

LITURGY OF THE PASSION

Luke 23:1–49

¹Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ²They began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” ³Then Pilate asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He answered, “You say so.” ⁴Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” ⁵But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

⁶When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷And when he learned that he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. ¹²That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

¹³Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”

¹⁸Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” ¹⁹(This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; ²¹but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” ²²A third time he said to them, “Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” ²³But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. ²⁴So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. ²⁵He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

Theological Perspective

At least three major theological themes emerge from the shorter alternative reading at the Liturgy of the Passion. Luke is particularly interested in (a) the inevitability of Jesus’ death as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy; (b) Jesus’ messianic nature and what is revealed about him in his conflict with Roman and Jewish authorities; and (c) the promise of deliverance fulfilled in Jesus’ death at Calvary.

Luke is convinced that Jesus’ death is part of a cosmic drama or divine plan with the story

Pastoral Perspective

Against the murmur of Passover crowds amassing in the Jerusalem streets outside, the indignant voices of the religious authorities echoed sharply inside Pilate’s praetorium. Even as the litany of allegations mounted against him, Jesus of Nazareth remained curiously silent, answering each charge indirectly or not at all. Why would a man accused of religious blasphemy and political insurrection not defend himself, since the stakes were literally life or death? As N. T. Wright has pointed out, the Romans knew

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²⁶As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³²Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

⁴⁴It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” ⁴⁸And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. ⁴⁹But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Exegetical Perspective

The scene opens in the middle of an outrage. The chapter division and the lectionary assignment divide the passage so that the reading begins just as the assembly of religious leaders reacts to Jesus’ answers to their questions, forming part of a longer narrative about Jesus’ arrest and trial. One way to summarize the essence of this long, complex pericope is to focus on the uses of power within it.

Jesus appears the helpless victim of the physical and emotional power of the assembly. The assembly

Homiletical Perspective

The story of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, and death is familiar to Christian worshipers through storytelling that harmonizes (or even homogenizes) the four Gospels. Although dismissed by the church, Tatian’s *Diatessaron* was enormously popular among early Christians. Preparing a Gospel commentary from his preaching, John Calvin worked with a harmony. Hollywood films compress the diverse stories into one, and Christian worship has provided Good Friday worship by collecting the seven words from the cross.

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determined by God. Humans are free to accept or reject God's gift of salvation, but Luke's recounting of the events at Calvary shows that God can bring victory even from the ultimate rejection, as even one of those who crucified Jesus gave testimony to the revelation of Jesus' identity in his death: "When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent'" (v. 47).

Luke grasps any and every opportunity to demonstrate that what occurs in Jesus' life and ministry is the fulfillment of prophetic foresight. Luke is the only Gospel to recount the story of the trial before Herod Antipas, possibly recalling Psalm 2:2: "The kings of the earth . . . and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed." Jesus' silence in the face of outrageous accusations recalls the Servant of Isaiah 53 who "opened not his mouth." Along with this passage, Luke, in common with the other three Gospels, references Psalms 22 and 69 with the division of Jesus' clothes (v. 34), the scoffing (v. 35f.), and the offering of vinegar to drink (v. 36). The signs and portents of the eclipse and the veil of the temple being torn in two were the kind of things associated with great acts of God in general and with the Day of the Lord in particular (Amos 8:9; Joel 3:15).

The idea of God's having a plan raises questions of human freedom and predestination in general (once famously described as "a mysterious method of express delivery by which a package arrives before it has in fact been shipped") and leads to further questions about God's intent with respect to the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus in particular. The language of God's plan, divine intention, predestination, and the like becomes necessarily an incomplete and inadequate attempt to affirm the absolute freedom of God while also articulating our own experience. Seen in this light, Luke's sense that Jesus is a fulfillment of prophecy becomes an affirmation of trust in God's providential love more than a statement of historical fact.

Luke has an apologetic purpose in confirming Jesus' innocence in the testimony of the centurion, as that is part of what Luke understands is important to Jesus' being called Messiah. In the second of Jesus' trials, this time before Pontius Pilate, Jesus is accused of being precisely the kind of Messiah that he has declined to be, possibly explaining why his own people could be incited to call for his death. He is not accused of blasphemy here before a Roman court. Instead he is charged with perverting the nation, inciting disaffection or rebellion through refusing to pay taxes to Caesar and, finally, claiming to be an alternative political power, a king (v. 2). Luke's

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how to kill people, and rebel kings were sent to a particularly horrific death. Still, as the authorities circled like birds of prey, Jesus remained impassive. Why did Jesus the healer not miraculously transform the hearts before him, the way he did countless times in the Galilean countryside? Why did Jesus the preacher not stand tall at this precipitous moment and speak truth to power? Why did Jesus the prophet not condemn his adversaries with righteous zeal, or Jesus the rabbi confound his foes with one of his adroitly articulated parables? Of all things, Jesus, the Word incarnate, was . . . speechless.

The intensely famous story of Jesus' trial, sentencing, and crucifixion offers a wealth of material for a Good Friday preacher, although the forty-nine verses of today's Luke 23 lection make selecting a manageable focus a priority. Examining the events through the eyes of one or more of the participants might uncover a fresh experience of Christ's passion because of the diversity of perspectives present. One might explore the disassociated ambiguity of Pilate, the cruel voyeurism of Herod, the survivor's guilt of Barabbas, the shocked awe of the Roman centurion, or the heart-wrenching tenderness of one of the crucified criminals.

What of the Jewish priests and scribes? That they are branded forever as the murders of Love itself creates an opportunity for modern preachers to confront the horrors of anti-Semitism perpetuated through the ages. The atrocity committed by the religious authorities against Jesus was resolutely not ethnic in origin, but sadly commonplace enough whenever enforcers of the status quo are faced with the threat of change or insurgency.

Of course, central among the large group of people present on that cataclysmic day was Jesus himself. What was he thinking in his final hours? What was he feeling? Was Jesus frightened, as in the Garden of Gethsemane? Was he enraged, as when he overturned the money changers' tables in the temple? We are offered little insight, because of Christ's silence. Again the question looms: why did he not speak? On trial for his very life, the expected response of Jesus would have been either eloquent self-defense or proclamations of messianic mission, but once again Jesus upended things by choosing a third way. He refused to give them the rope they sought to hang him. By not answering his prosecutors, Jesus forced them to own their own actions, which is ironically engagement through nonengagement. We might see this as an echo of a pivotal theme throughout the Gospels, one crystallized in Mark 8:27–29, when

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“brought” Jesus to Pilate (v. 1; see also 22:66), so that Jesus does not control even his movement. At various points in the narrative, the crowd or some other power forces him to go where they want him. The assembly represents the religious authority of the Sanhedrin, while Pilate represents political authority. One can discern the cowardice and weakness of the power wielded by the authorities in their indecisiveness. Each authority tries to pass Jesus along to someone else. The cruelty and bullying of Herod and his soldiers demonstrates their abuse of power. Pilate, who does not answer to any other figure in the narrative, still seems caught in a web of power from which he cannot extricate himself. He tries to find a compromise, with the release of Barabbas, but the crowd exerts power over Pilate through an intimidating and unrelenting show of mob force. The ultimate manifestation of power and control, of course, comes at the crucifixion. The forces arrayed against Jesus control his body and even his life. The scoffing and sarcasm of the people and leaders exert the power of verbal abuse. The power used against Jesus exemplifies the attempt to control the threat that Jesus represents to the political and religious power structure.

Other characters in the passage give the reader insight into power dynamics. The authorities have imprisoned Barabbas for insurrection. His imprisonment represents the power to control one who disrupts the social order. His act of insurrection sought to usurp power from official sources. The crowd forces Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross, an unfair burden to relieve themselves of the physical exertion. The women who wail and beat their breasts demonstrate the lamentation caused by a lack of power. Their expression of emotion releases their anguish over their inability to affect the course of events.

In contrast to the abuses of power and distortions of the purposes of power in the above examples, Jesus demonstrates redemptive power. When the crowds or authority figures use the corrupt power of accusations and calumny, Jesus responds with truth (“You say so,” in v. 3) or silence (v. 9). Jesus displays the power of integrity.

Contemporary readers may find the enigmatic nature of verse 34 frustrating. The text-critical debate continues about the originality of the verse. Although the manuscript evidence remains murky, the verse fits Luke’s theology of forgiveness (24:47). If Luke intends for the reader to understand Jesus as one who forgave his tormentors, then Jesus wields the power of reconciliation. The power to forgive derives from the power to control one’s anger, hurt,

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In spite of this ancient and overwhelming tradition, for preachers, there is much to gain by calling attention to the particularities of the story told in each of the four Gospel traditions. Using his special source, Luke provides fascinating entries into the story.

Only Luke brings Herod back into the story, an encounter perhaps unforgettably set to music by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, focusing on Herod’s curiosity about this Galilean: Herod “had been wanting to see him for a long time . . . and was hoping to see him perform some sign” (v. 8). If Weber and Rice can make millions from the story, surely there is promising profit for a preacher who is willing to ask, “What do we *expect* to see?” or “What do we *need* to see?” in order to fulfill the curiosity about Jesus that brings us to worship on a Passion Sunday morning. What we need, of course, we cannot see, and it is not available for our inspection. It can only be heard: the Word of God summoning us to faith in spite of such unpromising appearances.

Luke surprises us by telling us that the presence of Jesus brings Herod and Pilate together. They “became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies” (v. 12). Preachers might suspect that focusing on this unexpected turn of events only evidences our contemporary concern for reconciliation, but Christian commentators have always been fascinated by this. Reflecting on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ described in Ephesians 2, Cyril of Jerusalem contemplates the bringing together of Herod and Pilate: “It is appropriate that he who was to restore peace between heaven and earth would first establish peace between the men who condemned him.”¹ In the midst of the turmoil of Passion Sunday, a moment of peace embraces even those who are so indifferent to Christ that they are willing to hand him over to the mob.

Jesus is led out to be crucified. Mark and Matthew mention Simon of Cyrene, while John insists that Jesus carried his own cross, but only Luke tells us “they laid the cross on [Simon of Cyrene], and made him carry it *behind* Jesus” (v. 26). Simon follows Jesus carrying the cross, thus becoming an icon of Christian discipleship. Luke’s vision is not that of an *imitatio Christi*; only Jesus is crucified. Simon follows the way Jesus has walked bearing the weight of the cross. Jesus going before him makes discipleship possible. To witness such a sight is torturous. The scene has all the elements of an irredeemable tragedy.

Once again, however, what is ultimately true is not available to our eyes. This is the problem—and

1. Quoted in François Bovon, *Luke 3*, Hermeneia Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 271.

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understanding of Jesus as Messiah was fulfillment of the prophetic expectation that a descendant of David would be declared the Lord's Anointed One (1 Sam. 16:6; 2 Sam. 7:14). Moreover, the Messiah would be the servant of Isaiah 40–66, which is referenced eight times in the Gospel (including 22:37). In spite of being tormented and killed, the innocent Servant would inaugurate the time of God's rule through some kind of vicarious suffering. This would be a new exodus and a deliverance of the people of God (see 9:31), with his innocence declared by the very powers that put him to death: Pilate, three times (vv. 4, 14, 22), and the centurion at the cross (v. 47), along with the thief who defends Jesus (v. 41).

So Luke's theology of the cross is bound up with the themes of his whole Gospel: the rescue and restoration of those who are broken and deemed outside of the possibility of God's love and the beginning of bringing about the fullness of that promise. Jesus came with a particular concern for those at the edges of society. There were shepherds at his birth and women prominent in the story of his death (v. 49). The reign of God had begun in Jesus, just as he told the disciples of John the Baptist: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk . . . the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22), but it is to be fulfilled for the faithful as "paradise" (23:43). Luke appears to be reflecting a late and far from universal Jewish belief that at death the righteous are granted an immediate restoration of primordial bliss, "paradise" being an ancient Persian word for garden, reflected in the story of the garden of Eden.

There is no implication in Luke that Jesus' suffering and death is in any way a substitute for the suffering and death of anyone else. Certainly the Servant of Isaiah appears to have a representative role in the life of Israel, and so is said to suffer vicariously for Israel, but Luke tells a story that is more about the integrity of Jesus, in accepting the inevitable consequence of his life and ministry and the sacrificial giving or offering of himself with equanimity to the fulfillment of divine purpose as a kind of representative human expressed as Son of God. Luke would be quite happy with the liturgical acclamation: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

Pastoral Perspective

Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" followed by, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

The question of Christ's identity, then and now, is posed to each of us to answer for ourselves. In this, Jesus avoids rote faith, forcing us to take responsibility, to decide, to claim our own place in God's reign. In this tense trail of this Lukan passage, Jesus refused to make things easy. Kill me or follow me, he seemed to be saying. Either way, I will not let you phone it in.

Christ's demand for personal engagement was not limited to his enemies. Another worthy trajectory to explore is Jesus' longest speech of this lectionary passage, when he encountered his followers on the agonizing trudge to Golgotha. He broke his silence to cry out, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (v. 28). Why was Jesus so unaccountably harsh in the face of the very natural grief of his loved ones? One possibility is that even here Jesus was underscoring engagement by giving his followers information they needed to gird themselves for what was soon to follow. It seems to hearken back to Matthew 20:22, when Jesus asked, "Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink?" and they replied, "Oh yes, we are able!" The cup of martyrdom did come to Christ's beloved, and the awfulness of this moment of weeping (v. 27) is so harrowing that a preacher might be tempted to rush past it.

Yet the depth of his pain might also be an authentic testament to profound beauty. Julian of Norwich saw a stunning vision of this Good Friday witness: "And all His disciples and all His true lovers suffered more pains that their own bodily dying, for I am certain, by my own experience, that the least of them loved the Savior so far above himself that it surpasses all that I can say."¹

This is the deepest level of engagement possible, and it testifies to a faith that is claimed and owned and lived into with a fidelity that can hold true even unto death. Jesus called it forth from his followers, and it galvanized a motley crew of clueless and feckless disciples to arise and create a movement beyond anything the world had ever seen. Christ's refusal to allow the ushering in of God's new kingdom to be controlled by religious or political interests is a potent reminder to us this Good Friday that Jesus will never conform to status quo expectations. Instead, Christ will always seek to push us to go beyond our own limited imaginations of what is possible when we live as his coconspirators.

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1. Julian of Norwich, *A Lesson of Love: The Revelations of Julian of Norwich*, trans. Father John-Julian, OJN (New York: Writers Club Press, 2003), 59.

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and desire for revenge. Either Luke himself or a later scribe proclaimed the redemptive power of offering forgiveness, in the most difficult, painful, and demeaning of situations, to the least deserving.

The vignette about the two criminals (vv. 32–43) offers a textually undisputed example of Jesus' true power, as Jesus reveals the power to open Paradise (v. 43). This cryptic reference provides more imagery than it does clarity about resurrection existence. Paradise alludes to the garden of Eden, symbolizing innocence and renewal. Paul uses the term to refer to a place where a person can ascend and then return to earthly life (2 Cor. 12:4). Exactly what Jesus promises the criminal must remain undefined, but Jesus provides access for the man to a good, desirable place, over which Jesus has authority, and that enables the man to be in Jesus' presence beyond death.

At the exact point of Jesus' death, when he would have appeared to observers as the most vulnerable and least powerful, he shows the power of trust and relinquishment. Jesus commends his "spirit" or his life into God's hands. Luke portrays Jesus' death quite differently than Mark, who has Jesus utter a cry of abandonment. In the face of pain, abuse, and impending death, Luke's Jesus continues to trust in God. This power of trust influences the centurion, the Roman soldier, who declares Jesus' innocence.

With these narrative presentations of power, Luke critiques the typical understanding of power. People and political entities seek the kind of power that controls and protects. The defensiveness of the crowds, the indecisiveness of Pilate, and the cruelty of the soldiers suggest that power becomes corrupt in the hands of those who lack the personal integrity to wield it. Jesus exercises the healing power of forgiveness and the eschatological power of access to Paradise. Such power may not seem obvious; so one must trust in God in order to seek and rely on such power. The passage provides affirmation to those who seek only the power of redemption and reassurance to those who have access only to those kinds of power.

The lectionary committee recommends this pericope for Palm/Passion Sunday, giving the preacher the opportunity and obligation to interpret power in ways that sound alien to Western ears. Do we seek and exercise power with integrity, and not only for control and security? Do we trust God with the power of life and death and with our ultimate fate? Do we seek the power of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing? Can we follow a crucified Savior, who wielded eschatological power?

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

finally the failure—of films, most recently the painstakingly researched and vividly depicted *The Passion of Christ*: what may be shown on the screen and made available to our eyes is not the full truth. There is more happening than may be visualized. The drama is hidden and can only be hinted in a few remarkable words, thus providing a place for the preacher to speak of deep meanings.

The preacher must speak above a clamor. The crucifixion is noisy. The leaders scoff, the soldiers mock, and even one of the crucified criminals derides Jesus, but their message is amazingly consistent: "Save yourself!" (v. 37). Save yourself! Demonstrate salvation visibly so there is no possibility of ignoring it, no way for us to doubt, and therefore no risk. Save yourself! That is precisely what Jesus refuses to do, and that is what God refuses to do on Passion Sunday. The story offers no guarantees, only itself in its strange, frightening starkness. Worshipers used to the pretty palms and children singing on Palm Sunday may leave Passion Sunday stunned by the unrelenting realism of Luke's narrative. Luke refuses to provide something pretty to see, and he will not make the story simple.

Those who come to faith, or anything like faith, do so in spite of what they see and the circumstances surrounding them. The inscription atop the cross specifies the charges against an executed miscreant. Surely the title "The King of the Jews," well attested by the Gospels, is meant ironically. One of the criminals crucified with Jesus somehow senses the enigma beyond the irony and asks "the King" for some place in his "kingdom." Is this hopeless criminal grasping at straws when there is nothing left to lose, or does he see beyond what reasonably can be seen to a truth greater still? Whatever the man's motives, his plea is enough for the dying regent. Jesus responds generously, extravagantly, upsetting proper eschatologies and expectations regarding life beyond death: "Today" (not at the end of time) "you will be with me in Paradise." This is an unusual phrasing, but we hear Luke's emphasis on "with me!" As the criminal dies with Jesus, so also he will be with Jesus in a place of serene fulfillment.

"When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God." What has he seen? Others despair and keep their distance. The centurion draws near to proclaim Jesus' righteousness. Luke has told of God's purposes enacted in Jesus' life, and now Luke assures us of God's purpose in his death. The hidden truth of the death of Jesus cannot be seen, but it can be spoken, thus confirming the need for a preacher to bear witness at Golgotha so that we, with the centurion, may praise God.

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RESURRECTION OF THE LORD

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Theological Perspective

In this lection Paul is continuing an argument about the general resurrection of the dead. Apparently most people in Corinth had little or no problem trusting in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but were decidedly undecided about the idea of their own being raised by God's grace. For Paul, the two ideas are inextricably bound. If Christ was raised, and Christ alone, then "we are of all people most to be pitied" (v. 19). As he makes his argument, Paul is concerned with the trajectory of history; the notion of "first fruits" as an image of representative sanctification (vv. 20 and 23); the fundamental ordering of the universe toward the purposes of God (v. 23); and the final manifestation of God's victory over death (v. 26) in a mighty battle inaugurating the kingdom "handed over to God the Father" (v. 24), a vision of the unity of all things in God.

Paul has an understanding of history as a grand God-governed scheme with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the pivotal events in the arc of time. In the beginning, after God created the heavens and the earth and, within the earth, a paradise, a garden as a dwelling place for humanity, Adam's disobedience brought about the reality of death. Jesus, the Messiah, called Christ by Paul, similarly overcame death and makes it possible for humanity to live as though death were not. Death will finally

Pastoral Perspective

Paul knew the challenge of preparing an Easter sermon for a progressive Christian community. The Corinthian Christians were profoundly shaped by life in their cosmopolitan metropolis, once described as the New Orleans of its day by scholar Luke Timothy Johnson. The Corinth Christian community's pluralism—a mix of Jews, Gentiles, former pagans—combined with an ingrained Greek bias toward human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:19–20) posed a great challenge in uniformly living out a theology of the cross. Particularly distasteful to the Corinthians was the manner of Christ's death, because crucifixion was seen as "lower class," a Roman punishment typically reserved for slaves or provincial rebels in outlying areas such as Judea.¹ Therefore, the idea of God incarnate being crucified was preposterous ("foolishness") within the dominant Greek culture, as was the idea of an immortal soul being connected to a perishable body.

Then, as now, the resurrection story remains timelessly peculiar, and today's preacher is likely to encounter a spectrum of belief—and disbelief—when traversing the Easter season with a congregation. What can be glossed over for much of the liturgical year roars into view on Resurrection

1. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 270.

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

Exegetical Perspective

At the risk of trivializing, if one were to compare Christianity to the game where opponents successively remove wooden blocks from a neat stack until the removal of one block causes the whole structure to collapse into a pile, in this chapter Paul defends the resurrection as the one block that could crash the whole enterprise: theology, ministry, and personal faith. The reader may not have enough information to discern accurately the position of “some” of the Corinthians (v. 12). Typical of the epistles of the NT, this passage provides only one side of the conversation.

The Greek-thinking Corinthians may have felt the influence of the strand of Platonic anthropology that affirmed the immortality of the “soul,” so that the body remained dead, leaving no need for a resurrection. This anthropology often assumed that at death the pure, inherently immortal soul escaped from the corrupt material body. Because Paul writes to a Gentile audience, this possibility remains open, although Paul’s use of the phrase “for this life only” in verse 19 points away from this interpretation. That phrase suggests that the opponents believed in no afterlife of any kind, even an immaterial soul. Some strands of Jewish thought, such as that of the Sadducees, claimed no belief in an afterlife. The later Pauline tradition deals with a realized eschatology with the

Homiletical Perspective

The richness of the Gospel lessons may cause preachers to overlook 1 Corinthians 15:19–26. The briefest of Easter Sunday readings, it seems to have been carved out of Paul’s long, complicated argument to satisfy the need for an appropriate epistle on Easter. Although it may not compete with the narrative excitement of the Gospels, there is a promising tension stirred by Paul’s question, “How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (15:12).

Such a question slithers like a snake among the Easter lilies. Preachers would prefer to ignore the question, because the only answers we are given are judged hopelessly inadequate by “modern thinking.” Talk about resurrection is dismissed out of hand, even as it was dismissed in first-century Athens (Acts 17:32). Jesus’ resurrection, our resurrection: who could possibly believe that? What is being dismissed, however, is not what Christian faith has taught. Easter Sunday provides opportunities for teaching and learning.

Many people simply cannot bring themselves to hope for any kind of life after death and are quite comfortable with that. “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,” we can live with that: God has blessed us in this earthly life; we have lived good lives seeking to serve God; and we have enjoyed “length of days and years of life and abundant welfare” (Prov.

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

Theological Perspective

be destroyed at the consummation of time, when the time of Christ's dominance will be given over to God the Father and paradise will be restored. This vision of history is fundamental to much of Paul's theology. His idea that Christ descended to earth (Eph. 4:10) give rise to the later doctrines of Christ's descent among the dead to rescue those holy ones who had died previously (1 Pet. 3:18–20).

The theological problem here is the problem that time does not exist until matter expands, thus making history itself a part of creation. There is therefore no necessary distinction between schemes that see general resurrection and new creation occurring at the end of history and those that assume some kind of entry into paradise at the time of death. All time is accessible to God at once, making both visions of what happens at death possible. We are constrained by language as much as by history in articulating all that is implied by resurrection.

The image of the first fruits comes from the ancient law regarding the offering of the first crops of the harvest in the house of God (Exod. 23:19). It was understood that with such a representative offering the whole crop was made holy. So Paul understands the role of Adam, the representative human who brought about death for the whole of humanity, and the role of Christ, the representative human who brings life for the whole of humanity in an interim time until death is defeated and the salvation of God is made fully manifest. Paul's purpose in using the Adam-Christ distinction here is to direct his readers toward an understanding of the richness of what has occurred in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and to oppose any spiritualizing tendencies that would allow them to affirm the first resurrection, that of Jesus, and not their own.

For Paul, the latter is a necessary and indisputable consequence of the former. It is also a characteristically Jewish affirmation of physicality and a contrast to those who would follow a more Platonic belief in the continuing life of a disembodied soul. This idea is as hard in our day as it was for the Corinthians. As Paul will argue later in this chapter (vv. 42–49), the resurrection of the body is not resuscitation. He talks of a "spiritual body." He calls it "imperishable." He does not, however, mean that it is a disembodied soul, even as he is prepared to call it a mystery (v. 51). We might say that if it is God's desire to bring life even out of death, then that must be as true for us as it was for Jesus. If God is trustworthy for life in the first place, then God is trustworthy for life to eternity.

Pastoral Perspective

Sunday: the incredible empty tomb. For many modern Christians, the tale of a human rising up through the rot of rigor mortis and into sweet new life is simply too fantastical to buy into. This leads some to lip-synch their way through Easter hymns and creeds in the manner of colluding with children about Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, or other cultural traditions cheerfully perpetuated despite dead certitude that they are utter fiction. Put in a more gracious way, many in a given congregation today might claim that it does not matter what "really" happened after Jesus died, that meaning is more important than fact, and that resurrection is simply a helpful way to talk about new life made possible for a community when it follows the beautiful ethical wisdom of the rabbi Jesus.

"Hogwash," says Paul flatly. If the empty tomb is mere metaphor, then the way of Jesus leads nowhere, and Christians are, of all people, *most* to be pitied (v. 19). Paul, following the martyred disciples, fights against any attempt to explain away the astonishing news of Christ's bodily resurrection as something other than God's direct, miraculous intervention. Resurrection is central: the very emptiness of the tomb provides the fullness of salvation. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul ratchets up the stakes beyond intellectual questions of the empty tomb's historical accuracy or supernatural plausibility. He expands the Easter story into something deeply personal: our own resurrection. If resurrection is perceived as something that happens only to divine messiahs in antiquity, it is easy for Christians to remain hearers of the story rather than active participants. What issues might surface as a preacher explores the personal implications of Easter with congregations today?

One challenge might be found in the way Paul speaks about a specific ordering of the universe: resurrection comes first to Christ, then to those who belong to Christ (v. 23). What does it mean to "belong" to Jesus? Do I qualify? Am I a good enough Christian? Will I be claimed by Jesus at the end? A conscious or unconscious worry about inclusion, or lingering questions over purity criteria, might cause a tendency to ignore Paul's core teaching of our participation in resurrection.

Looking at the careful language Paul uses in this text might go a long way in addressing worry over spiritual self-esteem. Christ's resurrection is described as "first fruits of those who have died" (v. 20). "First fruits" are often described as the initial results of an endeavor, and a traditional agrarian definition is the idea that prized first fruits are

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

Exegetical Perspective

resurrection already having occurred (2 Tim. 2:17–18). Whatever the exact teaching of the group within the Corinthian church, Paul vigorously defends a future resurrection involving the transformation of the whole of each believer: body, soul, and spirit.

The preacher will find difficulty in breaking up the long chapter into units without losing continuity. Paul writes with more passion than precision in this chapter, but one can discern his argument and why he considers it important. The lectionary reading begins in the middle of a thought, as Paul concludes explaining the importance of the resurrection. Earlier in the chapter Paul has marshaled evidence to support belief in the resurrection. The Scriptures help interpret the belief, and the postresurrection appearances, including that to Paul himself, support the historicity of the resurrection. Despite this testimony and scriptural support, a group within the Corinthian church claims not to believe in the resurrection. Paul responds to this group by stressing the importance of the resurrection. To deny the resurrection calls into question the proclamation of the church, the faith of individual believers, and the defeat of sin.

The reading begins with Paul's most dramatic argument about the importance of the resurrection. Without the resurrection, one should pity Christians. The term translated as "pitiable" does not occur often in the New Testament. Its use in Revelation 3:17 also confronts people who have deluded themselves. For Paul, without the resurrection, Christians deserve pity, because they hope for something that will never happen. Even with the forgiveness and regeneration that Christians experience in this life, they "are still in [their] sins." In Romans, Paul considers the entire creation enslaved to sin. Only when the whole creation breaks free from sin will individual Christians experience true freedom from its effects (Rom. 8:19–23). As Paul states earlier in 1 Corinthians, the ability of a believer to know and love remains limited in this life (13:12). The joy, peace, and love that one experiences in this life pale in comparison to what awaits in the new creation. Resurrection enables participation in this transformed creation.

When Paul compares the result of Adam's sin with the work of Christ, he suggests that death has come into the creation as an alien thing, an "enemy." Paul does not consider death a natural occurrence, but a corruption of God's good creation. Paul does not explain carefully here his understanding of the Genesis story of temptation, but he seems to understand the Adam narrative as an explanation of the

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3:2). These people do not hope for more, require more, or in some cases even want more.

Others trust in our personal immortality, that after death our soul or personal essence enters a heavenly realm. Such a notion was almost certainly held among some Corinthians. Many people assume that this is what Christians believe when we speak of resurrection and a future life. The image of the journey of the immortal soul to the gates of heaven has spawned thousands of cartoons and jokes, and preachers know how useful these can be for preaching! The market for stories about the afterlife is apparently quite profitable these days as well. As I write this, the top two bestsellers on the *New York Times* "Paperback Nonfiction" list are *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* and *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* ("A boy's encounter with Jesus and the angels"). Their recounting of near-death experiences makes it clear that death is not the end of life but only a transition from one realm to another, more glorious one.

This appears to be a natural function of human life and death. It is a process in which God is something of a bystander, passively experienced as a sense of oceanic love and acceptance. "Who has ascended to heaven and come down?" asks the book of Proverbs (Prov. 30:4), anticipating the answer "No one!" However, our bestseller lists insist: "Well, quite a few!" Christians eagerly comb these volumes for hope and encouragement—it is hard to imagine a sizable secular audience for them. These narratives focus on the experience of an individual, while the resurrection we speak of on Easter Sunday points to the action of a gracious God.

What many people take to be the resurrection is that Jesus somehow came back to life over the weekend. He was dead; he's now alive (raising questions, of course, about how dead he was). "Shake it off!" the coach shouts to an injured player: Jesus shook it off. Just as people who have flatlined on an electrocardiogram have been resuscitated, so also the crucified corpse of the Galilean was resuscitated. What Christians have wanted to say, however, is not simply that Jesus is alive again, but "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." He who was dead and therefore powerless has been raised, lifted up, vindicated, and exalted by God and given a new, unanticipated, and unpredictable life that is by no means merely a continuation of his precessor life (though there is continuity).

Here the preacher can draw on familiar Easter stories to point to the strangeness of the risen Jesus

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

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Finally we have Paul's vision of Christ handing over those who belong to him to the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler, authority, and power (v. 24). Here we find Paul's recognition that we are living in a time between the inauguration of the reign of God in Jesus and some kind of full manifestation of that reign at the end of time, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (v. 25). Paul ventures into apocalyptic rarely, but does so here in the faith that God is working God's purpose out. His future reference is for the purpose of encouraging his readers to grasp the fullness of the reality of resurrection, so that they can live fully and faithfully in the present. Thus they can live life in ways acceptable to God, so that they can be part of God's working out of the grand scheme of history.

The immediate consequence of Jesus' resurrection is not that death itself is overcome. It is clear that we will all die. It is rather that the *power* of death is overcome, freeing us to live as though death were not, trusting in God's grace and love for our life. There is an old truism from the field of psychoanalysis: if your tendency is to depression, your issue is meaning; if your tendency is to anxiety, your issue is death. The consequence of Easter is that death no longer holds sway in our lives, and our meaning is found in self-giving love after the model and pattern of Jesus.

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presented as an offering to God, sanctifying the rest of the harvest. Jesus has gone first, allowing the rest of us to be gathered in at the gleaning. Perhaps this reassuring connection to and identification with Christ is what Paul intended by his stress on the fact that both death and now life have come through a human—first Adam and now Jesus (vv. 21–22). In God's radically reshaped kingdom following that first Easter, Jesus is our first look at how things will work going forward. *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*, and in that coming, even death itself will be destroyed.

This last component of Paul's teaching is of significant import. A minister friend of mine, a cancer survivor, once remarked that resurrection offers us "the biggest kind of life," because it opens the door to the fullest breadth and depth of possibility, unhampered by the hopelessness and helplessness that comes with a dread of death. The radical invitation to a new way of being is ours, but only if we claim it. For the Corinthians and for us, this remains a difficult task, as Barbara Brown Taylor has stated:

Resurrection is not something we can test, like gravity or true north. It is a nonmaterial reality, which was one of the reasons Paul was pushing it so hard on the Corinthians. By pushing them on resurrection, Paul was pushing them to believe that life was more than they could see, taste, or feel. He wanted them to know that there was a dimension and quality of life that was all but invisible to them—something much more comprehensive than the present—and that if they missed out on it then they were the most pitiful people on earth.²

In the end, Paul's beautiful vision allows us to experience Easter not just as a tomb but also as a doorway, as we are invited not just into a changed future but into a new present as well, if we can by faith believe in the unbelievable.

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2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 73.

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introduction of sin and death for humanity. Part of the effect of the coming of the Christ into the world is to bring life where Adam brought death. Paul does not examine the full implications of this contrast between Adam and the Christ, but he suggests that human effort cannot conquer sin (see Rom. 5:12–21). Paul interprets sin and death in the language of a spiritual battle. The victories that the church sees now constitute only evidence of a final, decisive triumph, in which sin, death, and evil meet ultimate defeat. Without the resurrection, if the world simply continues in its present condition, the defeat of the forces of evil will never occur. Christian faith and hope mislead, because sin and evil will continue to flourish.

