul at the hands of the Philistines leaves them without a leader, so they turn to David. It is also possible that exhaustion with years of bloodshed and battle leads them there. Perhaps they are simply tired of fearing for their lives, so they come to their senses. Maybe they fear the continuing Philistine threat on the horizon and think they stand a better chance of winning with David at the helm. Whatever it is that leads them to Hebron, they cry out with one voice for peace, and all the tribes, both those of Israel and those of Judah, ask David to reign as their king.

While we hear of many miracles of healing in the New Testament, this seems to be an incredible miracle of healing in the Old Testament. It is the healing of nations. It is the healing of the people of God as a whole. It is also the healing of David the exile, whose life was threatened. The passage offers testimony to the power of God to make a way when there seems no way, and to offer a peace that passes understanding. In a world that continues to seem much more prone to fragmentation, it is a miracle of unification. Our imaginations are challenged to find a modern parallel to this act of peacemaking. It calls to mind Nelson Mandela emerging from twenty-seven years of prison to lead the nation of South Africa to a multiracial democracy. It testifies to the possibility that, despite all appearances to the contrary, peace may come in the Middle East or in any war-torn part of the world. Our God is a God of reconciliation and healing, and the reuniting of the tribes of Israel is proof that even after generations of bloodshed peace can be achieved.

In this small set of verses we also have the seed of a promise that ties into the prophecy of the lordship of Jesus Christ. Genesis 49:10 declares, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his." David makes a covenant with the people before the Lord at Hebron, and just a few chapters later God will bless David with a covenant that will ensure the lineage of kings of Israel right up unto the lordship of Christ.

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

Theological Perspective

down his life for them (John 10:11–14). The image of the shepherd is an enduring one, as in the beloved Psalm 23 (a “Psalm of David”). It points to the care of God, now in Jesus Christ, for God’s people. It is a care more comprehensive and deep than any human shepherd—even David—can give.

Covenant. David’s anointing is accompanied by his making a covenant with the people (v. 3). His political leadership is to be grounded in the theological relationship God establishes with Israel, expressed in covenants. As king, David’s rule is to reflect the vision God will establish, and in his covenant with the people, David commits to acknowledging God’s ultimate rule. David is to realize that he rules “for the sake of . . . Israel” (v. 12).

In Jesus Christ, God’s “new covenant” is established (1 Cor. 11:23–26). He is the fulfillment and culmination of all God’s covenants. He is the vision of God’s intended desire for the world and God’s people, in person. Jesus Christ is God’s new covenant in himself. God’s covenant in Christ is a covenant with the world, grounded not in a human king, but in the initiator of all covenants, even God.

God Is with Us. David becomes greater and greater, since God is with him (v. 10). This epitomizes the best dimension of his kingship, his relationship with God, which is to undergird all he does. David’s own history in his sinfulness shows his weaknesses and how his sense of following God’s will is clouded at times when he lives in disobedience. Nevertheless, David follows God “with all his heart” (1 Kgs. 14:8; 15:3).

This assessment of David could be said of all of us. What is most true for us should be that God is with us. We fail. We sin. Nevertheless our hearts should be centered on following God with all that is within us. Jesus is our primary model, as one who maintains faithfulness to God’s will in all things, without sin. Like David, we will need to seek forgiveness. Through Jesus Christ, this forgiveness is available. In him, we experience that God is with us.

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

(Gen. 31:40; 1 Sam. 17:34–35). Thus the story of David and the biblical text in general provide us with a vision of leadership that is strong and benevolent, assertive and godly. Asterius of Amasea calls us to be shepherds like the Lord, full of zeal and loving-kindness.

The image of leaders as shepherds and the people they govern as sheep is not altogether the best image for governance today, because it assumes a dependence of individuals on their leaders, when in fact all people are gifted and empowered, but may not have the opportunities to have their gifts acknowledged and used, their power liberated, and their voice heard. The shepherd imagery does, however, call us to examine our leaders today. Are our leaders today really in tune with all the people whom they govern? Do they see power as a gift to be used to bring all people, all life, into the fullness of being where power is shared, mutuality is esteemed, and diversity is celebrated?

Many of our leaders today profess some sort of religious belief—whether Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or some other faith—but are they caught up by the transformative Spirit of that Sacred Presence whom we have called by many names? David set the bar; the prophets who came after him raised it (Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–9; 42:1–9; 49:1–7). The biblical tradition calls us all to be “light.” Dare we live our vocation and lead accordingly, while mentoring a new generation that must take us into the way of peace? Our weary world cannot wait much longer.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–10

Exegetical Perspective

of the northern tribes. Interestingly, when David was earlier made king over Judah, no mention was made of a covenant with “the men of Judah” (2 Sam. 2:3–4). The difference may lie in the difference between the two parties who were accepting David as king. In making him king, the tribe of Judah was elevating one of its own sons, whereas expanding David’s rule over all the other tribes called for strengthening ties between north and south, which were at best delicate and strained. A binding contract, sworn by oath, would remind both parties that they had pledged loyalty to one another. This of course did not prevent the northern tribes from breaking away from the house of David after Solomon’s death.

We do not know the terms of the covenant between David and the northern elders. We can be sure that the agreement was two-sided. The tribes swore loyalty to David, and David in turn promised to rule justly and to defend and prosper the tribes. More specific terms may have been involved, such as a commitment by David not to tax the tribes heavily, or at all. Such a suspicion arises because in stories of David’s accomplishments nothing is said about taxation (in contrast to stories of his son Solomon), and his regime seems to be largely supported by the booty captured from his wars with Trans-Jordanian kingdoms.

The covenant between David and the elders of the northern tribes was not long-lasting in its effects. In David’s lifetime, the northern tribes took part in a revolt led by David’s own son, Absalom (2 Sam. 16–19), and a second revolt of the northern tribes was spearheaded by Sheba (2 Sam. 20). Solomon imposed conscripted labor on his subjects in order to acquire material for his lavish building projects, and it was Jeroboam, commander of the king’s labor battalions, who led the northerners in decisively rejecting the rule of the Davidic dynasty and forming a kingdom of their own (1 Kgs. 11:26–12:33). Henceforth the people of Israel formed two kingdoms that were never again to be united.

NORMAN GOTTWALD

Homiletical Perspective

This making of covenants is prominent throughout the Old Testament. It seems that from time to time God leans in and makes promises and lays out expectations for God’s people. In each case God asks for faithfulness and promises God’s companionship. The covenant God makes with David is one of the last ones made until Christ comes and offers all people the new covenant sealed in his blood. There is an elegant symmetry in both covenant and lineage hidden in just these few sentences that create a bridge between the Old and New Testaments, and between the king of the people of Israel and the King of Kings.

Taking the long view of this text, one also hears the story of the blessing of remaining faithful despite all opportunities and odds to the contrary. The lead character of this narrative is David, who begins as the most unassuming shepherd boy, and would be easily missed if one were to look only on his outward appearance. David is anointed but does not let it alter who he is, except to allow for the Spirit of God to work in him. He shows unparalleled courage in the face of a giant who mocks his people, and valor in battle time after time. David is repeatedly offered opportunity to assault Saul and to celebrate his demise, but he refrains out of respect and loyalty. In the end, this one who begins as a shepherd boy tending to his father’s flocks becomes a shepherd to the entire flock of the people of Israel.

LIZ BARRINGTON FORNEY

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

Psalm 48

¹Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God.
His holy mountain, ²beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
³Within its citadels God
has shown himself a sure defense.

⁴Then the kings assembled,
they came on together.
⁵As soon as they saw it, they were astounded;
they were in panic, they took to flight;
⁶trembling took hold of them there,
pains as of a woman in labor,
⁷as when an east wind shatters
the ships of Tarshish.
⁸As we have heard, so have we seen
in the city of the LORD of hosts,

Theological Perspective

Jews and Christians believe that God cannot be limited by human understandings of space and time. While God is said to be present *within* historical space and time, being the Author of these, God is not constrained *by* them. As human beings, finite in our ability to know and express the grandeur of God, we have to settle for earthly metaphors that point toward, but do not fully capture, the immensity, sovereignty, and benevolence of God. Psalm 48 is, among other things, a witness to God's character as the protector of God's people, described through spatial metaphors: mountain, city, temple. Embedded in this text is an object lesson for contemporary interpreters about the damage that occurs when spatial metaphors for God's universal reign are taken literally. The finite origins and finite objectives of these metaphors often become obscured. In the text of Psalm 48, the God of Zion, Jerusalem, and the temple achieves glory by becoming a very punitive landlord.

Mountains. Biblical scholars have exhaustively cataloged the ways in which mountains have a central role in the unfolding election of the Jews in the Hebrew Bible and, later, in Jesus' ministry. We remember, for instance, Mount Horeb/Sinai, from which God called Moses and revealed the Ten Commandments; Mount Nebo, where Abraham was sent

Pastoral Perspective

In thinking about Psalm 48 pastorally, I wonder, what does it mean to live securely in God's "steadfast love" (v. 9) and not under the stormy clouds of war, invasion, and terror? The psalmist paints our "sure defense" (v. 3) as the city of our God (v. 1), fortified Mount Zion (v. 2), and implores us to walk about it, go all around it, count its towers, consider its ramparts, and go through its citadels (vv. 12, 13). It is an impressive defense against the foes that assail "the towns (Heb. "daughters") of Judah" (v. 11). It is precisely this impressive defense, with its accompanied desire for "victory" (v. 10), that prompts us to ask where we look today for our safety, refuge, and sanctuary.

Psalm 48 speaks directly to our desire for security in a world full of nemeses. Israel's fear is that other nations will come and conquer them. Subsequently, when "the kings assembled," when "they came on together" (v. 4), we see ourselves surrounded, under complete siege, by all that would threaten us, including a terrorist bombing, or diagnosis of cancer, or being laid off from work. The threat the psalmist paints, though, is not singular but plural. Moreover, these threats have gathered together and are conspiring to overthrow us simultaneously. They are a unified storm front, ready to break through all our best security measures. It is like that late

Psalm 48

in the city of our God,
which God establishes forever.

Selah

⁹We ponder your steadfast love, O God,
in the midst of your temple.

¹⁰Your name, O God, like your praise,
reaches to the ends of the earth.
Your right hand is filled with victory.

¹¹Let Mount Zion be glad,
let the towns of Judah rejoice
because of your judgments.

¹²Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,

¹³consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation

¹⁴that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will be our guide forever.

Exegetical Perspective

With great exuberance and heartfelt pride, the psalmist praises God and lauds God's holy dwelling place, Mount Zion. Psalm 48 belongs to the thematic form group known as the songs of Zion, and is associated with the festival act of prostration before the would-be king God (cf. Pss. 95:6; 99:5; 100:4). The poem honors God as a mighty king and glorifies God's royal city (v. 2). The psalm can be divided into four units: verses 1–3, a hymn to God and Mount Zion; verses 4–7, an international response to Mount Zion; verses 8–11, a hymnic response by the cultic community; and verses 12–14, an invitation to procession.

Verses 1–3. The psalmist acknowledges the greatness of God, who is deserving of high praise in the city of God. Exactly what the “city of God” refers to in verse 1a is unclear. One would assume that the reference is to Jerusalem (see, e.g., Neh. 11:1; Ps. 122:3; Isa. 52:1; Dan. 9:16), but verses 1b–2 suggest otherwise. In these verses the psalmist speaks of God's holy mountain, the “joy of all the earth,” and then identifies Mount Zion as “the city of the great King” (v. 2), a point supported by Hebrew verse structure that places Mount Zion in parallelism with the reference to the “city of the great King.” Jerusalem, God's holy city, stood on Mount Zion. Thus Mount

Homiletical Perspective

Some poetic license is at play in the psalmist's glowing description of Jerusalem as a daunting city set on a high mountain. The truth is that neither the sight of the city then nor the sight of it now would make any self-respecting conqueror stop in his tracks and retreat in a panic (vv. 4–7). In this song the psalmist speaks the language of love, not the language of the reporter. His heart enlarges the attractions of Jerusalem, praise spilling out exuberantly without the restraint of fact—it is the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the most secure city in the world!

His assertions may be overdrawn, but by them the psalmist points the preacher in a fruitful direction. Jerusalem is not beautiful, strong, and secure by itself. It is “the city of the LORD” which “God establishes forever” (v. 8), and were it not for God's presence and activity “within its citadels” (v. 3) and “in the midst of [the] temple” (v. 9), it would be a city like any other. Jerusalem is beautiful because God adorns it; it is impregnable because God strengthens it; it is secure because God “will be [its] guide forever” (v. 14). Thus this psalm asserts the necessity of God's presence and favor for success in human endeavors and the wondrous results of that presence and favor, all stemming from a love that endures forever.

Psalm 48

Theological Perspective

by God to sacrifice Isaac; the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured; and the Mount of Olives, from which Jesus preached and taught.

Visually, mountains are excellent theological symbols, because they tower over their surrounding landscapes, and they connect the heavens and the earth. Often mountains are the source of much-needed water. They protect a variety of plant and animal life not found on the valley floor or in the deserts below. The mountains' visibility, grandeur, and immobility make them powerful images of God's steadfast nature.

The Temple. The temple in Psalm 48 becomes an architectural rendering of the sacred mountain of God. The architecture of the temple, like sacred mountains, describes the glory of God (vv. 12–14). The sanctuary itself represents the entire cosmos: “The God who is enthroned (invisibly) in this place breaks through the limits of space. This is not to be understood as a spiritualized concept of God, but rests on a mythological understanding of space, for which the temple (mountain of God), the place where God is present, is the place where the categories of earthly and heavenly are abolished, since the sanctuary represents the entire cosmos.”¹

YHWH has chosen to reside within the temple, but the breadth of God's rule radiates from that center across all space, even the space in which other deities have set up their own rule. In verses 4–8, the psalmist makes the point that though there are those who would challenge God for supremacy, they are quickly dispatched, and God's temporally and spatially endless rule is ensured. The essential claim is that our God trumps all challengers.

Previous Tenants. God's temple was not built on empty space. The literal and spiritual space in which the Jerusalem sanctuary on Mount Zion was built had previous tenants, namely, the Canaanites (Jebusites), who worshiped the god Baal. The supremacy of the Hebrew God was demonstrated geographically and architecturally as the Israelites built over the domain of Baal.

Spiritual supremacy is the companion of geographical supremacy. Taking over others' physical space and whatever physical resources might be housed there has always seemed to be the right of the greatest deity and that deity's emissaries. As history tells us, inserting one's god into the space held by another is not a

1. J. Maier, *Das altisraelitische Lodeheiligtum* (Berlin: Töpelman, 1965), 66, translated and quoted by Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 74.

Pastoral Perspective

afternoon hour, when dinner is beginning to burn on the stove and the baby is crying in his high chair, while the three-year-old is holding an open, permanent marker over the new white sofa that was delivered earlier that afternoon, and you are on the phone trying to understand what exactly the doctor is saying about your recent medical tests. It is as “though this world with devils filled”¹ were to conspire in a single moment to unleash their chaos upon you. In the psalm, however, the assembled kings never make it to Zion's gate, because this is “the city of our God” (vv. 1, 2).

Like the ancient psalmist, we long for security; it is embedded in our humanity, all the way down to our instinctive “fight or flight” responses. Consequently we have security blankets as children and homeland security as adults. When we travel, we pass through airport security; when we retire, we have Social Security. We gate our communities, hire security guards, and strike preemptively against real and imagined enemies as a matter of national security. When we feel vulnerable, we enter arms races, build walls to shelter our jobs from illegal immigrants, and draft laws and policies to protect ourselves against our foes.

Religion is not very much different in its propensity to construct fortifications that promote continuity and reliability. We fence the Table, structure our liturgies to delineate between who is in and who is out, and draw lines that qualify who can properly serve the Lord. The temptation to protect ourselves is all but overwhelming. Even the psalmist, in the end, succumbs to the temptation to exchange God with the secure city: “this [Zion] is God, our God forever and ever” (v. 14). Parenthetically, Jeremiah 7:1–15 pronounces judgment against such an idolatrous claim. The fact of the matter is that we long for that impenetrable bastion that will keep our fears at bay and eliminate all the risks that come with living. The problem is that we are utterly incapable of constructing such a sure defense. Zion itself can hold back the chaos and evil only because God is “within its citadels” (v. 3).

In the midst of such pervasive insecurity, the psalmist beckons us to see God's sure defense. In God's sovereign righteousness, we see that the powers that threaten us, as the kings threatened Israel, are “astounded,” “in panic,” tremble, are in pain “as of a woman in labor,” and take flight “as

1. Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” trans. Frederick Henry Hedge, in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), hymn #260.

Psalm 48

Exegetical Perspective

Zion, the holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, includes Jerusalem, making the reference to the “city of the great King” an entire geographic area and not one specific locale, namely, Jerusalem. This image of God’s holy mountain whereupon dwells “the house of the God of Jacob” plays a prominent role in Isaiah 2:1–4 and Micah 4:1–5. Thus in verses 1–3, the psalmist envisions a renewed and glorified Mount Zion, which includes a transformed Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 11; 60–62; 65).

Mount Zion has a long and rich tradition. Originally, God’s holy mountain was Mount Sinai/Horeb. Only later did the holy mountain become Mount Zion, upon which the temple and Jerusalem stood. The movement of the mountain of God from Sinai to Zion is also part of the theological schema of Israel’s redemption (cf. Isa. 2:1–3; 4:5; Heb. 12:18–24). This mountain becomes a welcoming place, where all God’s people can find refuge, joy, and peace (Isa. 2:1–4; Mic. 4:1–5). According to the psalmist, this holy mountain is under the protection of God, who is its “sure defense” (v. 3), giving it invincibility (cf. Ps. 46:5, 7).

Verses 4–7. The psalmist describes the response of other world leaders to Zion’s strong and beautiful state. Against such beauty, such greatness, the nations’ other leaders realize their own powerlessness. Zion stands in sovereign beauty just as her God reigns sovereign on her and in Jerusalem. Once unimpressive from all appearances and virtually indistinguishable from all the mountains and hills surrounding it, Zion now becomes the chief mountain among mountains (Ps. 68:16; Isa. 2:1–5).

The two metaphors—a woman writhing with labor pains and the shattering of the ships of Tarshish by the east wind—capture the depth of anguish and the degree of powerlessness that surrounding leaders experience at the sight of sovereign Zion. The “east wind” is also known as the khamsin or sirocco. It is a hot, dry, dusty wind that often blows for several days during April to June and September to November. Seen among the biblical people as a destructive force sent by God (Jer. 18:17; 19:12; Hos. 13:15), this wind could become a gale or whirlwind (Job 27:20ff.) with the strength to wreck ships (Ezek. 27:25–26). The leaders of Israel’s surrounding nations now know that Israel’s God is a force with whom they cannot reckon (vv. 4–7). In verse 8 the psalmist focuses on the Israelite community’s own response to the king’s responses. What the Israelites had once heard (cf. Isa. 65) has

Homiletical Perspective

The psalmist is confident of God’s ability to establish, enrich, and transform everything. The preacher might cite that confidence to encourage the faithful who wonder if their small efforts to live worthy lives and make a difference in their world amount to anything; or who struggle with a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness in the face of some claim or call the Spirit may be making; or the congregation that finds itself in a precarious place and is frightened because it knows it has little wherewithal of its own to make a way through trouble. With the psalmist, the preacher might testify to the fainthearted that *with God*, all things are possible, echoing the final line of the first reading for this Sunday from 2 Samuel about David, the insignificant shepherd who became the city’s builder and the people’s king: “And David became greater and greater, *for the LORD . . . was with him*” (2 Sam. 5:10). Psalm 48 opens the door to an exploration of some of Scripture’s most pervasive themes: the transforming power of grace; God’s election of the weak and insignificant to accomplish great things; the emboldening consolation that comes through trust in God’s faithfulness and power; the awe-struck rejoicing of the soul who, with eyes and ears of faith, sees and hears (v. 8) God’s love at work in and through her own responsiveness.

Psalm 48 celebrates the God who lends awesome loveliness and impregnable strength to Jerusalem; but the psalmist also celebrates the city as an emblem of God’s own beauty, strength, and steadfastness. Talking about Jerusalem is a way of talking about God: it is beautiful as God is beautiful; it is strong as God is strong; it is secure as God is faithful. When the psalmist urges us to walk around the city and take in its glories, it is so that we may understand that “this is our God” (v. 14). He invites us to ponder not only the works of God but also the God who made them. That God is faithful is not an uncommon theme in preaching, nor is the claim that God will not defraud anyone who trusts in God’s strength. We also hear sermons about the awesome transcendence of the Holy One, whose ways are not our ways and who resists, sometimes with deadly consequences, all our idolatrous efforts to capture and domesticate divine mystery.

Far less common, however, are sermons that speak of the loveliness of God—the beauty that captivates the heart and makes the seeker long for God as a deer seeks water (Ps. 42:1); the soul longs after a union not unlike that of human lovers. That God is in some sense *beautiful* is a deeply scriptural

Psalm 48

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timid business. From the beginning of human society, nations have claimed the lands of other peoples in the name of their own gods, installing the colonizers' deity or deities as spiritual sentries over the indigenous population. They either oust the people from the land or force their cooperation and conversion. Colonizers rationalize their actions by asserting the superiority of their religion and way of life, while deeming the native population ignorant and dangerous.

In the European colonization of Africa, cathedrals were built on top of ancestral burial grounds, thereby usurping the power of that place for the Christian God. Polytheism often was restructured as "veneration of the saints." During the "settlement" of the American West, on land that already had been settled for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived, the newcomers not only took the land but forcibly educated native children away from the religions of their ancestors. Subduing natives has always included vanquishing their gods from hearts, minds, geography, and eventually (it is hoped) history.

So it is in Psalm 48, that in the midst of a psalm of pilgrimage, dedicated to reminding the pilgrims of God's universal reign and steadfast loyalty, the history of the previous tenants becomes buried beneath the temple, literally and metaphorically.

Colonization. In pre-Israelite times, the Jerusalem sanctuary on Mount Zion was the sacred hill of the original Canaanite inhabitants, the Jebusites. The narrative serves to overthrow the Canaanite god Baal by setting the God of Israel in/on the place where Baal once reigned. Much of the power of religions comes from taking over the sacred geography of other religions—not only by the act of building cathedrals on pagan burial sites, but by redefining sacred time, as well. The Israelites reinvented some of the sacred festivals of other peoples and claimed them as their own. Christians claimed autumn harvest festivals (such as Samhain) as "All Hallows Eve" (Halloween), preceding All Saints' Day. The winter solstice and associated festivals of light became the day of Christ's birth. (No one knows the exact date of Jesus' birth, but if shepherds were abiding in the fields by night, keeping watch over their sheep [Luke 2], it was probably April and not December.)

When we mistake our *language for* God for the very *being of* God, we mistake metaphors for reality, and theological attributes become geographic reality. Because theology is often mired in ideology, divine desires inevitably mirror our own desires. We need to stop and ask, "Whom has my God displaced?"

EMILY R. ASKEW

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when an east wind shatters the ships of Tarshish" (vv. 5–7). Conversely, when we "ponder" God's steadfast love (v. 9), walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider its ramparts, go through its citadels, we find that God "will be our guide forever" (v. 14).

On this Sunday, the preacher might ponder God's reign in the ways God has helped the congregation "amid the flood of mortal ills."² Witnessing to God's activity in the particular reminds us that only God is our guide. Another place to ponder God's reign on this Sunday is with the companion texts. In the narrative of David's acceptance by all the tribes as Israel's king, we get a glimpse of God's intended unity, but also the reminder that not even the mighty King David was able to secure a lasting union for the north-south division.

In the New Testament readings, we hear the Gospel's claim of security, namely, through weakness and vulnerability. Jesus ordered his disciples "to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts" (Mark 6:8). Carrying out such a command is a statement of faith in God and not in our own provisions.

Finally, in 2 Corinthians, Paul echoes the way God's "right hand is filled with victory" for us. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). When we read this Sunday's lectionary texts, we hear the biblical witness that God "forever and ever" will be our God (v. 14). As Martin Luther's great hymn resounds:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never
failing;
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills
prevailing.³

DAVID G. FORNEY

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Psalm 48

Exegetical Perspective

now come to pass and they now see with their own eyes (v. 8).

Verses 9–11. The psalmist describes the sense of wonder that now fills the Israelite community. The scene shifts to the temple. The Israelite community now ponders God’s steadfast love, which is the source of Zion’s transformation and strength. For the Israelites, God’s steadfast love becomes known to them through the many deeds God has done on their behalf (v. 9; cf. Ps. 136).

Because of God’s mighty deeds, God’s “name” reaches to the ends of the earth (v. 10). Here God’s “name” denotes God’s reputation: God is the one who is faithful and keeps reputation, the one who is faithful and keeps covenant with Israel (Pss. 23:3; 25:11; 79:9; 106:8; 109:21; 138:2; 143:11).

Time and again, God’s “right hand” has come to Israel’s aid. Here in verse 10 the psalmist applies anthropomorphic qualities to God and uses the literary device of synecdoche to emphasize God’s person and actions. God’s “right hand” is said to be filled with righteousness (Ps. 48:10) and might (Ps. 80:15–16; 89:13). This “right hand” delivered Israel out of Egyptian bondage (Exod. 15:6, 12) and brought the people into the promised land (Ps. 44:1–3). Such strength, fidelity, power, and goodness are cause for celebration, to which the psalmist exhorts Mount Zion and all the towns of Judah (v. 11). God’s right hand has now scattered Israel’s enemies and taught them an uncomfortable lesson (vv. 4–8).

Verses 12–14. The tone of wonder and delight continues. The psalmist now invites the community to walk all around Zion. What the people have beheld with their eyes, they are now invited to experience with their whole being. Verses 12–13 suggest that a solemn procession around the city of God and Mount Zion may have taken place. The people’s experience, however, is not just so they can be personally edified and amazed. The invitation carries with it a task. They are to experience fully the transformation of Mount Zion and Jerusalem—temple included—so that they can tell the next generation who its God is. Thus the cultic community is not only the recipient of good news but also its bearer. Once again Israel claims God as its own, signified by the first person plural pronoun: “our” God. Covenant once again is mutual.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

conviction, and the experience of divine beauty a powerfully converting one; however, because it is also a much-neglected theme, the preacher who addresses this attribute will want to equip himself or herself with more than well-chosen words; he or she will need to lean on music, visual art, dance, and silence as well.

Finally, the psalmist recommends the practice of pondering (vv. 8–9, 12–13): considered observation and mulling, taking time to see, hear, and reflect on reality in the light of faith. Meditative discernment is a lost art in many twenty-first-century congregations. A multitasking people has little time or patience for simply walking around, looking, listening, and really seeing. If we walk around, it is with ear-buds in our ears and thumbs furiously texting. Moreover, in some traditions, meditation itself is suspect, construed as “navel-gazing” inwardness at the expense of action in the world. The practice of pondering that Psalm 48 urges on us, however, does not separate us from the world; on the contrary, it asks us not to miss a thing, to enter the world deeply and see more than ordinary eyes can see, and to take stock of the presence and activity of God here and now.

Pondering is not for its own sake; it is ordered toward testimony. When we learn to see and hear penetratingly, when we catch what God is doing and it amazes us, we will not be able to contain ourselves. We will speak of it to the next generation (vv. 13–14), passing on faith and, with it, a love for the world and a passion for its healing that are God’s very own. The preacher will do her people a great service by exploring the possibilities inherent in the ancient practice of pondering the mighty deeds and the beautiful cities of God.

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

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

¹David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ²David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. ³They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. ⁵David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. . . .

^{12b}So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. ¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So

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When was the last time you danced before the Lord? That your joy of being in God's presence was so overwhelming, that you started to boogie? The psalmist tells us to praise God in God's temple with dancing (Ps. 150:4). For some Christian groups, dancing is associated with the devil or equated with sin. Others who belong to reserved cultures, reacting like David's wife Michal, dismiss any expression of physical rejoicing by simply stating, "We do not do that here. We never have done it that way. Our fathers never danced before God."

David, while moving the ark of God, which he believed to house the very presence of the Lord, was so overcome with joy and delight that he stripped down to his undergarment and started leaping and twirling before God. When was the last time your minister or priest danced as King David? David must have looked like a drunken fool, a staggering buffoon, but David was not dancing to impress humans. He was dancing as an expression of joy that God was real and present in his life. Personally, I could not hold a tune if my life depended on it. I am the only member of my family who is not musically inclined. However, when we sing the hymns of the faith, I sing at the top of my lungs, to the consternation of my family members. I do not sing to please them or anyone else (not a difficult

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When was the last time you danced as if no one was watching? It is a rare sight, but this is exactly what David and all the house of Israel do with all their might (vv. 5, 14). They are giving a thank offering (Heb. *todah*) for the victory over the Philistines (5:17–25). Traditionally, this optional thank offering was given by someone whose life had been delivered from extreme danger. Often, *todah* involved a sacrificial meal, such as a David giving all of Israel "a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins" (v. 19). The central feature of *todah* is the joyful praise offered by the one delivered by the hand of the Lord (cf. Ps. 107:22). The *todah* of 2 Samuel 6 is not a single song or background music accompanying the return of 30,000 soldiers; it is the total embodiment of thanksgiving with "all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals" (v. 5). The dance of David and his men is the fullest expression of gratitude because they know that they were saved from peril, not by their own strength and cunning, but solely by the grace of God. It is the kind of celebration that is contagious; it draws people in (v. 15).

Do you remember going to that first school dance, where the boys and girls were self-segregated, lining the wall around the gym? The music would be playing, but no one was dancing. It always took

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

¹⁷They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. ¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, ¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

Exegetical Perspective

This delightful narrative describes how David, amid much jubilation and celebration, brings the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, the city of David. A high point of the story is David's dancing before the Lord. David's exuberance includes the multitude of Israel, whom David blesses and to whom he freely distributes bread, portions of meat, and raisin cakes. The narrative can be divided into four units: verses 1–5, the carrying of the ark from the house of Abinadab; verses 12b–15, the carrying of the ark from the house of Obed-edom; verse 16, Michal's reaction to David; and verses 17–19, the carrying of the ark into the tent in Jerusalem.

The first part of the narrative (vv. 1–5) opens with David gathering 30,000 men of Israel (v. 1). Such a large number suggests that this gathering is a military campaign, rather than a group of people ready to embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Their goal is to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The men all set out from Baale-judah (v. 2) and embark on the first leg of the journey. Baale-judah (which means "lords of Judah") is most likely the Canaanite name of Kiriath-jearim, which was situated halfway between Jerusalem and Gezer, usually identified with tell el-Azar. Baale-judah or Kiriath-jearim was one of the main cities of the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:17).

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This selection from 2 Samuel is part of the lectionary's continuous reading of the tumultuous story of David. In the lectionary, this saga of triumph, failure, and tragedy has been edited to fit the screen of liturgical use, and not always felicitously. Here two scenes have been cut: the shocking death of Uzzah (vv. 6–11) and the venomous encounter of David and Michal (vv. 20–23). Some preachers will be glad not to have to deal with the deadly divine touchiness on display in these episodes. The attentive listener, however, will wonder why David brings the ark up twice, and for what possible reasons Michal, gazing upon her ecstatic husband, despises him. The lectionary omits these passages, but the preacher will probably end up supplying them.

Because many listeners instinctively find Uzzah innocent—he was only trying to help!—the preacher may want to explain what God found so offensive. In trying to steady the ark, was Uzzah trying to control God? Intent on keeping God in a box, is he a domesticator of the Divine, whose actions on that fateful day betray anxiety about uncontained divine power, and show a habit of appointing himself to protect God's interests? It may be useful to moralize this incident in this way, especially if the congregation needs a lesson about relinquishing habits of control in the church's

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

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task considering that my singing voice is quite unpleasant); I sing for joy to be in God's presence.

What would happen if your parish or congregation, during a Sunday morning service, were to break out in dance? If instead of following the order of worship, those in the congregation would be so moved by the preaching that they started to dance for joy? Such emotional expressions may be more common among our charismatic and Pentecostal sisters and brothers, but for many mainline traditions, such demonstrations of joy would be frowned upon. Is it because we have allowed our culture to shape how we worship God, rather than letting the presence of God shape our worship? Why do we allow socially constructed customs and traditions to influence how we come before the Lord? Worse, what occurs when we begin to believe that our particular style of worship is closer to truth than some other groups' worship style?

I am not calling for all churches to incorporate dancing. Rather, I am cautioning against prohibiting a form of joyful expression, lest we find ourselves in the company of Michal. Our cultural need to control events all too often stifles the very presence of God from being manifested. Sometimes congregations prohibit expressions of joy—dancing, drumming, guitars, instruments, modern music, and so forth—as if their inclusion somehow violated God's will. Our churches would be revolutionized if we were to allow God's people to worship freely, without restraints.

Those who historically have been (and still are) colonized by Eurocentric Christian religious interpretations and traditions often dismiss their own indigenous worship styles so as to imitate the dominant culture, believing that their cultural norms are somehow inferior to Eurocentric religious forms. In so doing, they confuse a genuine expression of reverence for God with a manufactured reverence for the dominant culture. How can this particular Latino sing 300-year-old Germanic hymns unto the Lord? While I do appreciate them, they remain incongruent to my very being. Not worshipping my God through my *coritos* makes me inauthentic before the Lord. This is not to say there is something wrong with 300-year-old Germanic hymns. If I were of German descent, they would be very meaningful, but I am not. Let us learn to sing to the Lord with our own voices and languages and to dance through our own rhythms and movements.

The text tells us that once the rejoicing ended, King David distributed among the people a roll of

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a catalyst. The dancing might start with a teacher leading a line dance, or a small group of courageous students venturing onto the dance floor. No matter what starts it, though, once everyone forgets that others might be watching and, therefore, really begins to dance—then joy and laughter and celebration erupt. “King David leaping and dancing before the LORD” (v. 16) is such a catalyst to draw others in to the joyful celebration of the people of God.

Unfortunately, not everyone catches dance fever; such is the case with Michal (v. 16). Sometimes one person's public joy and praise touches upon another person's pain and misery. When we are the one who has not been delivered, it can be agonizing to see someone else celebrating. It is insult to injury. When we are praying for deliverance, day after day, year after year, but see only someone else receiving every blessing, we find ourselves despising their public display of triumph. David's open praise of God's deliverance hits Michal's raw and tender nerve. It is not clear if her pain stems from her family's waning fortune with the death of her dad, King Saul (1 Sam. 31). Her pain might also be because she was taken by David from her husband Paltiel (2 Sam. 3:12–16). Whatever the impetus, though, at the sight of David's dancing “she despised him in her heart” (v. 16).

How often we see this in the life of a congregation, when someone gifted and filled with joy comes dancing into a place of pain and sorrow. In one congregation, the Sunday school program had long been in decline; so one class invited a gifted teacher to lead their class for six weeks. This teacher had the gift of weaving humor into her teaching of Scripture. The first week, the class began to loosen up and engage the lesson with one another. The second week, they were laughing out loud and really began to feel that the gospel is, indeed, good news. By the third week, the class had to bring in more chairs to accommodate newcomers, and everyone was fully engaged and animated with the lesson. They were dancing as if no one was watching. During this third week, midway through the lesson, a member of the Sunday school class next door came in and said, “It's OK if you all don't want to take this seriously, but could you please keep it down for those of us who do!”

While it is tempting to dismiss party poopers like this, or Michal, pastorally they need our care. Michal's story is one of hardship and despair and, until she is delivered, she will not be able to revel. If the gospel is true, though, we can laugh and dance and play as God's children.

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

Exegetical Perspective

The ark of God, also known as the ark of the covenant, is carried forth from the house of Abinadab, who is a son of King Saul slain at Mount Gilboa by the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:2; 1 Chr. 10:2). Abinadab's sons, Uzzah and Ahio, use a new cart for the transport (vv. 3–4). Later Uzzah is stricken dead for touching the ark to steady it (2 Sam. 6:6–8; 1 Chr. 13:9–11).

The ark of God was a box made of acacia wood, with dimensions of approximately 4 by 2½ by 2½ feet (Exod. 25:10–22; 37:1–9), that was built by the Israelites during the wilderness period. Closely associated with God's presence, the ark traditionally contained the tables of the law given to Moses, although the function of the ark may have changed more than once throughout Israel's history. Eventually, it would reside in the Holy of Holies within the Jerusalem temple.

As Ahio and Uzzah transport the ark, David and all the house of Israel dance before the Lord, accompanied by an assortment of instruments (v. 5). The dancing establishes worship as a priority for the community as David celebrates the fact that he is chosen by God to lead the people. David's primary commitment is to his God, whom he understands to be sovereign. Over and above his great political and military gifts, worship is one of David's main contributions to Judaism.

The journey of the ark continues in verses 12–15. Obed-edom (v. 12) is a Levite who keeps the ark before it is finally carried to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:6–11). Again, David pays homage to God by sacrificing an ox and a fatling (v. 13). By performing such a deed, David acts as a priest. Once again he dances before the Lord, and this time the narrator mentions that David is girded with a linen ephod (v. 14), a garment commonly worn by priests.

In verse 16, the third unit, the ark finally arrives in Jerusalem, the city of David, and here a new character is introduced into the narrative: Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife, who stands at her window and watches David leaping and dancing. Michal despises him in her heart. Earlier in the David narrative, Michal stood by David and protected him when her father, Saul, sought to kill him. Now, she feels only disgust for him and chastises him for exposing himself with all his whirling and swirling.

Michal was King Saul's younger daughter, whom Saul offered to David as a wife, for the price of one hundred foreskins of the Philistines (1 Sam. 18:25). Saul probably hoped David would be killed in battle

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worship and spiritual life, or growing more open to God's freedom, sovereignty, and surprise; but it is not required by the text. It says only that Uzzah died because he "reached out his hand" toward the ark (v. 6). Perhaps Uzzah's hand brushed too close to the mysterious power the ark enclosed, with predictable results. This explanation is not without its own difficulties, but because other characters in Scripture are warned to keep their distance from the divine presence—or else—it may be the simplest.

More interesting than Uzzah's death is David's reaction to it. His anger flares at God for disturbing the proceedings (v. 8). Is David just shocked that God has dispatched one of his picked men? Is the source deeper? Has God struck David's pride a blow by reminding him who is boss at this culminating moment of the hard, drawn-out road to royal power? Does it annoy David that he has gone to such lengths to honor God, and God repays him like this? Is he upset that he cannot read God's intentions clearly enough to get things right? Is he worried he will never get the ark to Jerusalem, and a crucial element of his plan to consolidate power will be missing?

The preacher might ask about our own sentiments when we are made to confront our mixed motives in the service of God and neighbor. How many times have we expected a quid pro quo from God? What is it like to try hard to please God and be met with inscrutability, capriciousness, or worse? Do we allow ourselves responses of anger, frustration, and resentment toward God? This scene also invites an exploration of the multifaceted and changeable character of the biblical God, the images and convictions about God held by the congregation, and the dangers—spiritual, ecclesial, political, social—of versions that are too pat, one-dimensional, or comfortable.

It is notable that David's anger immediately turns to fear. What if he has upset God further by his reaction to Uzzah's death? What if the whole plan is wrong? What if the presence and power that the ark represents turns out to be as dangerous for David and the Israelites as David hopes it will be for his enemies? David's fear is the beginning of wisdom; he decides not to take any more chances—or liberties—with God that day, halting the procession and parking the ark in the house of Obed-edom (vv. 9–11). After three months, the ark is safe again—it has been a blessing to its hosts (v. 12). So David attempts the transfer again. Can the preacher imagine what he has been thinking about in those intervening weeks? What has he learned about God,

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

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bread, a portion of dates (or meat), and a raisin cake. Worship—no matter how exuberant it may be—absent praxis (action) is worthless. King David, the richest and most powerful man in the land, understood he had an obligation to those around him. Like Jesus centuries later, he fed the multitudes. While not everyone in the crowd was poor, no doubt many were. The food provided needed nourishment.

King David, during the procession that brought God’s ark to Jerusalem, sacrificed an ox and a fat sheep every six paces. The blood of holocausts filled the streets, but God, according to the prophet Isaiah, is revolted by such blood sacrifices. The smoke of worthless offerings fill God with disgust (Isa. 1:11–13). What is true worship then? According to Isaiah, to cease evil, learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, and plead for those who are most disenfranchised—in those times, the orphan and the widow (Isa. 1:16–17).

Dancing before God may provide space for a deep spiritual connection with the Author of the universe; but true worship is to seek justice, to physically—not solely spiritually—feed the hungry. There is something theologically wrong with those who ignore the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the alien, the incarcerated, and the infirm. Creative worship expressions may provide a sense of being close to God; but only when we touch the oppressed and dispossessed do we actually touch God. That which we do to the very least of these, we do unto God. Dancing is always fun; nevertheless, it is in the doing of justice that we get to enter into God’s presence. Then we have something to dance about.

MIGUEL A. DE LA TORRE

Pastoral Perspective

Liturgically, this passage invites us to think about the ways in which we praise God with joyful abandon. For those of us in mainline traditions, we especially should look at the ways in which the content of our message is out of sync with our affect. For example, we stand at the Lord’s Table and say, “This is the joyful feast of the people of God,” with a staid and serene voice. Then, as if to punctuate the point, we listen to a funeral dirge played on the organ, while no one speaks a word as they partake of the sacrament. It is as if the Lord’s Supper is only a memorial service for a dear departed friend, rather than a celebration of victory. The celebrant’s affect and the music do not support the notion that this is the joyful feast of the people of God.

However, *todah* does, and so does David’s dancing. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, which many traditions say at the Lord’s Table, tells of God’s salvation story for humanity and points to the glad feast that is to come. Even though we are not there yet, we do have seasons of rejoicing when we can dance as if no one is watching. We might be surprised by how contagious it might be. So, as Hafiz, the great Sufi poet, counsels, “Cast all your votes for dancing.”¹

DAVID G. FORNEY

1. Hafiz, “Cast All Your Votes for Dancing,” trans. Daniel Ladinsky, in *I Heard God Laughing: Poems of Hope and Joy* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 8.

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19

Exegetical Perspective

against the Philistines, but David won a decisive victory. He and his warriors killed two hundred Philistines and brought their foreskins to Saul, who in turn gave Michal to David to be his wife (1 Sam. 18:27–28). In this story, Michal shows her disgust for David, and he effectively cuts her off. As the text says, she bore no children.

Finally in verses 17–19, the ark is carried into the tent and set in its proper place. The tent that David pitches for the ark is not the tent of meeting or the tabernacle from the Exodus tradition. Once the ark is in the tent, David offers burnt offerings and well-being offerings (v. 17), which were sacrifices whose purpose was to please and honor God. Well-being sacrifices, also known as peace sacrifices, were eaten by the community and meant to establish a close bond among community members. After the sacrifices are offered, David blesses the people and provides an assortment of food for them as part of the festivities. Cakes of raisins are associated with the worship of other gods in Hosea 3, but in Jeremiah, these cakes are made for the queen of heaven (Jer. 7:18; 44:19). Thus David's gifts and choice of foods may have had some cultic significance that the Israelites adapted for their own worship.

The founding of a new shrine around the ark (v. 17) symbolizes a new regime and a new time in Israel's history. David is now recognized as the legitimate king. Through David's leadership, Israel will become a great nation, but not until David's son Solomon ascends the throne will a "house," more precisely the temple, be built for the ark of God (1 Kgs. 3:1–2).

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

himself, his motives, his power, and his people? What is the wisdom he—and we—receive from such setbacks? How might wisdom distilled from suffering and disappointment and humiliation feed into the ecstatic rejoicing that follows? The preacher may want to help listeners find cognates in their own experience for the uncontainable bursts of spiritual joy that often spring from the depths of calamities of our own and others' making.

In the second excised portion, Michal is repulsed by David's public indecorousness. An easy interpretation is that she belongs to that clucking, stiff, and disapproving race of churchgoers in every congregation who see the hand of Satan in enthusiastic expressions of religious feeling. Michal's story deserves a more nuanced hearing, and listeners deserve more than permission to let loose now and then in the worship of God. Michal's condemnation of the dancing David may have less to do with dancing, even less with dancing "uncovered" (v. 20), and more with pent-up rage at the manner in which he achieved his success. David's jubilant arrival in Jerusalem is the end of a long trail littered with intrigue and violence, in which Michal has been both influential player and pathetic, discarded pawn. His rise has cost her dearly, and no one, least of all David, is thinking about that cost on this day. When he comes home (the first time he has approached her in years), he probably expects submission, if not adulation, but she strikes out at him. He strikes back, rubbing her nose in her losses and promising to be even more vile than she already believes him to be (vv. 21–22). Is the childlessness the text chillingly announces (v. 23) God's punishment for her outburst? Does it mean that David refuses to have relations with her? Could it be that from that day onward she refuses him? Whatever the case, the preacher who grasps the patriarchal character of the biblical texts will not want to trivialize this painful scene by ignoring its feminist interpretation.

J. MARY LUTI

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

Psalm 24

¹The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
²for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.

³Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
⁴Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.

⁵They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Theological Perspective

There are two psalms here, two stanzas: one an affirmation of the Creator's creative ownership of creation, the other a majestic anthem of praise to God's mighty rule. Both are framed by questions and answers; both suggest processions on the way to worship; both speak of divine sovereignty and human stewardship.

"God owns this planet and all its riches!" This is how the ICEL Psalter translates the first verse of this psalm.¹ So the first six verses of Psalm 24 speak of the right relationship between Creator and creation, between creatures and their God. In an age when the creation's fragility and human abuse of creation are evident, the opening verses of Psalm 24 remind us that the earth belongs to God, not to us. If the earth and all that is in it belong to the One who brought order and beauty out of chaos, what does this say about divine sovereignty and human response?

Sovereignty as Power Over. Traditional Christian theology has often defined sovereignty as domination. We have taken Genesis literally and seen ourselves as called to "subdue" the earth, to take creation as our domain and its resources as gifts to be used for fruitful human productivity. This

1. International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *The Psalter* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995).

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 24 is a text designed for liturgical use, most likely a procession of some sort. It continues to serve that function in the Christian East, especially in the Syrian Orthodox liturgy for Easter. The clergy and people leave a darkened church and begin to process around it. They do this three times, singing Psalm 68, "Let God arise . . ." as they go. After the Gospel for matins is read, the priest knocks on the door of the church, beginning a dialogue, which is taken from Psalm 24:7–10. The priest says, "Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in." A voice comes from behind the closed doors (most often the sacristan, who is lighting the lamps) and asks, "Who is the King of glory?" The priest responds with the words of the psalm, and so it goes until the final response to the question, "the LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory." The priest announces to the people, "He is not here. For he has risen as he said." The people enter the church, now ablaze with light, singing to the risen Lord. They have come to worship.

Psalm 24 is a liturgical piece, but one with distinct theological purposes. Its first purpose is to identify God as the owner of the world, which it does by asserting, "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on

Psalm 24

⁶Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Selah

⁷Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.

⁸Who is the King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle.

⁹Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory.

Selah

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 24 stands as Proper 10's lectionary psalm in relation to 2 Samuel 6, the story of David's bringing the ark of God into Jerusalem for the first time. Many scholars associate this psalm with an annual procession during the Davidic monarchy, in which the ark may have been brought into the city gates and into the temple as a reaffirmation of God's reign over Judah. This theory sprang from the contours of the David story, several psalms that proclaim God's reign (particularly Pss. 93 and 95–99), and knowledge of the ancient Babylonian New Year's festival, a ritualized holiday lasting nearly two weeks, in which the king and the gods, especially Marduk, reaffirm divine rule in Babylon.

There are three segments to the psalm. The first two verses assert that the entire earth belongs to its creator, YHWH. Next, in verses 3–6, a series of questions, followed by answers, establishes the entrance requirements for those who seek to worship in God's temple in Jerusalem. According to these, purity of heart, words, and deeds, as well as ritual purity, is expected of people seeking the privilege of temple entrance. Finally, verses 7–10 offer a litany for the entrance of the "King of glory" into the temple precincts.

This psalm offers occasion to ponder the ambiguities of sacred space. On the one hand, the

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Just as the ancient, yellowed church bulletin found in a keepsake box hints what happened in worship decades ago, so also Psalm 24 outlines a dramatic encounter of worshipers and their God. Although there may be disagreement about when this "entrance liturgy" took place and what it meant, the tension of the language alerts us that something of high significance is taking place. In *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, Patrick D. Miller describes the celebration: "In the premonarchial and monarchial periods the central act was the procession of the ark, on which was enthroned 'the King of Glory,' into the sanctuary."¹ Although we can only imagine the action of the liturgy and guess who said what, the drama and movement of the liturgy are clear and provide preachers structure and movement for a sermon.

God begins worship. The very fact of God initiates the wonder and astonishment from which worship is born. This amazes and confounds the assumption of a consumer culture, that worship takes place in order to satisfy our needs, our tastes, our desires, and our market. God calls forth worship that arises unrestrained, far surpassing any need we might have and exceeding every calculation of consumer interest. Elsewhere pilgrims may chirp, "I was glad when they

1. Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 11, italics added.

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kind of theology also tends to see God's sovereignty as control over creation with divine power able to fix all manner of sinful human error. No need to worry about global warming, melting icecaps, oil spills, or polar bears; our sovereign God will take care of things and clean up our messes. This kind of theology says that humans are sinful but really do not have the power to destroy creation.

Sovereignty as Immanence. In the last half of the twentieth century, creation-centered theologies have helped us rethink the relationship between creature, creation, and Creator. The process theologians have given us the idea of "pantheism," or divine immanence in creation. Nature is not divine, but infused with God's creative power. Modern-day mystics from Matthew Fox to Philip Newell have helped us see the created order in a new light and our place in it as creatures dependent on God and one another. Creation is a complicated web of interdependent relations. Eco-feminism has embraced a creation-centered approach, rejecting domination and dualism, both qualities of patriarchy.²

Sovereignty as Freedom. To say that God is sovereign is to speak of freedom. There is a fine line between dominion and domination. Remembering God's ownership and human stewardship of creation, we can affirm the Creator's transcendence *and* immanence. Human freedom is a reflection of divine freedom, but Psalm 24 reminds us that creatures are dependent on the Creator in a way that God is not dependent on us. Out of freedom God chooses to share creative power, and so the psalm also calls us to "clean hands and pure hearts." We can affirm the lavish and extravagant wonders of creation and live lives of gratitude and generosity rather than greed and entitlement. We can take responsibility for the care of creation while remembering our dependence on Creator and creation alike.

That little untranslatable word "*selah*" introduces a new refrain (v. 7). If the first refrain (vv. 1–6) is an orientation toward the holiness of all creation, the second (vv. 7–10) is focused on the holy portals of the temple. The worshipers of a mighty, sovereign, majestic Lord are knocking at heaven's doors. Repentance marked the first climb up the holy hill;

2. See Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); J. Philip Newell, *The Book of Creation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990); Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

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the rivers" (vv. 1–2). Secondly, the psalm recognizes those who may come into the presence of the Lord to take part in worship. The psalmist poses questions of worthiness and then answers them. Only those "who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully" (v. 4) are suitable to enter into the presence of the Holy One. Finally, the psalm names God as the King of glory, using a question-and-answer litany.

The psalmist's three purposes serve a helpful function for all who would come to worship God. How often do we approach worship, not with God in mind, but the week we have had? How many times do we leave worship worried, not if we have worshiped God, but if we have been spiritually fed? Psalm 24's opening verses pull us up short, calling us back to a sense of our creatureliness and dependence on the One who owns the world and sets the waters flowing.

Those who would come to worship must take stock not only of their relationship to God, but also of their relations with fellow human beings. Those of the "company . . . who seek [God]" (v. 6) and know the blessing of the seeking have to live a certain way. Benedict Janecko, OSB, writes,

These prerequisites to enter for worship centered around moral qualities that emphasized social, communal, corporate concerns more than individual piety or private concerns. . . . All liturgy and sacrifice is related to the treatment of our neighbor. . . . These entrance requirements stem from the Torah, the heart of the Jewish Scriptures. They are appropriate as an examination of conscience at the gate or door (*Tor* in German) of the Temple. Torah testing at the *Tor* is the price of admission and one's passport to the inner sanctuary and inner life with God.¹

To come into the presence of God, then, means that we have examined our life and heart first. Perhaps this was on Jesus' mind as he preached the Sermon on the Mount and said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23–24).

Pastorally, Psalm 24 serves as an examination of the worshiper's conscience. As one prepares for worship, the three points the psalmist raises offer

1. Benedict Janecko, OSB, *The Psalms: Heartbeat of Life and Worship* (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1986), 62–63.

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first two verses declare that all creation belongs to God. Verse 8 continues this theme, as God is described as “strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle”—a reference to the myth of creation in which God brings the orderly world into being by defeating the primordial monsters of chaos, variously called Leviathan (Ps. 74:14; Isa. 27:1), Rahab (Ps. 89:10; Isa. 51:9; Job 26:12), the serpent (Isa. 27:1; Job 26:13), the dragon (Ps. 74:13; Isa. 27:1; 51:9; Job 7:12), or simply the Sea (Pss. 74:13; 89:9; Job 7:12; 26:12). According to scriptural understanding, there is no place where God is not, no place where God does not assert divine reign, no place that is not, therefore, sacred—no place where other forces may do what they please.

On the other hand, the rest of the psalm singles out the temple in Jerusalem as a particular locale of holiness. There humans may visit to worship God, but they cannot bring evil with them. All the earth is ultimately God’s, yet the battle over divine ownership is still ongoing, even in the hearts and minds of worshipers. When they come to the temple, however, unworthy intentions are set aside, and they are reminded of the moral integrity for which they were made. In this way, the temple and its precincts become the eschatological model of divine hopes—and faithful human hopes—for the entire world, which despite God’s ownership still remains ambiguously aligned and used.

This duality, in which all places are holy but some are set apart as most holy, continues among Jews and Christians today. Particular places become sanctified because worshipers have there met God. They become for these worshipers “thin places,” where the membrane between the ordinary and the sacred becomes particularly porous—places where the Spirit may transfigure our vision and understanding, renew our awe, challenge our decisions, and leave us remembering that even ordinary life is essentially extraordinary, when we see it for what it truly is. Theologian John Inge writes:

Place is central to such experiences [in which the veil between the seen and the unseen is momentarily lifted] since they are glimpses of a destination that we shall never fully know until we reach it. In the same way as the resurrection of Christ is the first fruit, as the Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all humankind, so these moments speak to us in a sacramental sense of our destination and of the manner in which everything will, in God’s good time, be in its place. . . . What is asked of those

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said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Ps. 122:1), but here worship begins with the daring assessment, “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it.” That initial verse is so familiar to us—and put to such hard labor during Stewardship Season—that we may tend to be blasé about its claim. It not merely that the temple “is the LORD’s,” or Jerusalem “is the LORD’s,” or Israel “is the LORD’s.” This is no local deity summoning our praise; rather, this is the One who created “the earth . . . and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” The claim of the psalm is vast and utterly unbounded, so we should not be constrained to interpret “the earth” and “the world” with paltry literalism.

This is no tribal God, nor God merely of the planet Earth. Physicist Carl Sagan famously provided a definition that “the Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be,”² and that sizes up the situation in which we come to worship. Contemporary physicists suggest that, given their calculations, there are not merely the four dimensions we experience (three dimensions of space and one of time) but as many as twenty-six, but certainly ten. What God do these dimensions serve? Physics now speaks soberly about multiple universes. Who authored these other realms, and under whose sovereignty do they spin? Psalm 24 insists they are the Lord’s. If we are not dazzled and perhaps a bit dizzy from the heights proposed by the psalm and seconded by modern physics, we are not paying attention. It is all the Lord’s “and the fullness thereof” (v. 1 KJV).

Stunned with such an encompassing vision, we inevitably wonder how we might worship such a God: “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” Psalm 15 asks a similar question in verse 1 and answers with requirements in verses 2–5. In Psalm 24 the answer only appears to be qualifications; rather, Psalm 24 describes the character and disposition of worshipers: they are “pure in heart” and seek the face of God. The situation is somewhat paradoxical: those who seek to worship have been shaped by worship. “Clean hands and pure hearts” describe those who seek God.

In the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the hero approaches the Holy Grail on his knees because no other posture is fitting for such an encounter. Reverence, not behavior, unlocks the door. Those who seek worship will discover “the face of the God of Jacob.” Those who want something else—entertainment, advancement,

2. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

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Theological Perspective

the second ascent is accompanied by an anthem of majesty and might.

A chorus from Handel's *Messiah* rings in our ears, an innocent question, asked by women's voices: "Who is this King of glory?" The answer comes from the male chorus: "The LORD strong and mighty!" Worshipers are ready to enter the grand temple gates accompanied by the ark of the covenant. Worshipers are entering sacred space accompanied by their glorious, regal, warrior God. Here, the sovereign God is praised for taming chaos, for military victory, but not, as before, for mercy or relationship. Only when both refrains are sung do we get a picture of divine sovereignty that tempers the controlling, victorious, warrior king praised in the second stanza. Psalm 24 is a song with at least two contrapuntal themes.

God's sovereignty is ownership, transcendence, immanence, freedom, holiness, and relational power. Human faithfulness is dependence, repentance, stewardship, and worship. Created world and earthly temple are both holy, sacred space. Just how are the doors of the temple lifted? How are the gates flung wide? Imagine the masses of worshipers pushing or pulling those grand doors open. Imagine a doorkeeper, pulling them open from the inside out. Imagine Holman Hunt's famous painting, in St. Paul's in London, of an ivy-covered door with no handle, the savior knocking, waiting: "Behold I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20). Imagine that open door in Revelation where "through gates of pearl streams in the countless host!"

The gates do not open by themselves; that we know. Even the mighty warrior king does not force them open. The faithful are entreated to open the doors, to welcome the Creator of heaven and earth. The doors of Jerusalem's temple were real doors. In psalms and hymns and prayers and pictures these doors are imagined in many ways—from heaven's pearly gates to the doubts and fears and wounds that keep us from welcoming our free, holy, and ever-present God.

So, along with this psalm, an Advent hymn rings in our ears, affirming our grateful response to God's sovereign love:

Fling wide the portals of your heart;
Make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ,
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

REBECCA BUTTON PRICHARD

Pastoral Perspective

useful instruction and an opportunity for prayerful reflection. First, we remind ourselves of the One we come to worship (mindful that the meaning of the word "worship" is to "ascribe worth"). We recognize that God is the creator and that we are not, and in so doing we renew our faith. Second, we examine ourselves and how we have lived up to this moment of worship. Now we ask ourselves if we have sought to live as God would have us live. Righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness are the attributes of the One to whom we offer worship, yet they are also to mark the life of the worshiper as well. Third, we again acknowledge the lordship of the King of glory, as we bid the ancient doors be lifted up!

Attempts to become relevant in the face of contemporary culture have caused many a church to engage in so-called worship wars. Our liturgical use of Psalm 24 may never involve a dialogue with someone behind a closed door. However, the issues raised by the psalm should engage us in an interior dialogue whenever we are preparing to worship, whether our liturgical practices are high or low, blended, traditional, or what have you. The psalmist challenges us to look at the very core relationships of faith, life, and worship in a meaningful way. Above all, we are reminded that God is God, and we are the ones who come to offer worship, because worship is not about us, but about the One who is alone worthy to receive it. Psalm 24 does not let us forget that worship must be grounded in faith and lived out in daily practice if we are to enter the precincts of the King of glory. For only the one who comes believing, with clean hands and heart, will see those ancient doors lifted up.

STEVEN A. PEAY

Psalm 24

Exegetical Perspective

who are given such experiences is that they should remain faithful to them when they “come down from the mountain.”¹

It is because we have experienced God’s particular presence in sanctuaries—whether constructed as such or not, whether made with human hands or not—that we can better see God’s presence throughout creation.

This brings us back to what we do and live when the festival is over, when worshipers “come down from the mountain.” Leviticus 25:23 sums up a vastly different land principle than our Western sense of ownership entails: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine [that is, God’s]; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” Such an ethic takes the entrance liturgy that worshipers encounter at the temple gate—the one requiring clean hands, pure hearts, and honest lips—and extends it to our entrance to all the land that belongs to God. As tenants on the land that God created, it is human responsibility to treat this land with the reverence with which we would treat the sanctuary, in effect to take off our shoes, for the ground on which we stand is holy.

As carefully as members of a congregation seek to preserve the beauty and holiness of their own churches, in order to pass them on intact to the next generation, just that carefully are worshipers called to preserve the beauty and holiness of the natural world, in order to pass it on intact to descendants. The biblical story witnesses that such holiness does not come easily, that it began in a battle with the forces of chaos and will continue to face challenge. Those who have glimpsed the Divine in the world can at least understand to whom we are answerable.

PATRICIA K. TULL

Homiletical Perspective

personal satisfaction, you name it, and we think we can—will inevitably be disappointed. Clinton McCann hears an echo of the third commandment in Exodus 20:7 and evocatively proposes translating verse 4, “who does not lift up to nothingness his soul.”³ Here is the human dilemma: we either lift up our hearts and souls to God, or we surrender them to nothingness in its infinite variety. Those who “ascend the hill of the LORD” and who “stand in [God’s] holy place” (v. 3) are promised: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8).

Such good and gracious news inescapably erupts in celebration, and verses 7–10 are a veritable explosion of hope and joy. Listening to these verses in Handel’s *Messiah* until you tingle is recommended sermon preparation. Astonishment and wordless awe precede preaching. In the movement of the psalm, the question has shifted from “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?” to “How may we greet the One who graciously approaches us and waits just outside?” What can we sing but, “Lift up your heads, O gates! . . . that the King of glory may come in.” Five times the Lord is identified as “King of glory.” Commentators overlook the subversive quality of the song. If the Lord is hymned as “the King of glory,” then Solomon, though he built this temple, is not. Neither is Josiah with his admirable reforms, nor the impossibly dreadful Manasseh, however imposing he might have seemed. Opening the gate (Rev. 3:20–21) we encounter the victorious One who has created “all that is,” rules “all that is,” and is worthy of all our praise, trust, and loyalty. Worshiping—directing our heart and soul to the One who is truly sovereign in the cosmos—we find our place, our right relationship (v. 5: “vindication”) with God, neighbor, and “all that is”—and nothing less than the “blessing from the LORD” (v. 5).

PATRICK J. WILLSON

1. John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (London: Ashgate, 2003), 76–77.

3. J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 74.

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

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

¹Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.” ³Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you.”

⁴But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says

Theological Perspective

It may be a suburban ranch-style home or a seaside villa. It may be a seedy motel room or a cardboard box. It may be a trailer or a tent or a tin shanty. It may be a roundel in Africa or a compact condo in Tokyo. Home is where we rest our heads. Home is where we get our bearings. Home is where we live and move and have our being. Whether it is a castle or a cave, home may be the most primal of all our desires.

King David is at home. He lives in a house of cedar. Solid. Substantial. The God of Israel is homeless—or so David imagines. The well-established earthly ruler decides that the ruler of heaven and earth needs a home, a place to stay, a residence. This passage helps us to think about the meaning of home and about the security, stability, and spiritual presence that result from abiding in God.

Security. “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (Acts 7:48). King David feels safe and secure in his cedar palace. This sturdy home represents security for the royal household but also for the nation. Such a home keeps enemies at bay. The people of God have found a secure home and they want God to settle in with them. Home is where we feel safe. The locks on our doors protect us. Our home is our castle. If we could just get God to move into the neighborhood, all would be well.

Pastoral Perspective

A number of phrases in colloquial English demonstrate just how much “home” means to us. We indicate that we are comfortable by saying that we “feel right at home.” We hear that “home is where the heart is.” Everyone from John Howard Payne to L. Frank Baum has reminded us that “there is no place like home.” Home is where we feel comfortable and safe; it is where we belong, where we fit.

Charles Dickens’s experience of domestic instability in his childhood influenced not only his writing but his adult life. Walking with his father through the countryside of Kent, he saw a grand house—Gad’s Hill—and it became the icon for the life he should have and sought. It was a great moment for Dickens when he had made his fortune and risen by his writing to the point where he could purchase that very house and finally be a gentleman.

Marilynne Robinson’s *Home* is all about what it means to leave home, to come home, and to stay home. It explores all of those perspectives through the lives of the Reverend Robert Boughton, a Presbyterian minister, and his two adult children, Glory and Jack. Jack has fled home and returns, because he has no place else to go and needs to regroup. Glory has come home to take care of her elderly, widowed father. In their interactions we get

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

Exegetical Perspective

From childhood Christians are cultivated to like King David. Young readers identify with the youngest of eight children, the one forgotten when dignitaries come to town, who in a Hollywood ending is singled out for glory (1 Sam. 16). They thrill for the boy who confronts the giant warrior Goliath, defeating him with nerve and a well-aimed rock (1 Sam. 17). They fear for the one eluding the murderous grasp of an employer and king run amok, and admire his survival skills (1 Sam. 18–26).

It is harder to love David as king. The lectionary crafts its semicontinuous reading to omit all questionable episodes until chapter 11, when David takes a married woman and kills her husband. However, those who read the whole tale can see that this action does not come out of the blue. If the lectionary fabricates a favored king's sudden fall from grace, the book itself tells a richer tale of a painfully human king, a dangerous man few would like to meet alone, a man embodying all the ambiguities of sovereign power.

Second Samuel begins at Saul's death. The lectionary reading from 2 Samuel 1 encompasses David's evidently heartfelt lament over Saul and his son, David's friend and ally Jonathan. It omits David's killing of the Amalekite who brought him the news and who claimed, regrettably (and,

Homiletical Perspective

Foremost among the difficulties of preaching the Lord's utterly extravagant promise of an everlasting dynasty for David is our guilty knowledge that this promise has not come true, that the situation described in the promise is contrary to the facts we know. The Lord promises, "I will appoint a place for my people Israel . . . that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more," but, as this is being written, the newspapers rehearse possible scenarios of Israel's response to the threat of an Iran with nuclear weapons. Regarding David's sons and grandsons the Lord promises, "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." Lest we mistake the thrust, verse 16 adds, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever. . . . your throne shall be established forever."

Forever? An official Web site of the Israeli government explains: "Israel is governed by a multi-party parliamentary system. The head of state is the President who fulfills mainly ceremonial duties. . . . The Knesset, Israel's parliament, includes 120 members elected for a term of four years in nationwide elections. . . . The Prime Minister is elected in nationwide elections for a period of four years."¹ One finds no mention of a king or

1. <http://www.science.co.il/Government.php>

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

Theological Perspective

Home helps us feel safe and secure, but the God of creation cannot be contained or domesticated. Our churches are houses of worship, but God does not reside even inside the grandest cathedral. David's desire to build a house for God corresponds to our desire to tame the transcendent with words and doctrines and platitudes.

William Placher has argued that the language of modern theology has tended to domesticate transcendence: "Transcendence that fits our categories has been domesticated." When the mystery of God is tamed, when the Holy One resides in our neighborhood, we come to claim divine sanction for our thoughts and actions. "Most of us have causes we believe in with some passion. We like to think that God is on our side. It is therefore tempting if we are told that we can design God to fit our specifications."¹ Just so, the walls we build with words tend to exclude grace and to shore up our own feelings of control and dominance, giving us a false sense of security.

Stability. *"My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people"* (Ezek. 37:27). When we read the whole sweep of holy history, we see that God's people have rarely stayed put. Abram was a wandering Aramean. The tribes of Israel dwelt in the house of bondage in Egypt. In exodus and in exile, the Hebrews were rootless, homeless, aliens, refugees. The Davidic reign was a time of peace and stability for the nation. In salvation history, David is seen as a paradigm for just rulers, good shepherd kings who provide for the well-being of the people. We know now that the Davidic reign lasted only a few generations at most. Nevertheless the cedar house and Solomon's temple are signs of permanence in a world of change.

Jesus of Nazareth was of the "house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). We know now that the Christ was not a political ruler, but that Jesus was a good shepherd. The shepherd imagery connected with David and with Jesus reminds us that we are God's flock, sheep of the pasture. Life with God is more a sojourn than a settlement. A sojourn makes sense in this postmodern moment, as it did in exodus and exile. Cedar houses and stone temples, churches and cathedrals, tend to tie us to tradition, engendering nostalgia and tightening our grip on the status quo. In a time when nothing seems certain or predictable,

1. William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 10, 16.

Pastoral Perspective

a glimpse of what all of us experience, in one way or another, of being "at home."

Glory Boughton reflects at one point on what a home should be like. She thinks of the home she wanted to have. She had envisioned an entirely different life for herself, a different sort of house than the one she grew up in and to which she has returned. Part of her coming home involves accepting that the life she envisioned would never happen. One constant for her, one that gives her perspective, is the childhood habit she has kept of reading the Bible. "All bread is the bread of heaven, her father used to say. It expresses the will of God to sustain us in this flesh, in this life. Weary, or bitter or bewildered as we may be, God is faithful. He lets us wander so we will know what it means to come home."¹

David has known instability. At home with his family, then drawn into the court of King Saul and a relationship with the king's son Jonathan that is closer than he had with his siblings, he experiences belonging. That life is disrupted, and David is cast out of the court and ends up running like a criminal, with Saul in hot pursuit. David triumphs, and the shepherd boy, the harpist, the good friend is now the king in Saul's stead.

David has experienced the good times and the bitter ones, and now he has come to a moment of stability. He is at God-given rest and dwelling in comfortable surroundings. The new home he wants to build is not for him, though. He wants to build a house for God, a great house that will honor the God who has been faithful to him. David is used to getting his own way, and Nathan sees nothing amiss with this plan to honor God's faithfulness and build a suitable home. God does not share that vision and reminds David through Nathan,

I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. (vv. 8–11)

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008), 102.

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

Exegetical Perspective

according to 1 Sam. 31, untruthfully), to have assisted Saul's suicide.

The lectionary omits chapter 2, in which David wars against Saul's remaining family, and chapter 3, in which for political purposes Saul's general brings him Michal, a woman he once abandoned, tearing her from a loving husband—and then for his pains is murdered by one of David's warriors. It omits chapter 4, in which Saul's son, Michal's brother Ishbosheth (Ishbaal), is conveniently assassinated.

These events are all preconditions of 2 Samuel 5, the reading in which, left leaderless, the Israelite tribes formerly ruled by Saul submit to David's reign. By omitting verses 6–8, this reading skirts around David's invasion of Jerusalem and moves directly to his civic building projects.

The following week's reading, 2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19, tells of David's bringing the ark of God to Jerusalem. Here two narratives of celebration intertwine with two texts of terror. In verses 1–5, David brings the ark from storage. In the omitted verses 6–12a, one of the drivers of the ark's cart, Uzzah, tries to steady it, incurs God's wrath, and dies, leading David to postpone the parade. The lectionary resumes in verse 12b, as David brings the ark to Jerusalem with dancing and celebration. It omits a quarrel between David and Michal, the woman forcibly taken for David, and the conclusion that Michal—whether by her choice, his, or God's we do not know—“had no child to the day of her death” (v. 23).

Readers have already encountered the deaths of Saul's sons Jonathan, Abinadab, Malchishua, and Ishbaal. Later, in 2 Samuel 21:8–9, the ritual slaying of seven more descendants will be disclosed. Now Saul's daughter will never have a child, not even with David. Immediately juxtaposed to this report of the end of yet another line of Saul's progeny comes today's story in 2 Samuel 7:1–14a.

By this time readers may wonder what kind of sensibility is producing this story. It is one thing to tell of a ruthless and powerful king who, despite Machiavellian ways, finds favor with the masses. It is another thing to claim that God is with this person (1 Sam. 18:12, 14, 28; 2 Sam. 5:10; 7:3). Divine favor continues throughout this passage, even when the story takes a turn the king does not expect.

David points out to the prophet Nathan—who appears for the first time, but certainly not the last—that even though he has built a palace for himself, no temple has been built for God. At first Nathan blesses his intention, but that night

Homiletical Perspective

an everlasting dynasty. With further study we may discover there are fourteen different political parties represented in the Knesset and another twenty-one parties governing municipalities, but no house of David, no throne *forever* to unify people.

People come to church and ask us sometimes, “Is the Bible true?” They wonder about the virgin birth or Jesus walking on water. The discrepancy between this promise and any extant political reality seldom is noticed, but read it out loud in worship, and the divergence becomes clear. What can we say? Why do we keep reciting this ancient, bankrupt promise? Clearly there is more at stake here than the deceptively decisive question, “Is the Bible true?” Something is more important than that.

No one knows why the people of God held on to this promise to David, why they read it in their worship and celebrated it in songs like the Psalm 89. Biblical scholars are as perplexed as anyone. Walter Brueggemann, in his magisterial *Theology of the Old Testament*, simply admits: “Interpreters are at a loss to know why this promise, now removed from political reality and carried only in Israel's liturgical, visionary, ideological hopes, continued to have shaping power for the life and imagination of Israel; but unarguably it did. Israel continued to hope for the king who would make visible in the earth [the LORD's] governance.”²

We are not the first people to recognize the incongruity between the grand promise of a dynasty and the grim political situation. The prophet Isaiah understood the political reality of his day and portrayed the house of David as a once great tree that has now been cut down. Only a stump reminds what that tree once was. David's line has been cut off. Then Isaiah says: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse [David's father], and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isa. 11:1). This startling new growth is not merely David redux, however, but a whole new politics and, indeed, the healing of the creation: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid” (Isa. 11:6).

It is not, as we might suspect, that the promise to David spoken in 2 Samuel 7 is too extravagant to be hoped for and too grand to be accomplished. Rather the extravagant ebullience of the promise sets our hearts to dreaming, and our hopefulness cannot be measured merely in raising “offspring” from David's line and loins. For people hearing this promise, one more king in a long, disappointing

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 616–17.

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

Theological Perspective

we do well to abide in the steadfast love of God, *hesed* (v. 15). Our God is far from homeless; our God is our home. In a world where change is the only constant, we do well to remember that the journey is home.²

Shekhinah/Spirit. “See, the home of God is among mortals” (Rev. 21:3). Ultimately, God promises to make a home in our midst, with us, within us. Transcendence cannot be tamed, nor can it be exiled from faithful sojourners. Divinity chooses to dwell (*shakan*) with God’s people; we are the tabernacle (*mishkan*) of God. David wanted to build God a house, but God dwells in a tent or a tabernacle, a mobile home that moves with wanderers, exiles, and sojourners. God does not settle down, but neither does God desert the wayward pilgrims.

When God says to David, “I will make you a house,” there is a promise of posterity and heritage—the house of David. There is also a promise to be a dwelling, a refuge for the people of God. In these ambiguous words, there is also a promise to dwell with the people, to “tabernacle” with them. Michael E. Lodahl connects the holy presence of God (*Shekhinah*) with the Holy Spirit (*Ruach, Pneuma*). Though *Shekhinah* is a postbiblical idea, it is rooted in the biblical tabernacle. Spirit, according to Lodahl, is “God’s own personal presence and activity in the world.”³ Mystery and glory are not tamed or domesticated, but immanent, available, numinous.

Home is where we live and move and have our being.

REBECCA BUTTON PRICHARD

Pastoral Perspective

What David learns is what many of us need to learn as we walk our spiritual journey: our plan for home and God’s plan are often quite different. To put it rather bluntly, it is not about us. David wants to do something for God, to demonstrate to God just how much gratitude he has for what has been done. All well and good, but that is not what is important. God seeks bigger, better things, so that David’s house will become a home encompassing all of humanity. God does not desire a house, but a heart. God does not want a dwelling, but David’s obedience. When the heart and actions are aligned, then they find their fit, and one is, finally, at home.

As a result of David’s obedience, God kept the promise and established David’s house forever, but not in the way David or the people of Israel expected. At a time when it seemed God would not keep the promise, especially in the face of the Roman conquerors, the God who had dwelt among the chosen people in a tent “pitched his tent” in a most unlikely way. God became one of us. Thus John would write, “The Word became flesh and lived [Gk. literally “pitched a tent”] among us” (John 1:14). This is why the early church saw the foreshadowing of the coming Christ in this prophetic word of Nathan. The coming One will bring that reality of home, of fit, of comfort, for which people long.

We all have our visions of our ideal home. God’s word to David reminds us that God’s own vision for our home is more intimate, greater, and more real than our own. David knew God’s faithfulness. If we respond as he did, we will find our way home.

STEVEN A. PEAY

2. Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

3. Michael E. Lodahl, *Shekhinah/Spirit: Divine Presence in Jewish and Christian Religion* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 41.

2 Samuel 7:1–14a

Exegetical Perspective

God countermands this royal offer and makes a counteroffer. God, who has found a tent perfectly adequate for centuries, does not need to be housed by humans. Unlike David, God is free from the trappings of power, free to roam, free to tread lightly. The owner of the cedars of Lebanon is no more honored when they are cut down than when they grow.

It will not be David who establishes God, but God who will establish David—and this is not for David’s sake. Rather, God has given him peaceful sovereignty for the sake of the nation, to “plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly” (v. 10). In other words, God has been with David, not because of the virtues he brings to leadership, but so that God’s hopes for the people, great and small, might come to fruition. This had not happened when they entered the land, when judges ruled them, or when King Saul spent his energy chasing David. Throughout that time they had continued to be ravaged from within and attacked from without. As human and ambiguous as David shows himself to be, as absolutely as power has corrupted him, nevertheless his vocation is to provide sanctuary for his people. That, rather than a nicer sanctuary for the ark, was God’s hope.

Sadly, readers know how ambiguously this hope was fulfilled. Within four chapters David is ravaging one of his loyal families, taking the wife and killing the husband (2 Sam. 11). There Nathan furiously reappears (2 Sam. 12). The prophet reemerges again only to defend the same wife, and her son, at the end of David’s life (1 Kgs. 1).

Many take comfort in David’s story, saying, “If God could forgive him, then there is hope for me.” Indeed, divine forgiveness comes, not because humans are innately adorable, but because God sees the unseen potential, the possibility that we may yet live into all that God made us to be. Even when that hope remains unfulfilled or only partly fulfilled, God remains faithful and hopeful, just as on the day our ancestors first emerged from the other ark, the one on Mount Ararat (Gen. 8:16–22).

PATRICIA K. TULL

Homiletical Perspective

procession of kings was nothing much to hope for; but the promise fed their imaginations to hope for something vastly better. The prophet Jeremiah had not a kind word for the kings of his time. He disdained the monarchy, its abuse of people, and its lack of righteousness, but even sour old Jeremiah heard this promise coming true and God announcing, “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer. 23:5). The promise presses forward, and the promise is not merely of a king but of wisdom and justice and righteousness ruling forever.

These are good words to hear in midsummer because this promise may be overwhelmed in jingle bells and bright lights, come December. On Christmas Eve this promise gathers us in its unquenchable hope: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. . . . Joseph also went . . . to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David” (Luke 2:1, 4). Our ears perk up and the hair on our neck stands at attention, because we know the King approaches and the promise to David is coming true in ways Nathan and David himself could never dare imagine.

We celebrate the deep truth of the Lord’s promise to David not only on Christmas Eve but every time we gather here for worship. We trust the promise to David because we trust in the faithfulness of the One who promises; and because we trust in the faithfulness of the One who promises, we know how the story comes out. Hear the last thing Jesus says in the Bible—do you remember the last thing Jesus says?—the last thing Jesus says in the book of Revelation: “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16). That signals a new dawn and a reign of wisdom, justice, and righteousness.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

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

Psalm 89:20–37

²⁰I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
²¹my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
²²The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
²³I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
²⁴My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
²⁵I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
²⁶He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'
²⁷I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
²⁸Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.

Theological Perspective

The claim in 1 John 4:8 that God is love (“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love”) raises important issues in theological grammar. In 1 John 4:8 what is the relationship between the subject, God, and the predicate, love? What do we mean by love, and what does our interpretation of love tell us about who God is? Should we understand who God is in light of our various human experiences of love? Is God’s love—or as Psalm 89 describes it, God’s “steadfast love”—not to be confused with human experiences of love, which are often partial and momentary?

In *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr proposed that “though God is love, love is not God.”¹ What mattered to Jesus, Niebuhr insisted, was “the love of God and of the neighbor in God, not the virtue of the love of love.”² In other words to claim that “God is love” is not based on some nebulous, abstract notion of love (even human experiences of love), but is derived from the Bible’s description of God’s love embodied in Jesus of Nazareth. God’s love is who God is and what God does in and through the anointed one. As Niebuhr puts it, the “God whom Christ loves is the ‘Lord

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 17.
2. *Ibid.*

Pastoral Perspective

This section of Psalm 89 reads like a campaign commercial for King David. “King David! The enemy shall not outwit him, nor shall the wicked humble him! His hand is on the seas and his right hand on the rivers!” It is all hyperbole and grandiose claims. “His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun! It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies! . . . I am YHWH and I approve this message.”

We would expect such exaggerated claims at the height of David’s rule, but many scholars believe Psalm 89 was written after 587 BCE, after the fall of Jerusalem, after the end of the monarchy. Against this harsh historical reality, the promises of Psalm 89 seem to make no sense. The holy city was in ruins, God’s people were in captivity, and the descendants of the anointed king—God’s chosen one—had disappeared. How could God’s promises be true if the Davidic monarchy had failed?

Riding the Metro North train between New York and New Haven back in the 1990s, I used to pass through once-thriving industrial towns along the coast. The landscape was a study in urban decay, littered with abandoned factories and office buildings. One sight always broke my heart: a big Catholic church outside of Bridgeport that stood

Psalm 89:20–37

²⁹I will establish his line forever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.
³⁰If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,
³¹if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
³²then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
³³but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
³⁴I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
³⁵Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
³⁶His line shall continue forever,
and his throne endure before me like the sun.
³⁷It shall be established forever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.

Selah

Exegetical Perspective

Christians who encounter this passage in a worship setting (i.e., taken out of its literary context) will undoubtedly assume that Jesus Christ is the intended recipient of all the promises made in Psalm 89:20–37. In the larger context of the whole psalm, however, this promissory speech is quoted as part of an angry complaint against God, who (according to the psalmist) has reneged on these marvelous promises. The first section of the psalm (vv. 1–18) extols YHWH’s steadfast love and faithfulness *in the past*, and the middle section (vv. 20–37) rehearses the details of the promises made to David and his lineage *in the past* (“then,” v. 19). The last section complains that these promises are not being kept in the psalmist’s own time (“But now,” vv. 38). The psalmist draws a stark contrast between the promises articulated in the first two sections of the psalm and the ignominious reality described in verses 40–45, in order to substantiate his claim that YHWH has “renounced the covenant” with David (vv. 38–39). The psalm ends with a reproach that comes close to accusing God of dereliction of duty (vv. 46–51).

The brief doxology numbered verse 52 is not a part of the psalm proper, but marks the end of the third traditional division of the book of Psalms.

If, as most interpreters assume, verses 38–45 describe the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the

Homiletical Perspective

The chaos monster is for me one of the most believable characters in the Bible because I have met him so often in my own life. In the Bible he is sometimes called Rahab, a personification of the primordial powers of the sea that the Creator has tamed: “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm” (vv. 9–10). Conceiving chaos as a monster with a name may strike some of us with scientific minds as primitive foolishness, but I believe there is something timeless and psychologically satisfying about giving a name to violent, disruptive powers.

Consider how a meteorologist on the Weather Channel shows us the whirling vortex of a storm picking up speed over the ocean and calls it by name: Hurricane Andrew. Hurricane Irene. Science explains the generation of the storm as the product of low air pressure, the rotation of the earth, wind flow, and the temperature of the water. We, however, are not satisfied with designating it as “hurricane number one” or “hurricane number two,” an objective nomenclature that would be more congruent with our scientific understanding. We humans insist on giving the storm a name. We personify it because our experience of it equals

Psalm 89:20–37

Theological Perspective

of Heaven and earth'; He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He is the power who causes rain and sun, without whose will and knowledge not a sparrow dies, nor a city is destroyed, nor he himself crucified."³ God's love is manifest in what God does—in God's preservation and care for what God creates and in God's covenants with Israel.