Paul understands the hope of resurrection as a motivation for ministry (vv. 30–32). Paul not only undertakes difficult ministry, but assumes great risk. Paul does not conduct his ministry because he believes that all people will respond to his message or that the efforts of the church, even aided by the Holy Spirit, will end suffering, oppression, and exploitation, but because he draws hope from God's future victory, including the victory over death through the resurrection. This message provides hope for a weary church, because Paul trusts the real victory over sin, in both individuals and social structures, to God's final triumph in the resurrection. The church can face danger and setbacks because of the hope of resurrection and the defeat and subjugation of evil in the eschaton.

One finds irony in the claim of the group in Corinth against the resurrection. Apart from an afterlife, the community of the church becomes the only "eschaton" to which one could hope. Who would want only the bickering, competitive, divided church of Corinth as the end result of the ministry and death of the Christ? Earlier in the chapter Paul has expressed gratitude for the change faith has brought about in him. He went from an angry persecutor to one who has experienced grace and regeneration (vv. 7–11). Paul might have contented himself with the experience of grace, but he knows that even such a gift of divine presence only whets one's appetite for life in the resurrection.

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(he appears and disappears and is initially unrecognizable) but also his familiarity (he finally is recognized by his friends, and he eats and drinks with them). The generative power behind this new resurrection life is God, the Giver of life and Author of life, whose design for human life will by no means be defeated or diminished by death. In the lesson from Acts, Peter makes it clear that God is the power at work: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth . . . God was with him . . . They put him to death . . . but God raised him" (Acts 10:38–40).

Jesus' resurrection prepares us for yet another surprise: "all will be made alive in Christ." God is doing a new and unexpected thing beyond our imagination. Isaiah hears God's announcement: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17). The risen Jesus is a new creation, not a resuscitation, not merely a repair job; and God's power means to include us in this new creation.

By no means, however, does this make the resurrection of Jesus more believable. If anything, it magnifies incredulity, but it is an incredulity that at least originates in an encounter with what the Scriptures give us to believe about Christ's resurrection. An appropriate and fitting disbelief needs to measure God's resolve to renew the entire creation, including even those who cannot imagine themselves believing this for a moment. God has a plan, and that, for some people, is the most incredible assertion of all. The task of the preacher is not simply to invite worshipers to believe *something* credible but to trust God's gracious activity that makes all things new, even us.

Easter does not insist that people believe in resurrection. The message that "all will be made alive" invites us to trust God who is the power of life. People wonder about life after death, which is also to say they need to know about the resurrection. Preachers who dare to speak of life beyond our measurements, calculations, and credibility will not lack for listeners.

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SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Psalm 118:14–29

¹⁴The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

¹⁵There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

¹⁶ the right hand of the LORD is exalted;
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”

¹⁷I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.

¹⁸The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 118:14–29, sung by different voices, is part of an individual song of thanksgiving belonging to the category of gate liturgies. During festival time, the throng of grateful, praising pilgrims entered the gates in a procession (Ps. 42:4) and were welcomed by a liturgical celebration of antiphonal statements and songs that were sung at the gates' entrance. The psalm opens with the psalmist's personal and confessional statement (v. 14) and closes with the psalmist exhorting people to give thanks to God because of God's goodness and steadfast love (v. 29).

The psalmist begins his song with a faith statement that flows from a life-threatening experience (vv. 5–13) that has enabled him to make the claim that the Lord is his strength, his might, and his salvation (v. 14). Israel's God sustains those who are struggling and saves those who are on the brink of death. To this God, the poet owes everything. With profound humility and joyous gratitude he makes known the Holy One's power that has worked through him in his time of grave adversity.

In verses 15–16 the focus shifts to the righteous who also sing glad songs of victory in their tents. The righteous would include those who are blameless in their ways (Gen. 6:9), whose mouths are

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Psalm 118 was originally composed as a hymn of thanksgiving for victory in time of war, a communal celebration of God's favor in battle. Although it is hard to imagine liturgically reenacting this psalm today as a way of celebrating our nation's success in Afghanistan or Iraq, perhaps retaining a sense of its gritty origins is worthwhile. What forces of darkness might we feel are arrayed against our communities today? What private battles do our parish members face on a daily basis, as they endure the agonies of addiction, depression, divorce, loss, and loneliness?

In verse 5, the psalmist cries out from a place of distress—literally a narrow, constricted space—a place of limited options, and a helpless sense of lifelessness. It is from this place of pain that the psalmist laments, “The LORD has punished me severely,” which is rendered more starkly in the King James translation as “chastened me sore” (v. 18). One idea that today's preacher may wish to explore is the image of God as parent or judge. The great preacher Spurgeon once opined: “It is well to have grace enough to see that tribulation comes from God: he fills the bitter cup as well as the sweet goblet. Troubles do not spring out of the dust, neither doth affliction grow up from the ground, like hemlock

Psalm 118:14–29

- ²²The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- ²³This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
- ²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
- ²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.
- ²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 118 is the last of a series of psalms, beginning with Psalm 113, known in Jewish tradition as the Hallel, or more specifically, the Egyptian Hallel. This group is called “Egyptian” because since ancient times it has been sung during Passover, which celebrates God’s liberation of slaves from Egypt. These psalms are also sung during the fall festival of Sukkot or Booths, on Shavuot (Pentecost), and during Hanukkah. They are called *hallel*, meaning “praise,” as in *hal-lelu-jah*, “praise the Lord,” a phrase frequently found in these psalms, though it does not appear in this one.

The part of Psalm 118 that the lectionary assigns to the Second Sunday of Easter begins with a word-for-word repetition of Exodus 15:2a, the beginning of the song celebrating the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, where the Israelite slaves were saved from Egyptian armies (see also Isa. 12:2). The NRSV places this verse at the end of a stanza that, beginning in verse 10, impressionistically recounts a battle victory. God’s being called the speaker’s strength, and might (or song; translations vary), and salvation concludes the stanza. The verse can also introduce the action, as it does in Exodus 15, and in the lectionary’s choice of verses. In fact, its flexibility can be seen in other translations: Tanakh makes it the

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The 118th Psalm invites worshipers to join in singing “glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous” and to “give thanks to the LORD, for God is good” and God’s “steadfast love endures forever” (vv. 15, 29). The military imagery of the victory may be off-putting to some worshipers, but the triumph is so great and its likelihood so small, and the song is so exuberant and so contagious, that reading the psalm we lean into its uninhibited joy and make the music our own. An ebullient dance swirls around us but we are not quite sure of the steps and how to enter into it. Reading the 118th Psalm is a bit like listening to a cast recording of a Broadway show. The music is glorious and compelling. A chorus sings, perhaps more than one chorus. Soloists intrude in the drama: here a plaintive soprano, there an authoritative bass. Here is a pair of singers: are they lovers? So much we cannot know from hearing only the music. We have the words of the 118th Psalm, but no one is clear exactly who the singers are. What is utterly clear is the abandon of their rejoicing and the depth of their thankfulness. “Do you hear the people sing?” asks Enjolras in the musical *Les Misérables*, and we certainly do hear the people sing, and we want to join them and sing the joyful song.

Psalm 118:14–29

Theological Perspective

fountains of life (Prov. 10:11), and whose tongues are choice silver (Prov. 10:20). Even though these people do experience many afflictions (Ps. 34:19), they are upheld by God (Ps. 37:17) and delivered from trouble (Prov. 11:8). They embody and mirror the divine quality of God, who is said to be righteous (Pss. 116:5; 119:137; 129:4; Isa. 24:16; 45:21; Jer. 12:1; Dan. 9:14).

In their song, the righteous praise the right hand of God that has done valiantly and presumably brought about the victory. Here the psalmist envisions God anthropocentrically and ascribes an anthropomorphic quality to God, namely, the possession of hands. In the context of verses 15–16, God’s “right hand” symbolizes authority and power. This right hand of God performs acts of deliverance (Exod. 15:6), victory (Ps. 20:6), and might (Isa. 62:8), gives support (Ps. 18:35) and blessings (Ps. 16:11). The signet was a ring worn on the royal right hand (Jer. 22:24). Thus, implied in the symbol of the right hand is the sense of royalty: God is king over all.

Verses 17–18 focus once again on the psalmist, who looks back on difficult times and attributes those times to God’s chastisement, as in the cases of Israel (Amos 4:6–13) and Judah (Jer. 14:1–6), whose many inhabitants suffered great pain and tragedies on account of their transgressions. Death, however, was not the final word for Israel and Judah, who live forever in the midst of divine compassion, promise, and hope (see, e.g., Mic. 7:18–20; Isa. 43:1–21; 61:1–7; Jer. 31:31–34). Such is also the case for the psalmist, who lives on to praise God and recount God’s mighty deeds (Ps. 118:1–18). Of note, verse 17 was one of Martin Luther’s favorite scriptural verses. He saw his own life reflected in this verse, and because this verse had such a great impact on him, he posted the words of verse 17 on his study wall at Coburg Castle. Thus verse 17 became his personal motto.

In verses 19–20 the psalmist focuses on the gates of righteousness, the gates of the Lord where the righteous will enter. Here the psalmist seems to be hinting at a liturgical ceremony about to take place. The gates would be those of the temple (cf. Ezek. 40–48), wherein God dwells. These gates are closed, but the righteous one anticipates that the gates will soon be opened (cf. Mic. 2:12–13). Theodoret of Cyrus, one of the church fathers, interprets the gates differently. He sees the gates as symbolic of the different forms of virtue, and through these gates—these virtues—it is possible to sing the praises of the God of all.

The psalmist continues to express gratitude to God in verses 20–24 and ends with a petition that

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from the furrows of the field; but the Lord himself kindles the fiery furnace, and sits as a refiner at the door.”¹ Do we believe today that suffering comes from God as a way of “punishing” or “chastening” us for ethical shortcomings or poor choices? If not, is there theological room to imagine any sort of “refiner’s fire,” where we are disciplined or restrained?

This piece of somber reflection is but a brief asterisk in the overall arc of Psalm 118:14–29, however, because this psalm is not composed as a complaint from a rebuked soldier. Instead there is palpable joy and astonished rejoicing: the Lord has given us salvation (v. 14) and light (v. 27) and steadfast love (v. 29). Less a chest-thumping whoop of victory, Psalm 118 is more a hand-upon-your-heart realization that, despite fierce suffering, you shall *live*.

How might our lives be different if we believed that God is truly and actively our salvation and hope? What if we felt literally rescued from death? Recalling Paul’s teaching that we share in Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15:22), Psalm 118 invites us to share the same flooding relief as the psalmist in the face of unexpected escape.

Christians interpret this Jewish text, offered during Eastertide, through the lens of Jesus, who would become—as Peter preached in Acts 4:11—the “stone that the builders rejected . . . the chief cornerstone” (v. 22). Today’s preacher might want to expand this theme of the rejected stone: are there times we feel rejected by others, or are there parts of ourselves that we internally reject? In what ways can these rejected pieces find healing through transformation? In what ways can these places of pain become shelters of cultivated compassion, extended to ourselves and others? By following the rejected Christ we find final acceptance and are able to move through the gates of righteousness (v. 19).

The lectionary’s placement of this text on the Second Sunday of Easter greatly illumines a feeling of salvation. Psalm 118 is part of the Jewish Hallel (literally “praise”), a collection of six psalms (Pss. 113–118) that are recited as part of the Passover Seder, in thanksgiving for God’s redemptive deliverance of Israel from bondage. There is rich imagery in imagining Psalm 118 being sung by Jesus and his disciples as part of the Last Supper (“When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives,” Mark 14:26), when Jesus’ dazzling reinterpretation of the sacrificed paschal lamb commenced. The great power of Psalm 118 for this Second Sunday of Easter

1. www.spurgeon.org/sermons/2237.htm.

Psalm 118:14–29

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middle verse of a three-verse stanza (vv. 13–15), and CEB embeds it in a twelve-verse sequence (vv. 5–16).

The entire psalm is characterized by repetition. It both echoes lines found elsewhere and creates refrains of certain phrases. Verse 14's use of Exodus 15:2a is echoed once again in verse 21, and the other half of Exodus 15:2, "This is my God and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him," reappears slightly altered in verse 28.

Similarly, the final verse, verse 29, repeats precisely the psalm's opening line in verse 1, a frequent psalmic refrain, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Pss. 106:1; 107:1; 136:1 and every other verse of that psalm; Jer. 33:11; see also Pss. 100:5; 105:1). Dense repetition of phrases can be seen especially in Psalm 118's reiteration that God's "steadfast love endures forever," not only in the opening and closing verses but also in verses 2, 3, and 4, as the people are called upon repeat the refrain. Verse 9 echoes verse 8 almost word for word, underscoring that "it is better to take refuge in the LORD" than to trust humans. The enemies are said three times in verses 10–12 to "surround me," and three times the verses repeat, "in the name of the LORD I cut them off." Similarly, in verses 15–16, "the right hand of the LORD does valiantly/ is exalted" occurs three times in succession. Verse 19 expresses the speaker's own desire to enter through the gates, and the following verse, echoing, broadens to announce that "the righteous shall enter."

Phrases from this psalm are repeated in the New Testament as well. Verse 22, "the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," is quoted by Jesus in Matthew 21:42 (also Mark 12:10, Luke 20:17). It appears again in Acts 4:11 and 1 Peter 2:7. Similarly, verse 26, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD," is quoted by Jesus in Matthew 23:39 and Luke 13:35 and is echoed by the people when Jesus rides into Jerusalem before his death (Matt. 21:9, Mark 11:9, Luke 19:38, John 12:13). Verse 25's "Save us, we beseech you," which in Hebrew is *hoshi'ah na'*, appears in the same accounts, rendered as the crowd's cry, which in the Greek transliteration is "hosanna."

The liturgical invitation familiar to many church members, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," originates with verse 24 of this psalm. Though it is so familiar we might think it occurs commonly, this is in fact its only appearance.

The sequence of thought in this psalm is more a script for a liturgical event than a unified poem.

Homiletical Perspective

The Second Sunday of Easter and the 118th Psalm conspire to offer fresh possibilities for people to enter the triumphal song of God's victory. Worship attendance will be a fragment of what it was the week before, but those present will be hard-core worshipers willing to work with a preacher's sermon. Just as the psalm invites worshipers to sing "glad songs of victory" and "give thanks," the sermon might encourage worshipers to contemplate their own experiences that replicate the death and resurrection motif of the Sundays of Eastertide. Reading the 118th Psalm, we hear the voices of worshipers recounting their experience: "Out of my distress I called on the LORD" (v. 5); "All nations surrounded me . . . They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side" (vv. 10–11); and here, "I shall not die, but I shall live" (v. 17). In some congregations the people sitting in the pews listening to the sermon could stand in the company of those worshipers to tell their own stories: "When the doctor said that, I thought everything was over, but . . ."; "Drinking all day every day I was ready to die, and then . . ." There are so many stories that could be told and should be heard because they are at their depth "glad songs" of God's victories, and our telling of them is one way of giving thanks. The occasion of Second Easter and the text of Psalm 118 suggest the possibility of inviting worshipers to allow their own witness to irrupt into the sermon in much the same way that those who tell their stories in verses 5, 7, 10–11 add to and magnify the "glad songs." Certainly that would not be appropriate or helpful in every worship service, but the preacher would be the best judge of how Psalm 118 might be enacted in a particular congregation. The witnesses recounting their experience shape a place for hope and encourage the voices heard in verse 25—"Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!"—to cry out in hope. Recognizing the openness of the liturgy suggested in Psalm 118, the preacher may invite worshipers to imagine the power of the resurrection as they have experienced it in their own living.

The 118th Psalm provides a wonderfully helpful reading for preaching on Second Easter because it holds in balance the singularity of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ of God and the multiplicity of death and resurrection-like victories that people of Christian faith cannot help recognizing as part God's victory. The once-and-only resurrection of Jesus is not merely a once-upon-a-time occurrence that happened long ago in a place far away, but the ongoing sign of God's gracious work on our behalf. What is triumphant in the resurrection of

*Psalm 118:14–29***Theological Perspective**

the God of salvation act again to save him and his people and to grant them success (v. 25). Significant in this unit are verses 22–23 and 24. In verses 22–23, the psalmist parabolically speaks of the stone that the builders rejected, which has now become the cornerstone. This cornerstone, an ashlar that has been squared, has to carry the weight of a building that presses down on it from two divisions. Only good and strong material can be used to fashion a cornerstone. The point being stressed is that the one saved (v. 21) was once the one rejected, despised, and persecuted, but is now honored by God and chosen for an important task (see Isa. 52:13–53:12; cf. Isa. 28:16). In the early first century CE, Christian writers associated the cornerstone with Christ (see Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; and Eph. 2:20) and by extension, the Christian community (1 Pet. 2:1–10). Thus, the least in the reign of God have the potential to become the greatest through God’s work. In verse 24, the day that the Lord has made is a joyous day, a time of celebration and victory (cf. Amos 9:11–15; Zeph. 3:14–20).

Words of gratitude shift to words of blessing in verses 26–27. The psalmist envisions the throng of praising pilgrims anticipating the arrival of their king. Verse 26 is messianic and has often been cited on special days or during festivals. For example, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowds shouted the same kind of greeting (see Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9–10; Luke 13:35; 19:38). In verse 26b “the house of the LORD” refers to the temple. This new anticipated king gives cause for acknowledging the Lord as God, the Sovereign One, who has now given the people “light” (cf. Isa. 9:1–7).

Having seen and experienced all the marvels and goodness of God, the psalmist now acknowledges God in a deeply personal way. God is not only the psalmist’s strength, might, and salvation (v. 14) but also his “God” to whom he is deeply indebted (v. 28), which moves him to exhort others to give thanks to God and proclaim that God’s steadfast love endures forever (v. 29).

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Pastoral Perspective

is that we are invited to exult with Christ as he now sings again through us, “I shall not die, but I shall live!” (v. 17). As a pastor friend commented, “What a strange victory—Christ seemingly gets crushed by his enemies, but in the end, the smited one wins.”

How might Psalm 118 help us respond to this victory of Easter? Structurally, this pericope moves from an intensely personal song of thanksgiving (vv. 14–22) to communal liturgical expression (vv. 23–27) and then back to individual praise (vv. 28–29), which mimics our own rhythm of life with God as churchgoers. The central verses of this passage seem to serve as liturgical directions, especially verse 27’s “bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.” What can that mean? This curious phrase is rendered differently in various translations, including the material to use in the binding, that is, “cords” (KJV), “boughs” (NIV), and “garlands” (*The Message*). The horns formed the corners of the altar in the ancient temple, and presumably if a worshiper was presenting a living creature as a sacrifice, he would tether the animal with a cord to the altar’s horns so that it would not slip away.

What would it mean for us today to imagine our congregations being “bound with cords” to God as a living sacrifice? Does this conjure harsh images of bloodthirsty death, or valuable notions of covenanted communal discipleship? Every Sunday we are asked to give sacrificially, laying our offerings of money upon the altar. What might it feel like to expand this concept to include our very lives? If we were to regain a keen sense of Psalm 118 as a victory celebration, a song of thanksgiving for being rescued from distress and death, we might just enter the “gates” of our sanctuary doors with glad songs (v. 15) and shouts of joy, bound by love all the way up to the altar (v. 27) and beyond, leaning into the Lord whose steadfast love endures forever (v. 29).

SUZANNE WOOLSTON BOSSERT

Psalm 118:14–29

Exegetical Perspective

Though stage directions are missing, we can hear the call and response reverberating throughout between the “I” of a leader and the “we” voicing collective praise. The circumstances in which the psalm was first sung are unknown. Still, we can imagine someone calling the people to repeat the key refrain about God’s enduring steadfast love before recounting in two different ways, in verses 5–9 and 10–13, God’s deeds of salvation in narrow straits. The portion prescribed for this Sunday, beginning at verse 14, continues to emphasize God’s power to save the righteous when embattled. Here especially, plural voices intermingle with the “I.” Beginning in verse 19, a procession comes into view, a parade toward the temple, arriving at the horns of the altar in verse 27.

This psalm is coupled with John’s story of Jesus’ resurrection appearances to his disciples, first when Thomas was not present. Echoing the psalmist’s proclamation of God’s saving deeds, the disciples who were there announce to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” Eight days later Thomas too sees Jesus and believes. Both the psalm and the story convey the worth of telling stories of faith. Belief and praise are given substance as the disciples recount what happened, and as the worship leader in the psalm recounts the drama of conflict through which God comes to save. We come to know, and to voice, God’s enduring steadfast love, not just when we see it with our own eyes, but also when we hear it relayed through the lives and witness of others.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

Jesus Christ is God’s steadfast love. Note the repetition of “God’s steadfast love endures forever” in the opening verses and concluding affirmation of the psalm (vv. 1–4, 29). Despite the warlike imagery employed in the psalm, the victory belongs not to brute force or chariots but to steadfast love that brings worshipers to church the Sunday after Easter.

What Walter Brueggemann has called “Israel’s core testimony”¹ of faith (Exod. 34:6–7) is sung, remembered, reenacted, and summoned to meet the pressing need. The powerful and overwhelming endurance of God’s steadfast love we hear most dramatically enacted in the resurrection of Jesus, but that utterly unique action provides us the pattern to recognize the powerfully present steadfast love of God we encounter time and again in the ordinary stuff of our human living. As to resurrections, we believe in only one, and therefore we cannot help hoping for many. Living by the pattern of life rising out of death, we discover hope to meet the worst the world has to give us. Because we trust in the steadfast love of God that we recognize most clearly in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we discover the steadfast love of God that lifts the deadliest moments of our lives and raises them to new and abundant life. Speaking of this in the abstract is less powerful than the witness born by individuals in the 118th Psalm (vv. 5, 7, 10–11) who speak in compelling specifics.

Our notions of resurrection are so often banished to considerations regarding life after death and final questions, but the doctrine of the resurrection insists that the steadfast love of the Lord interrupts our despair in the midst of life. The resurrection of Jesus Christ prompts us to look for new life not only at the end of life but right now and right here.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 319–20.

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SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 5:1–9

¹After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” ⁷The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

Theological Perspective

Miracle stories of Jesus in the Gospels invite theological reflection on a number of levels. They present opportunities to see important theological themes in relation especially to who Jesus is, and to his authority, power, mercy, and desire to establish wholeness for those who are suffering.

Sometimes in the history of biblical interpretation, details of these stories have been allegorized to lift their meanings beyond the biblical situation itself to a larger picture of the work of God throughout both testaments. For example, in this story the man who was healed had been disabled for thirty-eight years. This is the length of time mentioned for Israel’s wandering in the wilderness (Deut. 2:14). So some have seen the story as pointing, in different ways, to the power of Jesus in overcoming the period of Israel’s unsettledness and thus as a fulfillment of Israel’s life under the law. This spiritualized reading thus gave the story significant theological overtones.

Jesus’ healing of this disabled man occurred on a Sabbath (5:9), as did a later healing of a blind man (John 9). The story thus thrusts Jesus into conflict with the religious authorities over Sabbath observance. This opens the wider theological emphasis of who Jesus was in relation to the Sabbath—and the law. This is a theme throughout Jesus’ ministry. So

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“Do you want to be made well?” The question that Jesus asks this “invalid” man by the pool at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem resonates throughout history and in every person’s life at one level or another. The man by the pool seems to take Jesus’ question as an accusation that he is not trying hard enough, rather than an invitation to be healed. His response to Jesus is that when the healing opportunity comes, when the pool is stirred up, he is never able to get there in time. He is telling Jesus that while he longs to be healed—indeed, he has been ill for thirty-eight years—the circumstances of the world prevent him from being healed.

Jesus’ question has many ramifications for this man and also for us. The man by the pool is called an “invalid,” a standard word in English used to describe people who need profound assistance in their daily lives. It is a striking choice of words, and it goes to the heart of the healing ministry of Jesus. Because of his illness, this man has become “in-valid,” not valid, not viable, without worth; yes, his humanity is slipping away, both in the eyes of the world and in his own eyes. He is not even called an “invalid person,” but rather the adjective itself has come to describe his entire identity—he is simply “invalid.”

After thirty-eight years of this, he has perhaps come to accept this dehumanizing view of himself,

John 5:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

This powerful and provocative passage presents several small but vexing questions. Why does John hide the specifics about the festival, when he typically includes that information? The section from chapters 5–10 includes mention of several named festivals (6:4; 7:2; 10:22), so why does John omit the detail here? Does it matter? What significance should the reader place on the disputed words that form verse 4 in some manuscripts? From what condition does the man suffer, that prevents his movement? For the contemporary user of the lectionary, why does the committee divide the passage in half? The two halves of the passage treat different issues. Should the reader focus on the concerns of one half, or on the interaction between the two parts? The second half of the passage contains intriguing ideas, such as Sabbath observance and Jesus' threat in verse 14, that deserve attention. This article can do little more than acknowledge these questions and suggest referral to the technical commentaries for the possible solutions. Even with these distractions, the passage raises much deeper questions about healing and the response of those who receive it.

The interaction between Jesus and the man displays narrative art, psychological insight, and theological reassurance. With few words and a minimum of conversational exchanges, John portrays a

Homiletical Perspective

The Gospel of John is one of the most difficult books in the Bible from which to preach, because it is so dense and interrelated and because several theological assertions in the Fourth Gospel trouble many Christians today. These phenomena come into play in this reading.

The lectionary does violence to the Gospel of John by assigning only verses 1–9 of John 5. From the perspective of this Gospel, the passage is the platform from which the author launches the larger discussion in John 5:10–47. To honor John 5:1–9 in its literary and theological integrity, the preacher needs to give some attention to the whole chapter. However, John 5:1–47 is so long and so thickly packed that a single sermon cannot give the entirety of the passage the attention it deserves. My remarks here lift up themes and motifs that could individually become the focus of a sermon or that could together become foci within a sermon. The preacher could also summarize aspects of the text in a teaching moment at the time the passage is read during the service.

John 5 records one of seven signs in the Fourth Gospel (John 2:1–11; 4:46–54; 5:1–47; 6:1–15, 22–71; 6:16–21; 9:1–41; 11:1–57). The functions of the signs suggest possibilities for preaching.

For John, existence is divided into two spheres, heaven above and the world below. Heaven is

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Theological Perspective

the story raises theological issues, both in its Sabbath context and within the story itself.

Jesus' observance of the law is seen in his attendance in Jerusalem at one of the festivals (v. 1). At the Sheep Gate he encountered a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. Jesus knew of his prolonged troubles and took the initiative in asking him if he wanted to "be made well" (v. 6). Jesus gave the man an opportunity to desire a gracious healing. This would come not from the waters of the pool—which were supposed to be able to heal if a person entered them "when the water is stirred up" (v. 7)—but from Jesus himself.

Some have seen this question to be important, in that the man perhaps did not really want to be healed. He may have "enjoyed ill health." His routine, his situation, his way of life may have grown comfortable as the life he knew; and he may not have really desired a change. On a broader scale, when we encounter Jesus—who offers healing or a new way of life—do we want to be healed? Do we want to accept the grace, be changed from the way we are to what God wants us to be and become? This is the challenge of Jesus' question, both to individuals and to the church. When Jesus reaches out for us with the question about being "made well," our responses are not automatic. We realize that if we receive this gift, our institutional lives and personal lives can be greatly altered. Do we want to be made well?

To the man's answer, that he had no one to put him in the pool when the waters were stirred up, Jesus responded simply by healing the man. Jesus commanded him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (v. 8). Then "at once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk" (v. 9). The healing was instantaneous. It did not depend on whatever "right answer" Jesus may have been expecting from the man, in response to his question of whether the man wanted to be healed. The man's response did not create the healing. Jesus healed from pure grace, by his power, and out of his mercy. The man was the recipient of Jesus' pure care and love.

From this healing miracle, three theological points stand out.

Jesus Wants Us to Be Made Well. The healing miracles of Jesus show that Jesus' desire to heal those in need burst forth like a volcano when he showed his care in giving health and wholeness. Physical healing miracles like this show Christ's concern with the outward conditions of our lives, as well as the inward. Karl Barth emphasized that the healing

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that his primary definition is not "child of God" but rather "invalid." He has internalized society's view of himself, and he no longer sees any possibility of becoming a "valid" person except through a miracle, which always seems beyond his reach. Into his life on this day has arrived that miraculous power in the person of Jesus. Jesus' question may also mean that he is asking the man if he is ready to enter the world of humanity, if he is ready to enter into a whole new world.

Many of us who read this passage will experience uneasiness with Jesus' question to this "invalid" man. Many of us are in need of healing, just like this man. "Do you want to be made well?" It seems as if our automatic answer would be: "Of course; why do you even ask such a question?" The man's answer in this passage in John reminds us of the anxiety about our lives that resides in each of us. A fundamental part of the human condition is the anxiety about our status, about our longing to be loved, intertwined with our sense that we do not deserve to be loved. While we may not be as fundamentally afflicted as this man was, engaging his story often makes us uncomfortable, because we are so aware of the depth of our anxiety and our inability to feel good about ourselves, to feel accepted.

We spend much of our time and energy in a search for things that will make us feel valid and feel accepted. Some of us attach ourselves to money, some to racial classification, some to gender; this litany of attachments seems endless. This passage in John suggests a different approach: to turn our anxiety over to God. Jesus comes to this man not when the man has faith in him. This man does not even know who Jesus is and indeed cannot identify him after the healing. This is not a heroic story about the power of faith. He does not joust with Jesus, as does the Syro-Phoenician woman in the story about the crumbs from the table. He does not demonstrate deep faith like the woman with the flow of blood, who just wants to touch the hem of his garment. This story suggests that God is coming to us, just as the prologue to John puts it: "the Word became flesh and lived among us."

This sounds like great and hopeful news, until we get to the end of our lectionary passage, where we encounter an ominous phrase: "Now that day was a sabbath." We are reminded that we do not like people tampering with the systems that we have erected to hold back our anxieties—no healing on the Sabbath, please! We prefer to have in-valids to having people (including ourselves) healed by Jesus. It is a

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Exegetical Perspective

character that well represents passivity and lack of initiative. When Jesus asks the man if he wants to be made well, he does not answer the question directly (typical of the misdirection of Johannine conversations). He utters an excuse that betrays both his isolation and his inability/unwillingness to take action. After his healing he offers no gratitude or worship. When confronted by the religious leaders, he takes no responsibility for his actions or decisions (v. 11, sneaking a peek into the next section). John skillfully paints a picture of an unsympathetic character.

Looking back at the passage with the benefit of the modern discipline of behavioral science, the contemporary reader detects the possibility of insight into how people derive “secondary gain” from an illness. A condition, even with pain, also brings attention, freedom from responsibility, sympathy, the delicious pleasure of self-pity. The man seems isolated, so perhaps he did not derive attention from his illness; but he also never took a “failure is not an option” approach to getting into the water.

What insights might John have had into the secondary gain of illness? Even before the advent of the study of human nature as a science, an observant writer could detect how one who is sick “milks” the condition. What lay behind John’s portrayal of Jesus’ question, “Do you want to be made well?” Typical of the Jesus pictured in John, Jesus knows things about the man only by observation (v. 6, cf. 1:47), yet asks this question. Does Jesus ask the question for information or for the man’s sake? Does confrontation of the man’s passivity constitute part of the healing? Jesus calls the man to take up his mat and walk, actions that require initiative and obedience. Do Jesus’ instructions form part of the healing process, so that he learns to take responsibility and not depend on others or make excuses? If so, the rest of the narrative suggests that healing the man’s physical condition came more easily than curing his lassitude.

Perhaps as a side effect of the man’s psychological passivity, the man never comes to faith, even after experiencing a dramatic healing from Jesus. Famously, John explicitly tells the reader the purpose of the book: to lead the reader to believe (20:31). The disciples model this result by believing at the first sign, the water to wine at Cana (2:11). In that passage, the narrator tells the reader that the disciples believed. In the story of the blind man, he makes his own profession (9:38). John does not use either means to inform the reader that the healed man came to believe. John never carefully describes the process by which a person comes to belief. The

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characterized by immediate access to God and by such things as love, life, light, truth, health, community, and abundance. The world is characterized by the devil and by such things as hate, death, darkness, falsehood, sickness, isolation, and scarcity. Jesus reveals the presence of heaven in the world. Those who believe in Jesus can live in spheres of heaven while they are still in the world. At death, they follow Jesus to heaven.

A general aim of preaching on the signs might be to help the congregation recognize and respond positively to signs of heaven. Where, in our world, do we experience love, life, light, health, and the other values of heaven?

Since John 5 focuses on the move from sickness to health, a more specific aim of preaching on John 5 might be to help the congregation find analogies with the person who lay beside the pool for thirty-eight years, a very long time. Who today has been lying beside the pool of life for a long time? I think immediately of people who have been restricted for generations by systemic forces such as racism, sexism, poverty, and homophobia. A preacher might also imagine less obvious restrictions, such as abuse in childhood, or the inability to forgive or to receive forgiveness. What wounds and hurts have people carried for a long time?

To such folk, the passage is a word of assurance: God through Jesus is already in the world through forces leading to a world shaped by the values of heaven. The preacher should identify such forces and how they offer hope to people who have been living on the verge for thirty-eight years. Indeed, in John 20:22, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples. The church has the same Spirit that animated Jesus. How can the church become a sign of heaven in connection with those who long to dip in the pool of health and restoration?

Before Jesus’ arrival, the person beside the pool wanted to get to the water. However, other people not only would not help but stepped in front of him. Continuing the analogy, the homily might name individuals, groups, forces, and values that get in the way of a more abundant life for those stuck beside the pool. Indeed, the homily could explore how the church itself sometimes gets in the way of the values of heaven. The sermon could invite folk to turn away from obstructionism and to join God in solidarity with those who struggle to get to the water.

Identity in the ancient world was communal. To be was to be a member of a certain community. Many scholars think that John’s congregation was

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miracles mean God is “directly interested” in us, that despite our sin God has not given up on us. “Oppressed and therefore anxious and harassed” people can “live again.”¹ Jesus made the man well. Jesus’ care continues, and he can make us well too.