Verses 20–37 of Psalm 89 affirm a similar theological logic. The first section of the psalm (vv. 1–18) celebrates its two major themes: God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Unlike human love, God's love is "steadfast." It never wavers; it is neither fickle nor momentary. God does not stop loving Israel, even when Israel appears to no longer love God. Unlike human promises, God's faithfulness is firm; God keeps God's promises in season and out. God's steadfast love and faithfulness are not abstractions. They are firmly rooted in Israel's history with God, especially in the biblical history of God's anointed one, King David, as that is narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel. The psalmist appeals to that story as the basis for the claim that while human love may be fickle, God's love is steadfast, and that while human promises are often broken, God's faithfulness is never ending (vv. 1–2). "Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm" (v. 28). Nothing can deter or disrupt God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

If David's children "forsake my law and do not walk according to my ordinances" (v. 30), God will punish them "with the rod and . . . with scourges" (v. 32), but even while God rebukes and punishes, "I will not remove . . . my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness" (v. 33). God will keep covenant with Israel, even when Israel breaks covenant with God. Just as the rainbow is a sign in the heavens of God's everlasting covenant (Gen. 9:16), so too God's promise to continue David's throne is "established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies" (v. 37).

However, what the psalmist fails to acknowledge is that not only do David's children forsake God's law and abandon the covenant, but so does David as well. It is David who commits adultery with Bathsheba and arranges the murder not only of her husband, Uriah, but of those fighting with Uriah as well (2 Sam. 11:17). Just as God promises to punish David's children with rod and scourges for their sin, so too God punishes David. The child born to Bathsheba dies and God tells David, "The sword

3. Ibid.

Pastoral Perspective

abandoned, along with a three-story school and a spacious home that must once have housed the parish priests. The architecture dated from the turn of the twentieth century, back in the heyday of manufacturing, when immigrants from Ireland and Italy filled the factories and swelled the parish rolls. Once, when the train slowed down, I noticed an inscription on the school: "To the Glory of God." I imagined the pride and the hope parishioners must have felt when these grand buildings were opened. Now the boarded-up windows and crumbling façade told a different story, a story of a parish disbanded, a story of loss, sorrow, and failure. Where was the glory of God now?

The sturdy brick walls of that crumbling church, like the enduring words of Psalm 89, stand as witness to human failure and shattered dreams. Despite our best intentions, despite our faith in God's promises, we do not succeed.

The truth is that every great social justice movement has fallen short of the mark. The civil rights movement achieved some significant gains for African Americans, but racism still infects our society and thwarts the full flourishing of people of color. The women's movement brought to light the glaring inequalities between the sexes, but no one would claim that women have achieved equality with men. Despite the war on poverty, there is an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor. Every attempt we have made to bring about justice, equality, and peace has failed to achieve its goal. Like the Davidic monarchy and that long lost parish, our human efforts appear to come to naught. It seems like cause for despair.

Wait! The inclusion of Psalm 89 was no accident, and it is not meant to be ironic. Psalm 89 is a testament to God's faithfulness, even in the face of human defeat and failure. Throughout the book of Psalms, one message is clear: God rules the world despite evidence to the contrary. As part of that message, Psalm 89 invites the reader to expand the horizon of possibility beyond human history and into God's eternal realm. In other words, God's promises are eschatological. Come what may, even fall of parish or kingdom, the creator of the universe will have the last word.

If we read this passage from Psalm 89 in an eschatological light, the words provide hope in difficult times. The fall of Jerusalem may have meant the end of the monarchy, but it was not the end of God's faithfulness. David and his line did forsake God's law and did not walk according to

Psalm 89:20–37

Exegetical Perspective

house of David's rule over Judah, the psalmist would have had plenty of reason to wonder if YHWH had reneged on the promises detailed in verses 20–37. After 586 BCE the faithful faced an immense theological challenge trying to explain the disparity between their understanding of the Davidic covenant and the reality of the Babylonian exile. Some postexilic and intertestamental voices insisted that YHWH would eventually keep the promises made to David—that Judah would once again become a nation in its own right, with a ruler descended from David. Other voices (including those in the NT community) concluded that the promised “throne” was not limited to the earthly realm of Judah. Christians further concluded that the promised “line” of David led directly to “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David” (Matt. 1:1).

At first glance, Psalm 89:20–37 seems to echo the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7:8–16. However, there are significant differences between the two passages. Both passages promise that the Davidic line will continue “forever” (2 Sam. 7:13, 16; Ps. 89:29, 36), but only the psalm calls this promissory relationship a covenant (*berit*). “Covenant” is used four times in Psalm 89 (twice in this lectionary text, vv. 28, 34) but not at all in 2 Samuel 7.

In both passages, YHWH is said to speak (through an intermediary) in the first person (I, me, my, etc.). However, in 2 Samuel YHWH speaks directly to David (you, your, etc.), while in Psalm 89 YHWH speaks about David in the third person (he, him, his, etc.). The Hebrew word *zera* (seed) is used in both passages, with a singular sense in 2 Samuel 7:12 (NRSV “offspring”), referring to Solomon, who will build a “house” for YHWH's name (v. 13), and with a plural sense in Psalm 89 (NRSV “descendants,” v. 4; “line,” vv. 29, 36).

In the ancient Near East it was not unusual to use father-son metaphors to describe the relationship between a nation's god and its king, who ruled as the god's representative on earth (e.g., Jer. 31:9). In 2 Samuel 7:14–15 the father-son relationship is promised to Solomon, while in Psalm 89 “father” and “firstborn” (vv. 26–27) have David as their grammatical antecedent. Christians assume that the “David” who speaks in verse 26 is Jesus, who calls God “Father” and to whom “the throne of his ancestor David” was given (Luke 1:32). The references to sea and river in verse 25 pick up the creator god imagery from verses 9–12 and thus enhance the sense that the David referred to here is no ordinary mortal.

Homiletical Perspective

more than the sum total of the physical vectors that produced it, especially if the hurricane kills someone or tears the roof off our house or sweeps away a strand of beach that we have walked for years. Giving the storm a name feeds our insatiable hunger to find meaning even amid chaos, and that is a hunger we share with our ancient forebears, including the psalmist, whose verses we read this morning.

The lectionary uses only the middle portion of Psalm 89, but its opening and closing sections make it a profound exploration of the relationship between God and King David, between the order of creation and the order of the nation, between the chaos of nature and the chaos of politics. God's rule over the sea and the way God “crushed Rahab like a carcass” (v. 10) is paralleled by how God's power will work through David to “crush his foes before him” (v. 23). Just as God stills the waves of the sea (v. 9), so too God promises, “I will set [David's] hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers” (v. 25). The psalm asserts that the very power that overcomes the violent and disordering forces of nature will now work through King David, and that this will not just be a passing era of political ascendancy: “Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm. I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure” (vv. 28–29).

The verses that follow appear to make this a conditional promise, telling us that if David's children fail to keep the commandments, God will punish them. However, immediately following these warnings, God again asserts the inviolable nature of the covenant, as if a contractor were to promise a building so impregnable that the most violent hurricane in history could not damage it: “Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall continue forever, and his throne endure before me like the sun. It shall be established forever like the moon, an enduring witness in the skies” (vv. 35–37).

The lectionary concludes our reading from the psalm with this immutable promise from God, but that is not where the psalmist ends. Instead, he rants against God for abandoning the divine promise: “But now you have spurned and rejected [David]. . . . You have renounced the covenant with your servant. . . . You have broken through all his walls; you have laid his strongholds in ruins. . . . You have removed the scepter from his hand, and hurled his throne to the ground” (vv. 38–44).

Psalm 89:20–37

Theological Perspective

shall never depart from your house” (2 Sam. 12:10). Nevertheless God promises, “I will not remove from him my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness” (Ps. 89:33).

For centuries, when Christians have read this text, they have thought not only of David but also of him “who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:3–4). In both cases God’s steadfast love and unwavering faithfulness are materially embodied in human history. There are events that transpire in each story that call into question whether God’s love is truly steadfast and whether God is indeed faithful to God’s promises. Both David and Jesus are anointed by God, but unlike David, Jesus is without blemish or “sin” (“For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin,” 2 Cor. 5:21). For Christians Jesus, who is without sin, bears the full burden not only of David’s sin and the sin of David’s children, but also of Adam and all of Adam’s children—that is, humanity’s sin.

Whether one understands Jesus’ last words in Mark’s Gospel (15:34) to be a cry of despair or a confession of faith (Ps. 22), the cry of dereliction is both the nadir and the zenith of the Jesus story. If ever there were reason to doubt God’s steadfast love, it is at Golgotha. God’s resurrection of the crucified one is not only God’s vindication of him as God’s anointed but also the basis for Paul’s joyful declaration that nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). Even more than the rainbow in the sky and the continuing existence of Israel, for Christians the claim that “God raised him up” (Acts 2:24, 32) is the sure guarantee that God’s love is steadfast and God’s faithfulness unwavering.

GEORGE W. STROUP

Pastoral Perspective

God’s ordinances (v. 30), but their failure could not stop what God was doing in the world. God works through people, institutions, and even movements to accomplish the holy work of reconciliation. Yet every human endeavor falls short of the mark. That does not mean we should give up; that simply means we need to change our perspective.

If God is faithful, then God will keep God’s promises. If God keeps God’s promises, then those promises are ultimately eschatological in nature—already accomplished beyond the horizon of human history. This means two things: first, God is faithful, even when we do not succeed; secondly, God’s success does not depend upon our success. Now the hope of Psalm 89 becomes clear.

We live in a world that is addicted to measurable outcomes of success. How many units did you sell? How much money did you make? How many hits did your Web site get? Even in the church, we have surrendered to this way of thinking: How many people sit in your pews? How many pledging units do you have? Set in proper historical context, Psalm 89 frees us from the need to succeed, for in the face of complete human failure, God’s faithfulness and promises endure. In short, for those who strive to serve God, failure is not an option.

So what are we waiting for? Led by the Spirit, we can build churches, march in the streets, engage the powers and principalities of this broken world, not as people who fear they will fail, but as people who know that God will succeed. In short, our job is not to save the world, but to behave as if it has already been saved.

SHAWNTHEA MONROE

Psalm 89:20–37

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 89 refers to the anointing of David (v. 20) and to YHWH’s anger against his anointed (vv. 38, 51). In the biblical world, kings (and occasionally priests and prophets) were anointed (v. 20) or rubbed with oil as a sign of YHWH’s approval of their right to govern the land. The word translated “anointed” is *meshiach* in Hebrew and *christos* in Greek. In ancient Israel, the title “messiah” or “anointed one” is applied to a variety of different earthly leaders who are commissioned to carry out God’s will in their earthly spheres of influence. Thus Isaiah 45:1 says that Cyrus, the Persian who frees the people of Judah from their exile in Babylon, is YHWH’s anointed (literally, the “messiah,” or in Greek translation the “christ” of YHWH).

Toward the end of the Old Testament period, sometime between the Babylonian exile and the birth of Jesus, the term “Messiah” also began to be applied to a divine figure whose coming was associated with the end of the world as we now know it. Even in New Testament times the people of Judah were divided in their expectations. Some people expected the Messiah to rule like an ideal king on earth, and others expected him to usher in a new kingdom in heaven.

The steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*’emunah*) of God is extolled in Psalm 89 before (vv. 1–2, 5, 8, 14) and within the lectionary passage (vv. 24, 28, 33). *Hesed* is a multifaceted idea that combines the qualities of kindness, loyalty, mercy, and love into the single most important attribute of Israel’s God. *’Emunah* refers to the durability and reliability of God’s promises. In the final section of Psalm 89, the psalmist questions whether YHWH’s *hesed* and *’emunah* are things of the past (v. 49), perhaps hoping against hope that YHWH will prove him wrong. By reframing the nature of the promised throne, and reidentifying the David to whom the promises are made, the Christian community can continue to affirm that the unchanging *hesed* and *’emunah* of God reigns supreme.

KATHLEEN A. ROBERTSON FARMER

Homiletical Perspective

The chaos monster is loose again, disrupting the reign of a king who was supposed to be so powerful his hand was going to rule over the sea and the rivers. The psalmist ends in despair, asking how long God will hide from sight, and calling God to account for the divine promise: “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (v. 49).

The disillusionment of the psalm is so intense that we preachers may be tempted to cheer things up by immediately Christianizing it, drawing on the tradition that Christ is the son of David, and in Christ God does keep the covenant. Before resorting to that strategy of theological construction, we need first to consider the psalm simply on its own terms. The psalm offers wisdom to the politics of our own day. It warns us not to let the fear of the chaos monster rule our hearts so that we dangerously ascribe to any political leader a manifestation of the same creative power that is God’s alone. The psalm reveals this to be a dangerous political theology that leads to human desperation and lament.

Happily there is a verse that follows the psalm and points to another way of believing and acting. Although the verse is printed in our Bibles as if it were an integral part of the psalm, it is in fact a freestanding doxology that marks the end of Book III of the Psalter: “Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and Amen.” That single, simple act of praise to God alone—no earthly king mentioned!—offers a countertheology to the idolization of any earthly ruler. Whether or not the chaos monster goes on the loose again, whether or not our political leaders fail us, whether or not we are lost in lament and disillusionment, one thing remains eternally at the core of our existence: the praise of God forever. Amen and Amen.

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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

2 Samuel 11:1–15

¹In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

²It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. ³David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. ⁵The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

⁶So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. ⁷When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. ⁸Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. ⁹But Uriah slept at the entrance of

Theological Perspective

When the children of Israel marched out of Egypt, they found themselves wandering in the wilderness. Liberation from oppression is not easy, but the next step is ever more difficult: Where, how, and on what basis should they build the relationships and institutions that make a faithful and sustainable civilization possible? After all, every enduring civilization requires an economic base, for no people can live on manna forever. Further, a family system is needed, for when males and females get together, there is an eventual need to nurture and socialize the next generation. Because people are flawed and seek their own advantage in matters of status, wealth, and affection, they quarrel. Hence a legitimate authority for keeping order in the face of internal disputes and external threats is necessary. Above all, people need a transcendent normative reference to guide their economic, emotional, and political lives.

As to the Hebrews who had escaped from Egypt, God had called them together and formed them as a people by giving them a new identity. They were to become the earthly witnesses to the Author and substance of the law mediated by Moses, who also led them to the promised land.

However, the law was mostly a set of negative limits for personal behavior, coupled with instructions for right worship. How to get from

Pastoral Perspective

A prominent man in my congregation stopped by my office one day and asked, out of the blue, "What is the church's stance on adultery?" Taken aback by the question, I hesitated. "Uh—we are against it?" He responded, "Of course, but I would like to hear you preach on the subject." Preach about adultery? He had to be kidding.

When this passage from 2 Samuel appears in the lectionary, I, like most of my colleagues, flip to the New Testament, hoping for a less dangerous text. There are good reasons to be wary of the topic of adultery. Garrison Keillor once quipped that when a pastor preaches about adultery, the congregation has only two questions: how long has the affair been going on, and who is it with? More seriously, one of the ethical requirements of preaching is that you do not turn the light of God's judgment on your congregation without standing with them—and adultery is not in everyone's repertoire of sins.

Unfortunately, adultery is more common than we'd like to admit, and it is not just the rich and famous who get caught in the trap. Estimated statistics vary, but many experts believe that between 30 and 50 percent of married people have engaged in sexual relationships outside of marriage. Adultery is also cited as a cause of many divorces. Given that our congregations are full of married and divorced

2 Samuel 11:1–15

the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. ¹⁰When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" ¹¹Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." ¹²Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, ¹³David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

Exegetical Perspective

The first ten chapters of 2 Samuel describe David's rise to power as king over all Israel, with YHWH's full support and approval (2 Sam. 5:10). However, these narratives about David's God-given victories over outside powers give way abruptly in chapter 11 to the first of a painful set of memories about the sinful side of God's chosen king.

This lectionary cutting makes it clear that David (usually remembered as the ancestor of the messianic line of kings) committed adultery and had one of his own trusted warriors murdered in an attempt to conceal his sin. This is only the beginning of the story of David's personal failings. The authors of 2 Samuel 11–1 Kings 2 portray David as a weak and ineffectual parent (1 Kgs. 1:6) who refused to punish his firstborn son Amnon, when Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:21), and allowed his sons Absalom and Adonijah to create havoc in his kingdom (2 Sam. 14–1 Kgs. 2). God's judgment on David's behavior (see Proper 13, 2 Sam. 11:26–12:13a) links this dysfunction in David's family to his behavior in 11:1–15.

In addition to David, the cast of characters in this story includes Joab, who was commander in chief of David's armies (as well as his nephew), and Uriah the Hittite, who was one of David's elite group of soldiers called "the Thirty" (2 Sam. 23:24, 39;

Homiletical Perspective

Does King David rape Bathsheba? "Rape" is a loaded word. In our society the meaning of the term has been shifting in recent years. I have heard in the news that some authorities believe the word should be used to describe any form of forced sexual intercourse. Although 2 Samuel 11 does not explicitly tell us that Bathsheba resists King David, there are many details in the story that suggest he probably commands her to have sex with him against her will. For one thing, it is clear that both she and her husband are devout keepers of the covenant with the Lord. She, for example, ritually purifies herself after menstruation, and Uriah refuses to go home and have intercourse with her to maintain what may have been a form of ritual battle-readiness. Given how strenuously both Bathsheba and Uriah adhere to the laws of the covenant, it is not unreasonable to assume that they are faithful to one another in marriage as part of their commitment to keeping covenant.

There are other telling details in the story. Bathsheba initiates nothing. King David first observes her naked from his roof. All he knows is that she is "beautiful," and she awakens his desire. He sends someone to inquire about her and to find out her name. Then he sends messengers to bring her to him.

2 Samuel 11:1–15

Theological Perspective

these to the formation of a free, peaceful, flourishing, and just society was not clear. Moreover, the land was occupied by many tribes who worshiped gods that did no honor to the God who is the Creator of all, the Lord of history, and the Source of universal moral law. The peoples that dominated the land the Hebrews entered lived in agricultural territories protected by citadels and were in constant conflict with their neighbors. Some routinely terrorized others, even seeking to exterminate them altogether and claiming divine sanction for doing so. Others lived by raiding their neighbors, taking their animals and stores, and taking their wives and children to serve them as slaves when times were difficult or the opportunities seemed easy. These practices demanded that each group had to have its own warriors led by strong young men to defend their bands and conduct the raids, as well as experienced elders to keep some kind of order. It was a rather Hobbesian world of a war of each band against all other outsiders.

Some tribes were able to establish “dukedom” under a warrior turned warlord. They developed views of religion that reflected their social practices, but did not develop social practices that reflected a valid religion. Most were dedicated to various natural powers of fertility—of the herds, of the cropland, and of their captured wives. Each band had its own god, which was invoked to protect their turf, to enhance their fertility, and to infuse their offspring-warriors with courage.

To establish themselves in the land that they infiltrated and conquered, the immigrant children of the exodus sought to build a society based ultimately on God’s laws and purposes as they understood them at that time. The Hebrews formed temporary leagues led by charismatic “judges” who formed temporary alliances for defense or conquest. They also raised up priests such as Eli to conduct the rites and rituals that they thought could best honor the God who had led them in battle, and they recognized prophets such as Samuel whom they thought could rightly discern the signs of the times and proclaim the mandates of God.

Life was insecure amid the constant rivalries and plundering of the tribes, and neither the priests nor the prophets could control the violence. In that context, some of the elders demanded the formation of a centralized monarchy. The stories of the books of Samuel are a narrative account of the struggles to establish a monarchy and thus to pacify the territory and establish a relative modicum of justice.

Pastoral Perspective

people, preaching about infidelity runs the risk of alienating untold numbers of parishioners; but silence on the subject seems like either tacit approval or a lack of concern for what goes on in real life. That is why 2 Samuel 11 deserves another look.

This is an amazing passage, a well-told tale that marks the turning point for 2 Samuel, where David goes from being the anointed one to the grasping one. The story begins with a succinct description of a king grown complacent. David has become so successful in his military campaigns that he no longer even bothers to fight. While his officers lead “all of Israel” out to battle the Ammonites, David idly lounges around the palace (v. 1). Then it happens: David sees a beautiful (and naked) woman bathing in a house nearby, and he is filled with lust. Although she is the wife/property of another man, David wants Bathsheba. Acting on desire alone, David sends for her, takes her and lies with her, and then sends her home.

We do not know what Bathsheba thought of all this. We only know she complies with the request of her king. Given David’s power and position, it is hard to imagine that Bathsheba could have said no. The same thing happens every day in the United States, where people with power coerce others into unwelcomed relationships. For instance, this is a particular problem in the U.S. military, where the rape of enlisted women (and men) has become an epidemic. In an era when we strive to protect our children from sexual predators and teach our sons and daughters that “No!” means “No!” the story of David and Bathsheba opens the door to this timely and critical issue.

After David has satisfied his lust, the bad news arrives: Bathsheba is pregnant. As the result of one impulsive act, suddenly events are spiraling out of David’s control. What follows is a series of increasingly desperate attempts to cover up his crime of adultery by hiding the source of Bathsheba’s pregnancy. He calls Uriah back from the war, expecting Uriah to “go down to his house,” but Uriah will not go. He tells David it would be a violation of his covenant with his men. Next, David gets him drunk, hoping Uriah will forget about his men and “go down to his house”; but Uriah will not go. It turns out Uriah is a more principled man than David. So David does the unthinkable. He sends Uriah back to the front lines with a message for Joab: make sure Uriah dies in battle.

This passage is first and foremost a sad story of power’s corrupting influence. David has risen so

2 Samuel 11:1–15

Exegetical Perspective

1 Chr. 11:41). Hittites had ruled much of Anatolia before any Israelites settled in Canaan, but by the time of David the term would have been an ethnic rather than a national designation. Uriah's wife is called Bathsheba only in verse 3. In the rest of chapter 11 she is either called "the woman" (v. 5) or the "wife of Uriah" (v. 26) or referred to by pronouns (vv. 4, 27). Although Bathsheba takes no initiatives in this story, other than informing David of her pregnancy, later (in 1 Kgs. 1–2) she will play an active role in the palace intrigue that makes her son Solomon king instead of Adonijah (David's oldest living son).

The term "all Israel" is used throughout the Former Prophets (in the Hebrew canon, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) in a representative sense to refer to those who fight on Israel's behalf. Rabbah was the royal city of the Ammonites, who lived mostly east of the Jordan. Ammonites were said to be blood relatives but were despised by the Israelites (Deut. 23:3), who eventually conquered them (2 Sam. 12:31).

Biblical narratives characteristically demonstrate narrative economy: characters are seldom described in detail, and their motives usually are not reported. Thus we are not told what David thinks, only what he says and does. Only the repeated use of the word "send" (*shalakh*) hints that David has become the type of ruler who expects everyone to cater to his whims. In contrast, the narrator has Uriah himself tell us why he does what he does (v. 11), thus making his upright behavior contrast sharply with David's unfaithfulness. We are not specifically told why David remained in Jerusalem (v. 1), but it seems clear that while Joab and Uriah (and "all Israel") were out fighting on his behalf, David was home lounging on the roof of his palace (v. 2). The text does not say Bathsheba was bathing on a roof, but that David saw her from the vantage point of his roof—the same roof on which Absalom will later take David's concubines (2 Sam. 16:22). Since chapter 12 makes it clear that YHWH does not blame Bathsheba, we have no reason to assume that her bathing was a deliberately provocative act. The note that she had just finished her menstrual period (11:4) makes it clear that the child was not Uriah's.

The NRSV makes David's actions in verse 4 sound innocuous, but the Hebrew says literally that "David sent messengers to take (*laqakh*) her" from her home to the palace. *Laqakh* (take) will be used again in Nathan's parable to describe the rich man's actions (2 Sam. 12:4) and is used elsewhere

Homiletical Perspective

Imagine what it is like for Bathsheba when officials from the court show up at her door demanding that she come with them. Since David had to inquire who she was, it is clear that the two have had no prior personal acquaintance. The royal summons must in itself be an anxious event for Bathsheba. She has no choice in the matter. A woman in a patriarchal society cannot refuse what the king commands.

King David has initiated the whole sordid business to satisfy his lust, and the details of the text suggest that Bathsheba submits because she has no choice. Portrayed as passive throughout the story, the only sentence we ever hear her speak is "I am pregnant." The king, not the woman, is in command. What the king wants, he gets. If, then, rape is defined as any unwelcome act of sexual intercourse, it is probably accurate to say that David rapes Bathsheba. Whether or not David would call it that, he knows he has done such great wrong that he tries to hide it by getting Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba.

Consider Bathsheba's distraught state upon finding herself impregnated by the king. How will she explain it to her husband Uriah, who, since he has been away in the armed service, will know the child is not his? If she reveals who the father in fact is, what might King David do? He might deny his involvement and command that she be killed as someone undercutting his regime with her unfounded charges. Should she run away? Commit suicide? We do not have a diary or journal of Bathsheba to tell us her exact thoughts and feelings. We know this: a sexual act that was imposed upon her has caught her in a tangled web.

Once Uriah refuses to sleep with Bathsheba, King David devises a plan to have him killed in battle. Rape, then murder: the court historian recounts in nasty detail David's nefarious behavior. To be fair to David, there are many memories of beautiful and compassionate things that he does as king, including the deep friendship he has with Jonathan, the kindness he shows to Mephibosheth, his vision of a temple built as a dwelling for the holy presence of the Lord, and the music and poetry he composes to the glory of God. There is goodness and tenderness in David, as well as lust and violence. History is kind to him. Over the centuries his name rises above his evil deeds as he becomes more legend than human.

Nearly a thousand years after King David's death, the phrase "son of David" is used as an honorific title for Christ. It appears no fewer than fifteen times

2 Samuel 11:1–15

Theological Perspective

When we enter the story in 2 Samuel 11, one feels as if one has entered the second act of a Greek tragedy, a Shakespearean play, or a Wagnerian opera. The hero has providentially emerged from obscurity, defeated the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath, served in the house of the ecstatic warlord, Saul, who had been anointed by Samuel as the one whom God favored to lead Israel. As David's fame as a warrior surpassed his, Saul tried to swallow him into his household by giving him his daughter, Michal, in marriage. David, however, saw that Saul was a troubled person, one who had no vision of the future role that Israel was to play in history. Indeed, Samuel recognized his error and secretly anointed David as king, which effectively revoked the authority of Saul, although Saul nevertheless sought to establish a dynastic monarchy on a warlord basis.

As Saul became more unstable, suspicious, and jealous, David feared for his life. He fled Saul's house, went into hiding, gathered his own army, and led them into exile. In time he made alliances with other opponents of Saul, even offering to fight with allies of the Philistines (although he refused to kill Saul when he had the chance, due to his honoring of the fact that Saul had been anointed). Gradually Saul not only began to fade as warlord; he abandoned any residual trust in God and turned to a witch who conjured up the soul of the now-deceased Samuel. When Saul inquired as to his destiny and was abruptly told that he would lose a battle against David's allies, he (and his son) committed suicide.

David, meanwhile, gradually built a coalition that had the marks of an emerging empire and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, uniting the country religiously. He established a standing army, installed court officers and a new priesthood, and made provisions for the administration of justice through governors and vassal kings. Bloody struggles against some enemies persisted, to be sure, even after Saul's death, but a rather secure rulership was established on the basis of a messianic political theology of history, and he was grateful to God.

MAX L. STACKHOUSE

Pastoral Perspective

high that he thinks he is above the demands of the law. Bathsheba's pregnancy reveals his infidelity, so David uses his power to "solve" the problem. One false step leads him down a path where he ends up with blood on his hands.

We should also note that David does not have murder on his mind when he looks out over the city and spies Bathsheba. He simply acts on impulse and desire—then all hell breaks loose. In the same way, most people I know who have had affairs did not intend to hurt anyone. Despite David's story, adultery usually does not begin in bed; it begins over lunch, over drinks, or online. These small but exciting interactions seem harmless, but they can quietly undermine our most important covenantal relationships and cause untold damage—to our spouses, to our families, and to ourselves.

I have heard people try to justify adultery in different ways. They rationalize it: "My marriage is basically over." "My needs are not being met." They romanticize it: "This is not adultery because we are truly in love." They normalize it: "Everyone is doing it, so what is the harm?" In the final analysis, the verdict is clear: adultery is never acceptable. Even a favored son like David is not above this law, and when he crosses the line, the consequences are dire.

So what does the church think about adultery? We are against it. Why? Because adultery is a sin, and we should not shrink from saying so, no matter who squirms—even if it is us.

However, preachers should always tell the whole truth: that sin and grace walk hand in hand. Yes, adultery is a sin, but fortunately God is in the sin-forgiving business.

SHAWNTEA MONROE

2 Samuel 11:1–15

Exegetical Perspective

to connote force rather than consent (see 2 Sam. 12:10–11).

When David urges Uriah to go home and “wash” his “feet” (v. 8), he is using a phrase with double meaning. The word “feet” is often used in Hebrew as a euphemism for genitals or sexual activity, and it is clear from Uriah’s response in verse 11 that he understands the word in that way.

The biggest narrative gap that must be filled in by any reader of this story concerns the motives of the historians of Israel. Since the authors of Chronicles could summarize what they saw as David’s glorious career without referring to his imperfect personal life, readers are compelled to ask why the authors of 2 Samuel included this (and the other dysfunctional-family narratives) in their story of David. Most scholars conclude that the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua–2 Kings) was put together in its present form in the midst of the national and religious devastation of the Babylonian exile. When the priests, prophets, and scribes began to record this version of Israel’s experiences in the “promised land,” they already knew their story would end in defeat and deportation. Thus, their historical narratives attempted to answer an essential question for future generations: How did we come to lose the land God promised us we could have? Rather than blaming God, they concluded that the promised land was lost because of human sinfulness. So even as they reported on their ancestors’ victories, they refused to idealize or to gloss over the sinfulness of either their people (as in Judges) or their leaders (as in Samuel–Kings).

Even David, the ancestor of the messianic line of kings, to whom YHWH promised an unbroken line of descendants, ruling “forever” (2 Sam. 7:8–16), is portrayed as sometimes faithful, sometimes not. David rules by the grace of God rather than by his own merit, and the duration of his dynasty is due not to his faithfulness but to the enduring faithfulness of God.

KATHLEEN A. ROBERTSON FARMER

Homiletical Perspective

in the Synoptic Gospels, beginning with Matthew 1:1. The evangelists associate David’s name with God’s promise to establish a permanent covenant with the king’s dynasty.

David’s many good accomplishments, however, do not exculpate the evil he did to Bathsheba and Uriah. They do not preclude asking a thorny question: in a society that suffers the scourge of date rape and sexual abuse, what are the theological implications of designating Christ as “the son of David,” as the son of a king who raped a man’s wife and then devised a scheme to have the innocent husband killed?

For me the answer lies in the character and nature of Christ. His acceptance of women who minister to him and his appearing to them on the first Easter honors and empowers women. Christ acts in exactly the opposite manner from King David at his worst. Christ transforms the meaning of “son of David,” not by filling the title with his predecessor’s lust and abuse of power, but by extending David’s compassion and justice to all women and men alike. Being called the son of a highly imperfect ancient king while redefining the meaning of that title is an act of revelation, a disclosure that the past does not control the new moment that is at hand in Christ. Christ is historically related to King David, fulfilling God’s promise of a permanent covenant with the house of David, but Christ brings the wholeness and health of God’s reign, a realm in which there is no more rape and murder. To call Christ “son of David,” while remembering the evil as well as the good that King David did, is to affirm that God enters the mess of human history in order to redeem the world. Christ, the “son of David,” gives us a more perfect kingship than David or any other mortal ruler could ever achieve.

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a

²⁶When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son.

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, ^{12:1}and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” ⁵Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

Theological Perspective

The David we encounter walking on the parapet of his castle in Jerusalem was a noncombatant ruler of a basically pacified realm. His many difficulties seemed to be mostly in the past, and he felt thankful for his many blessings, as we can see in many psalms attributed to him. However, it was not clear where he and the institutions he had constructed would be led in the future. Perhaps he would build a temple, a house for the ark.

Then he saw Bathsheba.

She was the wife of a noted soldier, Uriah the Hittite, possibly a mercenary in David’s special forces, and she was evidently quite beautiful. She was taking a ritual bath, usually done in modest privacy, on the roof of a nearby house. Perhaps Bathsheba believed that no one could see her bathing; perhaps she was announcing her availability to the king with her husband away on deployment. In any case, David was filled with lust. He sent servants to bring her to the palace. She got pregnant and David realized what a scandal it would be if one of his famous warriors found out that his wife was cheating on him with his commander in chief. David tried to cover his covetous behavior toward his neighbor’s wife by calling the husband home on temporary leave “to report on the progress of the battle.” Surely he would take advantage of his

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This passage could be entitled, “David and Bathsheba, Part 2.” It begins with a helpful recap, in case anyone has forgotten David’s shameful behavior. “When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son” (vv. 26–27). These two verses tell it all: David’s adultery, Bathsheba’s pregnancy, Uriah’s murder. After all his scheming and duplicity, it seems that everything has turned out all right for David. With Uriah out of the picture, Bathsheba’s pregnancy is legitimized, and no one is the wiser. Wait! Now comes a word from the Lord.

This wicked tale of adultery and murder unfolds without so much as a peep from God up to this point. Now God, who has witnessed the whole sordid affair, weighs in with the last verse: “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (v. 27b). This line is better translated literally: “The thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of YHWH.” In this rendering, it stands in sharp contrast to David’s assuring words to Joab in verse 25: “Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes.” David thinks his misdeeds are hidden and all is well, but God has seen it all and declares it evil.

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a

⁷Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. ¹¹Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. ¹²For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.” ¹³David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Exegetical Perspective

This passage cannot be understood without reference to 2 Samuel 11:1–15, where David made Uriah’s wife both pregnant and a widow. David may have thought he had successfully concealed his adultery by killing Uriah, but the narrator tells us that YHWH both knew and disapproved of David’s callous abuse of power (v. 1). No one suggests that Uriah’s wife was aware of the role David played in her husband’s death, and neither the narrator nor the prophet blames her for what happened.

Nathan appears three times in stories about David. When David consults him about building a house for YHWH in 2 Samuel 7:2 (= 1 Chr. 17:1), he is called simply “Nathan the prophet,” as if he were already known to the audience, and the message he delivers from YHWH promises David an everlasting dynasty (2 Sam. 7:4–17). In 1 Kings 1:8–40 Nathan conspires with Bathsheba to make sure Solomon becomes king after David. Here in 2 Samuel 12:1–14 Nathan is sent by YHWH to deliver a message that makes all of the political and personal chaos described in the following chapters into a consequence of David’s sins against Uriah.

The word “sent” (*shalakh*) is used twelve times in the twenty-seven verses of chapter 11 and once again in 12:1. David repeatedly sends others to do his bidding, giving us an impression of his casual use

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How do you confront someone who commands vast authority and power and uses his or her position to commit atrocious evil? It is a question that haunts history. Those with little or no influence have struggled mightily with how to hold accountable those who are in power and who possess the resources to enforce their will through violence, imprisonment, and death. This is the situation that Nathan the prophet faces with King David. The monarch forced himself sexually upon Bathsheba. When she became pregnant by him and David was unable to get her husband, Uriah, to sleep with her because he was consecrated for battle, David ordered that the innocent man be sent to the front line, where he was killed. The story smacks of Lord Acton’s observation that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

If you are a prophet, if you are the mouthpiece of God, who demands moral accountability, and if you encounter such abusive power, what can you possibly do? Given how brutal and unconscionable the king’s actions are, you have good reason to fear that it would be dangerous to confront David head-on about his malfeasance. David did not hesitate to send Uriah to his death, so why should he not do the same to you if you cross purposes with him?

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time at home to visit his wife, so that no one would wonder about whose child it was when she delivered. Uriah preferred to bunk with the palace guards and did not visit her.

Drastic steps had to be taken to cover up the affair. Thus, David plotted with his loyal general, Joab, to have Uriah assigned to a vulnerable position when he returned to the front. Joab did as instructed. Uriah was killed, and after the period of mourning Bathsheba became a part of David's harem, which he had taken over from the deceased Saul.

The story is not done, but some consequences were already apparent. Others were more long range. The prophet Nathan informed David that he could not build the temple he was dreaming about, for he had blood on his hands. Through a parable about a poor man who has his only lamb stolen from him by a powerful man who has many sheep, Nathan condemned David to his face and warned him that there would not be peace in his house, because of his sin. David repented and asked for God's forgiveness. The model political leader saw himself as exercising power under moral law and for godly purposes.

This part of the story also signaled the beginning of the later biblical tradition of the ethical prophet. It was to supplant the earlier definition of a prophet as one who was the mouthpiece of a warrior deity who commands the extermination of enemy peoples. Now the prophet is one who speaks for truth and justice to power. Military power is not the only kind of power, and a political vocation cannot deal only with the gaining of a monopoly of coercive power in a territory to enforce law and order; it must deal with the duty to foster the spiritual and ethical fabric of social relationships in a way that manifests wisdom, justice, and attentiveness to the formation of the next generation and the moral infrastructure of a civilization. These qualities cannot be established with the sword or shrewd policy alone, and David had not cultivated these qualities in his own life or nurtured them among his heirs. Indeed, domestic life in the house of David as it unfolded over the next several years was a mess. The child he had fathered with Bathsheba became ill, and although he fasted to stave off the illness, David resumed his habitual life when the child died, as if nothing had happened.

David had other children with other women. His eldest living son, Amnon, raped Tamar, his own half-sister. Absalom, a younger prince and a sister of Tamar, was irate that his father did not punish Amnon and took it on himself to render

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If this were the end of the passage, it would be enough to keep a preacher busy, because pastors know all too well that people can do horrible things when they think no one is looking. Anonymity breeds cruelty and self-serving behavior. Open any newspaper and you will find examples of good people behaving badly because they thought no one was looking. Whether it is bullying online, or insider trading, or killing civilians in a time of war—there is no end to the trouble people can get into if they think they will not get caught. What David is about to discover is what every person of faith needs to remember: we live *coram Deo*—ever before God. Even when our actions are hidden from all other people, God knows our every move—and stands in judgment. As the opening words of Psalm 139 declare: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” If David had simply remembered this, he might not have gotten into such trouble.

God's judgment is delivered by the prophet Nathan. The last time Nathan spoke to David (2 Sam. 7:1–17), it was to declare God's promise to watch over David and make a great name for him. God did all that was promised—and more. Now, Nathan is the bearer of judgment, and he proceeds carefully. He tells David a story about an arrogant rich man who, needing to feed some guests, takes a beloved sheep from a poor man and slaughters it. David is outraged by the rich man's behavior, declaring, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!” (v. 5b). Nathan turns on David and says, “You are the man!” (v. 7a) and goes on to deliver God's terrible judgment, describing God's fidelity and David's crimes in detail. David has “despised the word of the LORD”; therefore “the sword shall never depart from your house” (vv. 9, 10).

After listening to the litany of dire consequences that will befall him, David does something unexpected: he confesses. “I have sinned against the LORD” (v. 13a). Lesser men might have killed Nathan, but as low as David has fallen, he is still a man of profound faith. He admits his crime without excuse or hesitation. In some ancient manuscripts, a gap was left after David's confession so that Psalm 51 could be read. Believed to be David's full response to Nathan's judgment, Psalm 51 begins, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”

This passage is a vivid example of speaking truth to power, and Christians would do well to pay attention to the details. First, notice that God

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a

Exegetical Perspective

of imperial power, until YHWH sends Nathan to challenge David's misuse of his position.

Nathan's first task is to convince David that his behavior has been truly despicable. He tells a juridical parable, a realistic-sounding but fictitious report that asks the listener(s) to make a judgment about right or wrong in the case reported (see 2 Sam. 14:1–20; 1 Kgs. 20:35–43; Isa. 5:1–7; Jer. 3:1–5; Hag. 2:11–14; Eccl. 9:14–16). The stories told in juridical parables are meant to draw the listeners in, soliciting their empathy and inviting them to make a decision between the polarities described in the text. Once a judgment has been made, the narrator reveals how the behavior condemned in the story mirrors the listener's own behavior.

David identifies emotionally with the poor man in the parable and is indignant on his behalf (v. 5). Seen from the poor man's perspective, what the rich man did was a blatant abuse of power. Nathan informs David that in fact he and the rich man are morally identical (v. 7). They both have taken what they want but do not need from someone who has no power to refuse them. The crime they have in common is the victimization of the powerless, which is completely counter to YHWH's will (see Mic. 2:1–2; Amos 2:6–7; 5:10–11; Isa. 3:14–15; 5:8–9).

Nathan begins to deliver YHWH's judgment on David using a typical prophetic messenger formula ("Thus says the LORD . . .," v. 7). As in other prophetic oracles (e.g., Amos 2:6–16), YHWH identifies why the addressee should be grateful (vv. 7–8), describes the transgressions that prove lack of gratitude (v. 9), and details the consequences that will follow (vv. 10–12). The oracle hinges on the verbs "give" and "take." *Laqakh* (take) was used in 11:4 (NRSV "get") to describe David's acquisition of Bathsheba, twice in the juridical parable (12:4), and three times in YHWH's judgment speech (12:9, 10, 11). When the people of Israel first demanded a king to govern them like other nations, Samuel warned them what such a king might be like (1 Sam. 8:5, 11–18), and the key word in Samuel's warning was "take" (*laqakh*). According to Samuel, kings (or as we might say, those with unchecked power) tend to "take" whatever they want from those who are unable to resist their depredations. Now David, who once realized that he owed his success to YHWH's love for Israel rather than to his own merits (5:12), has become a king like those in other nations, assuming that he deserves to have whatever he can take. Nathan says that YHWH "gave" David all of the trappings of kingship, including all of his

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However, as a prophet, Nathan cannot let the evil go unchallenged. He uses the strategy of indirect communication, telling a parable that awakens David's empathic imagination. The strategy is perfectly matched to the king's own talent for expressing himself in poetic, imaginative ways. David was esteemed as a gifted poet and musician. Furthermore, as a youth David was a shepherd. Nathan's tale of a poor man's lamb that eats at his owner's table appeals both to the memories of David's upbringing and to his poetic imagination. Nathan's parable gets underneath the strongman role that David fills as king and turns him into a vulnerable human being, enraged at the injustice of the rich man who pilfers and slaughters a poor man's only lamb: "Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity'" (vv. 5–6).

The parable has engaged a side of David that is totally different from the man who forces sex upon Bathsheba and orders the death of her husband Uriah. David is no longer the absolutist king acting from the prerogatives of power and authority. Nathan's parable has touched the moral sensibilities of David's humanity. The prophet can now safely address the king directly about his wrongdoing: "You are the man!" The prophet interprets David's depraved actions in theological and ethical terms: "Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with sword of the Ammonites" (v. 9). David, instead of turning on the prophet in anger for revealing his secrets, becomes penitent: "I have sinned against the LORD."

The story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan has had an enduring impact upon the theology and poetry of the community of faith. For example, Psalm 51 claims to be "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." We now know that David did not in fact compose this psalm, because its thought and language draw upon prophets who came centuries after king David lived: Jeremiah, Third Isaiah, and Ezekiel.¹ The psalm, however, provides a way of seeing how the story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan shaped the theological thinking of subsequent generations as it came to

1. Richard Hays, general editor, *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), 457.

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Theological Perspective

the punishment. He killed Amnon, which left him as probable heir to the throne (although other pretenders were to prolong the conflicts over succession for years).

Absalom was handsome, intelligent, passionate, and vigorous. He was also ambitious, increasingly alienated from his father, and impatient. He conspired with selected dissidents with old tribal and warlord connections and gathered an army to stage a coup. He got his father to leave the capital by a ruse and seized Jerusalem. David rallied his forces and came back to Jerusalem. Absalom fled, taking David's harem with him—a great insult to the father of the nation. David's army pursued him, and Joab, the faithful general, after a long series of rebellious conflicts, killed Absalom. Oddly, David was simultaneously happy that the rebellion was apparently over and plunged into a deep grief over the death of his son, from which he never quite recovered. The conflicts over succession were not over; they troubled the land for generations.

Standing in the wings was Bathsheba, who had born David another son, Solomon. She too was an ambitious person and cajoled David into designating Solomon as the heir of the realm. Solomon evidently had a sense of vocation and was to inherit the kingship when David died, build the temple, and become the most famous ruler in the land between David and the birth of Christ, “son of David” (Matt. 1:1), who cast the understanding of the messianic theology of history and the kingdom in basically new directions. The legacy of these stories has left a deep imprint on the theological debates about the relationship of faith and war, of family life and political authority, of cultural pluralism and national unity, and of the roles of prophets, priests, and kings in public matters and civil society. These issues are still matters of contention in Jewish and Christian (and Islamic) theologies of civilization and thus require continued attention.

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chose Nathan to deliver God's message because Nathan had access to David. There was a preexisting relationship that allowed the prophet to speak to the king. Having access to people with power is critical if the church is going to speak its truth.

The second lesson this passage offers is about the form of the message. Nathan does not confront David head-on by saying, “God knows you slept with Bathsheba and killed Uriah, and you are in trouble!” Instead, he reframes the truth in a way that David can hear it, engage it, and respond to it. In fact, Nathan's story is so effective David is condemned by his own words. Right now, there is a great deal of injustice and oppression in our society, and we, as Christians, are called to name those sins. However, we will not get anywhere if all we do is point the finger of judgment at those in power. Nathan's example invites us to reframe the message so everyone stands on common ground. If all we do is condemn others, our words will fall on deaf and defensive ears.

The last lesson concerns the true purpose of judgment. The mark of Nathan's success is not that he tricks David into condemning David's own actions. It is not even when Nathan cries out, “You are the man!” Instead, Nathan is successful when David confesses—for that is the true purpose of God's judgment. God judges us not to condemn us, but to transform us by bringing about repentance. Whether the word “repent” is in Hebrew or in Greek, it means to “turn around” or “turn back.” Ultimately, that is God's deepest desire: that we turn from our sinful ways and return to God. There may be consequences to our sinful acts, but God is always willing to put our sins aside and restore us to right relationship.

This episode is not the last word on David, but it is a defining moment. He is still the greatest king of Israel, but this story reveals that even the mightiest king must live by the word of God. We hear an echo of this truth in the first chapter of Matthew, where the lineage of Jesus is traced: “And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah” (v. 6).

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Exegetical Perspective

predecessor's wives, and would have given him even more (12:8). Instead of feeling grateful, David has felt the need to "take" another man's wife by taking that other man's life. Now, according to Nathan, YHWH will *take* David's wives and *give* them to someone else (12:11), who turns out later to be his own son Absalom (2 Sam. 16:22).

In his condemnation of the rich man, David has judged himself as one who "deserves to die" (v. 5). While Saul died for his unfaithfulness to the Lord (1 Chr. 10:13), David's punishment will take another form. YHWH had promised to "establish" David's "throne" forever, stipulating that the human sins of David's "house" would be punished "with blows inflicted by human beings" (2 Sam. 7:14–16). Thus, repeating the word "sword" (vv. 9, 10) as well as the word "take" (vv. 9, 10, 11) to emphasize the symmetry between David's sin and his punishment, YHWH decrees that the violence done by David to Uriah will bring unending violence to David's "house."

The lectionary reading stops in the middle of verse 13 with David's confession of sin, but many traditions follow that ending with a reading of Psalm 51. The superscription of the psalm claims that its penitential prayer originated with David "when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

From the perspective of the exile, looking back over the history of God's chosen people, the authors and editors of Deuteronomy–2 Kings saw a definite contrast between what a king chosen by YHWH should do (Deut. 17:14–20) and what the kings who ruled over Israel and Judah did in fact do. Even David, who comes as close to being an ideal king as any, falls short of God's standards. Precisely because they recognized and recorded this continued pattern of human failure, readers today can see that it is God's grace, not human faithfulness, that brought forth the messianic line.

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be interpreted through the poetic and liturgical imagination of the psalmist.

The psalm is an expansion of and meditation on David's acknowledgment, "I have sinned against the LORD." The poet/theologian takes us into the depths of what such a confession means. The healing work of forgiveness and renewal involves nothing less than open-heart surgery: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10).

The psalmist's awareness of how thoroughly infected his spiritual heart is makes him open to God's creating a clean heart within him: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Ps. 51:3). The astonishing thing about this confession is that although the superscription presents the psalm as if it were David's own words, it stands as part of Israel's hymnbook, a part of its life of corporate worship. We most often associate hymns with experiences of personal piety, but here is a hymn inspired by a confession that was wrenched by a prophet out of a king who had abused his power. By placing the memory of that story permanently into Israel's hymnbook, the psalmist alerts the community to be continually attentive to the misuse of power and the need to confess it and to seek a new heart, not just for individuals but for the whole system of power relations that permits such abuse to occur.

The story of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan is far more than a salacious palace scandal, the kind of revelation that tabloids and talk shows love to exploit, although we risk reducing it to that whenever we call it the story of David and Bathsheba and omit the names of the innocent husband and the wise prophet. The psalm makes clear that it is not a story told for prurient interest. It is rather a wake-up call to the nation about the abuse of power and the need for repentance.

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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

Psalm 51:1–12

¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

Theological Perspective

Two theological themes are intertwined in our lectionary reading: human sin and God's mercy. Many interpreters of this passage emphasize one over the other, particularly God's mercy. Focusing on both, however, makes a more dramatic account of the text, because it is in the deepest and the darkest of human transgressions that God's mercy stands up to the challenge. It is when human depravity becomes incomprehensibly unforgivable by human standards that God's overflowing mercy shows its redeeming power, and it is here that God's mercy shines forth brightly. Hence these two themes need to be articulated in tension with each other, even as the ending of this essay emphasizes God's steadfast love and mercy.

A discourse on the human condition and sin may display abstract theological eloquence, but sin always manifests itself in concrete sinful acts. Sin is a brutal and pervasive historical reality. It is committed by the mighty as well as by the lowly; it is committed in the most brazen as well as in most concealed and sophisticated ways. When sinful acts are committed, they are always committed against other beings, even as they are acts that violate the very being of the perpetrators themselves. It is against this historical concreteness of sin that the psalmist's act of confession and seeking forgiveness must be

Pastoral Perspective

Liturgically, the words of Psalm 51 are most often associated with the penitential season of Lent. Yet the pastoral applications of the psalm are legion. The appearance of this text in Ordinary Time offers an opportunity to consider penitence and guilt, and mercy and redemption as gifts of God that are needed not only in high holy seasons, but in the myriad circumstances of everyday life.

We are all too well aware that sin is not seasonally limited. Its manifestations will vary with individual failings and social circumstances, but sin is constant. For some, sin appears overtly—in the form of transgressions against the Ten Commandments along the order of theft, adultery, covetousness, or even murder. For others, sin appears more attractively veiled—in the guise of good intentions gone wrong, silence in the face of evil, charity at the expense of justice, generosity shared for the sake of one's own ego. Sins of actions and attitudes, sins of commission and omission, sins done against oneself and one's neighbor, sins done publicly, secretly, even unknowingly: they are ubiquitous.

How does one begin to "come clean" about sin, especially in a society that is prone to defensiveness and rationalization? The psalm's opening words—"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love"—offer a beginning. The psalm invites

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⁶You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Exegetical Perspective

One of the seven penitential psalms found in the Psalter (Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), Psalm 51 demonstrates the essence of true penitence. In this psalm, the psalmist pours out his heart to God in honesty and earnestness. Conscious of his sin, he shows his readers and listeners the way that leads to forgiveness and true communion with God. The psalmist's prayer is direct and straightforward; his conversation with God is an example of profound humility and deep trust. The psalm can be divided into six parts: verses 1–3, an invocation of God asking for forgiveness of sins; verses 4–6, a confession; verses 7–9, a prayer for forgiveness; verses 10–13, a prayer for renewal; verses 14–17, a vow; verses 18–19, an exhortation.

Cognizant of his transgressions, the psalmist pleads with God to be merciful and compassionate and to wash him thoroughly from all iniquity (vv. 1–3). Clearly his own sinfulness is causing the psalmist great distress. He is able to beg for God's mercy because he already knows that God is merciful (cf. Mic. 7:18–20; Sir. 18:13). The consciousness of God's love allows the psalmist to remain faithful to God and keeps him from breaking under the weight of his own guilt. God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, begged the Israelite community to wash themselves and make themselves clean from all

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The question regularly rises in the context of Bible studies on Psalm 51. Someone asks, "Well, what do I have to do to be forgiven?" On one occasion I heard it like this: "If I was as awful as this psalm makes me out to be, what would I have to do to be forgiven?" The person asking the question did not experience that sense that "my sin is ever before me"; rather, he felt he had an advantage over David. He had not greedily eyed his friend's wife; he had not plundered her for his own delight; he had not contrived the death of his friend; and he had not covered over it all with a patriotic fiction. (For those keeping score, that is four out of ten commandments.) The person asking the question was a good person, one respected in the community, holding a position of authority professionally, the sort of person who comes to Bible study. He could say with some truthfulness, "I am not that bad"; but still he wondered and still he asked, "What do I have to do to be forgiven?" When Psalm 51 is read in worship, the preacher addresses a congregation of people who wonder *what they have to do*, which is to say, the preaching predicament is perplexingly paradoxical: Psalm 51 raises the question to which it is also the answer.

In the episode of 2 Samuel 12:1–15 alluded to in the superscription to Psalm 51 (not printed

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seen. This is the significance of the superscription in our lectionary reading (not included above), which introduces the passage with an account of King David's taking of Bathsheba and his plot of having her husband Uriah killed. This is no petty mischievous act but a serious one, especially in the context of an enormous power differential between the violator and the violated, the institutional background in which the crime was committed, and the cunning with which it was executed.

While there is a general recognition among biblical scholars and theologians that sin necessarily and always involves a violation against another person (e.g., Bathsheba and Uriah), there is a common tendency among them to rush to the interpretation that the transgression is committed primarily against God or that the theological-moral crisis is "properly" with God. This interpretation is often rendered as a matter of fact, one that is devoid of any ideological presuppositions. While a particular text, such as our lectionary reading, may appear to focus directly on God as the primary subject in the theological-moral dialogue, textual/theological critics need to be more critical.

The focus on God as the main offended party may be based on a political ideology that views the sovereign as the primary subject and believes the people have no subjecthood apart from the sovereign ruler. Since the people have no subjecthood apart from the sovereign ruler, the primary offended party is the sovereign (God). In this case, the pain of the offended subjects remains secondary or muted. In spite of the cautionary remarks that the intention is not to deflect the pain from the offended individuals or people, the contrary may just be what is going on. It is only when we take seriously the concrete historical victims (God immanent in the face of violated beings) that we can proceed with true confession and seek God's grace and forgiveness.

Without a doubt, God's grace and mercy are abundant for any repentant sinner. God's wellspring of grace and mercy has not dried up, in spite of the fact that generations upon generations have come to this wellspring seeking grace, mercy, and forgiveness. It continues to flow and to embrace those who come with contrite hearts. There is not much requirement but a porous heart—a heart ready to confess and accept culpability, responsibility, and God's forgiveness. None who come in the spirit of humility and openness to God will be rejected, even as the world continues to reject them. No sin is beyond God's mercy and forgiveness; there is no sinner who

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us to approach the throne of grace, not out of confidence in our own innocence, but in gratitude for the trustworthiness of God's *hesed*.

God's mercy, not our self-justification, is the beginning point in forgiveness. God's mercy provides a safe place for us to face the truth of our sin and transgression. Left to our own devices, we might well seek to hide even from ourselves our complicity in evil. This is the nature of original sin—the sin in which "my mother conceived me": the drive for exoneration that first led Adam and Eve to try to hide from the Lord in the garden. Of course, we cannot hide in the presence of God. The light of truth reveals everything.

What we discover along the way is the faithfulness of God, which sustains us, in spite of our unfaithfulness. Thus, the "truth in the inward being" that God desires is not in order to exact our deserved punishment. Instead, this truth opens the way to the beginning of wisdom. It is the first step toward "joy and gladness," the opening to "a new and right spirit."

This openness toward truth, which God desires for us, is diametrically opposed to our proclivity to seek cover. In our culture, being "found out" implies failure and presages judgment. In the news or neighborhood gossip we hear of people—politicians, financiers, spouses, teachers, pastors—who are "caught in the act." Being caught implies being captured, snared, and imprisoned by guilt. It is the *discovery* of guilt, even more than the action, that leads to shame and social shunning.

The psalmist offers a very different outcome to the uncovering of truth. In the hands of God, truth is the first step toward *freedom*. For those in our society who are "spiritual but not religious," perhaps access to this paradox might best come from a well-known cultural resource: Twelve-Step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. This passage's uncanny parallels to the Twelve-Step programs may provide an entry point to explore the nature of our human weakness—whether sin, addiction, or some other form of brokenness—and the power of God to save us.

The Twelve Steps begin, "We admitted we were powerless over our addiction—that our lives had become unmanageable"; this is very close to "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (v. 3). If our powerlessness to save ourselves were the last word, that would be death to us; but what we cannot do, God is able to accomplish. It is in the power of God to "restore us to sanity," in the phrase of Twelve-Step programs, equivalent to "wash [us]

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their transgressions (Isa. 1:16). Only God can forgive sins and heal the heart of all guilt. The fact that the psalmist is able to acknowledge his sinfulness (v. 3) is a sign of great hope and the first step toward true penitence. By acknowledging his sinfulness, the psalmist takes responsibility for his actions and becomes a model of humility and courage.

Verses 4–6 are the psalmist’s confession. He admits outwardly and forthrightly in God’s presence that he has indeed sinned. The heart of the confession is found in verse 4: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned.” The psalmist’s confession does not imply that he has committed blasphemy. In essence, every sin committed is committed indirectly against God, because sin is a violation of right relationship, with God and with others. Ironically, only through God’s grace is one able to be self-reflective and to admit one’s sinfulness. Thus, despite all human weakness and shortcomings, God’s love, God’s grace remains present in people’s lives, regardless of the sham, the beauty, the sordidness of one’s life. God’s love, God’s grace enables the psalmist to take account of his life. With the ability not only to acknowledge his sinfulness but also to take responsibility for his actions, the psalmist now knows that there are consequences on account of one’s actions. The psalmist stands ready to accept these consequences (v. 4).

In verse 5 the psalmist offers a self-portrait. He sees himself guilty from birth. This self-identity seems to go against Genesis 1:27, that all are created in God’s image, according to God’s likeness. The psalmist’s sense of self is similar to that of Isaiah, who in the midst of an experience of God cries out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).

The confession closes with the psalmist acknowledging the fact that God favors truth. He then asks God for wisdom in his heart. The psalmist knows that all wisdom is from God (Sir. 1:1–10), and he wants that wisdom to be poured out into his heart. For the Israelite people, the heart was the central organ of intelligence. From the heart comes all emotions, feelings, passions, and moods such as joy (Deut. 28:47; Job 29:13), grief (Ps. 13:2; Jer. 4:19; Isa. 65:14); courage (2 Sam. 17:10; Ps. 27:14), and fear (Deut. 20:3). As the seat of intelligence, the heart understands (Deut. 8:5; 29:3; Prov. 14:10) and remembers (Isa. 44:19; 46:8) Thus, to be instructed with wisdom in the heart is a crucial step in working toward personal conversion and transformation.

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above) David simply says, “I have sinned against the LORD.” This admission is by no means inevitable. Many commentators suggest David was trapped by Nathan’s tale of the poor man with “one little ewe lamb” and could do nothing else. The story is not that compelling. David could have said, “Cute story, Nathan, but I am the king and you are the prophet, or you *were* the prophet, because next week we will be bringing in a new prophet, and by the way: Joab, will you please drive Nathan home . . . safely?” David is king and commander and could have told Nathan, “We appreciate your concern, but the nation is at war, and this is a matter of national security that you could not possibly understand, and you were nice to come, but as the official press release stated, ‘The sword devours now one and now another.’ These things happen in war.” Out of a repertoire of possible responses David says, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Historical criticism assures us that Psalm 51 is exilic or postexilic, composed and sung many long years after David’s reign slipped into history, but canonical criticism insists that preachers give hermeneutical attention to another equation: Psalm 51 equals “I have sinned against the LORD.” This is David’s psalm. He teaches us how to come to God. This is everyone’s psalm because no one escapes need for these verses.

It begins with the character of God: gracious, merciful, and full of steadfast love. The psalmist prays confidently in verse 1 because that he draws deeply on God’s self-disclosure in Exodus 34:6: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Walter Brueggemann calls this Israel’s “core testimony,” the central affirmation of God at the heart of all the theology, stories, and psalms.¹ This is who the Lord is revealed to be, and we can count on that in prayer and confession. Until the character of God is understood, there can be no homecoming, no reconciliation, and certainly no new creation. Even so, we are self-reliant creatures and think we can do very well on our own. We are more accustomed to relying on our own abilities and achievement than we are in trusting to the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God.

So vast are the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of the Lord in C. S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* that each year a tour bus arrives in hell to transport its inhabitants for a holiday in heaven. There is no “catch”: if they like, they can remain in heaven. Few

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 117–228.

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cannot be justified by God's grace when he or she comes in faith.

What does this justification of the sinner by God's grace do? It gives the repentant and forgiven person a new heart. God's justifying the sinner means that God is at work giving a person a new heart, a new orientation. It is God's way of creating a new being. This is not an afterthought, but an expression of God's continuing creation. The God who creates is the very same God who renews creation; the God who creates is also the God who liberates, saves, and reconciles humanity to God and the rest of creation. God's forgiveness provides a new beginning; without forgiveness there is no new beginning, no new life.

The forgiven—the one who has acquired a new heart, disposition, and orientation—can now be expected to bear fruits of the Spirit. The one whose life has been changed by God's Spirit cannot remain silent and hide in seclusion, but breaks the silence by praising God and witnessing to what God has done in his or her life. The new human being cannot remain silent in the face of the continuing violation of life, but speaks truth to power with prophetic courage. As one who has experienced God's grace and forgiveness, the new human being also knows how to exercise forgiveness in relation to other human beings, both individually and collectively. Our dream of a new tomorrow will not come to fruition apart from forgiveness. In fact, it is a contradiction to speak of a new tomorrow—a tomorrow that seeks the well-being of all—without forgiveness. In other words, there is no new tomorrow without forgiveness, because, without forgiveness, no space has been created for commencing the journey toward a new and better tomorrow.

We started with human sin and journeyed through confession and ended in the creation of new beings who have become participants with God in the creation of a life-giving tomorrow. Sin may be pervasive, but it does not have the last word. New life in God is our destiny.

ELEAZAR S. FERNANDEZ

Pastoral Perspective

thoroughly," in the words of the psalm (v. 2). It is in the power of God to "remove our defects of character," in the Twelve-Step phrase, or to "put a new and right spirit within [us]," in the language of the psalm (v. 10). "Coming clean" is the beginning of wisdom, and it is *accomplished by God*. Like the waters of baptism, this is the start of God's ongoing work of salvation.

Perhaps in this way the psalm also provides an entrée to explore the meaning of the very word "salvation." For many churchgoers, our understanding of salvation is limited to the medieval sense of being saved from eternal damnation to hell. But for the postmodern listener, the ancient psalmist's understanding of salvation as "being made whole" opens an immediate and fresh perspective. Being saved is not restricted to—or even as concerned with—the disposition of our disembodied, eternal soul. Being saved by God is the beginning of *a new way of being on earth*: fully embodied, never perfect, yet invited to move slowly but surely toward the liberating light of truth. God's act of salvation is not only a one-time event, but an ongoing process of restoration and renewal.

For those who have already faced the truth of their sin, weakness, addiction, or brokenness, this psalm offers the next step as well. Once we have discovered the freedom that truth offers, we then face the fact that we will never be made perfect in this lifetime. For those who fear that they will always be struggling with their fallible nature; for those who are unable to forgive themselves; for those who are worried that they will fail themselves and those they love, the closing words of this section of the psalm voices their longing:

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
And sustain in me a willing spirit.

God not only has the power to wash us of our sins. God also has the power to restore us to a life of joy and a life committed to taking one step at a time. So the psalmist comes full circle: the God whose mercy endures forever can sustain us, even when we are prone to fall.

CHRISTINE CHAKOIAN

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Exegetical Perspective

The psalmist continues his conversation with God in verses 7–9, where he asks for God’s forgiveness. He wants to be purged with hyssop (v. 7) and washed clean, have his bones come back to life and his iniquities forgiven (v. 9). A hyssop brush was used to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the doorposts during the Passover (Exod. 12:22). It was also used in rituals for cleansing lepers (Lev. 14:4, 6, 49, 51, 52) and in the purification of a person defiled by contact with a corpse (Num. 19:6, 18). The hiding of God’s face from sins is used as a metaphor for forgiveness (v. 9).

Having acknowledged his sin and having asked for forgiveness, the psalmist now asks God to transform him. The desire for a clean heart and new spirit echoes Ezekiel 36:25–29. The psalmist yearns for a renewed relationship with God and desires to live in God’s presence. When once the psalmist is renewed and restored to God, then this person has something to teach, not only through words but also, more importantly, through one’s life. In telling the story of his own conversion, in living a life that exemplifies right relationship, the psalmist becomes a preacher, a teacher to transgressors so that they may witness a life renewed by and restored in God, which could become the impetus for their own change of heart (v. 13).

In verses 14–17 the psalmist begs for God’s protection and aid, and even promises to make known God’s faithful love (v. 14). Like Micah (6:6–8), the psalmist realizes the folly of outward sacrifices. What is important is a humble and contrite heart (v. 17).

The psalmist’s last words are an exhortation. As the psalmist has been transformed, so he wishes the same for Zion/Jerusalem, God’s Holy City, where, once again, sacrifices would be acceptable to God because all would be, once again, in right relationship with God and with one another (cf. Amos 5:21–24).

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

do. All of the souls of hell feel they deserve better, as a matter of fact they feel *entitled* to something better. “I only want my rights,” says one, “I’m not asking for anybody’s bleeding charity.”

“Then do. At once,” his guide says. “Ask for Bleeding Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought.”² As Lewis’s story plays out, even “the asking” is not required: only a deep longing and desire for God. The poet of Psalm 51 cries, “Do not cast me away from your presence.” Not everyone wants that. Some people would rather be right than forgiven. What distinguishes Psalm 51, however, is the passionate longing for God. The psalm yearns for much more than a juridical judgment like Nathan’s word, “The LORD has put away your sin” (2 Sam. 12:13b). What the psalmist aches for is a new creation: “a clean heart . . . a new and right spirit” that has the capacity to enjoy the life God has given it.

“Let me hear joy and gladness,” sings the psalmist (v. 8), for that is the sound people make who know and long for their home in God. The prodigal son’s simpering plea for forgiveness (Luke 15:18) is finally drowned out by “music and dancing” (Luke 15:25), because the glad harmonies of homecoming are inevitably more exhilarating than the dull thud of sin separating us from that celebration.

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2. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 26.

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**PROPER 14 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 7
AND AUGUST 13 INCLUSIVE)**

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33

⁵The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom.

⁶So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

⁹Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth,

Theological Perspective

Our lectionary reading invites us to reflect on an enduring theme that is not only intellectually perplexing but also emotionally wrenching. We are talking here broadly of the theme of human alienation and pathos, which we often dismiss easily as part of historical reality when it visits others, but which sends us screaming deep in our guts when tragedy comes close or hits home. When it comes close or hits home, we are left with no choice but to wrestle with it; yet we often fail to understand its import, not only because we are immersed in our pain, but also because we fail to connect the dots—especially when the dots include the history of our past actions that we want to forget and the consequences of which we are now reaping. However, the past is not past, even if it is not remembered, for it lives in us as individuals—in our ways of thinking and acting and in the social institutions we have helped to create, which may be hurting the new generations.

What are social institutions? Social institutions emerge out of social interaction and give stability, order, coherence, legitimacy, and shape to social interactions. They stabilize behavior or stabilize society; solidify interactions so that they do not become haphazard; raise reciprocity to the level of obligation; order meaning; mediate the relations

Pastoral Perspective

The death of Absalom is not a simple case of grief over a dead son. It is the tragic conclusion of a complex story of love and betrayal, forgiveness and heartbreak, political duty and power battles. To miss this larger context would compromise an appropriate pastoral response.

The story begins in 2 Samuel 13 when King David's eldest son, Amnon, creates a ruse by asking David to send his half-sister Tamar to comfort him in his illness. Amnon rapes her and then, instead of restoring her honor by marrying her, he discards her. Absalom, Tamar's full-brother, takes her into his household to protect her, but he does not forgive his half-brother. Two years later, Absalom creates a ruse, asking King David to send all of his sons to visit him, Absalom, for sheep-shearing festivities. Absalom kills Amnon, heir to the throne, and then flees to Geshur. After three years of mourning, King David's heart goes out to his son Absalom and longs for his return; but family relations do not exist in a vacuum. Joab, David's Machiavellian military commander, recognizes that David's mourning threatens his ability to govern. Through yet another ruse, Joab convinces David to bring Absalom home to Jerusalem; later Absalom wins the forgiveness of his father and is restored to the palace. Immediately Absalom sets out to take

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while the mule that was under him went on. . . .¹⁵And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. . . .

³¹Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you."³²The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."

³³The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Exegetical Perspective

To understand the complexity of this narrative detailing a battle fought in the forest of Ephraim, in which David's son Absalom is killed, we need some background information about the relationship between David and his sons. David had a number of sons, but this pericope mainly concerns Absalom. To understand why this young man rebelled against his father David, we need to review some sordid family history.

Absalom had a very beautiful sister, Tamar. Absalom's older half-brother Amnon, David's son by a different wife, lusted after Tamar. Eventually, Amnon gave in to his passion, tried to seduce Tamar, and ended up raping her. Then he discarded her. David apparently did not intervene to set the situation to rights, and Absalom's hatred of his father began to grow. Absalom retaliated against both Amnon and David by having Amnon murdered. Then he schemed to dethrone David. As Amnon raped Absalom's sister, so Absalom now claimed David's concubines (2 Sam. 16:20–22). Absalom teamed up with some of David's enemies among the Israelites, and David had to fight against them or else be defeated himself (see 2 Sam. 13–18). Today's narrative in 2 Samuel 18 opens with David's army poised for battle against Absalom and the rebel Israelites.

Homiletical Perspective

Preachers seldom tell the story of Absalom in 2 Samuel 13–19:8, which is a pity, because this is one of the most captivating episodes among the stories of David. In Joseph Heller's novelization of these stories, *God Knows*, David tells the reader at the beginning, "I don't like to boast . . . but I honestly think I've got the best story in the Bible."¹ Walter Brueggemann explains, "David is indeed the dominant engine for Israel's imagination. The literature and faith of Israel are endlessly fascinated with David."² That attraction continues through the New Testament from beginning to end (Matt. 1:1; Rev. 22:16). Preachers who sit down and read these six chapters recalling Absalom and David will want to preach this story. We may not know what to say about this ambiguous and complex narrative, but the story compels us to say something, because pastors will recognize this as a story members of the congregation are living.

David's sons, to put it bluntly, are a mess. They may be heirs to an everlasting promise (2 Sam. 7:8–16), and they may be dazzlingly gorgeous (2 Sam. 14:25), but they are a mess. Amnon rapes his beautiful half-sister, Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–14), and

1. Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 5.

2. Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 111.

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Theological Perspective

of individuals to each other into a meaningful and coherent whole; and regulate relations among individuals in connection to basic and secondary needs.

These patterns are perpetuated over time, bridging several generations. While they are creations of human beings, social institutions outlast the lives of individuals. Institutions acquire a status or life of their own; they are bigger than the sum of all individuals; and they transcend individuals in space and time. This point is very crucial if we are to understand how we have become inheritors of previous acts and how our collective acts influence and shape the coming generations. Because of the crucial role that institutions play in our lives, we can only imagine the extent in which they can wreak havoc of our lives when they are corrupted. In this context, individual sinful acts become institutionalized sinful acts, which we may call institutional or systemic evil.

It is against the background of social institutions that we need to understand the agony and grief of David the father of Absalom and David the king, who is the symbolic embodiment of the impersonal institution, kingship. In this story we can see in tension human agency (individual emotion, pain, regrets, and experience of threat to one's security) and an impersonal institution (kingship) that has acquired a life of its own in which everyone submits, leaving not much time to mourn one's losses, because the institution must continue.

Against this background Joab, King David's general, advises the king not to let the death of Absalom trouble him, because, in the name of preserving the instituted authority, the "sword," indeed, "devours now one and another" without mercy. Here we have the institution (kingship) crushing everyone and everything in its path, including the leader, because the institution stands supreme or above the individual. Preservation of the institution is an obsession and the object of devotion. The institution, in the case of our lectionary reading the kingship, has become idolatrous. It is against the background of corrupted institutions that we must see the interweaving of our individual lives and social institutions and must evaluate our exercise of self-agency, our experience of suffering and pains, and our attempts to break the cycle of death-giving practices for the sake of birthing a new tomorrow.

When those whom we love suffer, or when what we value is destroyed or taken away from us, our

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the throne, amassing armies and waging all-out war on his own father.

At the opening of chapter 18, David musters his troops against Absalom's forces. He himself is prepared to go into battle, but his advisors—including Joab—insist that he remain behind. The king has remained behind in war before, which ended shamefully (2 Sam. 11). While David's troops were in the field, he took Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite; their assignation resulted in her pregnancy. To cover his tracks David commissioned Joab to orchestrate Uriah's death in battle.

This time, David is ordered to stay behind. Perhaps it is a sign of his compromised authority that David acquiesces to his advisors. He has only one request of them: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (v. 5). Joab perceives that David's divided loyalties threaten the entire nation. In an accident of fate, Absalom is caught in the branches of a tree. In verses excised from this reading, David's troops obey the king's command to protect his son, but Joab takes matters into his own hands and drives three sticks into Absalom's chest. Only then do Joab's armor-bearers finish the task.

In a poignant scene, David awaits the news of the outcome of the battle. What would good news mean? It is clear that he desires political victory, but perhaps even more, he desires that his son Absalom live. When the news arrives, the king trembles and weeps: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!" (v. 33).

How does one relate to a tale of such tragic proportion? One pastoral approach might be to explore the complex motives we bring to our own lives. It might begin with a hypothetical monologue with each of the main characters: David, Joab, and Absalom. What were the driving values that prompted their choices? What were their deepest fears and highest aspirations? How did they perceive the others—for example, as a rival to be defeated, a pawn to be manipulated, a prize to be won, a failure to be redeemed? After exploring each character, a next step would be to invite reflection on similar questions: what are our driving values that prompt our choices? What are our deepest fears and highest aspirations? How do we perceive others in our life, and how does that impact our relationship to them? Each of us is driven by multifaceted loyalties and drives.

This text might function as a mirror by which we see our own complicated choices. There is no easy resolution; instead, the very complexity invites us simply to acknowledge the consequences of our

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33

Exegetical Perspective

As they prepared for battle, David ordered his loyal men—Joab, Abishai, and Ittai, each of whom commanded a third of David’s army—to deal gently with his son Absalom (v. 5). Joab was the general or commander in chief of David’s army (1 Chr. 11:6; 27:34), who had successfully defeated the Edomites (2 Sam. 8:13–14; 1 Kgs. 11:15) and the Ammonites (2 Sam. 10:6–14; 11:1–27; 1 Chr. 19:6–15; 20:1–3). Joab had always been loyal to David. Abishai helped David in the fight with Ishbi-Benob, a giant, and he had remained loyal to David throughout his life. Ittai was a native of the Philistine city of Gath and also remained David’s staunch supporter during Absalom’s rebellion. The story emphasizes the loyalty of David’s men, in contrast to Absalom’s betrayal; yet the narrative makes it clear that, despite Absalom’s rebellion, David’s main concern is for his son’s welfare.

The battle commences in the forest of Ephraim, which may have been located somewhere in the Transjordan. (Alternatively, Ephraim may have been located in an area east of Jordan, some distance from Jerusalem.) The battle was a bloody one, but David’s troops prevailed.

Absalom’s defeat is described in a vivid scene. In the course of battle, Absalom was riding on his mule. As the mule went under some thick branches of a great oak, Absalom’s hair became entangled in the branches. The mule continued walking, emerging out from underneath him, and Absalom was left hanging from the branch (v. 9), trapped directly in harm’s way. Despite David’s instructions that Absalom not be harmed, ten young men under Joab’s command surrounded Absalom and killed him (v. 15).

The last part of the narrative, verses 31–33, describes a Cushite messenger bringing what he thinks will be glad tidings to David: the battle against all of David’s enemies has been won. The Cushite attributes the success to the Lord, who has now vindicated David by delivering him from the power of all who had rebelled against him. The narrative does not indicate whether or not David was pleased with this news; rather, David’s question to the Cushite reveals that his main concern is not the outcome of the battle but the safety of his son. He asks a simple question: “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” David is not as concerned for himself or for his troops as he is for Absalom, even though he has been angry with Absalom for a long time for the murder of Ammon, and even though Absalom has attempted to usurp his throne. David identifies him as “the young man,” so perhaps the

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he is assassinated by her brother (his half-brother) Absalom (2 Sam. 13:23–29), who then flees the country for his life (2 Sam. 13:37). The storyteller whispers to us that David’s heart follows him into exile (2 Sam. 13:39). Television miniseries and movies thrive on less dramatic plots: why would we not preach such marvelous stories, especially when we can discern in them a word of hope? Absalom soon returns through the wiles of Joab (2 Sam. 14:1–24). Joab is David’s nephew, commander of David’s army, and a character of ferocious loyalty, as we see vividly in this story of Absalom.

The story is long, more than 6,000 words, and would require a worship hour to read completely, so the preacher must edit thoughtfully: how important is Absalom’s burning of Joab’s barley field (2 Sam. 14:28–33)? Is any congregation ready to hear how Absalom claimed David’s concubines (2 Sam. 16:20–22)? The lectionary already has edited the story so poorly that listeners are misled about who is actually responsible for the death of Absalom (2 Sam. 18:14–15)! Like any other storyteller the preacher must decide what to tell, what to omit, what to emphasize, where to pause and wait for listeners to catch their breath. The story is a story without a happy ending and concludes with a tearful old man weeping alone, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33).

“Would I had died instead of you” is not, however, the kind of bargain life cuts with us. God knows we wish it were different. If only millions in oil and gas contracts could be traded for an untroubled son. If only a mother’s happiness could be bargained for some smidgen of happiness for her daughter that does not include handfuls of pills. “I would give anything if I could make it different,” we say, but we cannot give everything, and we cannot make it different, and that is David’s aching dilemma at the end.

Worshippers often do not realize that the Bible tells stories like this. Because they have not heard this story, they may assume the only thing Christian faith has to say about their pain sounds like the sermon preached by Shimei as David trudges out of Jerusalem. We may not remember Shimei but we know his sermon. Shimei curses David, throws stones at him, and tells him that God is giving him exactly what he deserves: “The LORD has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See,

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33

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grief reaches to the deepest sea and soars to the highest heaven. In the face of our suffering loved ones, we may, like King David, wish we could suffer on their behalf. Hurting and not knowing what has caused our misery, we raise our anguished cries to the heavens with the posture of an innocent sufferer. On deeper reflection, however, especially if we take a long-range view, our losses and pains may not be completely born out of innocence, as King David's was. In many ways, we are not only victims; we are also perpetrators. Absalom's rebellion and death and the pain of King David are fruits of a long historical drama of sin and judgment. With King David and Absalom's story as our mirror, we can say that in many instances we are also reaping the fruits of sin and judgment from our past actions. The drama of sin and judgment, passing tragically from one generation to the next, is being played out in our individual and collective lives. Parents would readily say that they care deeply for their children; yet we may ask, what kind of society have they bequeathed to their children? We can only point out the social inequality, poverty, violence, and ecological ruins. We only need to do a historical excavation to discover the skeletons in our closets. Beneath our history of civilization lies our history of barbarism.

How shall we break the continuing historical cycle of sin and judgment? This requires serious examination of the ways we have lived our lives, both individually and collectively, and discernment of how God is speaking to us in our pain and in our grieving. Maybe, as God speaks through our pain and our grieving, a light may break in that will illumine our paths toward a new tomorrow, but it may not come on time to save our own children. Still it is worth our while to wager in active hope, if their suffering is to have salvific meaning.

ELEAZAR S. FERNANDEZ

Pastoral Perspective

impulses, which all too often remain invisible to us until after their results have been made apparent. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32), even when the truth is terribly uncomfortable.

Another approach might be to raise the places of both disconnection and connection between this passage and our own lives. Few of us will ever have to face the devastating experience confronting David: a son who rapes a daughter and another son who kills his brother and then betrays his father. Few of us will ever be challenged by the tension between loyalty to family and fidelity to country, love for one's child and fulfillment of one's duty. Few will ever be immersed in such political intrigue or military strategy.

Yet there are many experiences in King David's narrative to which many of us can relate. Perhaps we have family members—brothers or sisters, parents or children—whom we love and with whom we long for a relationship, yet who disappoint, disavow, or even betray us. Perhaps we have experienced the pain of deep personal yearning for family bonds, and the reality that our political views are so diametrically opposed that we cannot be in the same room together. Perhaps we have experienced a longtime friend or advisor, in whom we placed our confidence and authority, thwart our explicit wishes and betray our trust. Perhaps we have lost an estranged loved one to death, and we know what it means never to have the opportunity to make amends.

The unresolved grief with which this passage concludes invites us not to try too quickly to settle these tensions. Moreover, the silence of the text concerning moral judgment encourages us not to place blame on one party or another in our own discordant lives. Instead, we are invited to bring all of our reality—painful losses, broken relationships, failed responsibilities, betrayed trust—to the throne of grace. It is God's to determine the outcome of our lives; it is ours to ask for God's mercy.

CHRISTINE CHAKOIAN

2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33

Exegetical Perspective

Cushite messenger does not realize that Absalom is David's son. His reply is perhaps unintentionally cavalier. The Cushite offers David an indirect answer: "May the enemies of my lord and king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man" (v. 32). In this way, David finds out that Absalom is dead.

Absalom was not buried in the usual family grave (2 Sam. 2:32). Instead, he was given the burial of an accused man (2 Sam. 18:17), one similar to that of Achan (Josh. 7:26), the son of Carmi of the tribe of Judah, who intentionally brought about the Israelites' defeat at Ai (Josh. 7:1, 18–24). Even though David loved his son, Absalom was buried as a traitor.

Verse 33 captures the deep pain, grief, and remorse that David feels at the death of his son, an accumulation of regret. In agony, David weeps aloud: "O my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" The depth of David's grief and pain becomes apparent through the threefold repetition of "Absalom" and the fivefold repetition of "my son."

This narrative illustrates the complexity and messiness of human relationships and emotions. It shows the enormity of the consequences that can result from our action or our inaction. It reminds us that we cannot reduce complicated situations and relationships to simple categories of "good" and "evil" or "love" and "hate."

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Homiletical Perspective

disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood" (2 Sam. 16:8). When we do not preach to the brokenhearted ones who futilely long to strike a bargain—"Would I had died instead of you"—we leave the pulpit for Shimei's message to claim.

Preachers inevitably look for some moral to this story, but we look in vain. We can chirp petty moralities about it: that we should not be distracted by vanity and wealth as Absalom was; that we should be obedient and faithful as Joab was not; that our sentimentality about our children can break our hearts, as David's heart was broken. All these nice, pat meanings pale before the sheer anguish of David the king who is also David the father of Absalom: "O Absalom, my son, my son! Would God I had died instead of you!"

Every parent who has lost a child resonates with these words. These words grasp our hearts tight because we can lose so much, we can hurt so much. If the Bible does not know about these things—if God does not know about these things—what does it matter? These words stir our hearts, as they have stirred the hearts of people of faith for centuries, because they tell us something about God. At the beginning of these stories the prophet Samuel identifies David, saying, "The LORD has sought out one after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). Here in the grief of "one after God's own heart" the story opens a window to show us God's own heart. That is why the people of God keep telling the stories of David. In David's anguish we see nothing less than the face of God, the God who shares our suffering and loss, the God vulnerable to our tears. Ultimately, at the heart of all things, God is the one who cries, "My son, my son! Would I had died instead of you!" The tears in this story are part not only of the history of David but of all history and every story.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

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PROPER 15 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 14 AND AUGUST 20 INCLUSIVE)

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

¹⁰Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. ¹¹The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. ¹²So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established. . . .