Jesus Can Make Us Well in Ways We Do Not Expect.

The man responded to Jesus’ question by saying he had no one to put him into the pool. He expected healing in the way with which he was familiar; this was his idea of how he could be made well. The human odds were against him, but his healing came from the blessing of Christ. Unexpectedly, Jesus shows us, as Calvin said, “how far His goodness exceeds the narrowness of our faith.”² Against all human hope, Jesus made the man well. Our faith needs always be open to the unexpected ways Christ can make us well—make us “well-er” than we can imagine!

Jesus Can Make Us Well, Even If We Have to Wait.

The thirty-eight years was a long time for this man to suffer. His ailment was not temporary. The period of time underscores the hopelessness of the man’s situation. We too may have to wait—what seems endlessly—for God’s healing to take place. Calvin reminds us: “For though there seems no end to our protracted troubles, we ought always to believe that God is a wonderful deliverer who easily shatters every obstacle by His power.”³ Patience is not easy to come by, but we should never close the door to what healing and new life possibilities may emerge for us, at any time. We can be made well, even when we wait!

DONALD K. MCKIM

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reminder that most of us do not want to be made well. We prefer whatever stories and artifacts we have accumulated to enable us to hold our anxiety at bay.

This story is good news! It proclaims that God’s grace comes freely to us, unrelated to our works. It proclaims that God’s intentions of healing are coming to fruition in Jesus Christ. There is a strong note of edginess and even warning that runs through this story, however. Our cultural image of being self-made does not like to hear that God’s grace is not related to our hard work. To imply that our status and our existence depend on God, a power who resides outside ourselves and is ultimately beyond our control, is to risk being charged with blasphemy in a self-made culture.

In a world where we allow so many other powers to define us, in a world where the gap between the “valids” and the “in-valids” grows wider each day, this story tells us that God is the One who makes us valid, and that God intends all of us to be valid. It tells us that God intends to bring the “in-valids” into the center of life. This intention can be exceedingly threatening to cultures whose central values include self-reliance and individualism, or to cultures that believe that God’s healing power must be confined to its rules and boundaries. In this sense, the question to this man is a question that exposes all of us and that includes all of us: Do we want to be made well?

NIBS STROUPE

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (repr., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1967), 224.

2. John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John: Part One 1–10*, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 119.

3. John Calvin, *Commentary on John 5:8* 4:120.

John 5:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

act of writing the book suggests that even though faith comes as a gift, the individual has choice in the development of belief. John does not explain what blocks the man's belief. This omission prompts reflection in the reader. The man's long-suffering condition suggested hopelessness. Even in that situation, a dramatic healing did not automatically produce faith.

What conditions within a person lead to the development of faith? What impedes faith? The man does not display hostility, the condition that prevents faith within Jesus' opponents. That hostility comes to the forefront in the confrontation over the Sabbath setting for the healing in the second half of the lection. The man meekly cooperates with Jesus' opponents, but does not seem to share their antagonism toward Jesus (v. 15). The passage offers the possibility that faith requires active seeking, the willingness to understand where healing and power come from.

Despite the call in this passage to move beyond obtuse refusal to seek a deeper understanding of Jesus' healing in order to come to faith, the passage offers reassurance. A popular assumption among churchgoers is that one must muster enough faith to prompt God to act. Under this assumption, a lingering condition suggests an insufficient faith. In the passage, Jesus takes initiative to offer healing in the absence of faith or determination. The man's answer to the question of his desire for healing leaves room for the possibility that he did not fully desire Jesus' intervention. Jesus offered healing to one who, both before and after the event, displayed no real faith or qualities that "deserved" what happened to him.

This dramatic passage, which occurs only infrequently in the lectionary cycle, offers the preacher an opportunity to explore the ways we embrace our pathologies, our lack of physical, spiritual, and emotional health. What benefit do we derive from our tempers, from inequality, from poor communication? What keeps us from the joy of experiencing healing and from belief in the divine power that invites us to health and wholeness, with all of its benefits and challenges?

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Homiletical Perspective

made up primarily of Jewish people who had been excommunicated from a synagogue.

On the positive side, John uses the signs (in concert with the rest of the Fourth Gospel) to reinforce the congregation's sense of identity: you *are* members of the family of God. That theme underlies John 5:10–47, especially 5:31–47. With so many people having questions about their identity these days, this motif could become the basis of an empowering sermon.

On the unfortunate side, one of the devices John uses to reinforce the congregation's identity is to delegitimize Jewish leadership ("the Jews," 5:10). As John portrays them in this passage, especially 5:10–18 and 5:39–47, Jewish leaders do not know God and belong to "the world." While we may have a certain empathy and understanding for caricature in the distressed situation of John's congregation, today's preacher needs to call the congregation's attention to the fact that John misrepresents Judaism. To repeat such caricatures today reinforces anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. A minister could use John's misrepresentation of the Jewish leaders as the starting point for a sermon that critiques not only John's caricature but the larger phenomena of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Moreover, John 5 highlights John's claim that only those who believe in Jesus know God and dwell in heaven while in the world (e.g., John 5:22–23, 37–38, 40–47). A sermon can assure Christians that God loves us and that we know something of God through Jesus, without simultaneously saying that God does not love people who are not Christians or that non-Christians cannot know something of God.

The Fourth Gospel is based on a dualism between heaven and earth. A preacher might challenge this dualism. Many Christians today think experience is more ambiguous. Attitudes and behaviors may lean more toward the values of heaven or those of the world, but experience is seldom purely one or the other. The preacher could encourage congregants to lean toward the values of heaven while living through the ambiguities of today.

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DAY OF PENTECOST

Romans 8:14–17

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Theological Perspective

Romans 8:14–17 marks a turn in Paul’s complex theological argument. Broadly speaking, in the first five chapters Paul has explored a theological history of sin and salvation. Then, in 6:1–7:25, Paul has described the implications of this history. Romans 8:1–17, though, finds its center in neither the recitation of our past nor the stipulations that follow such a recitation. Instead, it names a current-day reality—albeit briefly—before moving into a vision of the future beginning at 8:18. Verses 8:14–17 are the culmination of his argument about the present. So, is that vanishingly thin slice of time we name “the present” insignificant for Paul? Not at all. But also yes.

Yes, because the present, for Paul, is shaped by the Spirit of God; Pentecost is not so much an event that came several weeks after the first Easter as a claim about the continuing activity of God in the world. It is a kind of refusal on God’s part to leave us bereft of Godself. If God has not abandoned the present in favor of the future, then who are we to do so?

Indeed, the means by which God continues to act in the world—the Spirit—is not some external force that exists merely to resist the fear-driven servitude of a life of slavery or to maintain the status quo until something new and better comes along. Instead, the Spirit spends its energy shaping us, transforming us from a people of the flesh to a people of the Spirit

Pastoral Perspective

Paul has spent most of chapter 8 contrasting life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. The meaning of “flesh” is a source of debate, but perhaps the best approach is to note that “flesh” is life lived under the power of death, life constricted by fear and anxiety that arise from our knowledge of our own finitude and mortality. When we give ourselves over to the flesh, we tend to be dominated by fear, and we sell ourselves into slavery. For Paul, “flesh” describes the process by which we seek to answer the anxieties of our lives by turning ourselves over to the idols of the world, whether money or violence or racism or sexism or some other idol that calls our names.

In these verses Paul addresses this process and asks us to remember who we are and to consider a different answer for our anxieties. We are children of God, adopted by God in Jesus Christ. That is our primary definition, and we are bold to claim that we are children of God, not because of who *we* are or what *we* have done, but because of who *God* is and what *God* has done in Jesus Christ. Paul asks us to remember this primary definition as we wind our way through our journeys. Living in the Spirit is to live in the knowledge, freedom, and hope that we belong to God. A few verses later Paul will describe this as the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21). Paul recognizes that we are always in

Romans 8:14–17

Exegetical Perspective

The broad canvas on which to place the book of Romans is Paul's apocalyptic belief that history is divided into two ages—the present evil age and the coming realm of God. In the old age, the Jewish community maintains awareness of God's purposes. Gentiles, however, persist in idolatry and ungodliness and are often hostile toward the Jewish community. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the turning point of the ages. Through Jesus, God makes it possible for Gentiles to turn from idolatry to the God of Israel and to be joined to the eschatological community (the church) now and in the future realm of God.

The problem in the Roman congregation was that Gentile believers disrespected their Jewish counterparts. The congregation could not function as a community whose present life embodied qualities of the community as it would be in the final eschatological world. Paul directs Romans to Gentiles (Rom. 1:5), whom he wants to embrace the Jewish people. Paul admonishes Gentiles, "Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 15:7).

Many Christians think that "law" in Romans refers to Torah, God's special instruction to Israel. However, in apocalyptic literature, the word "law" sometimes refers to God's general command to

Homiletical Perspective

Think of a time when someone said to you, "I'm spiritual but not religious." What was he or she revealing? When pressed, such a person might scramble to distance himself or herself from denominations, ecclesial structures, doctrine, or affiliations with a particular church or faith community. Perhaps some are put off by the style or sentiment of those who boast about being "Spirit-filled Christians." Others might speak of their experience with "organized religion" as oppressive, even abusive. Still others judge religious ritual and practice to be deadening, irrelevant, or hypocritical. Many resist identification with any religion that claims to have a corner on the truth. However, there is still among these "spiritual but not religious" people an abiding desire for truthfulness in life and practice.

Pentecost Sunday is a good day to preach with such folks in mind. Today is a day to thank them for discerning "Spirit" apart from abstraction, stale language, and empty ritual; it is a time to meet their curiosity, intuitions, experiences, and convictions with the church's own. The church bears witness that Spirit and "religion" need not repel but may marry one another. This is the season when the preacher—with the assistance of the appointed texts—helps the church talk about Spirit and how it is related to God, creation, and human life.

Romans 8:14–17

Theological Perspective

and from a collection of slaves to a family of God. It prepares us for the future that Paul begins to describe in the verses that follow today's passage by preparing us to be the kind of people that can live in that future.

This is what makes the language of adoption in verse 15 so provocative. Adoption is not an expression of the natural shaping of biological families. It is an expression of choice—of willing into existence a relationship that otherwise could not exist. We do not become the people the Spirit is turning us into by simple processes of natural maturation; we become those people because we are being transformed into something we are not. We are becoming children who see God and recognize him as “Abba! Father!” rather than seeing God as a being of power and distant holiness, a master to whom we are obedient, but who is otherwise strange to us. We are being made into children in order to become heirs.

As heirs, we gain both new rights and new responsibilities. Later in Romans, especially in chapters 12 and following, Paul will lay out those responsibilities in greater detail—and attend to the present in more developed ways than in today's passage. Those details reveal the degree to which the concerns of the present are ethical concerns more than theological ones. That is, Paul's twin theological foci are the past that Jesus redeems for us and the future into which the Spirit is pulling us; our present consists largely of living in light of that past and toward that future.

This helps explain why the present is also insignificant for Paul: because life in the present is not its own point. Paul is no existentialist, for whom this life is as good as it gets. Instead, the Spirit is the means through which we are moved into God's future, and the present is a time of preparation for that future. Athletes train for the big game, but that the training is not its own point. Mothers prepare for childbirth, but the pregnancy is not its own point. The Spirit makes the present coherent—and therefore of limited import—because it is transforming us into children who are ready for an inheritance that is to come.

This also helps explain why suffering is part of our present: because transformation means loss. There is a seductive ease to fleshly life: desires can be sated rather than trained, comfort can be prioritized over fitness, and questions of meaning can be cheerfully ignored. There is a harsh peace in slavery: life is defined, significance determined,

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a dialogue between the life of the flesh and the life of the Spirit. He urges us not to settle back into the power of fear, which leads us into slavery, especially in times when mortality and finitude crowd themselves upon our consciousness.

I thought about these words recently as I went to visit a church member who has terminal cancer. She is about my age, and as I entered the hospice, I prayed, asking God to open me to the Spirit so that I could be who God needed me to be. I cried out, “Abba, Father!” as I recognized the fear of death. I asked God to strengthen me to be present with her in her struggles, instead of feeling overwhelmed with fear of my own mortality. When I came into her room, she burst out crying, both because of the pain in her body and the pain in her heart. As I experienced her struggle and fear, I felt anxiety well up in me. As the power of the flesh gripped me, the words formed in my mind: “Perhaps just a short visit this time.”

Thanks be to God, I was able to receive God's Spirit of life, so that I could be present with her and not be dominated by my anxiety in the presence of her terminal illness. I stayed with her for a long time, amazed and grateful for God's Spirit, which lifted me up from slavery and fear. It was a great gift to me and, I hope, to her.

We live in a culture that encourages us to disengage from one another in order to avoid the awareness of these struggles over the meaning of our lives. We seem to be constantly in flight from ourselves and from one another. We busy ourselves with work, which permeates our lives through technological extensions such as cell phones, laptops, BlackBerries. We distract ourselves with entertainment on television and video games and surfing the Web. Nevertheless, the pain and the awareness of our separation and finitude and mortality bubble up. Faced with this pain, many of us fall back into a spirit of fear and seek something to numb the pain. The list of painkillers that we use is long—TV, drugs, sex, food, money, work, the Web, the lottery (to name a few)—and relying on these painkillers often becomes an addiction. This spirit of slavery, as Paul describes it, is what makes us so easily distracted, so hurt, so hungry, so angry, and so prone to violence. It is life according to the flesh.

Paul urges us to live in the power of the Spirit, to consider that we are children of God through God's gracious love. Such an adoption will not exempt us from pain and suffering; indeed, such an adoption will draw us even more fully into the pain and

Romans 8:14–17

Exegetical Perspective

Gentiles regarding “what they should do to live, and what they should observe to avoid punishment” (2 Esd. 7:21).¹ The Jewish community obeys God by following Torah. Gentiles drifted into ungodliness. For Gentiles, the failure to follow this law means condemnation that is both difficulty in the present and punishment after death.

Romans 7 describes the struggle of Gentiles with this latter law. Even when Gentiles desire to obey, sin makes it impossible. Gentiles are slaves to the law of sin (Rom. 7:25) and, thusly, are condemned (Rom. 7:24). However, as already noted, God makes it possible for Gentiles to have a place in the realm (Rom. 7:4–6).

Gentiles in Christ are no longer subject to the law of sin and death (per above) but are set free and are animated by the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:1–8). Both sin and the Spirit are powers with personal force fields. Sin is not just an action or a state, but is an entity that attempts to control individuals and communities by leading them to violate the law. Living in the flesh, for Paul, means living in the grip of sin (Rom. 8:12–13). By contrast, the Spirit is one of God’s agents. For Paul, the Spirit fills people with the power of the coming realm. The Spirit is the “first fruits” of the new world (Rom. 8:23).

From the point of view of these larger concerns, Romans 8:14–17 is both an assurance and a challenge. It assures Gentiles that they are, indeed, led by the Spirit and consequently are children of God (v. 14). That is, they have a place in the church and will be included in the realm in the future. In addition, the text is an implicit challenge to the Gentiles to recognize that all who have the Spirit—including the Jewish community—are children of God. Indeed, the very words “children of God” come from the language of Judaism.

In antiquity, as so often today, people from one ethnic group feared people from other groups. Gentiles who became aware of their ungodliness feared the final judgment. When the Gentiles discount the Jewish people, they are slaves of the old world and its fears of other people and of the final judgment (v. 15a).

Paul reminds the Gentiles that God has adopted them into the eschatological family (v. 15b).

1. Around the time of the writing of the Gospels and Letters, some in the Jewish community articulated the “Noahide laws.” These laws—allegedly given to all people through Noah—explained what God revealed to and required of all people: prohibition of idolatry, murder, stealing, sexual unfaithfulness, blasphemy, eating the body of a living animal, and the positive command to set up laws to govern society. Gentiles were responsible to follow these principles. See *Jubilees* 7:20–28 (second century BCE) and the fuller description in the Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 58b.

Homiletical Perspective

At first, this task may seem awkward. People of the Word and the Book have had a difficult time saying what “Spirit” means. Sometimes disagreements about how the Spirit is present have divided the church. Even Jesus says that the Spirit is like the wind: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). However, the church knows the Spirit; it confesses that at its beginning, at Pentecost, the Spirit of God, the same that animated and inspired the ministry of Jesus, was there, as promised. God promises that the Spirit of Christ is present *any time* that the church is born again, becomes flesh, and matures as Christ’s body in God’s world. Articulating what the church knows about the Spirit is not a problem to be solved at Pentecost. It is an opportunity to let ourselves be caught up in its movement and see where it takes us. On Pentecost we land in a number of places in the New Testament where God’s Spirit is breaking into the church’s experience and understanding.

In Acts, we are huddled in one place with all the Lord’s followers (Acts 2:1), wondering whether the future of God’s actions through Jesus Christ is fizzling out. In response, the Spirit makes a dramatic entrance as rushing wind, tongues of fire, transformed speech, and opened ears. In John, the Spirit (depicted as an Advocate or Helper) is promised by the very one who embodies it (John 14:16) and who later will breathe it into the people (John 20:22). So bold are these images and promises that we might miss the text that is quietly wedged between Acts and John—a selection from Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

In Acts, the setting for the Spirit’s fiery descent is a “house where all were sitting” (Acts 2:2). Paul’s text literally brings it home. His talk about the Spirit is laced with familial imagery. In Acts, Luke opens the camera’s lens to encompass the Spirit’s work within the global family. To address the Roman church, Paul takes a snapshot of family life as he knows it. References to parents (“fathers,” in this case) and “children” punctuate what he says. Here there is no rushing wind or fire descending to make the Spirit’s presence evident. There is no group of animated individuals from all parts of the world publicly giving witness in their own tongues. Instead of Peter’s sermon on the last days (Acts 2:14–40), Paul gives us the image of household slaves trading bondage for a familial bond. The only sound we hear in Paul’s text is the cry of the heart—“Abba!” It is the sound of one’s soul awakening and becoming

Romans 8:14–17

Theological Perspective

and responsibilities limited. To be transformed from flesh to spirit and from slave to heir is to leave behind such seductive comfort and harsh peace.

More than that, this transformation means taking on a particular kind of suffering. It is not simply the pain of letting go of an old way of life; it is the anguish of being shaped into the form of one who was despised and rejected for revealing the failures of old ways of living. That is, as we are transformed, we discover not only the suffering of letting old things go but also the pain of being challenged and rebuffed by a world indicted through this change. Suffering, Paul reminds us, will be imposed upon us.

Paul offers us no cure for this suffering. To do so, in fact, would undermine his larger argument about our place in time: were there a cure now, we would find the Spirit's pull on our own spirits less urgent. Rather than a cure, Paul offers up companionship: the Spirit is uniting us with Christ as joint heirs to God's kingdom. Since it is the work of this same Spirit in our lives that catalyzes our suffering, such companionship would be cold comfort, were it not also for Paul's confidence that this companionship is meant to provide more than comfort. It is meant to give meaning to present suffering by situating it in the larger story of God's salvific work in history, which will be consummated in future glory.

That the lectionary includes this passage among its Pentecost texts serves to remind us that Pentecost—at least as Paul understood it—is principally about neither a past event nor the shaping of a church for the present. It is about the current work of being transformed from slaves to heirs, so we can share with Christ in a forthcoming inheritance.

MARK DOUGLAS

Pastoral Perspective

suffering of human life. In this movement from life according to the flesh to life according to the Spirit, we will find danger as we encounter our anxieties and fears. Paul suggests throughout this powerful eighth chapter of Romans that we will also find the possibility of real life. As our awareness of the pain grows, we are encouraged to cry out, "Abba, Father!" seeking God's powerful Spirit to keep us on the path to abundant life.

The power of the Spirit transformed those women and men who were gathered together on Pentecost from fearful folk to powerful witnesses for God's love in Jesus Christ (Acts 2). That same Spirit is still available to us in our daily walk as we seek to find our way in a world where hardship, distress, peril, famine, and sword seem to dominate life. Paul closes out chapter 8 with those images of distress that threaten to trap us in life according to the flesh. He reminds us then, as now, that God's loving Spirit is in us. He calls us to remember that nothing in all God's creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God. We are God's children; let us live in that Spirit.

NIBS STROUPE

Romans 8:14–17

Exegetical Perspective

The Jewish people are already in that household. The ancient world respected old things. The Gentiles—as newcomers—should respect the Jewish community as the more established members of the eschatological household.

Scholars rightly point out that the cry “Abba! Father!” refers to an ecstatic religious experience, probably speaking in tongues. This cry may have come at the emotional climax of a charismatically charged service of worship. Less commonly noted is the fact that Jewish people had regarded God as “Father” since Abram and Sarai. Paul’s point in verse 15c is that the Gentiles join their Jewish counterparts in confessing the living God. The Gentiles, then, should recognize that they are now in covenantal relationship with the Jewish community.

According to Paul, the cry “Abba! Father!” is inspired by the Spirit. The experience of the ecstatic cry is God’s gift to the Gentiles to assure them that they are indeed “children of God” (v. 16a). Since Gentiles are adopted fully into God’s family, they are now legal heirs of the inheritance that God has for them, namely, a place in the eschatological world (v. 16b).

However, this place in God’s household comes with a sober warning. Paul believed the world was in the last days before the apocalypse. Satan, the principalities, and the powers had entrenched to resist the coming of the realm. Consequently, the suffering of the faithful would increase as the apocalypse grew nearer (v. 17c). In this matter, as in others, the Gentiles join the Jewish community, which has a history of suffering because of their faithful witness (e.g., Isa. 52:12–53:12). The Spirit, then, is a resource that God provides to Gentiles to endure the final tribulation.

If today’s congregation is troubled with the same kind of animosity toward Judaism that was present in Rome, the text contains direct guidance. If the congregation does not disrespect Judaism but shows superiority toward other groups, the text may instruct the community by way of analogy.

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Homiletical Perspective

alive to the God of Israel and Jesus Christ. It is not our pattern of speech that is transformed, but rather our understanding of ourselves.

Think of what it feels like when some good friend says to you, “You are like family.” You know then that your relationship has deepened. You recognize a level of intimacy and trust that you had not assumed before. When a group of friends and acquaintances becomes a “family of choice,” all become joint heirs to a legacy of shared memories, convictions, joys, sufferings, and sorrows. The Spirit is present when that happens in church.

Imagine the impact this part of Paul’s letter must have had on the Roman church of his time. The church family in Rome had been fractured by an imperial edict. In 49 CE the Roman emperor Claudius had expelled Jews (including Jewish Christians) from Rome under the suspicion that Jews who believed in Christ might cause a political disturbance.¹ The “parent” community (the Jews) was separated from the “children” (the Gentiles), opening a vacuum in leadership for the Roman church. When the edict was lifted (upon the death of Claudius), the Jewish Christians returned to their churches, only to find that they had been displaced. New Gentile leaders were putting their stamp on the community, perhaps distancing themselves from the legacy of Israel. New questions and concerns must have surfaced about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within God’s realm. It was an opportunity for a spirit of fear to intrude, open up old wounds, and put old boundaries into place.

What Paul says here counters that encroachment. What binds these Christians to one another (and them to us) is the same Spirit that gave direction to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Like them, we are being transformed into a family of choice that says, “Our Father,” with one voice, eagerly awaits the fulfillment of God’s promises, and knows the sufferings of Christ’s body as its own.

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1. David L. Bartlett, *Romans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 2.

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

1 Kings 17:17–24

¹⁷After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” ¹⁹But he said to her, “Give me your son.” He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰He cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” ²²The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” ²⁴So the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”

Theological Perspective

On its face, this passage follows a smooth narrative arc: a boy dies and his mother charges Elijah, her visitor, with bringing this tragedy upon her; Elijah takes the boy into a private room and charges God with bringing the tragedy upon them; God hears Elijah and gives life back to the boy; Elijah returns the boy to his mother, who recognizes Elijah as a man of God. The passage, moreover, marks the culmination of Elijah’s early narrative: God feeds Elijah by raven at the Wadi Cherith; God feeds Elijah, the widow, and her son with unemptying jugs of oil and meal at Zarephath; God gives life back to the widow’s son. In each instance, God reveals God’s interest in preserving and promoting life in the midst of the forces of death.

The passage, however, is riddled with narrative holes: Why does the widow accuse Elijah of bringing death into her house when he has already brought life through the miracle of unemptying jugs? For that matter, why does she accuse him of bringing her to God’s attention so long after Elijah shows her that God is attentive to her need? Why does Elijah ask God if the widow’s words are true before asking God to return life to the boy? How does the woman know that the “word of the LORD in your mouth is truth” (v. 24) when his prayer was said in private? If this passage is meant to reveal that Elijah now has power

Pastoral Perspective

Chapter 17 introduces us to Elijah, the prophet who was so important to Israel. Elijah is called by God to be a prophetic voice to King Ahab, but before he can really engage the king and his vast power, he must go into the wilderness to get ready, setting a precedent for later prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Elijah goes to a widow’s home, where he finds that she and her son are near starvation. When she shares her last bit of food with Elijah, a great miracle happens: the flour and the oil do not run out!

I remember hearing the first part of this story when I was a boy. It struck me then as a wonderful story of faithfulness—Elijah is faithful; the widow is faithful; God is faithful. It was such a happy story that I wanted them to get married. Like the boy in the story, I had lost my father, and I was sustained by a loving and dedicated mother who was poor. How I longed for Elijah to come and live with us!

Then comes the shocking second part of the story that interrupts our pastoral narrative: the boy dies. I remember my anger at this turn of events. How could the boy die when things were going so well? I felt the sorrow and bitterness of the widow as she questioned Elijah. I knew Elijah’s anguish as he questioned God. I joined Elijah and the unnamed widow in their lament and passionate anger: “O my

1 Kings 17:17–24

Exegetical Perspective

The Deuteronomic historians wrote and edited the books from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings about the time of the exile. Their overarching purposes were (a) to help the community understand why the exile took place, by offering a theological explanation in narrative form, (b) to reinforce the community's confidence in God's power to deliver them, and (c) to prompt the community to take remedial actions that would help return them to their land and, once they had returned, to prevent a recurrence of the exile.

All of these purposes come into play in the immediate context of our text. Beginning with 1 Kings 11:1, the writers emphasize the unfaithful behavior by Israel's leaders, climaxing with Ahab marrying Jezebel and worshiping Baal (1 Kgs. 16:31–34). Idolatry is a fundamental violation of the covenant. Elijah, the agent of God's judgment, invokes a curse—drought—on the land (1 Kgs. 17:1–7). The message is clear: The exile is God's punishment on Israel for practicing idolatry (and other violations of the covenant).

Nevertheless, within the drought God cared for Elijah, first by feeding the prophet at the Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs. 17:2–7) and then through the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17:8–16). Today's text brings this sequence to a climax as God, through the

Homiletical Perspective

Famine. Drought. Disease. Wilted crops. Women and children on the brink of starvation. Birds of prey circling in a cloudless sky. It is a landscape you can see every evening on the Internet, in magazine photos, or on the news. Some autocrat, warlord, or dictator is pursuing economic programs or hoarding diminishing resources that leave the poor destitute. It is a grim reminder that the web of life in the global village is fragile and interconnected. Helplessness pervades. Fear finds its voice and asks, "Can it happen here?" Some wonder, "Is there a word from the Lord?"

That is the landscape and the situation presented in this text from 1 Kings. The choices made by a succession of faithless kings have had environmental consequences. So busy were they at building an empire and a legacy for themselves that they have ignored the warnings issued by prophets, specifically, that their turning away from their allegiance to the true God of Israel will lead to spiritual and economic impoverishment. Now the skies are withholding their gift of rain, and the thirsty earth fails to yield sustenance. It is enough to get anyone's attention.

The stage is set for God's intervention by means of a prophetic ministry. King Ahab is presented as an agent of powerlessness and death. He is unable or unwilling to provide for the basic needs of the

1 Kings 17:17–24

Theological Perspective

over life and death—power which he will soon use against the prophets of Baal—why is the passage so clear in noting that God, not Elijah, brings life? Why, when she has already witnessed miracles and recognized that Elijah is a “man of God” in verse 18, does the widow need to confess that Elijah is a “man of God” in verse 24?

No amount of reference to editorial redaction or mother’s grief gets us entirely clear of the holes in the passage. The holes are too big to be overlooked by an editor interested in smoothing things over; the woman’s character is insufficiently developed to suggest any grief process she has gone through. A more viable explanation for the holes? Exposition on Elijah’s character as it is shaped by his relationship with God. That is, the holes are themselves revelatory about how Elijah behaves and, more importantly, how God acts.

What, then, do we discover?

First, Elijah is demonstrably human—something that has not been especially clear up to this point, since he has mostly been either the passive recipient of divine favor or a conduit of divine instruction. Elijah, far more than the miraculous healing and certainly more than the widow or her son, is the center of a story that sets a trajectory toward his confrontation with Ahab, Jezebel, and the priests of Baal.

In this passage, though, he is full of confusion and faith about his relationship with God (Is the woman right? Why shouldn’t God give back life?); full of confidence and doubt about his own abilities (taking the widow’s son from her but carrying him to a private room in which to pray). If we discover God favors Elijah in the two pericopes about ravens and unemptying jugs, we discover Elijah’s character in this, the third pericope. This Elijah stays consistent throughout his longer story: confident enough to take on the prophets of Baal, but frightened of the repercussions of doing so; faithful enough to speak a word of divine judgment against Ahab and Jezebel, but confused about whether God has left him alone after doing so. Elijah does not shed his human skin in order to become a great prophet.

Second, we see that Elijah prays as a human. Within consecutive verses, he both accuses and implores. A prophet so great that he appears alongside Moses during the transfiguration (Matt. 17), Elijah is, nonetheless, sufficiently distant from God to challenge God, even while being close enough to God to trust that God can bring life from death. It is this prophet—this human, praying prophet—that God hears.

Pastoral Perspective

God, what kind of God are you? Do you kill boys like this?”

Some commentators note that the text never says that the boy is actually dead, that he may have been in a coma. Perhaps so, but the point is that the widow and Elijah believe that the boy has been delivered over to death. This is not a story about inadequate and primitive methods of determining death. It is a story about God’s involvement in our lives, in all parts of our lives. This story affirms that God is intimately involved in our lives. The problems come when things fall apart in our lives—when our children die, when our spouses or partners are lost to us, when a tragic occurrence brings us unimagined misery. Where is God then? Does God cause these bad things? This story invites us to go into the wilderness with Elijah to have a time of preparation for deepening our lives and our relationship to God.

In these terrible situations, we are reminded in a stark way that we are creatures, mortal and finite. Our nation experienced this sense of mortality on September 11, 2001. We thought we were in charge of our lives and even in charge of the world. Then, in just a few minutes, we received a horrible reminder that we are creatures, and that we are not in control. We have learned that a few men can shake us to our foundations, and fear and anxiety have continued to dominate us as a people. This experience puts us in a place to understand why the people of Israel ran to embrace idols like Baal in Elijah’s time; they longed to find security in the face of fear and death.

The prophet Elijah was called to speak God’s voice in these kinds of times, speaking to political powers like King Ahab and speaking to the people who had turned their hearts and hopes over to Baal. In order to walk in these shoes, Elijah must first prepare his feet and his heart through the encounter with the death of the widow’s son. He lifts up a passionate prayer of protest to God, an acknowledgment in its most primitive form that God is separate from us, that God is not us. It is also a deep prayer of belief that God is intimately involved in our lives. Elijah does not lift up a passive, accepting prayer: “O God, your will be done.” He lifts up an anguished, hurting, passionate, protest prayer: “O God, are you doing this?” He cries out on behalf of all those who know the power of chaos and death.

Elijah believes that God is involved intimately in life, and he believes that God is on the side of life. He is outraged at the power of death, and he protests

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prophet, resuscitates the woman's dead child. The reader knows the stakes when the prophet confronts the feckless Ahab in the passage that immediately follows the reading for today (1 Kgs. 18:1–18). Ahab can follow the path of the widow in our text and be restored, or can continue in idolatry and face collapse.

The widow in our text is living in poverty, and her survival is threatened. As a woman in antiquity, her identity is tied with that of a man; when her child dies, she is pushed to the very edges of society, as she is a person with no resources and marginal identity. Her situation resembles that of Israel in exile, in that the community is now greatly diminished and its security and identity are threatened.

The woman and Israel differ in one important respect. The woman is a Gentile. Indeed, the story takes place in Zarephath, located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the land of Phoenicia, a center for the worship of Baal. The text does not indicate directly that she worshiped Baal, but that is possible. If so, a key point of the story (see below) is stunning.

After her child dies, the woman asks, "What have you against me, O [representative] of God? You have come to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" (v. 18). Commentators often describe the woman's statement as bad theology. However, we might also interpret it as a confession of sin. The woman recognizes that her participation in idolatry (the quintessential sin in the Deuteronomistic History) has brought about this calamity.

However, as she did in the previous passage (1 Kgs. 17:8–16), the Gentile woman does what the prophet says. She gives the prophet the corpse of her child. By repenting and doing what the prophet says, this Gentile woman is a model for Israel.

Elijah takes the dead body upstairs. Then prophet stretches on the corpse three times while praying. This action is a prophetic gesture (or a prophetic symbol) in which the action of the prophet represents the message. The living prophet is stretched out like the corpse, thus dramatizing the message that the decedent will become alive again.

The message is clear. If Israel repents of idolatry and listens to the prophets, God will restore the community. The stunning aspect is the fact that the woman is a Gentile (possibly a Baal worshiper). If God responds so powerfully to such a woman, how much more will God restore the fortunes of Israel! Thus the story is a powerful invitation to the community to repent and to follow the teaching of the prophets.

Homiletical Perspective

children of Israel: he leaves them to "eat and die" (17:12). Elijah the Tishbite barges into Ahab's royal court without credentials, unannounced, and without fanfare, bearing a word that is blunt and harsh (17:1). Elijah must be harsh in order to get the court's attention and break the cycle of corruption and violence that has brought suffering upon the people. Elijah's abrupt entrance into the narrative turns the rather dreary history lesson in 1 Kings upside down; suddenly the record and commentary on the reign of kings yields to the performance of a prophet. The turn gives us a chance to see a history of God's dealings with God's people from the underside, through the eyes of faith. It is the history to which Jesus will appeal when he announces the thrust of his ministry in Luke's Gospel. In fact, he will make reference to this text (Luke 4:25–26)!

What develops here is the account of a faithful figure that contrasts to the line of unfaithful kings. The preacher would do well to take a cue from what the composer of 1 Kings does. Whom do we trust to give us an account of the full meaning of history as it takes shape? Where does the power lie? An exclusive and uncritical focus on the most vocal and visible power brokers and news makers can obscure what God is doing underneath, behind, between the lines, and in the margins. Too often voices of authority are shrill enough to drown out what the Author of existence is up to—that is, until the preacher shows up.

By the time we get to this point in the story, Elijah is a prophet on the lam. His faithful witness to the word entrusted to him has left him utterly dependent on the God he serves. He has escaped the grasp of the court, but in the bargain he has broken loose of conventional sources of support and security. He has come through the wilderness, where he has been sustained and fed by the natural world. Before the wadi dries up, it quenches his thirst. When he lacks nourishment, ravens feed him. The images of manna falling, ravens feeding, and later, in the Gospels, loaves and fishes abounding "in the wilderness" link stories of God's provision in the midst of scarcity. Now Elijah is on the move again. He comes to the encounter with the widow we have been waiting for.

Look at what unfolds from the widow's standpoint. She lives in Sidon (Jezebel's homeland), beyond the boundaries that Ahab governs but not outside the reach of God's mercy. She represents all people who do not enjoy the advantages of privilege and who have fallen through the safety

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Theological Perspective

In the story, for the first time Elijah, not God, initiates the conversation. More than on any occasion up to this point, Elijah claims the mantle that God is bestowing on him. Perhaps, the story hints, we pray most authentically when we do so honestly, not perfectly.

The story, though, is not simply about Elijah. In the process, we discover a consistency to God's actions. All God has done so far throughout this narrative arc is to bring life to places of desolation, to bring abundance to a world shaped by scarcity. In the midst of land claimed by Jezebel and the priests of Baal, God is still at work, feeding those in need, comforting those who grieve, and restoring life to those who see only death. The widow may accuse and Elijah may doubt; however, God behaves consistently.

All of which makes the oft-developed analogy between Elijah and Jesus—an analogy that the lectionary tempts us toward by pairing this passage with that of Luke 7:11–17—easy to misplace. The point of comparing Elijah's raising of the widow's son to Jesus' raising of another widow's son might not be to help us see Elijah in Jesus. After all, Jesus doesn't question God or even pray that the boy might be raised. He simply says, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" (Luke 7:14). He does so because, as they approach a site of death, he feels sympathy for the widow.

The suggestion here is not that Jesus behaves like Elijah—though he too raises a widow's son. It is that Jesus behaves like God, bringing life out of a place of death—not by asking God to do something, but simply by doing something. Jesus, the Christ, reveals humanity and divinity in his actions. This is one to whom we pray in honesty, even as we follow imperfectly.

MARK DOUGLAS

Pastoral Perspective

to God, who seems in this instance to be on the side of death. Elijah will need all that passion and fire as he gets ready to face King Ahab, and as he prepares to face the power of Baal in the hearts of his people.

The inclusion of this passionate prayer of protest by the redactors suggests that God wants this kind of prayer. God wants prayers of praise and thanksgiving, confession, and intercession, but God also wants our prayers of protest. God wants our passion, not our perfection. God wants us, with all our struggles and questions and wrestlings, and in this sacred biblical text we see this desire laid out for us.

The question that the widow and Elijah posed to God in this story still haunts us. In the story, God brings the boy back to life, but 20,000 children in our world will starve to death on the day that I write this. Does God cause this? I can confidently answer no. Does God allow this? If I say yes, I must also raise my prayer of protest as Elijah did. I still do not have adequate answers to these questions, but my struggles with them and with God and with myself have increased my passion for God and for justice. In whatever we are called to do, like Elijah we must be passionate and persistent witnesses to God's presence in our lives and to God's call for justice throughout the world.

NIBS STROUPE

1 Kings 17:17–24

Exegetical Perspective

In addition, this narrative reminds Israel not only of the absolute sovereignty of God over all peoples but of God's will to bless all peoples, including idolaters. Even more striking, the text admonishes ancient Israel—and the church today—to look for the widows of Zarephath in our world who reveal to us God's restoring power. Indeed, today's preacher might seek to name individuals, communities, and movements in our contexts that are as surprising to us as the widow of Zarephath was to Israel.

Luke's story of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain is obviously modeled on the narrative of Elijah raising the dead heir of the widow of Zarephath (Luke 7:11–17). For Luke, the story confirms that Jesus is a prophet in the line of Elijah and Elisha, thus supporting Luke's Christology, which pictures Jesus as an eschatological prophet. For Luke, the story also reveals that God operated through the ministry of Jesus in ways similar to the working of that power in Israel. The ministry of Jesus and the life of the church are thus not in conflict with Israel but in continuity with Israel. The text in Luke indicates that the life-giving power represented by Elijah resuscitating the corpse was present not only in the ministry of Jesus but in the life of the church. The passage in Luke is a paradigm for the ministry of the church in Acts; as Jesus raised the young person, so the apostles and Paul raise the dead in Acts (Acts 9:36–43; 20:7–12). For Luke, this shows that individuals and communities can experience resuscitation by coming into the sphere of Jesus through the church. Today's preacher might ask, "Where does my congregation today encounter the restoring power represented in these stories?"¹

RONALD J. ALLEN

Homiletical Perspective

She does not know the God whose word is directing Elijah to her door. When he shows up, he does not come with a ready program for her salvation; rather, he comes as one in need. Like her, he is vulnerable, a person deeply at risk.

Naturally she is resistant. She has nothing to offer except a share of her meager existence. Her faith and trust in what the prophet is promising her (v. 13) is as small as the cup of water and the little cake she gives him. It is faith enough to bring about abundance when the promise of provision is fulfilled. However, even that measure of faith is tested by the illness of her son. Is this ragged one that showed up at her door an agent of death after all? Has she bargained away the life of her son for a bottomless jar of meal and jug of oil? Is this how this strange God of Israel works? Is the God of Israel so quick to offer a blessing with one hand, only to demand a sacrifice with the other? How often have we prayed for and received a blessing, only to be seized by the fear that it and more will be taken away in tragedy?

In what follows, God's agent Elijah shows that God's grace and concern is not confined to Israel or to the church. God's abundance is willed for all, especially for those represented by this widow. The prophet of Israel gathers up the afflicted child, advocates for him and his mother, issues a protest on their behalf, and calls for new life, even when death has come to swallow it up. In ways that remain cloaked in mystery, a faithful God—through the ministry of God's servants—breathes new life into God's afflicted people.

RICHARD F. WARD

1. Luke 17:11–17 is the case study in Ronald J. Allen, *Thinking Theologically: The Preacher as Theologian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). This book considers how eleven different theological families ranging from liberalism through evangelicalism to racial and ethnic theologies might understand preaching.

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

2 Samuel 11:26–12:10, 13–15

^{11:26}When 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, 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

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Having “taken” Bathsheba for an adulterous affair and then devised a shrewd cover-up “taking” the life of her husband, David reassures Joab, and himself, that Uriah’s death was simply another regrettable casualty of war: “Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another” (2 Sam. 11:25). We prefer the newspeak term of “collateral damage” to deceive others and ourselves regarding our complicity across a whole range of murder, oppression, injustice. Sin is rarely a matter of simple ignorance. It is willed ignorance, an oxymoron rendered plausible by our incredible capacity for self-deception. Enjoying the power of kingship, David is confident this is the end of the matter.

“But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, and the LORD sent Nathan to David” (11:27b–12:1a). One must admire Nathan’s courage and wisdom. Having witnessed the ease with which David dispatched Uriah, Nathan knows the risk of confronting the king with the truth. His courage is matched by the wisdom of choosing a more subtle means of engagement: He constructs a parable. A parable is much more than a simple illustration or example story. It is a subtle but subversive genre of religious language, challenging indirectly the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live. (A myth, by contrast, aims to unify and sustain a certain

Pastoral Perspective

How the mighty have fallen. David’s famous lament at Jonathan’s death years earlier (2 Sam. 1:19) might well echo in Nathan’s mind as the prophet grimly prepares to confront the darkness that now engulfs the house of David. Although empires often fall from within, YHWH’s abundant blessing upon this charismatic king has made David seem immune to the corrosive effects of power. Yet things have gone off-kilter. Abandoning his army before the siege of Rabbah, David indolently remains at home to grasp after a different sort of conquest. Adultery escalates into murder, and thus Nathan must navigate a tangled web of sin to confront the one who has so greatly displeased the Lord (11:27).

This plotline will feel familiar to a modern audience. Sexual trysts of corrupt political leaders—complete with self-serving cover-up attempts—have become a staple in today’s tabloid culture. There is a timelessness present in this cautionary tale. It is a snapshot of the human condition, a Pandora’s box illuminating the cascading consequences of sin, made all the more mournful because of David’s courage and faithfulness as leader of the united kingdom.

Preachers may be drawn to another intriguing element of this story: the manner in which Nathan deals with David. Prophets are not generally known

2 Samuel 11:26–12:10, 13–15

this deserves to die; ⁶he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

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.” . . . ¹³David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” Nathan said to David, “Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. ¹⁴Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die.” ¹⁵Then Nathan went to his house.

Exegetical Perspective

The story of King David and Bathsheba is one of the best-known portions of the court history presented in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2. Second Samuel 11 recounts the first portion of this story: David sees Bathsheba and arranges for her to be brought to him. They come together, and Bathsheba becomes pregnant. David attempts to cover up his sin. First, he brings Bathsheba’s husband Uriah back from the front lines so that the Bathsheba’s pregnancy can be attributed to her husband. When this fails, David has Uriah placed in harm’s way during a crucial battle. Uriah is killed; Bathsheba performs the proper mourning rituals, then comes to the palace, becomes David’s wife, and bears a son.

It seems that the clever and resourceful David has once again finessed his way out of a difficult situation. Except that, in God’s eyes, this situation is different. The ominous words “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” mark a distinct turning point in David’s story. Until this juncture, the narrative holds up David as one chosen and blessed by God. Though God’s perspective is presented in subtle ways, often more implied than explicit, as David prevails over every difficulty and enemy, it is clear that God is with him.

God cannot, however, stand silent in the face of David’s actions regarding Bathsheba and

Homiletical Perspective

One of Emily Dickinson’s poems begins with a verse that could have been an epitaph for the prophet Nathan: “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.” In today’s reading from 2 Samuel, Nathan, the main prophet in the court of King David, pronounces God’s judgment on David for the king’s sins against Bathsheba and Uriah. The path of that pronouncement is intentionally indirect. Like the nineteenth-century New England poet, Nathan seems to understand that “the Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.”

As preachers we aim to make it plain, to communicate clearly and directly the message we intend to deliver. One way for the preacher to do that is to tell the congregation what she is going to say, to say it, and to tell them what she told them. Nathan opts for another, more nuanced way; he delivers God’s word to David by way of a “juridical parable.” A juridical parable urges the hearer to judge the circumstances of the parable, and once the judgment is made, the lens drops and the hearer realizes that he has judged himself.¹ Indeed, that is Nathan’s intent. He uses the parable to “tell it slant” and to elicit self-condemnation from David.

1. Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 16.

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view of oneself or one's family, religious tradition, or nation. Myths construct the moral world in which we live, or think we live, summarizing essential values and commitments, and providing a model of how one should live. Even the best myths fall prey to sin and subtly become ways of justifying various kinds of sordid behavior, such as the exclusion of individuals and peoples that are different.) A good parable penetrates the defenses constructed by an individual or society and holds up a mirror or a window that invites the hearer to see oneself or one's community in a new way. The parables of Jesus, for example, are not "earthly stories with heavenly meanings," but sharp challenges to prevailing notions of the kingdom of God: How far does God's love reach? Who is excluded from the kingdom? Is wealth a sign of faithfulness to God?

Like many who accede to positions of power, David constructed a myth exempting himself from rules that apply to less distinguished personages. Yet Nathan banks on his intuition that David still harbors a deep passion for justice, at least where others are concerned. Nathan's parable is not an allegory—which might have warned David to get his defenses up—but a story that turns on an easily recognizable injustice: A rich man "takes" from the very poor. David explodes with righteous indignation, still unaware that the parable is aimed at him. Then, after a brief but pointed statement by Nathan, David recognizes himself in the parable and begins his repentance.

Nathan's statement throws new light on David's sins, suggesting that the adultery and murder were rooted in, or at least entangled with, the sin of ingratitude. The contrast between what God had "given" and what David had "taken," as the rich man had "taken" the lamb of the poor man, could hardly be sharper. Ironically, ingratitude is an especially powerful temptation for the affluent, for those who have so much, and seems more fundamental and inclusive than even covetousness. Covetousness is the "desire for," the "lusting after" someone or something, but the reference to God is only indirect. Ingratitude, on the other hand, is the failure to acknowledge that which God has already so generously given, and perhaps also the failure to discern what really matters. Gratitude is a fundamental virtue and nourishes, I believe, a host of other virtues, such as generosity, compassion, and the courage to seek justice.

Repentance and acceptance of forgiveness can be very difficult, especially for the powerful.

Pastoral Perspective

for subtlety, especially in egregious circumstances, so it is rather unexpected that Nathan chooses to employ *mashal*, or parable, to confront his king. Parables are not common in the Hebrew Bible, but Nathan has made a wise choice in using a parable for such a delicate situation. Some commentators have likened a well-told parable to a Trojan horse, alluring enough to gain access to the inner courts of an opponent whose defenses seem impenetrable.¹ It is likely that well-fortified walls of denial and rationalization hid the crushed-out, lovesick David.

At first glance, Nathan's parable of the Ewe Lamb seems to have little in common with the form Jesus most often employed. Several of the New Testament parables seem akin to "riddles," designed intentionally to confuse listeners or veil "secret wisdom" (see Matt. 13:10–17). In other examples, we see Jesus' use of the parabolic form as a lush canvas, a kind of aural enigma used actively to engage listeners into imagining a new world order, one radically reshaped by the inbreaking of God. This dynamic typically occurs by infusing familiar story elements with a kind of fairy-tale quality or unexpected plot twist. The strangeness creates a sense of puzzlement. As theologian Sallie McFague has suggested, a parable opens a fissure in the surface story (the secular), allowing listeners a glimpse of another realm (the religious). The surreal elements of a parable hook the listener into active participation. How is the kingdom of God like a mustard seed? McFague stresses that in Jesus' parables, the aim is confrontation toward some kind of decision, evoking not knowledge but action.²

In this particular text, Nathan's parable takes the guise of a legal case, no doubt similar to those David heard regularly as mediator of the royal justice system. The account is plain: a rich fellow steals an animal from a neighbor to feed a visiting guest. On the surface, this story sounds like a clear example of criminal greed, which is why David reacts with such indignation. What, then, makes this story a parable? New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass calls this text a "juridical parable." He comments: "By hiding their referent, juridical parables elicit a self-condemnation from the hearer(s) through the aid of an image. The hearer is forced to judge the circumstances of the parable, and then the lens

1. Joel Snider, "Hearing Parables in the Patch," in *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006), 83.

2. Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

2 Samuel 11:26–12:10, 13–15

Exegetical Perspective

Uriah. David breaks the commandments against covetousness, adultery, and murder. Through his actions, David has fulfilled Samuel's dire predictions in 1 Samuel 8:11–19 about what kingly rule will mean for God's people. The prophet Nathan arrives on the scene to declare that royal, cynical perceptions of reality are not consistent with God's purposes.¹

Nathan's confrontation with David is written in a different style from the storytelling in the rest of the succession narratives, leading some scholars to speculate that Nathan's parable is a later interpolation into a text that originally flowed from 2 Samuel 12:1 directly to 2 Samuel 12:15b. The tale of the rich man and the poor man's lamb functions as a juridical parable: a parable that intentionally disguises a real situation so that the guilty parties unwittingly passes judgment upon themselves.

Though the parable is clearly intended to mirror the plot that has recently unfolded in David's life, the characters in the parable do not correspond neatly with the actors in the real-life drama. The most straightforward interpretation is that David is the rich man, Uriah is the poor man, and Bathsheba is the little ewe lamb. However, in the actions initiated by David, it is Uriah who is killed, not Bathsheba. The inexact correspondence has invited conjectures about alternative identifications of the characters in the parable. The three verbs Nathan uses in 12:3 to describe the ewe's relationship with the poor man—eating, drinking, lying down with—are the same actions that Uriah refused to do with Bathsheba. Perhaps Uriah is the lamb and Bathsheba is the poor man. What of the traveler whose arrival precipitates the slaughter of the ewe lamb? In one Talmudic discussion, the rabbis identify the traveler as the evil inclination that has visited King David and caused him to sin.²

However one connects the dots, the parable describes a great injustice. The rich man's actions in the story are a travesty of the Middle Eastern value of hospitality. They are, in fact, cruelty masquerading as hospitality. Upon hearing the parable, David pronounces judgment: "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" (12:5–6). The word used here for pity or compassion, *hamal*, denotes an action taken by a person with the power

1. Walter Brueggemann, *I and II Samuel*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 279.

2. Jeremy Schipper, "Did David Over-Interpret Nathan's Parable in II Samuel 12:1–6?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 2 (2007): 387.

Homiletical Perspective

If good preaching is "good news," then it might appear that condemnation is neither a common nor commendable pursuit for today's preacher. If, however, the preacher aims to "tell all the Truth," then she will occasionally seek to name what is hard to name, for the purpose of transforming lives. This is daring work. The preacher can appreciate Nathan's courage. Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb, while not subtle to the reader, tactfully removes the scales from the king's eyes and greases the hinges of his heart. The preacher-prophet brings David into a story rife with injustice, allows him to make a judgment against the parabolic scoundrel, and then turns on the lights: "(Surprise!) You are the man."

However hard to it is to say and hear, Nathan's truth telling is vitally important for David. Nathan not only allows David to see the gravity of the king's sins; the prophet inspires David to claim what he has done and to repent. David says, "I have sinned against the LORD" (12:13). Clearly David has sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba too, and those omissions cry for due attention. Clearly David's confession does not bring Uriah back to life or save the innocent life of the child that Bathsheba will bear. Nevertheless, the fact that David recognizes his deplorable behavior is an indication that henceforth his relationships with others and with God will be different. If such is the case, then Nathan has offered a liberating word to someone enthroned with power and imprisoned by sin.

In this way, Nathan offers a path for the preacher of this text. Nathan bids the preacher to walk the slippery bank of truth telling and to plumb the depths of sin. Frederick Buechner follows the prophet's lead, urging preachers to tell the truth. For Buechner, preaching the truth includes the hard-to-look-at evidence of our humanity and the unconditional love of God. In *Telling the Truth*, Buechner writes this:

The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy.²

Preachers and congregants alike may favor "the comedy." In the congregations that I have served,

2. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1977), 7.

2 Samuel 11:26–12:10, 13–15

Theological Perspective

(Consider how many lawsuits end with a generous financial settlement but with no admission of guilt.) However, even repentance cannot undo the damage wrought by David's sin. Sin poisons the family and the nation, and thereby sets up a series of tragedies directly linked to David's adultery and murder. Violence does beget violence. Sexual violence begets sexual violence. The sins of the fathers (and mothers) often are visited upon the children and grandchildren. (I do wonder why verses 11–12 were omitted from this lectionary reading.)

Still, I find it abhorrent to suggest that God remits the judgment upon David and visits it upon the innocent child about to be born to Bathsheba. In an age of extremely high infant mortality, it makes more sense to attribute the death to natural causes. Perhaps we should let go of our personal conceptions of divine judgment, the image of God as a judge issuing carefully considered penalties from the bench. Judgment often seems much more impersonal and indiscriminate, a recoil of the moral order created by God that visits penalties upon the guilty and innocent alike.

We must be careful here, lest "natural" becomes too easily a tool of self-deception. It is often the case that the "natural" deaths of innocent children can be traced to our doorstep. Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino, for example, implores us to "be honest with reality" and to recognize that recent earthquakes and hurricanes in El Salvador were not simply "natural" disasters. Those who lost the most in those events of nature were the poor who had no choice but to live in mud huts on denuded hillsides, because the fertile plains were growing coffee for export.¹ Are we who are U.S. citizens, like the rich man in Nathan's parable, complicit in "taking" from the poor because we have for decades supported a regime in El Salvador that has increasingly marginalized the poor, giving them the scraps of land that no one else wanted? Natural death is not always "natural."

Closer to home, are we "taking" when we purchase fresh produce without protesting the plight of the workers, including many illegal aliens, who were likely paid less than minimum wage for harvesting the fruits and vegetables that we enjoy?

JOHN C. SHELLEY

1. Jon Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, trans. Margaret Wilde (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2004), esp. 1–11, 29–48.

Pastoral Perspective

drops and one realizes that he or she has judged himself or herself."³

Perhaps the Ewe Lamb is not such a plain account in any case. We recall that the word "parable" comes from the Greek *paraballein*, from *para*, "alongside," and *ballein*, "to throw." Parables often operate via implied comparisons. In this case, David symbolically is cast as the rich man and Uriah as the poor neighbor. We see the connection that Uriah has been wronged, that something precious has been ripped from him (first his wife, then his life), but what is gained by casting Bathsheba as the baby lamb? What a strange image!

Indeed, this parable guards its message far more closely than it first appears. A careful read reveals the characteristic surrealism of the parabolic form, effected here through a dramatic intensification of story elements. Not only has a rich man stolen; he has stolen from his *neighbor*. Not only has he stolen from a neighbor; he has stolen from a *poor* neighbor. Not only has he stolen a poor neighbor's lamb, he has stolen his poor neighbor's *only* lamb. Not only is this the poor man's *only* lamb; it is a *special* lamb, one raised as part of the family. There is oddness present: the baby lamb drinks from the poor man's own cup and is cuddled like an infant against the poor man's bosom. Indeed, this little ewe is like "a daughter" to the poor neighbor. How does casting the man and his lamb as a father-daughter relationship increase the stakes? An uncomfortable sense of taboo is evoked, a predatory plundering by a person of power (a general and king) over subordinates. It is a profoundly disturbing boundary crossing.

Nathan's rhetoric allows David to look in a mirror. The indirectness of the parable opens up space for David to relocate his moral compass, unencumbered by self-preservation. Nathan's terse "You are the man!" (12:7) becomes like the jaws of a trap snapping shut, forcing David to face what he has done. In this space comes the piercing recognition that leads to contrite confession: "I have sinned against the LORD" (12:13).

In reading Nathan's parable, we realize that we are all "the man." Though we may not rule kingdoms or become enmeshed in scandal, nonetheless we all have "sinned against the LORD." It is comforting to realize that one of the greatest heroes of the Bible was so imperfect, yet still so perfectly loved by God.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON-BOSSERT

3. Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 13.

2 Samuel 11:26–12:10, 13–15

Exegetical Perspective

to condemn a victim to death. In Exodus, when Pharaoh's daughter sees the infant Moses, she has *hamal* for him. She is in a position as Pharaoh's daughter to condemn Moses to death, but she spares him. David recognizes that the power imbalance in the story makes the injustice all the more egregious.

Then Nathan turns David's words of judgment into self-condemnation: "You are the man!" (12:7). Like the rich man in the parable, David's cynicism and greed have made him indifferent to the suffering caused by his actions. Nathan then proceeds to declare God's sentence of punishment against David. The sword will never leave his house. The lectionary leaves out that portion of God's sentence that describes graphic sexual violence. As David has taken another man's wife, so God will allow David's enemies to take his wives.

In declaring this sentence, Nathan puts his own life at risk. A ruler grown callous to matters of life and death would presumably have no problem killing a prophet who pronounces God's judgment against him. This makes David's response to Nathan a significant surprise. Instead of banishing or killing the prophet, David repents, saying, "I have sinned against the LORD" (12:13). David's repentance restores the relationship between David and God. As one commentator comments, "In the eleventh hour, David owns himself a child of the Torah."³ Still, what David has done cannot be undone. The consequences of his sin will reverberate through generations to come.

Indeed, some suggest that the purpose of the succession narratives was at least partly to explain to the exiles in Babylon the root of their suffering. It all began with the people's insistence on having a king. Even the king chosen for them by God ultimately fulfilled Samuel's warning about the abuses of royal power. The consequences of that abuse resulted in God's judgment on the house of David—which led to the downfall of his dynasty and to Israel's exile. As a people, their choice in 1 Samuel 8 led to David's choices in 2 Samuel 11, which precipitated the exile. Still, in David's act of repentance there is hope. The restoration of David's friendship with God allows the exiles to hope that God will show *hamal*, compassion, to them and bring them home.

KAREN C. SAPIO

Homiletical Perspective

church leaders have, in one way or another, pulled me aside and asked if we could "ease up" on the prayer of confession. In each case, the individual found the act of admitting wrongdoing to be too depressing.

To be sure, lingering in the mirror of the "things we ought not to have done" is not particularly fun. However, Nathan's parable propels us, like David, to examine our minor and major tragedies. Nathan's message opens up in us the possibility of knowing a fuller measure of God's redemptive *hesed* or steadfast love. The preacher today has an opportunity, if not responsibility, to follow Nathan's path toward liberation and transformation.

Daring work, indeed. Who really wants to hear that we fall short of anything, let alone the holy expectations of God? However, such truth telling opens the door to repentance, and repentance opens the door to new (and renewed) life. In her book *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Repentance begins with the decision to return to relationship: to accept our God-given place in community, and to choose a way of life that increases life for all members of that community."³ To be sure, admission of sin is a beginning for David. Whether the king's remorse leads to decisions to "choose a way of life that increases life for all" is a question today's text cannot resolve.

Like Nathan and David, the preacher has decisions to make. Shall we invite hearers of this Word to watch from the mezzanine the drama that unfolds between prophet and king? Shall we invite God's beloved to take their places, to enter into the tragedy, and to act in new, life-giving ways? If the preacher chooses the latter, she will not do so from a director's chair, but as a player in the tragedy-comedy of human sin and God's salvation.

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3. Brueggemann, 282.

3. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000), 66.

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

Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Selah

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Selah

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;

Theological Perspective

This psalm is one of the traditional Penitential Psalms, but it is really more a psalm of thanksgiving. Throughout, there are elements of Wisdom in the poem (vv. 1–2, 6–7, 10), but the theme of sin and forgiveness is primary (vv. 1–5), with the psalmist conveying the lessons learned through this experience, including trust in God (vv. 6–7). The word of God that came to him in this incident is described (vv. 8–9), followed by the psalmist's summarizing an important lesson, and a conclusion, which is a call to be glad and rejoice in God (vv. 10–11).

Traditionally, this psalm was attributed to David after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. Regardless, the psalmist is expressing personal experience. We are far removed from the psalmist in time and context, but experiences of sin, forgiveness, receiving the word of God, trusting God, and rejoicing in God are continuing realities for Christian believers. This psalm is an anatomy of Christian experience. The people of Israel may have used the psalm in the temple while presenting a sin offering. The power of the psalm affected Augustine, who was said to have "often read this Psalm with weeping heart and eyes, and before his death had it written upon the wall which was over his sick-bed,

Pastoral Perspective

In the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*¹ one of the three protagonists, Delmar, gets baptized by the lotus-eaters after his escape from prison. He emerges from the river in great exultation that he is now free and reunited with the Lord, guaranteed salvation. That exultation touches the joy that begins this psalm—a sense of reconciliation and release from the anxiety that always reminds us that we are lonely and alienated. Delmar convinces one of his colleagues, Pete, to join him in the baptism in order to feel the joyous release. Pete is baptized, and he too shares in the happiness "of those whose transgression is forgiven" (v. 1).

Everett, the third colleague in the movie, is skeptical about this process and brings the others down when he reminds them that the state of Mississippi, from whose imprisonment they have escaped, will likely not recognize their freedom in the Lord. Their anxiety about being recaptured still has warrant. Likewise, this psalm is a profound insight into the necessity and the complexity of the process of forgiveness—receiving it, giving it, accepting it. In the Christian tradition, this psalm has long been known as one of seven Penitential Psalms (the others being

1. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* directed by Joel and Ethan Coen (Studio Canal, Touchstone Pictures, 2000).

Psalm 32

at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Selah

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

¹¹Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 32 has most often been classified as an individual psalm of thanksgiving. Usually such psalms express an individual's thanksgiving for deliverance from distress (e.g., Ps. 34), resolving a crisis of faith (e.g., Ps. 73), or recovery from illness (e.g., Pss. 30, 103, 116). Psalm 32 expresses thanksgiving for the forgiveness of sin. In Christian history this psalm (along with Pss. 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143) has been designated as a Penitential Psalm to be read on Ash Wednesday and at other times during Lent. Though the psalm as a whole does not present an explicit expression of penitence, this theme is touched upon in verse 5.

It is interesting to note further that Psalm 32, along with some other psalms (e.g., Pss. 25, 31, 34, 37, 40, 41, 49, 51, 62, 67, 73, 111), has terminology and themes related to Israel's wisdom tradition. The didactic character of some of these psalms supports the suggestion that they were used in public worship settings, where an individual offered testimony in the form of teaching and admonition (e.g., vv. 1–2, 9–10).

Psalm 32 is clearly separated from the surrounding context as a discrete piece. It is one of the Psalms of David that predominate in Book I (1–41) of the Psalms. It is also called "A Maskil" (see also Pss. 42, 44, 45, 52–55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142), a term whose

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 32 presents the preacher with an opportunity to help the congregation to think about an important topic in both the Torah, Prophets, and Writings and the Gospels and Letters, but underemphasized in many congregations today: sin.

Several decades ago the psychiatrist Karl Menninger famously asked *Whatever Became of Sin?*¹ While Menninger was aware of how the church has abused the notion of sin and has used distorted understandings of sin to abuse people, he argued that a full-bodied life includes a healthy concept of sin, as well as practices of confession and forgiveness.

While Menninger wrote in 1973, we could make the same lament today. Our liturgies may contain prayers of confession and assurances of pardon, but we seldom give detailed attention to (1) what sin is, (2) how it affects us, (3) what God offers in forgiveness and restoration, (4) how we might faithfully respond, and (5) the benefits that accrue to us and the world. These five elements could provide the structure for a doctrinal homily.

While the Torah, Prophets, and Writings—the Scripture that we usually call the Old Testament—use several words for sin, each with a different

1. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973).

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that he might be exercised and comforted by it in his sickness.”¹

The Blessing of Forgiveness and the Peril of Silence.

The psalm begins with expressions of joy at the blessings of divine forgiveness. This forgiveness is very thorough, covering the totality of sin. This is seen in verses 1–2a, where sin is described in three ways: (a) transgression (disobedience or rebellion, cf. Ps. 51:1); (b) sin (faulty action or missing the way, cf. Ps. 51:2); and (c) iniquity (wrong, evil, or going astray, cf. Ps. 51:2). These are a portion of the range of Old Testament descriptions for sin; here the triad points to the extensiveness or entirety of sin—affecting the whole person.

The antidote for sin is also triadic. The psalmist rejoices in the blessedness (“Happy are those . . .”) of the divine pardon. Since sin is *contra* God, only God can deal with the ways in which the human/divine relationship has been ruptured. Here God forgives transgressions (v. 1a), meaning that God bears, carries, or lifts up the burden of sin (cf. John 1:29); covers sin (v. 1b), meaning that God hides or conceals a stain to be wiped out, so it is no longer visible (or powerful); and “imputes no iniquity” (v. 2a), meaning that God does not regard as guilty, as a sinner (cf. 2 Sam. 19:19).

True happiness is in receiving this complete forgiveness from God for the sin that has affected our lives in such a range of ways. The heaviness of sin, its weight, and what it does to our strength and vitality are acknowledged by the psalmist (v. 3) as something about which he has “kept silence.” This seems to have taken a physical toll, leading to “groaning all day long” (v. 3b). The perils of silence here were life-threatening. As Karl Barth has noted, “this silence was the seed of death in his existence in this past.”² To refuse to acknowledge sin to one’s self and to God leads ultimately to this kind of death.

The Wonder of Forgiveness and the Word of

God. The turning point comes when the psalmist confesses sin (v. 5). In language reminiscent of verse 1, sin is acknowledged and transgressions confessed to the Lord. Then comes the decisive and personal action: “*You* forgave the guilt of my sin” (v. 5d). The sin that brought about the guilt is now forgiven by God’s act. God alone can do this. God makes the

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Pss. 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). In these psalms the captivity and imprisonment to sin are depicted in various forms, along with the need for confession, forgiveness, and acceptance.

This psalm emphasizes a direct engagement with God and a physical sense of the captivity to sin and the alienation from God that results from such captivity. In verses 3 and 4, we hear about weight loss, sleepless nights, and psychosomatic pains that plague the psalmist. All of us are well acquainted with the physical power of this spiritual disease: the resentment that is bottled up in our psyches and in our bodies when we have been wronged and refuse to move toward reconciliation; the blindness of self-righteousness that makes us overlook our captivity, our culpability, our need for forgiveness; and the omnipresent anxiety that acts as an underground spring feeding the rivers of both resentment and self-righteousness in our lives.