^{3:3}Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. ⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, “Ask what I should give you.” ⁶And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father

Theological Perspective

In a presidential debate, an audience member asked the candidates, “How would your religious beliefs, if you’re elected, impact the decisions that you make in the office of the presidency?” One candidate insisted, “My religious beliefs wouldn’t affect it. My religious beliefs affect my character in the way I treat people and the way I live. . . . The only thing . . . that would affect me . . . is my oath of office and my promises that I’ve made to the people.” Another asserted that religion should “suffuse your life” and “is inextricably tied in with how you behave.” The magnitude of the office, he confessed, requires decisions “beyond the ability of mere mortals to truly decide” and should drive the president to seek God’s guidance.¹

Though the political context of the United States differs greatly from that of ancient Israel, this glimpse into Solomon’s life invites the reader to reconsider the bifurcation of public and private spheres and the relegation of religion to intrapersonal experience. Without hesitation, Solomon would insist that his religion impacts every decision he makes as king. For ancient Israel life in the polis *is* the life of faith. A covenantal relation with God governs their entire way of life, and the monarch reigns as the one anointed by God, governing by proxy as ambassador

1. <http://archives.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1201/26/se.05.html>

Pastoral Perspective

In the Old Testament lection we witness the passage of time in the form of a transition in leadership, from David the shepherd-king to his son Solomon. While David was tragically flawed, his life, leadership, and devotion are clearly understood to be within the providence of God. His forty-year reign (a generation) signifies stability and security; a transition, on the other hand, always brings with it the possibility of disruption and chaos.

In Israel’s history we are given a portrait of Solomon as he assumes the mantle of leadership. Solomon loves the Lord, he offers sacrifices, and he walks in the statutes of God. His practice of faith is both liturgical and ethical. As the passage unfolds, we discover that Solomon will also have a mystical experience. In a dream, God offers to fulfill any request that Solomon makes.

This dilemma might provoke a conversation within each of us. What is our greatest priority? What is our deepest desire? The dilemma is of course a challenge to our faith, convictions, and core values, and it exposes our capacity for self-deception. We can often deceive ourselves about what is most important to us, but life often presents us with decisions to make and paths to walk that clarify the desires of our hearts.

Solomon responds to the question of God that comes to him in the dream. He acknowledges the

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

Exegetical Perspective

The beginning of 1 Kings marks the end of King David's earthly life and reign. The book's first verse signals a change: "King David was old and advanced in years; and although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm" (1 Kgs. 1:1). In the next chapter, David sleeps "with his ancestors" and is "buried in the city of David" (2:10). David's forty-year reign ends, and Solomon's forty-year reign begins.

This Sunday's reading from 1 Kings suggests a smooth transition of power. The preacher will be wise, however, to consider what the day's appointed text does *not* include. The narrator of 1 Kings reports that Solomon "sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established" (2:12). Considering the verses that follow, the word "firmly" may be out of place. For the balance of the chapter (2:13–46), a section omitted in today's assigned text, Solomon violently asserts his newfound power. Would-be rulers and old adversaries of David are executed (Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei) and banished (Anathoth). To read only the day's selected verses, one might conclude that the transfer of royal authority from David to Solomon occurred without incident. The blood spilled at Solomon's command tells a different story. The preacher will decide whether to incorporate the "unspoken" verses in today's two-part reading.

Homiletical Perspective

How many stories have we heard that ended with a sleeper waking only to discover that it had all been a dream (1 Kgs. 3:15)? Solomon, the newly anointed king (1 Kgs. 1:39), sleeps at the house of worship that was at Gibeon, and in that place hallowed by the prayers and sacrifices of Israel "the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night" (3:5). Though we may consider our dreams as nocturnal attempts to come to terms with the tensions and conflicts of our days, dreams in Solomon's world were not merely the chattering of our human unconscious; they were nothing less than the intrusion of the supernatural into human life. The narrator of 1 Kings insists that this dream derives not from Solomon's guilty conscience but is inaugurated by God: "the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night." The Lord initiates the conversation: "Ask what I should give you" (3:5).

The conversation between the Lord and Solomon is polite and filled with "the proper protocol of piety,"¹ but observant preachers will not overlook the spattering of blood staining the initial pages of 1 Kings. The lectionary reading has been clipped prettily to circumnavigate the unpleasantness and violence, but the narrator of 1 Kings insists on telling

1. Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 47.

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

Theological Perspective

of the Lord. Solomon recognizes the magnitude of the call and within the context of deep, personal devotion prays for wisdom.

A chapter earlier, Solomon's reign begins with a flurry of executions as he reestablishes the Davidic throne against would-be rivals (1 Kgs. 2:13–46), but that which truly secures Solomon's success and inaugurates his reign as servant of God is a divine encounter. "Solomon loved the LORD" and frequently worshiped on the altar at Gibeon (1 Kgs. 3:3, 4). During one such pilgrimage, Solomon's worship extends into his sleep, where a wistful conversation unfolds with YHWH. "Ask what I should give you," the Lord invites (3:5).

Before answering, Solomon humbly reflects upon his father's legacy. While David's military prowess and political achievements were more than noteworthy, something much deeper proved foundational to his success. In Solomon's eyes, YHWH's "steadfast love" made David great. He was "your servant," Solomon tells God, and "walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart" (3:6). Consequently, he rose from tending sheep to the throne of the people of God. Now Solomon muses, how will I get there from here? You have made me king, and yet "I am only a little child." I know neither "how to go out [n]or come in," yet I am in the midst of a great people too numerous to count (3:7, 8). The magnitude of his circumstance and his paltry ability free him to admit that human glory is always derivative, even for the king. It comes from God and God alone. "Give your servant," Solomon asks God, "an understanding mind to govern your people" and the ability "to discern between good and evil" (3:9).

In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve forfeited their glory by asserting their independence from God and their right to determine good from evil. Rather than reflecting God's glory and trusting God's goodness, they chose self-determination and fell prey to the evil one's deception. Solomon's prayer for wisdom suggests a return to Eden and God's original intent for human beings. Simply acquiring the skills necessary for international diplomacy or economic development would not be enough. According to the wisdom tradition, wisdom is "more than human ability to master life; it [is] hidden with God and [has] to be given to human beings."² In fact, such intimacy exists between wisdom and God that the

2. Richard J. Clifford, "Introduction to Wisdom Literature," in Leander E. Keck, John J. Collins, et al., eds., *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5:9.

Pastoral Perspective

faithfulness of God, the enormity of the challenge facing him as a leader, and his humility in assuming the role. Therefore, his one request is for wisdom: "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" (3:9). Solomon asks for the very gift that is needed. In the context of humility, and in his receptivity to God's promptings, he is led to the appropriate next step—a dependence upon the Lord who gives wisdom and discernment. The additional merit in his response is that he does not use the request for his own benefit, but for the mission: that he may govern the people.

I recall a conversation with a wise mentor who made a distinction between two types of leaders. Does a leader think she can change her organization, or not? If the answer is no, she will use a leadership role for her own self-gain. If the answer is yes, she will exercise power for the common good. Solomon is aware that wisdom, a gift of God, will allow him to govern the people. He uses the power and benefits of the office for the good of the people.

This pleases the Lord. The humility of Solomon toward God has led to a selflessness of the king toward the people. Therefore, the Lord grants the request: a wise and discerning mind; but in addition there are the gifts of wealth and honor. These are not the priorities of Solomon, nor are they his requests; yet they are bestowed on the king as gifts of God.

Those who read the ancient story of Solomon and reflect on it will discover lessons that challenge and comfort. We are immersed in a culture that clamors for advantage, power, and possessions. The possibility of having our greatest wish granted is like winning the lottery; it is a fantasy of a transformed life, where we are, in an instant, placed in a position of power, influence, and control (not unlike the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4 and Luke 4) over others, or perhaps over all.

Of course, our patterns of behavior are conditioned by the culture, and the absence of a winning lottery ticket does not discount the allure of such an outcome. The questions are appropriate even in our most mundane circumstances: What is our deepest desire? What is our core value? These questions are relevant for individuals and institutions, for congregations and communities.

The challenge of the text, however, does not negate the comfort that is also communicated in the narrative. God offers wisdom to those who are receptive; God exalts those who are humble. There is

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

Exegetical Perspective

The reading continues with the third verse of chapter 3, a verse that portrays Solomon in contrasting colors. With one brush stroke, Solomon is described as one who “loved the LORD,” and followed his father’s adherence to Mosaic law (3:3a). With another stroke, Solomon “sacrificed and offered incense at the high places” in violation of Deuteronomic law (3:3b). The “principal high place” is identified as Gibeon, a hill town northwest of Jerusalem (v. 4). Gibeon is a holy place (1 Chr. 16:39; 21:29; 2 Chr. 1:3, 6, 13), but one wonders why Solomon chooses to offer sacrifices outside Jerusalem, the home of the ark of the covenant.

Whatever mixed messages the narrator conveys about Solomon in verses 3–4, they yield to the passage’s main event. At Gibeon, the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream and says, “Ask what I should give you” (3:5). God’s appearing in a dream has precedent; one quickly recalls Jacob’s experience of God in a dream at Beth-el (Gen. 28:10–22). However, God’s offer to grant Solomon whatever he asks is unique in Hebrew Scripture and further establishes the legitimacy of Solomon’s enthronement. Whatever questions and doubts may have surrounded Solomon’s rise to the throne are answered by this holy encounter.

God’s offer to Solomon supports the idea that David’s son was divinely ordained to be David’s successor. Likewise, Solomon’s reply to God gives credence to the earlier assertion that he “loved the LORD” (3:3). Solomon begins with due remembrance of God’s love of David and David’s love of God; that bond was forged by David’s “faithfulness,” “righteousness,” and “uprightness of heart” (3:6a) and by the Lord’s provision for David, ultimately expressed in the gift of “a son to sit on his throne” (3:6b).

The king continues by highlighting the point that he is God’s choice (3:7). In Solomon’s view, the unlikely call of young David to be Israel’s king is echoed in Solomon’s ascendancy to the throne. It is clear, of course, that Solomon is not a “little child” in years, but his humble self-identification fits the Davidic pattern of God equipping the servant of the people. God is the chief actor. As in the previous verse, in which God has “shown” and “kept” David, God “made your servant [Solomon] king” (3:7). As God elected David, so God elects Solomon. As God makes Solomon a legitimate successor of David, so God has created a great nation, a chosen people (3:8), for Solomon to lead.

Still, the question remains: What will Solomon request as he begins his kingship? After three verses

Homiletical Perspective

the story—the whole story of Solomon’s accession to the throne—in such detail that we cannot avoid the carnage. Reminding us of later scenes from *The Godfather*, when in failing health Don Vito Corleone prepares his son Michael to seize leadership, David reminds Solomon of old grudges and debts that cannot be ignored (2:1–9). “Then David slept with his ancestors. . . . Solomon sat on the throne of his father David” (2:10, 12); but the manner in which “his kingdom was firmly established” (2:12) involves the storyteller intoning a threefold “So King Solomon sent Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he struck him down, and he died” (1 Kgs. 2:25, 34, 46).

By no means should the assassinations be understood as a rough background to the pious conversation in the dream world at Gibeon. Solomon devoutly understands his violence to be nothing less than the will of God. Regarding the necessary liquidation of his cousin Joab, Solomon theologizes, “The LORD will bring back his bloody deeds on his own head” (2:32). The narrator does not shrink from the gore of palace politics or retreat to Gibeon to spiritualize what has taken place but consistently theologizes about it all. Walter Brueggemann explains, “Moving beyond celebrations of worldly success, the Solomon narrative seeks to root Solomon’s governance in the will and purpose of YHWH, the God of Israel.”²

The Lord’s dream question, “Ask what I should give you,” echoes the blank check given earlier to David—itsself an oracle heard in the dark of the night by the prophet Nathan—“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me” (2 Sam. 7:16). David’s house is now made sure in Solomon’s hands, and the Lord asks the question with the assurance that whatever Solomon asks will be given to him. With a modesty that has so far not characterized Solomon in the narrative, he confesses his youth (“I am only a little child” [3:7]) and his lack of experience in leading an army (“I do not know how to go out or come in” [3:7]). This humility and his elegantly expressed sense of being dwarfed by the demands of the task (3:8) provide a pause in which listeners are meant to wonder, “What will he ask?” The preacher and congregation are invited to an imaginative exploration of the question, “If God promised to give you whatever you ask, what would you ask for?” Big crowds and big dollars attend the preachers of “the prosperity gospel,” and asking for “riches” features regularly in

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel’s Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 74.

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

Theological Perspective

quest for understanding and discernment necessarily leads into the divine presence. Recalling his father's legacy, Solomon acknowledges his limitations and surrenders to YHWH. In dependence upon God, his reign is established. Still dreaming, he feels the pleasure of the Lord.

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." What does God enjoy? What brings God pleasure? It would have made sense for the king to ask for long life, riches, or the death of his enemies (3:11). However, these successes are gratuitous when understood alongside right relation with God. Solomon's request for a "wise and discerning mind" points toward a deep understanding of his place in this world. Whatever riches, honor, or length of days he may see are only secondary. Of primary import is that Solomon loves and worships God and returns to a primal dependence upon God. Intricately interwoven are the boundaries of his heart and the boundaries of his kingship, so that a seamless life of faith unfolds and brings God joy.

While not all are called to political leadership, the tasks of every life vocation eventually outpace our ability to match them. From raising children to making decisions for ailing parents, from managing family finances to balancing trillion-dollar budgets, our ability to discern good from evil has been severely compromised. It is not all about raising children, balancing budgets, or even leading a great nation. Perhaps these too are gratuitous gifts. With Solomon, may we see that the beginning of wisdom is God.

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an echo of Solomon's experience in the Christ hymn found in Philippians 2: we are encouraged to have the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." Again, in the context of humility and receptivity, there follows the gift of God who "highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name." No king will compare with Solomon (1 Kgs. 3:13); and yet, "every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10, 11).

We are often inclined to seek the honor, recognition, and status. We forget the conditions by which these outcomes may or may not occur: the liturgical, ethical, and mystical practices that shape us, walking in the statutes of the Lord, a practice that is a "long obedience in the same direction" (Eugene Peterson).¹ The common witness of both testaments describes the qualities of a life that is pleasing to God: we empty ourselves for others, we seek the common good, we put the needs of others before our own, we acknowledge our dependence on a higher power.

Solomon is a neglected figure in the preaching heard in most of our congregations, and of course his excesses are well documented. Nevertheless, this passage is a lesson in how one assumes a leadership role and lives in a relationship to the God who is gracious and, at the same time, powerful. Perhaps Solomon's example moves us to examine our uses of power and influence; and perhaps, as we read of his experience, we will become more receptive to the One who spoke and speaks in dreams, who gets our attention, who yearns for leaders who seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness.

KENNETH H. CARTER JR.

1. Eugene H. Petersen, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

1 Kings 2:10–12; 3:3–14

Exegetical Perspective

of framing his burgeoning leadership in the context of David's reign and God's election, Solomon replies directly to God's offer. Quite notably, Solomon does not ask God for fame and fortune. To the contrary, he asks for understanding, for a king's wisdom to lead God's people.

Scholars are divided about the meaning of Solomon's request. For some, the king's request for right judgment bespeaks an integrity and character worth modeling. In this view, Solomon's "people first" perspective is precisely what makes a great king great. For others, the king's request for understanding to govern the people implies fortune and fame. As Proverbs 3:13–18 makes plain, longevity, honor, and material possessions are born of wisdom. In that light, if one asks God for wisdom, goodly benefits will soon follow.

However one understands Solomon's motives, his response is pleasing to God (3:10). In fact, God pledges to give the king not only the wisdom he seeks but "riches and honor" too (3:13). Again, it is God who gives. We might freely refer to the "wisdom of Solomon," but the narrator of 1 Kings would hasten to add that whatever wisdom the king possesses is a gift from God. Likewise, whatever honor and wealth Solomon realizes in his life are given to him by the Lord. These gifts, however gracious, are conditional. The final words God speaks to Solomon in this dream make clear what is expected of Solomon: "walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments" (3:14).

At the end of this passage, we recall its beginning. At the onset of today's reading, Solomon chooses to make sacrifices to God in a high place, a place that defies God's "statutes" according to Mosaic law (3:3). How fitting, then, that when the king wakes he returns to Jerusalem, the home of the ark and the living presence of God. It is there that Solomon will build a temple like none other. It is from there that Solomon will lead the people of Israel for forty years, as his father did before him.

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their intercessions. A plea for "long life" would allow Solomon time to remedy his immaturity. Solomon's greenness at leading men into battle could be quickly counterweighed by asking "for the life of your enemies." We can think of all manner of things we might ask for.

What Solomon asks for is "an understanding mind" or, as the NIV translates, "a discerning heart" (3:9). Translation here is by no means a pedantic point. Solomon asks to be equipped for the central work of the king: to make judgments, "to discern between good and evil." Brueggemann translates "a listening heart" and reminds us that the key word is *shema*: "hear, listen." He elaborates: "It is remarkable that the phrase is not 'to speak justice' or 'do justice,' but instead to 'hear justice,' suggesting that justice is not in the verdict or in the imagination of the king but is intrinsic to the case itself, if only the king listens well enough to hear."³

"A listening heart" could be the very thing we need to discern among the voices clamoring for our attention in the media. "A listening heart" would be welcome at the dinner table—when or if the family sits down to a meal together. "A listening heart" could transform the dramas enacted in board rooms. To imagine "a listening heart" at the heart of our government could cause us to dream as boldly as Solomon. Solomon woke from his dream, but people the world over keep dreaming that dream of one who governs being able to discern with "a listening heart." People want to be heard, certainly, but they want more than for their grievances to be noticed: they want a leader with the wisdom to help them sort through complexities of good and evil. That would be more than sufficient, as the Lord recognizes in awarding Solomon even the "riches and honor" he does not ask for and anticipating the words of the son of Solomon (Matt. 1:6–7): "Strive first for the kingdom of God . . . and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).

PATRICK J. WILLSON

3. Brueggemann, *Solomon*, 112, n. 34.

PROPER 15 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 14 AND AUGUST 20 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 111

- ¹Praise the LORD!
I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- ²Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.
- ³Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.
- ⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
- ⁵He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

Theological Perspective

At a recent basketball game, I noticed a hospital advertisement flashing periodically around the arena: the health system offers “Wisdom for Your Life.” I was reminded of my own efforts to get healthy. Weight loss and fitness are not goals to attain; they are lifestyles to adopt. Several years ago I lost twenty pounds by exercising and eating better. To my chagrin, I realized I could never stop exercising and eating better and expect to remain healthy. Healthy living must become a way of life. Similarly, wisdom is not merely obtained. It is a lifestyle, a habit, a practice. Psalm 111 bears witness to such living.

The psalmist declares, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all *those who practice it* have a good understanding” (v. 10). The Hebrew for “it” is plural; so the line literally reads, “those who practice *them* have a good understanding.” Possibly, the sheer magnitude of the fear of the Lord lends to the plural rendering, but within the wisdom tradition such intimacy exists between wisdom and YHWH that they are inseparable. Thus, the wise life begins and ends in God, and the core response is “Hallelujah! Praise the LORD!” (v. 1). Ritualized within the worship of the “congregation,” such praise spills over an adoring heart, into the “company of the upright” (v. 1). For that which

Pastoral Perspective

The people of God are sustained by acts of praise, which remind them (and us) of the power and providence of God. Psalm 111 is a guide to praise, and yet it is one that calls us to a careful examination of our liturgical practices. “I will give thanks with my whole heart” (v. 1) is a challenge to the ordinary congregant, or worship leader! We often make our way into the sanctuary with a mix of emotions and commitments, some the residue of all that has happened in the previous week, and some the anticipation of the challenges that are ahead. If worship really is about God, the act of praise calls for the offering of the whole heart (being). The psalm places this gift clearly within a certain context: the congregation (v. 1). While this runs counter to a North American culture that privileges the individual experience, a biblical spirituality of worship is located in community, among the people of God who gather on the Lord’s Day.

When we gather to worship God, we soon become aware that we are stepping into a flowing stream, one that carries a rich and substantive history. In worship we reflect on the “works of the LORD” (v. 2), “his wonderful deeds” (v. 4), and the “works of his hands” (v. 7). This is clearly related to the story of God’s relationship to Israel in history: deliverance from slavery, provisions in the wilderness,

Psalm 111

- ⁶He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
⁸They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
⁹He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalms 111 and 112 are widely recognized as companion psalms. In form both psalms are acrostics; that is, each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Thematically, Psalm 112 picks up where Psalm 111 leaves off, echoing key words and phrases like “praise the LORD,” “fear,” and “delight.” Scholars rightly identify the psalms’ complimentary form and content. The common assertion that Psalm 111 focuses on God and Psalm 112 focuses on the human response to God is noteworthy, if not overstated. In Psalm 111, the author’s eyes are on the works and nature of God *and* on a right human response.

Psalm 111 begins with a call to worship, “Praise the LORD!” (Heb. *hallelu-yah*). It is one of twelve psalms in the Psalter to open in this way. The first verse mirrors a pattern found in psalms of praise: a call to praise is followed by reasons to praise. The psalm’s individual voice echoes previous psalms (Pss. 107, 108, 109), but the speaker is located in a congregation. Implicitly, praise of God is deeply personal but not private. The psalmist’s pledge of praise (v. 1b) points to an undivided, total response. The phrase “with my whole heart” appears in several psalms, most notably Psalm 119 (Pss. 9:1; 86:12; 119:2, 10, 34, 69, 145; 138:1). In these psalms, as in Psalm 111, the phrase connotes the fullness of one’s

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No sermon leaps out of a cursory reading of Psalm 111. Certainly nothing novel asserts itself. It would appear everything this psalm says has been said better somewhere else in the Scriptures. The psalm appears to be a tote bag carelessly stuffed with assorted platitudes. It is not that the psalm is wrong; it simply does not seem compelling. Noticing the margin notes in a study Bible, however, the reader discovers Psalm 111 is an “alphabetic acrostic” or “abecedary,” an artful alphabetical achievement not instantly apparent when translated from the Hebrew language and alphabet. To replicate the original experience we might try:

Aleph: Alleluia! I will extol you, my God and King . . .

Beth: Blessing your name every day . . .

Gimel: Great are the works of the Lord . . .

The poet writes his psalm so that each letter of the alphabet strikes in order on *the half verse*. This is tricky; this is hard. Although Psalm 111 may not be among the most familiar, we encounter here an artist meticulously teaching us the art of praise. The painstaking invention commends the seriousness of the song to us.

We recognize this form instantly, as if we have always known it. A is for apple; B is for ball; C is

Psalm 111

Theological Perspective

elicits such adulation is shared by all who ponder the works of the Lord.

From time eternal God's creation has awed humanity, and its glory and majesty delight all who ponder. Such greatness includes and yet transcends the expanse of the heavens, the height of mountains, and the depth of the sea. As breathtaking as these can be, what about the unexplored frontiers of stem cells, DNA, and atomic structures? What about sound waves, color spectrums, and everything beyond the narrow frame of human reference? Great are the works of the Lord! Creation is a delight, and countless are those who pause in awe; but not everyone responds, "Hallelujah!" Though creation declares God's glory, many fall to the primal sin and allow that which "delights" the senses to become an end unto itself.

Creation delights the observer, but more importantly, it declares God's glory (Rom. 1). The practice of wisdom leads to the precipice of the created order, where the vast expanse of the Lord's works invites the observer into the venture of faith. Here, the greatness, glory, and majesty of God's deeds beckon a surrender to the Creator, and the enduring nature of God's righteousness presses upon the soul (v. 3). To delight in creation and remain outside the covenant of faith ultimately amounts to folly, for the grandeur of the Lord's deeds transcends everything scientifically verifiable. The wonder of it all begins with a universe that is fearfully and wonderfully made, but always points beyond itself to the Creator's story of grace and mercy. The practitioner of wisdom attends to the marvels of the created order and the God to which it points, a God who acts redemptively in behalf of the human community.

For Israel, the Lord brings his wonders to mind (v. 4), wonders displayed in God's creative handiwork and demonstrated in his gracious and compassionate response to their prayer for deliverance out of Egypt (Exod. 2:23–24). To one outside the community of faith, the events of the exodus may appear as nothing more than the natural occurrence of pestilence, tragic storms, and infant mortality. Similarly, the subsequent securing of the land of Canaan can be interpreted as a mere snapshot of the tribal wars of ethnic claims to a strip of Middle Eastern land. The wise, however, recognize God's power and delight in God's provision for those who fear him (vv. 5, 6). Though anyone who ponders the Egyptian plagues could marvel at nature's power, the wise see God's glory. While the courage of the Hebrew refugees would inspire the most casual

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establishment of the covenant, giving of the law. In contrast to a generic and passive deism, which sees the divine power apart from us and therefore uninvolved, Israel's memory and naming of God is always personal, active, and engaged. The promise, to give thanks for these gifts in the company of the congregation, is necessary, for we are often inclined to forget. At a practical level we resonate with the words of the hymn: "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."¹

It is helpful for us to be grounded in the content of worship: to study the history of where we have been and how we have been shaped, and to delight in the mighty acts of God. In this way our identity is named and claimed. Again, this is somewhat countercultural. In a market economy, worship can drift toward the novel or unusual, the spontaneous or utilitarian. Does worship stir our emotions? Does it help us to make it through the day, or night? Does it change the world? None of these outcomes is bad, but they are not the primary agenda when God's people assemble together.

Instead, we lift our hearts to the Lord with the simple word of Hebrew, "Hallelu-yah" (note the similarity in structure to the next two psalms, 112 and 113). We turn away from ourselves, toward God, and our primary agenda becomes praise and thanksgiving. So the worship leader and preacher must acknowledge that the first act of the liturgy is reframing the agenda, changing the subject. This is more easily said than accomplished. Most of those who gather for worship will have received messages throughout every waking minute that make the opposing claim—that it is about us: our needs, our desires, our comfort, our security, our pleasure. These claims are of course attached to products that are skillfully marketed to fill the appetites of our hearts. That most products fail in this regard is beside the point; the assumption is that this is an appropriate relationship, between the producer and the consumer. To be honest, this is not entirely negative; most of us are drawn to a greater quality of life with the tools and materials that make this possible. I am writing these words on a laptop, and you may be reading them on an e-book!

A holy day, a holy place, and a holy people, however, present a different way of approaching life. We are set apart as God's people, given a new identity, and liberated from the status quo. "Do not be conformed to this world," the apostle Paul wrote

1. Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (1758).

Psalm 111

Exegetical Perspective

being—words, emotions, actions. Praise that is truly praise cannot be halfhearted.

The psalmist's praise does not arise *ex nihilo*. "The works of God" and the nature of God (vv. 2–9) evoke human delight. In the context of the Psalter, Israel's "delight" (v. 2) is often linked to the teachings of God (Pss. 1, 112, and 119). The psalmist's reference to "study" suggests a continuation of that theme, but the author will expand the notion of studying the written "works of God" to include God's saving acts in Israel's past. Both are worthy of remembrance; both are reasons to praise.

In the verses that follow (vv. 3–6), the psalmist offers something of a primer for students of God's works. Though not explicitly, the author alludes to the exodus, to the feeding stories in the wilderness, and to the entrance into the promised land. These "great works" and past acts are, of course, bound inseparably to the covenant that God commands and establishes at Sinai.

Stylistically, verse 3 establishes a pattern that repeats. The psalmist begins with a description of God's works (v. 3a), then makes a worshipful claim of God's nature. So the *upbeat* expresses the works of God as being "full of honor and majesty," a reference to God's sovereignty. The *downbeat* that follows lands squarely on a general character reference of God: "his righteousness endures forever." In the following few verses, this cadence continues. The repetition of "He" at the beginning of verses 4–6 brings the reader in step with the psalm's rhythm. With each of these verses, the works and nature of God are further developed.

In verse 4, the psalmist cites God's "wonderful deeds." What may lack specificity here points implicitly to the exodus. References to God's "deeds" in the Psalter, as elsewhere in Hebrew Scripture, commonly point back to Egypt and to the parting of the Sea of Reeds (e.g., Deut. 11:1–3; Ps. 106:22). This salvific act of God's leading Israel out of Egypt is followed by a description of God. In the psalmist's words, the God of the exodus is "gracious and merciful."

From the exodus, the psalmist leads the reader into the wilderness. More exactly, the author remembers the stories of God's provision of food in the wilderness. Echoing the accounts in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11, verse 5 looks back to miraculous feeding stories and anticipates the theme of "fear" (better understood as reverence for God). The psalmist's remembrance of manna and water for a people "who fear [God]" may be a gracious

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for cat: with an abecedary a child learns to name the world and learns the sounds and shapes of language. The simple A-B-C form orients us to the world we live in. At the Dallas/Fort Worth airport you can purchase a Texas ABC. A is for armadillo: a small mammal with a hard, leathery shell. B is for barbecue and for beef. C is for cowboy: a person in the cattle business, a football team, but also a style of dress.

Tourists should know that fearful-looking armadillos are harmless; that ordering pulled pork barbecue will be futile; and that everyone who dresses like a cowboy may not be one. Texans have a proverbial saying describing someone as "all hat and no cattle." Appearances can be misleading. Not everything that looks strange needs to be feared. Not every desire can be fulfilled. The psalm is a hymn of praise, but it also embraces didactic purposes and echoes themes from the wisdom tradition. The wisdom the psalm provides aims at the final verse's goal of "good understanding." Elsewhere that same Hebrew phrase is translated "good sense" (Prov. 13:15). How does one come by "good sense"?

"Good understanding," the wisdom tradition teaches, begins with "the fear of the LORD." Psalm 111 is followed by Psalm 112, yet another alphabetic acrostic, and the pair is like a diptych hinged together by the thought that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 112:1; Prov. 1:7; Job 28:28). Placed side by side in the Psalter, this pair replicates the two tables of the law: the praise of God in Psalm 111 is followed by a description of the righteous person in Psalm 112. Everything a human person needs to know is right here, and it is as easy as A-B-C. Psalm 111 is a primer of praise; Psalm 112 is basic instruction in the moral life, a sort of "Righteousness 101." This is what counts for something, what abides: God's "righteousness endures forever" (Ps. 111:3); so also those who follow the way of God, "their righteousness endures forever" (Ps. 112:3). Bad times will not endure forever, and bad people will not endure forever (Ps. 112:10). What lasts in human life is our praise of God and our generous dealings with our neighbors (Ps. 112:5, 9). That is a way of life worth singing about and worth learning about.

The psalm is an alphabet of faith, a primer of praise. From A to Z, from Aleph to Taw, from Alpha to Omega, "I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart," sings the psalmist (Ps. 111:1). The psalm is categorized as an individual hymn of praise, but the singer locates the song "in the company of

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Theological Perspective

observer, the wise sense God's providential hand and become convinced of God's covenant love. They understand themselves to be chosen by God, covenant partners in a redemptive plan intended to bless all nations (Gen. 12:3).

The appropriate refrain would be "Hallelujah!" for the practice of wisdom leads to an understanding of God's redemptive grace and mercy that expands throughout one's life. Rejoicing in God's greatness, the psalmist declares, "The works of his hands are faithful and just" (v. 7). What does God do? *This* is what God does. God does *faithful*. God does *just*. These are God's works! The wise habitually remind themselves of this, and it becomes an eschatological song of victory in the book of Revelation, described as "the song of Moses . . . and the song of the Lamb." Those who have conquered sing, "Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways" (Rev. 15:3). *This* is the way of the Lord!

Adam and Eve doubted God's goodness and lost trust in God's word, and the folly of their ways led to tragic consequences (Gen. 3:1–6). The way of wisdom leads back to the garden and to a renewal of trust in God. Is God trustworthy? That is the question, and the way of wisdom answers confidently, "Yes": "All [God's] precepts are trustworthy" (v. 7). They revive the soul and rejoice the heart (Ps. 19:7, 8). The wonders of the created order call attention to God's power and divinity, but the story of God's greatness fully unfolds in his mercy and grace extended to those bound and in need of deliverance. The wise spend their days learning the dialect of such love, and trust in God's faithfulness becomes a habit of the heart.

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Pastoral Perspective

to the Romans, "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2). The renewing of our minds is a process that is shaped by a scriptural imagination, and a scriptural imagination is fed by a diet of biblical worship. At the heart of such worship are the Psalms. The Psalms remind us again and again to remember the story of a God who creates, redeems, and sustains us, who is faithful even in spite of our faithlessness, who remembers even in the context of our forgetfulness, who is powerful precisely at the point of our weakness. This God is gracious and merciful.

The paradox here is that such a God is sufficient for our deepest needs. The One who is worthy of worship merits our trust and inspires our hope. We are confident about the future because we have remembered the past (vv. 2–9). Salvation is a moment in time perhaps, but salvation is also a historical movement. Salvation is an individual experience, to be sure, but salvation is also a communal celebration. In worship we are reminded of all of this.

Worship, however, involves more than memory; the living God is with us, and we receive these teachings and practice them to gain wisdom. We praise God because we have the resources to move with strength into the future. We delight in the good news that, despite appearances to the contrary, the One who has been with us in the past is still at work, shaping us who are "the works of his hands" (v. 7). In such a moment of worship our basic instinct is to offer praise and thanksgiving, to this God who is "our help in ages past, our hope for years to come."

KENNETH H. CARTER JR.

Psalm 111

Exegetical Perspective

interpretation of those Hebrew Scripture texts, but in this verse the author introduces to the psalm a connection between God's provision and Israel's awe of God. (This theme returns in verse 10 and continues in Psalm 112.) As in the preceding verse, the psalmist frames the "great work of God" with a reference to nature of God. The One who satisfied Israel's hunger and thirst in the desert is "ever mindful of his covenant" (v. 5).

From the wilderness, the psalmist leads the reader, by suggestion, into Canaan. Verses 6 and 7 employ the same "upbeat" and "downbeat" pattern, but in the span of two verses rather than one. For the psalmist, Israel's arrival in Canaan confirms not only God's capacity for great works but God's faithfulness to the covenant established at Sinai. Verse 6b gives full credit to God for "giving them the heritage of the nations." The gift of the land, like the commandments (precepts) established in the wilderness, is understood to be "faithful," "just," and "trustworthy."

The perspective of the psalmist begins to expand in verse 8, from a focus on God's works to a proper human response to the works and words of God. The author suggests that these "great works" become the central point of Israel's life together. As God's teachings are trustworthy and eternal (v. 8a), so the faithful performance—the enactment—of those teachings is essential to faithful souls in Israel.

This idea is further developed in the final two verses. Verse 9 offers a kind of summary of verses 4–6. After citing the "redemption" (exodus) and "his covenant," the author concludes with a description of God's nature: "Holy and awesome is his name." This high claim about God's character gives rise to the psalm's final verse.

In the end, the psalmist returns to themes introduced in the opening verses. In essence, because God is "holy and awesome" in word and deed, the proper response to God is "fear" and the "practice" of it. The phrase "fear of the LORD" has multiple meanings, but in this context it carries the connotation of reverence. (How would one "practice" being afraid?) In the final beat of this psalm, after due remembrance of God's amazing work and teachings, the psalmist leaves the reader with a kind of directive: Be faithful, as God is faithful. Remember the saving work of God. Practice obediently the teachings of God—and, always, praise!

ANDREW NAGY-BENSON

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the upright, in the congregation." In the midst of the people the psalmist sings, "Great are the works of the LORD" (v. 2), but the individual "I" named in verse 1 is not the only one who knows these great works. Some scholars have speculated an antiphonal element to this psalm, not unlike the call and response of African American preaching. "A," the psalmist sings, and the congregation answers, "All my heart praises the Lord." "B," the psalmist continues, and worshipers respond, "Bless the LORD, O my soul." "C," the psalmist intones, and people respond, "Cause great are the works of the LORD!" The psalmist is not presenting new information but rather leading the worshipping community in recital and recovery and celebration of its faith. Evans E. Crawford of Howard University hears an extraordinary music in this rhythm of call and response:

If you ask me what kind of music or the name of the music, I must confess that I do not know. It may have a name, or maybe it seems to have a name. All I can say is that there are moments when what breathes on and within me does not have a name I know. You can be sure, however, that I am so awed I am going to discover its name.¹

The psalmist's musical art invites worshipers to enter more deeply into the mystery of what they already know, for we always know only in part and are always in the process of learning more about the mysterious God we encounter "in the company of the upright, in the congregation." It is as basic as A-B-C, Aleph-Beth-Gimel, Alpha-Beta-Gamma, one thing after another. Like a child's A-B-C that teaches how to name the things of this world, this psalm is a primer of praise that teaches us how to speak of our lives in the "gracious and merciful" hands of the Lord.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

1. Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 51.

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PROPER 16 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 21
AND AUGUST 27 INCLUSIVE)

1 Kings 8:(1, 6, 10–11) 22–30, 41–43

¹Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. . . . ⁶Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. . . . ¹⁰And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. . . .

²²Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, "O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. ²⁵Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to

Theological Perspective

The biblical account of Solomon's dedication of the temple is haunted by certain questions of continuity: What does what we are doing *now* have to do with what was happening *then*? Is there a trajectory? Are the presumed authorities legitimate? Will the circle be unbroken? The narrative voice within our text speaks to these questions as much as Solomon himself, and the same questions reach each of us as we ask what it might mean to read and receive the account faithfully.

What is in question at the dedication of the temple is nothing less than the accrediting presence of God. As we shall see, Solomon seeks to cover all bases. Countless sheep and oxen are sacrificed, and all elders and heads of tribes are brought in as witnesses to the procession in which priests carry the ark of the covenant from Zion to Jerusalem to the inner sanctum of the temple called the Holy of Holies. As the priests emerge, we are told that the temple is filled by a cloud signifying that the glory of the Lord fills the place. While this phenomenon is conveyed unproblematically, the text nevertheless goes to the trouble of observing that there was nothing within the ark except Moses' two stone tablets (v. 9). In a similar fashion, Solomon's prayer fluctuates between, on one hand, a spirit of royal self-assertion by way of proprietary claims and oft-

Pastoral Perspective

We may quibble about whether Solomon had a pastor's heart; he certainly had a pastor's sensibility. Solomon is about to celebrate the greatest achievement of his administration—the dedication of the temple. Solomon's father, King David, was prevented from building a suitable "home" for God, the task was left to Solomon, and he did it!

The temple is a symbol of great importance. A motley crew of men, women, and children now can exhale, for they finally have arrived at their destination, a homeland. They had been a nomadic people, adrift and lost for generations. They fought strange people who were occupying the land that God had promised to their ancestors. They marched through a long history that started with their cries in Egypt, filled a wilderness wandering with their murmurings, and left them unsettled as they sought ways to govern themselves. Solomon understands the importance of the hour. As a leader, he knows what to do. He assembles the people, all the people. He brings the ark of the covenant to be placed in the inner sanctuary of the temple. He witnesses the mystery of God's presence in the thick cloud that fills the temple. He offers a prayer.

It is meaningful that Solomon prays; in this action, he invites all, the leaders and the masses, to pray also. The monarch stands before the altar

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their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me.’²⁶Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

²⁷“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!²⁸Regard your servant’s prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today;²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place.³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive. . . .

⁴¹“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house,⁴³then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.”

Exegetical Perspective

This text includes part of a lengthy prayer of seven petitions by Solomon (vv. 22–53) on the occasion of the dedication of the temple. The prayer is enclosed by Solomon’s blessing of the assembly (vv. 14–21, 54–61), in which the fulfillment of God’s promises to David and Moses is highlighted, concluding with a call to obedience (v. 61). The chapter as a whole is enclosed by liturgical actions (vv. 1–13, 62–66).

The prayer’s introduction (vv. 22–26) and conclusion (v. 53) center on God’s incomparability and God’s keeping the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:1–17), both now and into the future. God’s faithfulness surrounds and grounds the prayer petitions. God’s people can pray in confidence because God is a promise keeper. At the same time, Israel’s repentance and faithfulness to God remain integral to the relationship (vv. 23, 61).

The second segment of the prayer (vv. 27–30) requests that God hear and forgive (see also v. 52). In both segments God is understood to be present and within “praying distance.” The opening question in verse 27 regarding the divine dwelling does not contradict verse 13; the point is that, in the strictest terms, no place (even heaven) can be considered *the place* where God dwells. God dwells *both* in heaven and in the temple (see Ps. 11:4). God’s people can lay claim to the promises that God will hear.

Homiletical Perspective

This was a glorious day. In many ways it was reminiscent of the occasion when Solomon’s father David was made king of Israel and Judah. After David was crowned king of Israel and Judah, he had the ark of the covenant brought to Jerusalem. The relocation of the ark to Jerusalem in David’s day was the culmination of his coronation. The ark was a symbol of Israel’s covenant with God and the presence of God in their midst. Therefore, as it relates to Solomon, the presence of the ark of the covenant at the dedication of the temple served to legitimize his kingship.¹ Under Solomon’s leadership, the ark of the covenant would not be housed in a tent. It would be placed in an opulent inner sanctuary of the temple, which took seven years and thousands of forced-labor hours to build.

When Solomon assumed the throne, he confessed to God that he was only a boy and needed wisdom to rule the people. Evidence that God granted him wisdom was demonstrated in his rhetoric in his speech and prayer at the dedication of the temple. In his speech, Solomon not only acknowledged Israel’s past but embraced it, while allowing his very presence to symbolize Israel’s future. His repeated

1. Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 293.

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repeated, self-legitimizing allusions to “my father David” who “had it in mind” to build this selfsame house (v. 17) and, on the other, his insistence that the Lord cannot and will not be contained in a structure made by hands so humbly human as his own (v. 27).

The latter assertion addresses a concern that lurks throughout Hebrew texts, especially as it emerges from the sensibility we term prophetic. The freedom of God resists every instance of what Walter Brueggemann calls “royal domestication,”¹ and even as Solomon urges the people of Israel to pray *toward* the temple in their prayers to God, the fact that it will eventually be razed by Babylonians serves to relativize Solomon’s claims for it. Given the personal failures of right worship that await him just around the bend, it could be that reading the text faithfully requires that we read Solomon skeptically when it comes to his rhetorical determination to make Israel’s enemies God’s enemies too, to make Solomon’s wars God’s wars.

It is this lack of a specifically prophetic consciousness within the royal mind-set that troubles a figure like the Jesuit poet and activist Daniel Berrigan. As he reads the portrayal of Solomon, he spies a reprehensible aloofness (concerning the slave labor that built the temple, for instance) entirely fitting the job description of the skilled politician from ancient days to our own anxious present: “We have on the king’s part a detached sense of a god of detachment. . . . Let nothing, no human need or lack, no injustice or suffering impede this lofty intercourse.”²

When we note the ways in which Solomon has begun to liken God to the token deities of other nations, reducing the freedom of the living God of the prophets to the blasphemously narrow, perceived self-interest of his own career, we are better prepared to receive the news, within three chapters, that he will soon find himself pledging away his allegiance to other, all-too-local gods (11:4). We will not be able to discern the buildup to his betrayal if we bracket it away from our consideration of his beginnings. As the prophets show us, the prayers of the king—perhaps especially when it comes to temple talk—are not to be kept beyond the scope of prophetic critique (Jer. 7:4).

1. Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 150.

2. Daniel Berrigan, *The Kings and Their Gods: The Pathology of Power* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 44–45.

Pastoral Perspective

of God, in the presence of all the people, and he prays—for himself, for Israel, and for all people, including the foreigners in their midst.

Solomon’s prayer is poignant and personal. He praises God for all God has done for Israel’s ancestors. He acknowledges that God is too great to be confined—not on earth and certainly not in a house built by human hands. Solomon entreats God to lend an ear whenever prayers rise from and toward the temple, the place where God’s name is revered—not just the prayers of the people of Israel. He invokes God’s care for anyone who lifts up prayers in the shadow of the temple where God’s name resides.

Through his dedication ceremony, Solomon offers us a holistic spirituality. In the city, the center of the nation, and in the temple, the center of religious life, Solomon begins a new phase of his administration by praying. In this seminal act, Solomon brings together the ruler, the city, the temple, and the people, linking them into a web of mutuality and accountability with God and neighbor.

The first action in the temple is the placing of the ark in the Holy of Holies. God’s military presence now resides in the deepest chamber of the temple. The second action is prayer. Solomon, the ruler of the nation, makes it clear that the temple is the place of prayer for all people. The building is important because it houses the assembled masses. The temple is the place where the people gather to learn about God and to wait for God’s presence to be made real and clear.

Solomon’s act of prayer is a reminder to us that the church is not where God is confined, waiting for our orders for a rich, easy life. Rather, the church is where we gather to encounter the living God. It is the place where God meets us, where we can know and be known by God and each other. It is where we come into God’s presence as the gathered community to worship, pray, and offer thanksgiving.

Today, most mainline Protestant denominations are wrestling with changes in how people understand church. Some now speak about clusters or gatherings of people and are looking for ways to eliminate bricks and mortar. If we read the Bible carefully, we will remember that God has never been tied to an edifice. The whole earth is not big enough for God, let alone a building.

Solomon’s prayer brings us back to what we already know: that God’s love and care are expansive, inclusive, and abundant. In the African American church tradition, we speak of a God whose power and presence are “so high, we can’t

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Seven petitions follow (vv. 31–32, 33–34, 35–36, 37–40, 41–43, 44–45, 46–50). They anticipate virtually every possible future situation that could be faced by the people. The prayers are directed to God “in” or “toward” the temple *and* ask God to “hear in heaven.” A strong emphasis on Israel’s God, who stands ready to hear, animates this text.

All but the fifth petition (vv. 41–43) focus on the people of Israel. All but the fifth and sixth petitions focus on sins the people have committed and the importance of turning back to God. Note that sacrifice is never mentioned as necessary.

Sins have had ill effects on the people’s daily lives. These adversities include personal, communal, and natural disasters. Notably, God’s action is not often linked explicitly to these disasters (clearly only in vv. 32, 46), and then it is a matter, not of introducing a punishment in a retributive sense, but of “bringing their conduct on their own head” (v. 32; cf. also vv. 39, 46), that is, mediating the effects of the people’s own behaviors.

Note further that the prayers are never simply for God to forgive sins, but also for God to act in other ways to reverse the effects that their sins have had on various aspects of their lives. Salvation, therefore, is understood to comprehend more than forgiveness; it includes also the amelioration of sin’s consequences, including in nature (vv. 35–37).

This chapter gives great prominence to the importance of prayer in all aspects of the life of the people of God. The God to whom prayer is offered is one who encourages prayer with respect of every situation that life might bring; no matter how difficult the predicament, prayer can be efficacious in bringing life and well-being to the community. The God of Israel *receives* prayer, *evaluates* prayer in terms of the people’s repentance, *transforms* prayer in view of the divine promises, and *uses* prayer as a means in and through which to act in the lives of those who pray.

The fifth petition in Solomon’s prayer (vv. 41–43) is unusual in that it relates to foreigners who pray and does not focus on a particular life situation. The petition relates to anything concerning which the foreigner may offer prayer to God. The call for God is to hear and to act in response. Even such outsiders are understood to have access to God; they do not have to be integrated into the chosen community in order for their prayers to be heard and answered. This petition on behalf of foreigners is also grounded in God’s promises to Israel and God’s presence in Israel’s temple. The faith of Israel is “ecumenical” in

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use of the phrase “your servant David my father” reminded the people that he was David’s son, while helping them transition from a reign sustained by a culture of war to one of peace. With the speech Solomon was communicating to the people that though his reign would be very different, it would be no less blessed than the reign of his father.

Preachers can employ this text to remind us that while many churches may feel pressure to change to get new people in the pews, we should have the wisdom to bring all of the people of God along with us as we go into God’s glorious future. Rather than abandoning traditions and rituals that have been meaningful in the past, we should find ways of building on them, even as we embrace new and diverse ways of being. Solomon’s example of acknowledging the historic symbolism of the ark while dedicating a new temple was a very wise way of embracing both old and new generations. Church anniversaries and founders’ days (or other services that mark a major shift in congregational culture) are perfect occasions to use this passage to remind people of the importance of acknowledging and embracing the past while moving faithfully into the future.

In verses 10–11 the glory of God filled the temple to such an extent that the priests became overwhelmed by it. They could barely continue their duties, because God’s glory was so great. The presence of YHWH’s breathtaking glory legitimized the temple by witnessing to YHWH’s presence. YHWH’s glory also further validated Solomon’s kingship.

In verses 22–30, a prayer during the dedication of the temple, Solomon asked God to bless people even when and if they were unfaithful. He used several different scenarios. *If* the people ever had to go off to war, *when* the people sinned and were defeated by their enemies, *if* the people were relegated to live in another city after being conquered by another nation, he asked God to help the people to realize their mistakes and to repent of their wrongdoing. Though this passage may be evidence of revisionist history, it provides an interesting example of community prayer. It can be used in a sermon instructing people about different types of prayer. Very often our community prayers take the form of petition for current needs, repentance, or praise and thanksgiving. We do not always offer prayers of anticipation. As Solomon expressed in his prayers, there is no one who does not sin. In Solomon’s wisdom he offered prayers anticipating that the

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In spite of this, we have, within the prayer attributed to Solomon, a redemptively universalizing postscript that many scholars believe comes to us from the exile, a time in which the people of Israel came to know again the condition of marginalization, the plight of the undocumented, and an accompanying solidarity that tends to arise between wandering Arameans (Deut. 26:5). When a foreigner, one “who is not of your people Israel,” comes to the temple, Solomon prays that God will hear the prayer from within God’s dwelling place and do all that the foreigner asks (vv. 41–43). As the prayer has it, such an occurrence will extend the event wherein the name of God has been invoked in the building of the temple. It might even be argued that the invocation of the name of God in the temple’s dedication in some sense banks upon this hope that it will come to be understood as an international house of prayer.

This of course returns us to the questions of continuity with which we began and with which readers of the Bible are never exactly done. The trope of an ecumenical communion of hope will be rehearsed again by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 56:1–8) and dramatically insisted upon in Jesus’ clearing out of and teaching and healing within the Second Temple (Matt. 21:12–13; Luke 19:45–48). What shall we do with it in ours? Like Solomon we run the risk of presuming too much in our verbal invocation of the name of God, and of bearing false witness to God’s presence among us. We are, however, also recipients of God’s Spirit and God’s promise to guide us into all truth, empowering us to be faithful practitioners of God’s goodwill toward those who, apart from the revelation we receive through the reading of Scripture, might strike us as somehow essentially beyond the pale and beneath our communal interest. May God’s Spirit expand and invigorate our imaginations concerning God’s purposes within our community—broadly defined—in our reading today.

DAVID DARK

Pastoral Perspective

get over it; so wide, we can’t go around it; so deep, we can’t go under it.” We gather in a building and in community to remind us that we belong to God; to hear stories about a God who makes and keeps promises; to rehearse our history with a God who neither sleeps nor slumbers; to witness to a God who hears and answers prayers; to understand that God beckons to all people.

In this text for Ordinary Time of the church year, we are reminded that leaders set the tone. If the leader acknowledges God in all things, so will the people. If the leader is a person of prayer, the people will be too. If the leader reveres a power, presence, and mystery, the people will also. In his act of dedicating the temple, Solomon speaks volumes to the people—the leaders and followers. God is too big for us to define and confine. The temple and the church are the places where we assemble and wait for God.

The temple, like the church, is a symbol pointing to a bigger reality—that God hears the prayers of all; that we can depend on God to be there when we call; and that all are welcome to join in the celebration and prayer.

Solomon may not have been a pastor, but he offers pastoral possibilities: the place where we gather is the place where we slow down and offer space for God to enter into our lives and our hearts. It is the place where we welcome the stranger in our midst. It is the place where we embrace each other as sister and brother. It is the place where we worship and offer praise to God. It is the place where we pray. Thanks be to God.

BARBARA J. ESSEX

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that it understands its God not only to be active in lives of such outsiders but also to be eager to attend to their prayers (see Mal. 1:11). Also to be noted is the reference in the seventh petition that God grant compassion to outsiders—Israel’s captors—through whom God may work in response to Israel’s prayers in captivity (vv. 46–50).

The foreigners of whom Solomon speaks may refer primarily to the numerous travelers who made their way through Israel. They have heard of Israel’s God by reputation, namely, the great deeds done on behalf of Israel. This renown may draw some of these outsiders to Jerusalem and the temple, where they offer prayer. Solomon gives God two good reasons to answer the foreigner’s prayer: “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you . . . and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house” (v. 43). In other words, the way in which God responds to these people’s prayers is considered a key factor in drawing them into the community of faith; the foreigners would come to fear the Lord and realize that God’s presence is indeed associated with this temple now being dedicated. Solomon returns to this missional theme more generally in the conclusion (v. 60). The objective: so that “all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other.”

Solomon’s petition can be related to various texts in 1 and 2 Kings that focus on foreigners (1 Kgs. 5:1–18; 7:13–14; 10:1–13). For example, the story of Elisha and Naaman (2 Kgs. 5:1–19) speaks of a foreigner who is healed through the mediation of an Israelite prophet. Naaman moves from the healing to a confession of Israel’s God as his Lord (2 Kgs. 5:15), reminiscent of the confession of the queen of Sheba (1 Kgs. 10:9). This missional impact may well animate Solomon’s petition. Among other texts, Isaiah’s concern that the temple be “a house of prayer for all peoples” is pertinent (Isa. 56:7; cf. 2:3; Ps. 47:9; Mark 11:17).

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

Homiletical Perspective

people would sin and be in need of forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

In verses 41–43 Solomon asked God to bless the prayers of foreigners. What a surprise! It is very rare in the Hebrew Bible to find an Israelite asking YHWH to hear and grant the petitions of non-Israelites. Foreigners, *nokri*, were different from aliens, *gerim*. *Gerim* were non-Israelites who resided among the Israelites and fugitives who dwelled among the Israelites while seeking asylum. *Nokri* were occasional visitors, such as the queen of Sheba or Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram.² Solomon wanted God to answer the prayers of the *nokri* in the same way that God answered the prayers of the Israelites. However, he had two reasons for making this request. He wanted people all over the world to know and fear God’s name. He also wanted people all over the world to know that God’s name had been invoked over the temple that he built. Solomon’s prayer was at once inclusive and self-interested. He built the temple. Even non-Israelites needed to know YHWH dwelled in the temple that he (Solomon) built.

Solomon’s self-interested prayer may offer us a model of inclusivity. From his Israelite tradition Solomon learned that the Israelites were the chosen people of God and that people who were non-Israelites were ungodly. Though he was firmly rooted in the Israelite tradition, he was open to asking God to bless people who were not. This certainly does not make Solomon a model of interfaith dialogue. He wanted YHWH to bless people who worshiped YHWH.

However, if Solomon could ask God to acknowledge and answer the prayers of the *nokri*, then surely we as Christians can build upon Solomon’s prayers in a world sorely in need of inclusivity. The world in which we live needs people who are firmly rooted in their faith traditions but willing talk with and learn from people of other faiths. Being people of God is not about owning God. Rather it is about glorifying God in all that we do—including the ways we relate to people who are different from us and believe differently than we do. This passage offers preachers an opportunity to preach the value of cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue.

DEBRA J. MUMFORD

2. John Gray, *1 and 2 Kings*, ed. Peter Ackroyd, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 225.

PROPER 16 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 21 AND AUGUST 27 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 84

¹How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

²My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

³Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.

Selah

⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶As they go through the valley of Baca

Theological Perspective

With Psalm 84, we begin with what is certainly a song of praise concerning the temple; but, in no time at all, the concept of the dwelling of God, the house of the Lord, is expanded to somehow include the very space of pilgrimage, both in the imagination and in the lived experience of the one whose confidence and purpose resides in God's redeeming power—while never quite abandoning the physical structure of the temple and its environs as a centering image. In this way, the pilgrim soul knows life in God as both anchor *and* sail, somewhere *and* everywhere. As we shall see, this is a reciprocal relationship, because the very hope of Zion, that of the world to come, is carried in the lives of those persevering blessed ones the psalmist means to celebrate and dwell among.

I have in mind here the text's assertion concerning the people whose strength is in the Lord, people whose journey through desolation and deprivation is somehow nevertheless one of renewed and renewing vigor, going "from strength to strength" (vv. 6–7). It is within such people, the psalmist tells us, that the procession to Zion can be discerned and charted. Even more boldly, "the highways to Zion" are *in* their hearts (v. 5). It is within their very nervous systems and the visions to which they have committed their fragile livelihoods

Pastoral Perspective

In the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, a girl named Dorothy helps us understand the yearning for home. Swept away to a strange land by a tornado, the Kansas native, along with her dog Toto, is focused on getting back home. Dorothy encounters some colorful characters along the way. She is told that the wizard can help her get home; but getting to the wizard proves to be quite the challenge itself. Upon overcoming many obstacles and a few disappointments, Dorothy has one last encounter with Glinda, the good witch. Glinda tells Dorothy that home was always available to her. All Dorothy needs to do is close her eyes, click her heels together three times, and keep repeating, "There's no place like home."

Categorized as one of the "Songs of Zion," Psalm 84 beckons the sojourner home—to God's house. The psalmist approaches the temple and is overwhelmed by its beauty. Why not? The temple was constructed of the very best materials from around the world. It was sturdy and massive. Who would not feel safe there?

If even the birds find refuge and sanctuary there, how much more will human beings find a sense of belonging? The psalmist invites us into a place where we can relax and be at ease. The psalm is not just about a building; it is also about a relationship.

Psalm 84

they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
⁷They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
⁹Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

Selah

¹⁰For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
¹¹For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the LORD withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
¹²O LORD of hosts,
happy is everyone who trusts in you.

Exegetical Perspective

The context for this personal psalm (“my”) is related to Israel’s life of worship. It was probably sung by pilgrims on their way to a festival in Jerusalem or upon their arrival there (see Ps. 48:9–11; 122:1–2). The festival is perhaps Booths/Tabernacles (Lev. 23:33–43; Deut. 16:13–15). The psalm has been called a “pilgrim song,” an “entrance liturgy,” and, most commonly, a Song of Zion. Songs of Zion (see also Pss. 46; 48; 76; 87; 122) express confidence in God’s care for Zion, God’s dwelling place, and for those who trust in this God. The psalm is enclosed by references to the “LORD of hosts” and by expressions of the worshiper’s joy and happiness (vv. 1, 12). “Happy” is a key word in the psalm (vv. 4, 5, 12). That is, the worshipers are blessed by God and thriving with respect to that which is essential for life and well-being. Direct address to God (“your”) occurs throughout (vv. 1, 3–5, 8–10a, 12) and is interchanged with third-person references (vv. 2, 7, 10b–11). Verses 8–9 are petitions to God.

84:1–4. The “dwelling place” is most likely a reference to the temple. It is not that God is absent from other places in life, but that God’s presence is especially focused at this time and place (cf. the “real presence” theme in association with the Lord’s Supper). Psalm 11:4 makes it clear that God’s

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The genre of this psalm defies easy classification. It has the structure of a hymn; yet it is more than a song. Found among its lines is praise; yet this psalm is more personal and intimate than most praise psalms. Though it contains multiple genres, much of the psalm is testimony. Throughout this psalm, the writer poetically expresses a firsthand account of God’s goodness, the joy of worshiping in the temple, and the euphoria he and other travelers experienced as they journeyed from distant lands to dwell in the house of God. With this psalm, the preacher can remind congregations of the importance of testimony.

At the beginning of the psalm we encounter a testimonial of the psalmist’s joy about being in the temple. The psalmist was not just happy to see the temple in all of its splendor, though he was certainly impressed by its grandeur. Set high on a hill, carefully and painstakingly constructed of stone and cedar during a seven-year period, the temple was undoubtedly a marvelous vision to behold. Though the aesthetics of the temple were quite breathtaking, it was the presence of God that excited the psalmist most. He was so delighted to be in the temple that his soul fainted, felt spent, or was just exhausted. The word often translated as “lovely” in the first verse actually means “beloved” or “amiable.” It refers not

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that the life of God's promise is verifiably known within our world.

While alive to the risk of presuming too much in our identification with such souls, as if our own faithfulness along the continuum is self-evident when we are emotionally moved upon hearing the text read aloud, we are nevertheless called to see ourselves here, to feel ourselves summoned by the culture the psalmist describes, to see our own lives more feelingly by way of theirs. The community of aspiration we rightly call church defines its vocation along this trajectory of commitment and confession. The sense of God's ever-renewed renewal of human life that our text gives is both spirited, worldly, and intensely *for* the world. John Howard Yoder defines our communal identity thus: "The church is the part of the world that confesses the renewal to which the world is called. The believing body is the instrument of that renewal to the world."¹

Lest we unduly emphasize what we take to be our own role in the renewal of the world, the world that we *are*, we might allow the psalmist to direct our attention to the detail of the sparrow nesting and nurturing her young within the altar of the temple (v. 3) or, in the ever-broadening tone of the text, within the space of the ongoing redemptive purposes of God. The sparrow too, it is implied, is to be numbered among the blessed who sing God's praise. While holding to the embodied particularity of the Jewish temple and the historical church, we also have those minute particulars signaling the fact of God's affection and concern for the sustenance of every aspect of creation. The pursuit of Zion, in this sense, might be understood as a commitment to feats of inclusion not yet imagined in our fields of concern, extending to our regard for the thriving of all creatures and the lived mindfulness such a regard for their thriving demands. Whether buying, selling, consuming, or cultivating, within the economy of God, our services of worship (for better or worse) are without borders.

This is where the psalmist urges upon us the question of context in our worship of the God who would withhold from us "no good thing" in the work of upright living (v. 11). With this kind of question in mind, Thomas Thangaraj poses a rhetorical question of his own that urges us to imagine inclusion most radically when we dare to invoke the name of God: "If God, in the English language, stands for the ultimate context of all that

1. John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 78.

Pastoral Perspective

According to the psalmist, one does not have to be physically living in the house of God to enjoy the perks of being connected and close to God.

The human condition is marked by a deep longing for something bigger than ourselves. We are on the hunt for a home—a place that makes us feel secure and loved. The psalmist reminds us that our pilgrimage is the journey toward God.

There is meaning and purpose in the journey; we learn things about our God and ourselves. While we are not sure what or where the valley of Baca (v. 6) is, we may presume that it is a dry, barren place. However, God's people make it an oasis of life and joy with springs and pools of water. The challenges of life do not defeat God's people; we overcome troubles and move "from strength to strength" (v. 7) because God keeps us in God's divine care and love.

Some of us may feel ambivalent about "home," with a mixture of good and bad memories. For Israel, the temple symbolized home—a physical destination toward which they had been traveling for generations. At long last, they saw for themselves the promise of God made manifest. They could see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the results of their sojourn with God.

For us, the church symbolizes home. It is the place where everybody knows your name. It is the place where, when you show up, they have to take you in. It is the place where laughter and love rule. Even more, the church is the place where we gather to invoke God's presence and power; where we get together to pray for God's help and healing; where we sit, stand, and kneel together to worship and praise God for tender mercies; where we remember that God is alive and active in the world, seeking justice, truth, and harmony.

Contemporary life is fragmented and disjointed. Technology has made our lives more complicated and layered than ever. In almost any gathering these days, people are so busy checking e-mail, texting, skype-ing, updating their status on Facebook, and sending tweets, that they do not even interact with the people next to them. Despite all the conveniences of technology and social networking, we are feeling more disconnected and lonely. We yearn for something else, something more.

The psalmist here offers an alternative, something more. Go to church! Turn off the cell phones, tablets, and other electronics. Turn them off, and turn to God and to each other! Psalm 84 is a reminder that our relationship with God is the most important thing. It is a relationship of utter trust and

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dwelling place was understood to be *both* in heaven and in the temple. The psalm begins with a strong note of “longing” (see Gen. 31:30) for being present in the sanctuary; it is indeed a “lovely” place. See the close link to Psalm 42:1–5, with its reference to “longing” and the “throngs” of people who make this “festival” pilgrimage “with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving.” This longing is likened to that of nesting birds for a “home” where they may lay their young (cf. Pss. 42:1; 23:5–6; 27:4). To think of the temple as a “home” and a bird’s nest for the one who worships is a striking metaphor; it is a place where, like birds, the “young” can find the safety of a home. As such, it seems that the temple is understood not as a place for the occasional visit, but a place for ongoing rest and refreshment. Hence, it seems likely that the psalm is more than a pilgrimage song for long-distance travelers; the temple is a home for regular visits. The focus, finally, seems to be placed on the God whom one encounters at this place, and not the place itself.

84:5–7. The joys of the journey are here recalled. The worshipers are those “in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (cf. NIV); that is, the visits to God’s dwelling place in Jerusalem so live in one’s heart that it shapes one’s life. The location of “the valley of Baca” is unknown; it may be a dry area through which pilgrims traveled on their way to Zion. Perhaps the temple itself symbolizes a place where God’s people are transformed from a desert to a spring. The reference to springs and the early rain may be symbolic, referring to the refreshment that God’s people experience wherever they go (see Ps. 107:33; Isa. 35:6–7; 41:18–19 [cf. Exod. 15:22–25; 17:1–7; Num. 20:2–13 and the provision of water in the wilderness]). Wherever the pilgrims travel, God will bring joy and transformation, like a good rain in an arid land. This God “will be seen” in Zion! This is not a reference to an image of God that was ensconced in the temple and could literally be “seen” (see Num. 12:8). Rather, it is a reference to an experience of God’s presence; so “seen” carries with it the sense of fullness. As they journey, they go “from strength to strength” (v. 7), that is, as they draw near to Jerusalem their anticipation of the experience increases in intensity.

84:8–9. This petition makes special reference to the Davidic king, “our shield” (a protector from the enemy) and “your anointed” (God’s agent on behalf of the community of faith). This is a prayer for the

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to the aesthetic appeal of the temple but, rather, to the temple’s place in the psalmist’s heart. The temple was not just any place of worship. It was the dwelling place of God and was therefore very special.

After worshiping in the temple, the psalmist was convinced that those who had the privilege of dwelling in its walls or working in the temple on a daily basis (such as the priests and the Levites) were some of the most blessed people on earth. After all, for him, the privilege of worshiping in the temple for a brief period of time was awe-inspiring. Therefore, in the psalmist’s mind, working in the temple every day must have been a particular blessing and privilege. For preachers and church staff workers, the work of the church can be tremendously satisfying and spiritually fulfilling. It can also be so emotionally, physically, and spiritually draining that they can lose sight of the church’s ultimate purpose: to glorify God. The psalmist’s testimony can remind staff and volunteers of the privilege of working in the house of God. The preacher can ask staff and volunteers to reflect on the most joy-filled moments of their ministries. They may find that the joy-filled moments, even if more rare, outweigh the most trying ones.

From the beginning of this psalm, one can easily surmise that a visit to the temple at Jerusalem was no routine, uneventful, insignificant occurrence in the life of the psalmist. No, this pilgrim, who had traveled a great distance, was overjoyed to have made the journey. He was not simply happy when he reached his destination. He found joy in the journey itself. The pilgrims may have encountered bandits or thieves along the way. They may have run low on food at various points of the journey. They may have just gotten tired and thought of turning back rather than moving forward. However, as they made their way to the temple, they made it instead a place of blessing. Though the journey had its perils, those making the trip felt blessed, honored even to have made it. Rather than focus on the perils, they concentrated on the strengths of the journey and on the final destination.

The preacher can compare the journey to the temple that the psalmist and company made with the life journeys Christians travel in their daily lives. Each of our lives is fraught with good times and not-so-good times. The people about whom the psalmist wrote, who also included him, shared the journey to the temple with one another. Our worship time is enhanced when we take the time to share some of our journey with one another before, during,

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is, all that lives, and all that has being, then what could be more inclusive than ‘God’?²

If we are to avoid speaking the name of God in vain and a witness to God that is demonstrably false, we will have to keep in mind the radical hospitality of the God who extends shelter to sparrows and those we deem strangers and who sends sun and rain to the righteous and the allegedly unrighteous alike (Matt. 5:44–45). By so doing, we might begin to lean into our inheritance, our identity as the children of this kind of God, the God committed to the renewal of our world and ourselves.

This brings us back to the work of looking toward Zion. Do we have a sense of what it might mean to sing with the psalmist that we are close to the point of *fainting* in our longing for the dwelling of God, even as our hearts and our flesh *sing for joy* to the life of our always-including God (v. 2)? One day within this God’s restoring presence, the psalmist announces, even as a doorkeeper, is infinitely preferable to a thousand in “the tents of wickedness” (v. 10). I suspect we are to measure the wickedness that excludes and degrades in its perverse accounts of supposed profits against the lived generosity (not always obviously profitable by the lights of some) committed to living forms of creaturely flourishing.

As we seek to rehearse the text, to which of these cultures have we devoted most of our energies? What is the state of our service of worship? If we find that we operate within an estate tired, broken, and uninspired, may we feel the revivifying spirit of God in our lives again and the highways to Zion in our hearts anew.

DAVID DARK

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brings unspeakable joy. The “living” God is active in the world, caring for the sparrows, swallows, and for us. Such a gift results in uninhibited, expressive, sincere joy.

The psalmist does not sugarcoat the challenges of life. Even when we are connected to God, there are no quick fixes, and circumstances may not actually change. However, when we are in right relationship with God, *we* are changed, because our focus shifts from problems to the Problem-solver. We find respite and hope in the midst of challenges, for “a day in [God’s] courts is better than a thousand elsewhere” (v. 10).

In the presence of God, we are protected from all that would destroy us: “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness” (v. 10). We can trust God to be our provider, protector, and power. We know that we can rest in God’s presence: we are safe, loved, known.

Every time we enter the church, we enact a pilgrimage from the highways and byways of life into the presence of God, where we find refuge. Because we make our home in God, we are able to weather the storms of life with poise and confidence. Because we make our home in God, we are not left to wallow in pity and despair. Because we make our home in God, we live with confidence and are assured that we are not alone. Because we make our home in God, we are happy. We remember that circumstances do not define us. God does.

If we yearn for home as the psalmist in Psalm 84 does, we need only to remember that “home” is always available to us. Unlike Dorothy, we do not have to travel a yellow brick road, fight munchkins and flying monkeys, take out bad witches, or click our heels three times—although life often resembles this kind of journey. We need only remember that home is just one church away.

BARBARA J. ESSEX

2. M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 39.

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well-being of the king (see Ps. 61:6–7). Anointed (or “Messiah”) later became a name for the ideal king whom God would raise up in the future (see Ps. 2:2).

84:10–12. Verse 10 is hyperbolic. A “day in your courts” may refer to the outer courtyard of the temple area in which all people could gather. The “doorkeeper” probably does not refer to the temple staff, but to anyone who stands ready to enter into the precincts of the temple. Hence this word would refer to “those who walk uprightly” in verse 11 (see Ps. 15:1–2) and to those “who trust in you” in verse 12 (see Ps. 40:4). Further metaphors for God are used; God is “sun” (a source of warmth) and “shield,” bestowing “favor” on the people and “honor” to them (note the theme of “honor” in Isa. 43:4). God withholds “no good thing” from the righteous. This is not reward talk, but a recognition that God is at work in the lives of people of faith and that divine activity will bring goodness and happiness. God is always working for the best for such faithful ones, and that will become evident over time.

These references are not to divine “protection” in some absolute sense, as if to say that no one who trusts in God would ever get hurt. It is rather an expression of confidence that, come what may, God would be with the believer(s) and accompany them through times of danger. Nor is it being suggested that the city of Jerusalem was invincible, as if no army could ever conquer it or harm its citizens. Such naive optimism was not an element of the trust in God the worshipers had or the confidence in God that pervades these psalms. The language is metaphorical. God will never be defeated, finally, even though many people, buildings, and cities associated with this God could be obliterated. God will be faithful to God’s promises to this people, even in the worst of times and during the most destructive of experiences.

TERENCE E. FRETHERM

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or after formal worship. When we know of the circumstances of the lives of our brothers and sisters, we can have more meaningful prayer, take special interests of particular hymns and songs, and better understand the nuances of the sermon.

The psalmist’s testimony continued when he contended that one day in the temple is better than one thousand days spent in any other place he could imagine. He would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. He would rather be an usher at the temple than have box seats at the arena of sinners. This is quite an image. In our lives we are often confronted with opportunities for serving God and for accommodating or participating in ungodliness. Compared to the appeal of some sin, serving God can sometimes seem menial, unimportant, unexciting, or just plain dull. We can all be carried away by selfish ambition, to the peril of concern for friends, neighbors, or humanity in general.

With this psalm, the preacher can remind the people that there is power in testimony. Though the preacher can preach this psalm in sections, she or he can also structure one sermon in three movements to include the experiences of corporate worship, serving in ministries, and the joys and perils of daily life. The psalmist shared his thoughts and experiences in the form of poetry. The preacher can encourage parishioners to share thoughts and experiences in one-on-one conversations or before small or large gathered bodies, in words or the arts (such as music, dance, or painting). By paralleling the psalmist’s experiences with those of contemporary Christians, the preacher can make the psalm relevant to the lives of the congregation.

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**PROPER 17 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 28
AND SEPTEMBER 3 INCLUSIVE)**

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

¹So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ²You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you. . . .

. . . ⁶You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” ⁷For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

⁹But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.

Theological Perspective

Three theological-ethical themes stand out in these verses from Deuteronomy. First, they make plain that obedience to God’s commandments is not an external burden, but rather the path to life itself. This passage says at the outset that God gives the “statutes and ordinances” for the well-being of the people, that they might have life in the land that God has promised (v. 1). The point might easily be misconstrued as one in which obedience is an external condition to be satisfied, then to be rewarded with the prize of life in the land. But it is actually more subtle than that. The commandments present a structure for life that accords with the very nature of human being. To obey them is to step onto a path that leads to life as God has made and intended it. To follow them is to discover life itself, not to earn it.

Nowhere is this first theme from Deuteronomy 4 echoed more fully than in Psalm 1, which tellingly speaks not merely of “obeying” the law but rather to “delighting” in it and dwelling in it by meditating on it “day and night” (Ps. 1:2). The outcome for those embarking on such a path is compared to “trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither” (Ps. 1:3). Just as trees connected to their life-giving source of water flourish and bear fruit, so humanity connected

Pastoral Perspective

“Remember who you are,” read the poster hanging on the wall of the retreat center where I went to research and prepare this essay. It could not have been a more perfect summary of this section of Moses’ sermon to the Hebrews on the plains of Moab. It is just the message the disciples of Christ need to be reminded of as we face life and ministry in the twenty-first century. A former colleague, who ran a mentoring program for at-risk youth, took the phrase one step further. She always reminded the teenagers in her program, “Remember who and whose you are.” This important reminder—not only for teenagers, but for God’s people of all ages—is exactly what Moses preached to God’s chosen people thousands of years ago. In this sermon from Moses, God’s people, then and now, are called to remember who they are and let their light shine for others to see.

On Proper 17, which falls in late August or early September, churches are preparing to begin the church school year. Children and youth, teachers and parents are preparing (and in some cases have already begun) to return to school. Moses’ words at the edge of the promised land seem almost the perfect pastoral message for this time of year. The beginning of the school year and church program year is a fantastic time to be reminded of the basic fundamentals of our faith. We belong to God who

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Exegetical Perspective

The book of Deuteronomy is a second accounting of *torah*, a retelling of how the “law” or “instruction” came to be and its vital importance in the life of Israel (in Greek *deuteronomos* means “second law”). In Deuteronomy, the Ten Commandments are given for a second time (Deut. 5:6–21; the first is Exod. 20:1–17). We could think of Deuteronomy as Moses’ Farewell Discourse (cf. John 14–17). Moses knows that he will soon be parted from his people. He knows that he will not enter the promised land with them; so he gives them instructions to guide them into their new life. He recounts the history of Israel’s covenant with God and reminds them of the ordinances they must follow as God’s people.

Deuteronomy is not merely a reiteration of the *torah*/law; it is a celebration of gift of Torah, the “instruction” or “guidance” given by God. To the ex-slaves of Egypt, this “law” was the constitution of a new nation, guidelines for life as the people of God. These people who had been oppressed in Egypt for generations now could embrace God’s *torah* as a symbol of their new identity. They were no longer Pharaoh’s slaves, but YHWH’s people. Ideally, *torah* was a means for the people to respond to God’s grace and presence with them. Yet, invariably, people forgot or ignored *torah*. The Old Testament is replete with narratives about how some of the Israelites turned away

Homiletical Perspective

The people who have been slaves in Egypt are now gathered on the border of the land that God is directing them to conquer. Their journey toward freedom has been excruciatingly long, because although they have left the land of Egypt and its slavery, they still carry Egypt and its slavery in their hearts. They have to learn to lean toward freedom rather than rely on slavery for their definition and their meaning. Moses has heard from God that he will not be permitted to enter this land beyond the Jordan River. Moses may think that he is the one who should be leading them into the new land, but God has already told him to stop complaining and to prepare Joshua and the people for entry into the land. In his pain and internal struggles over this exclusion, Moses must gather the former slaves and teach them the importance of the Law and the tradition. It will be what keeps them moving toward God and liberation rather than toward slavery and death.

The verses in this passage are the prologue to the long sermon that comprises the remainder of Deuteronomy, in which Moses seeks to impart both the wisdom and the power of the Law and its traditions. While many of us often perceive the Law as deadly and repressive, Moses affirms it as life giving and expressive. From his point of view, the

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

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to its life-giving source of the “law of the LORD” (Ps. 1:2) will be strong, durable, and full of life.

John Calvin doubtless meant something of the same whenever he spoke of the third use of the law. This use neither condemns nor restrains but, rather, opens a path to living that corresponds to the way God has made humanity. It nourishes and prospers life. For Deuteronomy it would appear that this is more nearly the first and principal use of the law. For God’s people to practice fidelity to the “statutes and ordinances” is to discover how to live well. Now as then, the people of God will find life promising and fulfilling as they practice love of God and neighbor.

A second theme in Deuteronomy 4 may be summarized by saying that the presence and nearness of God is realized in ethical living. Whereas such presence or nearness of God is often represented as coming in solitary practices of meditation or contemplation, Deuteronomy suggests that they are also manifest in Israel’s embrace of the law. The housing of the tablets of the law in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 10:1–5) was one way of symbolizing the presence of God in the midst of Israel, since the diligent observance of the “statutes and ordinances” causes the nations to ask, “What other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?” (v. 7).

Far from being a solitary practice that might even seek escape from ordinary life, Israel’s embrace of the law was a communal practice that actively engaged ordinary life at the most concrete levels. The “statutes and ordinances” touch on significant relationships of daily living with a consistent requirement for other-regarding behavior. The salient point is that it is in these relationships—and not by withdrawal from them—that the presence of God is realized, the nearness of God is known.

Deuteronomy’s way of practicing the presence of God is a salutary word wherever a division is made between spirituality and ethics. More often than not, the two are treated as distinct domains. Sometimes they are thought of as alternative paths, sometimes as complementary ones. Too often they are thought of as distinctly different. Not so in Deuteronomy 4: here the practice of the presence of God is bound inescapably to the practice of love for neighbor. As Walter Brueggemann observes, “All through the book of Deuteronomy, the tradition is at pains to hold together *holy presence* and *social practice*, for either

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loves us, who has sustained us, and who calls us to share this good news with the next generation. The main purpose of Christian formation in the church is to make sure that the unique story of God’s salvation history is shared with the generations to come, so that they too can become living witnesses to this story, The Story. Moses’ words seem a near perfect message as the people of God come together to face a new year together. We can probably not be reminded enough of “who we are and whose we are” and of our common calling to share that good news with others.

Moses called the people of Israel and calls the church today “back to the basics”—to the statutes and ordinances of God. Why? Moses knows that as the people enter the land that God has promised, the land for which they have been waiting, the land that they have longed for, things will change for them. Moses fears that when the people are living well in the land flowing with milk and honey, the people may forget who they are. The people may forget who it was that brought them safely out of Egypt and into the promised land.

Scholars agree that Deuteronomy was likely written over the eighth to sixth centuries BCE by folks who knew that Moses’ concerns were valid and real. Patrick Miller states that Deuteronomy speaks to people in three sharply different circumstances: those who have not yet received the gifts and prosperity of the land, those who had lived long in the land and were accustomed to all its benefits, and those who remembered the benefits of the promised land but were now living in exile.¹ Pastorally, this passage can speak to a congregation at so many places along the journey in ministry and to individual believers at every stage of their journey of faith. “Remember who and whose you are” is a message that does not grow old or tired. We need to hear it during times of change. We need to be reminded of it when ministry is flourishing. We need to be comforted by it when all seems lost and all hope is gone.

When we remember and listen, our lives bear witness, to the world around us, of our God who loves and does not forget us. When we remember well, God uses us to bring others to the truth. When we remember God and God’s faithfulness, we will keep hope, even in the moments of greatest despair.

The statutes and the ordinances of God teach all of us, the young and the old, to remember who

1. Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 3.

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

Exegetical Perspective

to worship other gods and with prophetic warnings about the consequences.

People then and now need constant reminders to remain faithful. The lectionary narrative for today is just such a reminder and exhortation. Moses gives final instructions to the people as they are poised on the verge of entering the land. He reminds them how unique they are among the nations, that no one has “a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him” (v. 7). Israel’s God and law are so unique that other nations must see the Israelites as a “wise and discerning people” (v. 6), and Moses does not want the people to lose that identity.

Brent Strawn suggests we read Deuteronomy 4 from the perspective of three different ancient audiences.¹ The first audience is the Israelites who were present listening to Moses as he exhorted them: “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you” (v. 1). The lectionary leaves out verses 3–5, where Moses reminded them how difficult it is to keep these statutes and where he recounted the incident at Baal Peor, when the Israelites dallied with the women of Moab and their gods.

The second audience is the Israelites who were living at the time of King Josiah, when “the book of the law [*torah*]” was rediscovered (2 Kgs. 22:8). Many scholars agree that this “book of the law” was an early version of Deuteronomy, and its reintroduction to the people during the time of Josiah’s reforms was a call to recommit themselves as God’s people. Moses’ words in 4:1–2 and 6–9 neatly summarize the importance of renewing this covenant.

The third audience is the Israelites who were living in exile after the monarchy crumbled under foreign invasion. This audience had already experienced some things Moses warned about (see 4:30). Moses knew his people well. He knew that the Israelites would forget the mighty acts of God on their behalf and would turn to other gods, as they had been tempted to do several times in the past. In these passages, Moses speaks not only to the present audience grouped around him, but to generations down the line: “Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind

1. Brent Strawn, “Deuteronomy,” in *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R. O’Day and David L. Petersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 63–64.

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Law and its traditions are what give these ex-slaves their center, their identity, and their life. As I reflect on these words three thousand years later and note that the people of Moses have survived, despite centuries of exile, persecution, pogroms, and the Holocaust, who are we to argue with this approach? When Moses begins, “So now, Israel, give heed . . .” we should all pay attention.

Moses then adds the words that will confront all who encounter this tradition: “neither add anything . . . nor take away anything.” Therein lies the rub: if the tradition is to be passed on to future generations, those generations must wrestle with the meaning of the tradition in their own time. Indeed, the tradition itself developed the midrash, as a way of seeking to guide this necessary wrestling. For example, how do we interpret the meaning of the seventh commandment about adultery? When it is given in the next chapter of Deuteronomy, it is primarily about wives of married men, not about both spouses being sexually exclusive. In its original context, it allowed married men to have sex outside marriage, as long as the female partners were not family members or wives of other men. Over the centuries, it has evolved to restrain the sexual activities of both partners in marriage, and few of us would dispute such an “addition” to the tradition.

Scripture itself notes this struggle. What is the prophetic tradition of Scripture if not a calling out to the people of God that the voices for justice and compassion must be heeded and even strengthened? What would Moses think about Amos’s biting criticism of the Law and the tradition in Amos 5:21–25? Given his heritage as a liberator, I would like to think that Moses would add an “Amen.” In the name of Moses, many have seen it as an attack; yet it is the adding of the prophetic tradition to the Law of Moses that gives Judaism its vitality and endurance. The role of interpretation of the Law is necessary and vital but always difficult.

In the final words of this passage, Moses exhorts the people to teach their children well, to remember these words and the events that lie behind them, so that the next generations will remember who they are and whose they are. Moses is already experiencing the universal phenomenon of generational passage; he will not be allowed to go into the new land, and he tries as hard as he can to pass on the tradition and the witness to the ones who will enter the land. There is always great tension in this process. In order for succeeding generations

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

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alone is inadequate and will not grasp the attention of the nations.”¹

The third theme represented in Deuteronomy 4 is the luminescent justice of the “entire law” set before Israel. Not only does the writer contemplate the nations of the world standing in awe at the nearness of the God who nourishes the people with the law, but Deuteronomy contemplates with equal marvel the nations standing in awe as they ask, “What other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” (v. 8). Thus the law of the Lord that structures Israel’s life not only nourishes the people and brings them near to God; it also establishes a shining example of a justice that is for the healing of God’s creation.

Reflecting on the scope of the justice entailed in the law God entrusted to Israel, Patrick Miller summarizes it this way: “In that the law is humane, even with regard to treatment of the natural order, in that it seeks justice and impartiality in all cases, and in that it makes concern for the powerless and the disadvantaged the primary criterion of a just society, Israel’s law as set forth in Deuteronomy demonstrated indeed a higher righteousness.”² The arresting justice of Israel’s law extends humane considerations to all that God has made, to the natural order as well as to humans. It is further characterized by justice and impartiality that is not tied to the influence of elites. Its preferential attention to the least powerful and the most greatly disadvantaged distinguishes it from relationships of mere *noblesse oblige*.

Contemporary inheritors of Israel’s justice tradition thus have a framework that addresses the ethical dilemmas of the present age, from environmental degradation through social elitism to the overwhelming needs of the world’s poor and destitute. To the extent that such contemporary inheritors reflect the wisdom and discernment of this law, they will be once more a light to the nations.

D. CAMERON MURCHISON

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we are and whose we are. So “take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children” (v. 9).

Much like the people of Israel standing on the plains of Moab, at the edge of the promised land, we twenty-first-century Christians are standing on the precipice of much that is new. We are also like the Hebrew people who had lived long and well in the land, taking much God had given them for granted. Sometimes, like the Hebrew people in exile in Babylon, we feel that in our time much has been lost and left behind. These grounding words of Moses, reminding us of God’s commandments and our call to be prophetic witnesses to God’s love and faithfulness in the world, are as appropriate for the church in the twenty-first century as they were for the original hearers.

“Teach your children well,” Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sang in their famous 1969 hit.² Written by Graham Nash as an expression of his concern for what the society was teaching young children about war, at that volatile time in American history, the song captures much of the same spirit that Moses was offering to the Hebrew people in this passage from Deuteronomy 4; while they are “on the road,” they need a code to live by. In a later verse, the song encourages the children to “teach your parents well.”³

In Deuteronomy 4, Moses teaches all of us well and encourages the people of God to do the same with the generations to come.

KATHY BEACH-VERHEY

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 53.

2. Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 55.

2. “Teach Your Children Well,” lyrics by Graham Nash, © 2000–2012 AZLyrics.com

3. *Ibid.*

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

Exegetical Perspective

all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children" (Deut. 4:9).

To these three ancient audiences from three different periods of time, we can add a fourth: congregations today. How do we hear Moses' exhortations? How are we to celebrate and keep *torah*? In Matthew 5:17–18, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." For Christians, then, *torah* has not been abolished so much as it has been completed and fulfilled through Jesus.

Just as the word and presence of God are made manifest for Israel in *torah*, so "the Word [*logos*] made flesh" (John 1:14) is the presence of God for Christians through Jesus Christ. Just as Deuteronomy 4:1 equates the *word of God* with life, so the Gospel of John equates the *Word of God* with life: "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:4). Israel embraces the Word of God, the *torah*, as a sign of their life and identity; Christians embrace the Word of God through Christ, who is our life and identity. Just as the law is a means for Israel to respond to God's grace and presence with them, so we can respond to the grace and presence of Christ, who fulfills the law. Like those before us, we can make this good news known to our children and our children's children.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

Homiletical Perspective

to know the tradition and to see it as life giving, the preceding generations must teach it and live it well. The ex-slaves who are becoming the people of God must be grounded in the tradition in order to know their identity. If the Law and the tradition are to remain vital and life giving, they must permit, and indeed encourage, each generation to ask its questions of life and seek its answers in wrestling with the tradition.

In my youth the law, both religious and secular, agreed with the tradition that both sanctioned racial segregation and proclaimed its necessity. Through God's grace and movement, however, the time had come to question that part of the tradition. Although many white churches had to take votes on whether to allow black people to come to worship, the prophetic voice of the church tradition itself spoke out to seek justice and compassion. Without the tradition, we would still be wandering in the wilderness. Without questioning the tradition, the location of our wandering would be irrelevant because we would be like zombies without vision or purpose.

Moses was not the first to raise these questions of tradition and relevancy, nor will he be the last. Jesus raised them in his ministry, and Paul wrestled with them as he sought to guide the waves of Gentiles coming into the church. In the twenty-first century, the people of God face these issues again, as we all undergo tremendous change. Without the roots of the tradition, we will easily be fooled and swayed into dangerous territory. Without the encouragement to ask the questions of our time and our place, we will harden into people with no life. Three thousand years of Jewish and Christian life remind us of the staying power of the tradition. The challenges of the present age remind us that each generation must renew the tradition, and interpret it for our own lives.

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**PROPER 18 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 4
AND SEPTEMBER 10 INCLUSIVE)**

Isaiah 35:4–7a

⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

Theological Perspective

All language for God is metaphorical, and when metaphorical language for God hangs around too long, it begins to look literal—as if my finger could actually point directly into God. The metaphor “God the Father” is an example of metaphor that for many people has gone stale to the point of being uninformative and even abusive. The metaphor of God as Father often suggests qualities associated with an authoritarian, tough-love male parent, and it has become so sedimented, that the metaphor has lost its power to challenge and inspire and, most importantly, to change. Because we refuse to let go of old metaphors, new ones, of which there are many in Scripture, are ignored or underused and thus sound awkward, when spoken. (For example, “Mother Bear,” from Hosea 13:8, “Like a bear robbed of her cubs,” comes to mind.) If our understanding of God continues to change and grow, then our language for God should change and grow as well.

However, when preachers, teachers, and other theologians fool around with God-talk, people get nervous, and frequently they get angry. When we show the inherent and *necessary* instability of our finite words for the infinite mystery of God, we appear to take away the familiar God people have known from childhood. These emotional reactions

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A story from the Sufi tradition of Islam tells of a stream that finds itself butting heads with the edge of the desert, trying to make its way across the burning sand. It soon realizes that it cannot flow through the sands and that its futile efforts will result only in its becoming a stagnant quagmire. It hears the sand whispering that the way across the desert is to surrender itself to the wind in evaporation. As it becomes a mist, the wind will carry it across the desert to the mountains. In the cooler temperatures of high altitude, it will become rain falling on the mountainside and will find itself a stream again. The act of surrender and trust is foreign to the stream, who has forged its path tumbling down to the desert’s edge, growing bigger and stronger as it moves through gentle rolling hills and rocky gorges. After much debate with the sand and with itself, the stream finally lifts its arms to the wind and surrenders. The stream allows itself to be changed as it is carried aloft. It discovers that its essence remains intact despite its transformation. When it rains down upon a new mountainside, the stream remembers that it has undergone this transformation time and again in its eternal quest to BE the essence of stream.¹

1. Indries Shah, “The Tale of the Sands,” in *Tales of the Dervishes* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1970), 23–24.

Isaiah 35:4–7a

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Exegetical Perspective

Our text in chapter 35 is a preview and an anticipation of the fuller visioning poetry of chapters 40 and following. Already here, ahead of the ominous narratives of chapters 36–39, the tradition of Isaiah anticipates and promises restoration that depends upon the powerful, reliable resolve of God. Our verses, 4–7a, are sandwiched between two vivid images. In verses 1–2, the poetry bespeaks the revivification and restoration of fruitful creation, which will exhibit the glory of the creator God who is at the same time “our God,” the God of Israel (v. 2). In verses 8–10, the poetry describes a coming homecoming on the “Holy Way” (= the new highway) that will be safe and joyous. Thus the preceding verses on creation (vv. 1–2) and the following verses on historical return (vv. 8–10) bring together the spheres of “nature” and “history” to affirm that every imaginable sphere of reality is subject to the restorative power of YHWH’s rule. The outcome of such a display of transformative power assures the enhancement of YHWH and permits joy among those who benefit from the reassertion of divine governance.

The focal point of our verses is the divine declaration (given in prophetic oracle) in verse 4, a typical “oracle of salvation” that features the entry of YHWH, via such speech, into a context of despair. The declaration purports to transform such

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The nations have assaulted Israel, pummeled her until beaten down. In the calculus of geopolitics, it would be hard to imagine that she would be able to survive the onslaughts of greater powers, and yet the prophet declares that Israel’s God “will come and save you.” What will that salvation look like? Anticipating Israel’s liberation from the disgrace of exile, the prophet hands on divine promises that visualize the people’s future in a way that contrasts sharply with the misery of strength lost and hope dried up. The prophet’s word addresses a people whose losses have dimmed any vision of a salvageable future, and they can no longer hear God’s voice. God will open eyes and ears, remove the burdens of servitude that weigh the people down, and restore their voices, long suppressed. With sight, hearing, strength, and voices recovered, it will be as though the natural world itself will join in celebrating relief from Israel’s time of diminishment and spiritual drought.

No doubt an oppressed people’s interest lies in the immediate future. Isaiah uses dramatic language to open the people’s eyes and ears to the promise that God has not abandoned them and will have the last word. The exile ending—it must have seemed at the moment that God’s dominion was being made manifest, reversing their despair, and it was. But only

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occur because human language *for* God has *become* God. As we are well aware, substituting anything earthly for the Divine, like continuing to use certain metaphors as if they were gods themselves, is idolatry.

Metaphorical language for persons can become sedimented, literalized, and abusive, as well. Consider the language of physical disability as the metaphor for spiritual disability in today's reading. The language used in this passage intends to show the extreme nature of Israel's brokenness and, with that, God's power to change what appeared to the Israelites to be intractable human "problems." Our spiritual ancestors, for whom these metaphors had resonance, saw literal deafness, blindness, and other physical limitations as beyond human ability to heal. Biblical commentaries on this passage in Isaiah disagree on whether or not the healing of the people who are blind, deaf, mute, and lame is literal or metaphorical. It may be that the prophet is describing an eschatological reality wherein all physical (and spiritual) limitations are no more. However, whether the healing preached in Isaiah is literal, physical healing or a metaphor for spiritual disease and remedy, unexamined use of this language represents scholarly and pastoral negligence.

If the healing described in this passage continues to be understood literally, and we believe that at the eschaton, all physical ailments will be healed by God, we are suggesting that physical differences are "problems" to be "fixed." We expect that the body transformed at the eschaton will be "perfect." Even using Paul's notion of a transformed "spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15), we simply cannot imagine that bodies will retain the marks or characteristics of their earthly physical reality. (Medieval theologians spent a great deal of time debating the age and condition of the body assumed into heaven. "Will I look like I did in my twenties, even if I died dismembered in my forties?")

Disability theorists point out that what we call "disabilities" are simply failures of imagination in architecture and infrastructure. Human bodies are not the "wrong" shape, nor are they incomplete; rather, the physical environment in which we live is what is wrong or incomplete. For instance, when arthritis changes how high I can reach, and I am unable to grasp items on the upper grocery-store shelves, the remedy should not have to be that I stop going to the store alone, but rather that products be relocated on the shelves for easier access, or tools be created to help me reach up without pain.

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There is scientific, factual basis for this ancient Sufi tale. No doubt the original tellers observed and experienced the transformation of the water cycle many times in the arid terrain in which they lived. Obviously they also considered, imagined, and lived the spiritual transformation the process implies. In Isaiah 35 waters spring up in the midst of the desert, defying the laws of nature. The image illuminates the transformative power of God. What is the connection between the ancient practical, yet mystical story and the words of the ancient prophet? Can this ancient tale from a sister faith help us understand the workings of God in our time as well as in the prophet's?

Isaiah's oracles in chapters 34 and 35 most likely date to the exilic period rather than the period of kingship in the other chapters of First Isaiah. Their context and their audience are people in exile and captivity, people who may believe that God has abandoned them to their enemies. They may believe that this is God's justice, punishment for their sins of moral lapse and abandoning the ways of God. They are people enduring in the midst of despair. How unfathomable it must be to hear the prophet's words of God's strong protection, comfort, and deliverance! They long to have their sight restored and see the future with hope, to have their ears unstopped and hear good news, to be healed so they can leap for joy and sing God's praises. They long for liberation! They yearn for abundance in the barren landscapes of their lives, abundance that flows miraculously like a stream in the desert. Can they trust these words?

Most likely the readers of commentaries such as these have never been literally forced into exile and captivity. The metaphors of these words may still strike a deep emotional chord within us as twenty-first century people. The prophet's vivid language of liberation may spark light in our souls for reasons not fully known to our conscious minds. Individually, people know the pain of exile and isolation of captivity in broken relationships, in disillusionment with daily work and routine, in unexpected illness or joblessness, in choices we have made that lead to addictions. "Where is God in the midst of the pain of life?" is the perennial question. Where is God when we feel akin to the stream in story, butting heads with burning desert sands and becoming a stagnant wasteland?

Faith communities feel the metaphor of exile as they watch membership and pledge numbers dwindle. In twenty-first-century culture they are not in the center of people's lives as they once were,

Isaiah 35:4–7a

Exegetical Perspective

a situation of despair. At the center of the oracle is the exclamation “Behold your God” (NRSV “Here is your God”). Those addressed see and notice the arrival of God in a situation from which God has been thought to be expelled. In context this is an announcement that God is now present in the midst of exilic despair in the Babylonian imperial world that had thought that YHWH had been eliminated as player in imperial history and politics. The rhetoric is parallel to Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7–8; in both cases the declaration of God’s transformative presence is said to be the “gospel,” the news that YHWH is back in play in a way that will change everything.

The consequence of this divine coming, effected in and through prophetic speech, is that YHWH is one will punish and repay the ruthless imperial overlords, and give back to them what they have enacted against the vulnerable . . . including Israel. As a result, the subjugated people Israel will be delivered (“saved”). This declaration asserts that the historical process is not just an interface of imperial power and vulnerable subjects, as these two parties are wont to think. YHWH is a third agent, who transforms the entire context of power and powerlessness. Thus the coming of God is always disruptive, revolutionary, and emancipatory. The terms of engagement are shifted so that established power is placed in jeopardy and the vulnerable have new historical possibility because of this third agent.

Here that “news” is addressed to those without energy or courage, the ones who have given in to imperial absolutism and so ended in despair. The “weak hands” and “feeble knees” of verse 3 do not refer to physical disability, but to hopeless resignation that has concluded that Israel is forever caught in imperial deathliness and brutality from which there could be no exit (see Isa. 40:27 and 49:14). When YHWH is absent or disinterested or defeated, Israel is exposed to the unchallenged power of despair, and so is left passive and without possibility. Thus the oracular assertion of verse 4 is exactly a direct contradiction to the mood of those in verse 3. The coming of God contradicts that “world without God” in which the vulnerable have no possibility.

The ones who have “weak hands” and “feeble knees” in verse 3 are in verses 5–6 identified as the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the dumb, the ones with diminished human capacity who are narcotized to the rule of the empire, who in resignation accept the absolutism of the empire, who expect nothing outside the empire, and who submit without energy or courage to the world given by the empire.

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for a moment, because such a grandly drawn vision of a healed humanity and a repaired creation can never be entirely realized in human history.

This text can be preached without reference to the New Testament, of course, and when it is, the focus might be on the ways that God is always at work to free people from afflictions that diminish joy and disrupt communities. One might fairly say that God can lead a community of faith from its season of sterility—even a kind of death—to new life. There are different ways, both literal and metaphorical, of losing sight, hearing, and voice, and of being so weighed down that it is impossible to stand straight and strong. The need for healing is always contemporary—for Israel, for the church, and for the whole human race—and we pray it will be granted us and all who have need of it, sooner rather than later.

While the text certainly has to do with hope for the immediate future, at the same time and on another level it also points to the ultimate future, the eschatological moment of universal redemption, a new creation. A new creation is God’s business, in which we may be called to assist, but it is not the natural, organic outgrowth of historical processes. When we pray, as Jesus taught his disciples, “Your kingdom come,” we are praying for this new creation, a pure gift of God.

While Christians can read Isaiah without reference to Jesus Christ, we can also quite legitimately read Isaiah through the lenses of the New Testament. However the people of Isaiah’s time may have heard his prophecy, by the time Matthew’s Gospel was composed, Isaiah’s promise of the restoration of the people’s sight, hearing, strength, and voice would be heard eschatologically, as a sign of the advent of the transforming presence of the Messiah (see Matt. 11:2–6). The lectionary links the Isaiah reading with Mark 7:24–37, in which Jesus heals the disturbed daughter of a Gentile woman, followed by the healing of a deaf man with a speech impediment, probably also a Gentile. Where Jesus is, the kingdom (reign) of God becomes manifest, exhibiting the characteristics of Isaiah’s images of redemption. Jesus’ healing of Gentiles projects an eschatological vision of the kingdom that is bigger than the healing/restoration of Israel alone.

It is all too easy to hear the Gospel stories of Jesus’ healings interpreted as merely ornaments designed to heighten his reputation, but they are central to the church’s faith. One may not be prepared to decide exactly what was a “miracle” and what might be

Isaiah 35:4–7a

Theological Perspective

We simply fail to see the environment as malleable and assume that “fault” for inability lies with the individual. In this case, the specter of the perfect, transformed body *imposes* the concept of disability on the naturally aging body. We usually live with the unspoken assumption that human bodies should be changed to fit an ideal, and we refuse to consider instead that the environment should change to fit human differences. We can all count on being “disabled” at some point in our lives.

If the labels “deaf,” “blind,” and “lame” function metaphorically as tropes for spiritual dysfunction, we perpetuate an age-old but faulty connection between “disability,” sin, and the divine will. Historically, theologians have attributed any form of embodied difference (having a womb, having black skin, or being gay, blind, or paralyzed) to an ontological category that ranges from simply inferior and needing human mastery to sinful and needing divine mastery.

The theologically unspecified but functionally perfect human body, the body we imagine God created pre-fall, hovers in the background in these metaphors. This body, when explicated, usually resembles a twenty-year-old, Anglo-European, heterosexual athlete or model. Conformity in appearance exemplifies the perfection of Eden, while diversity of embodiment becomes a function of the imperfect realm outside of Eden. The historical pairing of different or diseased bodies with fallen spiritual states serves to contain our desperate human fear that pain and suffering are randomly distributed. With the tidy theological equation wherein socially stigmatized people are such because of the divine displeasure with us, we can guarantee our own physical safety (until such time as we cannot).

Many members of our congregations can tell stories, if we ask, about the shadows that cross the faces of well-intentioned Christians when they are introduced to a deaf daughter, a spouse with multiple sclerosis, or a brother in a wheelchair. Fear that we could be they causes the faithful, well-intentioned person to refer by default to the still-preached equation of physical disability and spiritual brokenness. When language for disability functions as a trope for spiritual disease and sin, even beloved hymns like “Amazing Grace” (“was blind but now I see”) can isolate and stigmatize some children of God.

EMILY ASKEW

Pastoral Perspective

particularly if they are in the mainline tradition. People choose to practice their spirituality in private, alternative ways. There are a wide variety of institutions outside the church to which people give their resources and in which they volunteer to serve their neighbor. Where is God in the midst of what may seem like a quagmire to the institutional church? Does God not want God’s communities of faith to survive, to thrive? Communities and individuals long to hear the life-giving words, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God,” in the midst of death-dealing situations.

Here is where the words of the prophet meet the Sufi tale. God is always present with God’s saving power. The decision of the stream to trust the wind is the secret to transformation such as the prophet foretells. Transformation and liberation come through trust in the willingness to allow God to do the shaping, especially when this reshaping requires radical change of form. God knows the true essence of any because it is God who creates it. God comes to save the true essence of individuals and communities as they give themselves wholeheartedly to the healing and renewing work of God. Surrendering to transformation in trust allows eyes to be opened, ears to be unstopped.

Here is where the words of both ancient story and prophet meet the meditation of a pastor’s heart. Who in the community is in a quagmire refusing to allow transformation? Where are the quagmires in the life of the community together? How can the community be of service to the quagmires in the world, bringing the good news of God’s transforming power even in the midst of its own transformation?

Full trust brings joy. It brings singing and dancing in the heart as people become cocreators with God, living water for others who are in the parched, desert places of life. The ancient prophet and storyteller call twenty-first-century people to be miraculous streams of God’s mercy, love, and grace. They are called through firsthand experience of the liberating miracle of trust and transformation.

JANE ANNE FERGUSON

Isaiah 35:4–7a

Exegetical Perspective

Now, in this moment of prophetic utterance, all of that is changed. They are wrenched out of their narcotized state. They are summoned beyond their resignation. They are empowered to new possibility:

The blind now see!
The deaf now hear!
The lame now leap!
The dumb now sing!

They notice in their new wakefulness; they recognize in the utterance their new freedom. They may again become active agents in their own history. They are now, again, ready to turn toward some new future possibility. (That rhetoric of course is reiterated in the summary statement of Jesus' transformative ministry in Luke 7:22.) It is the reentry of the gospel God that reopens human possibility and that culminates in the joy of departing empire. Such joy constitutes restless defiance and new venturesomeness in this world opened by utterance.

The imagery of "like a deer" in verse 6 provides a segue from revived human history (vv. 5–6a) to revived "nature" (vv. 6b–7). God not only makes Israel's new life possible; God also makes available the new life of all creation. Thus the promise of transformed human life is matched by the transformation and "return" from arid failure to the waters of life, for creation, since Genesis 2:10–14, has depended upon water to make flourishing possible. Thus in rapid succession there is witness to water, streams, pools, springs, swamps, all a contradiction of the lethal environment of wilderness, desert, burning sand, and thirsty ground. The waters make possible grass, reeds, and rushes that will sustain the entire ecosystem of "return." We may imagine a thousand species, along with jackals, swimming in delighted abandonment at the gift of rain and the abundance of sprouting life.

All—the most vulnerable, the most resigned, those most in the grip of despair and death—are summoned to newness. Those who leap and sing and dance may do so along with blooming crocuses (v. 1) and with sated jackals (v. 7)!

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Homiletical Perspective

explained differently in order to perceive that these "mighty acts," taken together, make a profound theological statement. For example, the Gospels portray opening the eyes of the blind sometimes literally and sometimes mystically. (Cf. John 9:14; Luke 24:31; Acts 9:17.) There is more than one way of losing sight, hearing, strength, or voice. The contemporary church, ideologically polarized, diminished in influence and culturally marginalized, may find itself suffering a kind of exilic experience not entirely unlike Israel's in Babylon. In its own crisis of faith, not seeing things too clearly, hearing impaired, limping along, it appears to have lost its voice. Yet there is cause for hope, for the Lord of the church is One who heals and restores. The "mighty acts" point as well to the ultimate healing of the whole creation.

Waters in the wilderness and "streams in the desert" portray an abundance of water as a redemptive image. Humanity's need for clean, fresh, and reliable sources of water elevates the everyday need for water to near-redemptive status. Although Isaiah knew nothing of Christian baptism, Christians may hear his water images in baptismal terms, trusting that the "living water" of the Holy Spirit is at work redemptively in the sacrament that forms the church, both relieving spiritual thirst and preparing our dry ground to bear fruit.

Even though we still live in historical time, it is possible to witness signs of the kingdom among us, now here, now there. The church is that community of baptized people that transcends race and tribe and ethnicity (i.e., it is "catholic"), and its work is, along with Israel, to become a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3). While the church itself looks for and trusts in God's healing for itself, it understands that the calling of all the baptized is to share with Christ the work of healing persons, whole communities, and a stressed creation. Needy as we are ourselves, it is nevertheless our privilege to be invited by God to participate in the divine work of new creation, even though, in historical time, the new creation will become manifest in the world only now and then, here and there, as we await the coming of the divine reign.

RONALD P. BYARS

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PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11
AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)

Isaiah 50:4–9a

⁴The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
⁵The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

Theological Perspective

As I read this passage from Isaiah in light of the final days of our Lenten journey, while Jesus makes his way to the violent death he knows is coming, I am left feeling ashamed by the prophet's manifestations of faithful steadfastness, together with Jesus' emotional posture as he prepares to suffer and die. The qualities and actions Isaiah describes, along with the sure knowledge of God's constant presence as one faces despisers, construct very narrow parameters for a faithful disposition. The question that nags at me while reading the Isaiah passage is this: are these qualities *suggestions* or *demands*? The element of shame comes when I cannot imagine myself being the kind of person the prophet describes. I cannot imagine that the elements of Jesus' life I am called to emulate are those by which I would present myself for an unjust death, going without a fight.

We can deconstruct beard-pulling, turning one's back away from violence and one's cheek toward it by arguing that the call is metaphorical: we are being challenged to live counterculturally. With the knowledge of God's presence, and moved by a set of values that are not the values of a violent and retributive culture (which characterizes human culture across time and space), we must live in the world differently than others do.

Pastoral Perspective

In an article entitled "The End of Church," historian Diana Butler Bass writes, "Something startling is happening in American religion: We are witnessing the end of church or, at the very least, the end of conventional church. The United States is fast becoming a society where Christianity is being reorganized after religion."¹ Butler Bass illuminates the current grassroots quest for life-giving spiritual experience, connection, meaning, and doing justice that is changing participation in faith communities as they have been known for the last hundred years. It seems the church is dying to be reborn. The hope is it will be like the legendary phoenix, who, after a lifespan of a thousand years, willingly dies in its nest of flames so that it may rise from its own ashes a new being.

The church as institution may not be as willing as the phoenix to trust the process. No doubt, to people in the pews it may feel more like crucifixion with very faint hope for resurrection. What will the new "church" look like? Will it care for them, nurture their faith, be the community they long for? Will God still be there?

This is not the first time that God's people have been called to undergo radical transformation.

1. Diana Butler Bass, 02/18/2012 7:50 am, "The End of Church," *Huffington Post Blog*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/diana-butler-bass/the-end-of-church_b_1284954.html.

Isaiah 50:4–9a

⁷The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
⁸ he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
⁹ It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

Exegetical Perspective

The second part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40–66, is concerned with the rescue and restoration of Israel, which had been defeated and displaced. In this poetry Israel is characteristically identified as “the servant of the Lord,” the one summoned and assured by God. In a few poems, however, the “servant” seems (perhaps especially to Christian interpreters) to be more likely a particular human agent. These latter poems have been dubbed by scholars as the Servant Songs and have often been treated quite distinctively from other “servant” references (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). It is by no means agreed who this Servant might be, and many candidates have been proposed (see Acts 8:32–34). We need not be too concerned about the identity of the servant, because in this poetry the speaker-servant determinedly turns attention away from himself and toward the God who is the key agent in the life of Israel, as in the life of the Servant.

This poetic text is dominated by the fourfold use of the phrase “the Lord GOD,” each time as subject of an active verb. In each case the speaker-servant is the object of the verb wherein the “Lord GOD”

has given *me*,
has opened *my* ear,
helps *me*,
helps *me*.

Homiletical Perspective

The unidentified servant of the Lord speaks as one who has been called to “sustain the weary with a word.” The “weary” the servant has in mind must be the Hebrew people, bewildered and suffering from the effects of their exile in Babylon. They were weary for good reason, having lost not only their homes and their dignity, but also the land, the temple, and the Davidic throne, causing them to suffer a spiritual crisis. Every time is a wearying time for perhaps the majority of the human race, and our own time is no exception. Life can be hard, and one of the hardest parts is trying to bear loss and injustice, whether personal or global.

Although our own crisis cannot be compared to that of the exiled people of Israel, those who love the faith and the church have at least some experience of being “weary.” Weary, perhaps, with trying to maintain a faithful witness without either resorting to reactionary defensiveness or blandly trying to fit in with a culture that neither understands our faith nor is particularly curious about it.

Those who go to church on Sunday (or Saturday evening) often set out with heavy hearts, not only when there are personal problems, but also frequently disheartened by news of the brokenness of the world, delivered to our electronic devices so relentlessly every hour of every day. Conflicts hot

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Theological Perspective

These countercultural values, which prompt countercultural actions, will change the present world in hope of God's future world.

However, in practice, these qualities do not always function to support a metaphor of countercultural living. The attributes that are salient for some people become attributes insisted on from the pulpit for *all* the truly faithful. In the face of this text, we do not stop to ask if faithfulness does or should look the same for everybody.

Feminist, womanist, and African American theologians have been asking questions like this of biblical texts and interpretations for quite a while now, but some interpretations never seem to change under the scrutiny of contextual readings. Rebelliousness? Bad. Fighting back? Bad. Not listening? Bad. Showing emotion? Bad. ("I have set my face as flint.") These passages are interpreted according to contemporary socializing tools that tend to favor those who are already in positions of relative power, when compared to marginalized people. Does God really require compliance, acquiescence, silence, and nonemotion from all of us at all times?

Consider Catholic and Protestant women called to ministry from early ages, who tried to ignore the call because their denominational theologies taught them from childhood on that church leadership was the domain of men alone. They could aspire only as far as Christian education or other forms of service and lay leadership. These women listened and listened, they did not act out or fight back, they kept every scrap of anger or resentment to themselves, with publicly impassive or even contented faces, in the belief that the official interpretation of the word of God had more authority than the words God was inscribing in their hearts.

If we read the qualities lifted up in Isaiah 50:4–9a as theological requirements for a faithful disposition, insistence on them can be life limiting. If, however, we read the qualities lifted up in Isaiah 50: 4–9a as *strategies* to use in navigating a hostile culture, they make sense. When the call to turn the other cheek comes from *within* a community that is marginalized, it is an effective strategy for survival. Women, African Americans, and LGBT people, among many other marginalized groups, have recognized that not fighting back in the face of violence, or staying quiet and accommodating, can be critical postures for physical survival, and in the long term can be effective tools for the eventual overthrow of corrupt systems. Martin Luther King Jr. brought racism to its knees by countering violent racism with the call

Pastoral Perspective

The impassioned words of the prophet in Isaiah 50 were written to the Hebrew people in exile in Babylon. They were captives wrenched from their homeland of Judah by political warfare. Family and friends were left behind in the ruins of Jerusalem. The cultural heritage and spiritual practices that sustained their faith were damaged almost beyond repair in the destruction of their beautiful temple. These people may have felt dead to God as they lived through radical displacement of home, family, and spiritual community.

However, they were not slaves in physical poverty. Their captors gave the Hebrew people economic opportunities. The deprivation they experienced was a poverty of identity and belief. In the absence of the religious institutions that kept their faith alive for centuries in Judah, the people were in danger of turning from God. They were forgetting who they were as God's people, descendants of the covenantal promise to Abraham and Sarah. They were tempted to worship the gods of Babylonia. Assimilation and syncretism threatened the ways of life that had sustained their existence for generations. Had the God of their ancestors abandoned them? Was their prosperity a "reward" from the gods of their new "home"? Who and what was at the center of their lives? Where would they find salvation, identity, and meaning, now that their traditional institutions were gone?

The prophet in Second Isaiah wrote to people in this context as they struggled through the alienation of exile. In Isaiah 50:4–9a the prophet speaks through the voice of the Servant, a figure that embodies the anguish of the people as well as unwavering confidence in the God of their salvation. The Servant's lyrical voice runs through Second Isaiah, personalizing the prophet's call to "denounce self-deception, repudiate false gods, return to truth, face the facts of life openly, embrace justice, be moved by compassion, find the roots of all life in the Center of life," in the one God.²

Exile, with its accompanying feelings of alienation, confusion, and despair, is a powerful metaphor for understanding the modern experience of change. Whether the crisis is individual or communal, the pain of change results in feeling exiled from "what was before" in the movement to "what is next." Individuals experience the confusion and despair of exile in innumerable ways through life transition: illness, unemployment, loss of relationship, aging, search for community, search

2. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 13.

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Exegetical Perspective

The speaker is on the receiving end of God's rescuing, transformative action. The "Lord God" who dominates the poem is the one who is known as the emancipatory agent in the old exodus tradition, who is now at work to accomplish a contemporary emancipation of displaced Israel from the empire of Babylon.

Our comment will be shaped by the fourfold repetition of the phrase "the Lord God."

1. In verse 4, it is this emancipatory Lord God who has entrusted this speaker-servant with an educated tongue, as one who knows what to say and how to say it. If we seek in the poetry of Isaiah 40–55 for the substance of such verbal performance, it is the declaration of the gospel that YHWH is back in play as a liberating agent who will soon dispatch Jews from Babylon, even though the Jews themselves had no hope for such dispatch. See Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7 for the explicit use of the term "gospel." The capacity to speak these words requires not only a capacity for such speech; it also requires that the one who speaks shall have *listened*. Faithful speech comes from faithful listening; the latter term is the Hebrew *shema'*, which means "listen" but also connotes "obey."

That good word to be spoken is one that will "sustain the weary." The Jews who lived under Babylonian hegemony must have been "worn out" by the imposition of imperial demand and imperial identity, perhaps exhausted by the endless work of maintaining a distinct Jewish identity in the face of such imperial pressure, which was hostile to such particular identity. In 40:28–30, those who are "without YHWH" grow weary, even as this God does not grow weary. The purpose of the utterance of this servant-speaker is to fend off the fatigue that comes with faith that contradicts the empire.

2. In verse 5 the poet reiterates. The Lord God has caused the servant-speaker to hear the gospel word and to be ready to obey it. He does not flinch from the subversive, emancipatory word that the Jews can go home and do not need any longer to submit to the empire. (His readiness to speak is quite in contrast to Moses, who resisted the same mandate in an earlier time; see Exod. 3:11–4:17). The human presentation of emancipatory possibility is a result of God's relentless resolve that is now entrusted to the speaker.

Clearly such incandescent utterance evoked hostility from which the speaker did not flinch. Such resistance may have come from Babylonian authorities who did not want Jews to depart the empire. More likely it came from Jews who had settled into the imperial economy and who did not want to

Homiletical Perspective

and cold injure people and disrupt communities, and it seems as though throughout the world, the nation, and even the church, we are constantly on the lookout to determine who is on our side and who is against us. Weary.

It happens, sometimes, that in our worshiping assemblies, we are met with a word that sustains us. It may be a word from Scripture. It may be the words of a preacher, forged out of a struggle to listen for a word from the Lord somewhere in that in-between place where text and context (the world with all its delights and agonies) meet. How is it possible for mere words to sustain the weary when we are all overwhelmed with the sheer weight of so many words, most of them trivial, some manipulative, and many just plain lies? Yet it does happen that in many churches small and large a word somehow penetrates the throw-away words and becomes, by the power of the Spirit, a clear word heard as though directly from Christ himself. Weariness is relieved. We are sustained by this word for another day.

Who is this agent to whom God has given "the tongue of a teacher"? It may be Isaiah himself, or another prophet—say, Jeremiah—or even Israel as a whole. Any of those may serve the purpose, since it is possible to argue that any one of them—or all of them—has been called to "listen as those who are taught." For Christians, Isaiah's figure of the Servant is best understood, from the viewpoint of the gospel, as Jesus Christ, who is, for us, both servant of the word and himself the incarnate Word. The compilers of the Common Lectionary pair the Isaiah reading with Mark 8:27–38, in which Jesus teaches his disciples the unwelcome lesson that he will be rejected, killed, and rise again. G. F. Handel used verse 6 as an aria for alto in his choral work *Messiah*, clearly in reference to Jesus: "He gave His back to the smiters, And His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair. . . . He hid not His face from shame and spitting." Handel follows the aria with the chorus singing, "Surely He hath borne our griefs. . . . And with His stripes we are healed."

Some of the church growth folks argue that churchy talk about the cross is a downer. They say that people do not want to hear about suffering, but about coming out on top. Some versions of Eastern religions argue that the goal of religious disciplines is to escape from suffering and from the cycles of reincarnation that perpetuate it. The proposed remedy is to learn the skill of detachment, withdrawing from entanglements with people and projects that are inevitably accompanied by hurt,

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Theological Perspective

to African Americans simply to stay seated—not moving from lunch counters, bus seats, and public streets. When one was shot at with water cannons and set upon by police dogs, staying put was a radical act of faithfulness, courage, and rebelliousness. As King pointed out in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” responding to white and African American pastors who asked him to hold off on his protests, “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’” Nonviolent resistance is strategic, when employed consciously with liberative outcomes in mind.

Whether or not the characteristics described by the prophet in this text are liberative or oppressive depends on who is preaching them. To ask that particular people limit their aspirations, subdue their passions, and turn their cheeks when those cheeks are already bruised and bloodied from turning them for years: it is simply unimaginable to me that this is the divine will or a manifestations of the surety of God’s presence. Someday soon, those of us who have listened quietly to others’ interpretations of God’s word for our lives will speak up loudly to describe our lives for ourselves, with the help of God. Someday soon, women who have always been “good girls,” and members of other silent, marginalized groups will act up and take over churches and courtrooms and congressional chambers. Someday soon, women will believe that turning the other cheek to a violent partner’s blow is not God’s will for their lives, no matter what the church tells them about being submissive. Someday soon, letting the full play of emotions loose—joy, anger, passion, silliness—will be a requirement for demonstrating the sure knowledge of God with and in us.

EMILY ASKEW

Pastoral Perspective

for personal meaning. Faith communities feel exiled from their heritage and mission in the midst of turmoil and conflict, in the loss of beloved leaders and pastors, through decline in membership, and through decline in financial resources. A preacher can always find a pastoral need to extend the prophet’s invitation—always a need to denounce self-deception and false gods, to honor truth and look life squarely in the face with compassion, a commitment to justice, to find the center of life in the One God. *The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced. . . . [God] who vindicates me is near* (vv. 7a, 8a).

The contemporary experience of many, inside and outside traditional communities, is that religious institutions have been taken captive by the politics of internal conflict, rigid doctrine, and obsession with institutional maintenance. A pastor might ask, “When is my community ‘abandoning’ God as their center and substituting syncretistic, survival tactics to please constituents unwilling to undergo transformation?” Ironically the prophet’s call to the contemporary church could be *into* a kind of exile through daring to be countercultural to its traditional self.

The prophet’s voice speaking through the Servant in Isaiah 50 could be the voice of the church in exile if the church is willing to go through radical transformation, painful though the change might be, to be reborn and shaped in ways not yet imagined. *The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning [God] wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward* (vv. 4–5).

The prophet’s message calls the church to return to listening to God, who is at the center of their identity and meaning. *I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; God who vindicates me is near. . . . It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?* (vv. 7b–8a, 9a). The call comes with the deepest assurance God will raise the community from the ashes of its former self into new life, purpose, and mission. After all, God delivered the Hebrew people from Babylon, and they returned to rebuild their temple. How will God lead God’s twenty-first-century people in the rebuilding of community after “the end of church”?

JANE ANNE FERGUSON

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Exegetical Perspective

depart. They resisted such an emancipatory gospel that would have shattered their settled world.

3. The speaker maintains his vocation because the Lord God “helps” him (v. 7). The language of “vindication,” “contend,” “adversaries,” and “confront” suggests judicial engagement, perhaps as a metaphor for harassment and accusation, or perhaps as litigation in which the speaker is accused of being a traitor to the status quo. The speaker will not give in; he is confident that God “vindicates,” that is, shows him to be innocent. No court can convict such a speaker of God’s truth!

4. In verse 9, the “help” of the Lord God is sufficient protection, and no court—of public opinion or of judicial proceeding—can touch the speaker, who refuses to be tried in such courts. The language of “vindicate” and “declare guilty” are echoed in the lyric of Paul in Romans 8:33–34; reliance on God is a refutation of every litigious threat to God’s truth. Our poem ends with that “weariness” that contrasts with the sustaining of the weary in verse 4. Without such a sustaining word, life on the terms of the empire leads inevitably to weariness. Fidelity to God’s truth sustains; resistance exhausts!

It is most likely that this poem reflects deep dispute in the actual sixth-century-BCE community of displaced Jews. The invitation to homecoming, so celebrated in the poetry of Isaiah, was not everywhere welcome, by imperial masters or by accommodated Jews. It has not taken much imagination, moreover, for the church to find in such a text testimony to Jesus, who also spoke and enacted emancipation that was vigorously resisted, both by the hegemonic empire of Rome and by settled addressees who were accommodated to the status quo of empire. Like that ancient speaker, Jesus suffered for the truth that he embodied. The impact of the poem is to underscore the deep, passionate resolve of the emancipatory God (and the human carriers of that God) who will not be silenced by resistance, abuse, or intimidation.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Homiletical Perspective

disappointment, and loss. Detach. Certainly it is possible to become overly invested in a relationship or in the pursuit of an ambition, and drawing back a bit may be the better part of wisdom. However, Jesus did not detach or draw back from his calling to speak and to be that Word that would sustain the weary, even when it became clear that his resolve would lead to the cross. Suffering is neither a goal to be desired nor one to be avoided at any cost. “I have set my face like a flint. . . . he who vindicates me is near” (vv. 7a, 8a).

The cross sets a different paradigm before us. Life is to be found in answering God’s call—doing what needs to be done; turning away from surrendering personal integrity in exchange for the favor of the powerful, while turning toward the hurting, the alienated, the shunned, and the weary; because love accompanied by risk and even by suffering is better than a risk-free life without love or loving. The only way any of us comes out on top is by joining ourselves to the Servant who is not trying to come out on top, the one who asks, “Who are my adversaries? . . . It is the Lord God who helps me” (vv. 8b, 9a).

Soon after predicting his death, Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). It is not likely that we will all be called to stand at the forefront of great causes or suffer martyrdom. It is quite likely that we shall all, in small ways, confront the opportunity to come close enough to the troubles of another to feel the weight of their suffering, and choose either to duck it or, in some measure, share it. Sustain the weary? “It is the Lord God who helps me.”

RONALD P. BYARS

PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11 AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 116:1–9

¹I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.
²Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
³The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
⁴Then I called on the name of the LORD:
'O LORD, I pray, save my life!'

Theological Perspective

Israel is admonished to love the Lord with all its heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5; see 11:1; 13:3). Given the profound religious expression found in the Psalms, one might expect loving God to be commonplace. However, the phrase “I love the LORD (YHWH)” is found only in Psalm 116:1. Even here it is somewhat problematic in that the Hebrew could be rendered either “I love the LORD . . .” or “I love *that* the LORD . . .” Perhaps the ambiguity is purposeful, since in the biblical tradition love (whether of God or people) is less an emotion than descriptive of appropriate actions within a relationship.

In Psalm 116 the author’s love (for God or God’s actions, or both) is related to God’s ability and willingness to hear the psalmist’s voice (v. 1). Thus the psalmist calls on the name of the Lord four times (vv. 2, 4, 13, 17). Calling on the Lord so frequently makes sense only in light of God’s willingness to listen.

The reason for this incessant calling on God is made immediately clear. Someone or something has threatened the psalmist’s very life. The plight is most emphatically and graphically expressed. Death possesses snares that entrap the petitioner; likewise, Sheol (the realm of the dead) has “found me out,” as though the psalmist is trying to hide (v. 3). Though the language evokes desperation, it is impossible to determine what the precise threat is. Is it disease

Pastoral Perspective

It is not unusual in the life of the Christian to have a moment, or perhaps many moments, when one wonders about prayer. Is there really a God out there? Do my thoughts and words go anywhere beyond the confines of my room? Is there a God noticing my uplifted hands or my tear-stained cheek? If the answer is yes, that there really is a God who is receiving what I offer in prayer, does that God really care about me? Is God simply too busy with more important things to be bothered with the struggles of my day-to-day life? Perhaps God created the world and is now just watching everything, including my life, from afar. Does praying make any difference at all?

Numerous research studies have been conducted in the last ten years to explore this question. Can the benefits from prayer be measured using the tools of science? Some of these scientific studies have tried to see if there is a direct correlation between prayer and healing. Some of these studies include patients establishing their own prayer groups. Other studies utilize distance prayers of intercession, offered on behalf of a specific patient by strangers many miles away and perhaps even of a different faith tradition. The results of these research studies tend to be all over the map, but the interest in prayer and healing seems to be growing.

Psalm 116:1–9

⁵Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.

⁶The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.

⁷Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

⁸For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling.

⁹I walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 116 is a prayer of thanksgiving by an individual (cf., e.g., Pss. 30, 32, 34). The psalmist expresses deep gratitude for deliverance in a time of great distress, perhaps a critical illness or some other life-threatening situation (vv. 3, 8, 15). The psalm was intended for public worship in the temple (vv. 14, 18–19) as an act of fulfilling vows (vv. 12–14, 17–19) accompanied by a libation (v. 13). The terminology is somewhat generalized, enabling the psalm to be used more than once by different individuals in differing situations (somewhat like hymns in Christian worship). No clues for a specific dating are found.

In the Septuagint and in the Vulgate, verses 1–9 and 10–19 were separated into two different psalms, but in terms of form and literary structure the integrity of the Hebrew Psalm 116 should be honored. In the course of time this psalm became part of a collection of psalms used in Jewish liturgy, the Egyptian Hallel (Pss. 113–118). Psalms 113–115 are recited before the Passover meal and Psalms 116–118 at its conclusion (consider Matt. 26:30 and Mark 14:26).

There are a number of ways the psalm can be divided structurally. Certainly verses 1–4 are properly recognized as the psalmist's acknowledgment of deliverance by God. Verses 5–11 articulate the psalmist's expression of gratitude (though vv. 5–7

Homiletical Perspective

"I love the LORD," the psalmist announces, and we may be excusably surprised to discover how rare such an exclamation is in the Scriptures. Psalm 18 sings a song with a similar theme and begins, "I love you, O LORD, my strength" (Ps. 18:1). Elsewhere the Hebrew Scriptures direct us to "love the LORD" (Deut. 6:5; 11:1; Josh. 23:11; Ps. 31:23), and in the Gospels Jesus interprets the Scriptures to place as central the love of the Lord (Matt. 23:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), but here the psalmist simply declares, "I love the LORD."

The cause of this exultation may also surprise us: the Lord "has heard my voice and my supplications," sings the psalmist (v. 1). The Lord has *heard*, and that is cause for rejoicing. The psalmist goes on to describe the results of God's hearing—"when I was brought low, [the LORD] saved me" (v. 6) and "you have delivered my soul from death" (v. 8)—but the engine driving the psalmist's praise and, indeed, love, is having been *heard*.

Surely preachers can identify with the psalmist's joy, even as they recognize an all too familiar situation. So often we read a text and wonder how it might connect with the lives of our listeners, but the situation of this psalm is direct and immediate. It is the song of someone who has been through hell. The translation of the KJV/AV is wonderfully evocative:

Psalm 116:1–9

Theological Perspective

or emotional distress? Has there been a serious economic reversal? Are there menacing detractors or enemies? No answers are forthcoming. All we can say for certain is that the psalmist is overwhelmed. This is not a casual prayer. It is rooted in sheer existential dread: “I suffered distress and anguish” (v. 3).

No wonder the psalm is so intently personal. In the nine verses of the lectionary reading, the first person personal pronoun is used eighteen times. There are only a few uses of the first-person pronoun in the rest of the psalms. This use (overuse?) of the first-person pronoun puts into bold relief the intensity of the psalmist’s feelings and the poignancy of the prayer. This language is not a function of theoretical devotion or academic abstractions about the nature of piety or prayer. This psalm is a matter of life and death. The psalmist has no compunction about appealing to God directly: “O LORD, I pray, save my life!” (v. 4). To be sure, the psalmist makes assertions about the divine nature. God is gracious, righteous, and merciful (v. 5). God preserves the simple, that is, one who is blithely receptive of or admirably open to divine instruction (v. 6). These general statements do not minimize the impact of the poignant personal plea as expressed in verse 4. “Save my life” is as basic a human sentiment as there is.

Wondrously, the prayer is answered. After such a buffeting by whatever was the cause of the despair and anguish, an inwardly directed petition is appropriate: “Return, O my soul, to your rest” (v. 7). “Rest” describes a condition that is the very opposite of what the psalmist has experienced and what has given rise to the prayer in the first place. Rest is the result of the Lord’s bountiful response in which the Deity has delivered the psalmist’s life from death, the eyes from tears, and the feet from stumbling (v. 8).

By the conclusion of the lectionary portion, the psalmist has moved from the prospect of death to being able to “walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (v. 9). Walking in this instance connotes more than mere locomotion or retaining one’s balance. This verb is among the most common in the Bible for living life as God wants it to be lived (Gen. 5:22, 24). As a result of the psalmist’s prayer, there is not only life in the sense of not being dead, but also life as it is meant to be lived fully in the presence of and according to the call of God. “Walk[ing] before the LORD in the land of the living” needs to be seen as the most abundant life that can possibly be lived.

While this psalm, as mentioned, is highly personal, it is nevertheless not individualistic. For

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Andrew Newberg is a University of Pennsylvania neuroscientist. Some call him a “neurotheologist.” Newberg compares mystical feelings with brain physiology. The subjects of his study are people we might call “prayer warriors,” those who have a long-established routine of praying and meditating for an hour or longer each day. Newberg says the brains of these people are different from the brains of folks who never pray or pray very little. His research has also found that “intense, long-term contemplation and other spiritual values appears to permanently change the structure of those parts of the brain that control our moods, give rise to conscious notions of self, and shape our sensory perceptions of the world.”¹⁰

In an era when scientific research is attempting to understand prayer, Psalm 116 comes to us as a gift. The psalmist of old bears witness that God both hears our prayers and cares about each one of us. The psalmist does not consider how this is the case, or put it under a microscope, but simply celebrates and shares it. The psalm begins with a bold declaration of love that one might see on the side of the Goodyear blimp or painted on the freeway overpass: “I love you!” There is no embarrassment here, no stoic restraint. This declaration of love is not just for the sake of the beloved, God, but for the benefit of all the world. It is testimony at its greatest. I love the Lord, and I am not ashamed to tell you why.

This love song is the psalmist’s response after crying out to God and being heard. There really is an almighty God who hears my prayers, listens to my voice! Therefore, I will call on God as long as I live. The psalmist is convinced that God cares and intervenes and that prayer is effective. This experience sets her course of life for years to come. The future will be bathed in prayer. Forevermore, the psalmist will not be afraid to cry out to God and to seek God’s intervention in life. She knows that God is real and that God hears her prayers. From then on, life will be led in constant conversation with God.

One of the beauties of this psalm is that the exact nature of the psalmist’s distress is not disclosed. The problem was serious, though. “The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish” (v. 3). Perhaps the psalmist was battling a life-threatening illness and came close to dying. These words may have been metaphorical, describing the feeling of being at the end of one’s rope for any number of reasons. This opens a door for Psalm 116 to be the prayer

1. Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman, *How God Changes the Brain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 7.

Psalm 116:1–9

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and vv. 9–11 might be read as two stanzas). The concluding section, verses 12–19, records the psalmist's decision to acknowledge God's action publically with the payment of vows and a libation in the temple.

The opening words of the psalm declare the wonder of divine attention. The psalmist's thanksgiving is expressed as a love for God in response to the love God has shown for the psalmist (v. 1). It is common to hear declarations of divine love for humankind, but not so often are humans said to "love" God. Such human love is usually directed to God's "name" or "law" (see Pss. 5:12; 26:8; 40:17), but there are a few places where the object of human "love" is simply God (e.g., Pss. 31:23; 145:20; Deut. 5:10; 6:5; 7:9; Exod. 20:6).

The psalmist cried out in "distress and anguish" (v. 3) for the Lord to "save my life" (v. 4) and reported that the Lord heard the desperate cry (vv. 1–2). The precise difficulty is not recorded, but it was as if the "snares of death" and Sheol, the underworld and place of death, had laid hold of the psalmist (v. 3). Sheol was understood as a desolate place; inescapable, void of the praise and the presence of God (see Pss. 6:5; 30:9; 88:3–13). It was also considered to be an aggressive power that could destroy life. Thus the psalmist praised God because the Lord had delivered the psalmist from the "pangs of Sheol" (v. 3; see, e.g., Pss. 30:3; 49:15; 56:13). God restored the psalmist to life (vv. 6, 8–9). Because of this divine act of mercy the psalmist pledged allegiance to God forever (vv. 2, 12–13, 16).

The psalmist praised God as "gracious," "righteous," and "merciful" (v. 5). This language is reminiscent of part of the great credo attributed to Moses in the book of Exodus: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exod. 34:6; see also Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jer. 32:18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3). The term "gracious" (Heb. *hanun*) is used in the Old Testament only in reference to God, but the verbal root (*hnn*) means to show favor and mercy to someone. It is often used with reference to the divine action whereby a person or group may be delivered from their enemies or from sin (see Pss. 4:1; 6:2; 9:14; Amos 5:15; Isa. 30:18–19; et al.) The Hebrew term translated "merciful" is a form of the verb *racham*, built from the term *rechem*, which means "womb." A better rendering would be "compassion." It is "womblike," "motherly," deeply caring love. The term is most often used in reference to God's "compassionate" action toward God's people (see,

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"The pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow." "Sheol" accurately transliterates the Hebrew but may sound like a place in faraway "Bible land," while "hell" is as close and familiar as the physician's waiting room or the family's dinner table. Commentators ponder the vagueness of the psalmist's plight: is it illness or persecution? The resilient effectiveness of the psalm derives precisely from this vagueness. This is an all-purpose song. It provides hope and rejoicing in the midst of whatever hell someone may be forced to endure.

Regarding another text, a student in an exegesis class asked, "How would you preach this differently if you knew someone in the congregation was dying of cancer?" She was young, only about eight months past her college graduation. She studied to be a pastor and wanted to be a good one, sensitive to the needs of her listeners. Her question was beautiful and innocent. She lacked experience to know there would not be a Sunday when she would not be preaching to people living with cancer. The Puritan Richard Baxter described his ministry as preaching "as a dying man to dying men." "The pains of hell" wind their ways through every congregation and this Psalm 116 provides hope.

Some people come to church in the same situation as the psalmist: they have been through hell and have come out on the other side to "walk before the LORD in the land of the living" (v. 9). They come to worship to rejoice and to give thanks that "the Lord has heard." Some churches provide services of "healing and wholeness" where it is appropriate to give such thanks; others provide a time in worship for people to express thankfulness; but preaching through Psalm 116 also provides occasion for people to experience their own gratitude, relief, and release from "the pains of hell" that no longer "gat hold upon" them. "It is very meet, right and our bounden duty," the Prayer Book reminds us, and the psalmist goes on to explain that we should indeed offer "a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD. . . . in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD" (vv. 17–19a).

Others come to worship bearing the heavy weight of "the snares of death." Between the chemotherapy treatments, they are able to sit through worship this week; next week that will not be possible. The depression lifted enough this morning that they could see a way forward just far enough to hope that there might be some word of hope from the Lord that would be worth coming to church. These people do not share the psalmist's rejoicing and

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one thing, throughout the whole psalm there are allusions to the community to which the psalmist belongs. Out of gratitude for God's bounty, the psalmist pays vows to the Lord "in the presence of all his people" (v. 18); the communal aspect alludes to the temple courts (v. 19). That is, this very personal psalm not only has a communal setting, but that setting is specifically the temple congregation, namely, the covenant people at worship. Another way of emphasizing that the psalm has a communal orientation is the assertion that in the sight of the Lord the death of *all* the Lord's saints is a precious matter (v. 15). In spite of the personal nature of this prayer, the psalmist is not in this situation alone. He belongs to a people.

There is an eschatological dimension to the psalm. Seen in christological terms, the death of which the psalmist speaks and from which the psalmist is delivered is more than the death of a single person. The Lord who saves the psalmist from death eventually saves all from death through Christ. Death from this perspective is more than the cessation of biological life. Death in its most radical form is the very opposite of what God envisions for the whole created order that the Deity is in the process of redeeming, restoring, and reconciling through Israel and through Israel's Christ. What the psalmist prays for and receives is ultimately achieved in God's actions that bring about the kingdom in which all may "walk before the LORD in the land of the living."

FRANK ANTHONY SPINA

Pastoral Perspective

of any disciple who has cried out to the Lord and experienced the comfort and love of God in the midst of crisis.

In times of distress, Psalm 116 invites us to have hope in the Lord. The God we worship and serve is gracious, righteous, and merciful. God does not respond to us based on what we deserve. Instead, God is gracious, loving us in ways that can be seen only as a gift. God is good and faithful. We do not have a god who is fickle or who takes delight in creating chaos or suffering for human beings. Forgiveness and mercy are the hallmarks of God's relationship with us. These attributes of the Lord make it possible for the psalmist to be at rest. The trials and tribulations of life can cause great anxiety. Trusting that God hears our prayers, cares about us, is gracious, righteous, and merciful, gives us courage to hold on to faith when darkness envelops us and the dawn is still a far-off dream.

The experience of feeling heard, loved, and cared for by God is something worth sharing. When doubts creep in, the experience of a brother or sister can be God's word of hope for us. We may be the recipients of the testimony of a fellow pilgrim and find ourselves getting a good night of sleep for the first time in weeks. The roles may reverse. We may be the one to speak up and share an experience of prayer that gives someone else the courage to pray and to believe that God not only hears our prayers but loves us beyond measure.

NANCY A. MIKOSKI

Psalm 116:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

e.g., Isa. 9:17; 30:18; 55:7; Jer. 31:20; 33:26; Ps. 102:13).

The term “righteous” (v. 5) does not appear in the Exodus 34 list, but the fact that God is “righteous” (Heb. *tsaddiq*) is the very basis of the psalmist’s confidence: the God of covenant keeps covenant commitments. The Hebrew term can refer to ethical conduct that is upright (see Pss. 1:6; 23:3; Prov. 8:20; 13:6). It also is used to describe the maintenance of what is right, of carrying through on commitments, particularly of loyalty to covenantal promises (see Pss. 7:7–11; Neh. 9:7–8; Gen. 38:26). The outcome of divine care, the result of divine righteousness, is the protection and rescue of the “simple,” that is, the naive and uninformed and those “brought low,” the helpless and weak (v. 6; cf. Ps. 111:4–6).

The relief that the psalmist celebrated was concrete and personal. Life itself was at stake (vv. 3, 8), and the psalmist cried out to God: “Save my life!” (v. 4). The term for “life” is rendered in the NRSV as “soul” in verses 7–8, but the Hebrew term *nephesh* is better understood as “self” or “life.” The psalmist wanted to be saved (rescued) and delivered in the here and now, and that is what the Hebrew suggests happened by the use of the verbs *yasha’* (v. 6; see also Pss. 9:14; 28:9; 69:35) and *natsal* (v. 8; see also Exod. 18:8; Isa. 5:29; 42:22). From “stumbling” and “tears” (v. 8), the psalmist was restored to the “land of the living” (v. 9). This “salvation,” then, is the basis for the offering of vows in the temple in the presence of all God’s people (vv. 13–19)

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

thanksgiving, but they can be instructed by the psalmist’s experience. This psalmist knows about “distress and anguish,” about “tears” and stumbling,” but this psalmist also knows about a Lord who hears and who is merciful. The psalmist is not smug in having come through hell but provides a reliable and gentle guide through the darkness. The first theologians of the church heard the voice of Christ in the psalms, bearing witness to his own experience and character. Luther understood the psalms as the prayers of Christ. We may read this psalm as the testimony of one who “descended into hell,” who knows every inch of that territory and has claimed victory over everything that dwells in any hell we may have to endure. The 116th Psalm affords the preacher opportunity to appropriate pastorally that misunderstood and often bewildering affirmation of the Apostles’ Creed. The psalmist offers a word of hope and encouragement to those going through hell: the trick is to follow the footsteps of the One who has gone before you.

Others come to church happy, healthy, and without any apparent care in the world. May God bless them! To them the preacher can offer the psalmist’s song as a tune for a rainy day, a word for the wise when the time is not so cheerful and bright. We need not be morbid, but we should recognize that no one gets out of this alive. The day will come when sickness visits, when we cannot lift our head, when all seems lost, when it seems death has captured everything, and “the pains of hell gat hold upon me.” Life and death can have a way of silencing us, but the psalmist directs us to One who listens, who hears at that very moment we think we cannot be heard. That is a God worthy of our love and worship.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1

- ²⁶ For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.
- ²⁷ Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;
- ²⁸ for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.
- ²⁹ She is more beautiful than the sun,
and excels every constellation of the stars.
Compared with the light she is found to be superior,
- ³⁰ for it is succeeded by the night,
but against wisdom evil does not prevail.
- ^{8:1} She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,
and she orders all things well.

Theological Perspective

This passage is an extension of one in which the attributes (all twenty-one of them: three times the perfect number seven) are extolled (7:22–23). Indeed, wisdom is praised to such a degree that, although *she* (in Greek, “wisdom” is a feminine noun) is not quite a personification of God, she certainly is reflective of eternal light (whose source is God), a mirror of God’s actions, and an image of divine goodness (7:26). Saying that there is a close relationship between wisdom and God’s being and actions would be an understatement. In wisdom, one sees God’s reflection, looks at a spotless mirror of the *magnalia Dei*, and is presented with an image of God’s goodness. Wisdom, God, and godliness all go hand in hand. Wisdom, in a word, is revelatory of God.

The role that this vaunted wisdom plays is nothing short of astounding. Though singular in substance, there is little that wisdom cannot accomplish, including renewing all things. One of her functions is influencing holy souls to become not only friends but prophets of God (7:27). Wisdom has a ministry, so to speak, to make people close to God and to provide God with authoritative spokespersons. Surely wisdom is among God’s most valuable assets. Seen in this way, wisdom’s role is akin to the Spirit’s role as described in other places in the biblical tradition (7:25).

Pastoral Perspective

The Internet makes the knowledge of our culture available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We are bombarded by information. What happened someplace on the other side of the world just minutes ago is now in my living room. Our information devices are portable, so there is almost no place where the news of the world and of our friends is not coming at us like water from a fire hose. It takes great effort to unplug from the stream of information for even short periods of time, and many people have no desire to do so. Does this flow of information make us wiser? Being intelligent or educated does not necessarily make one wise. Wisdom is distinct from knowledge. It requires thoughtfulness and the ability to make critical judgments. To be wise is to combine knowledge with good judgment.

Yearning for wisdom is a common human experience. It is present in every culture. The major religions of our world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—share this desire for wisdom. The ancient Israelites had their own collections of wisdom, from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes.

The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon knew something of this yearning for wisdom. David Winston describes the book’s first audience as one living with a mounting sense of disillusionment

Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1

Exegetical Perspective

The Wisdom of Solomon, for Christians of the Protestant and Reformed traditions, is one of the deuterocanonical or apocryphal books. The debate about canonicity goes back at least to the time of Jerome (345–419 CE), who wished to follow the shorter canon of the Hebrew Bible, which did not include the Wisdom of Solomon, over against Augustine (354–430 CE), whose arguments for the larger canon found in the Septuagint prevailed in the church until the time of the Protestant Reformation.

The date of writing seems most likely to be sometime early in the first century of the Common Era. The place is probably in the Hellenized city of Alexandria, Egypt. The author (clearly not King Solomon of the tenth century BCE) was a well-educated Jew, possibly a contemporary of Philo. The aim of the book was to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism over Greek philosophy, for Jews and non-Jews alike, at a time when the Jewish community was under some pressure to assimilate with the Egyptian culture within which they lived.

The Wisdom of Solomon is arranged in three large sections: 1:1–6:21, an exhortation in defense of virtue and justice; 6:22–10:21, praise for Wisdom; 11:1–19:22, reflections on divine justice revealed in the exodus. The reading for Proper 19 is situated in the center of the second large unit, and would

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The Wisdom of Solomon seldom appears among the readings in Christian worship; when it does, even more rarely does it provide the preaching text. Preachers, however, can identify with this author, who so adeptly faces the challenge every preacher encounters, that of translating the faith of his or her tradition into language, vocabulary, and concepts that communicate to the people and circumstances of his or her time and place.

The author's time was the late first century BCE, and his place was almost certainly in a Jewish community in a Hellenized Alexandria, where the philosophy and religion of Greece and Egypt tempted Jews to leave the faith of their forebears. The situation sounds familiar. The author, who was certainly not Solomon but someone, male or female, appropriating the voice and authority of Solomon, tried to picture the Jewish faith as robust, sophisticated, and enticing. Most biblical scholars give this preacher high marks.

This text, brief as it is, may put us off with its grand rhetoric, but that is precisely the opposite effect from what "Solomon" intends. He means to invite us in. Read all of chapter 7 and hear Solomon assuring listeners, "I also am mortal, like everyone else" (7:1). Unlike the kings of the ancient Near East he is not a god, but rather he approaches God as a supplicant,

Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1

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Wisdom of this sort provides ample explanation for why God's love for the wise person is incomparable (7:28). Presumably, the person who is herself or himself infused with and possessed by wisdom will find it in themselves to achieve in some measure what wisdom achieves. The implication is clear. Just as wisdom reflects eternal light, mirrors the workings of God, and is an image of divine goodness (7:26), the person who lives by wisdom and exudes its qualities would be able to do the same thing. This is wisdom's version of being created in the image and likeness of God. Though a sovereign God who has created all things at one level is beyond compare relative to humanity, at another level, because humanity is made in the divine likeness and image, and because humanity is capable of receiving wisdom from God (see 1 Kgs. 3), an ordinary human being is nothing less than the reflection, mirror, and image of that same transcendent deity (see Ps. 8). This assertion simultaneously says something equally incredible about God and humanity.

Wisdom is not equal to God but has been created specially by God. Thus, when one compares wisdom to other divinely created elements, wisdom is superior. She is more beautiful than the sun and excels the stars (7:29). This is astonishing, in that these heavenly bodies supply the created order with the light and sustenance necessary for existence. As necessary as these created elements are, wisdom is no less necessary. Wisdom is not a frill or something that has been added frivolously as a nonfunctional decoration to the natural realm. Wisdom is functional and foundational for existence. Given the fact that God's creation of light preceded every other part of creation (Gen. 1:3), it is difficult to imagine any higher form of praise for wisdom. Just as the heavens and the firmament proclaim the glory of God and God's handiwork (Ps. 19:1) so does wisdom.

Indeed, wisdom is even said to exceed the importance of light, since the latter regularly has to give way to darkness. Logically, night follows day (7:29–30). Wisdom's superiority lies in the fact that, whereas night overwhelms the day, temporarily but regularly, wisdom is never overcome by evil. In this metaphor, day and night are not simply degrees of light and darkness, but stand for good and evil. In wisdom's case, evil has no chance. Wisdom is never overcome by evil, that is, moral darkness (7:30). Put starkly, wherever wisdom is manifest, evil will not be found.

Given all this, it is good to know that wisdom is pervasive "from one end of earth to the other" (8:1). There are no places where wisdom's properties are

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and disappointment.¹ The author wrote for a learned Jewish community, steeped in the Greek philosophical tradition, but living through a time of turmoil and upheaval. This passage about the nature of wisdom offered a word of hope in a vortex of despair.

The Wisdom of Solomon was written during what we can now see as a transition period. It brought together the experience and theology of Judaism with Platonism, the dominant culture of the day. The wisdom described is a combination of Hebraic and Greek ideas. Wisdom here is not purely abstract. It is personified, and this is an important distinction. Wisdom is "more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars" (7:29). "Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things" (7:27).

Many in our congregations hunger for wisdom and come to church hoping to find something that will make them wiser. One of the most beloved Advent carols is "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." The verse we most often sing first refers to Jesus as Emmanuel, that is, God with us. Some hymnals also include a verse that refers to Jesus as "Wisdom from on high." "O come, thou Wisdom from on high, who orderest all things mightily; to us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in her ways to go. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel." Part of the deep longing we have for a Savior is a yearning for the wisdom he brings. We want more than information. We want to be able to live wisely.

While those who are philosophically oriented may find the personification of wisdom from the seventh chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon beautiful and profound, others will find it lacking. It lacks a narrative, and thus it can be difficult for some readers to connect with the passage. How do those flowing words help me to live wisely at the office or at home? In addition, and more significantly, this portrayal of wisdom, while taking on human traits, lacks a body. The writer of John's Gospel and the apostle Paul pick up the universal yearning for wisdom but move it from personification to person. In John's Gospel, the abstract becomes concrete and embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

It was precisely the Christian claim that God became human in Jesus that many found scandalous. The apostle Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians,

1. David Winston, "The Wisdom of Solomon," in *The Anchor Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 43:3.

Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1

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better be defined literarily as 7:24–8:1. Verses 22–23 list twenty-one qualities of Sophia, personified Wisdom, and could be read with 7:24–8:1, but just as easily they may be considered a separate unit. However, 7:24–25 is integrally related to 7:26–8:1, and the whole should be read as one unit with two parts: (a) 7:24–26, a unit built around five metaphors dealing with the manner in which Wisdom communicates the power of God by its pervading and pervasive presence; (b) 7:27–8:1, dealing with the place of Wisdom in the world and her work with humankind.

The five metaphors used in relation to Wisdom are introduced by the declaration of Wisdom’s immediate accessibility to human beings. With technical terminology reminiscent of Platonic and Stoic philosophy,¹ Wisdom is described as “more mobile than any motion” and in her “pureness” able to “pervade” and “penetrate” all things (7:24). It is this all-pervasive and always “presentness” that makes Wisdom so effective.

The metaphors themselves are most instructive. Wisdom is a “breath [Greek *atmis*] of the power of God” (7:25), the Greek suggesting something like “a whiff” or a “smell” of God’s power. Wisdom is “a pure emanation [Greek *aporroia*] of the glory of the Almighty,” a phrase that suggests the notion of God’s essence overflowing in a creative surge (7:25). Such an idea was quite bold for one working within the biblical tradition, given the philosophical musings present in the writer’s Hellenistic culture.²

While the first two metaphors suggest the way Wisdom flows from the glory of God to ensure the immanence of the Divine throughout creation, the following three metaphors emphasize the transcendence of God. Though Wisdom is said to be “radiant and unfading” (6:12; 7:10), Wisdom is a “reflection of eternal light” (7:26), not the eternal light itself. Wisdom is “a spotless mirror of the working of God” enabling all to see and understand God’s ongoing creative action. Further, Wisdom is the “image of his [God’s] goodness” (7:26); not God, but the source of an accurate representation of God. Much later Christ with similar language will be referred to as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3), each text drawing on other aspects of the work of Wisdom as well.

1. Michael Kolarcik, “The Book of Wisdom,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5:503–4.

2. David Winston, “The Wisdom of Solomon,” in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1979), 43:184–85.

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asking to receive wisdom (7:7). Like everyone else he was born helpless and had to have his diaper changed and his bottom powdered (7:4), but now he says, “I learned without guile and I impart without grudging; I do not hide her wealth” (7:13), that is, the wealth that came from his answered prayer (cf. 1 Kgs. 3:3–14). The king who has the grandest reputation for wealth and wisdom among all the kings of the world (1 Kgs. 10:23–25) wants to share what he has learned! Who would not want to listen? When Warren Buffett makes judgments on the stock market, people pay attention!

Solomon’s exuberant praise of the feminine wisdom may distract us from her benefits. We need to tune our ears beyond the din of gender battles in our day to hear Solomon’s delight in his consort. Here the author brilliantly appropriates for first-century Jews the traditional poetry of Woman Wisdom found in Proverbs 1:20–2:18 and 8:1–9:6, and then contemporizes it, using a vocabulary provided by first-century Greek philosophy (7:22). Some preachers may be refreshed, remembering that the Scriptures happily make abstractions into characters in the drama of redemption. Here wisdom is a woman. When Isaiah envisions the Israelites leaving Babylon, he pictures God’s Victory leading them as Moses led them before, with the Glory of God bringing up the rear and guarding their back (Isa. 58:8). The psalmist does not conceptualize a final reconciliation but pictures and personifies it in a kiss shared between Righteousness and Peace. In Romans the characters Sin and Death—by no means merely states or situations—rule like kings (Greek *ebasileusen*, Rom. 5:14, 17, 21) until they are overthrown by the rightful heir, the “Glory of the Father” (Rom. 6:4), Glory having become an active character in the drama of redemption. In much the same way Wisdom is not a passive, inert concept; rather, it is nothing less than the creative power of God emanated into the universe and described in the most personal terms.

Solomon’s poetry is exuberant and excessive and refuses the constraints of systematic theology. Wisdom emanates from God and is the very image of God, yet is distinct from God, as if God in zeal had overflowed the banks in order to call the human creatures back to friendship with God (7:27). She is one, as God is One (Deut. 6:4), yet in the infinite magnitude of events she is active everywhere and in everything: “she can do all things . . . she renews all things” (7:27). That “she reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other” (8:1) should not be

Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1

Theological Perspective

not manifest. Without wisdom, which “orders all things well” (8:1), the likely result would be chaos. Once again, in the light of wisdom’s reach and her ordering ability, we observe a God-like function being exercised. To be sure, in many places wisdom has the nuance of insight, prudence, reasonableness, intellectual skill, understanding, discretion, practical knowledge, and the like; but wisdom is also more than that. Wisdom reveals something about God that is crucial for appropriate knowledge of the divine character.

Wisdom of the sort described in this important book is consonant with the association of wisdom with Jesus Christ, who, like wisdom, reflects and mirrors the very essence of God (Col. 1:15). From a young age Jesus is characterized by a growing wisdom (Luke 2:40, 52). He even sees himself as a personification of wisdom (Matt. 11:19; see Luke 7:35; 11:49) and compares himself favorably to Solomon’s legendary wisdom (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31): “a greater than Solomon is here.” It is little wonder that the crowds are depicted as astonished at Jesus’ wisdom (Mark 6:2; Matt. 13:54). In addition, like wisdom, the Word—which “became flesh and dwelt among us”—is the light that dispels darkness and is never overcome by it (John 1:5, 14). In the end, wisdom calls attention not to an anemic ethical abstraction or cluster of religious platitudes, but rather is reflective of God’s essential being, God’s gracious actions, God’s consummate glory, God’s incomparable light, God’s intimate involvements with humanity in space and time, and, finally, God’s unique incarnation in Jesus the Christ.

FRANK ANTHONY SPINA

Pastoral Perspective

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:20–25)

It is Jesus Christ himself who best depicts the wisdom of God.

All who would inquire after wisdom should turn their gaze to Jesus Christ. This is what true wisdom looks like: Jesus, fully divine and fully human, dying on a cross. It is messy and bloody. It is painful and disturbing. Lofty Platonic ideals and even personification fall short of the wisdom Christians know in the incarnation of God, and most especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Platonic notions of wisdom float above the real world in which we live, always beyond our reach, while the wisdom of God came down to earth to live and to die among us. The place where the knowledge of this world intersects Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God, is an exciting place to be. We discover what good judgment looks like. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we grow in knowledge and good judgment and become wise in our relationships and in our decision making.

NANCY A. MIKOSKI

Wisdom of Solomon 7:26–8:1

Exegetical Perspective

After utilizing this engaging set of metaphors to underscore Wisdom’s relationship with God, the author then turns to the work of Wisdom (7:27–28; cf. Ps. 104; Prov. 8; Sir. 24). In the preceding and following passages many more details of Wisdom’s work are recounted (7:15–22; 8:2–16), but here the emphasis is on the way Wisdom “renews all things” and enables “holy souls” to become “friends of God” and “prophets” (7:27). To be “holy” meant to be devoted to God’s way, to “fear God,” and thereby to begin the quest for knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5–6; 3:5–7; 8:13; et al.). Friendship with God denoted a very close association, like that between God and Abraham (2 Chr. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jas. 2:23) or God and Moses (Exod. 33:11). To be a prophet of God was equally intimate (see Isa. 6:1–9; Jer. 1:4–10; Ezek. 2:1–3:11). Wisdom’s work was to bring such relationship to pass, to bring humans and God closely together, in order to please God, “who loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom” (7:28; see also 7:14).

Wisdom has no agenda apart from actualizing the divine will. Returning to the language of “light,” the author compares Wisdom to the light of the sun and all the stars. Wisdom is more beautiful than the sun and superior to all the heavenly lights (7:29). Why? Because the light of the sun is succeeded by the darkness of night. That is not the case with the light of Wisdom. The light of Wisdom is of greater value because “evil does not prevail” over it (7:30). Rather unexpectedly and subtly a moral category is introduced into the presentation. “Darkness” becomes a symbol of evil, and Wisdom is the guarantor of goodness. To enable humans to live in accordance with God’s moral way is the aim of Wisdom. God’s light is often praised in Psalms for brightening the path and directing the life of humankind (see Pss. 4:6; 27:1; 36:9; et al.). With this light throughout the world, “from one end of the earth to the other,” Wisdom brings order, and thereby the possibility of justice (8:1, 7). By bringing humans near to God and God’s goodness, Wisdom seeks to encourage the moral order intended by God to prevail.

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

construed as a terrestrial limitation, because just as Solomon brought the traditional wisdom theology up to date in first-century Alexandria, so also the twenty-first-century preacher looks to the farthest reaches of the universe and recognizes that Wisdom is there, more beautiful than the suns and more excellent than the stars surrounding her. Contemporary physicists tell of multiple universes and stagger us with estimations of multiple dimensions, far more than our four experienced dimensions, but the faith to which Solomon invites listeners is up to the challenge: “she orders all things well.”

In her work of ordering “all things well” Wisdom shows herself to be not only the breath of God’s power, the emanation of God’s glory, and the image of God’s face, but also “the providence of God.”¹ Solomon’s poetry provides evocative images for preaching providence. So much talk of providence hovers over the gritty tragedies of human life. The Heidelberg Catechism (1562) gets to the heart of the matter, asking what is meant “by the providence of God?” and answering:

The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.²

That is one of the loveliest and richest explications of providence but it is still difficult to imagine that it comforts or reassures someone diagnosed with pancreatic cancer or who has watched as the drought on Wall Street wiped out a pension to trust that all this has come by a parent’s loving hand. The problem is not that the theology is incorrect, but Solomon and other preachers know that right answers can say too much when spoken too soon. Instead, Solomon invites us to recognize Wisdom’s work of renewing all things and, when we fear we have no friends, making us friends of God.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

1. Roland E. Murphy, OCarm, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 144.

2. Q. 27, “Heidelberg Catechism,” in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part I, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 33.

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PROPER 20 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18 AND SEPTEMBER 24 INCLUSIVE)

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–2:1, 12–22

16But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company. 21For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves, "Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life come to its end and no one has been known to return from Hades." 12"Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. 13He professes to have knowledge of God, and he calls himself a child of the Lord 14He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; 15the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange.

Theological Perspective

It is unclear who wrote the Wisdom of Solomon, but it was not uncommon in the ancient world for writers to credit well-known and well-respected figures from their past history. Scholars now refer to this as *pseudepigrapha*. Since Solomon was understood to be wise, it is not surprising that the writer uses his name in this book that focuses on wisdom.

The perception of the ungodly is a running theme in this, and the author attributes their iniquity to the belief that "we were born by mere chance" and that after death "we shall be as though we had never been" (2:2). The ungodly are hostile to the righteous, whose testimony of holy living is an affront to them.¹ The "ungodly" or "cynical" may have followed the Epicureans' view of life (1:16), where pleasure is the greatest good. If the individual becomes the chief component in life and disregards the community, it can lead to negative consequences. The kind of life proposed by the "ungodly" may lead to a sense of hopelessness.

We sometimes live in great despair, but that is not our choice. It may be the socioeconomic, political, and religious situation. Many people are living

Pastoral Perspective

In all but the opening and closing verses of this reading, we hear the voice and reasoning of the "wicked," upon whom the author's words in the last verse comment briefly and devastatingly. The literary device of presenting an argument or point of view as the speech of a questioner, commentator, or opponent is a common one within didactic Hellenistic texts like the Wisdom of Solomon. Paul uses this "diatribe" style in, for instance, Romans 2:1–3 and 3:1–2. Other than having a dramatic effect, in an extended speech, as we have here, the diatribe allows the reader to appreciate the logic, or lack of it, behind a claim.

After an initial statement of the philosophical premise behind their attitude and actions—that life is "brutish and short"—the wicked lay out their plot against the "righteous man." They give reasons for why somebody who trusts in God offends them, and they then propose what amounts to a practical demonstration of their wisdom and the righteous person's folly. They will seize him unjustly, humiliate him, torture him without pity, and dispatch him to as shameful a death as they can conceive. In executing it all, they will watch what happens. Will he deny his God, cry for mercy, turn craven, and try to hide or buy his life? More particularly, will his God do anything, will God rescue him, will God

1. Scott Tunseth, "The Wisdom of Solomon," in *The People's Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, edited by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Wilda C. Gafney, Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, George "Tink" Tinker, and Frank M. Yamada (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 1168, 1170.

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–2:1, 12–22

¹⁶We are considered by him as something base,
and he avoids our ways as unclean;
he calls the last end of the righteous happy;
and boasts that God is his father.

¹⁷Let us see if his words are true,
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;

¹⁸for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him,
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.

¹⁹Let us test him with insult and torture,
so that we may find out how gentle he is,
and make trial of his forbearance.

²⁰Let us condemn him to a shameful death,
for, according to what he says, he will be protected."

²¹Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray;
for their wickedness blinded them,

²²and they did not know the secret purposes of God,
nor hoped for the wages of holiness,
nor discerned the prize for blameless souls.

Exegetical Perspective

This text from Wisdom of Solomon, written by a Jew of Alexandria, Egypt, soon after that city's conquest by Rome in 30 BCE, urges faithfulness, hope, and acts of justice at a time of increasing tension, disillusionment, and persecution of the Jewish community. The writer does so by giving voice to the wicked or "ungodly," considering their logic, and showing how it leads to unjust, violent, and deadly consequences.

The lectionary reading is portions of a longer speech by the wicked (1:16–2:24). Framed by depictions of them as aligned with death (1:16; 2:24), the speech draws us into their nihilistic worldview, their rationale for a life of injustice. The writer quotes them as using language that is personal ("saying to themselves," 2:1), eloquent, and informed by both biblical traditions and Greek philosophy. By making their words personal, the writer holds the wicked accountable for their choices: they seek death, not the other way around. By making the wicked articulate and conversant in biblical and Greek thought, the writer insists that readers pay attention and not too quickly dismiss them as uneducated or naive. Rather, the wicked voice what some may regard as a plausible philosophy of life, albeit one that the writer judges at the outset to be "unsound" (2:1). Their reasoning unfolds in four steps. Because life is ephemeral and death is inescapable (1:16–2:5), it is right to seek

Homiletical Perspective

Most scholars agree that this Wisdom was written in Egypt, most likely in Alexandria, by a Jewish author trying to hold in balance the growing Greek influence in Jewish communities (indeed, this author writes this discourse in Greek) and the need to affirm the sustaining power of Judaism. The author is not asking for a backlash against Hellenism but rather for a reaffirmation of Judaism. In this sense, he or she has a "Reformed" viewpoint: claim the original power of the tradition, but also claim recognition of "reformed and always reforming"—a nice segue from this commentator, who is a child of the Reformation!

In these verses, the author affirms God's power over death. As our author weaves this tapestry of Judaism and Hellenism, the idea of a meaningful life after death is used as a lever to open up the possibility for a meaningful life *before* death.

In this reading the author begins with a sophisticated understanding of the power of death in our lives. The power of death not only threatens our personal existence. It also causes us to make deals in our lives with the fallen powers of the world. We make these deals in order to feel better about our fate and to diminish the amount of anxiety in our lives. In a prelude to these verses, the author cautions us: "Do not invite death by the error of your life"

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–2:1, 12–22

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in desperate situations of poverty, unclean water, no employment, or harsh working environments. These situations of disparity generate a sense of hopelessness, so much hopelessness that we cannot find the light that will drive it away.

This sense of despair is embraced by the stoics and can be articulated more clearly through the Asian concept of *han*. *Han* is a word that tries to grasp the meaning of sorrowful pain and unjust suffering. There is a sense of sinking down into the comfortable misery of *han*, but a *han* compounded by the rejection of faith. It is a sense of disparity that then in turn strives to pull everyone else into it. It becomes a call to turn away from God, because even if one embraces faith and hope, the ungodly will seek to heap miseries upon us. Being with the wicked can blind them and lead them astray (2:21).

The people's words and deeds summoned death and entered into covenant with it as it was all they could see. The rejection of faith in God closed them off to everything else. Even as far as Greek wisdom is concerned, they have lost even the possibility of both good and bad.

Many people around the world feel pain, sorrow, and despair; they hope to move out of *han* and into a place of joy, comfort, and love. We become blind to the evils that we do, but other people's misdeeds are blatantly obvious. We need to be open and clearer about our own problems, peel back the blindfolds, and confess our own wrongdoings.

Verses 17–20 are the crucifixion tale and can serve as a warning to Christian believers that this will happen. For Christians, the call is to follow Christ's example in times of trial. This can set an unhealthy precedent if one is not careful to avoid reinforcing notions of self-sacrifice, as it has done to women throughout church history. However, it does support the call to nonviolence and responses of love toward those who would persecute the believers.

Hopelessness and sorrow are exactly the opposite of the abundant life promised by God.

Thus the author probably wrote Wisdom to encourage the Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt, in the first or second century BCE. Some had abandoned the Jewish religion and adopted Greek philosophy or the Egyptian gods. The author wanted to show fellow Jews that the wisdom of God was better than any Greek philosophy or Egyptian religion. The author does this by bringing in a theme that appears in earlier books of Hebrew wisdom (e.g., Job), namely, why evil people are sometimes successful while good people suffer.