It is difficult to read Psalm 32 without thinking of another chapter 32, in the book of Genesis. In that chapter the complex patriarch of Israel, Jacob, must confront the very process described in Psalm 32. He has lied to his father Isaac and stolen from his brother Esau, and after a long exile with his uncle Laban, he wants to go home, to find some peace. In order to do that, he must pass through Esau’s land, and his body and soul are in turmoil over his longing for home and his awareness of why he is not at home. Jacob tries many evasive maneuvers, exercises that all of us know in our own journeys, but in the end, it comes down to him and God. During the night before he crosses into Esau’s land, a being comes in the night to wrestle with him. (How many of us know this late-night wrestling!) Jacob finds forgiveness in his wrestling, in his naming his transgression, but he is wounded forever because of it.

The process of forgiveness—of acknowledging our culpability, our resentment, our struggle to reconcile—is both complex and costly. This is true on an individual level, as our psalmist indicates, and on a communal level as well. When I do workshops on the continuing power of race in our lives, I find that it is difficult to get those classified as “white” to acknowledge that we participate in racism and have benefited greatly from it. The process of self-discovery and of recognizing culpability is so similar to verses 3 and 4 of this psalm; there are often gnashing of teeth and deep feelings of guilt when recognition comes. Sometimes it is like verse 9, where the instructor is asking us students not to be like horses or stubborn mules.

1. Cited in A. F. Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1906), 161–62.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 578.

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precise meaning remains uncertain but that may designate a particular music or theme. The psalm is structured in two parts with a conclusion: verses 1–5; 6–10; 11. The first part opens with a wisdom-sounding affirmation (vv. 1–2; cf. Ps. 1; Prov. 2:12–15, 20–22). Next is a description of the psalmist's distress and act of confession (vv. 3–5). The second half of the psalm directs a prayer of thanksgiving to God for divine protection and deliverance (vv. 6–7) and then declares the psalmist's intention to teach in good Wisdom fashion all the assembled (vv. 7–10). An enigmatic term, *Selah*, stands at the end of verses 4, 5, and 7. Its exact meaning is uncertain, but it possibly is a musical notation indicating a pause or a change in the melody. The psalm concludes with an admonition to be glad and rejoice in the Lord (v. 11).

There are two textual problems to be noted. First, in verse 4 the MT has *nehpakh leshaddi*, a phrase quiet unclear in Hebrew. The JPS translation has “my vigor waned,” JB “my heart grew parched,” NIV “my strength was sapped,” NRSV “my strength was dried up.” Each of these readings tries to unscramble several different suggestions found in the Septuagint, Samaritan, Vulgate, and second–fourth-century-CE Greek translations. Each can be defended, but none of them significantly alters the overall meaning of the psalm. The NRSV is probably as good a translation as one can give.

The second problem is found in verse 6, where the untranslatable Hebrew phrase *le'eth metso' raq* has prompted several different translations. The NRSV has “at a time of distress,” JB “in a time of trouble,” NIV “while you may be found,” JPS “upon discovering [his sin].” The NRSV is probably the best reading.

The distress experienced by the psalmist is not made explicit, but it was severe enough to cause weakness of body and loss of strength (vv. 3–4). The psalmist's situation changed only when “sin” was acknowledged (v. 5). Did “sin” (some kind of disease perhaps) cause the physical difficulties, or did “guilt” produce depression psychologically? There is no way to know with certainty. In Hebrew there are three basic terms for what we call “sin”; all are used in this psalm, as they are in Psalm 51. *Pesha'* basically designates willful “rebellion” (vv. 1, 5). *Hata'ah* is a more general word for “missing the mark” (vv. 1, 5). *'awon* refers to either the fact of or the guilt from deliberate misconduct (vv. 2, 5). The details are not articulated, but when the psalmist acknowledged the fact of transgression and sin and confessed, the Lord, YHWH, took away the guilt and forgave the

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nuance, they share an idea presupposed by Psalm 32. God created the world for blessing and gave the human family guidance in how to live in blessing individually, with one another, and with nature. Sin is failing to follow God's guidance. Sin disrupts the life of the individual and the community. Sin refers to intentionally or unintentionally violating God's purposes and thereby interrupting God's plan for blessing self and community.

From form-critical and literary-critical points of view, Psalm 32 has the general structure of an individual thanksgiving, moving from lamenting a situation through God's response to giving thanks and making witness. Psalm 32 adapts this structure and infuses it with themes of confession of sin and forgiveness. The form of the psalm could suggest a movement for the sermon.

1. The psalm begins with an introduction (vv. 1–2) inviting listeners to connect with the psalm and sermon their own struggles with transgression. The preacher might point out that many people who struggle with transgression hope to find a path to happiness (blessing; see Ps. 1).

2. Verses 3–4 tell of the desperate situation of having violated (in unspecified ways) God's purposes and, consequently, groaning and drying up. When does the congregation encounter such behavior and consequences? Preachers tell appropriate stories from their own lives of being in such situations.

The psalmist attributes the consequences to God (v. 4). If the preacher's theology holds that God does not directly inflict suffering on people, the preacher could still point out that violating God's purposes sets in motion destructive patterns that eventually erode life. We invoke judgment on ourselves.

3. God restores the psalmist through forgiveness (v. 5). When the psalmist tried to hide transgression, the effects of the transgression disrupted life. When people confess, God forgives. Confession of sin is not a work the believer performs to earn forgiveness. Forgiveness is already in God's heart when transgression occurs. However, forgiveness cannot achieve its purposes (reempowering people in the way of blessing) until confession of sin creates the space in which forgiveness can work. Forgiveness does not mean acting as if transgression never took place. Through the act of forgiveness, God assures the community that the effects of sin no longer (entirely) determine the present and the future. The path to blessing is open. Again, preachers might draw on their own experiences of making confession and discovering empowerment.

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Theological Perspective

relationship right. God has put an end to the past by being the justifying, pardoning God. This is the way of restoration and new life.

What follows is an exhortation or advice (vv. 6–9) by the psalmist to others who worship the Lord, urging them to pray to God when they are in distress or need. God is a “hiding place” (v. 7a, cf. Ps. 27:5), preserving and protecting those in danger. Enemies of all kinds can be met by God’s power. Deliverance can occur.

A word from the Lord has come to the psalmist in the midst of his distress. God has let the psalmist know he was being like a horse or mule: “without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle” (v. 9ab). The good news is that God has overcome this dullness and has promised to instruct, teach, and counsel the psalmist “with my eye upon you” (v. 8b). This word of the Lord is a divine promise. God will teach and show the way one should go, giving the understanding the psalmist lacks. God provides the way forward. The future is open, since God is the one who goes before us. When sin is confessed and forgiven, we are protected, secure, and led by God. God’s eye is upon us (v. 8b; Ps. 33:18). God takes care of us, keeping the divine eye upon us.

The Joy of Forgiveness and Praise to God. Since no news can be better than forgiveness of sins and the ongoing protection and guidance of God (providence), the psalm ends with the lesson that the wicked face torments, while those who trust God are surrounded by God’s “steadfast love” (Heb. *hesed*; Ps. 31:7). The “righteous” and “upright in heart” are exhorted to express joy and praise to the God they trust in faith to forgive sin and to lead and guide them through life. As Calvin said, this is as if the psalmist had said, “There is nothing to prevent them from assuring themselves of God’s favor, seeing he so liberally and so kindly offers to be reconciled to them.”³ Joy and praise are the only appropriate responses to the blessings and wonder of forgiveness. In Jesus Christ, we Christians find all this in full measure!

DONALD K. MCKIM

Pastoral Perspective

This connection between forgiveness on an individual level and on a communal level keeps this process from becoming a hollow exercise, and helps prevent us from turning to self-righteousness or a shallow moralism. A lack of connection between the need for individual forgiveness and communal forgiveness is one of the main factors that often make the church and our individual members seem so mean and repressive and unloving. As the psalmist indicates in verse 5, when recognition comes, it is the beginning of release and relief and integrity, and even of hope, as the power of the anxiety and the anger start to subside and lose their hold on us.

The psalm begins and ends in joy. As we stumble through life trying to find home and hope, we should recall these possibilities of joy and salvation. Many are the streams of resentment and blindness and longing that run through our individual and collective psyches. Is forgiveness possible? Oh, yes! Is forgiveness easy? Oh, no! Is the process worth it? Oh my, yes! Our journey to forgiveness and a sense of being found and being home will be complex and arduous, as Homer’s *Odyssey* and its modern incarnation *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* indicate.

The possibilities of such a journey are stunning and truly unbelievable to us who have yet to take the first steps. The psalmist, like Jesus, knows our every weakness, whether it is our body’s wasting away, our groans too deep for words, or our strong resistance that makes us seem like mules to God. The psalmist promises us hope and joy in this journey of forgiveness. We may find the embrace of our brother or sister whom we have wronged, or we may find the healing touch of Jesus, who bore the brunt of the cost for us. As the psalmist says, we may even shout for joy!

NIBS STROUPE

3. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm 32:11*.

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Exegetical Perspective

sinner (v. 5). This is what prompts this declaration of thanksgiving.

The psalmist lifts a prayer to God and urges all the “faithful” (*hasid*; an adjective meaning “good” or “pious”) to turn to God in times of threat or distress (v. 6). God provides the only sure security and possibility for deliverance (v. 7). Then the psalmist determines to “instruct” and to “teach” the hearers (v. 8). As at the beginning, when the psalmist used wisdom-related terminology to declare the forgiven to be “happy” (a term found frequently elsewhere in the psalms: see Pss. 1:1–2; 2:12; 41:2; 84:5, 12; 112:1–2; 119:1–3; also see Prov. 3:13; 8:34), the style of wisdom instruction returns. In verse 9 a metaphor of a stubborn animal is used to make the psalmist’s point (for such a wisdom use of animals in comparisons, see Prov. 6:6–11; 27:8; 28:1; 30:15, 19, 24–31).

The psalmist’s final testimony declares YHWH’s “steadfast love” for all “who trust in the LORD” (v. 10). The term Hebrew *hesed* can be translated as “grace” (JB), “unfailing love” (NIV), “favor” (JPS), or “steadfast love” (NRSV). *Hesed* denotes loyalty, unbending devotion, reliable care, goodness, kindness, fidelity. When used in the language of covenant, it indicates the ongoing commitment of the covenant partners. When one exercises *hesed*, one also does justice (*mishpat*). One can be called *hasid* (“faithful” as in NRSV and JPS, or “godly” as in NIV). To know God’s *hesed* one must “trust” (*boteah*), place one’s confidence, in the Lord.

The conclusion of the psalm is a ringing call for the “righteous” (*tsadiqim*) and the “upright in heart” (*yishre leb*) to be “glad” (root *smk*), “rejoice” (root *gil*), and “shout for joy” (root *rnn*). The righteous and upright in heart are not “pure” or without fault, but they are forgiven and thus stand in the right relationship with God (see also Rom. 4:1–8). They are urged to join the psalmist in rejoicing at God’s marvelous act of forgiveness.

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

4. The psalmist exhorts others to make similar confessions of sin (vv. 6–9). Without using material that would embarrass members of the congregation, the homily could encourage listeners to identify situations for which they need to confess. Given the fact that the church has given little detailed attention to confession of sin and receiving forgiveness, the preacher would help a good many people with a practical discussion of how to go about these things.

The preacher’s theology may suggest reframing verses 6b–7. This part of the passage suggests that trouble no longer befalls us when we confess and receive forgiveness. This is simply not true to experience. Indeed, taking responsibility in a public way for complicity in sin sometimes increases people’s troubles when others who refuse such responsibility turn against the penitent. While confession and forgiveness do not preserve us from trouble, they do provide a perspective within which to make our way through continuing trouble. In this sense, God is a “hiding place” (safe space).

5. Like the introduction, the conclusion (vv. 10–11) moves away from the specific situation of the psalmist and toward a general affirmation. Those who continue to sin, the wicked, will eventually collapse, whereas those who trust in God (those who trust God with the confession of their sin) will experience God’s steadfast love, that is, covenantal loyalty. The response is to be glad, to rejoice, and to shout for joy.

The psalm is short enough for a preacher to employ a verse-by-verse format. If the congregation has a big screen, the sermon could include PowerPoint slides showing the movement of the psalm through its five parts.

Along the way, the preacher might point out the varieties of ways the Bible and Christian tradition understand sin. For example, for Paul, sin is an active power. For the Fourth Gospel, sin includes not believing in Jesus. For the book of Revelation, sin includes complicity with the idolatrous Roman Empire.² The message might include PowerPoint slides depicting each concept. A preacher could further develop a sermon series in which each message focuses on a different understanding of sin.

RONALD J. ALLEN

2. An easy-to-access summary of views of sin is Harold W. Attridge, “Sin, Sinners,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katherine D. Sakenfeld et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 5:263–79. Theologians across church history and into today offer their own distinctive understandings of sin.

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

Isaiah 65:1–9

¹I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here I am, here I am,"
To a nation that did not call on my name.
²I held out my hands all day long
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;
³a people who provoke me
to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens
and offering incense on bricks;
⁴who sit inside tombs,
and spend the night in secret places;
who eat swine's flesh,
with broth of abominable things in their vessels;
⁵who say, "Keep to yourself,
do not come near me, for I am too holy for you."
These are a smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that burns all day long.

Theological Perspective

The second and third sections of Isaiah (40–55, 56–66) offer a radically transformed vision of God, Israel, and the world. Chastened and inspired by years of exile and return to a devastated Jerusalem, various writers within the Isaiah school render explicit themes long latent in the Hebrew tradition: The Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, is also Creator of all that is; the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, is not only Israel's God but the only God there is; and the Lord intends for salvation to reach to the ends of the earth. Isaiah 65:1–9 and the surrounding texts, especially Isaiah 63–64 and 66, reflect a theological struggle to make sense of divine judgment and salvation within this strange new world.

The Lord speaks in Isaiah 65:1–9 and pronounces judgment upon the sin of exclusion, focusing on those who engage in various rituals with the aim of setting themselves apart as "too holy for you" (v. 5). The sin of exclusion has been especially destructive over the last century, with ethnic, religious, and national differences being used to justify segregation, economic oppression, and genocide. Exclusion is an especially insidious form of the sin of pride, which is rooted in our existential anxiety and our constant struggle to quell that anxiety by setting ourselves apart as superior to all others.

Pastoral Perspective

Growing up in the 1970s, I sometimes read a feature in *The Ladies Home Journal* magazine called "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" This monthly "agony column" presented husbands and wives discussing their perspective of a failing relationship, concluding with a therapist's summation. Much of the book of Isaiah seems reminiscent of just such a dialogue. On one side, the nation of Israel has issued an anxious complaint: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, YHWH! You have hidden your face from us and delivered us into the hand of our iniquity" (cf. 64:1, 7b). In our text for this Sunday, YHWH offers a plaintive reply: "I held out my hands all day long, saying 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name" (cf. 65:1–2). Through this vulnerable exchange, we glimpse bitter disillusionment, symptomatic of a relationship gone heartbreakingly asunder. Can this marriage be saved?

Isaiah is called to witness and record this wrenching dialogue between creature and Creator. In Isaiah 63:7–64:12, the Israelites lament being plundered by invading armies. Jerusalem and the temple have been destroyed, the people shamefully led like cattle into Babylonian exile. After enjoying copious divine attention and protection as God's elect, the people now suffer a loss of identity. God is hidden, the doors of heaven barred shut. "O that

Isaiah 65:1–9

⁶See, it is written before me:
I will not keep silent, but I will repay;
I will indeed repay into their laps
⁷ their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together,
says the LORD;
because they offered incense on the mountains
and reviled me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
full payment for their actions.
⁸ Thus says the LORD:
As the wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, "Do not destroy it,
for there is a blessing in it,"
so I will do for my servants' sake,
and not destroy them all.
⁹I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;
my chosen shall inherit it,
and my servants shall settle there.

Exegetical Perspective

The final chapters of Isaiah are in many ways an integration and culmination of many themes that appear and develop throughout the book. Contemporary scholars find evidence of conscious intertextual mirroring between these concluding chapters and other parts of the Isaiah corpus. Today's text may launch the conclusion of both Third Isaiah and a summation of the entire Isaiah collection.

God's pronouncements in the opening verses appear to be a direct response to the prayer of lament in 63:7–64:12. This lament bewails God's silence and God's failure to act on behalf of God's people. The lament asks in 63:11, "Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea?" It concludes chapter 64 with the challenge, "After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD? Will you keep silent?" The opening verse of chapter 65 defends God's accessibility. God has not hidden himself. To the contrary, God has called and reached out, but has been ignored by a rebellious people. In the opening verses of chapter 65, the usual direction of prayer has been reversed. The proper relationship of God and God's people in prayer is that the people seek after, call upon, and hold out their hands to God. Here that proper relationship is reversed. Here God must seek after, call out to, and reach out to God's people. That the appropriate relationship between

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When what binds a community together loses its adhesiveness, when things fall apart, we are inclined to place blame. It is someone's fault, and more often than not, it is someone else's fault.

Reading the chapters leading up to today's passage in Isaiah, we find more of the same. The covenantal relationship between God and Israel has broken down. Israel is in exile. Something is sorely amiss, and someone is to blame. As a result, Israel files charges against God. The exiles' questions are lined with accusation: Where was God? Why did God let that happen? Why did God not save us? Why does God not do something now? Are God's arms long enough and strong enough to redeem us?

God has heard it before. Earlier, God countered with rhetorical questions: "Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?" (Isa. 50:2b). Isaiah reasserts God's position: "See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear" (59:1). Again, in today's passage, God's counterargument surfaces: "I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices" (65:1b–2). The problem is not divine error but Israel's disobedience, and that indictment is promptly followed with

Isaiah 65:1–9

Theological Perspective

The sin of exclusion often appears as a benign withdrawal into an exclusive community and a letting be of those who do not qualify: “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you” (v. 5). Exclusion, however, is rarely innocent, for it so easily justifies self-interested campaigns against those who are excluded. We belittle, intimidate, harass, and even steal and kill, both because our superior status sanctions it and because it is necessary to maintain the self-deception that sustains our justification of exclusivity. We exclude others based upon a massive self-deception that we have earned the right to segregate ourselves in exclusive company. We fail to acknowledge the basic humanity of the other. The irony of verses 1–9 anticipates the same irony in the teachings of Jesus: Those who exclude others will themselves be judged and excluded.

The announcement of judgment in 65:1–9 is clearly intended as a response to the moving prayer of confession and petition offered by the “servants of God” in Isaiah 64. In marked contrast to those who set themselves apart as “too holy for you,” the prayer is strikingly and wonderfully inclusive. The petitioners repeatedly invoke the voice of “all” the people: “We have all become like one who is unclean” (64:6), “we are all the work of your hand” (64:8), “we are all your people” (64:9).

Remarkably, there is no distinction in this prayer between righteous and unrighteous, reflecting the humility and contrition of God’s servants (66:2) and daring to hope for “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). All this heightens the emphasis that it is the Lord who speaks in chapter 65 and proclaims the judgment. The new understanding of God’s salvation reaching to the ends of the earth does not mean the abolition of judgment; but it does insist that final judgment is the prerogative of God alone. How far this is from the exclusion sanctioned by Samuel against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:1–3!

Our world today has been transformed almost as rapidly in recent decades as the world faced by the writers of Isaiah in the late sixth century BCE. Nationalism, religious fervor, and globalization present powerful temptations to divide the world into “us” and “them.” As I write this on the morning after Thanksgiving, I am reminded just how difficult it is for us affluent Americans to give thanks without tacitly reminding God, and ourselves, just how superior and deserving we really are. Most of our religious traditions remind us repeatedly that God’s grace is infinite, that salvation is a gift that must be received with gratitude. However, it is difficult

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you would come down to rescue us!” *Harper’s Bible Commentary* remarks that the plea here is not just for God to “look down” from heaven, but literally to “come down,” as YHWH did with Moses and their ancestors in the wilderness.¹ Where is the manna now? The Israelites believe God has abandoned the relationship.

In our pericope, YHWH responds with a litany of grievances, including flagrant infidelity. The people have not *sought* or *called on* their Creator, indeed, they were too busy looking elsewhere for solace. The “elsewhere” depicted here is dark indeed. The people are accused of seeking after other gods—engaging in sexualized fertility rituals, necromancy, drinking a “broth of abominable things” (cf. 66:17), even child sacrifice (cf. 57:5). Eugene Peterson sums up God’s indignant accusation (65:3–4): “[The people] make up their own kitchen religion, a potluck religious stew. They spend the night in tombs to get messages from the dead, eat forbidden foods, and drink a witch’s brew of potions and charms.”²

How did it come to this? As in a chilling horror movie, YHWH’s beloved are sitting among bones in dank tombs, trying to divine help from any source possible, craving release from their ruined and ravaged world. It is easy to be appalled by their offensive acts, but the magnitude of the trauma they have suffered is hard for us to relate to today. Is there not something pitiable about humans who have lost their way so completely? Indeed, throughout Isaiah, God appears to vacillate between compassion and judgment, affection and outrage. Love is complicated.

Here is an entry point for today. What is the status of our own relationship with God? Are there times we feel abandoned too, when God seems achingly impotent amid the chronic calamities of our violent and unjust world? How do we attempt to assuage the pain of our own estrangements and dislocations? From what other sources do we moderns seek transformation, information, or at least garden-variety distraction? Perhaps we do not engage in cultic fertility rites in midnight cemeteries, but might there be instances when we seek meaning through meaningless, destructive forms? If we hold up this Isaiah narrative as a mirror for our own times, what might God’s lament be toward us? Would God likewise cry out: “I held out my hands all day long . . . yet you did not seek me”?

1. James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 593.

2. Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

Isaiah 65:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

God and God’s people in prayer has been reversed is an indication of the desperate state of affairs between God and Israel.¹

Verses 2–5 detail the specifics of this rebellion. The people’s defiance of God is outlined in seven participles. God accuses the people of walking in evil ways, provoking God constantly, sacrificing in gardens, burning incense on tiles, sitting in tombs, spending the night in secret places, and eating swine’s flesh and other abominations.

Many of these actions point to Israel’s assimilation of pagan practices of the surrounding culture. Garden sacrifice was related to the worship of fertility goddesses. Burning incense on bricks may have been associated with altars dedicated to the goddess Asherah. Sitting in tombs was part of the practice of necromancy. Spending the night in secret places probably refers to the common ancient Near Eastern practice of ritual incubation: spending the night in a purportedly holy place in expectation of receiving a communication from the resident spirit of that place. Eating swine’s flesh and drinking broth were part of cultic rituals for several different pagan groups.

The final practice that God condemns, withdrawing from contact with the general population, indicates a magical rite that endowed its participants with a state of heightened cultic holiness. The images of smoke and fire in verse 5 may be a conscious echo of Isaiah 1, where these images are also prominent. This enumeration of the people’s rebellious behavior concludes in verses 6–7 with the often repeated accusation of the Deuteronomic chronicler that the people have “sacrificed in the high places” (NRSV “offered incense on the mountains”; NIV “burned sacrifices on the mountains”).²

After detailing the people’s sins, the proclamation turns to pronouncing sentence. Given the rebellion of the wicked, what does God’s justice require? In the preceding lament, the people complained of God’s silence. In this response, God declares that God will not be silent. God will speak—and act—in judgment against those whose practices are a rejection of God’s law.

In verse 8 the tone shifts. God’s message changes from one of condemnation to one of blessing and promise. God will not withhold just punishment for the wicked: nevertheless, there is a space for mercy. The message of mercy begins with an analogy to

Homiletical Perspective

illustrations of Israel’s offenses (vv. 3–5) and God’s judgment (vv. 6–7).

The content of these accusations and counteraccusations may appear to offer little to a preacher in search of good news. Surely, the intensity of God’s indictment and judgment are not to be dismissed. However, in the midst of God’s assertions, we find something worthy of gospel proclamation. God’s “Here I am, here I am” is a statement of God’s availability. Apparently, Israel did not seek out or call upon God, but God was there. In God’s “Here I am” lies a still-speaking word for those who feel far from God, or those who experience the silence of God. The preacher-pastor hears the questions: Is God there? Here? Does God hear my prayer for my sick child? Where is God in the middle of the mess I am in? In the light of today’s passage, the preacher has reason to affirm God’s presence to “the exiles,” to those who feel dislocated from God, or dislocated by God. God’s presence is good news for Israel and for all who wonder whether God is with us in our isolation and struggles.

The final verses of this passage provide more good news. The tone changes abruptly in verse 8. After accusation and judgment, we hear surprising words of assurance and salvation. The turn is sharp and, admittedly, most welcome. The God who has just said “I will measure into their laps full payment for their actions” (v. 7b) says now, “As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, ‘Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,’ so I will do for my servants’ sake, and not destroy them all” (v. 8). God promises here a future for Israel, a future marked by God’s protection and their well-being.

This expression of mercy does not suggest that God forgets Israel’s past offenses, but that God chooses to renew the covenant. The promises made are tied closely to the recovery of Israel’s land. (We can imagine how the words “my servants shall settle there” [v. 9] must have sounded to a people who longed for home.) The promises made in these final verses reveal something important about God: though rejected and willfully ignored, God continues to make good on the promises long since established to Jacob and his descendants.

The brokenness of the human community is real. Examples of individual and corporate sin are many. The preacher may be able to point out, with great conviction, the ways in which we fail God and neighbor and self. However, in light of the final verses of today’s pericope, we may seek also to make audible the strains of divine assurance

1. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 268.

2. Brevard Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 535.

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to receive a gift with sheer gratitude, and we are powerfully tempted to hoard the gift as our own personal possession, suggesting we have transformed it from a gift into our accomplishment, a “work” in Paul’s language.

Economic globalization is widely praised as a process that overcomes racial, cultural, and religious exclusivism by breaking down barriers between peoples, nations, and cultures. This judgment may be premature. Given the hegemony of Western corporations in this process, globalization appears to many as a new form of colonialism, and therefore destructive of indigenous cultures. As a move toward uniformity shaped by Westernization of culture, globalization can be seen as an insidious form of exclusion. There are, of course, aspects of non-Western cultures that are abhorrent to Western values, such as various forms of the subjugation of women. What of value, though, is being lost by our careless disregard of indigenous cultures as they are eroded by powerful economic and political interests in the West?¹

One dramatic change of the last half century has been a much closer encounter with practitioners from other religions. I grew up in a small community that included Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans, and one Roman Catholic family. Today I live in a medium-size city that has two synagogues, two mosques, a Hindu temple, and several other non-Christian religions. What should be our posture toward these unfamiliar religions? Should we continue the great missionary effort launched in the early twentieth century to make it the “Christian century”? Should we politely ignore and tacitly marginalize those who are religiously different? Should we acknowledge them as also God’s children and seek opportunities for honest dialogue?

In one of the best theological books of the last quarter-century, Miroslav Volf develops the metaphor of “embrace” as a way to begin our journey to overcome exclusion: “*The will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.*”²

JOHN C. SHELLEY

1. See Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004), esp. 139–70.

2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 29, italics in the original.

Pastoral Perspective

In Isaiah 65:8 a moment of clarity is finally reached. Like a fever breaking, honest dialogue has cleared the air, and God’s anger softens in the wake of a new pronouncement. Though just recompense shall be swift for many, not all of Israel will be cut off: “As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, ‘Do not destroy it, for there is blessing in it,’ so I will do for my servants’ sake, and not destroy them all.” The bad grapes will not be allowed to spoil the whole cluster. Sweet wine is still possible. YHWH will carefully preserve the good fruit, without laying the ax to the whole vineyard. A remnant will be preserved.

We often think of a remnant as something left over, such as a cheap carpet scrap. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* offers a more contextualized description, defining “remnant” as “what is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe.”³ Misfortune can uproot shallow faith, but those with deeper roots can not only survive but flourish. To use a food metaphor, the idea of remnant might be akin to a “reduction sauce”—a cooking technique wherein the flavor of a sauce can be intensified by evaporating liquid through heat. While the Babylonian experience has caused most of the nation of Israel to fall away, the passions of the stalwart become more concentrated, upholding a courtship with God of incalculable beauty and endurance.

What part do we play in this ongoing love story? The American ecclesiological landscape now famously bears signs of the end of Christendom (the end of Christianity as the dominant civic religion). What could it mean to understand ourselves today as a new “remnant,” reduced in size but more concentrated? What if as congregations we again fall in love with God, letting go of the distractions of excessive institutional maintenance? After roiling in the heat of rationalism, pluralism, and secularism, what remains now of the mainline church can be potent indeed.

The message from Isaiah is a declaration of devotion. We need not fear changes in the church or in life, because despite our fecklessness and infidelities of faith, YHWH remains a true romantic.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON-BOSSERT

3. *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:669.

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Exegetical Perspective

a grape harvest. The image of Israel as a vineyard, found elsewhere in Isaiah, is repeated here. The quote, “Do not destroy it, for there may be a blessing in it!” may be a verse from a vintner’s song. These verses introduce the idea of a faithful remnant who will receive the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel even as the unfaithful majority are destroyed.

This passage reinterprets the term *’abadim*, or “servants.” The lament in chapters 63–64 uses this term to refer to the whole of Israel. These verses define this term as the faithful ones who uphold God’s law—the genuine core of Israel. This idea of a faithful remnant, which develops in the later portions of Isaiah, was a radical innovation. It introduced the concept that any given historical, political embodiment of the nation of Israel and the true and authentic Israel might not be identical. At verse 8, Rashi’s commentary points to a link between these verses and the story of Noah. Like the righteous Noah, who with his family was preserved at the time of the deluge, so too will the faithful remnant of Israel be preserved from the sentence of destruction that will be carried out against the unfaithful.

Contemporary preachers should be aware of how these verses—and others that develop the idea of the faithful remnant—have been used during the history of the church to support anti-Semitism. As the church came to perceive itself as “the new Israel,” it also began to identify the Jews with the wicked and rebellious servants now rejected by God. In Romans 10:21, Paul quotes Isaiah 65:2: “But of Israel [God] says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.’” Pope Pius IX directed that this text be inscribed in Hebrew and Latin over the entrance to the Church of San Gregorio a Ponte Quattro Capi in Rome. This church directly faced that city’s Jewish quarter. The church, with its inscription, remains there to this day.³

KAREN C. SAPIO

Homiletical Perspective

and forgiveness. God will not let Israel fade into history. With a vow to protect and save Israel, God demonstrates a hard-won love for people who have been hard to like. With that, Isaiah invites the preacher to turn as sharply as verses 8 and 9 and to make clear what seekers of the living God long to hear: God will not let you go. God’s love is greater than the sum of our sins. God’s assurance of pardon is a gift. Will the preacher speak of this good news with equal conviction?

When I was a child, friends of my parents separated. That couple was part of a network of close, longtime friends, all of whom felt the percussive waves of the split. The questions circled round: Who was to blame? Did you hear what he said? What she said? Then one night my parents hosted a party at our home. Their close friends arrived, and it sounded, from my bedroom, like any other get-together in my home: layers of voice upon voice. The estranged husband was there and seemed buoyed by the good company. Then his wife arrived. She was met at the door and brought into the living room. The house fell silent. It was clear that neither of them knew the other would be there. It was also clear that their meeting in our living room was carefully planned. An awkward silence gave way to a most peculiar sound of crying-laughing.

That night, friends showed two friends a love beyond judgment, a love that would not let either of them go. I did not have the words to say so at the time, but as I remember that night, two things remain. God was there—“here I am”—in our living room. God’s gift of mercy can heal what breaks within and between us.

ANDREW NAGY-BENSON

3. Blenkinsopp, 270.

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

Psalm 22:19–28

¹⁹But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
²⁰Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!

From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
²²I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
²³You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
²⁴For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;

Theological Perspective

We are most familiar with Psalm 22 from its opening verse, uttered by Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). This is sometimes called “the cry of dereliction.” It represented the point at which Jesus expressed the ultimate in forsakenness, feeling God was so far from his human suffering that it was as if God has turned away and left Jesus in utter desolation.

The psalm itself is an expression of one who is near death. The psalmist makes a desperate plea for God’s help in the midst of the most abject suffering. The language is brittle and brutal, a lament filled with the strongest descriptions of the troubles the psalmist has experienced. Cries to God go unanswered (v. 2). The help that is needed is not forthcoming (v. 1). The psalmist knows who God is, the God in whom ancestors have trusted and found deliverance (vv. 3–4); but now, to one who feels like “a worm, and not human,” the notion of committing one’s cause to the Lord for deliverance is met with mockery (vv. 6–8). Other images fill out this picture of hopelessness, where God seems silent (vv. 9–18).

The psalmist’s present needs are described in his complaints and laments (vv. 1–10), followed by a prayer for deliverance (vv. 11–21). Future hopes

Pastoral Perspective

This psalm begins with the painful words that Jesus utters on the cross: “My, God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The first half of this psalm also includes images that pervade and surround the cross narrative in the Gospels: mocking (v. 7) and casting lots for clothes (v. 18). Our passage for today renews the psalmist’s plea to God for help, using images of wild, devouring animals.

In the strange and mystical movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild*,¹ the forces of fundamental, chaotic destruction are represented by mythical “aurochs,” animals that are a combination of wild boar and bull. The aurochs, unleashed by global warming, are coming closer and closer to destroy the young protagonist, five-year-old Hushpuppy, a little girl who lives a fierce life with her daddy in southern Louisiana. Even at such a young age, she must face these demonic forces head-on. Like the psalmist, she screams out and cries out for salvation. She eventually faces them down, but only in the midst of a terrifying and dreadful journey, fraught with dangerous and primeval forces of death and destruction.

This psalm invites us to go down into our heart of hearts, to our very souls, where there is not only trouble but also deep anxiety, even terror. In this

1. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, directed by Benh Zaitlin (Cinereach, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012).

Psalm 22:19–28

he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

²⁵From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

²⁶The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!

²⁷All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.