Pastoral Perspective

miraculously ease his pain perhaps or enable him to slip from his tormentors?

Of course, their assumption throughout is that the answer to these questions is yes and no respectively. They conclude this from the premise with which they start; the grisly business of murder is, so to speak, just the experimental confirmation. Though this plot is horrific and serious, it is presented to us as part of an argument, a particular claim about wisdom and the sensible course of life. As we listen closely, though, we discover that the reasoning not only is specious but is clearly a rationalization for indefensible behavior.

The starting point for the wicked, the premise upon which they base their claims and justify their actions, is readily recognizable. Life is short and, worse still, it is unpredictable. We cannot avoid sorrow and pain, and there is a good chance that we shall experience suffering of a kind that makes life itself a burden. Life is not fair. It holds out the blunt choice of seizing what pleasures we can, while we can, "enjoying the good things that exist," or wasting our time while we let accident, sickness, old age, and death overtake us.¹ What is worse, no recompense for sorrow or unfairness awaits us. Death is death. So why live as if this was not true? Why be unrealistic, and act as if there was justice in the world, as if other people did have some divine image or sacredness about them, as if anything we did meant anything to anybody other than ourselves?

It is important to see that this conclusion does not necessarily follow. This is not a watertight philosophical argument. The wicked "reasoned unsoundly," even in terms of their own principle. The Old Testament, after all, speaks frankly about our mortality but regards it as all the more reason for enjoying the blessings of the Law and the favor of God while we can. In a mood more like that of Ecclesiastes, we might urge a modest, sober life, eschewing large-scale planning but doing such good as we can reasonably achieve. Greco-Roman culture too drew different conclusions from death's presence. Stoics, Cynics, and Epicureans all recommended a morally dignified life, not wanton mischief. The wicked here are being led by bad desires, not just poor argument. They have ill will, and so put ideas to wicked uses. This becomes clear from the speech itself. The righteous man is "inconvenient," his

1. Scott Tunseth, "The Wisdom of Solomon" in *The People's Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, edited by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Wilda C. Gafney, Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, George "Tink" Tinker, and Frank M. Yamada (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 1168.

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Exegetical Perspective

pleasure (2:6–9) and to pursue power at the expense of those who are weak (2:10–11). Indeed, the wicked should act aggressively and violently to discredit and eliminate the “righteous one” who opposes their thinking (2:12–24). This is the life project of the wicked.

The writer begins with the utter devotion of the wicked to death (1:16–2:1). They summon it with their speech and actions, honor death as a friend, “pine away” for it as for a lover, and even “make a covenant with [it]”—a phrase that evokes descriptions elsewhere of the wicked making an agreement with death or Sheol, the underworld (1:16; e.g., Isa. 28:15). They do so because, in their words, human life is “short and sorrowful” (2:1). Whereas similar laments about the fragility of life uttered by, for example, Job and Ecclesiastes (e.g., Job 10:20–22; 14:1–2; Eccl. 2:16–17; 6:12; cf. Ps. 102:3) lead eventually to a reexamined faith and perhaps even an ethic of joy, the wicked are captive to their despair and regard life as without meaning or purpose. Indeed, death is so potent that the wicked reject such widely held notions as that people “live on” after death through their name, children, or accomplishments. Similarly, the “ungodly” dismiss beliefs that God has power over death or that there may be some sort of life beyond it (2:2–5). Rather, all too soon after death—like traces of a cloud or passing shadows—it is “as though we had never been” (2:2). So, the wicked argue, why lead a moral life at all?

It is not enough for the wicked to espouse their worldview and indulge in life’s pleasures (vv. 6–9), however. They must torture and destroy “the righteous one”—a singular foe—who counters them at every turn (2:12–22; cf. Ps. 1). Their rationale for doing so builds in intensity, escalating to a deadly, feverish pitch. The righteous one is “inconvenient,” foiling the plans of the wicked by opposing their actions, reproaching and accusing them (2:12). The righteous one professes a worldview starkly at odds with theirs. He calls himself a “child” (NRSV) or “servant” of the Lord (2:13, 16, 18), a phrase that evokes Israel’s depictions of God as a parent (e.g., Ps. 103:13), the king as God’s adopted son (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:18–29), and the Suffering Servant who, like the righteous one, is despised and condemned to an ignoble death (esp. Isa. 52:13–53:12). The righteous one has “knowledge of God”—a hallmark of a wise person and of a just society (e.g., Prov. 2:1–5; Hos. 4:1–3). He believes that the end of the righteous life is happy. Thus the righteous one identifies with, speaks about, and trusts in the God that the

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(1:12). In the closing of chapter 1 that begins our reading, the writer notes that we make death our friend by trading our definition as children of God for other definitions that require less courage and call for less compassion.

Most of us in Western culture make friends with materialism and give it so much authority in our individual and collective lives. We do this because we have believed the lies of death: that the products, the stuff that money can buy, are the arbiters of life and can make us feel so much better. Some of us make friends with militarism, coming to believe that the weapons of war and violence and death can bring us peace and security and life. To this list could be added other powers like racism and sexism, but the process is similar: we trade our birthright as children of God for a bowl of porridge.

In the first verse of chapter 2, the writer reminds us of our belief that death defines our lives: “Short and sorrowful is our life.” In many places in this book, the author urges us to consider an alternative approach, the life-giving and life-creating power of Wisdom, of the feminine side of God. In these verses, we see the prelude to that approach: do not settle for or with death. It is not that our author is raging against our mortality. Rather, we are urged to begin to see that God has defined us in a deeper way than simply being glorified dust, destined for death.

In the second part of our reading in chapter 2, our writer has an astute analysis of why prophets and truth-tellers are so often persecuted and prosecuted. These verses have echoes in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah, words also applied to Jesus on the cross. The Wisdom verses 17–20 seem to lead directly to the taunts to Jesus at the crucifixion: “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the king of Israel, come down from the cross now” (Mark 15:31–32). While the Wisdom words were not about Jesus Christ, they do apply to prophets in every age who go below the surface of life to detect the roots of the deals that we make with death.

The prophets of God in every generation remind us of our deals with death and also remind us that it is possible to live our lives in a different way. These voices proclaim to us that captivity to death is not the only way. That idea is the assertion that our personal identity survives death. It is often called the immortality of the soul. For Christians, the resurrection of Jesus Christ put an emphatic stamp of approval on this idea, but when these words were written, the concept of an afterlife was not yet completely formed in Jewish thought; ironically, the

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The author states that God will bring about justice when God judges all people after death. The wicked will be punished, but those who were faithful to God will live with God forever.² There is a sense of urgency to remain faithful to God, because it is easy to fall into temptation and begin to worship false gods.

This temptation is very prevalent today within our own context and culture. Instead of worshiping the true God, we fall into worshiping consumerism or Americanism. We falsely build malls and they become our temples where we bring our weekly tithes. We gather there as a new form of spirituality designed to make us all feel better about ourselves. There is overconsumption of food, raw resources, and material goods, which society perpetuates. As we become faithful consumers, we begin to destroy our lives and our planet. We in turn can cause *han* to others and to the earth.

This Wisdom of Solomon passage becomes an imperative message for all of us today. We need to remain faithful to God, which is to resist temptation and be true to God. This means heeding the eco-theologians who warn us that we are on the road of destruction if we continue to consume at this rate. We need to stop raping the earth and taking whatever we desire from it so that our lives will become more “comfortable.” If we do not recognize this road of self-destruction, there will be no earth to live on. We need to choose to whom we will be faithful. Will it be God or consumerism? The choice is ours, but the urgency to choose correctly is imminent.

Thus this particular passage is about the realities of life and the difficulties of trying to live in this world as “righteous,” faithful believers in God (and now God in Christ). This person puts ultimate trust in God to endure these difficulties, and so can we. Each one of us chooses either to be a blessing or to be a misery to others. Let us choose to be a blessing felt by others.

GRACE JI-SUN KIM

Pastoral Perspective

behavior shows them up, and his words trouble them. Their murderous design, then, is to silence a witness to a way they have rejected. The righteous one has seen something they have not, something that they cannot quite dismiss and that they fear desperately. He is “a reproof of our thoughts.” The righteous stand for an enduring and appalling, “What if . . . ?” His ways are “strange,” but perhaps—perish the thought—he knows something we do not.

The author describes the wicked with a grim but superb irony: they “summoned death, considering him a friend.” What does it mean to make friends with death? It might mean, as it did for Plato’s Socrates, pursuing wisdom without regard to bodily comforts, wealth, or worldly success. In modern philosophies, particularly those inspired by Heidegger, it might mean living without illusions, with an integrity that comes from accepting our mortality. The wicked, though, make friends with death by using it for their personal advantage: they take death as a reason for rejecting responsibility and pursuing reckless, egocentric desires.

If, though, we trust in God, this friendship with death appears in all its self-dooming force. The wicked have only a little life, so they must scramble, scratch, and struggle for as much of the scarce supply as they can get. They are destined for violence and disappointment. This is their hopeless blindness; they cannot conceive of life except as a limited, oversubscribed commodity. Those who trust in God, however, are friends with life, with the One who gives all life and still has it in abundance.

No Christian can hear this passage without thinking of Jesus. The logic of the wicked is familiar too. It is a deep logic of our lives, and only the wisdom of God is deeper. The reasoning of the wicked appears in all the limitations of our generosity and in our corporate life, for instance, in our choice of short-term political gains over wise stewardship. We push off suffering to succeeding generations, and we squander the sacrifices of past ones. That is why we must hear what this lection does not say: that Jesus, the righteous One, died for the wicked, that we might open our eyes, renounce death and its temptations, and live.

ALAN GREGORY

2. Wis. 2:6. The passage omitted from the lection expands on the argument from the shortness and severity of life, urging the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure. We should “crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither,” presumably a source for Robert Herrick’s “gather ye rosebuds whilst ye may,” which has received proverbial status.

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16–2:1, 12–22

Exegetical Perspective

wicked deny. Indeed, the very sight of the righteous person—his existence and “manner of life”—now strange to the wicked, is a stark reminder that they chose a path away from “the law” and “their training” (vv. 12–15). In turn, they are certain that he looks on them with disdain, regarding them as “unclean” and corrupt (v. 16). Thus the wicked devise their brutal attack of the righteous one, beginning with the familiar plan to “lie in wait” for him (e.g., Prov. 1:11–14; Ps. 10:8–11), and progressing to insult, torture, and finally the sentencing of him to a shameful death so that they might test his claims.

In the end, the writer judges the logic of the wicked to be foolishness (vv. 21–22). Like fools, the wicked wander in their paths, their vision is distorted, and—although they profess to know—they in fact do “not know” (v. 22). The problem is not that they wrestle with the reality of death and the value of human life in the face of it. Such is a long and honest struggle of many in the world. The problem is that the wicked conclude that death devalues life altogether. It renders meaningless any sense of accountability to others. It makes pointless any advocacy for the vulnerable, any acts of justice for the weak. Ironically, it gives the wicked all-too-easy recourse to death-dealing themselves. The result is a vicious cycle of despair and violence that imperils everyone. The writer thus urges his community to discern the world and themselves in it differently—to respond in perilous times, not with disdain and destruction, but with trust in the purposes of God, hope, and belief in God’s power and relevance.

CHRISTINE ROY YODER

Homiletical Perspective

origins of such beliefs lie in Zoroastrian and Greek culture and were later applied to Judaism (and through Judaism to Christianity).

Prophets pay a great price for exposing our deals with death; they suffer isolation, persecution, prosecution, and execution. The Jewish and Christian martyrs were an astounding reminder to the Roman Empire that there was a power deeper and wider and more profound than it, a power based in love, justice, and compassion rather than in death, violence, and exploitation. No system of power in any age or any place likes to be reminded of this truth of Wisdom.

This Wisdom reading is not a clarion call to courage nor a joyful proclamation of the resurrection; there is no “I have seen the Lord!” here. Rather, it is a warning of the dire consequences of turning our lives over to death. Our spirits start to die long before our heart stops beating or our brain cells stop functioning. “Dead people walking,” we might call this, to recall yet another power that makes friends with death and makes us feel better, as the United States remains the last Western nation that believes in the efficacy of the death penalty.

The Wisdom here, then, first of all, is recognition of the fact that all of us are caught in the labyrinth of mortality, and that all of us seek to make friends with death in our own way. Second, the writer asks us to consider a life-giving alternative, the recognition that God is the author and power of life. God offers us the opportunity to participate in that life-giving power, both in this life and beyond, through God’s feminine side, Wisdom.

NIBS STROUPE

PROPER 20 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18 AND SEPTEMBER 24 INCLUSIVE)

Jeremiah 11:18–20

¹⁸It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew;
then you showed me their evil deeds.

¹⁹But I was like a gentle lamb
led to the slaughter.
And I did not know it was against me
that they devised schemes, saying,

Theological Perspective

The ministry of the prophet Jeremiah was fraught with difficulties. Through the whole book, Jeremiah faces challenges and dangers.

Jeremiah 11 recounts the blistering words of YHWH against the people of Israel for breaking the covenant and for idolatry in “making offerings to Baal” (11:17; cf. 17:1–17). Jeremiah delivered this message to the people to whom he was called to minister.

The result, in our passage, is that God has made known to Jeremiah a plot against his life (by the “people of Anathoth,” v. 21). Jeremiah feels like a “gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (cf. Isa. 53:7) as his enemies “devised schemes” to destroy him and “cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!” (v. 19).

Surely here is a prophet in trouble. He is lamenting. His laments have much in common with laments throughout the book of Psalms (Pss. 56:5; 140:2), many of which involve a person accused or threatened, unjustly. Like the Psalms, Jeremiah’s laments are “deeply moving articulations of grief and consternation that are brought to speech in powerful ways.”¹ Since the activities of Jeremiah that stir up the rancor and hatred against him are associated

1. Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 180.

Pastoral Perspective

When God reveals to Jeremiah that people from his hometown are plotting to kill him (vv. 18–19; see v. 21), Jeremiah appeals to God to bring “your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause” (v. 20). This is a remarkably confident prayer. It assumes that if God is righteous, God will punish those that are scheming against Jeremiah’s life. Jeremiah is confident that God will act on his behalf. Congregations today may feel uncomfortable with this sort of certainty, and a pastoral approach might be to explain Jeremiah’s prayer in terms of lament. The book of Psalms provides many examples of lament, including several laments that specifically mention the psalmist’s desire for God’s retribution and/or protection (e.g., Pss. 7, 10, 13, 22, 31, 35, 41, 43, 59, 142). These prayers of lament express complete faith in God’s justice, even as they entrust their feelings of anguish, fear, and despair to God.

Jeremiah describes himself as a “gentle lamb led to the slaughter” (v. 19; see Ps. 44:11), which implies that he is innocent and does not deserve to suffer. The “lamb to slaughter” imagery also suggests that he has been led unwillingly into this predicament. He did not want this job in the first place (see Jer. 1:6), and now look where it has gotten him. It might be tempting to read into the prayer that Jeremiah is saying God “owes him,” but that would be a mistake.

Jeremiah 11:18–20

“Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
let us cut him off from the land of the living,
so that his name will no longer be remembered!”
²⁰But you, O LORD of hosts, who judge righteously,
who try the heart and the mind,
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.

Exegetical Perspective

The prophet Jeremiah is sometimes referred to the “weeping prophet,” because his prayers and oracles are full of angst and lament over the fate of his people. Like Moses before him (Exod. 4:10–13), Jeremiah protested that he was not up to the job of being God’s spokesperson (Jer. 1:6). Even though Jeremiah had misgivings about being a prophet, God continued to call on him, and Jeremiah’s prophetic career spanned many years, from the time of King Josiah to the final destruction of Judah and the exile.

Though the book of Jeremiah records many harsh oracles that Jeremiah delivered to his people, it also describes how much Jeremiah suffered and grieved for his people (e.g., 9:1). Jeremiah’s story shows that being a servant of God does not guarantee a life of peace and happiness. To the contrary, Jeremiah often felt sorrow over having to announce his people’s impending doom and over their rejection of his words. In today’s lesson, some of Jeremiah’s own people had turned against him and were threatening his life.

Jeremiah’s message was urgent, because Israel, the northern kingdom, already had fallen to Assyria. Judah, the southern kingdom, was positioned between mighty Egypt to the south and powerful Assyria and Babylonia to the northeast. As these superpower nations amassed their armies to vie for dominance, the tiny kingdom of Judah was little

Homiletical Perspective

This passage from the ministry of Jeremiah shows him as a prophetic messenger for God and one whose life is endangered by his faithfulness to his call. The language here is blunt and threatening as Jeremiah lays out his situation before God. The passage shares features of the laments found in the Psalms, in which there is a fully agonizing description of the dangers and difficulties being faced before the lamenter places all things into the hands of God, calling on God, the one who has helped before, to help again. Jeremiah’s extreme situation here as he faces a conspiracy against his life is radical. This presents challenges for preaching, since people in the pews will not immediately identify themselves with Jeremiah’s context or plight.

The preacher’s task will be to “translate” or correlate the images of Jeremiah’s language into meaningful insights for the congregation. There is not a literal, one-to-one correspondence between what Jeremiah experienced and what church members experience today. This, of course, is the situation also with the laments in the Psalms.

Nevertheless there are realities expressed in the texts and in Jeremiah’s laments that can connect with contemporary experience. Preachers will know parishioners who feel as though their lives are threatened, if not from hateful fellow citizens—like

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Theological Perspective

with his proclamation of the word of the Lord to the people—particularly the condemnations of covenant breaking, idolatry, and unfaithfulness—Jeremiah’s ministry is at stake in the “schemes” against him.

Jeremiah has been a reluctant prophet from the start. In his call and commissioning by God, he protested that he did “not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (1:6). But God promised to be with him. Even if Jeremiah were to face danger, God’s promise was there: “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (1:8). Jeremiah may anticipate difficulties. But he trusts in God’s word of promise. Deliverance will be forthcoming, backed by the promise of the faithful God who divinely appointed him to this prophetic task, even before his birth (1:5). Now, however, this promise is being put to the test. More than simply words of disapproval from the people, or jeers, or even minor incidents of rejection, things are serious since dangers abound—dangers that involve Jeremiah’s very life. The death wish against him is so strong that his enemies want to treat him like a tree, destroyed with its fruit, and want his memory obliterated from all memory (v. 19).

As with other laments, there is a turning point in this passage. Verses 18–19 indicate things are as bad as they can get. In verse 20, the prophet appeals to the One who called him to his ministry, to God, whom he addresses as “O LORD of hosts.” This title conveys God in all the might and power that Israel has known and that also characterizes the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 46). After lamenting his dire circumstances, Jeremiah turns to this God, who initiated it all. We can understand his words as “personal articulations of faith when the prophet discovers that his prophetic assignment from YHWH is more than he can bear.”²

Jeremiah reminds God that God is a God who “judges righteously” (cf. Gen. 18:25). This means God will providentially intervene and act on behalf of those who are being unjustly treated. This is an appeal to the character of God, as God has been known in acts in Israel’s history. It is an appeal, theologically, to God’s nature as embodying justice and acting faithfully in accord with promises to be the God of the people (Exod. 6:7). Jeremiah has reminded the people of this divine promise in the midst of the condemnations about covenant breaking (11:4; cf. 7:23; 30:22). When things are at their worst, the only recourse is to go back to the God who is the “LORD of hosts,” the God of

2. Ibid.

Pastoral Perspective

Jeremiah’s appeal to God’s righteousness and his own innocence merely affirms what he knows to be true about God’s justice. Jeremiah’s prayer comes out of a tradition that promises God will defend the righteous and punish the wicked (e.g., Deut. 27–28; Ps. 1).

Yet, as Jeremiah knows only too well, there are many times when it appears that God has *not* set things straight. We share Jeremiah’s consternation when we see the innocent continue to suffer while evildoers seem to flourish. If we read a bit further in Jeremiah after today’s lesson, we find that Jeremiah’s lament includes a question to God: Why do the guilty still prosper, and how long will mourning last? (12:1–4). “Why” and “how long” also are questions frequently expressed in the psalms of lament (see Pss. 6:3; 13:1–2; 22:1; 35:17; 44:24).

Some Christians are afraid to question God, preferring to content themselves with platitudes such as “It was God’s will.” Many of us have been taught never to confront God, that we should accept everything that happens as “God’s plan.” We can learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters that God is not daunted by our questioning. The name “Israel,” which all Jews share, and which Christians have claimed as the “new Israel,” means “one who struggles with God.” This struggling is illustrated by the story of Jacob wrestling with an unknown opponent beside the Jabbok. When he sees he cannot subdue Jacob, the divine emissary gives Jacob a new name, “Israel,” because he has struggled with God and with humans. Note that the mysterious wrestler refuses to give Jacob his own name in return (Gen. 32:22–29). Questioning and struggling do not indicate lack of faith, and faith must not depend on receiving all the answers we expect.

In biblical tradition, God sometimes turns the question back on the asker. In the book of Job, after much speculation about Job’s innocent suffering, God finally replies, “I will question *you*. . . . ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding!’” (Job 38:3b, 4). Job repents in dust and ashes (Job 42:6), and yet God rewards him for his steadfastness. When Jeremiah asks, “Why?” and “How long?” God does not answer the questions directly; instead, God asks Jeremiah why he has become weary so easily (12:5). The implication is that God has not stopped working toward justice, and if Jeremiah intends to work on God’s side, he needs to take heart and rejoin the race.

It is important to note that God does not forbid Job and Jeremiah their questions. It is also important to note that sometimes God answers by

Jeremiah 11:18–20

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more than a stepping stone and a future source of tribute. Judah's situation was precarious. This is not the first time the people of God had been imperiled by other nations. The books of Exodus and Numbers, in particular, recount many instances when the people complained against YHWH or turned away from YHWH to worship other gods, despite the threat of invasion all around them. In Jeremiah's time, many of the Hebrew people still worshiped Baal and other foreign gods. Shrines to these deities dotted the "high places" where such worship took place. Jeremiah, like prophets before him, believed that Judah's only hope for avoiding the fate of the northern kingdom of Israel was to put their faith completely in YHWH and to honor the covenant established at Sinai, which meant renouncing foreign gods and beliefs. In this belief, Jeremiah had an ally in Josiah, the king of Judah.

Around time the Lord called Jeremiah (1:2), Josiah initiated kingdomwide reforms that aimed to bring the people back to the covenant with YHWH. The "book of the law" (probably an early version of Deuteronomy) was discovered in the temple, where it evidently had been hidden for a number of years, or where it was planted by religious leaders who saw in Josiah a chance to reintroduce it (see 2 Kgs. 22:3, 8; 23:3). For the next years of Josiah's reign, shrines to other gods were pulled down from the high places, and the center of worship was consolidated in Jerusalem. During this time, Judah managed to hold off invaders from the north and south; indeed, Assyria's grasp of the region had begun to weaken. It seemed the reform was having its desired effect in strengthening Judah's resolve and faith in YHWH.

Of course, as in any nation, not everyone favored the changes being pushed through. We see this tension in the lectionary passage for today. YHWH has told Jeremiah that someone has been plotting to silence him. Worse, the schemers are from his hometown of Anathoth (11:18–19, 21). It is not a stretch to imagine that there are people from Anathoth who resent this local lad telling them that because of their apostasy, the Lord is planning to bring disaster upon them (11:1–13; cf. 3:6; 5:18; 7:8–11; 9:12–16). The people of Anathoth regard him as a threat to the status quo, to the established institutions and way of life. They plot to silence this insurrectionist, to wipe his name from the earth.¹

Jeremiah prays a very personal lament to God, saying he feels like a lamb being led to the slaughter

1. Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 125.

Homiletical Perspective

the people of Anathoth in Jeremiah's case (1:21)—then at least by forces beyond their control that menace them with "ruin" of many types. These can be broken relationships, financial reversals, health concerns, or even a sense of abandonment by God. The main feature here is the overwhelming sense of potential loss or devastation in some form. "Evil deeds" (v. 18) are being fomented against Jeremiah. Evil can be real for us too—in whatever form.

A sense of helplessness in the face of evil is found in the image of the "gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (v. 19). Jeremiah adopts this image to indicate an extreme sense of vulnerability. The expression is well-known to us today, even though we do not witness the slaughter of lambs, for temple sacrifices or for food. Weakness, powerlessness, dependence, defenselessness—all these are natural and familiar reactions in the face of powers that can destroy us. This legitimizes the preacher's association of today's threats with those of Jeremiah. No matter what our situation, we can all feel like the "gentle lamb led to the slaughter" in the face of gigantic and annihilating perils that can destroy us.

In Jeremiah's case, his enemies want to destroy him—like a "tree with its fruit," to "cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!" The effects of his enemies' intentions here are the same as what we can face today, especially in light of the greatest specter of devastation: death. Our death looms as an ever-present source of threat. As Paul Tillich noted, "The anxiety of death overshadows all concrete anxieties and gives them their ultimate seriousness."¹ Who does not feel like a "gentle lamb," faced with this specter in front of us? Weakness, powerlessness, dependence, defenselessness all take on present meaning when we confront our own mortality and the "unknown" that death represents.

In this regard, these texts from Jeremiah are appropriate and meaningful for all congregations. Beyond any specialized threats to our lives in whatever forms, the ongoing and current reality of facing our lives being destroyed—like a tree; and our lives being "cut off" from the "living"—has the effect of universalizing this Jeremiah passage as it speaks to our common human experience, especially our fear and confrontation with our own deaths.

The laments of verses 18–19 and the utter bleakness of Jeremiah's situation, and our own, is met with Jeremiah's affirmation of faith in verse 20.

1. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 43.

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Theological Perspective

covenants, and—for Christians—the God we know in Jesus Christ. This is faith. This is trust. God can be trusted and believed in because of who God is and what God does.

Jeremiah's plea to this just God is "let me see your retribution upon them." Jeremiah knows it is only God who can remedy his situation, the situation that God has "made known to me" (v. 18). Jeremiah sees himself as "righteous" in this case, since he is carrying out his ministry and proclaiming God's word as he has been called to do. Now, with unrighteousness ("evil," v. 18) threatening to destroy him, Jeremiah's appeal to God as the righteous judge with the power as Lord of hosts to intervene in this situation is Jeremiah's plea for God to set things right. Righteousness can prevail only when the righteous judge who knows "the heart and the mind" (v. 20) acts. It is to this God that Jeremiah has "committed my cause" (v. 20).

The language here is legal; "my cause" means "my (legal) case." In this context, Jeremiah's plea for "retribution" is not for blind vengeance. It is for God's just help in righting the wrongs and implementing the justice on which Jeremiah may rightly depend. The culprits are unjust perpetrators; the prophet is unjustly treated; the judge can be trusted to "do right."

Our own lives and ministries may sometimes be under attack. These attacks may be "unjust" in a variety of ways. Jeremiah shows us the way of faith:

1. We can express our deepest emotions before God (lament). No feeling found in us can be foreign to God.
2. We can appeal to God for help. God is our only, ultimate refuge. At points where all things seem most threatening, God is there. God is just . . . and merciful.
3. We can trust God to be "for us." If we, like Jeremiah, have "committed my cause" to God, we can believe in God's providential help to pull us through. This is a conviction of faith. We see this in Jeremiah. We also see it in Jesus Christ, who committed himself to God's will and purposes, even as he knew "they hated me without a cause." God is "for us," in Jesus Christ.

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

reiterating the divine prerogative, to which the only response is faith. "In a dangerous world void of moral certitude, God demands of Jeremiah—and all those who dare question divine justice—faithfulness and courage," writes Louis Stulman.¹ God does not prohibit lamenting and questioning. As a supremely moral being, God no doubt expects that we will share God's anguish over suffering people and ask questions about justice, because we are made in God's image.

Patrick Miller muses that questions of theodicy (God's justice) are inevitable, and perhaps more so among people of faith. Those with the deepest relationship with God are not protected from such doubt and questioning. In fact, such a relationship "may force us to ask them all the more sharply."² Miller's insight challenges us to develop a true relationship with God, complete with anger and frustration and misunderstanding. The closer we become to God, the more of God's love, righteousness, and sense of justice we take upon ourselves, and we cannot help but be incensed at the violence and exploitation all around us. Like Jeremiah, we may offer prayers of lament. We may ask why and how long. In return, God asks us to stay strong and not give up. The implication is that God is working side by side with us to achieve the justice we long for.

As Christians, we affirm that God came into the world as a human being who suffered greatly and who prayed a lament from the cross: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; Ps. 22:1). God did not abandon Jesus, or Jeremiah, and does not abandon us. We know that God is with us in the midst of the fray, and that God hears our prayers.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

1. Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 127.

2. Patrick Miller, "Jeremiah," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 6:677.

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Exegetical Perspective

(vv. 18–20; see Isa. 53 and Ps. 44). Though he expresses fear and anguish, his prayer is one of complete trust in YHWH. He laments his suffering, but he is confident that his God will hear his prayer. Patrick Miller writes that Jeremiah’s lament in verses 18–20 provides “a glimpse into the inner struggle of those figures who were called by God to an often demanding and, indeed, terrible task.”² Jeremiah, perhaps more than any other prophet in the Hebrew Bible, blames God directly for his pain and suffering.

A prayer of lament expresses grief, fear, or agitation, but also confidence, because the one who prays the lament knows that God is righteous. Jeremiah trusts that God will respond out of God’s desire for justice. When addressing God, Jeremiah speaks not of his own desire for revenge, but of “*your* vengeance.” This is not the prophet’s trivial prayer for retribution against his personal enemies, but his affirmation that God will restore justice for all the righteous.³

Christians will hear resonances within Jeremiah’s story: a prophet is not accepted in the prophet’s hometown (Luke 4:24); his own people plot to kill him (Matt. 12:14; 26:4; Mark 14:1; Luke 22:2; John 11:45–57); he is like an innocent lamb that will be led to slaughter (John 1:29; Acts 8:32; 1 Cor. 5:7b; cf. Rev. 5:6); and he sometimes prays in the form of lament (see Mark 15:34; Ps. 22:1). God raised Jesus from the dead, and in doing so demonstrated that God does have the last word over destruction and evil. Even as we feel crushed by evil machinations all around us, we know that God hears our prayers. Like Jeremiah, we can pray with confidence, because we know that God’s righteousness will be vindicated.

MARIANNE BLICKENSTAFF

Homiletical Perspective

Here he addresses “the LORD of hosts,” a title for God that hearkens to God’s royal power and majesty (Ps. 46:7, 11; Isa. 1:24; 37:16; Jer. 6:6; 11:17). God is Lord of all. God is able to accomplish all things and is sovereign over all the earth.

This God is also a God who judges “righteously.” So Jeremiah, in casting himself on the Lord of hosts, reminds God that God is a just judge, the One who is righteous and establishes justice. Jeremiah believes he is being unjustly attacked by his enemies. After all, he is only carrying out his ministry of proclaiming the will of God to the people. His message contains denunciation of the people’s sin—as covenant breaking and idolatry, among much else. This incurs the wrath of his enemies. So Jeremiah’s appeal is to the God he knows establishes justice, on behalf of those who are powerless, weak, and unable to establish vindication for themselves. Jeremiah casts himself totally—in trust—on this God who will be his help. This is the God of the psalmist who exclaims: “The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed” (Ps. 103:6). The God of justice brings vindication—in whatever form! (Ps. 24:5; 37:6).

This is the word of hope in the midst of all that threatens us. The God we know and worship—and for us as Christians, in Jesus Christ—is the God of justice and righteousness, who will ultimately “do right” (which is what righteousness means). Jeremiah seeks “retribution” for his enemies because he knows God will do right, and Jeremiah has “committed my cause” to this God.

In Jesus Christ, we see one who also committed his cause to God, who knew God would “do right,” and in the face of his sinful enemies endured the cross. God’s vindication was in Christ’s resurrection. The triumph of Christ over evil means now that in our own situations—whatever they are and however difficult we find them—we too can trust in the God of Israel who is the God of Jesus Christ, who judges “righteously.” Even in the face of death, we commit ourselves to God, just as Jesus did. With the power of death defeated, all other threats in life can be met—by our righteous God.

DONALD K. MCKIM

2. Patrick Miller, “Jeremiah,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 6:563.

3. *Ibid.*, 6:676–77.

PROPER 20 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18 AND SEPTEMBER 24 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 54

¹Save me, O God, by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.

²Hear my prayer, O God;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

³For the insolent have risen against me,
the ruthless seek my life;
they do not set God before them.

Selah

⁴But surely, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.

⁵He will repay my enemies for their evil.
In your faithfulness, put an end to them.

⁶With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.

⁷For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

Theological Perspective

This psalm is a supplication, an individual lament or a calling on God for help. The structure is a very typical approach and a model of Hebrew (and Christian) experience: we approach God in prayer asking for help (vv. 1–2); we tell God the problem (v. 3); we express our trust that God will help (vv. 4–5a); we thank God and commit ourselves to God (vv. 5b–7). It may be understood as a communal prayer of the embattled postexilic community.

In verses 1–2, the psalmist turns to God, who alone can save him, and asks for vindication, showing that he has worked for what is true and just. It is a very direct prayer and petition to “help me.” I am in over my head, and the water is rising still. There is a sense of urgency, and “you are my only refuge!” Today we may try to do something about an unjust situation and then find that those in power simply do not want change to happen. People like to maintain the status quo and do not want to challenge the comfort zone. During these times, our approach to God becomes the last resort—when it should be our first. When everything else fails us, we fear that God is too busy to hear us. We need to recognize that God is always with us and never too busy. The theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher put it best when he said that we need to have an “absolute dependence upon God.” This is something many do

Pastoral Perspective

“Save me, O God, by your name” (v. 1a). Psalm 54 is a “royal psalm”; the speaker is the king, who is pleading for deliverance, most probably from foreign enemies. The psalm has a simple, twofold structure. A supplication ends with the reason for the king’s prayer, “the insolent have risen against me, the ruthless seek my life” (v. 3a). Praise for God as deliverer follows, closing with the reason for the royal confidence and gratitude: “for [you have] delivered me from every trouble” (v. 7a).

The structure is straightforward, but translating the psalm is beset with a surprising number of obscurities and alternative readings for so few verses.¹ Even the nature of the enemy is unclear. A good case exists for “foreigners” and “barbarians” but the NRSV translates “insolent” and “ruthless.” Most important, though, as regards homiletic possibilities, is the last verse: “For he has delivered me from every trouble.” Translators have puzzled over why the psalmist suddenly shifts to the third person when he is addressing God. Alternatively, if this is a reference to another agent, who is it?

The answer takes us back to the beginning of the psalm: “Save me, O God, by your name.” The psalmist pleads for the intervention of God’s name and at the

1. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1985), 23–27.

Psalm 54

Exegetical Perspective

The superscription of Psalm 54 (not printed above) attributes this prayer to David at a particularly perilous moment in his rise to kingship. With Saul in relentless pursuit, David and his small army flee to the Wilderness of Ziph, a desert region several miles southeast of Hebron (1 Sam. 23:14–29; cf. 26:1–2). There they move between strongholds as Saul continues to search for David “every day” (23:14). There Jonathan visits David for the last time to again pledge his loyalty and urge David not to fear (23:16–18). The danger intensifies when the citizens of Ziph, still loyal to the king, report to Saul that David is hiding in the area. Immediately Saul sends a search party to discover and report all of David’s hiding places (23:23). On the run for his life, with Saul and his forces again at his heels, tradition tells that David prays this lament.

Front and center in the psalm is the power of God’s name. The phrase “your name” comprises an *inclusio* or literary frame around it (vv. 1, 6b). The Hebrew of the first two verses begins with the vocative “O God” (*’elōhīm*); at the psalm’s conclusion, the psalmist invokes the divine name YHWH, calling it “good” and the means of his deliverance (vv. 6–7). The psalmist thus calls on God by name and appeals to the power of God’s name to save him. The plea reveals the understanding that to know a person’s

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Whenever I read psalms like this one, my mind automatically goes to an image of war or civil unrest. Perhaps I can attribute this tendency to my youth, where I played “cowboys and Indians,” always seeking to be the victorious “cowboy” over the menacing, “insolent” Indian. My imagination has been deeply shaped by the belief that war and violence are not only inevitable; they are also necessary. An interesting mind-set for a minister in the name of the Prince of Peace!

Part of such a connection is also the tradition surrounding this Psalm 54 that it is a part of a set of psalms written by David in his struggles with King Saul. This one is seen as being rooted in 1 Samuel 23, where the people of Ziph reveal David’s hiding place to King Saul, who is seeking to eliminate David as a rival to him and his son Jonathan. David’s hiding place is revealed, and he feels vulnerable and betrayed and in danger. Many scholars do not believe that this psalm originated in this story in 1 Samuel, but the earliest traditions make the connection, and we can learn from that connection, whether it is original or not.

A sense of loss and betrayal and vulnerability are key themes in this psalm. Whether it comes from David’s heart or not, it definitely comes from our hearts. If we limit our response to war and violence

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not achieve, but something that we can all seek to do. Religious feeling is the highest form of thought where we become aware of our unity with God and thereby strive for this sense of absolute dependence upon God.

The psalmist has enemies whom he describes as strangers (v. 3a). God-fearing people in Israel and people today often face oppression from both powerful people and institutions. The psalmist's enemies are ruthless (v. 3b) toward others who are weaker than themselves. They are people without regard for God (v. 3c), unlike the psalmist, who can say "I keep the LORD always before me" (Ps. 16:8).¹ This is a model for Christians, as well. In situations like this, I cannot just tell the enemies that God is on my side, as it means nothing to them. We need God to get us out of every problem. God is greater than all things and situations. God will help and sustain us.

Verse 3c ends with *Selah* and is followed by the central theological assertion: "God is my helper" (v. 4). God is active in retribution on the psalmist's behalf. We can all identify with the psalmist's conviction that God's faithfulness requires some action against the ruthless. At the same time, the psalm's scenario of "God and I against them" does not seem adequate to a world that does not divide cleanly into "godly people" and "God's enemies." God is a God of mystery; as finite beings we cannot completely comprehend the infinite. God is beyond our understanding; thus, many times we who sit in the pews need to stop putting God in a box and presenting this box to the world. God is bigger than any box that we can find. At the end of the day, we need to give up and recognize the mystery of God. In doing so, we recognize our own limitations and are humble in our faith, something we desperately need to be.

The psalmist recognizes that "God is my helper" (v. 4a). Oppression will be eliminated and God's goodness will triumph and come to those who have faith in God. No matter what situation we find ourselves in, we need to trust God. God provides unique ways to help us and through which to love the world. God gives the community of the faithful, where our individuality is valued as a unique outlet of God's love and a way through which God's goals can be reached. We live in a covenant community that protects and cherishes each other's "me" as a gift of creation. This is a way God helps us.

This psalm begins and ends with a reference to the "name" of God. The name of God is important,

1. Cyril Okorocho, "Psalms," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 659.

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end of the song gives thanks that the name of God has effected God's deliverance. God's name is personified here: in God's name, God acts; and in God's action, God himself is present. Since names answer the question "who?" the name of God expresses God's identity, God's person. This reading of Psalm 54 opens up a christological interpretation. When God defeats the king's enemies, God reveals God's faithfulness; God shows that God remains true to the special covenantal bond God has with Israel's king. With reference to Christ, we may see this in terms of God's keeping faith with the condemned and crucified Jesus: God raises the "king of the Jews" from death. Alternatively, we may read the psalm in a Trinitarian way. Jesus is the "name of God," God's action as giving himself, fully present in and with the flesh of humanity. As God's name, Christ keeps faith with the people of God and will deliver them from evil.

Of course, the psalm does not say "evil" but "enemies," the "insolent" and the "ruthless." We are uneasy with imprecation. The NRSV itself fudges the emotional tone, so we have "my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies" (v. 7b). That preserves a certain distance: "Well, yes, I did see it, but that does not mean to say I liked it"! The psalmist did like it; he "feasted" on the ruin of his enemies, enjoying their dispatch with considerable satisfaction. If we choose to read this psalm with reference to Jesus, we should not do so as a means of ignoring the unsettling delight of the psalmist. What, then, are we to do with the royal gloating? The fact that this is the enjoyment of a king—and kings, after all, protect their people from enemies and might well be satisfied when foes flee—does not help us much.

For Jews and Christians, the Psalms have long been intimate texts; we hear in them our own voices and the voice of our communities. The first thing that imprecations and glee at the downfall of foes should do is make us honest about our own hatreds. We do have "enemies," we have felt the passion of hatred. We also know something of its dark exhilarations, the headiness of self-righteousness, the self-pitying but also warming grudge, the energizing fantasies of revenge. Most of the time, though, our hatreds have little more in them than the malicious indignity of an overgrown child. We let the rage of infancy have its way with us.

That realization, though, should turn us around to consider enmities more truly measured to their causes. When we read the psalmist's rage at foes or his delight in their defeat, we should think of captives tortured, of families driven from their

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name is to be able to summon him or her—in this case God, who can act mightily. Indeed, God’s name itself has force, as suggested by the parallel “your strength” (v. 1b; see, e.g., Ps 118:10–14) and by the commandment elsewhere not to misuse the divine name (Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11).

The psalmist begins with an urgent petition (vv. 1–2). Notably the cry is first for God to save him and second for God to hear his prayer. That the order is counterintuitive and disrupts a common pattern in lament psalms (e.g., Pss. 28:1–2; 55:1–2) intensifies the sense of desperation. Repetition of first-person-singular suffixes further keeps the spotlight on the psalmist: “save *me* . . . vindicate *me* . . . hear *my* prayer . . . the words of *my* mouth” (vv. 1–2). The psalmist insists that God immediately devote full attention to his life-threatening situation.

Such is the psalmist’s only hope, given the unrelenting focus of his pursuers (v. 3). He does not say why they are after him and reveals little about who they are. He identifies them as “strangers” (*zārīm*), a term that typically refers to outsiders—people not of one’s family (e.g., Deut. 25:5), tribe (e.g., Num. 1:51), or wider community (e.g., Isa. 1:7). The NRSV follows other textual traditions and emends the term to “insolent” (*zēdīm*). The use in parallel of both “strangers” and “insolent” with “ruthless” in other texts suggests either reading is possible (“strangers” in Isa. 25:5; 29:5; “insolent” in Ps. 86:14; Isa. 13:11). So who are they? The psalmist’s vagueness about their identity contrasts with his clarity about their inexorable search for him: they “have risen against me . . . seek my life” (v. 3a, 3b)—the latter phrase also used to describe Saul’s search for David (1 Sam. 23:15). Indeed, the pursuers are so intent on destroying the psalmist that they “do not set God before them” (v. 3c). The psalmist alone is in their sights.

With the particle *hinneh* (“behold!”), the psalmist shifts to express trust that God is not at all like the pursuers (vv. 4–5). Whereas they “seek my life” (v. 3), God is “upholder of my life” and “my helper” (v. 4). These depictions of God implicitly associate the psalmist with the righteous whom God sustains (e.g., Pss. 37:17; 119:16). With an abrupt shift from third-person to second-person speech, the psalmist calls God to act now to save him: “by your faithfulness, destroy them!” (v. 5b, my trans.). The psalmist imagines relief can come only with the enemies’ downfall.

The psalm concludes with a promise of thanksgiving through action and praise (vv. 6–7). So hopeful, perhaps certain, is the psalmist that

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or even to David’s story, we will miss the power of this psalm. Its power lies in the nakedness, in the vulnerability of the psalmist. The writer has had a revelation of how little control they have, of how their places of safety turn out to be illusions. In that context, this psalm will preach anywhere, at any time. In our discovery of how much faith we place in ideas and institutions and powers that promise safety, or how much faith we place in ourselves, sooner or later we will come to the verse that begins this psalm: “Save me, O God, by your name.”

This psalm reminds us of the universal human condition of alienation and longing for home, especially in the postmodern world where rapid change seems to be the norm rather than the exception. There is no end to the lists of enemies that seem to attack us and that seek to destroy our institutions that provide safety. From drones to derivatives to nuclear terrorists, the forces of cataclysmic change and danger seem to be everywhere, whether it is the people of Ziph revealing our refuge, or the seemingly intractable worldwide financial recession, or rising global temperatures.

In these places and in these times, we cry out to God. As the psalmist puts it in another place, “My soul thirsts for you” (Ps. 63:1). We should note here that this is not Psalm 22, crying out “Where are you, God?” Here in Psalm 54, the author affirms that God is available, and that God will do what needs to be done to save the psalmist. Here the psalmist is thrown back to the fundamental, bedrock belief that he belongs to God, that she is the sheep of God’s pasture. As the old spiritual puts it in “He’s an On-Time God”: “he may not come when you call him, but he’ll be there right on time.” While this is a psalm of struggle, because of the discovery of the unreliability of familiar friends, it is not a quarrel with God. It is rather a reminder of the fragile nature of our lives and of our dependence upon God in our lives.

The psalmist asserts that God will take care of business, that God will bring him safely through the valley of the shadow of death. On one level, this is a psalm of despair: my enemies control my life! As is the case in many psalms (see Ps. 86:14), here the enemies are seen as insolent and ungodly. The heathen (if they are that) have so much power in my life! There is a level of despair and helplessness that makes the psalmist cry out, “Save me!” (v. 1).

On another level, however, this is a psalm of faith and relief—faith in God and relief that God is not swallowed up by the insolent enemy. The

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and how we choose to address God will determine our understanding of God. For too long, the church has used noninclusive, male, patriarchal language to “name” God. In today’s global world, it is important to recognize all people and refer to God in nonexclusive ways. In a global world, it may be advantageous to talk about God using the word “Spirit.” Spirit helps us understand God in a light that moves away from gender-specific language and is more inclusive of people of every ethnicity, sexual orientation, and economic status. Divisions will be broken down.

The psalm ends with thanksgiving to God, out of sheer gratitude to God. It is not clear whether verse 6a is speaking of an actual offering or of a general attitude of thankfulness. Whichever the case, it speaks of a thankful heart resulting in an offering to God. The psalmist is grateful for deliverance and victory (v. 7). Christian believers should be grateful for God’s forgiveness because of what Christ has done for us. Jesus Christ has given us victory over temptation and over every kind of evil that threatens us and tries to prevent us from living for the service of God and others. With God’s help, all things are possible. We can try to do things on our own when it comes to challenging situations of injustice; however, we need to come to God for help in working toward justice and liberation.

In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi has stood up against a government that was unjust. This is at the risk of losing her family and her life. She has recognized the evil within a system that wanted only military rule and nothing else. It is a fearful thing to stand up against an evil and unjust system, but it needs to be done. With God’s help, it can be done. God is a God who helps, who hears our petitions and will deliver us.

GRACE JI-SUN KIM

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homes, of children murdered, of parents shattered by grief, of the raped, the swindled, and the persecuted. This is not just good as perspective on our own conflicts, but it puts us in our place, which is holding our judgment over the curses of victims, praying for them, and, where possible, acting. The scandal, the terrifying outrageousness of Jesus’ command, “forgive your enemies,” comes to light here, when we think on these acts of enmity. Then, when that forgiveness occurs, as it sometimes does, we shall be humbled at the wonder of grace, and we ourselves shall be summoned to the costly work of forgiveness. That, though, returns us to Psalm 54.

The dedication of this psalm (not printed above) refers to “when the Ziphites went and told Saul, ‘David is in hiding among us.’” The story is found in 1 Samuel 23:19–21. Having fled to the wilderness of Ziph, David is given up by his supposed protectors. This touches us all at some point, sadly. Few experiences enrage, grieve, or break us like betrayal. Betrayed trust is agonizing, because when we trust, we hand ourselves over; we are, as we say, “in your hands.” The betrayer then discards us, for advantage, or out of malice, or just because of indifference: we have become a thing to be used or trashed. Breaches of trust, small or large, place us, though, not just in the company of the royal psalmist, but with Jesus, who received that awful kiss in Gethsemane. We must follow him with our outrage, our convictions of injustice, our despair and humiliation, slowly learning the cost of love and peace, in his footsteps and through his grace.

ALAN GREGORY

Psalm 54

Exegetical Perspective

God will act on his behalf that he depicts his rescue as accomplished (v. 7). In an ironic reversal, he anticipates the moment when his eye will “look on” his pursuers—those whose eyes had so long been fixed on him.

Some readers find the psalmist’s imprecation and anticipated triumphant gaze over his enemies unsettling in its raw anger. Others recognize the life-threatening moment and have cried out similarly to God to set right what is terribly amiss. Psalms like this one give voice to human suffering in ways that are honest and vivid, unconstrained by conventions of polite speech or theological rightness. By doing so, they confront and challenge us with the realities and consequences of suffering and make it more likely we can work for genuine reconciliation and restoration. Whoever the pursuers may be, the psalmist’s plea to God situates us in immediate danger and reminds us that deliverance—when viewed from a position of helplessness and fear for one’s life—can be difficult to imagine apart from the overthrow of one’s enemies. So the psalmist calls out to God, trusting that God’s name has the power to save lives, and that God can and will act.

CHRISTINE ROY YODER

Homiletical Perspective

psalmist continues to believe that God will come to the rescue; he just wants to make sure that God is aware of the gravity of the situation. In the cry of this psalm is the despair of our individuality and fragility, but even more strongly the shout out that in these kinds of places, God will provide sustenance and support and rescue.

We all know the story of this psalm: our discovery that the world is fallen, that the world is not often a nice place, and that life can be a load of trouble. Perhaps more disturbing, that God is the creator of this world, this kind of world in which we live, in which there is so much suffering. We often seek to shift responsibility for this situation from God to the “fallenness” of the world, so that God can remain clean and above the fray. The author invites us to go deeper into the reality of this psalm, to acknowledge that there is a fundamental lostness and terror connected to our existence. Hence, the cry: “Save me, O God!”

The psalmist proclaims that this experience of lostness is not the final word in life or in our particular individual lives. The final word is the sovereign and loving God who is at the heart of the world and at the heart of our lives. The psalmist acknowledges that there are powerful, insolent words and beings that seek to insinuate that they are the final word. The psalmist continues to look for—and urges us to look for—that loving, powerful God. In the life of Jesus of Nazareth, we will hear new and radical words about the power of loving itself, but that is a text for another time. For now, yes, there are powerful, attacking forces out there and inside each of us. The psalmist reminds us that God is not overcome by these forces or by our surrender to them, that God will save us by helping us to find our true selves as the children of God.

NIBS STROUPE

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**PROPER 21 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 25
AND OCTOBER 1 INCLUSIVE)**

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

⁴The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” . . .

¹⁰Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child; to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

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Today’s reading reminds us that our life in God has nowhere else to happen but amid the messiness of our all-too-human communities. Whereas we are often surprised to find how the genre of complaint within Scriptures serves as an avenue toward the possibility of blessedness (“God heard their groaning,” Exod. 2:24), the text assures us, this time around, that the complaining of the people of Israel constitutes a rejection of their God. Against the predominant model of the lone hero, whose powers of individuality serve to turn the wayward remnant around, we will see that Moses is not alone with the enlivening and scrutinizing spirit of the Lord in the work of making life new and that the prophetic task itself, the inescapably social call to candor and clairvoyance, might not operate only within our preferred boundaries.

The Israelites have begun to bristle under the demands of having been emancipated, and the provision of manna, which had to be gathered, ground with mortar and pestle, and boiled, only serves to get them fantasizing over the fish, melons, cucumbers, and garlic seasoning they were once afforded under slavery in Egypt. The people cry out, and the Lord, we are told, becomes very angry. Interestingly, there is no distance, in this instance, between God’s displeasure and Moses’ own except when it

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Starting with the occasion that begins this reading, the narrative proceeds in two directions. On the one hand, we have God’s response to the Israelites’ demand for meat: God sends them quail, meat enough and to spare, but he also severely punishes the people for their rebelliousness. The other line of development gives us God’s response to Moses’ own complaint about the people and his capacity to lead them: here, God initiates a change in the structure and exercise of leadership over Israel. The lection for Proper 21 omits the quail story, however, and leaves us with Moses’ plea and God’s commissioning of the seventy elders.

It remains very important to understand the complaint itself, not least because we so easily trivialize what is at stake. Given the judgment that follows, if we interpret the demand for meat as “whining”—a surely predictable outbreak of the grumbles after weeks of living on manna buns with never a burger within—we simply fuel the caricature of a capricious and bad-tempered Old Testament God. This misses the point because much more is involved than grumbling. The complaint is a challenge to God, and a desperately serious one, so serious that the narrator is careful to mention that, though indeed the Israelites went along with it, the complaint began among the “rabble,” the hangers-on to Israel’s trek (v. 4).

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¹⁶So the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.” . . .

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

²⁶Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” ²⁹But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”

Exegetical Perspective

Numbers 11 contains two discrete judgment stories: the first in verses 1–3, and the second in verses 4–35. Both of these stories conclude with place names that reflect the nature of God’s judgment. Verse 3 identifies the location as Taberah, or “place of burning,” where the fire of the Lord burned against the people for their complaint. Kibroth-hattaavah, which means “graves of craving,” is the place name in verse 34; it is the burial location for the bodies of those who had craved meat. Though there are similarities between the two stories, there is also a significant difference. The first story reflects the general cycle found throughout the book of Numbers: (1) the people complain; (2) God gets angry and punishes them; (3) the people cry out to Moses; (4) Moses intercedes with God for the people; and (5) the punishment stops.

In this second story, there is no intercession. Instead, the people’s complaint about the meat seems to instigate Moses’ own complaint. God responds directly to Moses. God does give the people the desired meat (vv. 18–19, 31), but then sends a plague against them (v. 33). By selecting verses from the second story, the lectionary has reshaped the narrative so that it is less about judgment than it is about the sharing of God’s spirit and the nature of Mosaic authority.

Homiletical Perspective

Why borrow leadership fables about moving cheese and melting icebergs¹ when Scripture provides this one? This leadership tale is powerful, appropriate for all times, and eminently preachable.

The leadership portion of the text is “sandwiched,” if you will, between familiar stories about bread and meat, manna and quails. In fact, the sheer familiarity of the stories (probably more often encountered in the parallel passage in Exodus 16) may present the preacher’s greatest challenge. Fortunately, the take-away lessons bear repeating. The story of manna and quails exemplifies God’s nature as abundant provider. At the same time, it describes human nature. The manna shows our tendency to grow weary with what is familiar, and to be easily bored. The quails warn us to be careful what we wish for, because we might find it sticks in our teeth over time. Yes, there is plenty to chew on.

However, this lectionary passage lifts out the verses that comprise the leadership portion of the text. In these verses, YHWH transforms the leadership of the Israelites from residing exclusively in a single prophetic leader (Moses) to a more

1. For example, see Spencer Johnson and Kenneth Blanchard, *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1998); John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber, *Our Iceberg Is Melting: Changing and Succeeding under Any Conditions* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

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comes to Moses' voicing of a deep despair that drives him—like his fellow prophets Elijah, Jonah, and Jeremiah after him—to ask to be put to death. The gap between what he knows to be God's purpose for his community and what his people pine for has become a burden that his heart, mind, and body can no longer bear. Is he expected to carry—he needs to know—the covenantal vocation of his people alone?

Not at all, as it turns out. The Lord instructs Moses to gather together seventy elders, those who Moses *knows* to be verifiably practicing elders from among the people, and bring them to the tent of meeting, where God will confer with Moses and give (can it be divided up in this way?) *some* of the spirit that, up until now, has been Moses' alone to bear (Num. 11:16). Here we might do well to imagine that what is being handed over, in a visionary sense, is—at least as much as it is a gift—a grace, and a calling, even as it is also doubtless much more. What all are they taking in, pondering, hearing, and experiencing when the Lord comes down to them in a cloud? Ecstatic prophesying ensues among the seventy, but it appears to have been confined to the tent.

We discover that the spirit given to the elders in response to Moses' despair was *not* confined to the tent of meeting and, in a wider sense, will *not* be restricted, even when it comes to those rituals and spaces we take to be God-ordained. To Joshua's alarm, it is discovered that the spirit has rested on the elders Eldad and Medad, who skipped the tent meeting but are nevertheless prophesying. As Joshua sees it, there must be no uncredentialed prophesying, and he urges Moses to put a stop to it. Moses is scandalously unruffled and untroubled when it comes to the question of prophetic authorization: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" (v. 29).

Would that *all* of God's people were prophets! There is much to be made of this riotously comprehensive word of eschatological longing. It is often noted that one can read the entire Bible, skipping the first two chapters of Genesis and the last two chapters of Revelation, and miss the essential trajectory of ultimate cosmic redemption. With his casual, corrective word to Joshua's desire to somehow police the activities of the spirit of God, Moses anticipates the radically catholic word of the Lord to be spoken by Joel ("I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. . . . Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour my spirit" [Joel 2:28–29]), as well as the surprising note of unconcern struck

Pastoral Perspective

The outrage is twofold. For a start, insatiable greed is at root of this caviling about the lack of meat. The NRSV translation smoothes this over with "our strength is dried up" (v. 6), giving us an image of weakly stumbling nomads, fainting for a decent meal. The Hebrew *nephesh* refers to the life-force or soul; it is the word used in Genesis 2:7 to describe how God breathed life into the first human, who then became a living being. However, it also refers to the seat of appetites or passions. Baruch Levine translates *nephesh* as "throat."¹ These people are a vast maw down which endless food must be thrown, or else they rebel. More seriously still, though, the complaint strikes at the identity of Israel, of the people God is forming. The details of Egyptian fare are marvelously and accurately detailed: "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt . . . the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic" (v. 5). They imagine Egypt as a paradise of sufficiency, even luxury. In effect, they "rewrite history";² in that retelling, Israel, the people whom God freed from slavery, disappears. The work of God in creating and redeeming this people is untold, and thereby the complainers reject that work, deny who they are, and compose themselves as a different people. Before the face of God, they yearn for a past life when they did not know they were God's people. Sending quail, therefore, is not God's compromise; God is not negotiating with rebels. God's action certainly is not a revision of God's will. That is why the gift of quail must be accompanied with judgment. God sends the people meat to show them that the arm of the Lord stretches thus far and further. So God challenges Moses, "Is the LORD's power limited?" (v. 23).

The demand for meat, therefore, introduces two themes, that of sufficiency and that of identity. Both are developed in connection with Moses' leadership. In despair over the complaining, and knowing God too well not to worry about the consequences, Moses laments and rages at God. At this point, he sounds more like the rebels than a faithful leader: "Did I give birth to all these people, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom?'" God, Moses implies, has given him an impossible task with an impossible people, and a job for which he—and perhaps God too—is not adequate.

God answers by initiating a change in the form of leadership in Israel. Moses will have the support

1. Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, Anchor Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 321–22.

2. *Ibid.*

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary selection begins with the Israelites expressing their desire for meat in verse 4. Such a craving is not new (cf. Exod. 16), but the way the Israelites communicate the complaint is. With weeping, they list a number of specific foods they used to eat in Egypt: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. They describe this as that which they used to eat “for free,” or “for nothing.” It was the food of slavery and bondage; its availability came at an immense cost. Additionally, they contrast the food of their memories with manna. The lectionary omits verses 7–9, which explain the appearance and taste of the manna, as well as the miraculous way it would fall, like dew, each night. Unlike the food they remember, the manna came at no cost to them, wholly provided by God. It will be another three chapters before the Israelites say explicitly, “Let us go back to Egypt” (Num. 14:4), but in essence they are hinting at that desire to return to Egypt by saying that God’s provision does not suffice. Though the complaint is voiced by the Israelites, it is instigated by the “rabble,” or the “riffraff.” This Hebrew word only occurs here in the entire Old Testament. Some have posited that these instigators are a group within the Israelites, but others believe that they are the group of foreigners who came out of Egypt with the Israelites (cf. Exod. 12:38).

The lectionary then moves to verse 10, when Moses hears the people weeping. The text tells us that God became “exceedingly angry” (NIV). As noted above, instead of interceding for the people, Moses complains. Moses is concerned about the practical problem of where he will find enough meat to give the people (v. 13), and he asks God a series of questions, including why God has treated him so badly and why God laid the burden of the people upon Moses. Twice in verses 11–15, Moses uses the language “finding favor in God’s sight.” In verse 11 he asks, “Why have I not found favor in your sight?” In verse 15 it relates to Moses’ demand: “put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight.” This is the very same language that occurs in Exodus 33:13 and 17, when Moses interceded with God on behalf of the Israelites after they made the golden calf. There God assured Moses that Moses had, indeed, found favor in God’s sight. Moses is here using God’s own promise to claim that God should kill Moses.

God does not answer Moses’ request for death, but responds to Moses’ concern of verse 11 about the burdensome nature of the people. However, the lectionary leaves out God’s direct answer in 11:17:

Homiletical Perspective

decentralized form where the prophetic spirit has been apportioned among a larger segment of people (the seventy).

To most effectively bring this Word to a particular people in a particular place, the preacher must first determine where the congregational leadership is located within the movements of this story.

The story has five movements, each captured in a line of dialogue:

1. A hungry crowd complains (“If only we had meat to eat!”).
2. The exhausted leader hands in his resignation (“I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”).
3. YHWH has a solution: choose more leaders to share the load, and send to them a portion of spirit (“Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel.”).
4. The people and underlings resist (Informant: “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” Joshua: “My lord Moses, stop them!”).
5. Moses gets it (“Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”).

Those exclamation points are found in the text, which is worth noting. The drama is inherent in this passage, so do not be afraid of that factor. Which dramatic turn best describes the congregation’s life now?

Perhaps the congregation is stuck in complaint, whether for good reason or not. Perhaps the leader’s exhaustion is surfacing. Perhaps the need has arisen: to delegate, to decentralize, to commission others for the work of ministry. Perhaps the congregation has already taken steps to share leadership more broadly. Have any Eldads and Medads been discovered, prowling on the edges of the camp doing spirit-filled ministry? If so, how has the central leadership core reacted? Perhaps a faithful Joshua (often a clerk of session or treasurer) is sounding the alarm: Has this action been duly authorized? My lord, stop them!

Perhaps the congregation has embraced the all-powerful movement of the Spirit, but the Spirit is not going where the leaders expected it to go. What then?

How interesting that the portion of Spirit given to the seventy was taken away from Moses. Perhaps this is at the heart of why leaders resist sharing leadership. Will a portion of Spirit be removed along with the responsibility? Maybe we did not want the Spirit “off our back” but only some of the work. How does the mathematics of Spirit-division work, anyway? Did Moses miss what he lost?

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

Theological Perspective

by Jesus upon hearing that an outside party was performing exorcisms in his name (“Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you” [Luke 9:50]). Moses’ words also bring to mind the way the far-reaching promise of the downpour of God’s spirit (Isa. 44:3) would again defy the local expectations of those who meant to continue the teaching of Jesus, as well as those who believed it had been definitely stopped, in the account of the day of Pentecost (“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” [Acts 2:4]). The promises of God have a way of growing beyond the imaginative grasp of those through whom they are announced. Perhaps those in the line of Moses presume *and hope* as much. Perhaps faithfulness demands it.

Can we draw boundaries when it comes to the divine spirit that blows where it will? The poet Allen Ginsberg saw fit to prophesy that all humans shall one day prophesy one to another.¹ While prophetic discernment and testing is always called for when it comes to the questions of who does and does not speak *with* or *in* the spirit that is holy, and how we might be receptive enough to hear it, the hope that the spirit of God will be poured out on all flesh is deeply in sync with the tradition whose concluding text affirms:

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”
And let everyone who hears say, “Come.”
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.
(Rev. 22:17)

May we live up to Moses’ sigh of hope, as well as Moses’ expectation that the spirit will appear among us when our attempts at human community leave us at the end of ourselves. Especially at such times, may the spirit of God be upon us.

DAVID DARK

Pastoral Perspective

of seventy elders. The passage does not give us any details of their function, though Exodus 18 suggests a judicial authority over all but the most difficult cases. Again, this should not be understood as a compromise or as a concession to weakness. Rather, God is releasing what is potential within Israel, as this people grows and changes under God’s formative guidance. The society is evolving to meet new conditions, making a necessary advance in complexity, not regressing or falling from an ideal. In commanding the change, God also takes care to preserve the continuity. Moses himself chooses and “registers” the elders; they extend his authority, and it is from the spirit given to Moses that God takes a portion for the elders.

When they received the spirit, the elders “prophesied,” that is, they were overcome with a divine ecstasy, much as is Saul in 1 Samuel 10. This prophetic frenzy does not last, but the commissioning it validates does. The spirit continues with the eldership, a development that should make us cautious about the easy assumption that “charisma” is inevitably opposed to institutional structures. In the closing verses, we have the theme of God’s sufficiency once again. Eldad and Medad receive the spirit, just as do the others, and so God remains faithful to Moses’ choice. God is not bound by place or the small print of ritual process. For whatever reason, these two had not gone out to the tent, yet still they are commissioned. Joshua objects, presumably concerned that Moses might appear superseded, out of the divine loop, the institutional continuity lost. Moses’ reply, though, is that of one who no longer doubts the sufficiency of God. Do not be jealous, he says, as if there was only so much spirit to go around. God could make all the people prophets, and I wish God would. Later on, of course, through the prophets of Israel, that is exactly what we are promised (Joel 2:28; cf. Acts 2:17).

ALAN GREGORY

1. Allen Ginsberg, *Planet News: 1961–1967* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968), 15.

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

Exegetical Perspective

“I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on [the elders], and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.” Instead, it gives God’s instruction that Moses gather seventy elders at the tent of meeting (v. 16). From there, the lectionary moves to verse 24, where Moses does as he is told. In verse 25, God speaks to Moses, takes from the spirit that is on Moses, and puts it upon the seventy elders, who prophesy. Even those who did not come to the tent, but remained in the camp—Eldad and Medad—receive the spirit and prophesy in the camp (v. 26). This causes Joshua some consternation, perhaps because he perceives their prophesying as a threat to Moses’ authority. Moses is neither threatened nor jealous. In the final verse of the lectionary pericope, Moses says that, ideally, all of Israel would be prophets (v. 29).

In many ways, verse 29 is a key to understanding the entire chapter. A prophet is one who has a close, direct connection with God, who speaks with and on behalf of God. The people have complained to one another, but seem to lack communication with God. Moses’ answer to Joshua expresses the deep longing that all of them would have a close, direct connection with God. In such a situation, they would not be a burden, but could lift up one another as they continue on in the wilderness. Jack Levison explains that by taking from the spirit that is on Moses and giving it to the elders, God has endowed the elders with the distinction of Mosaic authority, to handle the cases that Moses could not.¹

Even as this text indicates Moses’ willingness to share authority with others, verse 25 is careful to point out that the elders did not prophesy again. Their endowment is only temporary, in contrast with the permanent prophetic gifts given to Moses (cf. Deut. 34:10). Though this lectionary ultimately affirms that Moses’ leadership and authority go above and beyond that which is given to others, his generosity and generativity demonstrate that he merits the accolade given to him in the next chapter: “Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3).

SARA KOENIG

Homiletical Perspective

The text raises these, and many more, questions. The most complicated section is probably the least familiar, revolving around Eldad and Medad. Is it safe to assume that these two had been chosen by Moses? The text implies as much. How, then, did it happen that Medad and Eldad were in the camp when YHWH reappointed the Spirit? Was it due to some fault? Not knowing those circumstances, how do we know if these two had proper authority? What exactly were they prophesying? Cannot we better trust a faithful Joshua?

Certainly how one answers these questions will have implications for church leadership, no matter what form of government is in place. This text asks difficult questions of any church with a hierarchy or system of delegating authority. Perhaps every congregation (certainly every ruling elder) would do well to wrestle with Eldad and Medad as frequently as with Joshua and Moses.

As Matthew Henry’s commentary on this text says: “We ought to be pleased that God is served and glorified, and good done, though to the lessening of our credit and the credit of our way.”²

Chances are good that the preacher will already have identified with Moses, the exhausted leader who is responsible for a whole lot of hungry people. This text invites the preacher to take the next steps. Have “the seventy” been identified? Has there been push-back from “Joshua”? If so, perhaps it is time to echo Moses’ words: “Are you jealous?”

Meanwhile, pay closer attention to the Medads and Eldads. Maybe it is not so important to figure how, exactly, they ended up prophesying at the edges. Maybe it is more important that they prophesy.

May the Spirit abide on each one who has been appointed the task of prophetic preaching.

RUTH H. EVERHART

1. John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 414.

2. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of All the Books of the Old and New Testaments* (Berwick-upon-Tweed, England: W. Gracie, 1807-1811).

Psalm 19:7–14

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
⁸the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;

Theological Perspective

Having announced that the natural universe is charged with the expressive grandeur of God and that the cosmos itself, what we see and hear of it as well as what we cannot, is the Lord's handiwork, the second half of Psalm 19 seems to want to shift its focus toward the Torah, the instruction of God, without at all abandoning the world of wonders that preceded it. In managing to do so, the Scripture accomplishes the work Wendell Berry observes is characteristic of the good poem, in the way it "exists at the center of a complex reminding, to which it relates as both cause and effect."¹ If it is indeed the case that verses 7–14 constitute a later addition to an earlier text that, as a stand-alone psalm, struck some as overly prone to encouraging an idolatrous understanding of nature, it might be all the more appropriate to receive it as a prayer and admonition that summons us to dwell creatively within the tension between the given revelation (oral and written) of our Jewish and Christian tradition and the strange, wordless speech of the nonhuman world. It seems clear that the work of proving faithful recipients of the complex reminding within Scripture will involve many a feat of prayerful attentiveness.

1. Wendell Berry, "The Responsibility of the Poet," in *What Are People For?* (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1990), 88.

Pastoral Perspective

When interpreting this reading, it is important to remember that this is the second half of a psalm that begins praising God for the order of creation and, specifically, for the ways in which it reveals his glory. We shall see the force of this later. Our verses fall into a threefold pattern. We begin with a series of celebratory descriptions of God's law. These are correlated with anthropological symbols of receptivity and understanding: "soul," "mind," heart," "eyes." The NRSV obscures this somewhat by translating a disputed word as "innocent." The parallelism alone, though, supports "mind," as it does the "edict of the Lord," rather than the "fear of the Lord."¹ These three statements are followed by a confession of the surpassing value of the Law. The psalm ends with a reflection upon sin, a prayer to be kept from "great offense," and an appeal to God that these words, and by implication, all that the poet composes, be acceptable to God.

By and large, modern Western readers do not respond with immediate warmth to this poet's sentiments or to similar ones found elsewhere in the Psalter. We imagine, perhaps, the strains of a long bus ride with someone bending our ear as to how "the law of the LORD is perfect and revives the

1. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 1–50*, Anchor Bible Commentaries (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1995), 123.

Psalm 19:7–14

sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Exegetical Perspective

By choosing to begin at verse 7, this lectionary selection acknowledges what has been recognized for centuries, that there are two distinct parts to this psalm. The first, contained in verses 1–6, describes how the created world bears witness to God’s glory. Verses 7–14 are a Torah psalm that, like Psalm 1 and 119, highlights the gift of God’s instruction and how it is the essential guide to life.

While Torah is often translated as “law,” its connection with the verb “to teach” makes “teaching” or “instruction” a better translation. In fact, this lectionary selection uses a number of different vocabulary words to identify God’s Torah, and the words as synonyms in parallel with one another together convey the depth and breadth of the meaning of Torah. The noun “Torah” (NRSV “law”) begins the list in verse 7, placed in parallel with “the decrees of the LORD,” according to the NRSV translation. However, this Hebrew word is a singular noun, which could be translated as “statute” or “testimony.” Verse 8 presents two other nouns: “the precepts” or “appointed things” of the Lord are placed in parallel with the singular “command” of the Lord. Verse 9 introduces the final two nouns: the singular “fear of the LORD,” and plural “judgments” (NRSV “ordinances”) of the Lord. Thus, God’s Torah is related to God’s statute or testimony, God’s precepts or appointed things, God’s

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Do we love the law? It depends who is asking, and when, and why. Are we reading about the corruption of a major corporation and grumbling about lawbreakers who wreaked such havoc? Did we just spy flashing blue lights in our own rearview mirror?

Do we love God’s law? It depends who is asking, and when, and why.

Psalm 19 is not long, but traverses a fair bit of ground. Many scholars see the psalm as a conflation of two earlier pieces: praising the God of creation, specifically the sun (vv. 1–6) and praising the God of Torah (vv. 7–14). Some scholars separate out a third section containing the psalmist’s response (vv. 11–14). The entirety of Psalm 19 is used elsewhere in the lectionary, and it is undoubtedly helpful to hold together the two aspects of God’s revelation: creation and law. A contemplation of the law alone, however, is always appropriate for preaching.

For three verses (vv. 7–9), the psalmist praises the law with a string of declarative sentences before turning to poetry (v. 10). It is almost as if one cannot adequately describe the goodness of the law with simple prose; metaphor is needed to contain this truth. “More to be desired are [the laws] than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.” It is easy to miss this shift from prose to poetry, which means we may

Psalm 19:7–14

Theological Perspective

Determined to tie the teaching of the Torah to the joy of lived experience, the psalmist catalogs its effects: it revives our souls, it renders wise the mind that at first blush appears simple, and it proves so disruptively clear that it illuminates our vision (vv. 7–8). Against the notion that God’s instruction is somehow divorced from day-to-day affairs or merely a side issue to the business of getting on with life, the Torah is testified to be both restorative and transformative, renewing and reconstituting our relationships with one another, a manifestation of the creative love of the God who permeates and sustains our lives.

When the psalmist speaks of “the fear” of this God as being pure and forever enduring, it cannot be rightly read as a cowering before a being whose prerogatives toward us are contrary to our life and livelihood. Instead, the fear of the Lord is lived recognition of our deep dependence, a sense of finitude well placed, in view of the dizzying imagery of the first half of Psalm 19. Those who know the fear of the Lord practice living in ongoing and conscious acknowledgment that our life and sustenance are the gift of God’s blessing and not the fruit of our own labor or acquisitiveness. The alternative to right fear of God, in this sense, is the trap of perceived personal autonomy. As Norman Wirzba reminds us, “Autonomy is but a hair’s breath away from alienation.”² The precepts of God deliver us from such death-dealing delusions, and it is in this sense that the psalmist insists we do well to desire them more than gold. To be delivered by them into a lively awareness of our own interdependence is to partake of sweetness not otherwise available to our senses (v. 10).

As our text has it, it is precisely the Torah that would keep us knowingly immersed (though we are immersed whether we know it or not) within the enriching, enlivening beauty of God’s good world. The possibility of becoming blind to it, of failing rightly to envision one’s place as a beneficiary and cultivator within creation, is a source of anxiety for the psalmist—an anxiety our text confronts with a prayer of petition. It is here that we ask, in praying the psalm, that we ourselves be made more capable and willing in getting clear of our hidden patterns of bent, reductive thinking, and that God aid us against the pressures of the insolently ambitious and hard-hearted who do not know (or refuse to countenance) the right fear of God and hold themselves aloof to the life-giving flow of creation (vv. 11–13). The

2. Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 68.

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soul,” then perhaps fussing over a “secret sin.” To some degree, we owe our prejudice to one-sided preaching on Paul’s epistles that crudely opposes “law” and “grace.” That, though, is by no means the whole problem.

We live, it is said, in an “expressivist” culture. Cultural generalizations of this scope are risky, but it is true that there are strong expressivist tendencies within modern, Anglophone cultures. We value spontaneity, self-expression, originality, individuality; we urge people to be “genuine,” to discover themselves, and to be true to themselves. This is a long way from being all bad; indeed, it is the crucible of freedoms for which we should give God thanks. However, it has also yielded, perversely, the conformities and mass manipulations of consumerism, fashion, and celebrity. Moreover, it certainly makes it harder to appreciate the psalmist’s delight in the Law, in the order that enlightens, guides, restrains, and gives stability.

Perhaps, to appreciate the joy the psalmist finds in the Law—his unreserved trust and confidence in its power to serve life and give understanding—we should think about both disorder and oppressive, hidden kinds of ordering. We also live in an age of migrations, of the movements of displaced peoples, of the undocumented, the stateless, and the unwanted. For the refugee fleeing a war zone, the family clinging to life in a camp in a famine-starved countryside, or those chased from their homes by criminal governments, life has lost its moorings. Communication is confused in crowds of strangers, and normal, daily tasks are halted by ignorance of “what to do.” There are traps, trickery, and violence as the reward of unwary trust: the reliabilities of ordered, lawful community have dissolved, and chaos threatens to take all.

Remembering this plight, which is the plight of millions, we can appreciate the Law as a necessary grace, just as the psalmist does. The psalmist revels in God’s Law, he knows it grants a sure footing, makes for neighborliness, keeps the wicked in check, clarifies dark disputes, and, in it all, raises us to the love of God. Thinking about this, we might ask about the political, legal, and economic ordering we take for granted. Does it serve security of life, and for whom? Does it encourage our flourishing, establish our dignity as made in God’s image? What about those hidden, oppressive forms of order, such as the justice that favors the wealthy, the manipulations of advertisers and political campaigns, and all systems of bribery and bias, favoring a few at the expense of so many?

Psalm 19:7–14

Exegetical Perspective

command, the fear of the Lord, and the judgments of the Lord.

The ways in which all these nouns are described are also noteworthy. Verse 7 in the NRSV refers to the Torah of the Lord as “perfect.” The Hebrew word here has the sense of wholeness or completion; in other words, this verse affirms that God’s instruction lacks nothing. This wholeness is quantified in the very next clause: “reviving the soul,” which is to say that it restores the power of life. The “statute” or “testimony” is described as “true”; that could also be translated as “truth,” or something that is “established, stable, or confirmed.” Its job is to make wise the simple, those who often go astray (cf. Prov. 1:4, 22, 32, etc.). Verse 8 explains that “the precepts of the LORD” are “right,” or “straight”—they are not crooked or misleading. Moreover, they give joy, and make the heart happy. NRSV describes the “commandment of the LORD” in verse 8 as “clear,” though the Hebrew word used also refers to the sun in Song 6:10 and could be translated “pure” or “radiant.” It gives light to the psalmist’s eyes. The “fear of the LORD” in verse 9 is “pure,” or “clean,” and lasts forever, while the Lord’s judgments are described, using the same word as in verse 7, as “true,” all of them righteous. Verse 10 completes the description of all of these as of greater delight than gold, even fine gold, and sweeter than honey, even the different kind of honey that drips from a honeycomb.

McCann points out that the psalm does not only have two parts, but three: verses 1–6 focus on creation, verses 7–10 on Torah, and verses 11–14 on the psalmist’s response to God.¹ This final section identifies the psalmist as the “servant” of God, who is instructed by this extensive Torah. Verse 11 affirms a biblical truism, that there is great reward to be found in keeping the Torah. The truism in verse 11 is prevented from being a trite cliché in the following verse, as the psalmist goes on to acknowledge that even the one who seeks to serve God could fall into error or commit hidden sins. Therefore, verse 12 ends with the imperative request for forgiveness from those things. Additionally, verse 13 acknowledges that there are external influences—the “insolent” or “presumptuous people” who could take the place of God in ruling over the servant—and asks for God’s protection from them. The psalmist concludes, “Then I shall be blameless” or “whole/complete,” using the same word that occurs in verse 7 to describe the Torah. Such wholeness gets quantified in the final clause of verse 13, “innocent of great transgression.”

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:751.

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miss the power of the text. To catch the hearer’s ear, try playing with fresh metaphors. For instance, *The Message* paraphrase reads: “God’s Word is better than a diamond, better than a diamond set between emeralds. You’ll like it better than strawberries in spring, better than red, ripe strawberries.”¹

The psalmist describes why, exactly, the law is so good: “Moreover by [the law] is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward” (v. 11). The law is sweet because it has a reward. This reward is an “end” in the Greek sense of the word: a *telos*, a goal. These words are a more sober approach to the sweetness of the law. This is the perspective of logic, of cause and effect, of warning. This is law as loving parent: Stand back from the fire. Do not play with the beehive. Do not drink and drive. These prohibitions are for our own good; they exhibit God’s never-failing care.

The psalmist moves smoothly into language that acknowledges even the law has limits: “But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults” (v. 12). Hidden faults are part of human experience, but how should we approach these from the pulpit? A century ago it was common for preachers to address this subject with candor. In 1857 Charles Spurgeon preached a sermon on “Secret Sins” in which he said that sin cannot be held in check, as if with a bit and bridle. A person says he is going to indulge in something just once, but becomes obsessed: “You will go there every day, such is the bewitching character of it; you cannot help it. You may as well ask the lion to let you put your head into his mouth. You cannot regulate his jaws: neither can you regulate sin. Once you go into it, you cannot tell when you will be destroyed.”²

It is no longer fashionable to warn of sin’s destructive power in quite this way. Yet this direct approach accords with the mood of verse 12. However, since earlier verses rely on metaphor to convey their message, this psalm indicates that either method—didacticism or metaphor—is an appropriate way to convey the message about the importance of following God’s law. Part of the preaching task is to discern which approach is most suitable for a particular people, place, and time.

Do address hidden faults. Today’s hearers are as obsessed as ever with the issues of secrecy and exposure. Consider our entertainment. Crime

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress), 932.

2. Charles H. Spurgeon, “Secret Sins,” from the New Park Street Sermon Series, #116, The Spurgeon Archive (<http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0116.htm>).

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redemption to which we pray we might yet hold fast is not an afterthought, but the ongoing activity of a never-not-redeeming creator God, one whose loving creativity and dynamically saving purposes will conquer death and degradation.

Holding fast, the psalmist understands, is in large part a commitment of the imagination, a determination to imagine well and truly—a mental fight we cannot cease and from which we must not shrink. The temptation and the tendency to distort and cut down to size, to trade poetic thinking for perverse thinking, is always with us. It haunts our conceptualizing as well as our speech. So we pray, with the psalm, that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts would follow that which is redemptive, worthy, and true of life, and is therefore acceptable to the God who supports and redeems (v. 14).

In its work of complex reminding, our text allows no distinction between our meditations and our immersion as practitioners within and beneficiaries of the natural world, and this is very good news. The word of the Lord *re*-members that which is otherwise *dis*-membered, and our work of worship is never unrelated to the pursuit of restoration of right relation. In this way, may our journey together overcome the dualism that destroys, and may our thinking and doing be a sign of God's blessed ordering of all things.

DAVID DARK

Pastoral Perspective

In contrast, the psalmist knows God's Law as illuminating, since it fosters peace and makes sense of life's difficulties. He acclaims its clarity, the gift of a lawmaker who has nothing to hide, no perverse agenda concealed up his sleeve. Those "secret sins" are probably the mistakes of youth; anyway, the light of the Law suffices for today and God can be relied on to cleanse us from that which is past or of which we are ignorant. The Law is there for study and interpretation; it is infinitely better than gold, because we all know where a society built on the power and urging of wealth gets us. Most of all, God's Law comes with the presence of the giver himself, who is praised and prayed to, and who helps in the keeping of it.

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer" (v. 14). This brings us to the heart of the ordering for which the psalmist gives thanks. In the first half of his work, he rejoices in God's ordering of creation, appreciating that it too, in its own way, shows God's hand. The heavens and the regular passage of day and night reflect and speak of their Maker and, for those who have ears and eyes for it, do so brightly and loudly. So the nonhuman creation displays God's own signature, God's faithfulness. The sun runs its circuit like "a warrior," never turning aside.² The psalmist is adapting a Canaanite hymn to the sun, dethroning the sun in favor of its maker, the God of Israel.

The psalmist then goes on to describe the Law, using the sun as his metaphor. The Law "enlightens," "shines," is "clear." That Law, God's gracious word to Israel, is the first light, and the ordering of creation is known in the light of that light. Put differently, God speaks, and does not leave us to work out his will and nature from creation. When we take creation as our guide, at the expense of God's revelation in Israel and in Christ, we are on the way to idolatry, the "great offense" of mistaking creature for Creator. Then we lose ourselves in "nature," submit to its processes as fate. For Christians, there is a light beyond the Law, but one that "fulfills the Law." With the psalmist, we give thanks for the Law of Israel, for its guidance and its revealing of God's will. Also, though, we apply his praise to Jesus, in whom God has shown himself fully and unreservedly, the light of the world and "the world's true Sun."

ALAN GREGORY

2. *Ibid.*, 120.

Psalm 19:7–14

Exegetical Perspective

The entire psalm ends in verse 14 with what may be a familiar petition; similar formulae of dedication are found at the end of Psalm 104 (v. 34) and in Psalm 119 (v. 108). The specifics of Psalm 19:14, however, highlight that both what is said, “the words of my mouth,” and what is felt and thought, “the meditation of my heart,” are important and ought to be acceptable to the God who is both “rock” and “redeemer.”