²⁸For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 22 appears in the lectionary several times in a variety of configurations. Because of its use in the Gospel passion narratives (see esp. v. 1 and Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), the entire psalm is assigned to Good Friday all three years. Verses 23–31 at the end of the psalm, including mentions of future generations, appear during Lent in Year B, alongside one of God’s promises of progeny to Abraham, and the triumphant verses 25–31 reappear on Easter Sunday. The psalm’s first fifteen verses of lament coincide late in Year B with Job’s complaints.

Here a portion from toward the end of the psalm accompanies Isaiah 65:1–9. Any faint connections between them or with the epistle or Gospel are difficult to see. The psalm may actually suit better the other Old Testament reading, the story in 1 Kings 19 of Elijah’s flight into the wilderness to escape Queen Jezebel’s threats, and his miraculous restoration, first through the angel’s provision of bread and water, and then at Mount Horeb, where he meets God in the “still small voice” (or “sound of sheer silence,” NRSV) and is sent back into the fray.

This selection, from neither the beginning nor the end of the psalm, is unusual. Verses 19–28 cut across a literary and genre boundary at the reading’s beginning, and conclude three verses before the psalm itself does. Since the psalm’s primary division

Homiletical Perspective

Scholars often classify Psalm 22 as an individual lament. The designation “individual lament” is inadequate because such psalms go beyond lamentation. Individual laments provide the congregation with opportunities to express grief, and also assure the community that God is present and active in suffering. Without glossing over the depth of human angst, individual laments seek to empower the congregation with the courage, based on confidence in God, to live in hope through hard times.

Individual laments contain specific elements that are present in Psalm 22: (1) the complaint or reason for lamentation (vv. 1–2, 6–8); (2) a plea for deliverance (vv. 11, 19–21a); (3) expressions of trust in God (vv. 3–5, 9–10, 12–15, 16–18); (4) a vow to praise God for deliverance (vv. 21b–31). The reading assigned for today thus includes only a plea for deliverance (vv. 19–21a) and vow to praise to God (vv. 21b–28).

To respect the integrity of the psalm, the preacher needs to set verses 19–28 in the larger context in the psalm as a whole. A homily could use the four elements of the lament, identified in the previous paragraph, to structure the sermon.

1. The sermon could begin by identifying circumstances that cause the congregation to lament and by honestly articulating the congregation’s grief.

Psalm 22:19–28

Theological Perspective

are expressed as thanksgiving for answered prayer (vv. 22–26), with a concluding hope for the extension of the Lord’s rule over all (vv. 27–31).

Petition (vv. 19–21). The psalmist petitions God “not to be far away” and to be his help, coming “quickly to my aid!” (v. 19). His focus switches from his enemies to the only source of strength and rescue: God. In the midst of the most difficult troubles imaginable, one’s gaze must go beyond the here and now to the one who can bring help and powerful aid. Despite the persistence of the empirical realities, faith petitions for God to be active in coming for deliverance, so that one is not forsaken. Even when this help is delayed and things are seemingly hopeless, the psalmist calls God his strength and help, indicating the persistence of faith, even as troubles increase to the point of imminent death (v. 20).

Praise (vv. 22–26). At this point, the focus shifts to a postdeliverance position of praise. Rescue has come! (v. 21b). The psalmist rises to praise and thanksgiving and to promising to give thanks in the “great congregation,” paying vows before those who fear the Lord (vv. 22, 25). God has heard, acted, and brought help. Gratitude demands public proclamation of God’s actions. We are not told how God effected this rescue, but the testimony of faith is that it has occurred and is now to be proclaimed and witnessed to in the context of the worshiping congregation.

The great act of God, for which praise is due in the congregation, is an expression of the God who is to be feared and praised (v. 23). All who are part of the people of God, the “offspring of Jacob,” should “glorify” and show honor to God. They “stand in awe of him” (v. 23; cf. Ps. 33:8), because this God did not “despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted” (v. 24; cf. Ps. 69:33). God has heard and responded to the prayer of those who suffer (cf. Ps. 102:17). This is the source of great praise. Despite the psalmist’s initial feeling of being “forsaken” (v. 1) by a God who does “not answer” (v. 2), and whom he fears is “far away” (v. 19), God has been at work and has brought help, deliverance, and rescue. The psalmist’s testimony here encourages others to believe God will bring help to them, in the midst of all sufferings. As Calvin put it: “We are taught from these words that the people of God ought to endure their afflictions patiently, however long it shall please the Lord to keep them in a state of distress, that he may at length

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dimension all meaning and justice are called into question. Here in our core, the very purpose of our lives and of life itself is up for grabs. The psalmist asks us to go into depth of loss and pain and chaos and even death, and in this journey we will find demonic forces. It is a threatening and scary place, where we feel as if the wild animals of our lives and of our stories are hungry to devour us. This is no place for feelings of shallow sentiment. This is down in our depths, where the roaring lions and thrashing wild oxen await to attack us.

The psalmist asserts and affirms that we will also find God there. When we discover God’s presence in this kind of chaos, it is a stunning and joyous discovery. In the second part of verse 21, we see the psalmist’s discovery of God and an abrupt change in the psalm—from terror and pleas for help to a joyous praise of God’s defining and rescuing power. The change is so abrupt that some scholars believe that Psalm 22 is actually two different psalms woven together for dramatic or poetic or even royal purposes. Whatever the original nature of this psalm, it now represents an invitation to go into the deepest and most terrifying parts of ourselves: the most troubled, the most chaotic, and the most anxious. In those places we will find disturbing powers, but we will also find God.

The psalmist makes a turn to find God’s rescue and salvation, and then begins a widening circle of praise, starting with testimony in the worshiping congregation. In the worship services of our congregation, we have a time of sharing joys and concerns. On occasion an elderly woman of blended African American and Cherokee heritage has stepped forward to sing out God’s saving power in the midst of her suffering. Her song is of lament and of joy—lament at the human condition and our captivity to powers that seek to destroy us, and joy over the discovery that God is rescuing us from those powers and offering us liberation. As I read this psalm, filled with both trouble and praise, I am reminded of her and of myself and of many others.

In this psalm there is an emphasis on praising God for help for those who are afflicted, and the image of the healing ministry of Jesus steps forward. The “invalid,” the man who cannot walk in John 5, is healed, and he cannot help but praise God, even though he has no idea who Jesus is. In Acts 3 Peter and John heal a man by the Beautiful Gate, and the man begins to walk and leap and praise God in the temple. Our psalmist may not demonstrate the same physical exuberance as these two, but the exuberant

Psalm 22:19–28

Exegetical Perspective

between lament and praise occurs in verse 21, the lectionary selection incorporates a portion of the lament, but proceeds abruptly to joyful exultation throughout the remaining verses.

Quite a bit of negative animal imagery makes its way into the psalm. In verse 6 the speaker calls himself a “worm, and not human,” on account of the threats and mocking he endures from people whom he calls “strong bulls of Bashan” (v. 12), “a ravening and roaring lion” (v. 13), and “dogs all around me” (v. 16). These hostile animals reappear in the prayers in verses 20–21. The worm does not reappear; instead, the psalmist asserts humanness by speaking of brothers and sisters in the great congregation (v. 22).

Aside from the reproaches against God with which the psalm begins (vv. 1–2) and a brief prayer in verse 11, sustained supplication begins only in verses 19–21, where God is asked to overcome the distance and come quickly to deliver the speaker from fierce enemies. Interpreters and translators disagree over the tense of the second half of verse 21. The NRSV and some interpreters follow the Hebrew literally; they understand the second verb, which is perfect, as differing from the imperative verb in the verse’s first line, and translate it in the past tense (“Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me”). Because of this abrupt shift from plea to affirmation, NRSV divides the verse between two stanzas. However, other interpreters and translations, such as Tanakh and NIV, see continuity between the two halves of verse 21 and render the second verb as imperative like the first, delaying the first hints of praise till the following verse. Either way, the shift from supplication to gratitude is abrupt.

As an interesting side note, the KJV—relying on the LXX *monokeros* [“one horn”], the Vulgate’s translation *unicornis*, and earlier English translations—picturesquely renders the second half of verse 21 as “for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorn.” The unicorn recurs six other times in the KJV Old Testament. What the underlying Hebrew word *re’em* (plural *remim*) refers to is not known with certainty, but “wild ox” seems a fair guess. The first-century natural historian Pliny described a one-horned animal native to India, which he likewise called a *monokeros*: “[It] has the head of the stag, the feet of the elephant, and the tail of the boar, while the rest of the body is like that of the horse; it makes a deep lowing noise, and has a single black horn, which projects from the middle of its forehead, two

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Because many sectors of our culture discourage people from expressing—or even recognizing—grief, such an effort can have a powerful pastoral effect.

2. A homily could name ways the congregation longs for the circumstances to improve. Given the specific conditions of the circumstances of lamentation, what needs to happen for members of the community to experience the quality of life that God intends?

3. The message could articulate reasons for trust in God. The minister needs to go beyond generalized platitudes and to point to signs that God is present with the community. To anticipate language from paragraphs that follow, the preacher could help the congregation name where and how God is attempting to lure the circumstances toward as much blessing as is possible.

4. Given that verses 21b–28 constitute part of the lection for today, the preacher could highlight this section. These verses urge individuals to give public thanks in the congregation. Such acts not only praise God but encourage other members of the congregation to recognize and respond to God’s presence. The preacher might invite individuals in the congregation who have such testimony to give public witness in the sermon itself, in moments of testimony during the service, or in other situations in the life of the congregation.

My own theology—and that of some other preachers—holds to bedrock elements that are in tension with some theological motifs in Psalm 22:19–28. These elements are that God is always present and that God acts in unconditional love (which means that God would never directly cause others to suffer). While God has more power than any other entity, God’s power is limited. God works not through coercive force, but through lure.

In verses 19–21a, the psalmist assumes that God is “far away,” that God is not coming to the psalmist’s aid. In verses 21b–28, the psalmist assumes that God can intervene and act in a direct and singular way to change situations, as if God has dramatically pulled the psalmist free from “the horns of the wild oxen.” These notions trouble some people. I wager every pastor reading this essay is repeatedly asked questions like “Why would God abandon me?” “If God is omnipotent, why does God not intervene, especially in the face of innocent suffering?”

From my perspective, while the psalmist feels abandoned, the feeling is not true to God’s actual presence. My own hermeneutic would help listeners articulate their *feelings* of being abandoned in

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succor them, and lend them his aid when they are so severely tried.”¹

“From you comes my praise in the great congregation” (v. 25) points us to the psalmist’s sense that God is both the source and object of the praise that is given. God has provided the help and deliverance (source); so it is to God that all praise is presented (object). This is always the dynamic in worship and in our theological recognitions. God is the one who does it all for us—in creation, redemption, and our lives of faith. So it is to God that all praise, gratitude, and devotion is given. We live looking constantly in two directions. The “backward” look is at what God has done; the look “forward” is to ways of expressing the greatness of God’s acts and answers to our prayers and petitions.

Power (vv. 27–28). It has often been pointed out that, although Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 while on the cross, he would also have known the full psalm and that “the whole Psalm was the subject of His meditations during those hours of agony.”² The psalm now turns to anticipating the victorious power of God and the universal reign of the Lord. “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD” indicates that all peoples will in the future worship and acknowledge God for who God is (v. 27). For the Lord is the ruler and “dominion belongs to the LORD” (v. 28). This is the ultimate goal of history. The God who answered the psalmist and who helps the suffering and poor (v. 26) is the God to whom all peoples will finally turn, the God who has the right to rule over the earth.

Jesus’ mind would have come to these triumphant verses, even as he suffered on the cross. Ironically, it is his suffering—even his God-forsakenness—that leads to the ultimate triumph of his resurrection and to the establishment of “the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph. 5:5) that endures forever.

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praise is there. The praise of the psalmist resonates out from the worshiping congregation to the poor and afflicted, to all the nations, and even to generations of the future, to the unborn and unconceived, and even to unthought-of babies to come. Let all creation praise God!

This psalm begins in individual lamentation and a plea to God for rescue. In discovering God’s salvation, the psalmist acknowledges the importance of the community in discovering salvation and in sharing it.

I have been in and out of therapy most of my adult life, partially because of my own history and partially because I believe that all pastors and counselors should be in a conscious and intentional process of self-examination and self-discovery. Several years ago my most powerful therapist called me out of the blue in the Christmas season to tell me that he loved me and that he really thanked God for me. Since anxiety is one of my core values, I was totally flabbergasted, and I did not know how to respond. I mumbled something like, “Well, I love you too,” in an almost obligatory way, but his affirmation has stayed with me and fired me and sustained me. In my journey with him, I had gone down into the depths of deep resistance and chaos in myself, and he had helped me to find God’s affirmation in a place that I thought God had long abandoned. I understand and resonate with this psalmist, as deep distress and a plea for rescue lead him (and us) to a place where we have no idea that God bothers to enter. Like this psalmist, we are not forsaken. Even there we will find God.

NIBS STROUPE

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm 22:24*
 2. A. F. Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 112.

*Psalm 22:19–28***Exegetical Perspective**

cubits in length. This animal, it is said, cannot be taken alive” (Pliny, *Natural History*, 2:31).

In verse 22, the speaker anticipates praising God to other worshipers, and the contents of the call to praise are offered immediately after. Because these could so easily be a complete hymn of praise on their own, past exegetes have sometimes considered the psalm to have been composed from several originally separate pieces. Yet there is enough congruence in theme among the pieces to view them together. Israel is called to praise on account of God’s faithfulness to the speaker, who will pay his vows in gratitude.

Beyond the lectionary passage, verse 29 is extremely difficult to translate. Interpretations disagree, but it appears to concern those who have already died. The final two verses anticipate the praise of future generations.

The abrupt shift from lament to praise may have followed an oracle of salvation, a priestly reassurance of God’s having heard the speaker’s words (see Lam. 3:57; see also the discussion of Ps. 25 at Proper 10). In a way it does not matter exactly how the worshiper moved from prayer to praise, whether because of reassurance from another, because of a change in circumstance, or because of a renewed sense of hope or perspective. Any of them is possible, and we know them all. What matters is the movement itself, the fact that it happens at all. The speaker’s shift from individual praise to calls to others to echo suggests that what is true for the speaker is true for others too. Cause for divine rescue comes not from the individual’s own merits but from God’s unending grace, which, in God’s dominion, all worshipers share. Thus one person’s renewal is never cause for envy, but for reassurance—for the poor, for the ends of the earth, for the families of the nations, for all who find themselves on the margins.

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situations of distress, but gently suggest that their feelings do not account for the fullness of God’s presence. The blunt truth is that some circumstances do not change. Nevertheless, believing that God is with me is often enough to give me courage in the face of distress. Indeed, in some situations, the highest available good is to be aware that we are not alone. Awareness of such companionship enables us to go on.

As implied in the preceding comments, the fundamental purpose of preaching on Psalm 22 is to interpret its significance in ancient Israel and to bring it into conversation with the world today. However, the preacher can hardly overlook the fact that many Christians hear Psalm 22 through the lips of the dying Jesus: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). Either in the sermon itself or in a teaching moment at the time of the public reading of the lesson for today, the preacher could comment on the relationship between Jesus’ words and how awareness of the psalm as a whole affects our interpretation of those words.

Christians sometimes take Jesus’ cry from the cross to mean that God actually abandoned Jesus. In antiquity, referring to part of a passage typically brought the whole to mind. Jesus’ words are an honest statement of *feeling* with which many people can identify. However, as noted already, Psalm 22 ultimately affirms that God can be trusted to be with us.

In the apocalyptic theology of Mark and Matthew, Jesus’ suffering and cry is part of the tribulation, the intense conflict between the old and the new ages just before the coming of the apocalypse and the rebirth of creation. By crying from the psalm, Jesus confesses trust that his death is part of the transition from the broken present to the coming realm.

In a given moment, we *feel* abandoned, but one of the purposes of Scripture and Christian theology is to set our limited perceptions in a larger frame of reference, one that goes beyond our feelings. While the preacher needs to honor the depths of human despair reflected in the popular understanding of the opening words of this psalm, with sensitivity and timing appropriate to the circumstances, the preacher is called to speak the word of assurance of Psalm 22:19–28.

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

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. . . .

¹⁹So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. ²⁰He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” ²¹He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Theological Perspective

This call narrative of Elijah summoning Elisha as companion and eventual successor will remind Christians of a similar episode in Luke 9:57–62. There Jesus encounters would-be disciples who also ask to bid farewell to family. Jesus’ response is almost certainly hyperbole—“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”—but the point is clear: Followers do not set conditions on the call to discipleship. Elisha does return to say good-bye and even throws a going-away party featuring roasted oxen that days earlier had been pulling a plow. Elisha exemplifies the distinction between earning a living and committing oneself to that larger vision demanded of God’s prophets and Jesus’ disciples.

One primary theological question that emerges from this text is the relevance of calling or vocation in the modern world. As a college teacher I spend considerable time informally counseling students about what they should do with their lives. Most are perplexed by biblical call narratives, including the lectionary reading, which seem so clear and indisputably direct compared with their own struggles with life after college. I often suggest they distinguish between career and vocation.

Though used almost interchangeably in the modern world, etymologically “career” and

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A man is plowing a field. In the hazy distance, another man approaches. Perhaps the farmer, Elisha, is thirsty from working his oxen all morning, and so he pauses for a drink. Perhaps he suddenly notices that the stranger is walking directly toward him. Elisha must have shielded his eyes against the shimmering brightness, somehow recognizing this stranger as the great prophet Elijah, since the text reports this remarkable encounter so matter-of-factly. Elijah, likely determined to make good time in carrying out the Lord’s marching orders, does not even greet Elisha, but throws his own cloak, his prophetic mantle, over Elisha’s shoulders. This momentous anointing is so oddly performed—with such silent alacrity and lack of ceremony—that Elisha is left to scramble awkwardly after Elijah. The text notes that Elisha “ran after” Elijah, which suggests that Elisha may have been shocked into stillness for several moments, blinking in bewilderment at the sudden shift of his destiny. Elisha recovers quickly and decisively, though, despite Elijah’s strange behavior. Why is Elijah in such a hurry? Why is he so curt?

There is another curiosity arising in this story. Unlike so many other scriptural “call narratives,” Elisha does not demur or seek to question the validity of his gifts for service, as many prophetic servants

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary pairs this story of the call of Elisha with Luke 9:51–62, which includes the story of Jesus' call to a person who asks to "first . . . go and bury [his] father" before following Jesus. This is part of a series of stories Luke tells about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem that have parallels in the Elijah cycle. Many preachers will include this story in a sermon primarily focused on the Gospel text. Exegesis of this text will provide insights that will enrich such a sermon or a sermon focused on this text alone.

These verses form the conclusion of the story of Elijah's flight from Jezebel. After Elijah encounters the presence of God in "the sound of a thin silence" (19:12, paraphr.), God instructs him to return to the wilderness of Damascus and do three things: anoint Hazael as king over Aram, anoint Jehu as king over Israel, and anoint Elisha as the prophet who will take his place. These instructions set in motion the chain of events that ultimately results in the overthrow of the Omride dynasty by the house of Jehu. According to later accounts in 1 and 2 Kings, however, these events do not occur in the manner described in these verses. It is Elisha, not Elijah, who anoints Hazael and Jehu. Also, in contradiction to verse 17, Elisha is not known to have participated in any violent suppression of idolaters. Some scholars see these discrepancies as evidence that the authors of the

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Is it me? Is it them? Is anyone listening? Is this ministry making a difference in people's lives? Shall I keep my hand on the plow or leave this field? These questions and their despairing companions may appear at the preacher's door, from time to time, like uninvited guests. This is not simply a postmodern problem.

Reading the verses that precede today's text, we meet a ninth-century-BCE prophet who is ready to resign. Elijah is blue. His efforts to uproot Israel's apostasy and to grow faithfulness in the fallow hearts of Israel have not produced desired results. The prophet feels dejected, and his discouragement is compounded by Jezebel's pledge to kill him. The irony is not subtle: Elijah is, at once, a wanted man and an unwanted mouthpiece of God. Running on fear and frustration, Elijah reaches his end. Sitting under a solitary broom tree, he says, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (19:4). The prophet wants out.

God has other ideas. God accepts neither Elijah's resignation nor his rendering of his failures. God meets Elijah in the wilderness and recommissions him to his work. God says, "Go" (v. 15), and promises the prophet a servant and successor who will carry on and complete Elijah's mission. To his credit, Elijah goes as directed and locates Elisha, son of Shaphat.

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

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“vocation” point to different dimensions of human life. Career, which literally means “path” or “course,” captures the prevailing modern understanding of life. A career is a path chosen by an individual, who undergoes training or education in preparation and then moves through various stations on the path toward certain goals established by the career itself. As with a car, which shares the same linguistic root and is typically driven by an individual, a career usually designates a path followed by an individual.

Vocation, on the other hand, harkens back to an earlier time—for example, the era of Elijah and Elisha—in which life is seen as under the direction of a divine reality who “calls” individuals and communities to specific tasks. One’s life then ought to be lived in response to that call. One finds oneself on a journey without a clear destination, as one’s understanding of vocation expands, deepens, and even changes over time. With some exceptions the medieval church reserved the category of vocation specifically for those in the service of the Christian church, but the Protestant Reformers expanded the reach of vocation to include both the general admonition to “love one’s neighbor” and a more specific calling to any honorable craft or trade.

Ironically, it is just this tight connection between vocation and work that seems so problematic in our modern world. Does it make sense in our day to follow the Reformers and identify career or work as vocation? Unlike those living in the sixteenth century, most people today will have multiple careers or jobs during their lifetime. Miroslav Volf has suggested thinking of career and work in terms of charisms or gifts of the Spirit, along the lines of 1 Corinthians 12.¹ A person should be encouraged to consider a career on the basis of talent and aptitude and what he or she enjoys doing. There are always, of course, many practical considerations.

What then of vocation or calling? Free of the connections with work and career, vocation signifies that larger vision under which we ought to live. There are, of course, competing visions in our pluralistic world; but for Christians, that larger vision is shaped by the biblical story and includes the community of shalom embraced by the Hebrew prophets and the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. The kingdom of God is not about getting rich or famous or powerful, but about commitment to nonviolence, shunning of rigid hierarchy, special

1. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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have done before him (e.g., Exod. 3:11). This is additionally surprising, given that the invitation comes via an unusual source—not YHWH, but another human. Even so, Elisha does not doubt Elijah’s message of call, although he does take issue with the schedule. “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you” (v. 20). It is a poignant and understandable request, which makes Elijah’s terse reply (“Go back again; for what have I done to you?”) perplexing indeed. Commentators vary in their renderings of Elijah’s intent, offering a few different explanations, such as (a) it was a scolding reprimand, a questioning of Elisha’s commitment (see Matt. 10:37); (b) it was simply a common idiom, meaning roughly, “Go ahead—who am I to stop you?”; and (c) it was a granting of permission, but one tinged with warning, “Go, but do not tarry—remember what just happened to you.”¹

In any case, Elisha slows Elijah down long enough to experience closure with his family. Without any report of regret, Elisha ritually relinquishes his former life, using his plow for firewood to roast the slaughtered oxen for a ceremonial feast. Elisha burns the bridge between his past and future—there will be no going back. The fact that our passage mentions twelve yoke of oxen denotes that Elisha’s family owned a large amount of land, and, therefore, the renounced inheritance was considerable. That is of little consequence as Elisha sets his face to the future, unquestioningly following Elijah and the Lord.

This pericope is often referred to as the call of Elisha, which is precise. It is also Elijah’s tale, as it depicts the unfolding of a new call, extended back at Mount Horeb, when God commissioned Elijah to anoint two kings and “a prophet in your place” (vv. 15–16). The new decree at Horeb is an unexpected shift, coming as it does on the heels of Elijah’s abysmal breakdown in the wilderness. We recall that a despairing Elijah wandered out to the far edge of the promised land, leaving his servant at Beersheba, so that he might enter an uninhabited area to die. Under a broom tree, a suicidal Elijah begged God to end his misery and take his life away (19:4). Elijah, one of the towering figures of the biblical canon, was sick of ministry. He was utterly depleted and hopeless after years of grinding anxiety and loneliness. So, after years of faithful service, Elijah gave up on his calling.

How many burned-out clergy can identify with Elijah’s crisis? Ministry is a profession notorious

1. John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 246.

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Exegetical Perspective

Elijah/Elisha cycles have woven together fragments of several independent traditions.¹ The authors may have believed that it was important to link Elijah with events that took place later in history. Others participated more directly, but it was Elijah who initiated these crucial events.

Elijah acts only upon the third of the instructions he receives from God. He travels to Abel-meholah in the western Jordan valley, which appears previously as the place to which the Midianites fled when Gideon defeated them in Judges 7:22. There he finds Elisha, son of Shaphat, whom God has told him to anoint as a prophet to take his place. In some ways this is an unusual command. Anointing is usually reserved for rulers. As it turns out, Elijah does not anoint Elisha; he throws his mantle over him. What is the meaning of this action? Mantle throwing has no direct parallel in the prophetic tradition; however, Elijah's mantle appears earlier in chapter 19. When Elijah hears the sound of the thin silence, he wraps his face in his mantle and goes to the entrance of the cave where he has been hiding (v. 13). There God speaks to him directly, concluding with the three instructions that open this passage. The mantle, therefore, may be a tangible reminder of Elijah's encounter with God and God's command to seek out Elisha as his successor. Another clue may be found in Numbers 20:25–28, which indicates that when Eleazar puts on Aaron's robes, this signified that high priestly powers have been conveyed to Eleazar after Aaron's death. The inconsistency between God's instructions to anoint and what Elijah actually does is another possible instance of the authors' cobbling together independent traditions.²

When Elijah encounters him, Elisha is plowing. Elisha is working with twelve yoke of oxen and is with the twelfth. Twelve yoke of oxen indicate a large, prosperous operation. This implies that Elisha must turn his back upon considerable wealth to follow his prophetic calling. The twelve yoke also symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. That Elisha is with the twelfth signifies his importance: in him certain events and purposes will reach their culmination.

Now comes the verse that Luke will echo. Elisha tells Elijah, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you" (v. 20). Elijah responds, "Go . . . for what have I done to you?" What is the

1. Roger Tomes, "1 and 2 Kings," in James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 263.

2. Choon Leong Seow, "1 and 2 Kings," in *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 3:144.

Homiletical Perspective

Elisha is less than eager to accept the prophet's mantle, but, once again, God has other ideas. Elisha's initial lukewarm response eventually yields to a decision to follow Elijah. After a bout of indecision, Elisha returns home, slaughters his oxen, and thus severs his ties to his agrarian life. That Elisha's "definite maybe" yields to a full-fledged "yes" is clear. That Elijah's "enough" yields to his running more errands for God is equally clear. When, however, we mine the respective recommissioning and commissioning of Elijah and Elisha, we unearth the real demands on those who answer God's call and go.

For preachers, there is an opportunity here to explore the "joy and cost of discipleship." Both Elijah and Elisha are called by God, and both hesitate. Such hesitation seems not to signal a lack of faith as much as an awareness of the uphill climb of prophecy. In my interactions with divinity school students, I have witnessed and heard such hitches. Am I good enough to be a minister? Am I really called, or is this something I dreamed up? Can I preach God's holy Word week after week? Am I up to the never-ending tasks of ministry? Such questions are neither faithless nor without merit. To the contrary, they are authentic expressions of wonder. Elijah wonders. Elisha wonders too.

I recall a seminarian intern breaking down one day in my office. "I can't do this," she cried, "I'm not ready." I do not recall what I said in response, but I remember feeling that this student was in the midst of learning an important lesson in ministry: no one can do God's work without God's help. In the verses that precede today's lesson, God helps Elijah. In the chapters that follow, God helps Elisha, too.

To proclaim the choppy mantle passing from Elijah to Elisha is to make clear a human response to a divine charge. We stutter. We pause. We wonder. Sometimes we weep. However, our proclamation need not end there. Like Elijah and his successor, we know the tenacity of God's call. The faithful may meet the limits of their energy, but there they meet a God who helps them to claim and reclaim the "yes" that fuels and refuels their work. Like Elijah and Elisha, we learn and relearn that handing ourselves over to God is a most liberating and meaningful enterprise. It turns hesitant servants into channels of grace.

To be sure, such knowledge does not belong only to preachers and prophets. Dr. Jack McConnell knows this too. McConnell is the son of a minister, one of seven children. Growing up, McConnell's

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Theological Perspective

concern for the poor, compassion for one's enemies, and wariness regarding wealth.

Rabbi Michael Lerner reminds us of an especially arresting image for this larger biblical vision, linking it directly to our creation in the “image of God”: “To embody the divine spirit—to be made in the image of God—is to be a creature who has received a message and a command, to be partners with the divine in the healing and repair of this world.”² The notion of partnering with God is supported by Genesis 1:26, which declares human beings are created in God's own image. One prominent interpretation of the *imago Dei* is that human beings, reflecting the portrayal of God in Genesis 1, are called to be creators too, thus cocreators with God. Obviously, we should not envision this divine-human partnership as one between equals, but think of human beings as God's “junior” partners. The *imago Dei* also suggests that human beings become most truly who they are when they embody the fundamental character of God, described by Jews and Christians as merciful, compassionate, and just.

It is true that some jobs simply will not fit within this larger vision of what really matters. Recently, a former student resigned her position as a loan officer at a local bank because she was not comfortable complying with directives from her supervisor “to get as much money as possible” before agreeing to foreclosure proceedings.

On the other hand, there are many examples of distinguished and famous careers that are lived under a larger vision and become in effect a “vehicle” for vocation. Paul Farmer, for example, a medical doctor and cultural anthropologist, is one in whom career and vocation seem almost perfectly joined. However, most of us who seek to unite career and vocation will be much more like Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, who spent herself “in channels which had no great name on earth.” Nevertheless, says Eliot, “the good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts . . . and half-owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life.”³

JOHN C. SHELLEY

Pastoral Perspective

for depression, workaholicism, and isolation. Nonordained leaders can experience similar feelings of exhaustion and discouragement as well, especially as volunteerism today plummets amid our frenetic, 24/7 culture. Modern church leaders probably understand Elijah's lament all too well: “I have been very enthusiastic for you, God (and for your church), but I feel like I am all alone in the work” (cf. 19:10). Would restoration and a new sense of call be offered us too, if we reached out to God like Elijah?

The Lord hears Elijah and has mercy. The Lord hears Elijah and expresses compassion. God meets his servant at the nexus of his need and capacity. Eschewing condemnation, God instead gives Elijah a renewed vocation by sending him into the company of another, one who is also willing to be zealous and steadfast in pursuing the establishment of YHWH's reign. As if to underscore God's wisdom about his desperate need for community, Elijah inverts the sequence of the three new commands given to him. Instead of pursuing the critical anointing of two new kings, Elijah first seeks . . . *Elisha*.

Does this story end at the passing of Elijah's mantle in Elisha's sun-drenched field? Does Elisha take the baton at this ordination and simply march forward, navigating the prophetic burden in the manner of Elijah? Is Elisha therefore destined for a broom-tree breakdown of his own, after battling the jackals of evil and apostasy in some tattered future landscape?

Indeed he is not. Despite the dangerous difficulties of living in a time of evil kings, these two prophets are able to come together for an incomparable journey, creating and living into a new model of ministry, one based on mentorship, mutual support, and deep devotion (2 Kgs. 2:3–12). Our pericope is about one prophet's rescue, and another prophet's ascent. It is also about a God who unfailingly meets us in our vulnerabilities and limitations, ever attending to us in an adaptive way, always calling us out of darkness and encouraging us onward by reminding us that we are not alone.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON-BOSSERT

2. Michael Lerner, *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 29.

3. Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Story of Dr. Paul Farmer, the Man Who Would Cure the World* (New York: Random House, 2003); George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Bantam Classics Edition, 1985), 766.

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Exegetical Perspective

significance of this exchange? By going to kiss his parents, Elisha indicates his intention to break with his livelihood and family in order to follow Elijah. Elijah's response may be a simple acknowledgment that what he has done to Elisha, that is, calling him as a prophet, merits a formal announcement and farewell to his family. It is also possible that Elijah's assent is a test of Elisha's commitment: if he goes to kiss his parents, will he come back?

Elisha seals his commitment by slaughtering his oxen and burning their equipment to cook them. This marks a final break with his old life. Once the oxen are killed and their equipment burned, there can be no going back to his old life. His former means of livelihood is gone, and he will now embrace his new calling fully. Elisha's sharing of the meat among the people signifies that his prophetic career will build up God's people. Some scholars also see in this action a link to 1 Samuel 11, when Saul cuts up his oxen to summon the twelve tribes to the defense of Jabesh-gilead when it was besieged by Nahash the Ammonite. Elisha's role will also be to summon the people of Israel to action against external and internal forces which threaten them.³

The story ends with Elisha following Elijah and becoming his servant. This phrase is a translation of the Hebrew phrase *waysarethehu*, "and attended to him." This term recalls the relationship between Joshua and Moses. The same term appears in Numbers 11:28, which describes Joshua as Moses's assistant, and, more significantly, in Joshua 1:1, where God gives instructions to Joshua, Moses's assistant, upon Moses's death in such a way that makes it clear that Joshua will now take Moses's place as the leader of God's people. In the same way, this story implies, Elisha is now Elijah's servant and successor.

KAREN C. SAPIO

Homiletical Perspective

father would ask his children each evening, "What did you do for someone today?" Many years later, after a distinguished medical career, McConnell retired to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. The gap between his life and the lives of many maids, gardeners, and waitresses on the island was wide and clear. Many of these people had no, or very little, access to medical care. He wondered why someone did not do something about it. Then that pesky question crept back in: "What did you do for someone today?"

In the early 1990s, McConnell put away his golf clubs and recruited other retired doctors on the island. Dozens of physicians and nurses and dentists volunteered, and their neighbors in need began to get the care they needed.