If the psalm does indeed consist of a number of parts, something gets lost when the beginning section is excised from the other sections. Of course, the entirety of Psalm 19 occurs elsewhere in the Revised Common Lectionary: in the third Sunday in Lent for Year B, for example, and in the Easter Vigil for all three years. However, in the full structure of the psalm, Torah is the bridge between creation and the individual’s response to God. Some have understood this to suggest that both creation and Torah are sources of God’s revelation and are equally worthy of praise. Others have understood the message of Psalm 19 as speaking of the inability of the created world, or natural theology by itself, to enable a full and salvific *perception* of God. For example, Kraus explains that humans are unable to understand the message about God from creation. Though the heavens may be declaring the glory of God (Ps. 19:1), humans need the Torah to help them perceive and recognize God, and it is only through the Torah that God’s will is made manifest to humans.²

Indeed, the Torah is an unparalleled gift from God, and one worthy of its own reflection as this lectionary selection affirms. In its entirety, Psalm 19 holds Torah and creation together. In so doing, it affirms that creation and Torah complement one another and together bear a fuller witness to God than either one alone could possibly do.

SARA KOENIG

Homiletical Perspective

dramas parcel out details that unravel the identity of a murderer so that suitable punishment can be meted out. Documentaries describe the real-life machinations of politicians and lawmakers so that we can understand the workings of financial bubbles and crashes. Reality-TV shows expose the previously unseen plights of addicts or hoarders so that we can learn how to find or offer help.

There is a human desire to see inner workings made visible, particularly if we suspect that the workings are hidden precisely because they hide sin. We are fascinated because we crave the benefits of law, even as we resist its constraints. Law produces health and enlightenment and a way out. If human law is good and helpful, divine law is even more perfect and more whole. We have cycled back to where the psalmist began: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes” (vv. 7–8).

The psalm ends with a verse that follows on the heels of confession and cleansing: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (v. 14). No wonder preachers intone this frequently. After we have confessed as a people and before we venture to preach the Word, this verse provides a fitting transition.

May the Spirit abide on each one who brings the law to the people.

RUTH H. EVERHART

2. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 275.

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PROPER 22 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 2 AND OCTOBER 8 INCLUSIVE)

Genesis 2:18–24

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ¹⁹So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with

Theological Perspective

This passage is part of the second Genesis account of the creation of humanity. The earlier description (Gen. 1:26–27) highlights the creation of “humankind” (Heb. *adam*) in the “image” of God. In Genesis 2, the creation of woman is described, a creation that supplements and completes the creation of “humankind.”

The garden of Eden is described here (vv. 8–25) as the place where “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (v. 7). The man owes his existence to the creative act of God and the animating, life-giving spirit (*nephesh*) that made him a “living being.” Thus the creator-creature relationship is established. The man becomes an expression of the divine intention to be related to the creation, the implications of which continue to be lived out in human history. Theologically, all creation—including the creation of the “man”—is by God. Thus humans are inherently dependent on God for the “breath of life” and all else.

However, this creation of the “man” was not enough. In divine benevolence, the Lord God realized “it is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner” (v. 18). God could have been the “partner” for the man, but this was not the divine decision. Throughout Scripture,

Pastoral Perspective

The Old Testament tends to do theology by telling a story, sometimes historical and sometimes using imaginative accounts framed as history. In the latter, the narrator(s) intend to reveal both something about God’s character and disposition toward us and something about human beings and our relationships. In the Genesis 2 account, the one, lone human being, though living in a lavish Eden, lacks something. God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (v. 18). Then, flipping the order of the creation story in Genesis 1, God creates the animals and birds, and parades them before the man.

What is it that the first man lacked? The obvious answer is that he badly needed some company! One can imagine that the companionship of a dog would be nice, or a horse, or maybe a talking bird. It seems that the need for community is woven into the very fabric of the creation. As God introduces each species, the man names them, the naming suggesting that each has dignity and serves a purpose in the common order. All life is interdependent.

Although gender has not been mentioned up to this point in the story, gender may be presumed, because plant life has already been created, and reproduction in many plants requires it. Not even a simple, subsistence agriculture is possible without

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flesh. ²²And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.”

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Exegetical Perspective

Genesis 2:18–24 is an etiology, that is, a story of old that explains a current practice or belief. This function of the text is revealed with the word “therefore” in verse 24. The text has been interpreted as if it is a legal text with binding moral force, but such a reading distorts its original purpose, which was to explain why intimate relationships between men and women are so common and strong. It does not preclude things like human friendships, devotion to a leader, subservience to a master, or any one of a variety of good human relationships.

The passage is set within the context of the story of the creation of society that stretches from Genesis 1 to 11. In the ancient Near East, creation accounts described not just the fashioning of matter, but the structuring of the universe into the hierarchical order that they viewed as inherent in the world. In Mesopotamia, these accounts often included a story of human rebellion that led to a clearer separation between the human and divine realms. These accounts usually depict the creator god as less transcendent, more humanlike. In those parts of Genesis 1–11 that refer to God as YHWH, the Israelite God is depicted as a creator god who does not have a fully thought-out plan at the beginning of creation.

This passage in Genesis is the second stage of the creation of a cosmic hierarchy. In the first stage of

Homiletical Perspective

Christians adopted the Jewish Bible as their own defining Scripture because, among many other reasons, it is a supremely communal book for God’s supremely communal people, both Israel and the church. Nowhere is this made more evident than in the Genesis account of humanity’s creation. Humankind becomes distinct from the other animals through the acts of naming and marrying. The aboriginal Man brings the plants and animals into their full being by naming them, and yet his own life can be sustained only within marriage to the primal Woman.

“In names lies the significance of things” is an ancient adage. To a large extent, everything is (or becomes) what it is named. Contrary to the familiar rhyme “Sticks and stones . . .,” names truly *do* harm or heal. To name an object is in some sense to control it. Hence the refusal of YHWH—who is *not* an object within the world—to be named by Moses (Exod. 3). The divine figure who does combat with Jacob at the River Jabbok thus insists on renaming Jacob, giving him the name Israel, rather than revealing his own name (Gen. 32). The first Man’s naming of all nonhuman creatures signifies his rightful lordship over them. He is thus charged with caring for them, precisely as God cares for him, for a proper naming also entails responsibility.

Genesis 2:18–24

Theological Perspective

God is often described as the “help” or “helper” for humanity (e.g., Ps. 121:1). Here God truly adapts to the need for an “other”—who is not God—to be the help needed and the partner God wanted to give. God recognizes and responds to the man’s need in realizing it is not good for the man to be alone. Solitude is not the fullness of life God has in mind.

So animals are created, and the man names them. This is not enough, for “there was not found a helper as his partner” (v. 20). This led the Lord God to a further creation. From the “rib” of the man, a “woman” was created (v. 22). The creation of the woman fulfills the divine intention. The man recognizes now that “this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (v. 23). Now there is a completeness and fulfillment in “humankind.” The “man” and “woman” together are the creation of God. They exist in the Eden context in relation to each other and in relation to God. The divine intention is now carried out with the relationships established: Creator-creatures; man-woman; woman-man. The man and woman exist in relation also to the rest of creation, including the living creatures who inhabit the created order.

The richness of this narrative has led in a number of theological directions.

God’s Accommodation. This story is the first biblical example of God’s “accommodation.” This term was used by early church theologians as well as John Calvin to indicate that God “adjusts” to human capacity. God is revealed to us through the human words of Scripture; God communicates in ways we can understand. Supremely, God has “adjusted” to humanity by becoming a human person in Jesus Christ.

God “adjusted” to the needs of the man for a “helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:20) by creating woman to be this counterpart. Man and woman share life and each other so completely that they may become “one flesh.” God provides for what is needed most, another person who is the same as, yet different from, the man. God’s accommodation is God’s graciously providing a person who brings a fullness to life that could not come in any other way.

God Desires Community. The passage begins with God’s recognizing that the solitude of the man is not optimum: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18). God’s desire is to provide for the creation and for the man who is created, but for whom the divine creation is not enough. It is God, not the man, who recognizes that “aloneness” is not the best

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something like gender. The newly created birds and animals, including worms and others that aerate the soil, are helpful to the man. Although they are helpful and even comforting, the nonhuman creatures simply are not able adequately to rise to the level of “partner.” For that, the man needs another human being.

There follows the story of the “deep sleep,” the rib, and another of God’s creative moves (v. 21). God takes the role of father of the bride, escorting her to her husband. The man (Heb. *ish*) recognizes that here, at last, is someone who is really kin, and, in a play on words, calls her *ishah* (woman). The point of Genesis 2 would seem to be that community, gender, interdependence, and intimacy are essential to the created order. No doubt this is why this text has been chosen to accompany the Gospel for the day (Jesus’ teaching about divorce), and it is quoted in Mark 10:2–16.

The text should not be heard as though God requires every human being to pair off. After all, there are, and always have been, persons who by choice or circumstance remain single, and happily so. Singleness is not a failure, nor does the lack of an intimate partner imply that those who are single are disconnected from the networks that link us in communities.

How should Christians hear this text in an era in which we have become sensitive to the fact that some people are sexually attracted to people of the same gender? Is there any relevance at all, any word from the Lord for us now? It has been pointed out many times that, as far as the biblical record is concerned, there is no evidence that people in those times recognized what we call homosexuality. It is aware of same-gender intercourse, but we learn of it only in cases of sexual exploitation or cultic prostitution. If biblical writers were aware of equals of the same sex being drawn to each other in loving sexual relationships, they leave no record of it. We, on the other hand, do know of it. Should we take Genesis 2 as categorically excluding a loving bond between two persons of the same gender? Can we, rather, hear the text more generally as a reflection on God’s provision of the possibility of an intimate relationship, with a “helper” and “partner,” recognizable to each as the closest thing to one’s own flesh and bone?

The last verse in the text—the one that immediately precedes the account of temptation and fall—declares that the two “were both naked, and were not ashamed” (v. 25). To understand this text

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this creation account (2:4–17), Adam is clearly subordinate to God, and the protection of this hierarchy becomes the driving force for the series of tragedies that will ensue. Genesis 2:18–24 also establishes the hierarchical relationships between humans and animals, and between men and women, but it does so in a surprisingly subtle way. Both animals and women were created to be “helpers” for Adam. He names both of them, and the account is told completely from his perspective. The hierarchical structure clearly assumes that, just as Adam is God’s worker, so too women and animals are men’s helpers.

Nevertheless the text is clear to differentiate between the creation of women and the creation of animals. The text slows down in order to give careful attention to the creation of a woman. She is not just another detail in the creation of the world. Her creation is deliberate, the culmination of various divine experiments, until God creates a living creature in a way that has never been done before.

The account of the creation of a woman is the answer to God’s statement “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18). This creative act is a quest for what is good, that is, human relationship. At the most basic level, this passage shows that the ancient audience believed humans were not meant to live as solitary persons.

God decides to create a “helper,” a term that does not necessarily mean a subordinate, but certainly one who will not have a different purpose than Adam. In many ways, the creation of animals fulfills this purpose; but the operative criterion they do not meet is that they are not a suitable “partner” for Adam. The Hebrew word here is a preposition that can be translated as either “corresponding to him” or “opposite him.” It is a deliciously ambiguous word. Surely the woman will be “like” Adam in ways in which the animals fall short (v. 23), but it also captures the ancient belief that women were simultaneously unlike men and yet the persons with whom men formed intimate bonds.

What sets the woman further apart, from both Adam and the animals, is that she is the first creature not formed out of the ground. The distinction is highlighted by the second half of verse 23, which depends on the Hebrew wording. The word *adam* is simply the gender-neutral term for human person. The feminine form of this noun, *adamah*, does not mean “woman”; it means “ground” or “soil.” The *adam*/human comes from *adamah*/dirt. The first creation story (Gen. 1) then distinguishes not between the sexes, but between living things and

Homiletical Perspective

The novelist Walker Percy discerned the significance of names in the childhood experience of Helen Keller. Blind and deaf, she began to emerge from her speechless state when she understood that the liquid flowing over her hand was linked to the letters w-a-t-e-r that her teacher Annie Sullivan was spelling into her palm. Keller ceased living as a creature adapting to her environment. She became a namer, a free and morally responsible person, who could communicate with others. The act of naming is a triadic event, Percy argues. Without a responding “Thou” to participate in the nominative act, the name-giving “I” cannot acquire its communal identity. The I and the Thou discover who they are in naming things both common and objective to them.¹ Neither can the first Man find his identity with the animals. Though he is a created being like them, they lack the capacity to become his Thou. To become fully himself, he requires community with another of his own kind and yet not of his own gender: a female coworker who will be his complement rather than his duplicate.

It is noteworthy that the Woman is taken neither from the Man’s head nor from his feet but from his side. This *lateral* mutuality indicates that neither partner is meant to dominate the other. The Woman is the Man’s side-by-side consort, more than his friend. Their marital bond finds its bodily expression in sexual intercourse, the physical union that makes for spiritual communion.

In a poem composed for the nuptials of his daughter, Robert Frost names the nature of such marital mutuality. He describes it with a pun on the word “speed.” Though the word has come to signify “rate of motion or velocity,” its original meaning was “prosperity or success,” as when we wish someone “Godspeed.” Frost thus commends the unhurried deliberateness that makes for true marital love. Like birds flying in formation, with their wingtips almost touching, husband and wife should live and work in tandem. With each partner oaring properly on his or her own side, the married couple will push steadily ahead: “Together wing to wing and oar to oar.”²

Scripture suggests that such mutuality, whether in marriage or friendship, cannot be maintained apart from faith in God. Accordingly, Psalm 24 points to the original creation story, with its paradoxical

1. Walker Percy, “Toward a Triadic Theory of Meaning,” in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Picador, 2000), 159–88 (164–65).

2. Robert Frost, BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2012. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/r/robertfros116807.html>.

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life possible. God's creation of woman as the completion of the creative acts for "humankind" indicates that the divine intention is for humans to live in relationship with each other. The bond between man and woman is expressed in the description that "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (v. 24). In their becoming "one flesh," the human race is propagated, and a sense of creation continues. Humankind becomes a human community.

The human community owes its origin to the creator God, just as do the man and woman. God's creation could have stopped prior to the creation of humans. It could have stopped with the creation of a solitary man. However, providing for "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" establishes a human, social community as the context in which subsequent humanity lives. Thus, as humans we recognize the relationality in our existence, an interplay of persons with each other—all as creations of the God who desires a human community. This is a primal and basic foundation for the character of life together as created inhabitants of the earth; it is also a basic ethical foundation for the human community—common createdness.

Mutuality and Equality. Some have seen here a divine mandate that woman be subordinate to the man, because woman was created from the man. However, as one scholar has put it, "the creation of woman from man does not imply subordination, any more than the creation of the man from the earth implies subordination. The subordination of woman to man is effected by the frustration of the divine intention of equality."¹

Instead of subordination, this passage points to a radical mutuality and equality of men and women, both as created by God. Both live and love on the same ground, since both have their origins in God's creative act. Beyond this, cultural norms and practices get established, but none should mitigate the most basic, theological reality: we relate to each other as common creatures of God.

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

would seem to require hearing it in the context of Genesis 3, when the *ish* and the *ishah* succumb to the temptation to know "good and evil." To "know," in biblical usage, is about not just intellectual knowledge, but experience. When the partners "know" everything ("good and evil" just about sums it up), they will make direct acquaintance with lust, the wandering eye, and sexual temptations that have the capacity for betrayal, secret liaisons, and broken pledges that call for the need to cover up. The narrator of the story imagines a time of innocence, when neither of the partners had anything to hide or any cause for shame.

There never was such a time, of course, but we can imagine such a state of being, and to imagine it is necessary to help us form a contrast with the way we know ourselves to be right now. We can imagine a state in which we would be able easily to master our own appetites and impulses, rather than being driven by them. We can imagine a state in which utter transparency, one to another, would be unthreatening, since we would have no embarrassing desires or wanton transgressions to keep hidden. That is not the state in which we find ourselves. We cannot bear to be exposed; so, in shame, we cover our nakedness.

Imagining an original state of innocence may be understood more realistically as a longing for God to provide the innocence that we discover all too sadly we cannot reliably produce ourselves. We long for a redemptive reordering of our lives—a reordering that strikes a chord of recognition when we encounter the promise of it in the gospel. It is God, our gracious God, who has planted in us both the ability to imagine ourselves differently than we are, and a longing for that very transformation that will create in us something like innocence. That transformation—a pure gift of grace—is the gift set before us in Christ, and his promise of the kingdom (reign) of God. "As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22).

RONALD P. BYARS

1. John S. Kselman, "Genesis," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 88.

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Exegetical Perspective

inanimate ones. Notice that in Genesis 2:5 the first animate being created out of the inanimate ground is the human (in contrast with Gen. 1:1–26, where humans are the last living creature made). The gender-specific nouns of “man” and “woman” do not appear until 2:23, with the creation of the woman. Scholars disagree whether to translate *adam* prior to 2:23 as a proper name (“Adam”) or as the generic noun “human being.”

Genesis 2:21–22 is the only time a human is born out of a male body, here accomplished completely nonsexually. She comes not from his seed, but from his very bones, fashioned while the man is completely passive, cast into a divinely induced deep sleep (see 1 Sam. 26:12; Isa. 29:10; Job 4:13 and 33:15). While text presents an ironic account of a person coming from a male body, what is surprising is that childbearing is not explicitly mentioned until Genesis 3:16. Here in Genesis 2 the woman’s sole purpose is to relieve Adam’s solitary existence. The success of this new creation is voiced by Adam, who declares that she is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (v. 23).

The stress on the intimacy of the bond between the man and woman closes this passage. Verse 24 uses strong language to describe the way that men form new families. The NRSV of verse 24 states that a man “leaves” his parents, but the Hebrew word also means “abandons.” In place of that severed relationship, he “clings” to his wife so fiercely that their flesh returns to its state of oneness again. Some scholars suggest that this “one flesh” is a reference to procreation, but the explicit meaning of the text is that the intimate relationship between men and women creates a partnership so strong that it is as if they are a single unit, working together, making each other’s lives better than they had been when apart.

CORRINE CARVALHO

Homiletical Perspective

image of God’s having wrought the solid earth out of chaotic waters. Yet the Edenic garden has now become the Temple Mount, the sanctuary where, in worship, Jews once ascended the hill of the Lord—a symbolic act perhaps indicating a final ascent into heaven. This is the wonder of wonders, the entrance of mere humans into the presence and reality of the God whose might and right are beyond all comparison.

Jews and Christians are agreed that to be found unworthy before God is the ultimate horror.

Hence the psalmist’s summons for God’s people to maintain their integrity before the Lord, receiving from him their true blessing and vindication. This requires a radically transformed life wherein our future hope is already present, at least partially, in the quality and character of our lives. The biblical requirements for such living are at once richly suggestive and morally rigorous. They require a radical truth telling, a veneration only of worthy things, a touching that does not contaminate the soul, and a heart that wills only one thing: the love and service of God and neighbor.

That these are also the requisites for marriage hardly needs saying, though Wendell Berry says it well. Most modern marriages, says Berry, constitute a form of virtual divorce. They often entail two successful careerists constantly asserting and defending their rights and privileges, and thus in effect negotiating how things are to be divided rather than united. Authentic marriage, Berry contends, is exactly the opposite. There the husband and wife belong not only to each other and their children, but also to *the marriage itself*—to that public and permanent naming of their relation that has been sworn before God and neighbor.³ It sustains them when mere romance fails, for “mine” and “thine” have been declared “ours”—as it once was in Eden—and in life that is forever more “wing to wing and oar to oar.”

RALPH C. WOOD

3. Wendell Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community,” in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 117–73.

PROPER 22 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 2 AND OCTOBER 8 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 8

¹O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.
² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Theological Perspective

Psalm 8 presents a glorious view of God and humanity. It is a keystone description of the greatness of God (vv. 1–2) and the dignity with which God regards humans (vv. 3–8)—all of which is a source of praise (v. 9).

The psalm conveys the primary emphases of biblical and theological anthropology in portraying humanity as related to God. Whatever can and may be said about “human beings,” first and foremost in Scripture, they are seen in their relationship with God, which conveys their very essence. In the psalm, God has “made” human beings (v. 5), is “mindful of them” and shows “care” for them (v. 4). These features of the Israelite view, expressed by the psalmist, also form a basis for Christian convictions. Part of the psalm is quoted in Hebrews 2:5–9, in relation to Jesus Christ, who defines humanity in its pure and perfect form.

In this regard the psalm is important for its focus on the most basic dimensions of existence: God/humans and their relationship. All other approaches to the study of humanity can tell “part of the story” in describing dimensions of human existence and experience. Only the theological expression of humans as creatures of God, who are cared for by God and are “crowned” with “glory and honor” (v. 5), can express the deepest reality about who human beings truly are.

Pastoral Perspective

The psalm for the day is chosen as a reflection of and commentary on the first reading, usually from the Old Testament. Psalm 8 serves that purpose for Genesis 2:18–24, although it echoes more closely Genesis 1, the first of the two creation stories. Psalm 8 is framed by two identical verses, 1 and 9, which praise God. Our prayer, whether public or private, is incomplete without praise and thanksgiving, not because God needs it, but because God is worthy of it, and we have a need to express it. Part of spiritual formation is to undertake the discipline of offering praise and thanksgiving, which is basic to shaping a eucharistic way of life.

Verse 2 seems to suggest that the voices of the innocent and the vulnerable may serve to discourage the enemies of God. The atheist may scorn the church and its faith, and mount arguments against it, but probably will not go into attack mode against the children’s choir! In some sense, those whose faith is simple and transparent may disarm those who would not attack preachers and theologians (who are capable of responding with counterattacks). It is one thing to disdain the faith of the archbishop or those who write commentaries; it is another thing to disdain the faith of the people saying grace over a bowl of soup made in the steaming kitchen of the homeless shelter.

Psalm 8

⁵Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 8 is a psalm of praise that focuses on humanity's place within God's creation. The psalm title (not printed above) states that this song should be sung "according to the Gittith," a word that appears in two other psalm titles (Pss. 81 and 84), both of which are also psalms of praise. Psalm 8 concisely paints the outlines of God's creation, with humanity as its central element.

The psalm's structure mirrors its conception of the ordering of the cosmos. At the top is God the creator, who fights the forces of chaos and creates the universe. Just below God are the *elohim* mentioned in verse 5. The Hebrew word is ambiguous. Grammatically it is a plural noun meaning "gods" or simply "divine beings." This lies behind translations like the King James Version, which states that the human person is a little less than "angels." The same Hebrew word is also used in other parts of the Old Testament as the proper name, "God." The NRSV translates the word in this latter usage, as an alternative name for YHWH. In this translation, humans are just below God himself.

Humans are also defined in terms of their relationship to animals. The poem lists them in descending order. First come domestic animals (sheep and oxen), followed by animals that can be hunted or harvested (beasts of the field, birds

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 8 sets forth one of the highest cosmologies found in Scripture. The Genesis claim that we are made in the image of God comes to its grand climax: the gargantuan avowal that God has bestowed on humanity a status only slightly lower than the angels, and that our species is thus meant to have lordship over all other created beings. From such declarations, the early church came to envision the entire cosmos as a grand hierarchy. Angels stand at the apogee, with humanity somewhat lower, and then all of the animals and plants and minerals (with their own internal gradations) still further down. Nothing is absurdly accidental or theologically inconsequential. Everything within the sacred cosmology resonates with moral and spiritual significance. Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* remains the indispensable account, though C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image* is also excellent. Lewis recalls his shivering boyhood delight upon first encountering this grand celestial scale in John Milton's sonorous listing of the five angelic ranks found in Scripture: "thrones, dominations, principedoms, virtues, powers" (*Paradise Lost* 5:601). "That line," Lewis confessed, "made me happy for a week."¹

1. A. N. Wilson, C. S. Lewis: A Biography (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002), 35.

Psalm 8

Theological Perspective

The psalm is a psalm of praise that lacks the conventional call to praise the Lord. Nevertheless it is an expression of deep passion and joy in proclaiming who God is and who humans are in relation to God. The place of human beings in relation to the rest of the earthly created order sets them apart from animals and is expressed in the context of what the creator God has given them (v. 6). Their task of “dominion” carries with it the responsibilities of their relationship with the “Sovereign” (v. 1).

The Glory of God. Psalms praising God as creator (Pss. 19; 104; 139) are powerful expressions of the basic reality that underlies all else. The God Israel worships is the creator of all. This God is addressed, “O LORD, our Sovereign,” or “YHWH, our Lord.” This address calls God by name, followed by a title. The psalm praises the majesty and greatness of God, which is known throughout “all the earth” (v. 1). No higher appellation can be given. The psalm addresses the One who is Lord of all.

God’s “glory” is “above the heavens,” further conveying God’s magnificence. Even “babes and infants” testify to the greatness of God, as a confutation to God’s (or the psalmist’s) enemies and avengers (v. 2). God’s majesty, strength, and glory are expressions of God’s being and character. It is this God of all, whose glory fills the earth and heavens, who is the all-encompassing reality to which all things must look in reverential awe.

Highlighting Humans. Given God’s sovereign greatness, it is a wonder that God should be concerned with human beings! This is the psalmist’s astonishment (vv. 3–4). The created order proclaims the handiwork of God to the psalmist. The psalmist writes as a person of faith, and so he easily sees the heavens as “the work of your fingers,” along with the establishment of moon and stars. The greatness of the cosmos is an expression of the greatness and magnificence of the creator.

What is wonderment is that the creator God is also “mindful” of human beings! Humans are puny in comparison with the theater of God’s glory displayed in nature. Yet the creator God remembers and is concerned with human beings. God cares for them, goes to them, and acts on their behalf (the Hebrew verb here often used in the Psalms in this way and is variously translated in English; Pss. 65:9; 80:14; 106:4).

Karl Barth pointed out that God’s mindfulness and care for humans is focused especially in the fact

Pastoral Perspective

The psalm celebrates the world as God’s creation, and in verse 5, the psalmist rhapsodizes over the honor God has given to the human race, having made us “a little lower than God.” Note an echo of Genesis 1:26, in which the Creator fashions human beings in the image of God.

What is it that distinguishes human life from other forms of life? What invites us to see something of God’s own image stamped on our nature? After all, history and today’s news make it quite clear that we are as likely as any of God’s other creatures to resort to destructive ways. What distinguishes human beings may be that we, unlike all the other creatures, have the capacity to imagine ourselves differently than we are. We know that it is a dog-eat-dog world, but we can nevertheless imagine a world in which the lion becomes a vegetarian, the wolf lives with the lamb, and warriors beat their spears into pruning hooks. We know that the world is easily divided into winners and losers, but we can imagine a world in which even the losers maintain dignity and respect and are not reduced to begging. We can imagine a world in which the very old and the very young are safe and secure, neither exploited nor preyed upon. The ability to imagine how things might be different than they are may be one way in which human beings bear the *imago Dei*. For surely, as Scripture testifies, God has imagined a new creation, and has begun to manifest it in Christ.

God’s gift to mortals of “glory and honor”—a reflection of the image of God—leads to the psalmist’s praising God for having given human beings “dominion” over everything God has made. “Dominion” echoes Genesis 1:28. Here is a word that can lead to a lot of mischief. “Dominion” can be, and often is, understood to mean that human beings are in charge here, and whatever we say goes. If it suits the bottom line to dump coal ash or chemical effluents into the nearby stream or river, what does it matter if it poisons the fish and those who eat them? If it is possible to sell elephant tusks to people who are persuaded that grinding them to a powder and ingesting them is better than Viagra, then too bad for the dwindling herds of elephants. If wetlands, teeming with life, are in the way of what might be a new subdivision or tourist hotel, fill them in and pave them over. If you want to exhibit an animal’s head on the wall of your study, or shoot a sandhill crane just because you can, even though you need neither for food, then what is the big deal? “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet” (v. 6).

Psalm 8

Exegetical Perspective

and fish). There are creatures missing from this list. There are no creeping things, reptiles, or chaos monsters, for example. These absences show that the zoological list reflects those animals over whom God allows human mastery.

The psalm also evokes divinely created spaces. There are three of these: the heavens, the land, and the sea. Beyond that is God's space, defined positively as "above" heaven, or negatively as decidedly not heaven. This negative spatiality reflects the way the poem depicts God's transcendence, which opens and closes with a clear focus on the sovereignty of God: majestic and glorious.

Verses 1 and 9 associate this majestic glory with God's name. In biblical texts, both God's "name" and God's "glory" were the aspects of God's being that dwelled in the temple. This theology asserts that God is only partially manifest to the human community. God's placement of the divine name in the temple represents God's claim on that space and provides a tangible means for the community to interact with God. The glory of God is usually associated with the light and splendor of God emanating from the temple, which signified God's indwelling in that space. This combination of God's glory and the divine name is seen in Solomon's prayer to God at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. When Solomon sees God's glory, he states that not even the heavens can contain God (1 Kgs. 8:27), and yet God has ordained the temple in Jerusalem as the place where God's name will dwell.

Psalm 8 also casts the human speaker of the psalm as a kind of royal figure. The human person is "crowned" with the same "glory and honor" (v. 5). Human superiority over animals is expressed by their dominion or rule over them. Like Solomon, human rule over creation is only a partial dominion granted by the true king, YHWH. Like Genesis 1:28, this dominion is given to all of humanity, not just to a single human king or royal family.

The focus of the psalm is on the wonderment of the contrast between the greatness of this God and the attention given to a minor part of the created order, the human person. The words used to denote humanity in this psalm are unexalted ones. The first word translated "human beings" (v. 4a) is a collective denoting the human species. The second word, translated as "mortals" (v. 4b) is literally "offspring of humanity," again designated the class of humans, male and female. In later Israelite texts, this second phrase in its singular form (son of man) becomes a messianic title, which may be behind the

Homiletical Perspective

Far from being static and oppressive, this sacred hierarchy is creative and communal. Those at the apex of the scale attend to those below them, while those beneath render service to those above. When Augustine urges Christians to "set their loves in order," he has this graduated spectrum in mind. We are meant to love all things according to their rightful place in this gracious hierarchy—lesser things with lesser love, greater things with greater. God acts through this grand ladder of perfection. "He does nothing directly that can be done through an intermediary," Lewis writes.²

The psalmist is careful not to place God within the cosmic hierarchy. His glory is set above even the heavens. Thus must Jesus' dominical prayer addressing the Father who dwells in heaven be understood not literally but analogically—namely, as a figurative way of granting God the highest location, when of course he is beyond location. God is a circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere. Because God cannot be described, he must be known negatively, as in the stately hymn: "Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes." We have hope of encountering the God who *is*, only by knowing who and what God *is not*. The psalmist thus acknowledges that God is not a being among beings, not even the grandest Being of all. Only because God is uncreated—his glory residing above the heavens—can God both create and redeem all things, both order and reorder the universe.

Despite the psalm's soaring celestial cosmology and deep terrestrial anthropology, the psalmist acknowledges that the good creation has gone wrong. As Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw) darkly confessed, "Man was created a little lower than the angels, and has been getting a little lower ever since."³ We should not complain about the inhumanity of nature as much as our inhumanity to one another. The psalmist puts the matter more theologically by declaring that God has God's adversaries. God's enemies are those who use their own hands as if they were God's hands.

Our hands are the chief means of manipulating things (Latin *manus* means "hand"). God alone has hands that create. We who are his creatures have hands that are meant to *re*-create. We are free to use our hands to remake God's magnificent creation

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 73.

3. Henry Wheeler Shaw, *Josh Billings* (Ann Arbor, MI: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library, 1867), 83.

Psalm 8

Theological Perspective

that God has entered into a covenant with Israel as a revelation of the person of God. The psalmist, writing from the community of faith, would find God's gracious covenant and calling of the people of Israel to be the greatest expression of this divine care. Barth commented: "The Psalmist's astonishment is at the incomprehensible divine mercy which this action displays."¹

God's care for humanity is expressed in the covenant of grace, which is now fulfilled for all people in Jesus Christ. To read Psalm 8 in light of Christ as the incarnation of God in whom God has reached out to embrace human beings in love is to enhance even further the "dignity" of humans as created by God and humanity's importance in the heart of God. This is how human beings may be crowned with "glory and honor" (v. 5)—purely by God's mercy and grace.

Echoes of Genesis 1:26–28 are heard with the task of "dominion" given to humans (vv. 6–8). We recognize today the dangers in reading a passage like this as an untrammelled license to dominate the creation, unrestrained. The human task here is checked by the fact that while humans may be "over nature," they are also "under God." Humans live on earth and relate to the work of God's hands (v. 6) in the context of their covenant relationship with the Lord and Sovereign of all the earth. Human dominion is carried out as an expression of responsibilities as a covenant people. The care of the earth and its inhabitants is surely to reflect the One whose name is "majestic" in all the earth (vv. 1, 9).

This psalm praises God and highlights humanity's relationship with God, the great Lord and Sovereign. Read in the context of Israel's faith—and our Christian faith today—we recognize the truth of John Calvin's observation that the psalm focuses "principally on the theme of God's infinite goodness towards us."²

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

Is it really possible to respect people while disrespecting the earth that serves as home for every living creature? Is it possible to value human life and be indifferent to all the other lives that together form the environment that sustains our lives? We need to think carefully about this word "dominion."

The word "dominion," like all the other words in the Bible, needs ultimately to be interpreted by the way that Scripture as a whole communicates God's character and disposition. It is hard to imagine that the God who so tenderly created both plant and animal life, bringing each newly formed creature to the man to be named, has no respect for the dignity of each. It is hard to imagine that God intends human dignity to be served by reckless exploitation of other living creatures.

A more generous understanding of dominion would be to perceive it as stewardship rather than raw domination. Because we human beings are stamped with the image of God, and because we are capable of imagining a world where everything in the created order plays a useful and essential role, God has generously entrusted to us the use of and care for "sheep and oxen," "beasts of the field," "birds of the air, and the fish of the sea" (vv. 7–8). We humans are stewards—caretakers—of the creatures and their habitats, granted permission to make use of them as needed for food and clothing, while respecting the fact that our lives are interdependent with theirs. While we enjoy a caretaking sort of dominion, it is, after all, God who, first and last, is "our Sovereign" (vv. 1 and 9).

RONALD P. BYARS

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968), III/2:20.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm 8:1* (Calvin Translation Society).

Psalm 8

Exegetical Perspective

quotation of this psalm in both Matthew 21:16 and Hebrew 2:9, but here it is used to denote the utter incomparability of humanity and divinity.

This portrayal of the undeservingness of the human person, sparked by the poet's awed observation of the night sky, contrasts with the exalted description of God in the poem. Not only is God glorious and majestic, but he is also formidable. While the exact translation of the Hebrew in verse 2 is unclear, its meaning is not. God opposes all enemies with no more effort than that of a child. These enemies are probably veiled references to forces of chaos that the creator god defeats before establishing the created world, seen more clearly in references to Leviathan and Behemoth in other biblical texts (e.g., Pss. 74:14 and 104:26).

The psalmist conveys the effortlessness of God's creation in verse 3 as well, where God needs only his fingers to complete the heavens. This is not a God who builds edifices or fashions creatures out of mud. There is no Deity holding up the sky as in Egyptian creation accounts. There is not even need of speech, as in Genesis 1. God's fingers lightly fashion heavens so great they amaze their human observer.

Psalm 8 in its nine short verses captures the creation theology so neatly spelled out in texts like Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 1 Kings 8. Human dominion is not cause for pride, but rather is rendered in service to a God so great that humans should stand in awe that YHWH even notices them. By contrasting human insignificance and divinely ordained dominion, the psalmist captures the wonderment of human existence.

CORRINE CARVALHO

Homiletical Perspective

into magnificently new and different things of our own fashioning. Because God is the God of liberty and not of coercion, God allows us to refashion the creation, not only for good but also for ill. When we usurp God's own creative powers by pretending that they are our own, we become God's manipulative enemies.

The Roman Catholic novelist of mid-twentieth-century France, Georges Bernanos, regarded the grasping hand as the main metaphor governing modern civilization. Because we have sought to re-create the world according to our own disordered desires, our hands have become grasping and possessive and destructive. After the invention of the atomic bomb, Bernanos wrote that humans are betrayed by our own hands as we attempt not only to master matter but to annihilate it.⁴

How, then, might such deadly un-making and de-creation be resisted? The psalmist offers the staggering claim that God's enemies are overcome by the strength that issues from the newborn and the little ones. Israel and the church remain God's bulwark whenever we lay hold of the odd power that is akin to the spiritual innocence and physical vulnerability of infants. To avenge evil by "adult" violence and compulsion, whether physical or spiritual, is to squander the guiltlessness that Christ restores. To honor the God who has so highly honored us is to live by Paul's motto that "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The psalmist's exalted vision of human beings is vindicated when we order our loves according to God's gracious hierarchy. Only then do we become those of whom God is indeed "mindful," those whom God "cares for" in his coercion-refusing Messiah, and thus those whom God crowns with glory and honor.

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4. Georges Bernanos, *Essays of Georges Bernanos*, trans. Joan and Barry Ulanov (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1955).

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PROPER 23 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 9 AND OCTOBER 15 INCLUSIVE)

Amos 5:6–7, 10–15

⁶Seek the LORD and live,
or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire,
and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.

⁷Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,
and bring righteousness to the ground!

.....

¹⁰They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

Theological Perspective

To many, the conviction that “God is love” makes it impossible to attribute actual suffering to divine agency. That God somehow causes this accident, that war, or the next earthquake can reasonably strike us as unreasonable. What gives pause, however, is the affirmation that in all suffering, God is *there*. If there, and *here*, we may ask with Job, what can God’s proximity mean? Affirming that all who suffer—from forces of nature or the horrors of oppression and hatred—are ultimately received into the oneness of the Suffering Servant is a profound eschatological hope. Yet questions of theodicy “in the meantime” remain. Does God’s solidarity make the concreteness of tragedies any less incomprehensible? What is our “call” in severe times?

These questions may seem conceptually easier when confronting “moral evil” than when confronting chance and nature. When misfortune is entangled in human power and sinfulness, and especially when its consequences rebound against the mighty, then divine retribution may be sensed (albeit roughly, dimly). We discern not necessarily the actual interventions of God, on this day or that, but a pattern of providence intersecting history.¹ To objections that the mighty do *not* fall nearly

1. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), 224.

Pastoral Perspective

Not many texts are so candid about what the preacher may expect from the hearers: they will hate you (v. 10). Amos’s grim observation that his hearers “abhor the one who speaks the truth” (v. 10) will strike a familiar chord with preachers whose prophetic words on some moral issue have provoked fierce opposition within their congregations. Is it always and necessarily so? Let us proceed in the hope, at least, that careful attention to some of the pastoral questions raised by this text may help to create a more welcoming hearing for hard truths.

One hopeful sign is the existence in almost every community of one and often several congregations easily identified as “justice” churches. They may be smaller or larger in membership; they have a variety of denominational affiliations; they are often culturally, racially, and economically diverse. At some point in their histories (perhaps at their founding) these congregations embraced an identity of prophetic advocacy. The proposition that social service ministries can be strengthened and complemented by social justice advocacy is not a subject of debate in these congregations; it is a core value. They understand at least intuitively that in an environment of competing economic and political interests, justice for the poor and the weak inevitably involves public-policy issues. Members

Amos 5:6–7, 10–15

¹²For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

¹³Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;
for it is an evil time.

¹⁴Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.

¹⁵Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Exegetical Perspective

The prophet Amos lived in polarizing times. He had his career in the northern kingdom of Israel during an era of economic stratification and corruption, the eighth century BCE. Conspicuous consumption had become rampant among elite members of the society. Specific practices included widespread bribery, debt-slavery for the poor, and forced-labor projects, including the building of lavish estates. Taxation and other methods enabled wealthy individuals, especially those with ties to the royal bureaucracy, to benefit from the agricultural efforts of the rural poor. In many cases, powerful interests could swindle the less fortunate out of their land. Such developments undermined the pursuit of justice and mutual solidarity that Israel's God had demanded since the earliest covenants with the chosen people, and many prophets spoke out against this type of unfairness.

Historical context is essential for understanding Amos's passionate language, as he became a fierce advocate for social change. A peripheral prophet who operated outside the bounds of establishment circles (he did not belong to a guild of prophets or advise kings), Amos offered a bold critique of injustices as he witnessed them, and nowhere is his language more specific than in the accusations of chapter 5. The stirring call at the end of the chapter, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like

Homiletical Perspective

Amos's writings are relevant in our culture, and the preacher who is paying attention can draw numerous parallels between the Israelites' greed and the materialistic nature of our own society. Amos is known for his steadfast commitment to economic justice—a cause that is usually not a "winner" in terms of giving the congregation a pat on the back and making them feel good about themselves. Nevertheless, the prophetic preacher has a responsibility, like Amos, to help her or his congregation understand where they are falling short of the vision that God has for the faith community and for society as a whole.

It is difficult to call people to self-examination and communal repentance when things are going well, yet that is the task that fell to Amos. He preached during a prosperous time in Israel, when the nation was expanding its territory and enjoying a period of economic affluence. It is human nature to assume that God is pleased with us when things are going our way, when really "things going our way" is much more related to luck than any merit on our part. Assuming that we are favored by God is especially dubious when we are talking about economic prosperity, because so often one person's economic gain is forged on the backs of many others who are not so fortunate. Amos had the unpopular

*Amos 5:6–7, 10–15***Theological Perspective**

soon enough—while generations perish in the meantime—the reply should be a call for ethical engagement and faithful perseverance. Such was the situation when Amos envisioned God’s doom on the transgressions of Israel, the northern kingdom, and on her neighbors.

The transgression here is thoughtless, cynical contempt for those who are helpless, poor, and laboring for others’ gain—in today’s parlance the distressed low and lower-middle classes. The circumstances of Israel at this time are difficult to ascertain, but the implication within Amos is of a prosperous nation *taxing its indigent*: “you trample on the poor, and take from them levies of grain.” Not only are the poor denied justice, but the wealthy abhor whoever would defend the truth and “the needy in the gate” (in effect, where court was held). Amos’s faith, and underlying hope, is that such evil, in which an affluent governing elite makes justice taste like “worm-wood,” cannot sustain itself. A Day of the Lord will arrive when the wealth of the powerful (their stone houses and lush vineyards) will turn to ash, either from fiery invasion or from arrogant corruption collapsing on itself.

That Amos speaks of a structure of providential justice, not of a capriciously angry Parent, is evident in how he frames the judgment with a moral imperative: “Seek the LORD and live,” “seek good and not evil,” “love good, and establish justice in the gate” (vv. 6a, 14a, 15a). In a sense, this is not only a moral imperative but a kind of practical theodicy: the providence of God is a *participatory engagement between Creator and creature*, and the performances of the prophet and responses of those who hear are occasions where divine engagement is occurring. That the prophetic word can be heard is itself a reason for ultimate hope. To the question, how to justify the ways of God in the face of oppression, part of the answer is *the prophetic plea to repent and act*; for such call and response—implying that justice can be heard and pursued by people of conscience—manifests God’s deep ordering of life according to steadfast love.

How bracing and congenial this can be! Lest we become too “at ease” (6:1) in preaching this affirmation, we should consider the odd caveat about remaining “silent” in a time of evil (5:13). Verse 13 can sound as if the outspoken Amos were contradicting himself, or else being ironic, or alluding to the silences of grief and “the unspeakable”—unless he is *not* telling the wise to be “prudent” but is condemning the quietism of

Pastoral Perspective

of the churches we are describing here expect to be reminded of and challenged to live Jesus’ prayer, “Thy will be done on earth” (Matt. 6:10).

All of this is not to say that preaching Amos in these churches is easy. Nor is it to say that these congregations are necessarily more loving, more accepting, or less prone to conflict than their neighbors. We all have our blind spots and idiosyncratic episodes of truth-deafness. Nevertheless, these congregations affirm that social justice issues are appropriate subjects of conversation for biblical preaching. They have secured for their preachers a threshold of acceptance for the vigorous exploration of God’s demand for justice. Yes, the preacher (especially the new preacher) still needs to be a little careful about whom she or he picks on, but everybody understands that in a world distorted by greed, violence, and indifference to the common good, *somebody* needs to be picked on. If there were members who objected to using the pulpit for “politics,” they have long since moved on and joined more conventional congregations like yours, perhaps, or mine.

Here is where things get dicey. How does one deliver a full-throated exposition of Amos 5 in a congregation where this threshold of acceptance for prophetic preaching has never been established? Here members may welcome sermons about prayer, forgiveness, spiritual growth. Forceful calls for personal moral integrity are acceptable (“Christians should compute their taxes honestly”). Be careful, though. If your message on prayer drifts into the prayer-at-high-school-graduation debate, or if you suggest that forgiveness may have implications for public policy toward the children of undocumented immigrants, or if your honest-taxpayer message wanders into an observation that pending tax legislation takes from the honest poor to reward the wealthy, some of your hearers will feel that a line has been crossed. The folks who happen to agree with you may tolerate this breach of an invisible boundary more patiently than those who disagree. That is not the point. The point is that in such a congregational system there is an expectation of pulpit neutrality on most subjects of public debate—and you have violated this neutrality.

In our increasingly polarized public arena, this breach of pulpit neutrality is no small matter. In the 1960s, the denominational family in which I was nurtured (Presbyterian) was torn asunder by conflicts over civil rights and racial justice. At the same time nationally, northern Democrats and moderate Republicans were cooperating to craft

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Exegetical Perspective

an ever-flowing stream” (5:24), is the most familiar verse, but the earlier judgment oracles provide necessary background for this timeless call.

The current lectionary passage can be classified as a prophetic oracle (or more accurately, a series of oracles), stretching from verse 6 to verse 15. The decision to omit verses 8–9 from the reading is justifiable, since these verses about divine sovereignty interrupt the prophet’s indictment of the people and probably reflect a later addition to the text. The verses that actually do appear in the lectionary passage have undergone editing, and the whole chapter contains a series of colorful accusations and descriptions, punctuated by the prophet’s description of what the wicked have done wrong and what their punishment will be.

Much of the language has a legal character. The basic charge in this “arraignment” of Israel is that the people, especially the elite, have failed to pursue justice in their relations with each other, and the rich receive particularly strong condemnation for their manipulation of the poor. The plaintive cry for fairness is typical of Amos: “Ah, you that turn justice [*mishpat*] to wormwood, and bring righteousness [*tsedaqa*] to the ground!” (v. 7). The pivotal word for “justice,” *mishpat*, which appears here and in verse 15, is probably the most significant concept in the book of Amos. The connotation of *mishpat* is the act of deciding a case, and it also entails fair treatment for the entire community, with particular concern for persons in a vulnerable position. The prophet wants justice, which will mean an end to corruption and marginalization of the poor “in the gate” (vv. 10, 12), a common term in the Hebrew Bible for the place in a town where public business occurs and court cases are decided.

With regard to the specific charges, certain members of the elite classes are the ones who “trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain” (v. 11). A better translation of the first phrase would be “make tenants of the poor,” meaning to tax them out of their land. The extraction of grain levies implies unfair taxation, especially at harvesttime, when food supplies are more plentiful. This charge seems to indicate unfair seizure of much-needed surplus from the poor. This verse also implies systemic injustice and great vulnerability for the majority of the population who worked as subsistence farmers. Burdensome taxation could lead to loss of property, such that farmers had to serve as debt slaves on land they used to own (compare the number of stories in the New Testament involving tenant farmers strapped by indebtedness).

Homiletical Perspective

role of holding Israel accountable for economic inequality, as well as for too much use of military power and for practicing a shallow piety that did not reflect hearts and spirits that were truly transformed by God.

A twentieth-century preacher is going to have to consider carefully which perspective his or her congregation is coming from when crafting a sermon from the writings of Amos. Is the congregation affluent, or at least relatively comfortable and economically secure? Is the congregation composed of people who are just barely getting by, or even some who are *not* surviving without help from outside sources? Do most people sitting in the pews engineer the downsizing in companies, or do they wait with an underlying sense of despair for their pink slip? The answers to these questions will determine the direction the preacher wants to take, whether they will admonish the groups about the growing economic inequality in our nation, which cannot be pleasing to God, or whether they will offer a word of hope to people who are struggling, reminding them that God is aware of their plight and they are not alone. However, it is not always clear who the audience is.

For example, the congregation I serve is racially and culturally diverse. Approximately 24 percent of our members are immigrants from Africa. There are also Hispanic, Asian, and African American members, and roughly half the congregation is Caucasian. Along with this racial and cultural variety comes huge economic disparity. On any given Sunday, there are people in the congregation who are affluent professionals—physicians, professors, business owners, diplomats, and lawyers. There are also people who survive on the meager income provided by service jobs—home health aides and nursing-home workers, and many working two or three part-time positions just to survive. The challenge for the preacher is to bring out Amos’s emphasis on economic justice for those who have too much, while at the same time articulating God’s vision of a realm where everyone has enough for those who need, reminding that this is God’s best hope for us.

This lectionary passage from Amos, if exegeted and preached appropriately, can find the balance necessary for an economically diverse congregation. It will help the congregation for the preacher to give a little background on Amos—the dates when we believe he lived and prophesied, the historical circumstances, and the emphases of his prophecies. Amos 5:6–7 has an “it’s not too late” quality to them.

*Amos 5:6–7, 10–15***Theological Perspective**

the “prosperous.” Given this exegetical uncertainty, a hermeneutical stretch might be allowed. Most of us are neither prophets nor children of prophets (enjoy Amos’s irony at vv. 14–15) and only rarely hear God speaking beside our sycamore trees. We know we must risk our “whole being” when enacting the ultimate concern of faith, but we also know our courage is flagging and our understanding is limited, *at best*.² We hope we are *no worse* than self-righteous moralists and rationalizers. Perhaps we are wisely prudent in knowing that even when speaking “for God,” we cannot speak “for God”—not literally, fully, or in confident assurance.

Yet speak we must, in a faithful yet trembling language of speech *and* silence. Such mixed language is pertinent when seeking God in the midst of evil and tragedy. Perhaps the only adequate theodicies are “practical” theodicies,³ which justify the ways of God by girding us up to resist actual evils and injustices and attend to particular suffering.

There is likely no abstract, answering idea—not in Scripture, philosophy, or the arts—that would leave our responsible and critical minds at ease, theologically, with the intolerable excesses of suffering. However, in the hymn of verses 8–9 (omitted from the lection) Amos approximates the answer of Job 38–41. Out of the whirlwind, Job is addressed neither on his own terms nor those of his “comforters.” God recontextualizes Job in the magnificent spaces of creation but does not resolve the problem of evil. Like Job, Amos invites us to ponder the whole milieu of the good yet unfathomable Creator, whose love we sometimes know as *the gracious and troubling limit* to our knowing and doing. “The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and who turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, . . . the LORD is his name, who makes destruction flash out against the strong” (vv. 8–9a). With words of creation, and with the imperative to “seek good and not evil, that you may live” (v. 14a), Amos offers a task of solidarity and hope, with God and persons—but without the consolations of congenial knowledge.

LARRY D. BOUCHARD

Pastoral Perspective

and enact into law historic civil rights legislation. Today such cooperation seems unimaginable on most issues. Will our congregations also devolve into polarized camps where only one “side” feels at home?

The pastoral dilemma shared by many of us is compounded by the extent to which our members seem to maintain their political affiliations—and hence their opinions—as nonnegotiable. They say, “We are Republicans” (or “Democrats” or “Independents”) in much the same way as they might say, “We are Packer fans.” When “our team” benefits from a bad call or commits a foul, we are easily able to rationalize justifications. After all, the other team is worse! We may occasionally criticize the quarterback or complain about the play-calling, but in the end, winning is the only outcome that pleases. “We are Packer (substitute your own team here) fans. Do not be using your pulpit to trash-talk our team.”

Given these difficulties, what can we do to gain a more receptive hearing for Amos 5? Prophetic preaching can be more pastorally effective when we acknowledge our own privileged status. Most of us have some form of guaranteed pension, health-care coverage, and denominational policies that protect us. More than that, we are paid to read, to study, and to reflect. Outside of academia, few of our members enjoy the luxury of compensated contemplation. It is better to acknowledge our privilege at the outset than to be reminded of it later by someone who has heard the sermon as a condescending criticism of his own experience.

Prophetic preaching can be more pastorally effective when we embrace our critics, both after and before Sunday’s delivery. Follow-up contact with members who have expressed misgivings at the door after worship is a “no-brainer.” Such contacts are not for the purpose of rearguing our case; they are opportunities to listen and to value the person. Before we preach, we might interview members who have knowledge, experience, or opinions in the specific issues under consideration. Few things in life are more flattering or affirming than being asked one’s opinion on some important question. Our people will not forget that we have made them partners with us in proclaiming God’s word.

THOMAS EDWARD MCGRATH

2. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Perennial Classics, 1957), 23–25.

3. Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 112–41.

Amos 5:6–7, 10–15

Exegetical Perspective

These wealthy persons seem to use their advantageous position for the consolidation of power and expansion of their territories, but also for lavish pursuits. Amos refers to those who “built houses of hewn stone” (v. 11), just as he mentions the wealthy having a “winter house,” a “summer house,” and “houses of ivory” in 3:15. Archaeological evidence from Israel during this period confirms the existence of larger houses, and the elite decorated their residences with more expensive stone and ivory work. The planting of larger vineyards for export and consumption also occurred, and Amos is clearly aware of this development (5:11). What angers him more than the lavish lifestyle is that such projects become possible through mistreatment of the poor. This is a perversion of justice for the prophet.

Amos promises that YHWH will put an end to the trappings of these wealthy persons, leading them to desolation. The ones who built these fancy houses “shall not live in them,” and the one who planted the vast vineyards “shall not drink their wine” (v. 11). In the vineyards, where celebrations and festivals often occurred in ancient Israel, “there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, ‘Alas! Alas!’ [or ‘Woe! Woe!’]” (v. 16). The prophet promises a change of fortunes, warning his listeners that God will hold them accountable through judgment, reversal of the present state of affairs, and even death for the oppressors (vv. 16–17).

What makes the book of Amos memorable are passages like this one. The prophet wants his listeners to “Seek the LORD and live” (v. 6), and he claims that they are not following through on this call when they oppress the poor in their midst. The listener of this text becomes privy to a passionate defense of justice (*mishpat*), as the prophet rails against corrupt and selfish practices that lead to fracture, suffering, and a departure from God’s covenant call for mutual solidarity. Few other figures in the Bible or all of world literature speak with such passion and eloquence about the importance of justice in a fair society and the tragic implications of what happens when it is not present.

SAMUEL L. ADAMS

Homiletical Perspective

The preacher may choose to pull out some of Amos’s more dire predictions in prior chapters to show the congregation that God (through the voice of Amos) is not messing around. Amos 3:1–2 and 4:1–3 are examples of just how disappointed and angry God is with the Israelites; setting them alongside 5:6–7 will be effective in making the point that the situation is dire but retrievable. It is not too late to “seek the LORD and live.”

Amos 5:10–13 will likely be heard in different ways, according to the circumstances in which people find themselves. People who have exploited the labor of others to become wealthy themselves should hear these words as a warning: one can get rich at others’ expense for only so long. There will be a day of reckoning when the exploiters will no longer enjoy the luxurious lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. On the other hand, those who have toiled for years with little or no reward will find hope in these words, hope that their own situation can be lifted up and that they will receive just compensation for their labors. The preacher may wish to point out this theme of reversal and invite people prayerfully to consider where they fall on the rich/poor, oppressor/oppressed spectrum.

The final two verses are an invitation to all, regardless of past transgressions or current economic status, to live toward the vision of justice and fairness that God has for all humanity and all creation. Wherever we fall on the continuum of wealth and/or sinfulness, we can choose life from this point forward. One key component of Amos’s prophecy is that to choose life is not to make your own life as easy and pleasurable as possible. Choosing life means to live in such a way that your actions contribute to the common good and give all neighbors the chance not merely to survive, but to thrive.

LESLIE A. KLINGENSMITH

PROPER 23 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 9 AND OCTOBER 15 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 90:12–17

¹² So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.

¹³ Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!

¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 90 is at once a wisdom poem about space and time, a penitential song, a communal lamentation, and a prayer of Moses asking God to repent. We may also read it as a psalm of providence, for verse 17 anticipates a relationship between divine and human creativity: “Prosper the work of our hands.” All told, the psalm contemplates (not to say reconciles) hard issues of human experience and biblical theology.

Wisdom. Paul Ricoeur taught that “wisdom” traditions, including the Hebrew and Greek (as in Greek tragedy), contain forms of language and practice that probe into possibilities of the “good life” and into misfortunes that hedge the likelihood of achieving virtue and happiness.¹ Among the latter are matters of contingency (due to time, chance, or nature) and culpability (our tendencies to overstep moral or sacred boundaries while rationalizing our overstepping). In exploring together happiness, contingency, and culpability, wisdom does not try to formulate a theodicy or “justify the ways of God to men” (Milton). Rather, wisdom challenges its hearers to live with openness and courage, and to discern

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 243–47; André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 227.

Pastoral Perspective

“So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (v. 12). Many of us remember the earlier rendering, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (RSV). The psalmist has framed our mortal lifespan within the mat of the Lord’s eternal perspective. “A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past” (v. 4). Swiftly “our days pass away . . . our years come to an end like a sigh” (v. 9). We have seventy years, or perhaps eighty, “if we are strong” (v. 10). Many have fewer; a few have a few more. In our text for the day (vv. 12–17) the psalmist demonstrates faith’s response to the impermanence of our brief journey. He prays.

He prays for wisdom (v. 12). A cherished member of our congregation has recently endured a long course of treatment for a potentially lethal blood disorder. His ordeal included lengthy hospitalization, innumerable diagnostic procedures, and many weeks of diminished stamina. He met these troubles with characteristic grace and good humor, maintaining an optimistic expectation of recovery. In his late sixties, recently retired, happily married, and blessed with supportive children and young grandchildren, he should have a promising future to embrace and enjoy. At last the doctor has spoken the word he has hoped for: remission. The therapy has worked.

Psalm 90:12–17

- ¹⁵ Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.
- ¹⁶ Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
- ¹⁷ Let 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

Psalm 90 wrestles with the timeless issues of divine judgment and human mortality. The opening section, verses 1–12, has characteristics of a lament psalm and addresses the fleeting nature of human existence (in contrast to the eternal and transcendent Deity). In the style of laments, the speaker accuses God of an indifferent wrath that brings an end to human life “like a sigh” (v. 9). Echoing the existential cries of Job and Ecclesiastes, the psalmist declares, “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (v. 10).

The entire psalm shifts at verses 11–12, and it is here that today’s lesson begins. The speaker moves from lament to rhetorical questioning. In response to uncertainty about God’s wrath (v. 11), the first verse in the lectionary passage uses the language of Israel’s wisdom tradition: “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (v. 12). According to this logic, faithful individuals should enjoy their fleeting moments by bettering themselves and seeking discernment, even as they stand in awe of the living God. No one can avoid death, but the psalmist wants better awareness of finitude and the ability to treat every day as a gift.

The next section of the psalm includes verses 13–16 and stands in contrast to the despondent

Homiletical Perspective

My seven-year-old niece Embree was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia on January 26, 2012. Embree has always been a healthy child; she has had her share of ear infections and sore throats along the way, but had never been seriously ill. Embree is a delight to our whole family. She is bright, witty, hilariously funny, kind-hearted, and truly beautiful inside and out. Our family was shocked and frightened by her diagnosis, and we clung to each other and to our faith to help us figure out what to do next, especially in those first few days.

We quickly learned that Embree is one of the lucky ones, as far as leukemia diagnoses go. Her condition is treatable, with over a 95 percent cure rate for children. The treatment process is a long one, and some of the medicines have dreadful side effects, but we have every reason to believe that Embree will get well and live a long and happy life. Nevertheless, it is an awful thing to watch a child you love get poked with needles, lose her hair, have to guard constantly against infection, and weep with frustration over missing her first-grade friends. Many of us in the family have said that we would trade places with Embree, just to spare her so much suffering.

Such an experience is difficult even under “good” circumstances. We have each other, and Embree’s

Psalm 90:12–17

Theological Perspective

innovative paths of justice in the midst of ambiguity and pain. Wisdom—practiced creatively in the arts, in economies and politics, or in churches—searches out ways to “seek life.”

So it is wise to “count our days.” Verse 12 revisits the theme from verse 4, where a millennium to God is “like yesterday when it is past.” It allows us to consider the limits of time, not only in terms of divine anger at sinfulness, but also as the limits to the created order; yet the psalm also affirms time, even death, as part of our dwelling in the “space” of God (vv. 1–2). The challenge, always, is to see time as a gracious gift and a condition of suffering; and the psalm acknowledges that affliction is excessively real.

Lament. Unlike Amos, who imagines God’s judgment on sinful oppressors, the psalmist in verses 13–15 shifts to imagine suffering from the view of one like Moses (Exod. 32:12),² who witnesses the suffering of people for whom he is responsible. These lines echo laments of protest that dare to ask God to repent, awaken, and again be as God to us: “Turn, O Lord! . . . Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil.”

Laments of protest are among the hardest figures in Scripture with which Christians must come to terms. Even if the last words of Christ in Matthew and Mark (quoting Ps. 22:1) provide theological insight—that God receives even God-forsakenness into God’s life—they do not make the particular realities of God-forsakenness easier to accept or understand. Psalm 90, in acknowledging the excesses of affliction and evil (v. 15), restates God’s motive, aim, and meaning: the reality of *hesed*, “steadfast love” (vv. 13–14). The answer to evil and suffering is not an “idea” of love and justice but actual occasions of love- and justice-making, where the work of Creator and creature intersect. Our odd ability to call upon God to be God, to turn and again be steadfast love—such a capacity to protest is a divine gift. We are given to hear the imperative of *hesed*, the origin and aim of creation.

Providence. Less difficult to grasp than laments of protest (though still quite difficult!) are Scriptures affirming a causal joint or nexus between God and the world. Such is the psalmist’s prayer for God’s favor, that God prosper or establish “the work of our hands.”

2. David Noel Freedman, “Other than Moses . . . Who asks (or Tells) God to Repent?” *Bible Review* 1.4 (1985): 56–59.

Pastoral Perspective

This happy outcome brings my friend to a choice that is probably more determinative of his future than any choice he has ever made. Having achieved remission, he is now a candidate for a bone-marrow transplant. As the doctor explains, his remission should continue for a couple of years; beyond that, if and when disease resumes, there are no further treatments available at this time. He can reasonably expect perhaps two years of good health. A bone marrow transplant offers an alternative strategy. In the short term it involves another lengthy hospitalization, a risky assault on his immune system, unpleasant side effects, and some risk of rejection and death. However, if the transplant is successful, there is every reason to expect a natural aging sequence that could extend decades beyond his present age. My friend and his family have prayed for wisdom. He has chosen to go forward with the transplant. Courageously he has weighed the options, counted the costs, and wrestled with two competing sets of numbered days. How does our text function in such a pastoral situation? Has my friend chosen wisely?

Consider the pattern of thought that forms the psalmist’s prayer. He does not pray for “wisdom to number our days wisely.” Rather he prays that as we learn to count our days we may gain wisdom. He seems to be suggesting that wisdom, not unlike physical strength, may be increased by the exercise of making an inventory of our days. If so, then the psalmist’s question in the following verse makes perfect sense: “O LORD,” he asks, “how long?” (v. 13). How many days may we reasonably expect the inventory to hold? Few of us welcome the greeting, “Your days are numbered.” For my friend weighing his treatment options, and for those who face similar choices, numbering the days and, hopefully, years ahead is an essential step in exercising stewardship of life and strength. So the question is not so much, “Did my friend make a wise choice?” Rather, the question is, “Will choosing (among possible alternatives) make him wiser?”

In verses 13 and 14 the psalmist identifies an important insight that may be acquired as we learn to count our days. Our gladness is not contingent upon the outcomes of our choices. He prays to receive the Lord’s compassion; it is the Lord’s “steadfast love” that will “satisfy us in the morning . . . so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (v. 14). On any given Sunday, our congregations will include a significant number of folks for whom things have not turned out as they planned.

*Psalm 90:12–17***Exegetical Perspective**

language of verses 3–10. Here the psalmist offers a prayer, and the shift to a plural audience is noteworthy. The speaker represents the entire community of worshipers, as he entreats the Deity on their behalf. After petitioning God to show compassion in verse 13, the request that follows is one of the most beautiful lines in all of Scripture: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (v. 14). God extends “steadfast love” (Heb. *hesed*) to humanity, despite our brokenness. The careful reader should note the interplay between this petition and the more somber tone earlier in the psalm. The depiction of nighttime and death (vv. 4–5) gives way in verse 14 to more hopeful imagery of a bright morning and real possibilities for joy. The faithful servant who honestly recognizes mortality can enjoy his or her days through praise and a glad heart. A less optimistic petition follows in verse 15, as the psalmist seeks the same number of joyful days as despondent ones (“Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us”). Finally, this section concludes by calling for the divine works to remain manifest to all persons present and future (v. 16).

The psalm ends by asking that “the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands” (v. 17). Once again the psalmist states that any earthly success depends on divine graciousness. One of the more noteworthy features of Israel’s wisdom tradition is that books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job (and many of the psalms) acknowledge the power of the Deity to control all events. Even if unpredictable at times, God’s mercy becomes a prerequisite for an individual’s personal growth. Psalm 91 stands squarely in that tradition, as the petitioner asks for divine help in the midst of uncertainty.

The author of Ecclesiastes encourages his listeners to enjoy life to the fullest, “for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head” (Eccl. 9:7–8). The point here and throughout Ecclesiastes is that God has blessed earthly existence and given each person a few years to enjoy life to the fullest. Psalm 90 functions in a similar manner. This poem does not focus on eternal matters, but on the best route for joy: to live by praising God and treating every day as a gift.

When were these memorable verses written? Dating any of the psalms is notoriously difficult, since they are largely devoid of historical markers and were probably used in the worshiping life of ancient Israel over many centuries. Yet this particular

Homiletical Perspective

family has a huge support network through their church, school, and neighborhood. Best of all, Embree’s prognosis is positive. I watched other parents and family members in the hospital, especially parents who were bearing the burden alone, or whose children clearly were not as fortunate as Embree. It was clear that there were children who were undergoing ghastly treatments and were still not likely to survive. “How do they bear it?” I wondered.

There have been times in the hospital when I have had to remind myself that, as alone as that harried mother or bereft father may seem, they are never truly alone, for God is always there to comfort them and surround them with love. Also, this experience of loving someone through a potentially fatal illness has reminded me of the fragility and ultimate finitude of all life. Everyone dies of something, and every life has its share of sorrow and loss—especially if we love widely and deeply. That is the deal. The psalmists knew this, for their laments address the universal nature of loss and suffering, as well as reunion and joy. Whatever our state of mind and heart, we can find someone in the psalms who has been there.

There is a quote attributed variously to both Plato and Philo of Alexandria: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” I seek to remember that truth in daily life and encounters with difficult people, and Psalm 90 gives the preacher a chance to remind the congregation of it. Verses 12–17 really cannot be fully addressed without looking at the whole psalm, because the whole of the psalm gives us the sense of long-term perspective that helps us through the valley times of life. However long or terrible an experience is, it will end and is relatively short compared to the amount of time that God has been present and at work in the world. Human life is always brief and transient when placed next to the eternal nature of God’s love. Even God’s anger is a blip, whereas God’s presence and God’s desire for our wholeness will not be shaken.

Verses 12–17 inspire us to live with joy and hope in spite of life’s brevity. Since we never know when life could change or end, it is all the more important that we enjoy the time we are given on earth, that we “rejoice and be glad all our days” (v. 14). The preacher must be careful to strike a balance between the reality of life’s fragility and not being consumed by “doom and gloom.” Psalm 90 is an opportunity to consider the freedom that comes with fragility—since we are not in control, we can live life to the

Psalm 90:12–17

Theological Perspective

Students of process theology, derived from Alfred North Whitehead and re-envisioned by theologians like Catherine Keller,³ will find metaphysical ways of grappling with such passages; God is the nurturer of possibilities and lures toward the good, whose practical realizations require creaturely participation. Students of religious ethics know the dangers of claiming God's favor or finding its evidence in prosperity. In the face of suffering and oppression—when cries soliciting attentive compassion are heard, or when efforts of justice making are demanded—it can be dangerous not to claim God's favor. For the favor of God is, among other realities, the ever-sounding imperative of love and compassion. To be able to hear this imperative is to be empowered by God. Knowing what to do about it and indeed knowing how to refrain from futile or harmful doing requires wise discernment. We remain contingent and fallible servants of the Lord. It will always be a challenge both to “do the right thing”—seemingly impossible to discern fully—and to live rejoicing in the securing spaciousness of God (vv. 1, 14).

The psalm itself, however, can be regarded as a place to live. It provides space where the hard juxtapositions of contingency and culpability, and of suffering and steadfast love, can be lived within and lived through. It neither answers nor denies the problems of finitude and fault, nor does it enclose the worshiper in coziness. Rather, the prayer provides a place to live in and move from: toward creation and its grandeur, and toward all those pressured by affliction. Indeed, the psalm gives us a refuge wherein to acknowledge our own afflictions and despairs. Thus it recapitulates, in the music of worship and poetry of solitary contemplation, what it affirms of God. It can be at once our dwelling place and a place to move from, into the challenges of God's work. The psalm holds us and shoves us. In asking God to “prosper” us and “satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love” (vv. 17b, 14a), it begins to realize that for which it prays, a life in God, for oneself and others.

LARRY D. BOUCHARD

Pastoral Perspective

Disappointments come. Promises are sometimes broken. “How could I have been so foolish?” one may ask. What a liberating truth to proclaim: the Lord is the source of true gladness. Whether our days are many or few, the Lord of all the years offers gifts of joy that transcend outward circumstance and temporary heartache.

With pastoral sensitivity, the psalmist implicitly acknowledges that even those who gain wise hearts may endure unhappy days. So, if we cannot “rejoice and be glad all our days,” let us ask the Lord to “make us glad as many days” as we have been afflicted (v. 15). In teaching us “to count our days” the psalmist points to a reality we might call the “break-even point.” Pastoral preaching on this text might invite hearers to imagine a balance sheet of blessing. Is there some point in your life's journey you might call the break-even point? After that happy day, every other day, every blessing, is a bonus. Perhaps it was your daughter's wedding day or the day you held a first grandchild in your arms. Acknowledge that, by human standards, some lives never seem to break even; they are cut short by illness or violence; but affirm the psalmist's hope that gratitude numbers many glad days.

The heart growing more wise prays for the Lord's work to be manifest among us (v. 16). Here the homiletical door swings open for the preacher to imagine what this work might be in this congregation, in the community or in the world. Perhaps it involves mentors for the confirmation class. Perhaps it means establishing a free clinic for the homeless. Justice is God's work. Peacemaking is God's work. “Let your work be manifest to your servants” (v. 16).

Finally, wise hearts pray that our work may find favor with the Lord (v. 17). Having counted his days and made his choice of treatment, my friend will be using his tomorrows in service, gratitude, and praise. “O prosper the work of our hands!” (v. 17).

THOMAS EDWARD MCGRATH

3. See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Psalm 90:12–17

Exegetical Perspective

psalm bears the imprint of Israel’s wisdom tradition, especially the more skeptical voices of later eras. Psalm 90 contains incisive reflections on the brevity of life and the unpredictability of divine behavior that are so characteristic of Job and Ecclesiastes (both of these wisdom texts in all likelihood date after the return from exile). For this reason, the period after the exile remains the most likely setting for Psalm 90. As the Jewish community had to adapt to shifting circumstances and new uncertainties under foreign rule, the plaintive cries of Psalm 90 fit such a context.

Finally, it is important to note the place of this poem in the larger structure of the book of Psalms. This psalm begins a new section (or “book”) of the Psalter that includes chapters 90–106. The despair and uncertainty of this poem give way to a more hopeful assurance of deliverance in Psalm 91 and a thanksgiving hymn in Psalm 92. The protection of the faithful is more certain in these subsequent psalms than it is in the language of Psalm 90. Yet all three elements (uncertainty, assurance, thanksgiving) are critical aspects of the relationship between God and the people.

One of the more significant theological aspects of the Psalter is that it preserves the tension between these aspects of the human condition and does not seek to resolve them. Acknowledgment of difficulty, such as we find in Psalm 90, is significant. The psalmist recognizes the basic human tendency to seek divine favor and meaning in life, so that we can “rejoice and be glad all our days” (v. 14b). Psalm 90 also admits that even the most faithful believer can be unsure about whether such joy will ever happen. Even as doubt gives way to praise and thanksgiving, Psalm 90 offers a poignant example of human uncertainty and the longing for God’s mercy.

SAMUEL L. ADAMS

Homiletical Perspective

fullest, loving and serving with joyous abandon, trusting God to use us to further God’s vision for creation. God will use us in all our brokenness to continue the creative process—to “prosper the work of our hands” (v. 17).

Verse 16, which begins, “Let your work be manifest to your servants,” allows the preacher to invite the congregation to consider where they are seeing God at work in the world and in their lives. It is important that people understand that God is still at work, at this very moment, to bring healing, wholeness, and reconciliation. God did not retire at the time of the psalmist’s life.

On any given day, the people in the congregation are fighting great battles—illness, unemployment, isolation, poverty, addiction, grief, failed marriages. These are just a few of the struggles that our people face. Psalm 90, without minimizing the very real hardships that our people must cope with, can turn people’s eyes toward God and God’s unique presence to them in their battle. My family has witnessed God’s grace during Embree’s illness. Grace is meals brought to the family’s door, hundreds of people wearing T-shirts that say “Team Embree” to show their support, help with childcare and transportation for the two other children, letters, prayers, gifts sent to Embree and her sisters to cheer them up, and countless other gestures of kindness. These are the ways that God’s work is made manifest to hurting people. When we know where and how to look, we see this evidence of God’s mercy all around us. When we remind the congregation of this, they can prayerfully consider both *where* they experience God’s love and *how* they can bear that love to other people who are hurting. All we have is God, but we experience God through each other.

LESLIE A. KLINGENSMITH

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**PROPER 24 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 16
AND OCTOBER 22 INCLUSIVE)**

Isaiah 53:4–12

⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?

Theological Perspective

For Christian theology, Isaiah 53:4–12 constitutes one of the central scriptural passages for reflection on redemptive suffering. Because early Christians (Acts 8:32–35) identified the Suffering Servant with Jesus, this description of one who “was wounded for our transgressions” (Isa. 53:5) has become part of the Christian passion narrative. As such, this text provides fertile ground for exploring some crucial and complex questions related to God’s redemptive work through Jesus’ suffering.

We must begin by acknowledging that redemptive suffering is a dangerous idea. The idea that God redeems through suffering is used to justify abuse or to put a pious gloss on passivity in the face of human pain. It also becomes entangled in forms of internalized oppression that keep someone from resisting his or her own subjugation. Because of these dangers, many Christians emphasize the redemptive nature of Christ’s life and ministry more so than the redemptive nature of his suffering. However, Isaiah 53:4–12 forces us to reckon with the idea that an innocent man’s torment is the way God chooses to bring restoration.

Let us begin by looking at the way God’s activity is depicted in this passage. Verses 4–6 tell us that this

Pastoral Perspective

For years, I engaged in a practice about which I am not necessarily proud. I would put Jesus in a drawer.

Let me explain. Whenever I would stay at a Roman Catholic retreat center, I would typically find in my sleeping room a crucifix hanging on the wall, often above the bed. These Catholic retreat centers all seem to have the same decorator. To be sure, the artistry of the crucifixes would vary, but wherever I was in the world, I would find Jesus hanging on a cross above my bed.

At first, I did not put Jesus in a drawer. The habit began when I was staying at one retreat center outside of Rochester, Minnesota. I arrived late at night and made my way through darkened corridors to find my room, and when I turned on the light, I noted the usual crucifix—except that this one was different. This particular artist obviously wanted to portray the suffering of Christ as graphically as possible. The nails in his hands and feet were more pronounced. The crown of thorns was threatening, and one could actually see how the Lord’s forehead was punctured by each thorn. Of course, there was blood everywhere. Dripping. He was hanging just above the pillow on the bed, and immediately I knew

Isaiah 53:4–12

For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

⁹They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

¹²Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Exegetical Perspective

Throughout the ages, the vivid language and imagery reflected in Isaiah 53 has captured interpreters' imagination. This is no more evident than in George F. Handel's *Messiah*, which includes selected verses from today's lectionary reading. This musical rendition builds on the popular Christian interpretation that identifies the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 with the suffering Jesus on the cross. Jewish interpreters understand the Suffering Servant in a collective sense, as Israel during and after the exile. Even though bruised and battered, Isaiah is saying that the exiles ought to fulfill their true calling as servants of God in the world, as a blessing to the nations around.

David Clines proposes that we move our attention away from the often-fierce debate regarding the identity of the Servant to the rhetorical force of the poem itself, that is, how the language and imagery of this remarkable poem draws the reader in and alters his or her perception. In this regard, we can discern three interwoven themes that “seize the reader and bend him [her] to a new understanding of himself [herself] and of the direction of his [her] life.”¹

1. David Clines, *I, He, We, They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53*, JSOTSup 1 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976), 216.

Homiletical Perspective

There are a number of realities in the modern, Western world that make this Suffering Servant passage challenging for Christians to engage, embrace, and embody.

To begin with, suffering in general is rarely something we talk about or value; rather, we wish to deny or eliminate it, as evidenced by the prominence of the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel; the pursuit of success and at any cost; the reluctance of some family members to engage hospice at the end of life (because it does not promise to make things all better); or the self-medicating addictions that plague us (to get clean and sober, you have to feel the pain).

Even when modern middle-class folk do suffer, we are likely to express our sacrifice and pain solely in terms of personal experience. Enduring a bad relationship, or experiencing the fluctuations of the market and having our 401(k) retirement savings tank, or having cancer and undergoing chemotherapy may be painful and frightening; yet these are difficulties that cannot be equated with redemptive suffering or the result of what the New Testament calls “taking up our cross.”

Isaiah 53:4–12

Theological Perspective

man's affliction is not God's judgment upon him, as was assumed. Rather, the speaker realizes that this innocent man is "crushed for *our* iniquities." The onlookers are not witnessing a case of just desert, but rather an act of vicarious suffering for their own redemption. The text emphasizes the wrongdoing of the people: "we . . . have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way." We not only escape punishment, but we are redeemed through the punishment of an innocent man. The "LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." The translation in the Common English Bible is even more powerful: "But the LORD let fall on him all our crimes."

In verses 7–9, the narrator details the crimes against this man, although we are clear that the people's wrongdoing extends far beyond their treatment of this particular individual. He was oppressed, afflicted, tormented (CEB), maltreated (JPS). Then he was taken away and "cut off from the land of the living," "struck dead" (CEB). They laid his body among the wicked and the rich (NRSV) or the evildoers (CEB). All of this was done to him even though "he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth" (NRSV). Moreover, throughout the entire ordeal, this innocent man did not resist this cruelty; nor did he verbally defend himself. He remained silent, subjecting himself to brutality.

We then read one of the most troubling lines in the text: "Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain" (v. 10 NRSV). The text moves quickly to identify God's purpose. Indeed, some translations refuse the full stop: "But the LORD chose to crush him by disease, that, if he made himself as offering for guilt, he might see offspring and have long life, and that through him the LORD's purpose might prosper" (v. 10 JPS). God's will to "crush him and make him suffer" (CEB) is not for the sake of causing him pain, but for the sake of redemption. Through his suffering, the Servant is exalted. By his suffering, the Servant makes "intercession for the transgressors" (v. 12 NRSV). This man's affliction and torment are part of God's plan for restoration and wholeness.

Although the text moves quickly toward the divine purpose and the Servant's exaltation, it also occasions serious theological reflection on the idea that God chooses to use a man's affliction and torment as the means to redemption. Key to this reflection is clarity about the relationship between God and the Suffering Servant. We meet the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 42:1, with the announcement: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit

Pastoral Perspective

I could not sleep there looking up at the feet of the Lord with the nails sticking out and his blood ready to drip on my head. I took him off the wall and put him in a drawer.

Years later, when I had returned from yet another stay in a Roman Catholic retreat center and was talking with a friend, I shared with her my latest experience and confessed that I had a habit of putting Jesus in the drawer. This friend, a Roman Catholic religious, quickly grew exasperated with me.

"Good grief!" she exclaimed. "You Protestants! Why are you so afraid of the death of the Lord? You people gloss over the crucifixion as if it was some temporary inconvenience so you can get to Easter morning and celebrate the empty tomb! What is wrong with you?"

"That's the whole point!" I remember responding to her. "It's all about the empty tomb. It is all about the power of the resurrection—Christ's triumph over death."

"But don't you see?" she countered. "That is exactly it. He had to die in order to triumph over death. You cannot have resurrection without dying. He had to suffer in his dying so that every person who suffers throughout human history would know that the God of the universe understands suffering and pain and injustice and is fully capable of sharing in this because God encountered it."

I no longer put Jesus in a drawer.

In this passage, the writer continues the description of the Suffering Servant that began at Isaiah 52:13. The language is powerful and unrelenting. The Servant is the one who has carried our brokenness and our diseases. The servant was wounded for us, crushed, punished, and bruised. The Servant was oppressed and afflicted and is compared to a sacrificial lamb led to slaughter. Even in his dying, he is cast away from the community and buried among the truly corrupt and the defiled. This Suffering Servant has seen no justice and yet has not protested this cruelty.

Surely this is remarkable news, especially for those who encounter such suffering in the world today. Surely this is remarkable news, perhaps even comforting news, for those who know pain and sadness and cruelty and injustice.

A pastor friend called one day and relayed the tragedy of a family whose teenage son had been randomly and violently killed. He then asked for advice on how to respond to the grief-stricken mother and father who the night before had asked, "Why did this happen?"

*Isaiah 53:4–12***Exegetical Perspective**

Suffering. First, Isaiah 53 portrays the theme of extreme *suffering*. The Servant is “wounded” (v. 5), “crushed” (vv. 5, 10), “bruised” (v. 5), “oppressed” and “afflicted” (v. 7). It may well be that this suffering reflects the suffering Israel experienced during the exile and its aftermath. The expression of extreme trauma raises a number of questions regarding the nature of suffering and God’s role in this suffering. With regard to the latter, the Servant is said to be “struck down” and afflicted by God (v. 4); the crushing pain is called the will of God (v. 10). Questions regarding God’s role in suffering, which became quite urgent during the time of the exile, continue to resound in situations of extreme duress today. Isaiah 53’s claim regarding God’s complicity in the suffering of the Servant is best understood as an example of a sense-making strategy, not as the definitive answer to this enduring problem of why people suffer.

With regard to the nature of suffering, Jeremy Schipper proposes that Isaiah 53 also reflects the experience of disability, with its accompanying social isolation and stigma. We might consider the Servant in terms of disability (e.g., viewing the Servant’s suffering in terms of a skin disease such as leprosy or his status as a eunuch in the Babylonian court).² The most important payoff of such an interpretation is that it draws the reader’s attention to disability in a new way, inviting us to contemplate the suffering that society subjects upon people who live with disabilities, as well as reframing how one thinks about disabled servant(s) of God. Isaiah 53 thus helps the reader to notice the pain, suffering, and alienation many people may experience in today’s society.

Beverly Stratton notes that this poem convicts us when we include ourselves in the poem’s “we.” We recognize “that others suffer in part because of our sins: a homeless person, a battered woman, an AIDS victim, the disabled, abused children, refugees, the hungry, and groups targeted for genocide. Whether by our active involvement as perpetrators of their torture, by our conspiracies of silence about the realities of their lives and death, or by our passive complicity in systems that ignore or exploit them, others are wounded because of our transgressions.”³

Transformation. A second important theme that emerges is *transformation*. The pain and suffering

2. Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). The Schipper quote in the second paragraph below is from page 58.

3. Beverly Stratton, “Engaging Metaphors: Suffering with Zion and the Servant in Isaiah 52–53,” in Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 219–37 (229).

Homiletical Perspective

The biggest challenge here is that a text addressed to despairing exiles is not likely to make sense to modern Christians who see themselves as existing to influence—or even be the driving force behind—the predominant political or military power at work in the world today. Though the American church may be more in exile than we realize, the prevailing tendency is to identify with empire. An increasing exposure to and involvement with the poor and suffering across our land and in the developing world can serve to broaden our view of the kingdom of God.

An additional challenge will be the twin notions of corporate sin and substitutionary atonement in verse 5: “he was wounded for our transgressions.” Though these concepts are deeply embedded in the biblical narrative, they often are quite alien to modern secular sensibilities, easily rejected as outdated and abusive. Of course, we may agree that none of us is as bad as bad can be, but none of us is as good as good can be, either. Still, the suffering and death of one to benefit others (v. 10: “through him the will of the LORD shall prosper”) is an equation that will not automatically compute in the minds of many.

Redemptive suffering or bearing our cross is not a matter of pursuing persecution or suffering per se. Rather, God’s people are called to be a unique, peculiar, alternative society, displaying a “revolutionary subordination,” by embracing behaviors typically perceived as weak or foolish—like turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving up your coat, washing feet, sharing wealth, welcoming strangers, and loving enemies.¹ This is the stuff of redemptive suffering, the soil in which radical servanthood is cultivated, producing a harvest of humility, sacrifice, and love. Indeed, the power of redemptive suffering can happen anywhere, even amid agonizing pain and violence.

An estimated 92,000 men, women and children were murdered at the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbrück. This prayer was found on a crumpled piece of wrapping near the body of a dead child:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we bought, thanks to this suffering—our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.²

1. Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 173.

2. Rob Goldman, “Healing the World by Our Wounds,” *The Other Side*, November/December 1991, 24.

Isaiah 53:4–12

Theological Perspective

upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (NRSV). In Isaiah 49:1–6, the Servant himself announces his mission, to be “a light to the nations, that [the LORD’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” In Isaiah 50:4–9, the Servant recognizes the torment that awaits him, pledges his faithfulness to God, and asserts that God will vindicate him. There are still a number of troubling elements here, theologically, but involuntary suffering is not one of them. Taken as a whole, the Suffering Servant narrative depicts one who willingly takes on suffering as an act of faith in a God who remains present and will redeem. The Servant gives himself to God, volunteering his body as an instrument for God’s redemptive work.

The Servant’s chosen status and willful participation make plain that any application of Suffering Servant imagery to involuntary suffering is utterly inappropriate. By contrast, an appropriate analogy is the action of a nonviolent activist who willingly subjects him- or herself to the brutality of an opponent. This voluntary suffering has a strategic purpose insofar as it exposes the brutality of an oppressor. It also has theological meaning: God works through these beaten bodies to change hearts and minds, to establish justice, and to restore community.

Still troubling is the idea that God chooses tormented bodies as a means to redemption. Without quashing the necessary wrestling with such a claim and its implications, we might also understand God’s agency and activity differently. Rather than emphasizing God’s instrumental use of a body as a sacrifice, let us think about God’s redemptive work in a social context where people mistreat one another. God does not step in to rescue the one who has chosen to subject himself or herself to brutality. God does, however, vindicate this person, and this vindication serves as judgment on those who perpetrated the mistreatment. “We,” the perpetrators and the onlookers, are met simultaneously with divine judgment and unearned forgiveness. In such a frame, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:4–12 reminds Christians of more than our redemption through the suffering of Christ. It also alerts us to the ongoing nature of God’s redemptive work, as we live out our lives in the crucible of judgment and mercy.

ELLEN OTT MARSHALL

Pastoral Perspective

“Tell them the truth,” I told him. “Tell them you do not know why this happened.”

“Is that all I can say?” he asked.

“No,” I quickly replied. “In your next breath, you tell them what you do know to be true. You tell them that you know God did not wish for their son to die, and then you tell them that God is with them—abiding with them even in these moments of deep and unimaginable pain and grief, because God knows their sadness and suffering firsthand. That is what we know to be true.”

We know this to be true because the prophet Isaiah tells us this. We know this to be true because the prophet uses language that intentionally pierces our hearts: struck down and afflicted . . . wounded and crushed for others’ sinfulness . . . led to slaughter like an innocent lamb . . . oppressed and cut off and isolated from all others.

Then, however, the text turns to reveal the unique role that the Servant plays in God’s plan for Israel and indeed, for humankind. To be sure, this role is not for all who suffer pain and sadness and injustice. This role is unique to the one whom God has called to be the source of righteousness. It is important that we recognize the uniqueness of the Suffering Servant. God does not invite the suffering of all persons so they may be light for the whole world. God delegates this role to the one who encounters this suffering as an innocent on behalf of others. Pastors must be careful not to infer that all of human suffering occurs so that those who suffer will be glorified. That outcome is uniquely attributed to the one whom God called to suffer and die for the forgiveness of all, so that even God’s own self would know what it means to be oppressed and stricken and struck down. That outcome is why we cannot rush past the crucifixion to the empty tomb. That is why the suffering Jesus is no longer in a drawer.

RODGER Y. NISHIOKA

*Isaiah 53:4–12***Exegetical Perspective**

outlined in this chapter is transformed by God. In verses 10–11 we see how the Servant will prosper, how he will have a long life and many children—all indications of God’s blessing. The emphasis on new life that God brings in a situation of despair, whether the communal experience of exile or a personal crisis, is a compelling thought. However, one may well ask whether this point of view romanticizes suffering. Viewing the passage in terms of a disability framework, Schipper challenges the idea that the Servant is necessarily healed by God. He argues that, in light of Isaiah 56, “the figure with disabilities is vindicated from social oppression rather than cured of a defective body.” To think that those wounded and struggling with disability or disease are brought into the center of society and given a position of honor is a powerful thought. Such a transformation may change how we think of the real-life sufferers of disability and disease who, because of societal prejudice and stereotypes, are often excluded from society.

Vocation. Finally, there is the theme of *vocation*. The Servant is called to be a blessing to others, to carry their burdens. Once again, to consider that a diseased or disabled individual has a purpose to fulfill—something that is not always evident in the health-wealth-success culture in which we live—is a compelling idea that has the power to change attitudes and actions.

This emphasis on vocation continues the theme of power in the midst of vulnerability, which occurs throughout the biblical text. God is doing great things through ordinary, broken, and bruised individuals. For instance, Paul complains about the thorn (Greek “stake”) in his flesh that caused him incredible torment (2 Cor. 12:7). Repeatedly, he prayed for this thorn to be removed, but in the end Paul rested in the belief that God’s power is revealed through weakness: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

L. JULIANA CLAASSENS

Homiletical Perspective

Jesus as Suffering Servant. While it need not be the first or only direction the sermon takes, it is no secret the church has used this text to point to Jesus’ death on the cross, the Bible’s example of redemptive suffering par excellence. When we read this passage in light of the New Testament, Isaiah’s Suffering Servant comes to fulfillment in the Lamb of God (“that is led to the slaughter” [v. 7b]) who takes away the sins of the world.

It is noteworthy that the Suffering Servant is not merely a victim of human abuse and hatred; but in some sense God demands his death (“the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . it was the will of the LORD to crush him” [vv. 6b, 10a]). How could God do this? Why did God not just choose to say, “I forgive you,” and leave it at that? Why did Jesus die?

The New Testament writers develop a variety of images for the atonement—financial, military, legal, and sacrificial—but relational imagery is key. Forgiveness and love, in order to be real, require being willing to hurt, even to share the guilt of others as if it were one’s own. This is what God does in Jesus.

Some propose that the Son dies on the cross to appease the Father’s anger, while still trying to maintain that God is loving. This feels a little like the owner of a dog who is barking, growling, and straining at its leash saying, “Don’t worry, he doesn’t bite.” It is not very convincing. Sometimes it sounds as if what Jesus came to save us from is . . . *God!*

However, it is not anger but God’s love that motivates the suffering and death of Christ. At the heart of the redemptive suffering on the cross is love. We are called not only to proclaim the cross, but also to live it—to express God’s love as Jesus did—by ministering in weakness and vulnerability; by caring enough to be hurt; by letting our hearts be broken. Indeed, the greatest influence we have impacting others to become followers of Christ may well be our *lifestyle*—marked by redemptive suffering and love. “Ultimately this is why Jesus died . . . not merely to provide us with a ticket to heaven someday, but to be the key to a new kind of existence now, an existence that proclaims the gospel of salvation with our very lives. Jesus did not come just to prepare us to die. He came to teach us to live lives marked by redemptive suffering.”³

HEIDI HUSTED ARMSTRONG

3. For more on the relational imagery on atonement, see my sermon “Why Did Jesus Die?” in Joseph Small, ed., *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2010), 10–16.

Psalm 91:9–16

⁹Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,

¹⁰no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 91 provides a rich resource for theological reflection on the meaningful and troubling relationship between trust and protection. The first voice (vv. 1–2) confesses a profound trust in YHWH: “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust” (v. 2 NRSV). In verses 3–13, a second speaker responds to the first one with a series of concrete images to illustrate the protection that God extends to those who trust God. The psalm closes with divine discourse that confirms this relationship between trust and protection. “Because he has bound himself to me I will rescue him” (v. 14, trans. Erich Zenger¹).

As Erich Zenger notes in his commentary, “psalms of trust have their *Sitz im Leben* in times of anxiety” (Zenger, 433). That is, texts that offer assurance are born in contexts circumscribed by vulnerability. It makes sense, then, that such texts become most alive for us when we feel fearful. We see this clearly today as soldiers and their family members not only cherish this text, but give it expression in a wide variety of forms. Known as “the soldier’s psalm,” this text scrolls across Web pages devoted to individual soldiers and Web pages of organizations supporting military families. Psalm 91 is also

Pastoral Perspective

When a young follower asked church father Athanasius how he might grow in his devotion to and trust in God, the wise leader told him to memorize and recite the Ninety-first Psalm. This same advice has been given over the centuries as persons have sought to grow in their reliance on God and God’s trustworthiness. It is easy to see why. The psalm assures the hearer of God’s steadfast protection in all situations and against all enemies. The assurances are clear and unequivocal:

—No evil shall befall you.

—God will command God’s angels to guard you in all your ways.

—God will protect those who know God’s name.

—When they call on God, God will answer them.

—God will rescue them and honor them.

—God will give long life and salvation.

It is important to recognize that these verses in the psalm begin with a condition. Because the follower has chosen the Lord as one’s refuge and God as one’s dwelling place . . . then God will protect faithfully.

The concept of refuge is well understood in the Hebrew tradition. In Exodus 21:13, Numbers 35:9–15, and in various places in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and 1 Chronicles, six cities are designated as places of refuge in Israel. These were places of protection

1. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). Page numbers in parentheses indicate the sources of quotations.

Psalm 91:9–16

¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.

¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.

¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 91 offers readers a profound image of faith in a dangerous world in which the well-being of the believer is threatened. The theme of God's protection in the face of danger, which forms the central theme of this week's lectionary reading (vv. 9–16), is already introduced in verses 1–2. The lectionary selection for today is thus best read together with the parallel pericope preceding it (Ps. 91:1–8), with the second part of Psalm 91 serving as a reiteration of the promise of God's protection introduced in the first part of the psalm.

The two sections of this psalm are further tied together with the structuring metaphor of God as refuge. In both verse 9 and verses 1–2 it is said that God is the believer's refuge and fortress, the shadow and dwelling place in which he or she finds shelter (cf. also the reference in vv. 3–4 to God's wings, under which the believer safely hides). The metaphor of divine refuge is a foundational metaphor in the psalms; for example, in Psalms 46 and 48 this metaphor is extended to signify God's sanctuary presence.¹ This acknowledgment that God is a refuge forms the basis for the believer's profession that he or she is safeguarded from all kind of dangers: while traveling, from threats by day and by night (vv. 5–6);

1. William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 15–30.

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A word of caution for the preacher: Psalm 91 has suffered more than its fair share of misinterpretation! The all-encompassing assertion in verse 10 ("No evil shall befall you") can be easily misunderstood if not tempered with the subsequent declaration in verse 15 ("I will be with them in trouble"). A couple of verses here (vv. 11–12) actually find their way into the New Testament, where they are quoted out of context by the devil and used to tempt Jesus, although Jesus refuses to take the bait. In addition, verse 13 has been yanked out of context more than once to help justify the existence of a few bizarre snake-handling cults.

At the heart of Psalm 91 is a very existential question: What do God's people do when, as a sanitized form of the bumper sticker puts it, "stuff happens"? Especially when the stuff happening these days seems to be increasingly random and absurd.

Perhaps the spirit of our times can be captured in the observation "Old age tends to look back; younger age tends to look forward; and middle age tends to look . . . worried!" Actually it appears that more and more people of all ages look worried: worried when a little shadow appears on the CT scan; worried when the global economy sputters, and unemployment spikes; worried about a kid in a trench coat gunning down his peers; worried when some of

Psalm 91:9–16

Theological Perspective

embroidered on bandanas for soldiers and their loved ones to carry.²

It is not only soldiers and their loved ones who find such profound meaning in this psalm. It speaks to anyone in need of protection. God’s assurance bears them up and gives them hope. In the closing verses, YHWH declares, “When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them” (vv. 14–15 NRSV). These words give expression to an authentic faith, a deep conviction that God is indeed a faithful God. God keeps promises and is trustworthy. For those in vulnerable contexts, the psalmist’s words remind them of God’s faithfulness. Saying, singing, or wearing these words, then, serves as a way to “pray oneself into the hope, indeed the certainty that one is protected and gifted with life by YHWH” (Zenger, 429).

Without denying the promise of protection in the psalm and the importance of such message to believers in need, we must also reflect on the theological downside of this link between piety and protection. If one who trusts in God is protected, are we to conclude that the thousands who fall all around us do so because their trust was not great enough? Experience tells us that this question must be answered negatively. We know people who place their trust in God, bind up their lives with God, truly love God, and still suffer violence, abuse, and untimely death. There is simply no empirical ground for saying trust in God assures physical safety. To assert this connection—that one is rescued because of trust in God—is an offense to those whose equally profound faith does not protect them from the violence and cruelty of this world.

In light of these empirical realities and ethical concerns, we need to think differently about the mechanics of piety and protection. Jesus’ own use of Psalm 91 helps us to do this. In the temptations stories (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), Satan entreats Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in order to demonstrate his trust in God and God’s protection of him. Jesus insists on worshiping rather than testing God. Worshiping God is an end in itself. We do not worship God as a means to our own protection. Nor should we construe other people’s protection as evidence of their trust in God. This is the difference between magic and faith. Magic is a means to the end we desire. Faith bears us up to endure the end that comes.

2. I am indebted to Dr. Joel LeMon for acquainting me with the reception history of this psalm.

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where a person who unintentionally killed another could reside without fear of revenge until a trial could be held. This idea of a refuge or a place of protection was not unique to the Hebrews. In fact, many ancient civilizations the world over have recorded evidence of similar places.

In the contemporary world, the concept of refuge has broadened further. The United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 defined a “refugee” as a person who seeks refuge

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.¹

To make the Lord one’s refuge, then, one is seeking God’s protection because he or she believes they can find no such protection on their own or in their own life. This is important. These assurances and promises are not simply God’s doing, in a scattered or desultory way. These assurances and promises of God’s protection are provided for those who have chosen God as their refuge and the Lord as their “dwelling place.” There is an agreement here, not tacit but explicit, that those who run to God’s protection, who trust more in God than in themselves, will find a source of sustenance and care beyond themselves.

This is an important understanding in the ancient world and in the world today. The cities of refuge in ancient Israel were scattered throughout the land, and in order for people to experience their protection, they had to leave their lives behind and travel there. The protection did not come to them. They had to seek it and dwell there. To be sure, there is a crucial caution here. Such strong words of God’s protection and care can all too easily lead to a tendency to focus more on one’s self than on God. The promise of God commanding angels to “guard” us in verse 11 can lead to a superstition that we can do whatever we want, since God has promised to guard us in “all your ways.” This is contrary to the very promise of the psalm’s words, because it shifts attention from God to ourselves. The assurance here is not that God is at our beck and call to protect us from all dangers—especially those dangers we may choose to throw ourselves into as a way to test God. Satan

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c125.html>

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while at home, from any harm that will come to one's house (v. 10).

A number of vivid metaphors are furthermore introduced to depict God's protective presence in the life of the believer. So verses 11–12 speak of the safekeeping role of angels, a notion popularized in the widely popular concept of guardian angels who will ensure that you come to no harm. This promise of protection is also imagined in terms of being protected even in the presence of lions and snakes, which serve as metaphors denoting whatever forces threaten the safety, security, and well-being of the believer.

Psalm 91 ends with a confirmation voiced in direct speech from God (vv. 14–16), in which God forms the subject of seven verbs of deliverance (“deliver,” “protect,” “answer,” “rescue,” “honor,” “satisfy,” “show”) as means of assuring the believer of God's presence. This divine response offers a powerful affirmation of the conviction that the basis for the believer's confidence is not himself or herself but the promise of God's faithfulness.

There are several hermeneutical problems associated with this text. For one, Psalm 91 contains numerous bold statements, for example, in verse 7 that ten thousands will fall next to you, yet no harm will come to you. It is indeed a question of how to reconcile this conviction with the trials and tribulations that make up an unavoidable part of life. Moreover, a further problem relates to the link between faith and protection that is assumed in this text. This problem is most clear in verse 9: “Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.” One could summarize this confession as saying, “*Because* you believe, no harm shall come to you” (cf. also vv. 14–16). Such an interpretation, however, does not explain tragedy that befalls believers and unbelievers alike—a problem that evokes considerable theological reflection in the book of Job.

A further question raised by Frederick Gaiser regards the temptation of using this text in a magical sense, as a kind of talisman or incantation to ward off evil spirits. For instance, this psalm has been called the “Trench War Psalm,” apparently popular in the First World War among soldiers fighting in the trenches, reflecting the idea that if one were just to repeat the promise of protection outlined in this psalm, one would be safe.

Such a position reflects the basic human need to be in control—a notion that goes back to the ancient custom of wearing scraps of paper with

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the tallest buildings in the most powerful nation in the world become target practice for fanatics, and next thing you know a hundred and ten stories are reduced to a pile of twisted steel girders and toxic dust, with human bone fragments scattered on the surrounding rooftops and a national sense of safety and security decimated; worried when a military budget is nearly double what it was on 9/11, with two wars staggering on.

Clearly stuff happens, evil stuff. So now what?

Psalm 91 points us to a God who says, “I will be with them in trouble” (v. 15). Indeed, the absolute uniqueness of the God of the Bible can be summed up as this “withness,” which is ultimately spelled out in Jesus, the Word made flesh. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is our refuge, our sanctuary, our safe place, our security, the one who holds our struggles and sorrows, who holds all. When stuff happens we might be tempted to say, “There is Christianity”; but more accurately there is simply God-with-us; there is Jesus, a person to encounter, a relationship to experience.

This means that when stuff happens, our hope is not in circumstances changing, or things improving, or that certain stuff will not ever happen again. Our hope is that our lives are guided by the God-with-us-and-for-us revealed in Jesus. Our future is in his care.

At this point, a sermon might begin to explore some possible evidence of how we are trusting in God-with-us. More specifically the preacher might suggest that a measure of our ability to trust is revealed in how we respond when stuff happens to those we love the most, especially our children.

Ten years after the tragedy at Columbine High School, the school principal recalled how initially the surviving students were reluctant to talk to their parents. It was not because they did not have questions. They had plenty of questions, big questions: Why did I not die? Will it happen again? Will it happen to me? However, the students kept their questions to themselves because they knew that asking them would make their parents uncomfortable, and they did not want to upset them.

When our children have fears, how do we respond? Does it upset us? Do we say, “Do not worry, it will never happen to you,” or “I will not let it happen to you”?

Do we say, “Well, I have to tell you stuff happens, and God's people are not exempt”? Do we tell them God is our refuge? That Jesus Christ is the Sovereign Lord and Ruler of the universe, that he is our security?

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We may rework the mechanics of piety and protection in different ways to avoid blaming the victim and treating faith like magic. We are still left with a biblical text that promises that God will rescue those who know God's name. For those who find great meaning in this psalm of assurance and for those who are troubled by it, therefore, it is crucial to remember that Psalm 91 does not stand alone. It is nestled between lament (Ps. 90) and thanksgiving (Ps. 92). This set of songs and prayers illustrates the "ebb and flow of assurance" that Kathleen A. Farmer describes as part of the Psalms' overall structure.³ "In the book of Psalms the flow of human life and faith is seen to be more like an ocean wave than like a river current. Assurance and doubt can wash back and forth over the faithful" (Farmer, 149–50).

In this sense, Psalm 91 captures an authentic moment in the life of the believer, a moment in which one feels an absolute trust in God and a sense of being protected by God. The psalmist conveys the experience of God's promise, and we pray ourselves into that promise as we pray this psalm. Fortunately, there are also other psalms through which to express other, equally authentic religious experiences, such as betrayal, disappointment, righteous indignation, confusion, and undeserved rescue or unmerited grace. The Psalms constitute such a profound theological resource precisely because they give voice to myriad religious experiences and provide texts for incorporating a wide range of feelings into our worship. We must not deny the link between piety and protection conveyed in Psalm 91, any more than we would deny God's profound love for all those in danger and need. We must also affirm the plurality of images and religious affections that find expression in the Psalms, so that God can speak to us through these poignant texts in our darkest hour as well as our brightest day.

ELLEN OTT MARSHALL

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cleverly tries to invoke this when he tests Jesus during the Lord's time in the wilderness in Matthew 4 and Luke 4.

The call here is to seek God as our refuge and our dwelling place and, in so doing, to place our trust in God and not in ourselves or our ability to test God's faithfulness. The call here is to realize that our reliance on our own self-made securities cannot save us and protect us. Rather, we are to trust in God's amazing promise.

These are not easy words in a skeptical and cynical age, but precisely because we live in such a time, they are crucial words. In a real sense, we are all refugees. We have all come to realize that there are powers and principalities at work in the world that oppose our well-being and wholeness. They threaten us at every turn, and we are strangers in the very land that we call home, and the fear is real and palpable. This then is the power of the psalm and the reason for its being named through generations as a source of devotion and instruction. When we make the Lord our refuge and God our dwelling place, then we will be delivered, protected, and rescued and our lives will be long, and all of us will find salvation.

RODGER Y. NISHIOKA

3. Kathleen A. Farmer, "Psalms," in *Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition with Apocrypha*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Page number in parentheses indicates the source of quotation.

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biblical texts like Psalm 91 in an amulet. Gaiser notes that such “prebiblical superstition . . . seems to find ways to emerge in every generation, sometimes in more sophisticated forms including today’s various religion-as-self-help exercises.”² One should consider whether such a tendency does not fall victim to turning faith into superstition.

Actually the way in which verses 11–12 are used in the temptation of Christ narrative (Matt. 4:5–7; Luke 4:9–12) offers a critique of using Psalm 91 in a mechanistic manner. When Satan invokes the reference to guardian angels who will carry the believer on their hands, so that no harm will come to him or her (Luke 4:10–11), Jesus resists the temptation to invoke Psalm 91 in order to ensure his safety. As Mays says it well: “Real trust does not seek to test God or to prove his faithfulness.”³

What may be helpful in our contemplation on these complex hermeneutical issues is to note that Psalm 91 comes out of a time of trial, perhaps reflecting the context of the Babylonian exile. During this time, thousands *did* fall, and terrors *did* reach the house. Moreover, the reference to lions and snakes and pestilence assumes some very real threats that communicate what we know all too well: the world is filled with many dangers.

However, the remarkable thing about the faith reflected in biblical texts such as Psalm 91 deriving from this particular painful period in Israel’s history is that, even in the midst of the turmoil brought about by the Babylonian invasion, the loss of the temple, the loss of land, and the loss of life, one can still continue a relationship with God and find shelter in God’s love. We thus see in Psalm 91 a powerful affirmation of God’s presence in a world filled with threats. Actually it may be even more meaningful to profess God’s presence and deliverance while being in the eye of the storm.

L. JULIANA CLAASSENS

Homiletical Perspective

Do we tell them that sometimes it is not until we get to the place where God is all we have, that we come to know that God is all we need?

Perhaps we will even have the courage to share with them some words that theologian Gilbert Meilaender offered two weeks after September 11, 2001:

My child, the world is always a dangerous and threatening place where death surrounds us. [But] When I brought you for baptism I acknowledged that I could not possibly guarantee your [earthly] future. I handed you over to the God who loves you and with whom you are safe in both life and death. There is no security to be found elsewhere, certainly not from me or those like me. Live with courage, therefore, and, if it must be, do not be afraid to die in the service of what is good and just.¹

Psalm 91 is inviting us to “live with courage, therefore,” knowing that while stuff happens, grace happens as well. It is God’s grace that allows us to refuse to limit the loving-kindness of God to people who look and think like us; to pray and work relentlessly for the coming of God’s kingdom—the kingdom of the widow, the orphan, the mourner, the war-torn, the hungry, the poor; to make our lives a protest against all that is evil and trivial and tyrannical in our world and in ourselves.

While the challenge to trust is often conceived as a massive once-and-for-all decision, it may actually be more a matter of taking smaller steps and “practicing the presence of God” day by day. Even that might be too much for us. Perhaps the spiritual discipline of trusting God is learning to be present to God-with-us in our lives for the next ten minutes . . . then ten more . . . and ten more. “You have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place” ten minutes at a time!

HEIDI HUSTED ARMSTRONG

2. Frederick Gaiser, “‘It Shall Not Reach You:’ Talisman or Vocation? Reading Psalm 91 in Time of War,” *Word and World* 25, no. 2 (2005): 191–99 (191).

3. James Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 298.

1. Gilbert Meilaender, “After September 11,” *The Christian Century* 118 (Sept. 26, 2001): 7–8.

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PROPER 25 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 23
AND OCTOBER 29 INCLUSIVE)

Jeremiah 31:7–9

⁷For thus says the LORD:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
“Save, O LORD, your people,
the remnant of Israel.”

⁸See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,

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Jeremiah is surely best known in the history of Christian thought as the woeful prophet par excellence. His name is a byword for judgment, punishment, lament—doom and gloom. From histories of New England Puritanism, talk of jeremiads has gained general use as shorthand for theatrical sermonlike scolding and threatening. This week’s reading, however, is an oracle of hope, and hence a tonic for those who are in despair. It is also a reminder that the book’s message or canonical force features more than denunciatory harangues. How to handle the “hopeful more” is perhaps the Christian interpreter’s bottom-line theological challenge.

The book of Jeremiah itself abounds in text-critical, source-critical, and literary-critical perplexities, yet the basic outline of its historical context is comparatively clear and sure, annoying cloudiness over some specifics notwithstanding. Jeremiah lived during the end times of the kingdom of Judah’s First Temple monarchy, from the reign of Josiah to that of Zedekiah and the Babylonian exile. The book reads the course of human events through a Deuteronomistic lens, viewing well-being as God’s blessings for covenantal faithfulness and misfortunes as God’s chastisements for waywardness. Christians have fixed far more often on the intensity, bold imagery, and pathos of Jeremiah’s threats of judgment than his

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Southern Sudan. Darfur. Somalia. Bhutan. Columbia. Iraq. Palestinian territories. Myanmar. Sri Lanka. Afghanistan. Congo. Rwanda. Eritrea. Angola. Liberia. Haiti. What do these countries have in common? According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, they all have tens of thousands of refugees scattered around the globe. Alienated from their homes by war, oppression, poverty, disease, famine, and countless other causes, refugees from around the world long for home.

In 2011, the world saw the birth of a new nation: Southern Sudan. While significant problems exist, the citizens of this fragile young nation sang praises, danced in the streets, and rejoiced at moving beyond the civil war that has defined most of their lives and taking a significant step toward the promise of a lasting peace. As of this writing, violence persists, but not in the systematic and often genocidal manner it did only a year ago. There is hope for a people who were once at the very edge of their existence.

The ancient Israelites knew such hope. Carried into exile by the Babylonians, the time has come for them to return home. The Persians have defeated the Babylonians, and the Israelites can now return to rebuild, to renew their identity as God’s chosen people.

This return has three remarkable characteristics. First, while the core of returnees may be coming

Jeremiah 31:7–9

among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
⁹With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Exegetical Perspective

Jeremiah 31:7–9 begins in *media res*, but these verses quickly flash back to the past and forward to the future. The prophetic words of this passage promise restoration and new life for Israel. Contrasting vividly with Israel's situation at the time of this prophecy—in exile—this glorious vision makes their predicted restoration even more dramatic. This text reminds struggling and judged Israel that hope does remain, as God has not ultimately rejected them. This strong affirmation of hope emerges from the historical context behind these verses, the literary context within Jeremiah, and the central themes of worship and joy, for Israel and for the nations, which are pervasive in this passage.

The prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed several central events in Israel's history, was responsible for interpreting these events from a theological perspective. Due to a change in the power of ancient empires, the kingdom of Judah, David's descendants, went from being a safe vassal kingdom of the Assyrian Empire to being conquered by the Babylonian Empire within thirty years. When Babylon conquered Judah, they destroyed the palace and the temple in Jerusalem and took educated and elite Israelites with them into exile in Babylon. (A side note: as in many prophetic texts, the people of Judah are called by many different names in this passage,

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The God of the Bible, at least my Bible, is not ashamed to take a "mulligan," to stand again on the cosmic "tee" and swing mightily in the hope of sending this one three hundred yards down the middle of the fairway—never mind those two balls lost in the rough. This is wonderful if you are the one sitting pretty; if you are the one in tall grass or the bottom of the water hazard, would it not be better to forget about you? To push the metaphor past the breaking point, God, unlike certain former presidents, always insists on playing both balls, the one in the rough and the one on the fairway, because God knows there is a very good chance the second shot will land "out of play."

This pull and tug between moving on in an endless procession of soteriological "do-overs" and the divine remembrance of things past is central to Jeremiah 30–31, the "hopeful chapters" of the prophet of doom and depression. It may also be central to the biblical reading of history. How the tradition came to place these chapters between prophecies from exile and prophecies of exile is both part of the chronological puzzle of the book of Jeremiah and the theological puzzle of God's ways with Israel, and with us. It also seems a lot like life, "one step up and two steps back," to quote the prophet of Asbury Park: "We've given each other some hard

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oracles of consoling hopefulness, with the famed exception of verses 31:31–34, proclaiming a coming “new covenant.” Efforts to identify the prophet’s true voice amid the much-redacted whole or to score him as a pessimist or optimist on a psychological inventory are not without interest, but to date not notably successful. Other concerns vie for theological-priority attention.

Handling this oracle of salvation is a chief case in point. Here YHWH’s word of promise to save the people—the remnant of Israel, and Ephraim—runs counter to the tit-for-tat framework of Deuteronomistic rewards and punishments. If faithlessness *earns* punishing misery, pain, death, exile, and destruction, what could possibly account for a turnaround that prompts cries of gladness? Emergent Christianity, born amid troubles of the Second Temple era, inherited this question, this riddle or mystery, in speaking of the gospel, God’s good news, in Jesus Christ.

One response to the question throughout the history of Christian theology has been to double down on the Deuteronomistic view. Those falling short in faith and faithfulness are never so distant from or hateful to God that they cannot possibly repent of their ways, do good, and thereby gain or regain a measure of God’s favor. In polemics against “the Pelagians” at the turn of the fifth century, Augustine took issue with efforts to resolve the problem on these terms. God’s ways, he maintains, are beyond human ken: God’s *mercy* is more perplexing than God’s wrath.

The Augustinian strand coursing through the theological heritage of Reformed churches and its extensions spark disputes along much the same lines. “Covenant theologians” from John Calvin’s days to the present have found they must take into account biblically based covenants of two sorts, conditional and unconditional. By the former, God’s favor is predicated upon the human response of faithfulness; by the latter, God’s faithful love is unending, despite humanity’s breaches of promise.

The book of Jeremiah includes conditional-covenant passages, replete with calls to repent and with them implicit or explicit notice that moments remain for people to avoid disaster by recommitting to covenantal obligations. However, 31:7–9 mentions no conditions at all. The oracle declares the salvation of the people, a remnant of Israel. No qualifier restricts the remnant to a *faithful* or deserving few. God will gather them from the northland enemy strongholds—Assyria and Babylon historically—and then beyond, from “the ends of the earth.” The vast

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from the north, Jeremiah’s oracle promises the return of those scattered to the farthest reaches of the earth. This homecoming is more than just a migration; this is a reconstitution of a people.

Second, it is important to note the qualities of the people who are gathered. This is not a eugenics experiment, drawing together only the strong to ensure that the fittest and most capable will rebuild the nation. No, this group is defined by people with disabilities and pregnant women. This is a community of the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the physically weak. Unlike the warriors whose battles have defined reality for the Israelites, they are a people who are not just promised the consolation of God but deeply need such consolation. While in our age we wrestle with what determines citizenship, the Israelites are encouraged by the prospect that a new generation will be born in the land that was forcibly taken from them.

Third, while this return will be joyous, it will not be devoid of grief. Even as they are consoled by their God, the people will return in tears. How can they not? Most of them will have no memory of this place their ancestors called home, this promised land that was suddenly lost. Awareness of the lost generations, as well as the decades of displacement, will be palpable, even as the people struggle to embrace the end of the exile that has defined their lives.

The passage concludes with a powerful image of adoption. God claims the role as “father” of the people, naming Ephraim as the firstborn. Those familiar with the stories of Jacob will recognize the important social role a firstborn has within a family in ancient Israel. For God to bestow such a birth-right on Israel among the family of nations sounds profoundly powerful; however, it parallels the vulnerable kind of power illustrated in God’s gathering of the blind, lame, and pregnant. Israel is not strong through might; it is strong through its need for God and for community. The ties of mutuality that bind the people together, not its military or its wealth, are the source of its strength.

This is not a passage about adoption, though. It is more a passage of reconciliation, a renewal of a love that has been tried, tested, broken, and now restored. Like so many of the refugees noted above, the people have no real concept of that to which they will return. They are going back to the place that was the land of their great-grandparents. What they know, they know through stories and memories of others. Others have moved in since they moved on. These “others” may live in the Israelites’ family

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but all the names refer to the returning exilic community: Jacob, Israel, Judah, Ephraim.)

For many years Judah had assumed that God's covenant with David meant that there would always be a Davidic descendant on the throne in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 7). Furthermore, they believed that God's presence in the temple guaranteed their safety from enemies (see, e.g., Ps. 46). Long before the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah claimed that Judah should not place its security in a building like the temple, but rather should focus on obeying the Mosaic covenant, including the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17; see Jer. 7:1–15). This critique of religious practices allowed Jeremiah to explain that Babylon (a "foe from the north," chaps. 4–10) conquered Jerusalem as an instrument of God's judgment, because Judah was not obeying the covenant. For those deported, however, exile seemed like complete rejection by God (see Lamentations, a poem grieving over Jerusalem). Therefore, even though Jeremiah was convinced that Judah needed to experience God's judgment (see 30:12–16), Jeremiah promised God's healing and salvation (e.g., 30:17–22) and the restoration of the covenant (30:22).

While Jeremiah 31 is primarily concerned with the affirmative side of this historical situation, emphasizing the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, it is clear from its literary context that this prophecy is inseparable from prophecies of judgment. Even in Jeremiah 30:23–24 we see additional confirmation that God's judgment is not a matter of an instant, soon to be replaced by comforting promises of salvation. At least for this prophet, hope was always preceded by judgment.

In fact, the very language of hope reverses the language of judgment that had been Jeremiah's original message. When God called Jeremiah to be "a prophet to the nations" (1:5), God said that Jeremiah would embody this commission: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:10 NRSV). Contrasting plucking up and destroying with building and planting is found again in the contrast between judgment and hope. In Jeremiah 31:7–9, the focus is on building and planting (cf. Jer. 2:21). Because God has continued in faithfulness and everlasting love, even after God has executed judgment on Judah (31:3), there will come a time to plant vineyards (31:5), because God is now gathering the people together (31:8) instead of scattering them in exile (31:10). Reminiscent of Moses leading the people out of Egypt during the exodus

Homiletical Perspective

lessons lately / But we ain't learnin' / We're the same sad story, that's a fact / One step up and two steps back."¹

Quite possibly the greatest challenge facing the preacher of Jeremiah is not the already-noted problem of chronology, the book reading to some as if Baruch had dropped the manuscript in a windstorm and randomly reassembled the pages before handing them over to Zondervan and Kindle. The challenge is the lectionary itself. No matter which "track" the preacher is following, these verses come out of nowhere. As is often the case in preaching on an Old Testament text, the preacher is required to focus in a different way than when tending to the Gospel or Epistle. What the preacher must do, here and throughout the Old Testament, is "play" with the text. Old Testament narratives are much longer than those in the New Testament, and lectionary compilers have apparently chosen to let the latter decide the length of the former. Pithy sayings, dramatic climaxes, and angelic or prophetic messengers often claim pride of place in our readings, at the expense of narrative, character, and conflict. Our preaching on the Old Testament must look to the larger contours of the narrative and the full development of the characters, which means we will preach on more of the Old Testament than is read for that day.

Or not; that is up to the preacher. There is more than enough material to "stay small," noting parallels in image and phrasing between Jeremiah 31:7–9 and other parts of Jeremiah and the larger tradition, for example, the "weeping" of verse 9 (cf. Rachel's "weeping," 31:15–16); the idea of "gathering" in verse 8 (cf. Jer. 32:37 or Ezek. 37:21); and of course the "blind and lame, those with child and those in labor" (v. 8; cf. 2 Sam. 5:8 or Isa. 65:23, among many passages).

However, the preacher may choose to take a greater risk, one that perhaps requires setting aside the New Testament passages and focusing most of one's attention on Jeremiah and the ways of God (Ps. 126, this week's psalm, will help here). In other words, "go large" this sermon and wrestle with a question that might have actually occurred to your listeners as they were hearing the OT lesson: "What the heck is going on here?"

This is a great risk, so be prepared. If you choose to address a question or issue that is on the hearts and minds of those before you, they will not only listen; they will listen with attention and concern

1. Bruce Springsteen, "One Step Up," <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/bruce-springsteen/one-step-up.html>, accessed February 24, 2012.

Jeremiah 31:7–9

Theological Perspective

sweep of this saving action is witness at once to the universality of God's reach and the magnitude of God's compassion.

Likewise striking in the passage are the lengths to which God goes in order to bring about this homecoming. The hopeful word is not merely an invitation to come home. YHWH instead actually *brings* and *gathers* a "great company," then personally comforts and escorts them and takes them along watercourses on a route so straight that they never stumble. The prophetic promise is formed by multiple contrastive allusions to the wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt. This time, God does for the people what they showed themselves unable to do by their own efforts in Mosaic times. The passage attests to the *unconditionality* of YHWH's covenantal care.

The same point is underscored by explicit mention that the company includes those most in need of travel assistance, among them the blind and the lame. With regard to the company's inclusiveness, the reading prompts theological considerations about gender construction too. Jeremiah materials overall contain an above-average number of references to women—both positive and negative, stereotypical and creative. Verse 8 is an intriguing case in point. It specifies that the company includes women with child and in labor. The theological valences of this reference are not self-evident. Is the point here to highlight God's caring embrace of these women as symbols of special vulnerability—of helplessness during childbearing? Then again, is it perhaps less a signal of respect for women than an assurance of the survival of "the people" by indicating the presence of the next generation on the way?

Finally, one other gender-related message prompts thought. The image of God as father is, of course, familiar fare in Scripture and the theological tradition. It appears in verse 9 as a curious turn of phrase. God says, "I *have become* a father to Israel." Curious too is the grant to Ephraim, the youngest child, of the status traditionally reserved for the elder. Here fatherhood is an instance of voluntary adoption, expressing concern so loving that it disrupts the standing order of social relations. Brief as it is, this oracle of salvation as homecoming is a helpful reminder that the character of the journey is no less important than the moment of arrival.

JAMES O. DUKE

Pastoral Perspective

homes, farm their family fields, drink from their family wells. While they can return to the territory, they must craft home anew.

Sometimes, exile does not involve crossing international borders. Since the 1970s, a number of organizations across the United States and around the world have been working to help individuals with disabilities move from segregated institutions into communities. The Arc, L'Arche, Easter Seals, the National Organization on Disability, and others have helped lead a national effort toward meaningful integration of those who historically have been warehoused or discarded. Like the homes of the exiles returning from a foreign land, the homes needed for these adults and children will not be the homes that many of us take for granted. They will need to be universally accessible, and the residents will need practical and deliverable strategies to lives in these spaces. MOSAIC, a Lutheran organization based in Omaha, Nebraska, has been working with Habitat for Humanity International to address these issues in international settings such as Clinceni, Romania. Through the gracious work of these organizations and the powerful self-advocacy of the individuals concerned, those once exiled to institutions find their way to the home most of us take for granted.

On moving day, when a person with a disability moves into such a home, there is often a good deal of weeping alongside shouts and songs of joy. It is a time of grief, not only for the challenges so many face, but for those who never knew the joy of such a homecoming. The tears are also a recognition of the vulnerability this new setting presents, where the familiarity of the institution—as dehumanizing as it can be—gives way to the new life of a home of one's own. The transition will not be easy. It will take time, intentionality, and great care. In time, however, a new life can take root, and what was once thought to be impossible can become the new norm. The distant land becomes the company of one's familiar, and surely in such a moment God joins in the shouts of joy as God's people glimpse the reign that God has imagined for creation since the beginning.

TRACE HAYTHORN

Jeremiah 31:7–9

Exegetical Perspective

(see Exod. 14–17), Jeremiah claimed that YHWH would appear to the exiled people of Judah in the wilderness again (31:2).

Jeremiah's prophecies of Judah's return, describing straight paths and brooks of water, sounded much like a new kind of exodus. The same pattern is true in Isaiah 40–55, as God promises the preparation of a straight highway in the wilderness (Isa. 40:3) and springs of water in the dry land (e.g., Isa. 41:18). This allusion back to the original exodus (see Jer. 31:9) illustrates two theological points. First, Jeremiah and Isaiah both testified that God's acts in liberation, salvation, and redemption look like the exodus story: release for the captives and finding God in (literally) deserted places. Second, as Jeremiah was appointed as a prophet over nations, the exodus was to demonstrate YHWH's power over nations (e.g., Exod. 9:16). Accordingly, in Jeremiah, the prophet proclaims that Israel is the "chief of the nations" (31:7).

Similar to reflections on Israel's original exodus, however, Moses and Jeremiah were in agreement that Israel is not the "chief of nations" because of something intrinsic in Israel's identity. Instead, Israel may be called the "chief of nations" because of God's steadfast and unchanging love, as a faithful father loves his firstborn (31:9, 20; cf. Deut. 7:7–11; Hos. 11:1–9). In fact, Jeremiah's description of the returning Israel depicts Israel not rejoicing in Israel's own strength, but rather rejoicing in YHWH, who "redeemed [Israel] from hands too strong for him" (31:11). The Hebrew text is clear that this returning people is composed of the weak and the marginalized: "the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor together" (31:8). This returning group is no triumphing army, but rather is composed of some of those who have been neglected in worship at the temple (Jer. 7:5–7). Indeed, YHWH is going to bring them back home, whether with consolations (Greek of 31:9 [LXX 38:9]) or with supplications (Heb. of 31:9). The prophets often depict God consoling Israel after the judgment of exile, but rarely is YHWH described as pleading with the people to return. Either way, Jeremiah 31:9 demonstrates YHWH's continued care for the people in faithfulness and compassion, turning their mourning into joy (31:13).

LAURA SWEAT

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and may listen well enough to have an opinion on the adequacy of your sermon for the magnitude of their question. Cool. So what is going on here, preacher, in the "big picture"?

Everything and nothing, as happens almost every week, and each preacher chooses on which she or he will focus. We can talk about parallels and repetitions, chronology and history, Babylonians and Assyrians, Hebrew grammar and poetry. Or we can be poets. We can *make* something happen in the pulpit by talking about life and death, punishment and release, "The LORD gave and the LORD hath taken away" (Job 1:21 KJV). What is up with that? Why give, God, if you are only going to take away? Why not just leave us alone?

Jeremiah does not come up in the lectionary with any consistency except in Year C, so the preacher should feel free to step back from 31:7–9 and orient the listeners to Jeremiah, prophet, tool, and cosmic complainer. He is more like Job than Job himself, ordered this way and that, tossed in and out of wells and guardhouses, destined for Babylon but bound to Egypt, his words fuel for the fire, literally and metaphorically. Tell the listeners that we know more about Jeremiah than any biblical figure between Jacob and Jesus, more even than David and Solomon, and then tell them what you think it adds up to. How does the way God works in and through Jeremiah resonate in and with your congregation, your community, and your vision of how God would be at work among you? Every time we step back and look at the big picture, we risk falling into the abyss, so overwhelmed by what we see before us that we do not notice how close we have been standing to the edge. Better than boring ourselves and our listeners to death.

WILLIAM BROSEND

PROPER 25 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 23 AND OCTOBER 29 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 126

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
³The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

Theological Perspective

This psalm is fine-wrought testimony to God’s care for those in distress or need. The text is not totally puzzle free. Reading its initial verses as present tense, for example, transposes its overall thrust into a generalized depiction of salvific end time, whenever it may come. If they are taken as past tense, as in the NRSV, the psalm swiftly strikes three chords—a recollection of past gladness, an urgent plea prompted by present distress, and a reassuring promise of coming joy. Its theological theme is salvation, depicted in terms of a deliverance brought about by a stunning reversal of fortune and joyous homecoming.

The psalm itself, it seems, has not occasioned great dispute in the history of Christian theology or suffered ill-treatment by use as a proof text in theological polemics. Several of its images take their place alongside kindred word pictures in the scriptural supply room on which early Christians relied. The “prodigal son” homecoming from (self-imposed) exile, multiple New Testament references to sowing and reaping, and salvific turns from sorrow to joy illustrate the point. Although the Pentecost-narrative mention of the old men who “shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17) comes from Joel, overtones of the phrase “like those who dream” in this psalm are within earshot too.

One turn of phrase in the psalm, however, has hit the charts big-time in popular theology. “Carrying

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 126 is often thought to have come from the postexilic period, as a song of joy for the return from Babylon to the place that once was home. More than two generations have passed since the Israelites first left their homeland. For most of the people, Babylon is far more familiar than the land to which they will return. However, the promised land is home; it is their place. No longer will they be strangers in a foreign land, though for a time they may be the strangers in a place once known as home.

To grasp the emotional depth of this psalm, one has to feel some empathy for the ancient Israelites. Imagine losing everything. For some, it takes no imagination at all. Refugees from around the world who flee their homes to seek a better life, those escaping the violence of war who pack only what is absolutely necessary for their journey, a survivor of domestic abuse who in the dark of night sneaks her children to safety while her abuser sleeps off another night of drunkenness—for these, the “fortunes” of the past are left behind, and the future is filled only with questions and doubt.

It is profoundly difficult for those who have known such terror and loss to dare and dream of a future filled with promise. The past always seems in pursuit, hunting down those who escaped, ready to drag them back to the reality they once knew.

Psalm 126

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
⁵May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
⁶Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Exegetical Perspective

Along with other Psalms of Ascent, Psalm 126 focuses on extolling God's greatness on account of Israel's experience and expectance of deliverance and restoration. Its language echoes several prophetic texts, and it is likely from the time of Israel's return from the Babylonian exile. However, as the psalm's context indicates, this psalm is a celebration of God's acts of restoration in the past, present, and future, as weeping is turned to rejoicing for a community that worships the God who "restores our fortunes" (vv. 1, 4).

It is unclear, from a historical perspective, why the Psalms of Ascent (Pss. 120–134) were so named. Some scholars claim that the title "ascent" describes a stair-step poetic technique, where an image from one line is presented again in the following line.¹ For example, "YHWH has done great things for them" is repeated, with different pronouns, in verses 2 and 3. However, most scholars contend that the psalms of this collection describe the Israelites' procession up to Jerusalem, and particularly up to the temple. This context fits the themes of the collection of psalms, as Jerusalem (often called Mount Zion) and the temple are prominent themes (e.g., Ps. 122). Furthermore, these psalms consistently extol God's actions in

1. See Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 101–150*, Anchor Bible 17 (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 194–95.

Homiletical Perspective

We were like those who dream. What a wonderful, wonderful image, but about as removed from the reality of "ascending" to Jerusalem in the day of the psalmist, and our own day, as it could be. The Middle East is the place dreams go to die—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Depending on when one dates this undatable song, our poet was imagining, observing, or remembering . . . like a dream.

There are two principal homiletical sins for the preacher to avoid when focusing on this psalm, which the pairing with Jeremiah 31:7–9 will likely help. Both sins are universal to preaching, so even if you plan to preach on Bartimaeus, this might be of assistance. The first sin is relevance and the second thematic convergence; they likely do not sound all that sinful, but they can be.

Relevance may be what preachers crave most, the hope that their words will strike the listeners as important and timely. The typical strategy to achieve relevance is to fashion some way in which the biblical text is "about" the experience of the listeners. "Imagine yourself on a hot dusty road on the edge of town. No doubt that has happened to you, if you hike, or your car breaks down. You can almost hear your spouse say, 'It's not much further now.' How good it feels to see the end in sight! That is what the psalmist was talking about in our text today." No, it

Psalm 126

Theological Perspective

their sheaves” has taken on a freelance life of own in its King James Version rendering as “bringing in the sheaves.” Thanks, or no thanks, to countless churches, Hollywood films, and pop-culture trends, responses to the 1874 lyrics of “Bringing in the Sheaves” by songster-revivalist Knowles Shaw have today become a public referendum on the zealous faithfulness or market-driven hucksterism of Protestant America’s fabled “old-time religion.” Shaw was hardly original in allegorizing the sheaves as soul-won converts to Christianity or picturing deliverance as God’s welcome to the faithful in the afterlife. These moves, however, are so far from self-evident in the text itself that considering other theological options is apt. In many circles, memories of Shaw’s poem are likely to overshadow the psalmist’s memory of homecoming. Hence preachers today face a *theological* decision whether even to mention the hymn and, in any case, a tactical decision about how to keep church people riveted on the biblical text instead of Shaw’s rendition of it.

The common historical-critical estimate of the psalm’s context is that it is the work of a postexilic author, probably associated with temple worship. The psalmist memorializes the return from exile as a time of dreamlike (delirious?) joy. The situation thereafter has taken a turn for the worse, prompting cries for another restoration of (good) fortune. The petition shifts to benedictory mode: those who now sow in tears will shout with joy at the harvest and return home with plenty.

Of theological interest especially is testimony to God’s saving acts (here, restoration of fortune) in terms of a *repeated* pattern of *wondrous reversals*. The pattern appears often and variously in the Christian biblical canon. Much of early Christian witness relied on this pattern in proclamation. So, for example, one finds reversals from heavenly preexistence to advent/incarnation and then to humiliation/crucifixion, and a climactic reversal of the reversals by vindication/resurrection. This patterning is a literary strategy and more—a theological challenge. Asking, “how are people of faith to *expect* God to act?” is one way to pose the theological point at issue. The psalm’s turns from exile to restoration to distress to petition and eschatological reassurance are alerts that human expectations are subject to God’s overturning.

What is unstated in the psalm also is worth considering. Causal factors other than God are never mentioned. No religious or moral qualifications are cited as prerequisites for God’s action. Scads of other biblical texts can be used to fill in these blanks. God,

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When the psalmist declares that the restoration of Israel’s fortunes made them like those who dream, it is no metaphor. Such a restoration feels ephemeral, like a cloud seated in one’s palm—too precarious to hold, too tentative, too unsubstantial. Nevertheless, when it is real, the depth of joy cannot be contained. It is so palpable that even the stranger recognizes it.

This is the song of Israel returning from exile. Before they can even dare claim that they have been offered life abundant, the nations declare that the Lord has done great things for them. As in a creedal affirmation, they echo the observation of the nations, owning the reality that began as something like a dream: “The LORD has done great things for us” (v. 3).

In the repetition, one can feel the new reality sinking in. In such moments, we often have to say something over and over again before the dreamlike moment becomes a part of our new reality. It is our way of saying yes to the gracious gifts God provides.

The juxtaposition of the tears and the water-courses seems intentional, for the Negeb is a semi-arid region in Israel, with some sections receiving as little as four inches of rain a year. The rivulets of water that often come when a river bursts its banks after a heavy downpour can be the source of life for some desert communities. In the same way, the tears of so much weeping have watered the soil of new life, watering the seed that has given rise to the sheaves for the harvest.

Many of us cling to such promises just to get through a day. We want desperately to believe that the promise is not merely a dream, and that the cloud we hold in our hand will become the substance of our future. Those of us who love someone with an addiction know how hard it can be ever fully to embrace the dream. After years of deceit, sometimes violence or theft (or both), sometimes financial chaos or ruin, hours of waiting by a phone or in a police station or an emergency-room waiting area, it becomes incredibly difficult to believe that our fortunes will ever be restored. We have dared to exhale in the past, only to find the dream was little more than the cloud it appeared to be.

While many people are familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous (as well as its offspring for other forms of addiction) and its important work, Al-Anon may be less familiar for some. Founded by Lois W., spouse of Bill W. (the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous), Al-Anon is a space where the loved ones of addicts gather to tend to their own healing and recovery. It is a place of many tears, with stories of

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Exegetical Perspective

watching over Israel or delivering Israel from enemies (see Pss. 121 and 123–124).

Psalm 126 places God's deliverance of Israel in a particular context. While the historical context of psalms is rarely certain, the content of Psalm 126 seems to point to Judah's return from Babylonian exile around 538 BCE (Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, where Jerusalem is, comes to be called Israel again after the people return to Jerusalem). The Babylonian Empire had destroyed the palace and the temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE, and they had taken the elite members of society to Babylon. The prophets of the Old Testament, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah, both understood this exile as a means of God's judgment, due to Judah's disobedience of God's covenant. At the time of the exile, the people of Judah struggled with feeling abandoned and deserted by God, as they expected God never to leave them (see, e.g., Ps. 46). The themes of Psalm 126 highlight the reversal, not just of the fortunes of Israel (vv. 1, 4), but also of the emotions of Israel, as Israel now experiences joy, gladness, and laughter at their return home (vv. 2, 6).

When the psalm begins, particularly in its English translation, the psalm describes incidents in Israel's past: YHWH has already "restored the fortunes of Zion," laughter and joy have already returned, and Israel can rejoice and be recognized even among the nations, as they proclaim God's goodness to them (vv. 1–3). However, because of the fluidity of Hebrew, these verbs could just as easily be read as future tenses (e.g., see NJPS). Many modern translations have adopted the split between reflections on God's deliverance in the past (vv. 1–3) and God's expected action in the future (vv. 4–6). Indeed, it is the present tension of faithful expectation caught between past and future that provides a secure foundation for the dreams of verse 1: because God has restored the fortunes of Zion in the past, God can be trusted to restore them again in the present (v. 4). Other Psalms of Ascent follow this pattern of reflecting on the past and reinvigorating their praise and requests to God in the present.

"Restor[ing] the fortunes of Zion" is a common phrase in prophetic literature, describing the radical change brought about in God's relationship with Israel when God moves from judgment to favor (see Amos 9:14; Joel 3:1; Jer. 29:14; Ps. 85:1). It is this kind of astounding change that Isaiah 40–55 celebrates, as Isaiah envisions what Israel's life will look like when Jerusalem is restored. From Israel's perspective, God's reestablishment of Zion is a cause for

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was not. Nor can evoking foreign travel, pilgrimage, a march on the state capitol, or some other experience "just like the psalmist" be of any real value. The church is not the temple, marching on Washington is not ascending Mount Zion, and your listeners are not the psalmist. Sorry, preacher, but trying so hard to be relevant is an almost guaranteed waste of time. Not every passage in the Bible is about those listening to your sermon. Actually almost none of them are.

Then what is this text *about*? If I can find and focus on the theme of the text, I will preach about that. Really, preach on *your* theme? That must be why our listeners "joke" about the fact that preachers only have four or five sermons—God's love, seeing Jesus in the face of others, forgiveness, resurrection in everyday life, reaching out to the stranger in our midst—cycled and recycled from Sunday to Sunday. Psalm 126 is not a theme; it is a song, a poem, and a prayer. To recall a host of parable scholars, the psalm does not have a meaning, it is a meaning.

Look at it again, but backwards.

Verses 5–6: Sowing with tears will yield a harvest of joy.

Verse 4: Restore and refresh us, Lord, like a river in the desert.

Verse 3: It happened once before, and that was quite a party.

Verse 2: We laughed and sang with joy, everyone looking on with envy.

Verse 1: God's renewal of Jerusalem is a dream come true.

Are you sure you want to turn this into a sermon on "renewal" or "dreams"?

Start over. Yes, you can imagine the world and life of the psalmist, and you should think long and hard about the lives of your listeners, looking for the points of contact. However, the points of contact are not baldly experiential—that 2,500-year gap is hard to negotiate—or thematic. Look instead at the dynamics, the movement, the aspirations. Do not overlook the superscription, the place of this psalm among the "Psalms of Ascent." Do not ignore that the lectionary pairs this psalm with Jeremiah 31:7–9, a pledge from or to exiles that God will restore the people and recall the remnant. For heaven's sake, Jeremiah 31:6b says, "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God"; it does not get more "ascent" than that.

Ask: where in the lives of your listeners are the dynamics envisioned in Psalm 126 present? What aspirations might your listeners share with the

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Theological Perspective

it might be said, grants the petitions of those who gratefully recall the saving events of the past; or, perhaps, God rewards those who despite their sorrows persevere in their labors. Theological takeaways like these are not all wrong or without any worthwhile theological support. After all, to confess that God's merciful compassion embraces the entire human family and the whole of creation is not to be disrespectful of folks who are self-consciously, actively, devoted to seeking righteousness. Even so, the psalm provides no explanation of the why and therefore of "the great things" God has done and will do for those who "go out weeping." These sounds of silence in the psalm deserve attention. Here is a message of unmerited, undeserving reversal from weeping to joy. The change comes from God like unexpected storm floods bringing life-giving water to the bone-dry Negeb.

A distinct, yet related, theological issue emerges with the psalm's way of linking God, Zion's fortunes, and "the nations." In historical context, reference to the nations sets the psalm in association with prophetic materials, including Second Isaiah, and other texts that reflect on YHWH's sovereign reach beyond Israel and Judah to the world powers. A feisty "my god is better than your god" view was commonplace in the ancient Near East—and by no means there alone. In the psalm, Zion's restoration (presumably the return from exile) is such a wondrously "great thing" that even the *other* nations of the world take note and give credit where credit is due. The virtual doublet in first-person plural—"the LORD has done great things for us" (v. 3a)—is Zion's apt communal confession of thanksgiving. The humility of the response is striking, however. It follows, and repeats, simply what other nations acknowledge. It expresses no arrogance, no air of superiority. This psalm commends wondrous religious humility.

At least one other point deserves theological consideration. Sowing and reaping are the stuff of the workaday world. Yes, the sheaves mean well-being; but the wonder is not wealth, world conquest, the adulation of masses, invincibility, invulnerability, the highest heaven. The gladsome wonder is God's provision in ordinary life.

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great pain and loss. It is also a place where laughter can erupt as quickly as tears, a reminder that new life is always and already available to each of us. For most of us who enter those rooms, we begin by wondering if we can ever dream of a world where our loved one can be healthy and whole. In time, we come to realize that the promise of new life is ours, stepping from patterns of codependence to self-care, weeping along the way but, with time and intention, coming to know the shouts of joy sown in tears. It is in such rooms that we often first hear, "Surely the LORD has done great things for them," or at the very least, "Surely she or he has done great things for herself or himself."

Addiction, like so many forms of disease, is a kind of exile. Mental illness, physical illness, and other maladies can be equally exilic. The powerful lesson in this psalm is not just that the Lord will do great things for us, but that it may take others to notice those great things before we claim them ourselves. When we return from exile, we often get focused on all that lies ahead, all that must be done to restore what we once knew as home. While such practical matters are important, they can shield us from the remarkable work we have already done, the restoration that is already present in our life. When we pause to see how far we have come, we might just find that a shout of joy erupts from deep within us. It may be that joy that gives us strength for the journey that lies ahead.

TRACE HAYTHORN

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Exegetical Perspective

celebration, not just for Israel, but for the nations, as reflected in this psalm. Israel is able to return to Zion on account of God's use of other nations (Isa. 45:1–7), and Isaiah believes that Israel should use this returned fortune to be a “light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6; cf. 42:1). This positive response of the nations in Psalm 126, however, contrasts with the more typically negative and derogatory responses of the nations in the Psalter (e.g., Ps. 120:5–7). Nevertheless, here, when God restores Zion's fortunes, the implication is that this is good news for all nations.

The psalm is clear that the restoration of Zion is not the last word of God's deliverance, however. The last half of the psalm is concerned with God's future action, which the psalmist hopes will look like God's former action. Just as God was able to produce water from streams in the desert in the past (see Exod. 17:6; Isa. 41:18; Jer. 31:9), so now the psalmist hopes for new water in the “watercourses in the Negeb,” which are dry and arid until rains flood them.

Furthermore, as with other Psalms of Ascent, Psalm 126 uses agricultural imagery to describe God's coming acts of restoration. Even though sowing is a quintessentially hopeful act, looking for a future harvest, in this psalm, sowing is accompanied by tears and weeping (vv. 5–6). Their going out in sowing may evoke images of leaving Jerusalem for the Babylonian exile. The psalm provides hope for the future in a subtle way, however, as Israel is reminded that they carried the seed of sowing a harvest with them into exile: there was hope even when they left. God brought a harvest from this seed when they returned in joy. The seed did not remain in Jerusalem, waiting for their return, but was cultivated in the tears and distress of exile. Even though it was sown in weeping, it is now harvested, as fortunes are restored, in joy. Remembering, celebrating, and praying for God's acts in past, present, and future, this psalm praises God's deliverance and salvation.

LAURA SWEAT

Homiletical Perspective

aspirations of the psalm? Where can we find a party like the one the psalmist is recalling?

Movement, creating or recalling the sense of movement, seems essential to a sermon on this psalm. Look at all of the movements the psalmist calls to mind: the movements of exile and restoration; the movement of rejoicing and shouting; the movement of “the nations” in response to God's deliverance; the movement of a river in the desert; the movements of weeping sowers and rejoicing reapers. A sound homiletical strategy would be to allow the sermon to be carried, swept away, “like the watercourses in the Negeb” (v. 4).

Central to the movement are the contrasts at play in the psalm. There is no need to repeat that list, but the preacher might use it as the second clue to how the psalm wants to be preached, the movement of the sermon based on the dynamics of the contrasts. How might you “map” the movement and dynamics of your listeners, the contrasts alive in your midst, onto the psalm, or vice versa?

Fundamental to the psalm is the experience of joy. The preacher's goal may be to re-create the experience of joyful celebration, even exaltation, from and for the listeners. What would the restoration of your community's fortune look like, in parallel to rivers in a desert? What exile have your listeners been experiencing, that God wants to bring them back from? How has the community—sowers and reapers—collaborated and created nourishing good works that are a source of pride and rejoicing? When was the last time your church partied down?

“We were like those who dream” (v. 1b): one of the top-ten great lines in the Psalter, maybe in Scripture. At the heart of your sermon is, to borrow from the late Verna Dozier, the “dream of God.”¹ Dreams are wild and free and take you into places you (sorry) never dreamed of going. Preach that.

WILLIAM BROSEND

1. Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call to Return* (New York: Seabury Classics/Church Publishing, Inc., 2006).

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PROPER 26 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 30
AND NOVEMBER 5 INCLUSIVE)

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

¹Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ²so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Theological Perspective

The community’s confession that “the LORD our God is one LORD” and the command to “love the LORD your God” are of a piece. Those with ears to hear will not only believe that their God is one Lord; they will necessarily love God with their entire being. Their love for God is as indivisible as their God is one, a belief that centers both Judaism’s liturgical Shema (taken from the opening summons *shema*⁶, meaning “hear”) and Jesus’ moral code (Mark 12:28–34).

The confession that God is one Lord, if framed by Scripture’s narrative of God’s history with Israel, includes both quantitative and qualitative elements. God is the one and only God; God’s rivals are not legitimate deities at all but voiceless, worthless fabrications of a people’s wishful thinking (so Isa. 44). Perhaps for this reason, Deuteronomy’s storyteller rehearses Israel’s journey from Horeb to Jordan (Deut. 1–3) as a chronicle of God’s conquest over Israel’s (rather than God’s) rivals. Surveying this, the reader’s expected response to the question Moses puts to God, “What god in heaven or on earth can perform mighty acts like yours?” (Deut. 3:24), is surely, “No such god exists.” In a world where other gods are thought to abound, whether in heaven or on earth, there is only one God who could pull off this narrative of salvation.

Pastoral Perspective

Late in Ordinary Time, the church is recalled to the core of our faith, the wellspring of biblical witness, the heart of the matter: the Great Commandment. Having had a direct word of God in the Ten Commandments, now Moses stands between Israel and God, receiving and teaching, as prelude to everything that follows, the majestic Shema.

We are about to hear—in the remainder of Deuteronomy—the concrete, pastoral, practical, real-life implications of the covenant that God has made with Israel, linking God to this people (chaps. 12–26). Thus Jesus could say that the whole law and the prophets hang here (Matt. 22:40).

Everything rests upon the primal claim that the God who has heard and loved Israel, the God who has decisively delivered Israel, is “one.” The First Commandment—to have one and only one God—is axiomatic for all Jewish and Christian theology. The Shema is always the first commandment, the first and the last word that needs to be said repeatedly in the community of faith.

The One God who commands and demands is the One who has delivered, the One who has made a people out of no people and who therefore justly makes a claim upon them. The opening statement, “The LORD is *our* God,” is the basis for everything that follows. Israel has been named and claimed,

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

In Deuteronomy Moses re-presents the past covenant at Sinai for a new generation of Israelites born during the wilderness wanderings, now gathered in Moab waiting to cross over into the promised land. After delivering the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6–21), Moses explains in chapter 6 the demands of covenant.

God charges Moses to teach (*lamad*) the people (v. 1). This verb “teach” occurs seventeen times in Deuteronomy but nowhere else in the Pentateuch, which has prompted many interpreters to understand Deuteronomy as “instruction” or “teaching” (*torah*). Other interpreters argue that Deuteronomy is “preached law” that offers a constitution or national polity that Israel ratifies publicly at Sinai (see Exod. 24). Patrick Miller suggests that Deuteronomy intentionally joins these two interpretations; Moses’ rhetoric of persuasion and encouragement is accompanied with warnings of sanctions for disobedience.¹ Remembering, teaching, and learning about the Sinai covenant helps each generation to internalize the constitution of the community and thereby “fear” or “revere” the Lord (cf. 6:13) and keep the commandments (6:2). “Fear” means more than the

1. Patrick D. Miller, “Constitution or Instruction? The Purpose of Deuteronomy,” in *Constituting the Community*, ed. J. Strong and S. Tuell (Crawfordsville, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 125–41.

Homiletical Perspective

This passage comes early in Moses’ sermon that comprises this book, as he tries to teach his people the faith that has fired him to stand up to Pharaoh and that has enabled him to lead this grumbling, freedom-bound people through the wilderness. God has already told him in chapter 3 that he will not be able to go into the promised land, so he knows that he will not be there to guide them. He faces the age-old issue of the passing of a charismatic leader. How does the community that Moses has founded survive without him? He decides to shape them to be part of a living legacy, a legacy that will survive only by centering on God. If this sermon works, these people will become a living legacy that passes on the faith to their children and to their children’s children. So it has gone for thousands of years; so we should all pay attention here—it worked!

Moses begins with a positive reiteration of the First Commandment, found in chapter 5: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Moses puts it in terms of centering on YHWH, the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt, the God who will now give them the land of promise. This promise of the land continues to bedevil Judaism, and it has become a central focus of the conflicts of our times. On many levels, then, these verses are as contemporary as any

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Theological Perspective

Israel's claim that only one God actually exists, made radical by comparison with its polytheistic surrounding, lies at the heart of biblical faith. The verbs that conjugate God's existence according to the storyteller's prior narrative commend another, more qualitative kind of oneness. The opening vocative, "Hear, O Israel," summons his congregation to remember that this one God brought their ancestors out of a lifeless captivity for the prospect of a new life in a promised land.

To remember God is not so much to remember God's raw power in doing so, but to confess God's sovereign freedom to do so. God reports to no one, and God's reasons for acting are God's own. To remember God is also to realize that while the exercise of divine sovereignty is impartial and includes every nation and everyone (so Acts 10:34–35; 1 Tim. 2:4–5; Rom. 3:29–30), it is also exclusively partial toward an elect community with whom God has covenanted. So Israel is addressed to hear the truth of a claim secured by a unique experience of God's salvation and self-revelation (Deut. 4:33, 36) and by a historical memory of God sojourning with their ancestors in the wilderness. God's election of Israel is not a matter of saving one community instead of others, but of calling out a people to bear witness that "the LORD our God is one LORD" in a world populated by invented deities that displace God's lordship.

The subsequent command is stated more like an assertion: "You *will* love the LORD your God." Hearing is obeying (cf. Jas. 1:22–25). What is shocking is not its unqualified tone but the platitude itself: loving God is not the expected response of a people who believe their Lord God is sovereign over all creation and every creature. We might rather expect the admonition to fear creation's Lord or perhaps to show "our God" gratitude for having elected, delivered, and preserved them for a better future in the promised land. The verb used for love (*'ahav*) is sometimes used of a public display of affection toward another (Hos. 3:1). Why is such a demonstrative love assigned as the congregation's logical response to their one and only Lord? Earlier, God's uniqueness is described in terms of Israel's unique experiences of divine love (Deut. 4:32–40). Israel's exclusive, undivided allegiance to one God is deeply rooted in its exclusive experience of divine love.

Israel's love of God, then, is made necessary and logical by the acts of God's love for Israel. The reciprocity of affection is the nature of Israel's covenant with God. As 1 John succinctly puts it, "we

Pastoral Perspective

spoken for, possessed, and commandeered by a God who intends to bless the whole world through this priestly people.

Think of church and synagogue as places where we come to receive training in ridding ourselves of our natural inclination toward polytheism. Every Sunday, we Christians, as honorary, adopted Jews, gather in church and learn again to monotheize. Polytheism is a hard habit to break. Our innate inclination is to divide the world into *our* god as opposed to all of *their* gods, the nice little spiritual god of Sunday morning as opposed to the really important gods who reign Monday through Saturday. No preacher requires much insight to devise a long list of the idolatries rife in the congregation. Take this Sunday's first lesson as invitation to do so.

Hear, O church, our lives need not be jerked around by presumptive godlets: Eros, Mars, Mammon, Nation. There is the one and only God. We are free to throw off the crushing burdens of false gods in order to love and be loved by the one and only God.

The church marvels that, of all the demands YHWH could have made upon us, God's primary, pivotal, core command is twofold: "hear" (v. 4) in order to "love" (v. 5). On so many Sundays, Christians are urged to do the heroic and to risk the seemingly impossible—courageously to witness for the faith, to suffer the way of the cross, to attempt great feats. Deuteronomy reassures us that we are first simply to "hear." We are passively to allow the good news of God's loving covenant to reach out to us. We are, first of all, to hear the word that God has committed forever to be our God. We can be God's people, faithful and true, only by first hearing God's claim: "You shall be my people, and I shall be your God."

In a church drowning in a morass of petty moralism, where faith is presented as essentially something that we do, or think, or feel, the word that we are first to *hear* is a reassuring, comforting word to the congregation. In preaching this text, boldly tell the congregation that there is first of all nothing for them to do, to think, or to feel in this Sunday's gathering. Their great concern is not to put anything into practice or utilize any of this in their workaday world. They are simply to listen, then to hear (which implies a willingness to internalize what is proclaimed) and allow God to make covenant with them.

There is much good that Christians ought, must, and should do. Before any of that, we must hear the good news: God is the one and only God, God for us, God with us. A Christian's first duty is simply to "hear," to lay aside all our spiritual busyness and

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

Protestant sense of reverence or awe; it incorporates also elements of obedience and judgment.

The use of the imperative “Hear!” (Heb. *shema*'), the first word of verse 4, promotes the internalization of teaching and polity. The command to *hear* is more than auditory; it implies understanding, acceptance, commitment, and obedience. No wonder, then, that this word gives its name to the central prayer in Jewish prayer books, the Shema. The Shema became increasingly important in the Second-Temple-period synagogue liturgy, and today the words of verse 4 are often the first Hebrew words a Jewish child learns. Pious Jews recite the Shema twice a day. To proclaim the Shema is to give witness to God and to one’s relationship to God.² This testimony encompasses both words and actions, as verses 5–9 demonstrate.

Grammatically, verse 4 can be translated in many ways: “The LORD our God, the LORD is one [*echad*].” “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.” “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone [*echad*].” “Alone” (NRSV, NJPS) connotes the sense of “exclusively” or “uniquely.” The possessive “our” in “our God” points to an exclusive relationship between Israel and God (cf. Zech. 14:9). In this sense, verse 4 positively restates the first commandment of the Decalogue: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut. 5:7; cf. Exod. 20:3). This commandment presupposes the existence of other gods but declares that none of them matters (cf. Song 6:8–9, by analogy). Just as there is no God like Israel’s God, there is no people like Israel (2 Sam. 7:23).

The first word of verse 5 begins with a Hebrew construction called a *waw*-consecutive, which links the beginning of verse 5 with verse 4 and should be translated by “so” or “thus,” to link the two ideas. Though this *waw*-consecutive is ignored in most translations, including the idea of “thus” makes clear the result or the consequences of the proclamation about God’s uniqueness in verse 4. *Because* God is unique, Israel is expected to “love” (*’ahav*) God completely.

“Love” (*’ahav*) is not to be equated here with romantic feeling or emotion; such love cannot be commanded. Instead, Israel’s response is one of covenantal love, that is, loyalty and faithfulness expressed in action. Vassals in ancient Near Eastern treaties publicly pledged their “love” to the

2. In Torah scrolls and in many prayer books, the Hebrew letter *’ayin* at the end of *shema* (“hear”) and the Hebrew letter *daleth* at the end of the word *’echad* (“one,” as in “one God”) are written larger than the other letters on the page. Together these enlarged letters spell the word *’ed*, meaning “witness.”

Homiletical Perspective

in the Bible. Moses knows the struggles of the human heart, that we are always moving away from God in our individual and collective hearts, moving toward the false gods whose promises to make us feel secure lead us not to life but back into slavery and death. Moses offers his people (and us) a formula for moving toward freedom, for finding our true selves as the children of God.

He starts with what has come to be called the Shema, from the Hebrew word for “hear” that begins verse 4. “Hear, O Israel” became so important in the tradition that later Judaism would require every adherent to recite these words on a daily basis in the morning and in the evening. It provides a constant reminder of the possibility of experiencing God’s presence. This development points to a significant step in Judaism that emphasizes the primacy of God in our daily lives and the necessity of passing that knowledge on to future generations. While the special days and special places to know God’s power remain, these words of Moses’ sermon shift us to a day-to-day, everyday sense of God’s power and God’s call.

What is it that we are to hear and to acknowledge on a daily basis? “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” The Hebrew lends itself to several translations, including “God is one God,” and in this instance it is wise to take the meaning of both translations. “The Lord alone” indicates the uniqueness of God among all the mysterious powers of the world. Though many other “gods” will seek to claim our loyalty—race, gender, money, and nation, to name a few—the only ultimate power is the God who brought the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. “God is one God” emphasizes the unity of God. There are not several gods battling it out for supremacy; rather, there is only one God. Whereas Christians often make Satan a god nearly equal in power to God, in hand-to-hand combat with God for every soul, the Shema cautions against that. God is not to be divorced from the sticky parts of life by blaming them on Satan; God is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

The force of this commandment is that it identifies for these ex-slaves the One who is the center of their lives. As they enter the new land, there will be many other voices that will seek to win over their hearts. Here Moses exhorts them to remember who they are: children of the God who brought them out of Egypt. How are they (and we) supposed to relate to this God? Through love—not the sentimental, product-selling “love” of our culture, but

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Theological Perspective

love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). This reciprocity is not first of all duty bound: Israel’s obedience should not be merely the yang to God’s prior ying, repaid without genuine affection for God. Loving God is not the way to play the game: love God, win the land. Rather, God’s loving initiative disclosed in electing and liberating Israel (Deut. 4:37), without which Israel cannot be Israel, establishes the manner of love proper to a hearing Israel’s own covenant keeping: God’s people love God *in a manner exemplified by* God’s love of them.

What follows in our passage is an elaboration of the congregation’s love of God that takes its cue from God’s love of them and what this discloses about the nature of God’s oneness. God cannot be divided and deposited into separate public and private domains, as though the individual’s personal life with God has no bearing in the public square. If God is one Lord, the congregation’s love for God must be both a matter the individual member takes to heart (v. 6) and also a social marker that identifies an entire family (children), their public life (home and away), and their material goods (house, gates) as belonging to God. Moreover, the introductory formula, “these words I am commanding you today” (v. 6), doubtless refers to the entire law code, not just the *Shema* (cf. Deut 7:11), and regulates all of life. Loving one God, then, includes not only personal and public acts of devotion; it is a constant practice of daily life that bears witness that a people is on the same page with God.

ROBERT W. WALL

Pastoral Perspective

allow this reassuring, primal word from God to be our word. Our relationship to God is not dependent upon us, thank God, but rather upon a God who has covenanted with us to be our God.

Then we are to love. How loving of God not to command us first of all to be obedient, or faithful. We are to love. All our praying, singing, listening, speaking, serving, and witnessing are acts of love. Because we have so sentimentalized “love,” I hesitate to say this, but Deuteronomy makes me say it anyway: Who are Christians but those who have fallen in love with the God who has committed eternally to love us? We do what we do, and live as we live, and die as we die, for the love of God.

Just one more pastoral implication: To whom are these majestic, primal, heart-of-the-matter words addressed? First to Israel, the same ragtag ex-slaves who have shown repeatedly that they cannot be fully faithful to the covenant YHWH has announced to them. Then to the church, that ragtag gaggle of betrayers who delivered Jesus over to death, and who continue to do so repeatedly with the risen Christ. To those who time and again refuse to listen and fail to be faithful lovers, God tells us again for the ten thousandth time: “hear” and “love.”

After all of Israel’s “murmuring” in the wilderness and the golden calf incident, what is the first thing YHWH says to Israel? God invites the people to love as they have been loved; God recommits to love Israel no matter what.

That the one true God continues with us, through Christ, in spite of all the ways we turn away and consort with false gods, is good news indeed.

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

sovereign, with certain commitments. They were required to show their loyalty (as did King Hiram of Tyre who “loved” David and supplied his son Solomon with building materials for the temple [1 Kgs. 5:1]). The rabbis argue that the commandments to love our neighbor (Lev. 19:18) and to love the stranger (Lev. 19:34) precede the commandment to love God (in Deuteronomy) because we must love fellow human beings by acting in a way that makes God beloved (*Midrash Ha-Gadol*; cf. Mark 12:28–34 and the Great Commandment).

Moses admonishes Israel to love the Lord “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (v. 5). In Hebrew, “heart” (*leb*) is not the seat of emotion but of thought, intentionality, and perception (Deut. 29:4). The heart connotes commitment and obedience. Perhaps a better translation is to “love wholeheartedly.” Similarly, “soul” (*nephesh*) means “being” or “self,” that which constitutes one’s life. The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Akiva (second century CE) who recited the Shema as the Romans tortured him to death; he had been waiting his whole life to fulfill the commandment: “Now I know that I love him [God] with all my life [*nephesh*]” (*Berakhot* 61b).

Moses commands Israel in verse 7 to “recite” (a better translation would be “impress,” in the sense of making a sharp impression) God’s words to their children, day and night, at home and away—meaning all of the time and in every place. A literal interpretation of verse 8 gave rise to the Jewish use of phylacteries (*tefillin*)—small, black leather boxes containing Scripture verses on parchment, worn on the arm and forehead. The Shema becomes a public declaration in verse 9: Israel is to post these words on the doorposts of city gates and houses, framing these transitional spaces of entering and exiting with God’s uniqueness and Israel’s obedience; in Jewish tradition, a *mezuzah* containing these words is hung on the door frame of the home or business. “Historically, the Christian equivalent of displaying the words of the Shema has been to display the cross.”³

DENISE DOMBKOWSKI HOPKINS

Homiletical Perspective

rather a commitment based in gratitude and obedience, similar to the love of children toward parents. “Love” here in the Shema suggests both the indicative and the imperative. When I was a child, I loved my mother because I was so dependent on her, but it was only when I had my own children that I began to understand the depth of my mother’s love for me and what she had done for me as a single parent.

Moses lifts up three dimensions of the self that are to be dominated by this love. “Heart” connotes the experience of self, centered on intellect, will, and imagination. “Soul” means the center of the self, the operating consciousness and self-identifying presence and awareness of the self. “Might” means our capacity to act—what we will ourselves to do. Our imagination, our sense of ourselves, and our actions are all to center on God. We are asked to internalize this and to teach it to our children.

We are also asked to have an outward display of this loyalty and centeredness. In our time, it is much like a wedding ring that married partners wear. It is a symbol of a deep commitment. The Shema, like a wedding ring, does not make the relationship to God vital and healthy on its own. Only in daily engagement and commitment between partners does a marriage grow. So it is with the Shema. It is vital, but without the love and commitment that it requires, it can become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. It is why Jesus adds a corollary to the Shema – he had seen it hollowed out to become perfunctory and lacking in transforming power. Moses’ summation of the central commandment included not only love of God but love of neighbor as well.

NIBS STROUPE

3. R. W. L. Moberly, “Toward an Interpretation of the Shema,” in *Theological Exegesis*, ed. C. Seitz and K. Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 143.

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PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6 AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)

1 Kings 17:8–16

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah], saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.” ¹⁴For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Theological Perspective

Elijah is introduced into the narrative (1 Kgs. 17:1) without fanfare or fuss. He just shows up ready to go to work. The reader is made alert to two problems he encounters in Israel. Ahab, Israel’s newly crowned king, has married a Sidonian, Jezebel, who has brought the worship of Ba’alim with her into Israel’s capital city, with her husband’s support (1 Kgs. 16:31–34). God is very upset (16:33)! The second problem seems caused by the first: Elijah notifies Ahab that God has ordained a drought of undetermined length.

The Creator God of this narrative world is truly sovereign, whether over nature (17:1–7) or life itself (17:17–24). So while malevolent rulers seem in charge, the word of God’s prophets, such as Elijah, scripts and sometimes performs truth as it really is. So when word comes for him to travel to the south of Sidon, very near the epicenter of the current mischief, he does so without pause.

There Elijah meets a widow, an outsider who is from Jezebel’s world, but who unlike Jezebel is under the Lord’s command. Her status perhaps explains the strange exchange between her and Elijah. Even though the prophet is now a stranger who intrudes upon the widow’s last supper, he makes an outrageous demand of her, without apology: feed me instead (v. 11). We are not terribly surprised when the widow of Zarephath continues what the ravens

Pastoral Perspective

Last Sunday our first lesson was the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one.” In a way 1 Kings 17:8–16 could be seen as a practical, pastoral inference of that primal Deuteronomic claim. It is not as if Israel has its patron deity and the other peoples of the earth have theirs; rather, Israel’s one God is the only God, the God not just of Israel but of all.

After a dreary account in 1 Kings 16 of the infidelities of a succession of Israelite kings who were distinguished only for their repeated acts of terror against the people of God, God’s prophet Elijah abruptly enters the narrative (17:1). The story of God and us is taking a surprisingly sharp turn, a decidedly new direction orchestrated by God. Curiously that new direction will take the story out to the margins. The prophet sent by God to Israel must flee for his life from the rulers of Israel, beyond the vindictive reach of Ahab and Jezebel. There, outside of the confines of Israel, far away from the sources of royal power, Elijah encounters a powerless woman on the margins who is not an Israelite. With no rain, there is no food, and so she is pushed from the margins, where she has been eking out existence with her child, into hopeless, desperate circumstances.

She is a Sidonian, probably a Canaanite/Phoenician woman, a widow. That she does not worship YHWH is confirmed by her speaking to Elijah of

1 Kings 17:8–16

Exegetical Perspective

The drought announced to King Ahab by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1 frames three miracle stories in this chapter: Elijah fed by ravens in the wilderness (vv. 2–7); Elijah fed by the widow of Zarephath (vv. 8–16); and Elijah’s resurrection of the widow’s son (vv. 17–24). Each story highlights the power of Israel’s God over Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility and rain, in the areas of nature, geography, and life itself. Chapter 17 introduces a larger unit, 1 Kings 17–22, focused upon Elijah’s opposition to King Ahab, who calls Elijah “a troubler of Israel” (18:17) and “my enemy” (21:20). Elijah’s criticism reflects the polemic against the northern kingdom embedded in the encompassing Deuteronomistic History (Dtr). In Dtr’s view, Elijah is a prophet like Moses who proclaims no other God but the Lord, a comforting word to Jews during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, when Dtr was edited.