McConnell's retirement plans certainly changed. Since responding to the needs of his neighbors, his golf handicap has risen, and his leisure time has evaporated into 60-hour weeks of unpaid work, but his energy level has increased, and, by his own admission, there is satisfaction in his life that was not there before.

Do Elijah and Elisha feel the same? Do members of our congregations feel the same? On any particular day, perhaps not. The personal costs of "going" with God, of following God's call, are high. Following the call leaves in its wake an illusion that we can leave peacemaking and the heavy lifting of justice to others. Picking up and putting on the mantle of ministry, as Elisha does, brings with it decisions to live in ways that amplify God for the spiritually hearing-impaired. The job description can be overwhelming.

Those whom we serve have seen—or strain to see—what lies beyond our healthy hesitation to follow God's call. The discoveries are too many to name, but they hold something in common: the joy of bringing God to people and people to God. Such is the work of prophet and preacher and all people of God—a God whose call and care for the called is relentless.

ANDREW NAGY-BENSON

3. Marvin A. Sweeney, *I and II Kings*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 233

PROPER 8 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 26 AND JULY 2 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

The first reading for the Second Sunday of Easter is from Acts 2:14a, 22–32, in which this psalm is quoted (according to the Septuagint) in Peter's speech. The Greek translator of the Hebrew psalm took some liberties, transforming parts of the Hebrew text from an earthly perspective to the prospect of personal immortality with God. Nonetheless, the original Hebrew text's emphasis on the fact that earthly life is surrounded by the presence of God and that true life is to live in God's presence opens this psalm to just such a transformation. For those who read this text with faith founded on the resurrection, that transformation has reached its complete fulfillment. Psalm 16 helps us to prepare for the mystery of life we celebrate at Easter.

Despite the difficult text for verses 3–4, the psalmist's theme of trust in God is clear. From the opening prayer for protection (vv. 1–2) through the remaining verses, the psalm uses different images to assert that the Lord is the only good and certain happiness (vv. 2, 9), a true inheritance (vv. 5–6), the only wise counselor (v. 7), a sure protection from mortal dangers (vv. 1, 8, and 10), and the guide to life (v. 11).

The opening petition is grounded in the confessions of trust that follow. For good reason

Pastoral Perspective

Alleluia? In too many churches the Sunday after Easter belies the profound good news of Jesus' resurrection. The worship service preaches, "Jesus Christ Was Risen Last Sunday." The alleluias have faded, the lilies have wilted, the congregation has dwindled, the pastor has gone on vacation. "Our triumphant holy day" is now "Low Sunday," a sanctioned holiday from even the usual order of service. We are "churched out" and enervated, as if we had preached and prayed and sung Jesus out of the tomb by our own efforts.

Worship planners need to take seriously the message that is perhaps inadvertently preached by a diminished service today. The Second Sunday of Easter is not intended to be second rate, but a second round. All those Easter morning sermons about death not being the end, about life after death, about beginnings and not endings—where is the integrity of our Easter preaching, if the next Sunday is dead? Faithful to the Gospel of this day in every lectionary cycle, Jesus is alive and among his own, imparting his life-giving peace and forgiveness (John 20:19–31). Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia! It is not over!

Can Psalm 16 resurrect the Second Sunday of Easter?

Do not skip the psalm today. Not only does it sound the notes played in the other readings; it is the

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

Psalm 16 is a psalm of confidence, which means that even in the midst of trials and suffering, the psalmist finds reasons to express confidence that God will save his people. Psalms of confidence often take a lamenting tone, at least in part, as the psalmist takes time to list the things that are wrong in his world and the things that he alone, or the people alone, are helpless to defeat. Only after making sure that the reader or listener is aware of the depths of the darkness does the psalmist allow the light of God to shine on the experience.

Once this light is brought to the psalm, it is affirmed in loud, clear language and strong images. There is no equivocation on the part of the psalmist when he declares his confidence in the Lord's saving power. As with other psalms assigned to the Easter celebrations of the Christian community, this psalm acknowledges both the reality of suffering and the ever-present help of the Lord.

Psalm 16 follows the pattern of other confidence psalms in that it acknowledges suffering and allows the psalmist a moment to be distressed about it. Phrases such as "Protect me, O God," "I take refuge," and "I shall not be moved" (vv. 1, 8) suggest conflict and opposition in the psalmist's life, but also express a firm, even fierce, confidence in the Lord's presence. It goes on to assert that those who do not

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Resurrection proclamation continues unabated on the Second Sunday of Easter. Having heard the good news of Jesus' rising on Easter Day, the church gathers to witness anew to the wonders God has done. Psalm 16 gives voice to that proclamation with its rejection of death and its confidence in the unfailing care of God for God's people. Peter's inclusion of it in his sermon to the people of Judea (Acts 2:25–27) points today's preachers to the psalm as well.

Here at the beginning of the Easter season, we are still marveling at the miracle of resurrection life; yet we also remember what came before. Just as the psalmist remembers times of need and disorientation, so the church remembers the fear, violence, death, and despair of the three days before the resurrection. It seemed that death had triumphed, that evil had done its worst; yet God did not abandon Christ, who might well sing with the psalmist, "You do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit" (v. 10). Neither does God abandon us. Indeed, the God who lived and died as one of us has saved us from death as well, joining us to Christ in his death and resurrection.

One of the Eastern Church's best-known iconographic images is that of the risen Christ reaching down into the grave to rescue Adam and Eve. Standing on the broken gates of hell, he raises

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this psalm has been called a “prayer song,” for the psalmist confesses throughout the psalm why grave personal needs should be placed before the Lord. This is the essence of prayer: not that we are informing God of something unknown, but that we are reminding ourselves of divine love and protection as a basis for growing in our faith.

The initial petition (vv. 1–2), which speaks of protection and “refuge,” would seem to indicate a situation in which physical security or asylum was sought from the Lord. This would be supported by the references to death (“Sheol” and the “Pit”) in verse 10. The next verse also broadens the plea into a more universal sentiment. The immediate need is expressed in language that recalls God’s continued, universal covenant loyalty and protection for the whole people. The awesome words of verse 2, “no good apart from you,” express the universal domain and exclusive loyalty belonging to God that is found in the second commandment. So the petitioner of this psalm appropriately acknowledges the power and dominion of the Lord, appealing to the Lord’s own covenant loyalty and fidelity as the basis for trust in divine aid.

The following four verses (vv. 3–6) appear to contrast this confession by those who trust in the Lord, the “holy ones,” with those who depend on other gods and offer cultic worship to them. This is more than just an oblique confession of the Lord’s supremacy. The psalm is acknowledging the appeal that other, seemingly more proximate and practical, sources of help can have, especially in serious situations.

In the psalmist’s wider culture there are many different gods to call upon. They are rejected. This is not necessarily an easy choice. Nor is dependence on God any easier for us. Human ingenuity, technological advances, and accumulated epochs of learning are our “idols,” which can finally appear to have erased the need for otherworldly realities. The story of human achievements has made the memory of God’s saving deeds vague and mysterious. Resurrection can become a modern symbol for the next human advance. Real faith, as exemplified by the psalmist, stretches the person beyond human capability and earthly realities.

The unusual images in verses 5–6 build upon the confession found in verse 2. The images “portion,” “lot,” “boundary lines,” and “heritage” reflect covenant language for the distribution of the land after the conquest. The psalmist is not boasting of land he has received; rather he boasts that the Lord

Pastoral Perspective

only reading on this day from the Old Testament. The psalm might be included in the order of service as an opening prayer, read responsively or in unison. Its expression of confidence and trust rightly grounds the worship experience in God’s presence any week of the year. Do not skip this psalm on this particular day. Its gratitude and rejoicing lifts the worshiper’s whole self (“heart,” “soul,” “body” in v. 9) to see “the path of life” (v. 11) beyond death. On the Second Sunday of Easter, it gives voice to the experience of being held in God’s hand, secure in God’s goodness in every circumstance of life driving our need for protection and refuge.

Psalm 16 may be sung by the congregation. The hymn “When in the Night I Meditate” is a paraphrase from the 1912 Psalter. Some congregations will recognize the tune from Lenten worship services. “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” is also sung to the tune St. Flavian and may provide a musical and liturgical continuity when its last line is brought forward into this day: “Abide with us, that so, this life / Of suffering overpast, An Easter of unending joy / We may attain at last!” In its reading, praying, and / or its singing, Psalm 16 offers themes and images to the readings from Acts 2 and John 20.

This psalm makes a formal appearance in the life of the church when cited by Peter in his Pentecost sermon. First- and twenty-first-century believers alike hear compelling good news. Jesus was “crucified and killed. . . . But God raised him up . . . it was impossible for him to be held in [death’s] power” (Acts 2:23–24). Luke was sure that the words of Psalm 16 were on the tip of Peter’s tongue, a ready interpretive framework for any and all who would doubt that God raised Jesus from death, neither abandoning his soul to Hades nor allowing his flesh to experience corruption (Ps. 16:10 and Acts 2:27). In the next breath of that sermon, there is witness to life, joy, and gladness; again the psalmist’s words offer a script to the heretofore ineloquent Peter (Ps. 16:11 and Acts 2:28). “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11). What language shall we borrow?

Hearing the words of the psalmist in the sermon of Peter was compelling to first converts. It may be comforting for latter-day believers, new and longtime, who struggle for words to express their faith. “You are my Lord. . . . You do not give me up. . . . You show me the path of life” (vv. 2, 10, 11). The intent of Peter’s sermon is christological;

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demonstrate such confidence in the Lord will be left out of the rewards of knowing him.

Even with the acknowledgment of suffering and the inclusion of those who do not put their trust in the Lord, the tone of this psalm is strongly joyful, using moving and vivid words such as gladness, rejoicing, security, joy, and pleasure to express his experience of the God in which he has so much confidence.

Verses 1–2 set the tone for the psalm: confident, but with an acknowledgment of danger. The psalmist cries out for God’s protection, confident that he will be protected when “in you I take refuge” (v. 1). He assures God that he is faithful, that he has no other recourse to blessing, and that God is sovereign in his life.

Verses 3–4 are somewhat problematic because of translation difficulties; scholars are not entirely sure what the phrase usually translated “multiply their sorrows” is intended to mean. However, it is clear that these verses address the case of those who worship other gods. Because the psalmist is confident in the Lord alone, he rejects the acts of those who turn to other gods instead. No good can come of that (an idea continued from “I have no good apart from you” in v. 2); they will only multiply their sorrows. The psalmist will not be tempted to offer sacrifice to these other entities (“drink offerings of blood”), nor will he use their names in incantations and prayers (“take their names upon my lips”), because again, his confidence is in the Lord alone.

In verses 5–6, the psalmist emphasizes that he has chosen to place his confidence in the Lord, “my chosen portion and my cup.” “Cup” here is a metaphor for destiny, the path one’s life will follow. The psalmist has chosen a destiny linked to the Lord’s, and he is well satisfied with it. He is content with his allotment in life, and confident that the Lord will sustain him in it.

In some sense he may see this as a reward for his confidence. It is typical for the psalms to assert a worldview in which faith is rewarded and guilt punished, and we have already seen this in the preceding verses, which indicate that those who do not place their confidence in the Lord have their sorrows multiplied. For the psalmist, however, the rewards are tangible—a heritage and a share in the land given to Israel.

Verses 7–8 suggest that there are also less tangible rewards given to those who trust in the Lord. The psalmist receives counsel—that is, wisdom and

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them to new life with him. The message is clear: death has been defeated once and for all through Christ who saves us. Because of the good news of resurrection, those who preach with Psalm 16 in mind will lift up the unswerving faithfulness of God in every circumstance. It has been said that in baptism we have already died with Christ—we have seen the worst. Since we have also been raised with him, we can live in confidence that God has already saved us from all that might destroy us. Throughout all of the many deaths and fears and trials we face in the course of our lifetimes, God remains our constant refuge.

Preaching from the psalm might also focus on the nature of the Christian life. “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup,” says the psalmist (v. 5); as followers of Jesus, we choose him again and again. Here on this Second Sunday of Easter, we can still proclaim resurrection joy and confidence in the Divine, but as the sound of the trumpets fades and we journey on through our lives, we forget that joyful confidence, and doubt creeps in. If we live as the psalmist lives, however, we continually choose Christ, reaffirming our trust in him. As the church we remind one another of God’s faithfulness, even in the face of the Pit, upholding one another as we seek to live faithfully.

In the other readings for the day we hear the voices of Peter, Paul, and John, each of them bearing witness to what he has seen and heard. Although, like Thomas, we have not seen the risen Christ with our own eyes, the church also bears witness because we have received the testimonies of so many who have gone before us. To preach from the psalm in the context of all the readings, then, is to affirm that we know the faithfulness of God, not only through our own experiences as individuals or communities, but through the experiences of so many faithful ones in every time and place. To stand with so many witnesses is to rejoice in all things and at all times, for the steadfast, saving love of God is sure.

After my father’s funeral my mother shared all sorts of memorabilia with the family: the seersucker sport coat and the white bucks that fit my older son perfectly; the collection of Orioles caps; the photographs of my father as a young boy, riding a scooter with his constant companion, Skippy, a Boston bull terrier. There were letters and notes and sermons. Then my mother showed me a few typewritten pages that took my breath away and made the tears flow. On those pages were the words my father said at the grave of my stillborn sisters.

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is his inheritance. Like the Levitical priests of old, the psalmist receives his sustenance from the Lord. The “inheritance” is not material possessions, as with the Levite, but the experience of the Lord’s closeness, protection, and mercy. The true inheritance of the believer is to live in the presence of the Lord (v. 2). A dramatic fulfillment of this is Paul’s affirmation that now “Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). The psalm hints at such a union, but Paul celebrates this union with the resurrected Lord. Through Christ, it is the Lord who has made us his inheritance.

The consequences of this divine union are drawn in the next verses (vv. 7–11). Divine counsel and guidance are present day and night. The Lord is guide and protective companion during the journey through life. Therefore, body and soul are made joyful, secure. Moreover, in the face of physical death, the psalmist is certain that the Lord will sustain his life. The Lord leads only on a path to life and joy.

The assertion that the Lord will surround us with divine presence is a challenge. This ancient psalm understands the Lord’s mercy and love so well that it affirms faith in the Lord as the giver of life, even against all odds. The Lord is the one who leads to life, and the psalmist rests in the security of this belief. Christians transform this faith to a belief that the Lord sustains life even after death. Nor should we doubt, since we have been given the resurrection of the Lord to sustain this faith. Is our faith in eternal life with God still as powerful, as steadfast, and as sure as that of the ancient psalmist, who did not have the knowledge we have been given?

In summary, the psalm is a hymn celebrating faith in the Lord’s saving presence among us. The psalmist witnesses to the steadfast trust and praise that such a faith should inspire. The real meaning of life is to belong to the Lord, to remain in the divine presence. The gift of that presence is realized and celebrated in the resurrection.

THOMAS P. MCCREESH

Pastoral Perspective

the intent of the psalmist’s prayer is more personal. Faith begins here, in the simple language of relationship and address.

Psalm 16 is generous with personal pronouns, especially “I” and “you,” and they are used interpersonally: “In you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you’” (vv. 1–2). In this song of trust the word “trust” is never used. Trust is spoken in the language of relationship. Belonging sustains and nurtures believing. As pastors have heard from those distanced from the church or doubting its beliefs, saying creeds and confessions in church can be confusing, meaningless, even disingenuous.

Nevertheless, this pastor has heard from those who affirm that saying, “In life and in death we belong to God,” opens a whole new experience and perspective for them. New and longtime members express that the Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is “welcoming,” “assuring,” “grounding,” “good news.” It affirms that faith is relational, not ideational. The ensuing convictions of trust in Jesus Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit—not in a list of “I believe’s”—both reflects and evokes deep personal confidence in God and commitment to life in “holy and joyful” community.

Worshippers will also hear the language of Psalm 16 in the reading of the Gospel. The psalmist begins his or her prayer with an unequivocal “You are my Lord.” John ends this resurrection account with Thomas’s climactic confession, “My Lord and my God!” Do some of us start with strong faith and then move through the unpleasant places and dark nights unmoved and unalone? Do some of us start with doubt and work and wait toward believing? Great is the mystery of faith! For the preacher opening the homiletical door to Thomas’s doubt and our own, the psalmist’s “You are my Lord. . . . You show me the path of life” sets us on our post-Easter journey. What we are given to see is the life-transforming presence of God and “the fullness of joy.”

Can Psalm 16 resurrect the Second Sunday of Easter?

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

Psalm 16

Exegetical Perspective

prudence—as he seeks the Lord in his heart through prayer. He gains steadfastness, a quality much admired by the Hebrews and often attributed to God himself. The psalmist asserts, “Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.” This could also have a military interpretation. The “right hand” often refers to the sword hand, and the psalmist could be saying that his confidence in the Lord makes him courageous and steadfast in battle. It could, however, also be applied to the metaphorical battles of life, in which steadfastness is just as necessary. Steadfastness is much easier for anyone who can confess: “the LORD [is] always before me.”

Because the Lord gives counsel, instruction, and steadfastness, the psalmist is glad. In verse 9, he rejoices in his spirit, and even his body rests secure under the protection of the Lord that he sought at the beginning of the psalm. Verse 10 seems to indicate that the psalmist had once been near death, either through sickness or in battle, and that he was rescued from this fate because of his faithfulness to the Lord.

One interpretation of this rescue is that it is the source of the psalmist’s confidence, and he can be assured that his confidence is merited because God has already proven through this rescue that he can be trusted to save. However, the rescue can also be seen as a reward for the confidence in the Lord that the psalmist has already displayed, adding it to the list of the numerous benefits that those faithful to the Lord receive.

The psalm ends with a proclamation of the Lord’s continuing consent to provide guidance by showing the psalmist the path of life. This may reference the rescue above, but it also may have more spiritual connotations. This interpretation is enforced by the next lines, which speak of the Lord’s presence in vivid emotional terms—fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. This psalm declares not only confidence but joy and pleasure in the ongoing presence of the Lord.

KATHERINE C. CALORE

Homiletical Perspective

My mother had carried the twins full term before it was clear that something had gone wrong. What had been a growing wave of joy in our family came crashing down when the girls were lost to us even before they were born. It was different in those days; there was no funeral or even a time of prayer with the family. My parents refused to allow the hospital to dispose of the bodies, however, and my father took the girls to be buried in the family plot. Only one dear friend accompanied him. Though it was only the two of them, there were things that needed to be said. For all of the pain in my father’s heart, all he could do was give thanks for the goodness of God—the God who welcomed my sisters home, the God who held our lives in divine hands, the God whose faithfulness is beyond measure.

For all of the jubilation of Easter, Psalm 16 expresses a sort of quiet joy. This is the kind of joy that comes from having seen the worst and lived through it—joy that is tempered with the knowledge of what the world, and life, can do. It is a song of confidence and trust in the one who does not abandon God’s people to death. One might even say that it is something of a love song, sung not because the psalmist has led a perfect existence, but because God has been faithful, even through the worst of life. It is God who has been steadfast; the Lord who has given guidance and security. “You show me the path of life,” the psalmist sings, “In your presence there is fullness of joy” (v. 11).

KIMBERLY BRACKEN LONG

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PROPER 8 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JUNE 26 AND JULY 2 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, according to the superscription, is a Song of Trust from the first Davidic collection of the Psalms. Those who preach from this psalm might explore Christian understandings of trust in God's rescue or salvation, and the still-pertinent problem of false gods. This psalm also offers an opportunity to contrast Hebrew and Christian beliefs about the afterlife, and to consider a Christian understanding of a psalm that promises that God will never abandon the faithful.

Psalm 16 begins with an unusual direction: "A Miktam of David." This marks it as a Davidic psalm, although the meaning of the word *miktam* (*mich-tam*) is unknown. This direction appears in only six of the Psalms, all of them linked with David, all of them about trust and protection; so it has been suggested that perhaps *miktam* is a word identifying this theme of covenant and trust. It has also been suggested (by the translators of the Septuagint) that the word means an inscription in stone. Neither possibility can be confirmed; the word remains archaic and mystifying.

The argument of the psalm is readily apparent, though: the psalmist requests God's saving protection in response to his trust in God, extols the virtue of those who choose the true God, blesses the Lord for his inheritance of wisdom and for relationship,

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 16 is a love song penned by a poet who is convinced not only that God is a source of goodness, but that in fact nothing good is possible apart from God (v. 2). Various categories as a "psalm of trust" or a "psalm of confidence," this text is a paean to the clarifying beauty of wholeheartedness. Although the blissful tone of Psalm 16 might incline some to experience it as simply a lovely liturgical set piece, it remains potently instructive for life today. Indeed, Psalm 16's message about the fruitfulness of centering on God offers a bracing tonic to the shallow restlessness of modern culture.

What must it be like to have one's heart so captivated by God? How can we cultivate the same loyal focus as the psalmist? The prospect is daunting, living as we do amid our media-saturated cacophony of advertisements, commercials, and reality shows, all of which push us toward a frenetic whirl of earning and spending, acquiring and squandering. Driven by unmitigated hungers, we precisely lack what philosopher Søren Kierkegaard calls the purity "to will one thing," and we therefore suffer a kind of spiritual ADHD as a result.

The distractions come from inside as well. A pastor friend recently remarked that the grasping so prevalent in America today is not unlike the greed that curdled human devotion in the garden of Eden.

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

Though the mood projected in standard English translations of this psalm is calm, beneath the surface lurk multiple textual and translational disturbances. The NRSV shows only two textual notes, in verses 2 and 4, but this is deceptive. The NASB more realistically shows eleven notes, and the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* records seventeen, seven of them in verses 2–3 alone. The superscription is so untranslatable that most English translations simply transliterate the Hebrew word *miktam* without attempting to decide what kind of literary genre or musical form it may be meant to describe.

Ancient rabbis were already confused by the term, dividing it into two words: *mak* meaning “meek,” and *tam*, meaning “undefiled.” Because of multiple uncertainties over the meaning of individual words and the irregularities in syntax and grammar, translations of verses 2–4 vary widely. The gist that most versions squeeze from these impossible verses is a disavowal of rival gods, underscoring negatively the initial affirmation of loyalty to YHWH. It is as if the subject itself engenders confusion.

The next striking features of this psalm, despite the chaos of initial verses, are the repeated affirmation of absolute trust in YHWH and no other, and the joy that proceeds from such allegiance. While many psalms focus attention on a human enemy,

Homiletical Perspective

How unfortunate that Psalm 16 is so seldom preached! This psalmist wants to preach and bear witness! Thomas G. Long, in his homiletics textbook *The Witness of Preaching*, speaks of his title: “The testimony of the witness is not about the global meaning of human experience but about God’s claim upon life. It is Yahweh who is witnessed to in the testimony.”¹ The psalmist bears witness. The Acts of the Apostles hears this psalmist’s sermon as a witness to the resurrection and carries the message forward into the New Testament. Peter preaches Psalm 16:10 in Jerusalem in Acts 2:24–32, Paul preaches it in Antioch in Acts 13:34, and this psalmist teaches us a way to preach.

The text of the psalmist’s sermon is Exodus 20:1–3. Patrick D. Miller calls it “a meditation on the First Commandment.”² The poetry of the psalmist, however, transforms command into a compelling description of the delights adorning those who declare, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you” (v. 2). Verse 1 may be addressed to God as an expression of the psalmist’s faith and loyalty,

1. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 46.

2. Patrick D. Miller, *The Way of the Lord: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 113.

Psalm 16

Theological Perspective

and suggests that he will be joyful, for he believes that he will remain in relationship with God forever. In this general shape, Psalm 16 resembles many other psalms, although it lacks the threat of bodily distress and the presence of named enemies that often appear in similar psalms. Those who choose other gods, other portions, or other counsel are clearly in opposition to his choices, but the psalmist is not personally bedeviled by opponents in this psalm.

Psalm 16 opens with an invocation: “Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge” (v. 1). The call for help is followed immediately by the reason for this call, a “for” clause that may also be found, for example, at the openings of Psalm 26 (“Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering”) and Psalm 56 (“Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me”). The psalmist asks for protection because of his relationship to God: “I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord’” (v. 2). Psalm 16 is, throughout, a powerful expression of trust in God, apart from whom the psalmist knows no good (v. 2). God is the psalmist’s chosen portion (v. 5), and the psalmist blesses God for instructing him in the way of the Lord (v. 7). In sum, because of his trust in the Lord, the psalmist experiences a glad heart, a joyful soul, and a secure body (v. 9). Through trust in God, he has achieved the only good life possible: one in which he is living a life of faith, holiness, and trust.

For the psalmist, trust means complete faith in God, renunciation of any gods other than God, and a life spent pursuing God’s wisdom, the path of life in God’s presence where “there is fullness of joy” (v. 11). One theological topic preachers might explore is what trust in God actually is—and what it does for us and to us as children of God. How is it possible that we might be in relationship with the Creator of all? What do our traditions teach us about how we live into this relationship? How do we cultivate trust in God? What might we expect to happen to us as a result of this ongoing relationship?

The psalmist, meanwhile, emphasizes that we must not place our trust in anything but the true God of Israel, and he decries the worship of false gods. While verses 3 and 4 are, according to Robert Alter, incredibly opaque to translation, the second clause of verse 4 (with its reference to refusing blood offerings) makes clear that the psalmist is distancing himself from pagan worship and is refusing to serve false gods or even to repeat their names (“I will

Pastoral Perspective

It is hard to hear God’s voice when the serpent is hissing unending temptations in our ears. This haunting discontent is finely captured in novelist Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*, as Henderson laments his lack of inner peace:

Now I have already mentioned that there was a disturbance in my heart, a voice that spoke there and said, “I want, I want, I want!” It happened every afternoon, and when I tried to suppress it got even stronger. It said only one thing, ‘I want, I want!’ And I would ask, “What do you want?” But this was all it would ever tell me.¹

A preacher could explore many similarities between our context and the psalmist’s world, for his was a landscape described as rife with a multiplicity of counterfeit options (vv. 3–4), surely an apt description for today. Do we too “multiply our sorrows” (v. 4) by looking to lesser “gods” as sources for security and happiness? Are we aware of the ways our daily choices either distract us away from or propel us toward a patiently waiting God? Above all else, Psalm 16 wants to remind us that YHWH is the one true “path of life,” a luminous presence that dwarfs all other consolations. Such a message is an invitation into spiritual wholeness, but how might we move forward to achieve this? We could follow the lead of the psalmist, who understands God through very specific verbs, which a preacher might translate into modern embodiments. The psalmist

- takes refuge in God (v. 1);
- focuses on God (vv. 2, 8), avoiding counterfeit options or substitutes (v. 4);
- recognizes God as his portion, his heritage (v. 5);
- blesses God (v. 7);
- accepts God’s counsel (v. 7);
- pays attention as God shows him the paths of life (v. 11).

What would it actually be like for us to live as the psalmist?

Another way of following the psalmist in nurturing greater spiritual wholeheartedness might be found in considering again the two categories commonly used to classify this text. Is it a psalm of trust or a psalm of confidence? Is there a difference? Are not both synonymous with belief? Scholar Barbara D. Adams, in the business article “Trust vs. Confidence,” writes of an important distinction:

Although these terms are often used interchangeably and have some commonalities, they are different in several ways. A confidence judgment typically has

1. Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 24.

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Exegetical Perspective

this one seems undistracted by such worries. It even leaves concrete events and places behind, and hangs suspended on pure relationship.

Verses 5–6 play with the vocabulary of land inheritance. This association appears most prominently at the end of verse 6, with the word *nakhalah* (plural *nakhaloth*), translated in the NRSV as “heritage.” It also appears earlier in the verse with *khavalim* (“boundary lines”; for both words together, see Ps. 105:11) and in verse 5, with *menath* (“portion”), *heleq* (“territory”), and *goral* (“lot”). Elsewhere this language describes tribal allotments. It is also employed metaphorically to describe Israel as God’s own inheritance (Deut. 4:20; 9:26, 29; 32:9; 1 Sam. 10:1; 1 Kgs. 8:51; Ps. 78:71; Isa. 19:25; 47:6; Zech. 2:12).

This vocabulary often applies to the priests and Levites, who have no land inheritance (Deut. 12:12; 14:27, 29), but whose inheritance and share is none other than God (Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9; 18:2; Josh. 13:33). There is no way to tell whether the speaker in this psalm is actually a Levite or priest, as some commentators have suggested. At the very least, the psalm employs the language of inheritance to render superlative the portion that is God. In fact, both Exodus and Jeremiah suggest that a reciprocal relationship between God and the entire nation had been derived from the idea of priestly spiritual inheritance. When the nation first arrives at Mount Sinai, God’s first words to the people, even before the Ten Commandments, are these:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. (Exod. 19:4–6a)

Jeremiah 10:16 makes the reciprocity even more evident, describing God as “the portion of Jacob” and Israel as God’s “tribe of inheritance.”

For one praying this psalm, God is not an add-on to a life made sufficient by possessions. Rather, God is the pearl of great price itself, beside which all other lusters pale. Verse 6 adds to the rich vocabulary of inheritance an aesthetic vocabulary that proceeds from better to best: the psalmist’s divine heritage is first pleasant and then beautiful. The NRSV’s “goodly heritage,” based on the King James, is thin here; the Geneva Bible had called it “a fair heritage,” and the Tanakh says, “lovely indeed is my estate.” The psalmist is entirely content with God as a single, and singular, inheritance. What more could anyone want?

Homiletical Perspective

but the psalm is preached to human listeners. The psalmist provides us a usable model for preaching.

Unlike other sermons on the First Commandment, the words of the psalmist do not rail against idolatry and fickle faith but simply describe the joy and security that follow from covenant loyalty to the Lord. This is not Joshua preaching for a decision (“but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD,” Josh. 24:14–15); this is not Elijah mocking the priests of Baal (1 Kgs. 18:27); nor it is the prophet Isaiah preaching the folly of “those who carry about their wooden idols” (Isa. 45:20–46:7, quote from v. 20). The psalmist dismisses idolatry as a sadly deluded and self-inflicted wound: “Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows” (v. 4a). Too bad about them, the psalmist seems to say. The word “god,” *elohim*, is added into the text, so one could properly read “those who choose another” something—anything in place of the Lord—“multiply their sorrows.” Instead, the psalmist wants to sing, preach, and celebrate the joy of those who choose the Lord, and the language is exuberant and unrestrained, speaking of gladness and rejoicing, “fullness of joy” and “pleasures forevermore” (v. 11).

Experienced preachers know that it is much easier to preach against something than it is to preach for something. Kicking idols around the sanctuary is not difficult; after all, they are only inanimate chunks of wood. Scoring points against the false gods and godlets is a piece of cake, but how do we speak of the One who is vastly greater than anything that can be said? The psalmist exhibits homiletics of joy, describing the benefits of faith in God.

The psalmist speaks because the psalmist has been spoken to. The psalmist can bless, praise, and rejoice in the Lord because the Lord has spoken a word of counsel and guidance (v. 7). Because the Lord has broken silence, the psalmist may also break silence, praising God and inviting those who listen to a way of life characterized by joy and ample reasons for rejoicing. Perhaps the Word of the Lord was spoken by a Levitical priest or some other authorized person. Perhaps the Word of the Lord was spoken into the consciousness of the psalmist in that mysterious way that belongs specifically to the Word of the Lord. However it has come, the psalmist has heard the Word of the Lord and rejoices.

We long for such a Word from the Lord, and that is one reason we come to worship. We lead complicated lives, and so we want many things; but when we come to worship, we hope for something beyond our own wisdom. We may not know how

Psalm 16

Theological Perspective

not bear their names on my lips” in Alter’s translation).¹ The psalmist knows that he is presented with a choice (vv. 5–6), but he chooses the God of Israel gladly, and is rewarded for that choice.

We are still presented with similar choices. While today we may no longer be tempted by pagan gods in temples or hillside shrines, our congregations remain as subject to pursuing idols as was the psalmist or any of his immediate audience. What are some of these false gods to whom we in our culture pray or otherwise give devotion? How might we too pray to be released from any temptation toward idols? Why do we too need to learn that “[t]hose who choose another god multiply their sorrows” (v. 4a)?

In verses 9 and 10, the psalmist suggests that he is secure in body and soul because of his trust in God, and that God does not (will not?) give up his faithful one to death. Throughout the Psalms, of course, when the psalmist speaks of rescue, that deliverance is expected in the here and now; the idea of God rescuing the righteous through an afterlife does not enter into mainstream Jewish theology for centuries. Although life after death is not a part of Psalms theology, it certainly is for Christians. Indeed, the writer of Luke–Acts appropriated these verses and interpreted them as a prophecy of the resurrection (“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption,” Acts 2:27).

Preachers might explore these different expectations about God’s rescue in the world today, and in the world to come. What difference does it make in our faith and action if we expect God to move in our world? How does it shape our faith and action if we imagine our reward comes only or primarily in the next life? How have Christians read (and how do Christian read) passages such as these from the Hebrew Bible through the filter of our Christian theology?

GREG GARRETT

Pastoral Perspective

a very specific referent. A trust judgment [...] is characterized by a specific lack of information, and by the need to take a “leap of faith” from what is known to what is unknown.²

Although trust is a fundamental principle of faith, one wonders if claiming confidence in God might facilitate a greater robustness in our discipleship. Adams’s notion of a “specific referent” implies prior knowledge, a concrete pattern of experience that has the capacity to be influential. Perhaps the psalmist is confident in God precisely because he *knows* God deeply. Throughout Psalm 16 we see that the psalmist’s “prior referent” is not simply knowledge of creeds or doctrines about God but, rather, a real relationship, one described as replete with “pleasures” (v. 11), which suggest a tangible intimacy with a responsive Creator.