In verse 8 God commands Elijah to move to Zarephath, a port city eight miles south of Sidon in Phoenician territory. Ironically, this is the land of Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife, whose father is king of Sidon. Even here, in Baal’s territory, drought and famine are felt; the widow is about to prepare her last meal before she dies (v. 12). It is Israel’s God, not Baal, who provides for Elijah as well as for the

Homiletical Perspective

The great prophet Elijah has just appeared on the biblical scene. The memory of his prophetic voice is so powerful that he stands out in the biblical tradition. We see his prophetic vision and power in action from the start. He jumps right into the political arena by announcing to King Ahab that God is ordaining a drought, a calamity greatly to be feared in any part of the world, but especially in Palestine. Our passage picks up the story in the middle of that drought, which has brought famine to the land because the crops have failed.

Elijah has pronounced God’s movement in the drought, and at first, he then retreats to the beach or to the mountains. Elijah hides from King Ahab and withdraws to a nice cool oasis. Yet that place dries up in the drought, and God sends him back into the struggle. He goes not into Jewish territory but rather into Gentile territory in Sidon, a fact that Jesus will note in his first sermon, a sermon that almost gets Jesus lynched (Luke 4:25). God likely sends Elijah into Sidon because it is the home territory of Queen Jezebel, the powerful woman who has influenced King Ahab to move toward worship of Baal.

Elijah goes not to a home of comfort but to a widow’s home, a home of poverty and destitution. She and her son are near death from starvation caused by the drought. God is sending Elijah into

1 Kings 17:8–16

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of Gilead had begun (17:6), since the word of the Lord had already prepared her to feed Elijah (v. 9).

This claim of divine providence is mentioned only in passing. Nowhere is the reader led to believe that the widow had received God's word in writing! In fact, her initial response to Elijah's bold request admits only to two realities. First, his God is not her God: "as the LORD *your* God lives" (v. 12; cf. 17:1). Second, rather than doing what is asked of her, she pointedly explains her dire circumstances to Elijah: I have only enough food for one final meal "for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die" (v. 12).

The reader supposes that the prophet's exhortation, "Do not be afraid," is not meant to comfort one facing death but rather to inspire confidence that his God keeps promises of salvation made. Mention of the "word of the LORD" is repeated seven times in 1 Kings 17; in each case, the divine word promises what is then realized. This is a narrative of fulfillment (so v. 16), and so sustains the biblical riff that a right hearing of God's word saves lives. Indeed, the sheer defiance of the prophet's bold declaration of what "the LORD the God of Israel" says (v. 14) addresses the widow's fear, which the reader comes to understand is shaped by the unmet promises of her hometown Ba'alim (cf. 16:31). The prophet of this God carries a word very different than that of the priests of Ba'al.

The shape of the prophetic word is important to note. Elijah's request for life-saving food comes with a prediction of a future made without qualification or condition: the promise of God's provision is stated as fact, not as a stated condition of her compliance. God's care promised to Elijah extends to those who keep his company (see v. 15).

One of the more surprising features of Scripture's definition of divine providence is that God collaborates with unsuspecting outsiders as agents of God's salvation. While the Lord tells Elijah that the widow is under God's command (v. 9), nothing she says indicates as much! Frankly, readers are perhaps stunned that the widow responds to the divine word without witness of its power! In any case, the theological lesson learned from her example is that sometimes outsiders collaborate with God in working out God's salvation for the sake of others for whom they care. Relationships of circumstance often cultivate loyalties that prompt decisions and hospitable actions that God can providentially use as the means to a redemptive end.

Luke's Jesus recalls this story to interpret the hostility of those opposite the widow: believing *insiders*

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"*your* God" (v. 12). Wicked Queen Jezebel (who was introduced in 16:31) is also a Sidonian; both women are presumably worshipers of Baal, but in her sacrificial hospitality to the prophet, the poor widow is quite a contrast to the powerful, oppressive Jezebel. Unlike the true believers, this unbeliever compassionately cares for God's prophet. The widow's compassion provides occasion for Elijah's first great wondrous work in response to the woman's gift. Amid the desperate circumstances of a famine, God miraculously feeds both God's faithful prophet and the poor woman on the margins.

Elijah—great prophet of the true, living, one and only God—is introduced through his interaction with a pagan woman on the margins. The linkage with Luke 10:29–37 is apparent, a story of Jesus about receiving kindness and showing kindness among strangers. Acted out before us is a challenging lesson for Israel and the church. It appears that there is no way to worship this God without going to the margins, where God does some surprising, salvific work.

Elijah is told, "Go now to Zarephath . . . and live there" (v. 8). The mission to the Sidonians, like most moves beyond margins of Israel, is initiated solely by Israel's God. The mission to the Sidonians is God's idea before it is Elijah's. That we are surprised to find the prophet ministering to a desperate Sidonian woman is testimony to our own attempts to circumscribe the sovereignty of the one and only God. In the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12:1–3, Israel is ordained to be a blessing for all the families on earth. All. Blessing Israel is YHWH's unique way to embrace all the nations. In 2 Kings 5 we will see this blessing made manifest in the healing of Naaman the Syrian general. In Joshua 2 a Canaanite woman named Rahab (marginalized as a harlot rather than as a widow) will be utilized to bless some Israelites.

Of all the suffering widows whom God's prophet might have asked for hospitality and who might have been fed, the only one blessed was this outsider (to Elijah), this vulnerable Sidonian. The widow's response to the prophet's demands for the last of her precious food (17:11) shows her surprising faith in God. God's blessing given to the woman demonstrates the faithfulness of God, even to those out beyond the boundaries of the faithful in Israel.

No wonder Jesus angered the insiders at Nazareth in his inaugural sermon (Luke 4:24–27) when he reminded the faithful of this scandalous reach of divine beneficence beyond the borders. We the faithful, the insiders, those at the center of orthodoxy,

1 Kings 17:8–16

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widow and her son, showing that God's power is not limited to Israel (cf. Luke 4:14–30).

The intentional contrast between the widow and the other Sidonian woman, Jezebel, extends the irony. Jezebel feeds the Baal prophets at her royal table (1 Kgs. 18:19) and kills the Lord's prophets (1 Kgs. 18:4; 19:2). The widow feeds God's prophet Elijah and later acknowledges that he is "a man of God" after he resurrects her son (17:24). Jezebel's son, Ahaziah, dies (2 Kgs. 1:2–4, 17), while the widow's son lives, according to "the word of the LORD" (repeated five times in 1 Kgs. 17, in vv. 2, 5, 8, 16, 24, and in 2 Kgs. 1:17). The "word of the LORD" brackets this miracle story (vv. 8 and 16) and communicates both the reliability of God's word as spoken by Elijah (confirmed by the widow's testimony in v. 24), and the authority of Elijah as God's prophet. The widow's response to Elijah substitutes for Elijah's missing call and consecration story at the beginning of chapter 17.¹ Elijah's encounter with her prepares him for his meeting with King Ahab later on.

The widow knows nothing of God's command to either Elijah or herself. The use of *hinneh* in verse 10—"he came to the gate of the city and look! [*hinneh*] there (was) a widow woman collecting sticks" (my trans.)—suggests the providence of God working behind the scenes to coordinate the timing of their encounter. Elijah tests her by first asking for "a little water" to see if she will be open to obeying the divine command. As the widow goes off to bring him water, he ups the ante by asking for "a bit of bread" (v. 11). She protests that the usual expectations of hospitality (Deut. 23:3–4; Prov. 25:21; Job 22:7) cannot apply in her case, since she has "only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug" (v. 12) and is near death. Implicit here is a critique of Baal, who should be taking care of her but cannot. According to ancient Near Eastern myths, Baal dies during the dry summer and descends to the underworld, awaiting rescue by his female consort, Anath, who brings him to life so that the rains can return to the earth in the winter.

By asking for food and water in the midst of drought and famine, Elijah proclaims that God, not Baal, is in charge of the seasons and the rain. Elijah is not insensitive to the widow's situation, but invites her to trust in his God in spite of it. Elijah shows empathy to her in his encounter. He does not ask for too much water or bread. He responds to her

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a place of frightening vulnerability. It is a reminder that the poor are always the most vulnerable, especially in times of great crisis. The comfortable are grumpily spending down their resources on food and water, but at least they have resources to spend. This widow, like millions of others in human history who are poor, is left to a life of destitution, starvation, and death. It is why the biblical tradition emphasizes so strongly that the people of God are always called to works of charity and justice for the most vulnerable in all societies.

Into poverty and suffering God sends Elijah, and God asks a lot of the people in this story. God asks a lot of Elijah, sent not to a land of milk and honey with Jewish friends, but rather to a poor woman in Gentile territory. Elijah's partner in this story is a foreigner and a widow, a "nobody" who has no worth or power in the world. God—and Elijah—asks a lot of this widow. We assume that as a Gentile she has no knowledge of YHWH, yet she is asked to become a central partner in a dangerous and scary story about God's power. Elijah is a foreigner who comes to her home to ask for water in a time of drought. The rules of hospitality (and male domination) dictate that she must honor the request of this stranger. We should note that the Gentile woman in John 4 is not so compliant to a similar request from Jesus.

This unnamed woman honors the stranger's request, but it must be galling to her for a foreign man to be coming into her home and requesting to drain her meager resources. She obeys Elijah's request for water, but she resists when he asks for food. She reminds him that she is a widow, that she is poor in a time of drought. Then she reveals how desperate her situation is: she has no food left. She currently has a bit of meal and oil, and when she bakes that, it will be the last meal for her and her son. She is literally one meal away from starvation, and now this stranger asks to share even part of that. We see the starkness of her situation; starvation stalks this woman and her son.

The stranger tells her something unbelievable: "Do not be afraid; God will provide." Elijah asks this widow, in the midst of her harsh struggle for life, to say yes, to trust in a God whom she does not even know. If she says yes, it will cost her dearly—the likely death of her and her son. She does find the courage to say yes (the story seems uninterested in explaining why she says yes). Rather than being dominated by fear, she takes courage and says yes. In a remarkable turn of events, she finds abundance in her courage. Whereas she feared that she would find

1. Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 168.

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who know him well but who reject his mission to save them (Luke 4:23–26). This point frames Luke’s entire narrative of Jesus, which is parallel to Elijah’s in his mission to bring good news even to the outcast and outsider, especially those hospitable to him. Jesus’ outrageous appeal to the widow also signals Israel’s outrage at his messianic mission that eventually will lead to his Roman execution.

Perhaps this is the theological point that we should preach. The widow of our story represents all those whom we casually dismiss as “outcasts and outsiders,” for all kinds of reasons. God sets an eye on her salvation, miraculously providing food for her household, as she provides for God’s prophet because he chooses to keep her company.

ROBERT W. WALL

Pastoral Perspective

are still scandalized when reminded that our God is one, that all are within the reach of God’s intentions for the whole world. If you are tempted to preach on this text, be warned by the violent congregational reaction Jesus received that day in Nazareth!

The church of any age must be reminded again that our God is greater than the borders of the church. “For God so loved the world” (John 3:16)—not just the church and people who look like me—that God sent the ultimate prophet who gave the ultimate gift out on the margins, on Calvary. As the faithful gather this Sunday, this ancient prophetic tale asserts that the main work of the church is always beyond the church, that God orders us, “Go now to . . .” all sorts of places and serve all sorts of people, particularly the desperate and the marginalized, the famished and the vulnerable.

Even as Jesus challenged those in Israel who would limit God’s reach to Israel, so the church is challenged by Elijah’s ministry with this widow (and her ministry to him!) to extend the borders of the church’s witness. Hunkered down with the faithful, sensing no claim from the desperate Sidonian widows of our age, we unfaithfully limit the scope of God’s universal salvific intent. Refusing to go where God sends us, failing to serve those whom God loves, we jeopardize our worship of the God who teaches us to say, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one, and you shall love the LORD your God.”

A truly prophetic church is the one that lives out the truth that there is one and only God, and that no corner of earth is immune from God’s sovereign pronouncement: “Mine!”

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

1 Kings 17:8–16

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anxious protests about having nothing to give him with “do not be afraid” in verse 13. Consequently, the widow uses the same oath formula—“by the life of the LORD your God” (my trans., v. 12)—that Elijah uses in announcing the drought in verse 1, showing she is open to that trust. Using the prophetic messenger formula (v. 14)—“this is what the LORD says” (my trans.)—Elijah makes it clear that God provides the food that “she as well as he and her household ate for many days” (v. 15). Second Kings 4:1–7 tells a similar feeding story about Elisha, Elijah’s successor (cf. Jesus: Matt. 14:13–21; 15:32–39; Mark 6:32–44; Luke 9:10–17). Elisha’s reviving of the Shunammite woman’s son (2 Kgs. 4:37) echoes Elijah’s revival of the widow’s son (1 Kgs. 17:17–24; cf. Jesus, Luke 7:11–17).

Many commentators idealize the widow’s social situation by referring to her as poor and pointing to biblical laws linking widows to vulnerable strangers and orphans (Exod. 22:21–25; Deut. 10:17–18; 14:22–29; Ps. 146:9). However, the poverty of the widow of Zarephath may simply be the result of the famine rather than of her status as a widow. In chapter 17 she oversees a “household” (v. 15) and owns a house with an “upper chamber” (v. 19) in which Elijah lodges.

Deuteronomy gives widows special privileges (16:11, 14; 24:17–22) such as gleaning, in order to incorporate them into the economic and social life of society and, at the same time, to keep them in line with Deuteronomic laws. Widows are idealized as poor, pious, and chaste in the ancient world, but also suspected of having the potential to be witches, necromancers, and prostitutes (e.g., Tamar in Gen. 38:6–26), who are sexually dangerous to the social order and involved with foreign cults.² No wonder that a widow figures into Elijah’s criticism of Baal and the king.

DENISE DOMBKOWSKI HOPKINS

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death, instead she finds life. As Elijah promised, the meal and the oil do not run out. God does indeed provide.

On the surface, this seems like a beautiful, inspiring story of faith. Elijah, the powerful prophet of God, is brought low by God’s sending him into a situation of extreme poverty, but his faith in God carries him from starvation to sustenance. The poor widow is asked to make a life-threatening decision: to share with a stranger what few resources she has. She decides to say yes, and rather than finding death, she finds life. If this were a Hollywood movie script, Elijah and this widow would likely get married! Before we feel all toasty and pleased about people of faith being rewarded for their faith and courage, let us remember how difficult and dangerous this story is.

Its political context is a prophet on the run from the ruling powers in a dangerous time. The story itself will not let us get too cozy, either. It is much more complex than we prefer it to be. In the next part of the story, the widow’s son does die, and it causes a crisis of faith for her and for Elijah. This story intentionally invites us into scary and threatening territory, and because of this, it also invites us to consider our own calling, not to places of ease and acclaim, but rather to the scariest place of all—where our voice and our story meet the voice of God. Here in this place, we hear powerful news also: “Do not be afraid.”

NIBS STROUPE

2. Roy Heller, “The Widow in Deuteronomy: Beneficiary of Compassion and Co-Option,” in *The Impartial God*, ed. C. Roetzel and R. Foster (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 1–11.

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PROPER 28 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 13 AND NOVEMBER 19 INCLUSIVE)

Daniel 12:1–3

¹“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. ²Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

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These verses from the apocalyptic book of Daniel are unique in the Old Testament. They mention “resurrection” (v. 2), a theme not otherwise found in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is, of course, at the core of the New Testament, since it is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some see an allusion to a coming resurrection in Isaiah 26:19. If so, “it is the only other instance of the concept in the OT.”¹ The common Old Testament view is expressed by the psalmist: “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence” (Ps. 115:17). The familiar term “Sheol” means basically the grave or death—to which all persons go (Gen. 37:35; Ps. 89:48). There is no thought of an ongoing or transformed existence or a life that stretches on eternally.

The writer of Daniel has “pushed the envelope” in terms of Old Testament theology, for the writer has “dared here to go further than any theological predecessor in Israel since he suggests that beyond the culmination of human history and God’s victory on behalf of righteousness is a world populated by the saints themselves.”² The operative verse here is Daniel 12:2: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of

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The book of Daniel leaves many a preacher and pastor a bit wary. It joins Revelation in the New Testament as a primary source for threatening misconceptions and misinterpretations. Daniel’s “predictions” of what is coming for Israel may be impressive, at first. Scholarly research, however, has discovered that this presumed foreknowledge was written *after* the predicted events had taken place! The events being described as “in the future” occurred at various times from the seventh to the fourth centuries BCE. Most historical commentators agree that the author of Daniel probably was writing around 164 BCE. No wonder the forecast is so accurate! As one commentator puts it, “By writing from the fictional standpoint of one who is looking in the direction of events which had in fact already transpired, the writer could obtain instant authority as a legitimate seer and prognosticator.”¹ If only weather forecasters had the same opportunity to tell what the weather was going to be after it already had happened! However, we need not accuse the writer of misrepresentation. In that age, this style of writing was a vehicle for establishing the credibility of the writer. One should not read Daniel as a prediction

1. W. Sibley Towner, “Daniel,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 706.

2. *Ibid.*

1. W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 175.

Daniel 12:1–3

Exegetical Perspective

At first glance the beginning of the passage seems to refer to the last verses of the previous chapter, in which major powers clash in battle. Forces under Ptolemy and Antiochus were waging war in the second century BCE. Daniel 12, however, quickly redirects attention to the dawn of a new era: “at that time” God will intervene to consummate history and grant the faithful people eternal life (v. 1a).

The vision presents Michael (cf. Dan. 8:15–16; 10:13), the warring angel, who will “arise” (v. 1a). The action verb denotes that he is ready to fight on behalf of the faithful. The introduction of Michael suggests that God’s people will prevail through the power of God.

Michael receives two epithets in verse 1: “prince” and “protector.” Daniel is told that his people are going to be led by “the great prince” at a time when they did not have their own king, and when the world was under the oppressive regime of the tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes (*epiphanes* is a Greek term referring to the appearance of a god, and this title is thus Antiochus’s claim to divinity; Daniel makes it clear that Israel’s God is the true God). Antiochus defiled the temple in Jerusalem and prohibited the Jews from observing sacred covenantal rites. At a critical juncture, Michael will come as the people’s protector. The Hebrew word for “protect” (*shamar*)

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The book of Daniel is a turbulent book. The strangeness of genre in its final six chapters—dreams and visions—poses a particular challenge to writers of commentaries, let alone writers of sermons.

In the latter half of Daniel, we find ourselves struggling to orient ourselves in a liminal world populated by angelic messengers and horned beasts. Conquerors and their armies surge to and fro across blurred landscapes. All that is clear in Daniel’s frightening panoramas is that for these powers of empire, nothing is sacred. In the name of world mastery holy sites and human lives are overrun without mercy. Yet that single observation anchors this text firmly, if unsettlingly, in the present.

Many interpreters agree that the dreams and visions of chapters 7–11 are successive recapitulations of the same sequence of military campaigns and successive regimes. Each succeeding vision functions as an amplification of aspects of the previous vision. The verses before us at the beginning of chapter 12 are, for all their brevity, the culmination and capstone of the five chapters that precede them.

We might imagine the transition from chapter 11 to chapter 12 musically. Most of chapter 11 throbs with the heavy, tramping cadence of timpani and bass; but at its close—sudden silence. Chapter 12

Daniel 12:1–3

Theological Perspective

the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

During the period between the Old and New Testaments, the theme of life after death was developed more fully. A doctrine of bodily resurrection emerged, even as there were disagreements about the extent of resurrection: for only Israel, or for all people?

By the time of Jesus, the two major religious parties of Judaism, the Pharisees and Sadducees, disagreed on whether or not there will be a future resurrection. The Pharisees affirmed it; the Sadducees denied it (Matt. 22:23–29; Luke 20:27–40; the old joke is that no belief in resurrection by the Sadducees is why they were “sad, you see”).

This Daniel passage anticipates New Testament emphases on resurrection centered in Jesus Christ. A central conviction of Christian faith, voiced by Paul, is that “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the message the church preaches as it witnesses to its Lord and Savior, who proclaimed, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). The expectancy of this Daniel passage is amplified and brought to sharper focus in the person and work of Jesus as the Messiah. In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension Christian hope is inaugurated and resurrection life is communicated to us (Rom. 6:5). Like Paul, Christian believers can “know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10).

Theologically, “resurrection” is part of the constellation of concepts that form eschatology, the doctrine of the “last things.” These include themes such as eternal life, judgment, heaven and hell. So “resurrection” is not a theme to be preached only on Easter. It should be brought to bear on the whole range of theological topics about which we preach and teach.

The basics of resurrection can be drawn from the Apostles’ Creed, which summarizes Christian faith.

God Raised Jesus. “On the third day he rose again from the dead,” says the creed. The New Testament emphasis is that God raised Jesus (Acts 2:24, 32; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14). Resurrection is not an inherent power; it is the work of God. God’s power in salvation is extended to raising Jesus to ratify what Jesus did in his death (Rom. 6:20–23). Now believers can walk in “newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Whenever resurrection occurs, it is God’s work—never a human work or a natural process (like the

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of the future; rather, we should focus on the primary message of God’s salvation.

So the pastoral assurance here is that the preacher need not divert into the realms of angels and miracles and calendars of doom. Nor should a sermon on this text attempt to prepare the listener for a date of destruction or of elevation as one of the “chosen.” Surely there are literalists still on the scene who do use this book and other apocalyptic literature to substantiate the *Left Behind* literature.² This author does not join them in that project.

Rather, let us look at the text from a more appropriate angle of vision. What is the writer, in the final analysis, attempting to convey to us? What is the motivation to write such a message at this particular time?

In 164 BCE, the situation “on the ground” was this. Antiochus (who, incidentally, was the brother of Cleopatra) had been forced out of Egypt around 168 and passed through Jerusalem on his way out. His mercenaries plundered the city, and by 164 the temple itself had been desecrated. The history of oppression, followed by this most recent devastation, was bound to have had a demoralizing effect on the Jews. They needed a message to give them hope in the midst of a sense of ultimate defeat. To the breach comes Daniel, with several messages to deliver.

“At that time” (unspecified), there will be bad times, but your people will be delivered, says Daniel. God is still in control (v. 1). Why should they (or we) believe that? Because, in the previous chapters the writer has been establishing his claim that the times of destruction over the last centuries had been in God’s hands. History had been predicted and therefore was under God’s control. So what is happening now and will happen is not a loss of control on God’s part either. Ultimately, time is in God’s hands. This verse should be taken as an affirmation of the sovereignty of God. Things look bad, but have courage. God is faithful.

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth,” in other words, those who have died, “shall awake” (v. 2). Here, miraculously enough, is an early affirmation of resurrection or eternal life. Of course, we now encounter another problem. Daniel also says that some will not be so fortunate. They will awaken to “shame and everlasting contempt.” Once again, we have to take into account that

2. *Left Behind* is a series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, published by Tyndale House, that portray a Christian dispensationalist view of history.

Daniel 12:1–3

Exegetical Perspective

in the Old Testament usually has God as the subject when the object of the verb refers to human beings. Michael (whose name means “Who is like God?”) will mediate divine protection. In the New Testament, the book of Revelation echoes the theme of the angel Michael leading the forces of heaven in battle against the forces of evil (Rev. 12:7).

The heavenly narrator, who has been presenting the vision of God’s ultimate victory since chapter 10 in the book of Daniel, underscores the gravity of the situation: it will be “a time of anguish” (v. 1a), for which the Septuagint uses *thlipsis*, a Greek word meaning “tribulation,” sometimes used to refer to the end times. The noun can also refer to birth pangs. Through the veil of affliction, a new world will be born.

The angel Michael depicts the “time of anguish” as an unprecedented crisis (v. 1). The unheard-of suffering, however, will not spell the end of the faithful. God will not leave them unshielded (v. 1). Deliverance will come; death will not have the last word, for those who die will be brought back to life. The faithful will receive everlasting life (v. 2) and will enjoy the fruit of their labor for eternity (v. 3). In this verse, the first clear reference to individual resurrection in the Hebrew Bible, the finality of death is overturned, and everlasting life is promised for the faithful.

In this vision report, eternal life is offered to a clearly defined group of people—those whose names are “found written in the book” (v. 1b). In Jewish tradition, “the book of life” (*sefer hachaim*) is the book in which God records the names of the righteous (see, e.g., Isa. 4:3 and Ps. 139:16). Those who have sinned and are unrepentant are blotted out of the book (see Exod. 32:33). Those who may see the end in their lifetime will be joined by those who died but will be brought back to life (see Paul’s description in 1 Thess. 4:16). Some people will be put to “shame and everlasting contempt” (v. 2). The book of Revelation, which derives much of its symbolism from Daniel and other Jewish apocalyptic writings, describes a similar scene of judgment (Rev. 20:12–15).

While the two paths are presented in parallel (“everlasting life” vs. “everlasting contempt”), the lot of the latter is given an additional descriptor of “shame.” Though the extra word may have been a gloss, in the present form of the text it adds to the gravity of the punishment reserved for the unfaithful, invoking the framework of honor and shame essential for the understanding of the culture of the biblical world.

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opens with a single high trumpet note: “At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise” (v. 1a, NRSV). As we turn toward the sound, astonished at the heavenly figure rising on the horizon of time, one abrupt final crescendo of discordance bursts from the orchestra: “There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence” (v. 1b). Just as suddenly, the discord resolves itself into a richly sustained major-key chord: “But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book” (v. 1c).

The vision of these verses, captured in a few poetic strophes, is both weal and woe. God’s protective power will be stirred up, even as empire focuses its gaze on the land where Israel’s remnant has been bargaining for its life. Deliverance will come, but only as a last wave of deadly persecution rakes over the land.

If nothing else, this reading prompts the church to do some hard thinking about power, human and divine. One could imagine a sermon that focuses simply on the sudden divine interruption of the deafening tumult of kings and kingdoms upon the earthly stage. The curtain that veils heaven is drawn back, and, in a single stroke, the apparent ultimacy of earthly power is radically relativized. Who is Michael? Michael represents that factor on which no empire on earth ever counts—the persistent divine investment in those whom empires dismiss as weak, insignificant, defenseless, disposable, easily eliminated.

In frightening times, the seer called Daniel encourages us to find shelter not in the promises of empire, but in a Power against death that is deeper and more enduring than the noise of battle across the world stage—a Power that protects and delivers (v. 1).

A second preaching approach might focus on verses 2 and 3. Most interpreters agree that these verses clearly suggest some conception of the resurrection of the dead. The seer envisions those who “sleep in the dust” (a typical image of death, common in the Psalms) awaking to the true nature of things. The implicit message is that our alliances in this life matter, leading to enduring life or enduring shame. However, this is visionary language, and preachers are wise not to overliteralize it, attempting to pin labels on either worldly powers of the day or (for that matter) those in the pews. Moralizing sermons are not in order.

A sermon might challenge us to find our place on this stage where heaven and earth contend for the

Daniel 12:1–3

Theological Perspective

flowers blooming each springtime). All glory in the resurrection goes to the God who raised Jesus and in doing so, said yes to Jesus' life and ministry.

Resurrection of the Body. Daniel perceived that those “who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” (v. 2). We believe in the “resurrection of the body,” according to the creed. Our union with Christ by faith brings us into a “resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:5). This is not resuscitation, the return to this life of someone already dead. Jesus raised people this way (Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–44). The future “resurrection of the body” means transformation, into a new life of a new body, a “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44). Radical transformation brings an “imperishable” spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:50). What this is like, we cannot envision. What we affirm is that “the risen body is different from the bodies that we know and touch here and now, but it remains a body, a body made for communion with God.”³

Life Everlasting. The creed concludes with an echo of “everlasting life” from Daniel 12:2. This is the hope of “eternal life,” the life Jesus came to bring (John 3:16; 1 John 5:11). It is life of endless duration, but it is more. Eternal life is the kind and quality of life Jesus brings, here and now. Eternal life begins now, as we are united with Christ by faith. We belong to God in Christ. The power of death is defeated in Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:51–57). We share in the life Jesus promised, that we will “never die” (John 11:25–26). Christian hope is a destiny to dream about, as we know that “what we will be has not yet been revealed” (1 John 3:2).

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

Daniel is interpreting, from his own religious context, what God will do. We need to look at this text theologically (and pastorally) and realize that Daniel was asserting his contemporary theological conviction that God's control of history had particular outcomes.

Some readers will note the similarity to the doctrine of double predestination. Much of mainstream theological reflection over the centuries has rejected such a doctrine, because it would render history meaningless. Our role in the ongoing unfolding of God's ultimate purposes would be no more than to sit back and watch, with no meaningful participation. Daniel 12:3 is a further affirmation of what we are calling a promise of resurrection, but note in verse 4 that Daniel is told to keep all this a secret. In other words, we humans just cannot know what God plans!

So what can we draw from all this? The book of Daniel as a whole, and this passage in particular, must be looked at from several perspectives. First, it is not a calendar of future events. Second, neither is it a book to be feared or discounted. Third, it is a book filled with affirmations about how much God loves, and ultimately saves, humanity. Fourth, it is a book that turns our faces to the future, not by predicting specific events, but by assuring us of specific outcomes, namely, that history has meaning, that we have responsible roles to play in it, and that we can find comfort in the reality of a God who so loves us that even resurrection (eternal life) is assured.

WILLIAM V. ARNOLD

3. David H. Jensen, *Living Hope: The Future and Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 33.

Daniel 12:1–3

Exegetical Perspective

Those who are recorded in the book of life (v. 1) and destined for eternal life (v. 2) receive an even more detailed depiction in verse 3. Their number will include “those who are wise” (v. 3). Though the English translation associates them with sages, the Hebrew verb may designate not only *those who are discerning* but also *those who make others wise*. The latter half of verse 3 (“those who lead many to righteousness”) is a strong parallel with “those who are [or cause many to be] wise.” The equation of righteousness with wisdom is in consonance with the narrative, legal, prophetic, and sapiential traditions of the Hebrew Bible. Daniel 12 honors the ministry of those who nurture others in the wise path of righteousness. Those who promote pious ways among the people may face death but will receive their reward in the end. The narrator can describe their afterlife blessing only in nonliteral categories: “shall shine *like* the brightness of the sky . . . *like* the stars” (v. 3). The import of the similes highlights the indescribable nature of what is in store for the faithful. The idea of eternity at the end of verse 3 also refers to something that finite human beings can only imagine.

Daniel 12:1–3 offers hope amid the difficult struggles that God’s people face. The path charted for them is strewn with many challenges, but the faithful will never be left without God’s guarding care. There will be deliverance for them—some in their lifetime and others after their death. The world is in the midst of war, but the present temporal pain signals God’s ultimate deliverance. Those who are wise and righteous may suffer and die because of their faith, but resurrection and everlasting life are in store for them.

JIN H. HAN

Homiletical Perspective

human future. A hint about which part of the script is ours emerges in verses 2–3. “Passive spectator” does not appear to be one of the available roles. We can choose the part of the wise. They are the embodiment of hope, the ones who do anything they can to “lead many to righteousness,” no matter how late in the day it seems.

Hope is hard. Persistence is hard. This century has seen greed and market manipulation widen the gap between a wealthy overclass and the world’s chronically disinherited and disenfranchised poor. Weekly, it seems, somewhere in the world a fragile cease-fire meant to foster efforts at face-to-face reasoning disintegrates amid a fresh hail of gunfire. This text envisions a time when the swagger of wealth and the power of military might to maintain control through fear has disintegrated into dust. The wisdom that teaches justice will finally outshine the temporary glitter of self-aggrandizing empire, “like the brightness of the sky” (v. 3). Aligning ourselves with the life-giving power of God rather than the death-dealing powers of greed and military dominance matters in an ultimate and “everlasting” way.

One might also pursue in a sermon the intriguing idea that God’s vision of the human future is not static condemnation to a sealed fate, but includes a possibility for open-ended growth (v. 3). God does not give up hope that love and justice and hope can be learned, perhaps even by those who have been hardened by bitter experience to these possibilities.

Good preaching from the book of Daniel will not be a smug mapping of history, but a serious business of asking in what true, life-giving power consists. This is the rhetorical aim of Daniel’s dreams and visions and can be our aim, as well. The power of the Spirit outmaneuvers the power of hoarded wealth and the power to make afraid. We have a role to play amid the vectors of history. It is to be custodians of Spirit-driven hope.

SALLY A. BROWN

PROPER 28 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 13 AND NOVEMBER 19 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 16

¹Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

²I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."

³As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,
in whom is all my delight.

⁴Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names upon my lips.

⁵The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

⁶The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 16 is usually seen as a psalm of confidence and trust. The psalmist expresses commitment to God, not in relation to some specific emergency or need, but through the totality of life. Biblical scholars cannot pin down the dating, context, or origins of the psalm. So what the psalm recounts, theologically, transcends the specifics of communal or personal history to express the confidence and commitment to God that the psalmist has experienced and that, by extension, those with faith in the God of the psalmist can still experience today. We can characterize three dimensions of this faith in three segments of the psalm.

Help (vv. 1–4). The psalm begins with a cry for protection and help that expresses faith in God as the Lord. Indeed, God is "my Lord," claiming a personal relationship with the God of Israel and an appropriation of the conviction that this God can enter into relationship with Israel and its people (v. 1). The totality of what is meant by acknowledging God as "my Lord" in the context of Israel's covenant relationship with God must stand behind the psalmist's affirmation of faith. The confidence and intimacy of this relationship is recognized in that protection can be sought from this God in whom the psalmist takes "refuge" for

Pastoral Perspective

The Psalms offer a wondrous array of perspectives on the life of faith. As the "hymnbook" of the people of God, they offer vehicles for praise. They also offer to both individuals and groups rich sources for self-examination. A careful and reflective reading of almost any psalm will lead one into deeper knowledge of both human nature and the nature of God. John Calvin, in the opening to his *Institutes*, observed that the more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn about God, and vice versa. Knowledge of either God or self without knowledge of the other is woefully inadequate.¹ Psalm 16 is a beautiful example of this interweaving of knowledge of God and knowledge of self. Consequently, it is a rich source for insight, comfort, and inspiration.

Psalm 16 might well be characterized as both an admission of need and an expression of joy. Verse 1, for example, begins with a declaration of need for protection. Protection from what? We do not know for certain, and it does not matter. The important thing is that in the very expression of that need, the writer affirms the knowledge that refuge is already available. In one sense, the psalmist is already in God's shelter. Robert Alter, in his translation of Psalm 16, makes the verb more active by rendering

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chapter 1. First published in 1536; multiple editions available.

Psalm 16

- ⁷I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.
- ⁸I keep the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.
- ⁹Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.
- ¹⁰For you do not give me up to Sheol,
or let your faithful one see the Pit.
- ¹¹You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Exegetical Perspective

The psalmist, who has lived through mortal danger, praises God for being saved from death. Though clearly marked by its out-and-out celebration of regained life, Psalm 16 has a complex structure that defies neat summary. In its structural disarray, which echoes the psalmist's fervent euphoria over God's deliverance, the psalm begins with a plea that we might expect to encounter in a lament: "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge" (v. 1). The two verbs ("protect" [lit. "keep"] and "take refuge") portray the urgent search for shelter in YHWH that is commonly found in Psalms of Lament. However, the psalmist's petition for protection immediately gives way to the declaration of trust and praise (vv. 2–11).

The psalmist conveys the sense of delight that flows out of God's dealings with those who seek divine protection. The primary cause of the trouble seems to have to do with the threat of death (see v. 10). Deliverance leads the psalmist to pronounce that the sovereign YHWH is the single source of all good (v. 2). The psalmist makes it clear that God's rescue is not to be construed as one of many alternatives in life. Good things come from God alone. "I have no good apart from you" (v. 2b) can also be construed as a statement that YHWH *is* the supreme good.

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The preacher who chooses to make this psalm her preaching text will find that questions of interpretation are lined up to greet her at the study door. Is Psalm 16 the confident creed of the secure on their way home from worship on a sunlit morning (in which case "refuge" functions metaphorically)? Is this the breathless testimony of someone who has just looked death in the eye and lived? Do verses 9–11 contain a nascent (and highly unusual) Old Testament doctrine of resurrection?

The tradition of interpreting Psalm 16, particularly verses 9–11, through a passion lens is ancient, as old as the church itself (see the sermons of Peter and Paul in Acts 2:25–28 and Acts 13:35). We need to be careful lest this fact automatically foreclose broader ways of understanding the psalm. How might the psalm have resonated within the exilic or immediately postexilic community in which it probably originated?

For centuries before the early church's eager appropriation of the psalm's final verses, this psalm functioned as praise on the lips of worshipers no less awed and grateful for God's preserving power than we. Nothing in the psalm forces us to assume that the divine rescue from the oblivion of Sheol in verses 9–10 can happen only on the other side of death. The psalm simply affirms that, when life hung

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safety and, positively, in the recognition that “I have no good apart from you” (v. 2 NRSV) and “all good things I have come from you” (v. 2 TEV). In short, one’s well-being depends on God alone.

There are textual ambiguities in verses 3–4. The plain reading of the NSRV is to contrast the “holy ones” in the land (v. 3a), in whom the psalmist delights (the pious in Israel), and those who “choose another god” (v. 4a). The psalmist wants nothing to do with idol worshipers and the results of their actions. In this way, the psalmist casts his lot with the Lord.

Theologically, the psalmist’s call for help, for the totality of life, is grounded in a deep expression of trust that acknowledges that God is lord and the source of all safety and goodness.

Heritage (vv. 5–8). The amplification of the psalmist’s trust and confidence looks back to what God has done. “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup” (v. 5a) evokes images of receiving what God gives (Ps. 11:6), especially in the allotment of the land of Canaan (Josh. 13:14ff.; 18:2ff.). In the broadest sense, however, it is YHWH who is the “portion” for all the people—as a nation (Jer. 10:16a) and as individuals (Pss. 73:26; 119:57; 142:5; Lam. 3:24). What God has given in the psalmist’s heritage is also upheld by God (“you hold my lot,” v. 5b). God’s gracious gifts, originating with God, are maintained by God’s continuing provisions (providence). Both these dimensions, grace given and grace sustained, are important Christian convictions as well.

The “boundary lines,” which the psalmist acknowledges have “fallen for me in pleasant places,” also evoke the division of the land of Canaan among the tribes of Israel. The word “lines” literally means “rope,” as used in measuring a plot of ground. The psalmist is being figurative here to convey the theological conviction that God has “lined up” the psalmist’s life and that all the pleasantness received comes from the one who has given it—God, who is the ground of all existence. This includes the “goodly heritage” that is the faith of Israel. This heritage includes the belief in a personal God who is active in history, enters into the life of the nation, and gives and guides a person’s life.

Since God is the source of all, the psalmist blesses the Lord, “who gives me counsel” (cf. Ps. 73:24). This image is completed when the psalmist acknowledges that God shows him “the path of life” (v. 11a). This guidance of God is a part of God’s continuing care

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the verse as, “Guard me, O God, for I shelter in You.”² Thus the psalmist both acknowledges the need for protection and at the same time reveals that shelter has already been found with God. The writer is confident of the availability of that refuge. Here we see the interweaving mentioned above. The human admits need and, at the same time, affirms that God is present and available. In the same verse we learn something both about the writer and about God.

Similar insights into the nature of humans and the nature of God recur throughout the psalm. Verses 4 through 6 could be taken as an affirmation of the second commandment: the people of God must have no other gods before their God. The psalmist acknowledges that there are other choices (idols) to which allegiance could be given, and there is evidence that such choices have ended badly (multiplication of sorrows, v. 4). To choose God offers a widening of boundaries, here referring not so much to property as to vision and awareness of one’s own nature and to the writer’s knowledge of God’s nature. The human’s nature is capable of growth, while it is within God’s nature to offer occasions for that growth.

Here again the psalmist is affirming both human finitude and divine hope, in which are found “fullness of joy” and “pleasures forevermore” (v. 11bc). Alter renders this affirmation by the psalmist as “my pulse beats with joy,” again accenting the active enlivenment that is found in God’s care.

James Luther Mays points out that verse 10 is cited by both Peter and Paul in the New Testament book of Acts as an indicator of the promise of resurrection (Acts 2:24–31; 13:34–37).³ So how can such a psalm function pastorally in preaching? Without making specific recommendations on the structure of a sermon, there are several perspectives that seem helpful.

First, the nature of God and human nature should be held together in a dynamic and creative tension. To treat them separately robs both of them of the richness they offer when integrated. One could contrast them, to be sure. Emphasis on God as infinite and humans as finite would be accurate but not particularly enlightening. When they interact with each other, an important conversation is taking place. That conversation makes for deeper and more

2. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 45. The quote two paragraphs below is from page 47.

3. James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 89.

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The textual complexity of verse 3 has vexed translators and commentators, who pore over the identity of the “holy ones.” Whether this phrase refers to the members of the worshiping community or to other deities is unclear. The NRSV translation has the psalmist contrast the delight of those like-minded noble ones who would join the blessing of YHWH (v. 3) and the grief of those who seek another god (v. 4). The psalmist refuses to be part of the worship of the latter group (v. 4) and dismisses their votive as “drink offerings of blood,” implicating them in violence. Between the two paths, the psalmist avowedly has chosen to trust in YHWH, who alone gives abundant blessings (vv. 5–6; cf. v. 2b).

Psalm 16 describes God’s life-giving presence in a tangible manner, using geographical terms like “my chosen portion,” “my lot,” “the boundary lines,” “pleasant places,” and “heritage” (vv. 5–6). Even “the cup,” though not geographical, contributes to the construction of the surroundings of overflowing blessings. One does not need to limit the location of the psalm to the physical place of a sanctuary, and yet the psalmist is undoubtedly describing the ambience of worship. YHWH is the psalmist’s heritage, as is the case with the tribe of Levi, for whom serving God is their inheritance (Deut. 10:9; Josh. 13:14). In verse 6 the psalmist is hedged about in a place characterized by pleasantness and goodness, and the juxtaposition of the synonyms (“pleasant” and “goodly”) amounts to the superlative sense (v. 6). The radical beatitude is repeated in the last verse, in which God’s presence offers joy par excellence (v. 11).

In verses 7–9 the psalmist refers to physical existence: “heart” (vv. 7, 9), “right hand” (v. 8), “soul” (v. 9), and “body” (v. 9). These references enhance the portrayal of YHWH’s close proximity. They are concatenated with the figures of speech for God’s palpable presence, such as YHWH’s face (“your presence,” NRSV) and “right hand” (v. 11). These bodily images illustrate how YHWH’s companionship sustains the stability that the psalmist enjoys (vv. 8–9), and the sense of security in turn promotes worship and thanksgiving (cf. v. 7).

The expression of “the night” in verse 7, which is otherwise a period of rest, may be a metaphor for the time of trouble. Even in the darkest hours, the psalmist knows what YHWH would ask of the faithful. God’s counsel touches the innermost being. The psalmist finds God worthy of full attention in every moment of life (v. 8a). The focused praise provides the psalmist with security (v. 8b), which

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in the balance, God did not abandon; God delivered. Second Temple worshipers rejoiced in the fruit of faithfulness, the abiding joy of divine presence. They rejoiced that we are not abandoned children.

A preacher may choose to take the opportunity in Ordinary Time to awaken his congregation to these older traditions of interpretation. Communities who have come through crisis, particularly, can identify with the psalmist’s wonder at the unshakable nearness of God. The preacher could simply weave phrases of the psalm with the congregation’s (or wider community’s) own story, closing the service with a creative sung setting of Psalm 16.

A second preaching approach might take a cue from long-standing christological appropriations of verses 9–11, yet broaden the christomorphic reimagination of the psalm to embrace other passion-like features within it. Who has not known the Good Friday of profound tests of faith (v. 4) or the Holy Saturday of waiting and listening in the night for a sustaining word (v. 7)? If Ordinary Time is a season for holding up to the light of faith the most ordinary features of human existence, then surely among the most ordinary of these is the extraordinarily painful regularity with which we, or those we love, experience profoundly dislocating life transitions. Suddenly we or someone we care about is handed a different life than the one on which we had all set our hope. A blood test reveals the onset of chronic or life-threatening illness. A family member is diagnosed with a mental disorder or some form of progressive dementia. There are other losses: lost employment, and with it the plans that depended on that reliable income; a pregnancy longed for and then lost, early or late; lost relationships, lost mobility, lost dignity.

In such experiences we face the real temptation to turn from the God we are no longer certain we can trust, and to worship at other altars (v. 4). We pray through endless nights (v. 7). We may not be able to find it in ourselves to testify that God does not abandon God’s own; others may testify when we cannot (vv. 9–11). A sermon can name these realities, perhaps reminding us along the way that, in our baptism, God has taken up our lives into God’s own, cradling the Good Fridays and Holy Saturdays of our lives, holding them until light and life break out anew. Such a sermon will validate experiences of deeply tested faith and set those experiences against a horizon of hope, yet without rushing forward to a preemptive triumphalism.

Finally, a sermon might focus closely on verses 3 and 4. Obscurity in the language of the underlying

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and providence. For the psalmist, this can include the gift of the Torah (see Ps. 119). For the Christian, God’s whole revelation in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ is God’s “counsel” that leads to the “path of life”—by way of the One who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

Thus the psalmist will “keep the LORD always before me” (v. 8a). This presence of God at the “right hand” provides the deepest confidence and help; so the psalmist “shall not be moved” (v. 8b). The psalmist’s living “heritage” continues to assure that the God who has acted, continues to do so, and is a “refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

Hope (vv. 9–11). Past and present confidence in God spills over to gladness and rejoicing (v. 9a). The whole self—heart, soul, and body—“rests secure” (v. 9b). The future dimensions of death are included as the psalmist affirms that neither Sheol nor the Pit—two expressions for the land of the dead—holds terror or disturbs the security found in God. This is the ground of hope.

In Acts 2:27 and 13:35 this psalm text is alluded to in relation to Jesus Christ and his resurrection. The power of death cannot destroy God’s “Holy One.” Death holds no fear. Early church theologians interpreted Psalm 16 christologically, as did Luther. It is a psalm Jesus could have prayed throughout his passion. What the psalmist first experienced is also the experience of Jesus Christ. God was his help, his heritage, his hope.

For the here and now—and for us—the psalmist experiences the life-giving path, God’s presence that brings joy and “pleasures forevermore” (v. 11c). As Calvin put it, the psalmist “testifies that true and solid joy in which the minds of [people] may rest will never be found any where else but in God; and that, therefore, none but the faithful, who are contented with his grace alone, can be truly and perfectly happy.”¹

The experience of the psalmist is a model of our own Christian experience. We seek God’s help, meditate on God’s benefits, and express joy as we experience the path to eternal life, in Jesus Christ.

DONALD K. MCKIM

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intriguing reflection. When faced with difficult decisions, we sometimes are aware of a collection of voices that participate in a conversation in our head. The decision we ultimately makes depends on which voice we prioritize over the others.

Using that frame of reference, perhaps the psalmist could be credited with not only admitting to frailty and the need for protection but also acknowledging that there is a dilemma in making the choice as to which authority or source to trust. God, at the same time, is offering shelter to human beings, but that shelter must be sought and affirmed. Herein lies an example of the interaction between the human and divine, acknowledging the characteristics of each, in an intimate conversation with each other.

A second issue to be acknowledged has to do with the location of the initiative in this psalm. Does it lie with God or with the psalmist? The answer is both. On the one hand, the words begin with a curious mix of the writer both requesting God’s shelter and also claiming already to have taken shelter with God. So the initiative could be laid at the feet of the writer. At the same time, how could the writer have taken this initiative without prior knowledge that the shelter was available? Here lies an opportunity to wrestle with the nature of the divine-human relationship. It is not a simple matter of who took the initiative. Rather, it is a matter of mysterious interaction that cannot fully be explained but, surely, should be fully claimed. The psalmist does not seem to worry about that. The point is that the shelter is there. Therefore, as the writer puts it, our hearts can be glad, and our souls can rejoice.

WILLIAM V. ARNOLD

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm 16:11*.

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procures well-being in every aspect of human existence (v. 9). Steadfast loyalty to YHWH keeps the psalmist spirited and secure, for God's presence nourishes the "heart," "soul," and "body" of the devoted worshiper (v. 9). The particle "also" in verse 9b underscores that nothing is lacking in the blissful state of full awareness of God's goodness. YHWH will not abandon to death the one who keeps faith in God (v. 10). Even in the face of a life-threatening situation, the psalmist is blessed with God's care that abides (cf. Ps. 23:4).

YHWH shows the psalmist how to find life instead of death (v. 11a). "The path of life" in verse 11a refers to the manner of life that YHWH requires. The discourse on embodied blessings communicates exuberance. One can detect the sense of excitement, for example, when the psalmist sometimes addresses YHWH in the second person (vv. 2, 5, 10–11) and sometimes in the third person (vv. 3, 7–8). The switch of the pronouns creates a scene in which the psalmist, moved by God's power to save, praises YHWH directly and then offers testimony to others in the worshiping community.

The terminus of the psalm renders death declawed and leaves the sheer delight of life in its stead (vv. 10–11). The ground of praise for YHWH's deliverance is laid out unequivocally in verse 10, and the psalmist is filled with the superabundance of satisfaction (v. 11). The idea that God will not let the faithful one perish is repeated in the book of Acts (by Peter in 2:31; by Paul in 13:35), in which Psalm 16:10 is used as the scriptural witness to the triumph of life over death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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text here has led to quite different translations and interpretations. One reading takes "holy ones" (v. 3) as a reference to trustworthy companions in faith; these are contrasted in verse 4 with neighbors who take the syncretistic option, casting their lot with local fertility gods, just in case there is some payoff (thriving fields and flocks).

There is something uncannily contemporary about this—the temptation, ever with us, to worship at many altars, just in case. What if it really turns out that the one who dies with the most toys or the most powerful friends really *does* win? What if it turns out that this life is all there ever was, after all? One would not want to miss out. So, like cautious gamblers dispersing our chips across the roulette board, just in case, we pay homage, in effect, at many of this world's "altars."

According to other interpreters, the "holy ones" of verse 3, far from being faithful friends and neighbors, are the pagan gods *themselves*. These verses become a vehement repudiation of false faith, bringing to mind the summons to ancient Israel: "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). Costly tests of loyalty to the covenant are associated with the exile tradition. Consider the "faith trial" stories of Daniel, the three young men in the furnace, and Mordecai in the book of Esther. A preacher might try reading the psalm intertextually with one or another of these very stories.

These stories challenge our notion that spiritual allegiance is a purely "individual" matter. Our faithfulness to God has consequences for the well-being of our communities—within and beyond the congregation. Who and what we worship makes a public difference. Our creeds and prayers shape our deeds. Every life given over to the love and justice of God widens the breadth of a community's welcome, deepens its generosity, and reaps the sustaining joy of days infused with divine presence.

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PROPER 29 (REIGN OF CHRIST)

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

⁹As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.
¹⁰A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened. . . .

Theological Perspective

Daniel 7 has been called “the most important chapter of the entire book, the fulcrum on which all the rest balances.”¹ In this chapter, the previous story of Daniel and his friends in the court of Nebuchadnezzar shifts to a recounting of Daniel’s dreams and visions. This turn from Daniel’s external life to his inner life as a visionary prophet shows how the faithful obedience of Daniel and his comrades is ultimately vindicated by the actions of God. As the ruler and governor of history, God’s kingship and dominion are “indestructible” (v. 14 CEB).

The chapter opens with a graphic description of four beasts from the sea (vv. 1–8). Traditionally, these beasts represent present great empires such as Babylon and foreshadow Rome. The gruesome portrayals of these beasts clearly set them against God and make them subject to God’s judgments, which occur in the chapter’s next segment (vv. 9–15). All powers opposing God face judgment before “an Ancient One” (variant: “Ancient of Days”). They are destroyed. A ruler of a new age is introduced as “one like a human being” (v. 13; Aramaic and RSV: “one like a son of man”) whose realm is “an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away” (v. 14).

1. W. Sibley Towner, “Daniel,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 701.

Pastoral Perspective

In Daniel’s heavenly vision, an “Ancient One,” along with the thousand thousand who serve and the ten thousand times ten thousand who attend, opens our imagination to the God beyond all names for God. After an array of beasts representing competing powers are defeated, the Ancient One offers to “one like a human being” “dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (vv. 13–14). Daniel dreams that the “one like a human being” will lead an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, with kingship that shall never be destroyed.

We often say that we are “only human.” Daniel’s vision offers a remarkable insight: that being human is enough, that God works through human beings, as most evident in the incarnation of Jesus, who is also called “one like a human being” or “one like a son of man” in other translations. Recognizing our humanity and accepting both the glory and the limits of human existence are the tasks of life fully lived. Ironically, we betray our humanity when we try to be more than human. To try to be more than human is always to be less. Until we can see the humanity in the other, we are in darkness. Surely God has given us the gift of self-consciousness so that we can be “other-conscious”—the first step toward living and moving and having our being in Love.

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

¹³As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.

¹⁴To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.

Exegetical Perspective

Power Made Visible. These verses from Daniel 7 provide one of the most extensive descriptions of God’s appearance found in the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 6; Ezek. 1; Exod. 33:17–23). God, appearing in a vision to Daniel as the “Ancient One,” is dressed in long white robes and has hair white as lamb’s wool.

This depiction of God is a carefully crafted and symbolic answer to some urgent questions that the exiled people posed—and that contemporary readers care deeply about too. Namely, is God present in the midst of terrible events? Can one discern God’s rule within the chaotic and seemingly incomprehensible events of history? Does God have any response to the unrighteousness that seems to hold sway in human governments?

The God of Israel’s Righteous Rule. Daniel 7 reflects the crisis of foreign power that came to a head in 167 BCE when the emperor of the region, Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” (he claimed that he was a “god made manifest”), outlawed Judaism and forbade the population of Jerusalem from practicing their ancestral religion, under threat of death. The God of Israel had often worked through historical events, but how could God be at work through this king and this turn of events?

Homiletical Perspective

Congregations and some ministers in so-called mainline churches do not much like to hear or think about judgment. Judgment calls to mind those churches whose preaching and teaching are full of threats, usually directed at individual sins or at people and groups whose opinions and values seem worthy of condemnation. To those turned off by it, judgment is dismissed as simply “judgmental.”

Human judgment is inherently risky and requires of us a good deal of modesty. Our judgments of others may be wrong, even unjust. Nevertheless, it is possible to go too far in backing away from biblical themes of judgment. God’s judgment, after all, is not subject to the same fallibility as human judgments. In fact, if God does not judge, then there is no hope at all that there will ever be ultimate justice. Justice is the very heart of the Christian hope: it is what the reign (kingdom) of God is about.

God’s reign is manifest here and there, now and then, in our own time, usually unplanned and often unexpected. The biblical promise is that God’s rule will ultimately fill the whole earth. Among other powerful images of a repaired creation, the prophet pictures swords beaten into plowshares (Isa. 2:4) and in Isaiah 65, which strings together a whole series of such images, the wolf and the lamb lying down

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

Theological Perspective

This picture of God as judge over all the earth and its rebellious powers, and the introduction of the figure of “one like a human being” as king, present a strong image of God’s ultimate sovereignty. The language and imagery represent the furthest reaches of human expression to describe and depict God’s greatness, decisive authority, and supremacy.

The figure of “one like a human being” is ambiguous, due to two Greek versions of Daniel. The Septuagint portrays an angelic figure coming from the heavenly realm to rule the world. An alternate Greek translation suggests a human being who rises from the earth to the heavens. “Son of Man” is ambiguous in Jewish tradition, an ambiguity also associated with Jesus’ use of the term (Matt. 10:23; 16:27–28; Mark 8:38; 13:26). In any case, the emphasis is on the figure’s role in “glory and kingship,” and the message is that “all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (v. 14).

The theological dimensions of these texts are expressions of the unsurpassed authority of the God whose power is all-encompassing. Two emphases can be made.

Judgment Is Certain. The visions of the four beasts, regardless of any identities or historical manifestations they may represent, portray the fate of any world kingdom ultimately judged by God. Their animal representations give way to the figure of “the Ancient One” and the “one like a human being.” The world is like a troubled sea with empires rising and falling (vv. 2–3), in all their cruelties and tyrannies. Every nation finds itself placed before a throne and Ancient One—God (cf. Ps. 90:2)—with descriptions of God’s clothing and hair, throne, and fire, all indicating God’s holiness, justice, and judgment (cf. Ps. 97:3–5; Isa. 10:17; 33:14). God is surrounded by the thousands who attend the royal presence. Then “the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened” (v. 10; see Isa. 65:6; Mal. 3:16).

The overarching theological point here is that all human empires or governments or institutions are ultimately judged by God. All human structures are “provisional” in that they will pass away. Their actions are important, but they face the ultimate standard of God’s judgment, the contours of which are presented throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. Despite apparent “power” and the oppressive nature of regimes, there will come a certain day of judgment when all actions are assessed. Those who work for justice, peace, and liberation anticipate

Pastoral Perspective

There is a Hasidic tale in which the old master asks his students, “How can we know when the darkness is leaving and the dawn is coming?” One student says, “When we see a tree in the distance and know that it is an oak and not a juniper.” Another says, “When we can see an animal and know that it is a fox and not a wolf.” The old master says, “No, we know the darkness is leaving and the dawn is coming when we see another person and know he is our brother or she is our sister. Otherwise, no matter the hour, it is still dark.”

Martin Buber, with his luminous vision for human-divine love, makes a wonderful companion for the book of Daniel. A quotation attributed to Martin Buber says: “A person cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human. To become human, is what this individual person has been created for.”

Every preacher can think of people who by their humanity have enlarged the pool of wisdom and love in the world. The Christian preacher’s task is to invite all to see that the wonder and power we find in extraordinary persons is possible in ordinary persons. Martin Buber is also credited with writing, “Every person born into the world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique.” How does this insight change our perception of what it means to be “only human”?

A little-known human being who formed the souls of generations without many people ever knowing his name is an eighth-century monk named Eadfrith. Eadfrith was the creator of the magnificent Lindisfarne Gospels.¹ His illuminated pages are spectacular. That this is the work of a human being who lived on a barren island in the middle of nowhere is nothing short of miraculous. Eadfrith’s work was meant to help other human beings picture and experience the joy of being creatures in God’s creation. At the heart of Eadfrith’s work is the story of Jesus Christ, centered on the pattern of the cross. For each evangelist, he had pages of crosses within crosses, because the cross is at the heart of the human story. Eadfrith’s vision, like Daniel’s vision, reached beyond time and space, into the swirling, spiraling, infinite reaches of the Divine, and joined these abstractions with human imagination. Like the book of Daniel, Eadfrith’s work was handed down in a living community of faith. Like Daniel’s visions, the Lindisfarne Gospels inspire those who experience

1. For more information about Eadfrith, see <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/lindisfarne.html>; <http://www.lindisfarne.org.uk/gospels/>.

*Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14***Exegetical Perspective**

In answer to this question, the writer of Daniel 7 uses apocalyptic imagery to depict the workings of the heavenly sphere, a vision typically unavailable to humans. The reader catches a glimpse of the heavenly courtroom, complete with jurors made up of God’s angelic council (7:10d), books or scrolls that contain records of past actions (see Pss. 40:7; 56:8; Mal. 3:16) and/or future judgments (Ps. 69:28), and a judge who is none other than the God of Israel. In this depiction of God, the white hair and robes evoke the ancient Canaanite traditions of the god El, whose long gray beard was a mark of wisdom as well as antiquity.¹ Daniel 7 marks a significant contrast by describing God’s hair as *white*, not gray. White is the color of justice, purity, and righteous leadership (see Zech. 3:1–5; Isa. 1:16–18). Thus the God of Israel brings not only antiquity and wisdom but also righteousness to bear in the divine response to foreign rule.

It is useful to notice the description of the foreign empires over which God renders judgment. In the prose verses leading up to today’s passage, the writer provides a stark contrast between the righteousness of God and the voracious, brutal, and self-deifying power of foreign empires. Using all the symbols of predatory power at his disposal, the writer depicts these empires as four beasts rising up from chaotic waters (vv. 2–8). The first beast, a lion with wings, is the Neo-Babylonian Empire (which destroyed Judah in 586 BCE); then there is the Median Empire, shown as a bear devouring flesh, followed by the Persian Empire (which ruled Judah 538–332 BCE), depicted as a grotesque leopard with four heads and four wings. The fourth beast, a symbol of the Greek Empire (which dominated Judah after 332 BCE) is the worst and is akin to the water dragon Leviathan (Ps. 74:14). It has ten horns (rulers) plus a “little horn” with a mouth that speaks blasphemies against God (v. 8), a reference to Antiochus IV. All of these empires would claim sovereignty over Judah during its long history. Only one throne in the heavenly court is occupied, the one belonging to the Ancient of Days, who presides over the judgment of these unrighteous and brutal forces.

One Like a Human Being. Unlike the beastly empires of human rulers, God does not hoard power stingily. In the second portion of the passage, the writer describes a mysterious turn of events in

1. For more information, see Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

Homiletical Perspective

together (Isa. 65:25). “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17).

It may be that those of us who have never deeply experienced injustice find it hard not to believe that the world needs only a little love and a little imaginative tweaking to straighten everything out. If we have not been personally burned with an injustice, we should not have to look too far to find someone who has, either someone within our circle of acquaintance or someone whose voice we encounter from a distance. For many, many people, the world has not been a gentle place. Whether stemming from human cruelty and insensitivity or from the capriciousness of nature—whether genocide, warfare, terrorist acts, desperate poverty, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, congenital diseases, crippling illnesses—hurtful injustices wound not just a few, but many. Social and political systems are susceptible to distortions that divide society into winners and losers and guarantee that winners keep on winning while losers keep on losing. In addition to that, we are all afraid of something or someone, and our fears lead us to accept the instituting of defensive measures that would otherwise be at odds with our personal sense of morality.

Injustice is deep enough and wide enough that only God can heal it. That is what biblical courtroom scenes are about, whether in the Old Testament or the New (see 1 Cor. 6:2–3; Rev. 4:4; 20:4). In the book of Daniel, the “Ancient One”—not an old man, but the God of the forebears, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—takes a seat on the throne of judgment. The Ancient One’s clothing and hair are white—signifying not age, but purity. The book of Daniel provides an image of “a stream of fire” issuing from the presence of the Ancient One. Fire signals both a process of purification and a moment of theophany—of divine revelation. The image introduces a solemn moment, as “the books were opened.” No wrong would remain hidden; no injustice would have gone unrecorded.

The drama of the scene is heightened when “one like a human being” comes with “the clouds of heaven” to be “presented” to the Ancient One (v. 13). “One like a human being” (Aramaic, *bar nasha*, “son of man”) stirs our attention, if only because Jesus borrowed the image to refer to himself. The figure is of one who appears human but, “coming with the clouds of heaven,” is clearly more than human. The Ancient One designates him to be the agent of judgment.

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14

Theological Perspective

this coming day. Those whose lives are oppressed by injustices and brutal force anticipate this day when the true God is the true judge.

Jesus Christ Rules. The “one like a human being” or “one like a son of man” is, as mentioned, an ambiguous figure, but the function of this figure is plain. He rules over all. With the authority of the Ancient One, he is the one who exercises rule, glory, and kingship. All peoples, nations, and languages will serve him. His rule is everlasting. It never passes away. His kingship is “indestructible” (v. 14 CEB).

From a Christian perspective, this figure anticipates the rule of Jesus Christ. Christ’s lordship is expressed throughout the New Testament as an affirmation of faith (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:13; Rev. 11:5). As Karl Barth put it, the description of this Coming One is “the preparatory form of what in the New Testament is called [Gk.] *parousia* in the pregnant technical sense, namely, the effective presence of Jesus Christ.”² The coming reign of Jesus Christ is taking shape now, already at work in the earth. As Barth also put it, “the Son of Man in Daniel is a personage equipped with all the marks of the almighty action of God, embodying the kingdom of God in its victorious advent into a shaken world. ‘Behold your king.’”³

For Christians, the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ is as certain as the day of judgment. It is customary to recognize the reign of Christ as “already, but not yet.” Christ’s effective presence is with us, now—in the midst of all difficulties and oppressions—and it is also “to come” in fullness. Daniel’s vision of this “everlasting dominion” that will “not pass away” and the kingship that “shall never be destroyed” are words of hope and consolation, even as the animal beasts of empires work their destruction in the earth. We are assured that as people who “serve him” (v. 14), the future is secure; our future is secure. We participate, even now, in this indestructible kingdom that will have no end.

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

them to greater awe of the Divine and amazement at the possibilities of being human.

It would be interesting to inquire of one’s gathered community as to what human stories are present there. The Holy Spirit yearns to be made new and passed on from generation to generation.

MARTHA STERNE

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (repr., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), IV/3.1:292.

3. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2:45.

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Exegetical Perspective

the heavenly council as a figure described only as “one like a human being” riding on the clouds of heaven comes forward. Another way to translate the phrase might be “one in human form.” That is, this figure resembles the humanlike features of the Ancient of Days, in contrast with the beastly figures of human empires. This figure is then given the power and honor that the beastly empires desired, but the one like a human being will preside over an eternal kingdom that will include all the peoples and kingdoms of the entire earth.

Some have argued that this figure is the archangel Michael, while others have argued that the figure represents all of the people of Israel. The point is that the “one like a human being” is aligned not only with God’s righteous rule, but also with the community of God’s faithful people. The symbolic nature of the passage undermines all attempts to reduce the imagery to one set of meanings. The symbolic nature of the passage is what gives it power. Symbols have the ability to undermine what only seems to be “real.” In this passage, the writer would have his readers understand that what seems real and true—that Antiochus IV and other empires dominate human history—is, in fact, false. When seen from an apocalyptic perspective, God is at work in human history guiding the cosmos toward justice, though God’s ways are not easily understood.

Daniel 7 has had an enormous influence on the NT. The Synoptic Gospels pick up the reference to “one like a human being” who comes with the clouds of heaven (Dan. 7:13) and shape it into a reference to Jesus, the “Son of Man,” who suffers now but will come in the future to usher in God’s eternal kingdom (e.g., Mark 8:38; 13:26; Matt. 13:24, 37; 16:28; 19:28; 24:30; Luke 12:8–9). Revelation borrows the language of Daniel to characterize Rome, to depict the Christian community’s own demonic and political enemies, and to celebrate the triumph of the Lamb who was slain.

AMY C. MERRILL WILLIS

Homiletical Perspective

We are loathe to associate Jesus with judgment, even though we say in the Apostles’ Creed, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” It is exactly here that judgment and good news (gospel) are joined. In the time of Daniel, divine judgment guaranteed that oppressive empires would be crushed and God’s people would prevail. Viewed through the lens of the gospel, Jesus is the executor of universal justice (“that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him,” v. 14). That is good news, for one thing, because the one designated to execute the divine justice is One who walked in our streets, healed the sick, and befriended sinners.

Divine justice is not about getting even. It is not about returning eye for eye, blow for blow, or hurt for hurt. In fact, it is beyond the capacity of human imagination to envision how injustice can be repaired at all. What the gospel offers is a promise that it shall be repaired, and the promise is rooted in the resurrection of the crucified one. A deep and ugly injustice has not been undone (the resurrected Lord still bears the marks of the nails) but has been transformed. It is not possible to explain a process that led from a cursed death to his glorious transfiguration, but only to celebrate it and trust it as a down payment on a new creation.

Judgment, then, from the point of view of the gospel, is the opposite of divine indifference. Judgment is, in fact, a form of grace. Judgment is God’s love at work. Its aim is not to destroy, but to restore the wounded, the broken—and to reconcile what, from a human point of view, seems irreconcilable. Judgment is a healing stroke. “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD; for he is coming, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness” (Ps. 96:12–13).

Daniel 7:14 is a doxology, quite appropriately, praising the executor of God’s eternal justice. “His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away.” In this world of contradictions, it is in his reign that we rest our hope.

RONALD P. BYARS

PROPER 29 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 20 AND NOVEMBER 26 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 93

¹The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
²your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.

³The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.

Theological Perspective

The majesty of God who reigns as king of the universe is the theme in Psalm 93. Like Psalm 47, this psalm celebrates God's sovereignty over the whole earth. Images from the creation story and a robust creation theology reinforce that God is Lord of all, as the psalm praises the incomparable One whom Israel worships in holiness.

The psalm praises God as king over the world (vv. 1–2), proclaims God's victory over forces of chaos and destruction, and ends with praise for God's laws and God's house. In a theological sense, we can trace a movement from the being or person of God, to God's ongoing action in sustaining of the world, to the provisions God makes for God's people in providing direction for life and for worship. John Calvin wrote: "The psalm commences with the celebration of the infinite glory of God. It is then declared that such is his faithfulness that he never deceives his own people, who, embracing his promises, wait with tranquil minds for their salvation amidst all the tempests and agitations of the world."¹

The Majesty of God (vv. 1–2). The psalmist uses available royal imagery to indicate God's supremacy and greatness. The description of God as "king,"

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, Calvin Translation Society, *Commentary on Psalm 93*.

Pastoral Perspective

The image of God robed in majesty and girded with strength, who establishes a world that shall never be moved, works well for those for whom the world "as it is" works. This was certainly the image of God that, for instance, the Tudor line of English royalty preferred. When a king reads Scripture, that king probably has turned down the corners of the pages with Psalm 93 and the other royalty psalms. The psalms are attributed to a king (David), who was chosen by God to reign as king over God's people. The purpose of such an earthly kingdom was that all things would be ordered and secure.

The Tudor era offers an interesting evolution in the concept of kingliness. Henry VIII did not identify himself as God overtly, but he declared himself the Supreme Defender of the Church and in effect he played god with the church. The chaotic later years of Henry's rule saw the execution of several wives and challenges to the church's policy regarding marriage and divorce. Some wondrous gifts came out of Henry's kingship. Through his adoption of Protestantism, people were able to pray in their own language, and the people could take Communion, but Henry certainly did not establish heaven on earth.

Elizabeth I became queen not long after Henry's death, and she was a ruler who attempted to reorient

Psalm 93

⁴More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!

⁵Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house,
O LORD, forevermore.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 93 belongs to the category of psalms called hymns of praise (see also Pss. 145–150). More specifically, it is an enthronement psalm celebrating the Lord's power as sovereign of the world (see also Pss. 47; 95–99). As a hymn, the psalm is first-order discourse; that is, it is the language of worship and encounter with God, not the language of intellectual analysis. Nevertheless, in five compact and well-crafted lines of poetry, this hymn voices deep and careful thinking about the God of Israel.

No Game of Thrones. The psalm opens by declaring God's kingship, majesty, and strength (vv. 1–2). These are not just abstract attributes of the Deity. The psalmist uses metaphor to render them as concretely as possible. Majesty is God's royal robe; strength is the Lord's regal garment. Such language conjures ancient and familiar images of human rulers cloaked in the special capes and robes of office. Yet the psalmist moves beyond a simple comparison between God and human leaders when he proclaims that "God has established the world; it shall never be moved" (v. 1ef).

Ancient Israel was acutely aware of the failures, limitations, and tyrannies of human monarchs. Unlike human kings and queens who must constantly shore up power and support, often through exploitative and

Homiletical Perspective

When we try to speak of holy things, and especially of the Holy One, human language always falls short. It is not possible that God is simply one more phenomenon among all the finite phenomena that, taken together, make up our world. In some crucial sense, God is both different from and apart from anything or anyone in human experience. In short, it is simply impossible that we should ever be able to say anything about God except indirectly, making use of the whole flexible repertoire of human language, including poetic speech with its power to form similes and metaphors. A problem is that similes and metaphors can easily say too much, or too little. So it is possible to critique as inadequate anything at all that someone dares to say about God.

The amazing thing about human language is that, even when it is inadequate, it can communicate effectively nevertheless. God is not a royal monarch, of course, and cannot be blamed for any of the faults of human rulers. However, when the psalm says, "The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty," it rings true for people of faith. The God who has, at divine initiative, been revealed to Israel's faith is, in some sense, "king." Not an arbitrary ruler. Not one who is indifferent to any, or partial to some. Not a domineering figure who commands and controls by the exercise of sheer force. No. None of these.

Psalm 93

Theological Perspective

“robed,” “girded,” sitting on a “throne” uses terms that point to the highest position. All these images connote power and majesty, a greatness expressed explicitly in God’s establishing of the world that “shall never be moved.” God’s world is set firmly in place and will not be shaken (CEB; cf. Ps. 104:5–9). In short, “there is no power, human or otherwise, which can threaten the Lord’s sovereignty over the world.”²

God’s power first was expressed at the time of creation. The psalmist acknowledges that God created the world and established its stability forevermore. This is an astounding statement. No human power could do this, and no cosmic forces could convene on their own to bring forth a created earth that is established “from of old.” The creations can only be the action of God, the king and Lord of the universe, who is “everlasting.”

Creation itself reflects the majesty (v. 1) and greatness of God. Today, in the midst of all forms of scientific theories and religious arguments for how the earth and the solar system came to be, we may lose the simple sense of God’s great majesty in creation. Some years ago there was the story of a child who was gazing at the stars with her parent. The parent was expressing marvel at the whole starry heaven. Looking up, the child asked, “Which ones did we put up there?” Because of the impressive space program and multiplicity of satellites orbiting the earth, it was natural for the child to inquire about what humans have done to put stars in the sky! As people of faith, we affirm that the everlasting One is behind it all. In creation, God—by whatever means—set the whole creation firmly in place. Despite all the movements and activities of particles and people throughout the solar system, this creation is held secure, so that “it shall never be moved.” God’s greatness guarantees that, and the psalmist praises God for it (v. 1).

The Might of God (vv. 3–4). The same God who created the world also sustains the world and keeps it secure. The psalmist references the floods that have “lifted up their voice” and their “roaring.” These evocative images harken back to God’s power over the primeval chaos through God’s creative word (Gen. 1). Now, despite the “thunders of mighty waters” and the “waves of the sea,” God’s ongoing might and power continue to keep the established world enduring. As Christoph Barth put it, “God has given security to the world, so that

² Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 815.

Pastoral Perspective

a shaken world. She was so disturbed by the violence and hatred, particularly the burning at the stake of hundreds of faithful people for their religious beliefs, that she stated as church policy the oneness of Christ. She considered the religious disputes as trifles compared to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Unlike her father, Henry VIII, who viewed his personal needs in tandem with God’s will, Elizabeth’s prayers were directed toward the needs of her kingdom. For Elizabeth a stable monarchy on earth reflected the divine kingdom and helped hold back the flood waters of chaos and keep all things ordered and secure.

Mary, mother of Jesus, was Queen Elizabeth’s opposite in many ways. “The world as it is” did not work well for people of her social and economic status. She was a lowly peasant, but she could affirm that God had looked upon her with favor, and that all generations would call her “blessed” (Luke 1:48). Her son Jesus did not perpetuate the same sort of “generations” as earthly monarchs, but established a heavenly kingdom, in which the mighty are cast down from their thrones and the hungry are filled (Luke 1:52–53). From the lowliest of origins came a king worthy of being “robed in majesty” (Ps. 93:1) and receiving glory and honor (Rev. 4:11).

Psalm 93 and the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) are holy companions. The Magnificat fills out the vision of ideal monarchy, as it details the kingdom of heaven that God would establish through Jesus. What is good for the poor, the sick, the powerless, the lonely, and the little ones will be good and life giving for all.

We are always moving through cycles of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Psalm 93 offers a worldview oriented to peace, prosperity, stability, and power over chaos. To discuss how that worldview resonates or does not resonate in people’s lives at any given time could be useful. To know that when a stable world ends, a new world is beginning, and to acknowledge that the end of such stability is often where faith starts, is a valuable lesson for congregations.

MARTHA STERNE

Psalm 93

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violent means (see 1 Sam. 8:10–18), God’s kingship is rooted in God’s own creation of the world. The ability to bring order out of chaos, to create the natural world *and* a social order (see Gen. 1–2) gives evidence of an enduring power that is rooted in God’s goodness and commitment to life. Moreover, this reference to God’s creative work affirms the dependability of the world. Under divine providence, the earth will endure as a place where the natural environment flourishes (see Ps. 104) and where human society thrives without fear of the destructive forces of chaos (see Gen. 8:21–22).

The stable and enduring nature of the world is testimony that God’s governance is dependable. This was not a foregone conclusion in the psalmist’s world (nor is it in ours). Ancient Israel was familiar with the older traditions of Canaan and Mesopotamia, in which younger gods violently challenge, kill, or depose a decrepit or immoral older god. In these stories of generational conflict among the deities, violence occurs simultaneously with the creation of the world, calling into question the fundamental goodness of the world. Yet the psalmist rejects such violent images in this hymn and affirms instead that there is just one throne and one everlasting God, “established from of old,” from before creation (v. 2b). For the biblical writers, God’s rule is not subject to whimsy or rash decisions, and neither is God subject to disruptive challenges from other forces.

Roaring Waters. In the first two verses, the psalmist draws upon humanistic images to understand God’s reign, but in the next part of the psalm the writer turns to nonhumanistic imagery to capture a different aspect of God’s majesty. In verses 3–4 the psalmist gives us the roaring of the floods, the thundering of mighty waves, and the pounding of the breakers. The NRSV translation captures the staircase parallelism of the Hebrew poetry, a technique that repeats the language of the previous lines but adds a new element to expand the meaning with each repetition:

The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
The floods have lifted up their voice;
The floods lift up their roaring. (v. 3)

The parallelism conveys an ever-intensifying and expanding experience of power that the religious imagination can see and hear. In these verses, God is like these powerful waters, but as in verses 1–2 God surpasses the concrete image. God is more majestic; God is higher and louder than the waves.

To understand the psalmist’s choice of language, it is necessary to return to the ancient literature

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Nevertheless, in faith, those who trust God love and honor God as “king,” recognizing that “king” is only one simile among many.

It is surely natural that we borrow images from human experience to try to say something true about God, because it is the only experience we have. It should not be surprising, then, that the psalmist and others turned to the language of a royal court to speak of the Holy One. There is a sense in which, when we catch a glimpse of God, it becomes instinctive for us to want to bow, to bend the knee, to assume some posture of awe, gratitude, and humility.

“The LORD,” says the psalmist, “is girded with strength” (v. 1b)—but not the kind of strength that delights in either intimidating or diminishing us. Rather, it is the kind of strength that “established the world” (v. 1c), and keeps it from falling into chaos. It is a strength that God manifests for our sake—strength enough to overcome formidable opposing forces that threaten to overcome us or undermine us. Just to think of this God, from whom all things come, is to evoke in us an impulse to praise. Psalm 93, then, is basically doxological. It makes use of heightened language, the kind that calls out to be sung rather than said. “Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting” (v. 2).

The ancient Hebrews were in awe of the power of the sea, which must be equally true for anyone who has witnessed that power. Sebastian Junger’s true story *The Perfect Storm* evokes the awesome power of wind and water so effectively that it is difficult ever again to imagine being sentimental about a tranquil blue sea. It is no wonder, then, that when Israel contemplated the creation of the world, they pictured the opposite of the created order in terms of “a formless void,” as darkness covering “the face of the deep,” with the *ruach* (wind, or spirit) of God sweeping “over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2).

“The floods have lifted up, O LORD; . . . the floods lift up their roaring” (v. 3a, c). The void, the darkness, the deep, the waters represent the chaos that not only preceded the creation but still threatens it. If you have ever hunkered down inside your house trying to wait out a hurricane, listening to the sound of the wind that resembles nothing quite so much as some huge monster first inhaling, then—after a terrible pause—exhaling, in one long breath after another, you may have some indelible sense of what it might feel like to feel chaos pressing down, threatening all ordered life. The psalmist declares, “More majestic than the thunders of

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even the threatening waters of the flood cannot overwhelm it.”³ For God is more majestic than the mighty waters; God is “majestic on high” (v. 4). If we can be awed by floods and rivers and oceans, how much more should we be awed by the greatness and might of the creator God?

All this points theologically to God’s providence in sustaining and maintaining creation. The psalmist identifies what we humans often take for granted: the ongoing, sustaining power of God in maintaining the universe. Without the God whose creative power upholds the world, all would fall back into chaos, and the universe would collapse. No wonder praise is due for the majestic might of God, the creator and sustainer!

The Provisions of God (v. 5). The great creating and sustaining God also provides for God’s people. The psalmist praises God’s “decrees” (laws) as being “very sure.” God’s laws apply always; they will not deceive or lead us astray. They are trustworthy. God’s “house” is holy because God dwells there. God has provided a place of worship so that the majesty of God can be praised and enjoyed forevermore.

In addition to sustaining the universe, God sustains us as the people of God by giving us what we need, which includes guidance. The Reformed theological tradition regards the law of God positively, as an expression of God’s will, how God wants us to live. We need this guidance to give shape and direction to our Christian lives. The worship of God—not confined to any one “house”—can happen anywhere in God’s universe. The “house of God” meant the presence of God for the Israelites. It is also true for us. Anywhere we are—our God is present there.

DONALD K. MCKIM

3. Christoph Barth, *God with Us: A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 243.

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of Mesopotamia and Canaan that informs biblical thinking. Throughout the Old Testament one encounters the language of mighty waters, an ancient symbol of chaos and all that is inimical to life and order. In ancient Mesopotamian and Canaanite stories, these waters are sentient and often threaten the gods, but in the biblical tradition, the waters are not a threat to the Lord; the Lord's power is even greater (Gen. 1:1–2). In Psalm 93, they positively illuminate the Lord's power (see also Pss. 89; 74).

This portion of the psalm affirms that God's majesty is something like those waters; it is not tame and not subject to human control. If God's rule is dependable and God's world is enduring in verses 1–2, the psalmist affirms in verses 3–4 that God's power is also dynamic, even to the point of being threatening to the human who fails to appreciate its sheer force. Much as the turbulent tides of the oceans can be beautiful, glorious, *and* life threatening, so God's power cannot be domesticated to suit human needs.

Holding It All Together. So how is one to hold together these seemingly contradictory views of God's majesty—the stability of the ancient monarch and the fierce power of untamed force? The Old Testament does not usually see such differences as a problem. In fact, the Old Testament typically delights in presenting diverging voices and views of any given situation. In this case, however, the psalmist brings God's dependable governance and God's untamed power in creative tension by invoking God's decrees and the holiness of God's temple (“your house”) in verse 5.

While the unrestrained majesty of God is too mighty for humans to withstand, the Torah attests that divine rule over the world involves covenant relationships between God and God's creatures. The decrees (Exod. 20–24) of this covenantal bond order society for the good of its inhabitants. The psalmist affirms that these decrees are sure; that is, God will honor God's covenant commitments. At the same time, the psalmist affirms the holiness of God's temple, or “the wholly other” of God's own majestic presence within the temple. As part of the world, yet set apart from the ordinary, the temple is the place where God's pure and untamed power can reside in such a way that humans may approach it in worship and offer their psalms of praise.

AMY C. MERRILL WILLIS

Homiletical Perspective

mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea . . . is the LORD!” (v. 4).

In most churches, our practice of baptism is sparing enough with water that it would be very difficult to perceive any threat to life in it. Yet baptism is not just about washing, or just about new life. The baptismal waters, like the waters that drowned the earth in Noah's time and the waters of the Red Sea that threatened the Hebrew people as they fled Pharaoh's army, represent the possibility of death. We are always poised between death and life, and the ways that lead to death are surprisingly appealing, quite seductive. The apostle Paul uses death as a metaphor for sin, and sin is more than the description of a few peccadilloes now and then, but rather a pervasive power that clouds our vision and prevents us from seriously seeing and responding to the interests of others and the interests of the natural world and certainly from being responsive to God. To pursue our own interests, without being attentive to the interests of others or to our God, leads to all sorts of immorality, from the personal to the political.

God's power is at work in our baptism, both to drown the self that can so easily use and exploit other selves, and to buoy us up from the chaos of death and toward the light. The majesty of God is visible to the discerning eye in the sacrament of baptism, at work in our lives to do for us what God does for the whole creation: drown the disorder, the chaos, the storms, the anti-life, in order that we can take a deep breath (of the Spirit) and absorb the genuine goodness of the creation.

The human monarch's laws and rules, enforced by the sword, incite resentment and even rebellion. “Your decrees,” O God, “are very sure” (v. 5a).

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