What might the implications be in moving to such a position? All we need to do is open up our Day-Timers, calendars, and checkbook registers to understand where we place our confidence. Our calendars bluntly proclaim where we focus our attention by recording how we spend our precious time. Our bank summaries candidly testify to our allegiance by indicating what we deem valuable or necessary. We do not need to wait for Stewardship Sunday to explore the myriad ways our investments of time, talent, and treasure serve as an accurate barometer of the quality of our life with God. In what ways do we remain uncommitted or partially involved, timidly hedging our bets, due to lack of real conviction? How would our own lives shift if we practiced actual confidence in God as One who does not give us up to the Pit (v. 10)?

The good news is that God remains fully committed to us. It is as if God is a kind of immovable lighthouse, guiding us to shore in the midst of every kind of weather, if we but confidently keep that Light ever before us (v. 8). When we do, we will find our way home to Psalm 16’s gorgeous picture of blessed shelter and refuge (v. 1), filled with “fullness of joy” forevermore.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON BOSSERT

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 45–46.

2. Barbara D. Adams, “Trust vs. Confidence,” www.citeulike.org/user/eitelman/article/3352797

Psalm 16

Exegetical Perspective

Following this climactic middle of the psalm, a new thought is introduced: God as teacher. In verse 7 God is the one who gives advice and who causes wisdom to arise from deep inside, even in the speaker's sleep. Security proceeds from this coupling of God's instruction and the speaker's receptivity: with God always before the psalmist, there is no stumbling. Joy and celebration accompany such security, and in the final verse the psalm combines all three motifs—teaching, relationship, and joy:

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of joy;
in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

In a nutshell, the psalm articulates a deep sense of rest and satisfaction in allowing one's spiritual priorities to determine one's pathways: I choose and delight in God alone; God teaches me; and what comes of this is a life that is both secure and delightful.

Such an insight in the midst of a material world must have been difficult even in ancient times. Some other parts of Scripture do not achieve it. Isaiah 61:6, in fact, couples Israel's role as priests of the Lord with enjoying the wealth of nations and glorying in their riches. The previous verse even envisions foreigners as their farm workers. An insight like that of Psalm 16 is today, if anything, even more challenging, given the rich allure of multitudes of luxuries, the confusion of wants with needs, our oft-repeated designation not as citizens but as consumers, and the insistence that shopping is our economic duty.

As this psalmist knows, and as contemporary psychologists often point out, happiness does not lie with wealth or its pursuit. If it did, our nation would be the happiest on earth. The more we wasted, the richer our life would be, and the wealthy among us would be the most jubilant of all. Rather, satisfaction in life, joy, and abundance lie in having our priorities straight, in choosing God not only as teacher but as inheritance, as pearl of great price, apart from whom we have no good.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

to articulate that yearning very well, but we want something we have not read in the paper or heard on NPR or seen on television. We want God's Word, wisdom, guidance. The good news is that God's Word, wisdom, and guidance are spoken in our worship. The witness of the psalmist in verse 7 that the Lord "gives me counsel" is completed in the affirmation of verse 11: "You show me the path of life."

This psalm, which sets our hearts to yearning for "the path of life," is "the path of life." It is performative language: it *does* what it *says*. It is a sacrament: it gives what it talks about and asks for. In worship, and specifically in this psalm, we find "the path of life." The psalm's native habitat and home are in the house of worship. The Hebrew phrase translated by the NRSV "I keep the LORD always before me" (v. 8a) "is often inscribed on the ark or at the front of the synagogue"³ of Jewish congregations. This is the place where the Lord speaks the Word, where "the path of life" is disclosed, and where we find our true home in praise of God.

Moreover, we find our truly human existence walking this "path of life" of which the psalmist speaks. The apostle Paul spoke of it in his letter to the Galatians as he enumerated "the fruit of the Spirit," which "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23).

So abundant is all manner of human life that it cannot be measured and cannot be contained. This life overflows the banks of life itself. Surely the psalmist does not have a fully envisaged theology of resurrection. Just as surely, the psalmist cannot imagine that life so filled with God's generosity can offer anything less than "pleasures forevermore." God's faithfulness insists on the triumph of "fullness of joy," in spite of every one of death's threats. The psalmist may not know how to talk about resurrection, but the psalmist bears witness to God's keeping (Ps. 121:5–8) in which we may take refuge, so that "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8).

PATRICK J. WILLSON

3. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, in *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 1298.

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

Isaiah 66:10–14

¹⁰Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
¹¹that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom.

Theological Perspective

Sometimes the God who “changes not” can seem very changeable to us. At one moment, God is nowhere to be found. Then the clouds part, and like a sudden blast of midday sun pouring through the cracks of a darkened sky, God’s presence nearly strikes us down. Suddenly, God is all too obvious.

Isaiah 66 is surely one of those “suddenly, God” texts. Ready or not, we are almost attacked here by a God who comes like a premature birth, shredding our schedules and our simple theologies. The God who will not be stopped demands our humility and purity. Most of all, God comes rushing upon us in order to console us.

Like a mother who rushes to lift a frightened infant to her knee, who comforts urgently but tenderly, who nurses both to feed and to calm, so God hastens to console us. Like the traumatized child, full of fears and sins and confusions, each one of us is invited to let our tensions and anxieties go limp, as we let God be God and let ourselves stop pretending to be anything more than God’s needy little baby.

That is not how we like to see ourselves. We are the grown-ups, serious minded and spiritually mature. We have been taught to abhor the idea, coming from Freud and others, that religion is a coping device, invented to help us face our terrors,

Pastoral Perspective

The city has just given birth! The Lord has delivered the bouncing babies! What unexpected words from the prophet Isaiah. We are to rejoice with this new mother and to mourn with her. How often have we, as pastors, sat beside the bed of a new mother and held the little one, perhaps doing some “dandling” of our own? These are undoubtedly some of the most joyous tasks of the pastor or other church leader. They can, however, also be times of mourning, if the child or mother is sickly, if there are financial burdens that rest heavily on the parents, or any other number of other changes that impact the life of the family. So, we may approach this bedside with mixed emotions.

What, though, does it mean that the city (particularly the city of Jerusalem) gives birth? Who are these children, and what role does God play in their lives beyond the delivery room? The mother in this passage is the city. It is that mother of all mother cities, Jerusalem. Note that the mother is not just the temple, but the whole city, with all her complexity. This mother nurtures her children by feeding them abundantly from her breast. None go hungry. There is milk and nourishment for all. Her breast brings comfort. The mother need not worry, for the Lord has provided all the resources she will need to carry out her task.

Isaiah 66:10–14

¹²For thus says the LORD:

I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm,
and dandled on her knees.

¹³As a mother comforts her child,

so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

¹⁴You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice;

your bodies shall flourish like the grass;
and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants,
and his indignation is against his enemies.

Exegetical Perspective

Isaiah 66:10–14 is a hope-filled poem that echoes many of the themes heard earlier in Isaiah, including promises to Jerusalem (vv. 10–13; cf. 40:1–2; 52:1–2; chap. 62) and the juxtaposition of God’s servants and enemies (v. 12; cf. 33:1–16; chaps. 34–35). The time has come to turn from mourning and lamentation to joy and jubilation. Jerusalem, God’s holy city and mountain and symbol for the nation Israel as a whole (Isa. 2:2; Amos 2:5; Mic. 4:1), is about to be restored. This restoration will bring comfort to the Israelites. Furthermore, in Jerusalem the Israelites themselves will be comforted. For the prophets in general and for Isaiah in particular, the destruction of Jerusalem symbolized God’s rejection of Israel (see Lam. 1). Embedded in the promise of Jerusalem’s restoration is the promise that not only will Israel one day be restored as a nation but also this city Jerusalem and its people will, once again, become God’s dwelling place (Joel 3:17; cf. Ezek. 37:27–28).

Part of a larger passage that deals with the vindication of Zion (66:1–13) and the coming reign of God (66:14–24), Isaiah 66:10–14 can be subdivided into two units: verses 10–11, a call to rejoice, and verses 12–14, a divine promise to Jerusalem. The central theme of the passage is comfort and God’s fidelity to the Israelites.

Homiletical Perspective

In our age of digital cameras, even amateur photographers can crop, edit, and enhance the photographs they take. If there is someone in the picture with a ridiculous expression or caught in an embarrassing posture, that person’s image can be eliminated, and the focus is on the smiling, genial countenances one chooses to preserve. The edited photograph idealizes a moment in time that was, in fact, much more complex.

In a similar fashion the lectionary sometimes crops a portion of a text, resulting in a simplification of something that is much more tangled. Today’s reading is a case in point. In the NRSV, Isaiah’s apocalyptic song appears to end at verse 16, not verse 14, where the lection stops. By eliminating the last two verses, the lection provides a much sunnier picture of God’s redemptive action. Tender maternal images characterize both Jerusalem and God. The returning exiles are breast-fed by Jerusalem: “you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast,” or as the REB renders the Hebrew: “you may suck comfort from her and be satisfied.” That word “suck” gives sound and substance to the metaphor, so that we hear and picture God’s mothering care.

Verses 15 and 16, however, present an altogether different vision of God. Images of a wrathful, violent deity displace the divine mother: “For the LORD will

Isaiah 66:10–14

Theological Perspective

a false comfort beyond compare. It is infantile, Freud said, the pathetic illusion of the neurotic. Not surprisingly, the Christianity of our time has reacted, and our theology almost wholly ignores the tenderness of God, much less anything about our neediness. We prefer Paul's "I put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11 KJV) to Jesus' "unless you turn and become like children" (Matt. 18:3 RSV). Jesus may not have read Freud, but we have.

As Calvin reminds us, our view of God and our view of ourselves are closely related. Sure enough, we reject our newborn neediness and God's mothering as a single piece. The God of the grown-ups is grand, even if too distant to care or too busy to help. The practical result is that we do not turn our awareness to God, because we think God is too glorious to be interested in us, too cosmic to care for the individual, much less for the baby.

For Isaiah, God is exalted *and* available. God is pure holiness, exalted far above our unholy lives; but God is also here, making holy. God is to be praised, but how quickly the grown-ups will praise God into inaccessibility, imprisoning God in glorious isolation. Isaiah balances the two sides: God is exalted and near, holy and accessible, as available as a mother who drops everything else, breaks out of our theological confinements, and comes running to comfort a frightened infant.

Freud notwithstanding, sometimes we have good reasons to be frightened. It may be that we have just become more clearly aware of the power of evil within us. Perhaps we have seen ourselves and our deeds with new, more honest eyes, and quite rightly we are frightened when we see how sin seems to win again and again, frustrating our best intentions. Awareness of sin without knowledge of grace can be paralyzing.

It may be we have just come face to face with the surprising power of evil around us, seeing perhaps with new clarity the unfairness that often defines our institutions or the unexpected hatred that someone bears toward us. When we learn we have made too light of evil, when we are shocked by its inexplicable destructiveness, we are right to feel the sudden chill of dread.

It may be that death is at hand, that illness will not be put off, that a relationship is shattering, or that violence is at the gate. If in the season of death and grief it is possible for a Christian to go on each day with calmness and serenity, it is only because we are honest about what we fear and about that for which we can scarcely hope.

Pastoral Perspective

Does the city or town in which you find yourself nurture her children in the ways that are described here? Is there plenteous food for all the children? Are there resources for families in need? How does she decide who is fed and who goes hungry? Do we truly believe that God has provided enough for all? These are some of the questions that inform our ministry and mission as congregations. We notice that all children do not receive equal basic needs or the same start toward a good education.

As companion children of the city, we can toddle to those in need with outstretched arms and open hands, sharing what we have, or we can guard our food and possessions while building walls and writing our name on our food to ensure that we have enough, no matter if our playmate has none. We, the congregation, are but one member of the family, but we have a choice as to how we respond to the needs of the children. Both those who are childlike givers and those who are childish hoarders are called to rejoice and drink deeply, for the city has enough for all.

Does it make a difference that this mother city is Jerusalem? It could, as we think about who these children might be. Jerusalem has given birth to many faiths and nationalities. The three monotheistic religions call this city home and have claimed their piece of her. If those who call on God are the children, they are siblings who continue to fight to this day over who will get the nurturing breast. On the other hand, the children of Jerusalem celebrate God's presence in her midst through their varying rituals and acts of remembrance. She carries them through Shabbat and the Lord's Day. She plays with them during the times of harvest and celebration and comforts them in the days of atonement and crucifixion.

Jerusalem is both a hoped-for possibility and a lived reality. Those of us who do not dwell there have the opportunity to move toward the peaceful hope of the nurturing, carrying, playful Jerusalem through getting to know our siblings. Interfaith dialogue and projects to benefit children of our local cities point to this hope-filled Jerusalem of the future. We were all once helpless infants dependent on others to provide for our needs, whether Christian, Jew, or Muslim. We share responsibility for those who cannot speak for themselves.

We too are the children. So we benefit from this loved city, who in turn nurtures us, consoles us, feeds us, plays with us. In essence we are a family of strangers both within and outside of the

Isaiah 66:10–14

Exegetical Perspective

Addressed to the Israelite people in supposedly postexilic times, the poem begins with a double imperative, “rejoice” (v. 10). The poet calls the people to rejoice with Jerusalem, to be glad for her, and to be joyous over her. The reason for such celebration is yet to be disclosed, which adds a tone of anticipation to the poem. The people are told that they will nurse and be satisfied at Jerusalem’s consoling breast. They will drink with delight at her glorious bosom. Metaphorically, Jerusalem becomes “mother” to the people (vv. 10–11). Once portrayed as the beloved of God (Jer. 2:1) and because of infidelity later condemned as a harlot (Isa. 1:21), Jerusalem, daughter of God (Zeph. 3:14), is now imaged as a nursing mother whose breasts are laden with milk and ready to feed and care for her children. Barren and bereaved Jerusalem is about to be transformed (cf. Isa. 49:14–21).

The second part of the poem opens with the traditional prophetic messenger formula, “Thus says the LORD” (v. 12a). What the prophet hinted at in verses 10–11 now comes into full view. Jerusalem will become a fruitful mother through God’s graciousness. Israel’s God will make Jerusalem prosperous by means of the wealth of other nations, all of which will enable Jerusalem to be a tender “mother” to the people (v. 12). The two similes “like a river” and “like an overflowing stream” capture the flow of goods that will come into the city. Jerusalem, once impoverished and destitute, will become a new and important trade center. Jerusalem will be able to provide for the people only because of God’s benevolence. God is the one who sustains all life. The gift Jerusalem receives from God is the gift she is able to give to the people—nourishment and care. For the Israelites, God and God’s great love will once again be with them in ways that they have known in the past.

The poet’s use of metaphorical language to express the renewed relationship between God and Jerusalem, Jerusalem and the people, and the people and God is striking in verse 13. In the first two lines, the poet depicts God speaking directly to the people. Just as a mother comforts her child, so God will comfort the Israelites (v. 13a–b). Here the simile ascribes maternal imagery and instincts to God, who is usually portrayed as a warrior (e.g., Isa. 19:1–15; 34; Jer. 20:11), father, and redeemer (Isa. 63:16). The image of God as a caring, nursing mother appears only in the book of Hosea (Hos. 11:2–4). God’s comfort, however, will be in direct relation to the people being comforted in Jerusalem (v. 13c). Hence, the restoration and renewal of Jerusalem

Homiletical Perspective

come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury, and his rebuke in flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, on all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many.” No wonder the lectionary crops these verses. They create dissonance with the warm and nurturing images that precede them. Nevertheless, eliminating them is a loss, because they set up a tension with the earlier verses that could make for a profound sermon on the conflicted understandings of God we hold in our hearts.

How are we to make sense of the abrupt transition from a mother suckling her child to the commander of a mighty military force? We might interpret the passage by saying that the Lord is a God of both grace and judgment. God nurses and nurtures, but God also judges and punishes. If you have only the God of grace, you sentimentalize the Divine. If you have only the God of judgment, you turn God into a tyrant. I suppose there is some truth in this theological argument, but it strikes me as too simple a solution.

I would not be satisfied with a sermon that did not challenge these devastating words: “those slain by the LORD will be many.” Or as the Jerusalem Bible reads: “The victims of YHWH will be many.” Victims of the Lord! Are there not enough victims of human violence that God too must join in the bloodshed? In an age when many people appeal to divine judgment to justify murderous actions, I find it irresponsible not to challenge such a horrifying image of God. Perhaps those who produced the lectionary left these verses out precisely for this reason: they did not want to perpetuate the misuse of God’s name for violent purposes. If that is the case, I do not approve of their strategy. We will never overcome the pathological use of religion by sanitizing the Bible. Even if we ignore them, these violent passages will remain in the hands of those who celebrate them and tout them as the divine warrant for their rants and raves and brutal acts.

A more fruitful theological approach would be to start with the observation that a vast portion of Scripture reveals that the human heart is filled with a confounding mixture of the sublime and the ugly. When we recall that this song from Isaiah is written after the exile, we begin to understand how the prophet can place side by side the mothering God and the slaughtering God. Exile is the reverse of a mother suckling her child and dandling the babe on her knee. Exile is tearing the child out of the mother’s arms. Exile is separation, sorrow, and

Isaiah 66:10–14

Theological Perspective

More than this: when we go through a time, as most of us must, when God is nowhere to be found, when faith itself is meaningless, and when dread mixes with doubt and despair, then fear is the only honest response. At that moment, theology has nothing to say. The God who is high and lifted up is busy and gone away. At that moment, this is a text we simply must hear. It gives us permission to visualize ourselves as helpless and frightened. Even more daringly, this text gives us the imagination to visualize God as a mother rushing toward us, picking us up and tenderly holding us, comforting us until dread dissolves and joy is born. It announces the gospel: we are tenderly held by a God who delights in coming to our salvation.

This is not a theology for the weak but for the honest. God is grand and glorious, but also *here, now*. Claiming that truth is not a crutch for the perennially frightened, but a saving power for those who are being made bold by the solid foundation of their faith.

Who is this God who rushes toward us? None other than the God who rushes to be born in the night, who goes steadfastly to Jerusalem, who immediately enters the city, who for us and for our salvation is obedient even to death on the cross, who rushes to meet us at dawn, who goes ahead and yet is with us always, never leaving or forsaking us even unto the end of the world. This is the God who, like a rushing, mighty wind, enters “every trembling heart” so that we need never be alone, never afraid, never without comfort.

RONALD COLE-TURNER

Pastoral Perspective

church, united by location and by the God who has delivered us.

Can you picture the scene of God bringing babies into the world like an obstetrician or a midwife? When we think of deliverance, we often think of heroic images like a Cecil B. DeMille version of the Moses saga, with thousands of people being led out of bondage or traveling through walls of water. Here, however, the image is a quiet one with few observers: God bending over the city of Jerusalem, guiding new life into the world. The Lord ensures that the delivery is a safe one and that the parents have all that they need. As Jerusalem comforts the cries of her newborn, so too does God comfort the family as a whole. God delivers. God provides. God comforts. What more do we need?

We are told that we will see all these things and that they will cause us to grow. We will grow in the city as we learn to feed, clothe, and nurture her children. We will grow in understanding when we share conversations with our siblings both within and outside of the church. We will grow in faith, when we believe that God has provided for the mother and child and live out of this abundance to share God’s good gifts with each other. May we rejoice and stand tall in God’s sure and steadfast love for all the city’s children!

KATHY L. DAWSON

Isaiah 66:10–14

Exegetical Perspective

will be a means of comfort for the people, but the ultimate source of the comfort will be God.

The theme of comfort is central to the book of Isaiah. God's anger will give way to comfort (12:1). The prophet refuses to be comforted in the face of the destruction of the people (22:4). Both the people and Jerusalem become the recipients of God's message of comfort that the prophet proclaims to a city ravaged and a people exiled (40:1). Elsewhere Zion/Jerusalem is promised comfort by God (51:1–3; cf. 51:17–20). Comfort will be the divine gift given by God to a wayward people in need of healing (57:17–18) and will become part of the mission of the Lord's anointed one (61:2).

Verse 14 concludes the poem. The theme of rejoicing heard in verse 14a recalls the opening lines of the poem (v. 10). The restoration and transformation of Jerusalem will be cause for the people's heart to rejoice; just as Jerusalem will enjoy prosperity and wealth, so will the people enjoy invigorating life, a message that the poet captures through the use of a simile that speaks of bodies flourishing like grass (cf. 58:11). All of these occurrences will serve as signs that the hand of God is with the Israelites called "servants." With God's enemies, however, divine indignation will prevail (cf. 10:12–14; 14:27). Here the poet ascribes anthropomorphic images to God. The hand that was once turned against the Israelites and that once struck them (5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4; cf. 40:2) is now the hand that will show favor to the people. In sum, the poem acknowledges the fidelity and ongoing creativity of Israel's God, whose work continues to be transformative.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

Homiletical Perspective

weeping in a strange land for a home that appears to be lost forever. Return from exile is reunion with the one who gave birth to Israel. Return from exile is being joined again to the source of nurture and comfort.

Isaiah, however, does not stop with the vision of the nursing mother. The image of nurture and warmth awakens in the prophet memories of the invaders who had hauled the exiles away. Picturing the tenderness of God arouses a passion for vengeance against those who violated mother and child, who desecrated Jerusalem and led its citizens to captivity in Babylon. Viewed from the perspective of destruction, exile, and sorrow, Isaiah's sudden move from the mothering God to the slaughtering God makes sense. This is how the human heart works: filled with a vision of a redeemed future, it imagines with equal force the divine wrath descending upon those who led us through hell: "The LORD will come in fire . . . to pay back his anger in fury . . . and those slain by the LORD shall be many" (vv. 15–16). Instead of ignoring these verses, as the lectionary does, and instead of holding them up as a revelation about the nature of God, I suggest exploring the human dynamics that produced them and then facing how those same dynamics are at work in our hearts. Until we do this, until we come honestly to terms with the paradox of how we imagine God as gracious to us and wrathful to our enemies, religious belief will continue to fuel the brutal cycles of violence and vengeance that surely make the Mother of us all weep and mourn for all of her children, no matter whose earthly side they are on.

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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

Psalm 66:1–9

¹Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
² sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise.
³Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.
⁴All the earth worships you;
they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name.”

Selah

⁵Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

Theological Perspective

In these verses we find no teddy-bear God or warm, fuzzy Jesus. Here we stand in awe of the God of terrible deeds. We have almost forgotten such a God ever existed.

The really puzzling thing in our text is not that God is “terrible in [his] deeds” (RSV; “awesome,” NRSV, NIV), but that we are to make a joyful noise to such a God and to give our glorious praise. Something inexplicably jarring is going on here. How can saying, “God, your deeds are terrible,” be a way of praising God? How can that be “glorious praise”?

“Your deeds are terrible” are words we reserve for mass murderers and terrorists, for those who commit crimes against humanity. An atheist will say: “I have seen the terrors your God allows, and I will have none of it.” If a believer ever entertains such thoughts, are they not quickly suppressed in favor of the God of sunny days and happy outcomes?

God is nothing if not good, we tell ourselves. And “good” quickly becomes “nice.” Our defanged and domesticated God is a happy cheerleader, urging us on to sunnier landscapes and brighter moods.

Against that, we have the thunderstorm of this text. Even here, we try to safeguard God’s reputation—and, to be truthful, to protect ourselves from having to stand face to face before the God of “terrible deeds.” How? We point out how the text

Pastoral Perspective

God is worthy of praise. According to the psalmist, the whole earth stands back in awe, marveling at God’s amazing work. Those who are against God cringe in fear at the power and might of their enemy. God is the one who moved the waters so the Israelites could walk, not just through the sea into safety, but into the land that was promised. God is the beneficent ruler, ever vigilant, keeping “watch on the nations” (v. 7). We are not to keep silent in the face of these wonders, but to sing them aloud with a joyful sound.

This is quite a contrasting image of God from the other Old Testament passage designated for this Sunday. In Isaiah 66:10–14, God was so close to humanity as to deliver the children of the city to their mother as an obstetrician or midwife, an immanent God, who comforts the crying infant. By contrast, in this psalm, God is the lofty ruler who performs wonders beyond anything capable of humans. God is so far above us that all humanity, even all of creation, must raise their voices to be heard in praise.

When thinking about these two passages in tandem musically, it is like contrasting a lullaby sung by a mother to her infant child to the combined choruses of all nations singing Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” at full volume. This contrast may unearth some of the controversies in worship music styles between praise choruses and gospel standards that

Psalm 66:1–9

⁶He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There we rejoiced in him,
⁷ who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let the rebellious not exalt themselves.

Selah

⁸Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
⁹who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.

Exegetical Perspective

With an exuberant spirit, the psalmist calls all the earth to praise God, to burst into song in celebration of God's awesome deeds. Creator God is a God of extraordinary power, who makes even Israel's enemies cringe (v. 3). This God keeps watch on the nations, which serves as a warning to the rebellious ones not to act haughtily by exalting themselves (v. 7). The nine verses of the psalm are part of a community hymn (vv. 1–12), with the latter part of the psalm being an individual thanksgiving (vv. 13–20). The first part of the psalm is a festal liturgy that extols the majesty of God's glory made manifest in his everlasting reign (vv. 1–7). The second part of the psalm is hymn of blessing that praises God for God's miraculous saving deeds (vv. 8–12; see also v. 3).

Verses 1–9 can be subdivided into three units: verses 1–4, verses 5–7, and verses 8–9. Each of these units is a specific invitation. In verses 1–4, the psalmist invites the entire earth to make a joyful noise (v. 1), to sing the glory of God's name (v. 2), and to declare aloud the awesomeness of God's deeds (v. 3). Verse 4 responds to the invitation voiced in verses 1–3. Indeed, the whole earth does worship God and does sing praise to God and to God's holy name. To sing the glory of God's name is, for Israel, to proclaim God's creativity expressed through creation (see, e.g., Pss. 103 and 104).

Homiletical Perspective

We have a number of phrases in common American English for being caught in an impossible situation: "I'm boxed in"; "I'm trapped"; "I see no way out of it"; "I have tried every possible avenue, and they are all dead ends." If you have been in such a situation, only to have things open up in a way you never expected, then you probably clearly remember your feelings of relief and gratitude. If it was a person or a group of people who came to your rescue, your heart overflows with thanksgiving for what they did, every time you remember them. If it was a chain of unforeseen events that reconfigured your predicament so that you were no longer trapped, it may be that every time you replay what happened, you find yourself spontaneously thanking God. You do not figure out a doctrine of providence or posit some set of presuppositions that will account for your theological interpretation of what happened. Instead, sheer, boundless gratitude takes over your entire being: "Thank you, thank you, thank you, God."

The psalmist is filled with just such a memory. It is not a personal, individual memory, but the corporate, formative memory of the Hebrew slaves escaping through the parted waters of the Red Sea and entering the promised land through the parted waters of the Jordan River. For the psalmist, these scenes of rescue and arrival are not simply events

Psalm 66:1–9

Theological Perspective

says it is God's enemies who "cringe before you" (v. 3). What a relief, we say. No cringing needed—at least not for us. Only bad people need fear the terrible deeds of God. Of course, we would prefer it if God would never do anything terrible, but at least we are comforted to think God is terrible only to our enemies and not to us. God lets us pass across the sea on dry land and then drowns the Egyptians in order to let us escape. Exodus and salvation are nice, so what are a few Egyptians?

We know this does not quite work. How can we worship a God who saves by destroying?

One solution is offered by Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395), the youngest and perhaps the most subtle of the three great Cappadocian theologians. In his mystical *Life of Moses*, Gregory suggests the destruction of the Egyptian army is meant not so much as a literal history but as a figurative portrayal of a God who destroys everything inside us that enslaves us. So God kills only allegorical Egyptians.

Gregory is especially distressed at the thought that the God of the Passover would free Israel by killing the firstborn of the Egyptians. God kills innocent babies for the sins of their parents? "How would a concept worthy of God be preserved in the description of what happened if one looked only to the history? The Egyptian acts unjustly, and in his place is punished his newborn child. . . . If such a one now pays the penalty of his father's wickedness, where is justice? Where is piety? Where is holiness?"¹ In other words, is the God of terrible deeds really holy and just?

The solution Gregory offers is that we must look for the "true spiritual meaning." Look beyond the history, he suggests—almost setting it aside as impossible at a literal level—and focus instead on the true teaching. For Gregory, it is this: "When through virtue one comes to grips with any evil, he must completely destroy the first beginnings of evil."² In other words, if you are serious about a life of Christian virtue, you must allow God to destroy in you the newborn stirrings of sin. According to Gregory, the Christian who hangs on to just a little sin is the one who should be cringing.

This may be true enough, but Gregory's allegorical interpretation, so widely used in the early church, is hardly an acceptable exegetical strategy for us today. If we cannot soften the text by through allegorical exegesis, what can we do?

1. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 75.
2. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

Pastoral Perspective

tend to emphasize the nearness and compassion of God, and traditional or contemporary hymnody, which tends to focus on the greatness and power of God. Perhaps these musical wars are not so much about the style or instrumentation of the music, but about who God is.

Perhaps the collection of songs we have in Scripture, particularly the Psalms, can show that both images of God are part of our musical heritage in the church. For every song like Psalm 66 that offers praise to the great and powerful God, there is a Psalm 23, with a God who takes care of us as a shepherd tends the flock. For every Psalm 74, which wonders why God is so far away, there is a Psalm 46, which begins, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Our songs in the book of Psalms are both corporate and personal. They are full of joy and lament. God honors all of these, so why do we think that God is pleased with only one type of music?

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a twentieth-century German theologian and martyr, was growing up, his family gathered each evening to sing hymns and spiritual songs around the piano. The family was very musical, so they would often add harmony and additional instruments to accompany their singing. Dietrich's twin sister, Sabine, remembers that the young Bonhoeffer developed a secret code for the family's hymn repertoire.¹ Hymns that spoke of a personal relationship with God, often through Jesus Christ, were classified as "red" hymns. Those whose lyrics evoked a more distant relationship with God were classified as "black" hymns. The children were often encouraged to choose their favorites to sing, and young Dietrich much preferred the red ones. Whether red or black, our worship-music tradition presents varying images of who God is and our relationship to the one who is worthy of our praise.

Youth and young adults today are very eclectic in their musical tastes. If you want to find out what they believe, ask them for a sample playlist from their MP3 player or cell phone. The barriers between rock and country, classical and jazz, traditional anthems and praise choruses just do not seem to be there for this generation. It could be an interesting exercise to ask a group of youth or young adults to write down what "making a joyful noise" to God might sound like. What would the lyrics be? Who would accompany our "noise"? Then repeat this same exercise with an older group. Would there

1. Sabine Leibholz, "Childhood and Home," in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 24.

Psalm 66:1–9

Exegetical Perspective

Singing God's glory also means celebrating God's redemptive deeds that began with Abraham and Sarah and continued through postexilic times (see, e.g., Pss. 107, 136). Thus, for Israel, praise is both confessional and theological. Praise describes God's nature, attributes, and activity in the created world. Praise acknowledges God as the source and giver of all good gifts. The appropriate place for offering such praise was not only in the temple but also at cultic festivals and feast. The image of all the earth making a joyful noise to God and praising God's name is a typical one found throughout the psalms (see, e.g., Pss. 19:1–4; 98; 100; 148).

The psalmist extends a second invitation in verses 5–7. This time the invitation is to “come and see” God's tremendous deeds. These deeds are cause for praise (vv. 1–4). Verse 6 is an allusion not only to the exodus event (Exod. 14:21; 15:19), but also to the Israelites' crossing the Jordan River, recounted in Joshua 3. These two events implied in verse 6 form the backbone of Israel's self-understanding as God's chosen people in relation to salvation history. In verse 7 the psalmist makes clear that might characterizes God's dominion and justice.

For the Israelite community, the exercise of God's might has been prominent throughout history. At the time of the exodus, the might of God's arm caused terror and dread to fall upon the Egyptians (Exod. 15:16). Before the exile, the people were called to acknowledge God's might by recalling the divine deeds that have come to pass (Isa. 33:13).

During the time of the exile, the community looked to the God who is to come with might, with an arm that would rule (Isa. 40:10). In postexilic times, God came from Edom, splendidly robed, marching in great might and announcing vindication (Isa. 63:1). This God of might is the one who passed judgment on Assyria, who came from far away with burning indignation “to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction” (Isa. 30:27–28). All the nations were as nothing before Israel's God, who toppled them from their positions of power (see Jer. 46–51; cf. Isa. 13–23; 34). Such divine might also ruled against Israel, because of its apostasy, idolatry, and injustices (Isa. 22:1–14; Amos 2:4–16). In verse 7, however, Israel is called to praise God for God's mighty works against the nations that have exalted themselves and exerted their power unjustly, as in the case of Assyria and Babylon.

Lastly, verse 7 celebrates the sovereignty of Israel's God, “whose eyes keep watch on the nations” (cf. Jer. 16:17). The nations have been forewarned;

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in the past but liberating realities in the present moment, as if the assembly were once again at the Red Sea and the Jordan River: “Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot” (vv. 5–6). These memories are so vivid that they drive the psalmist to exuberant praise: “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise” (vv. 1–2). Rhapsodic excitement comes upon the psalmist at the very thought of what God has done: “How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you” (v. 3). The psalmist then shifts from exhorting all the earth to sing, to the claim that they already are doing so: “All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name” (v. 4). Unlike verse 1, this verse is not a command but a description.

Robert Alter's translation of verse 4 makes clear just how extravagant the psalmist's description of the worshipping world is: “All the earth bows down to You, and they hymn to You, hymn Your name.”¹ All the earth bows down and sings hymns to God! That is certainly not what we see in ancient Israel's violent and precarious history. The earth does not bow down to God. The empires of the earth rise up against God and against God's people. The imperial rulers are not impressed with the exodus and the entry into the promised land. They do not “cringe” before God (v. 3), and they do not sing praises to God's name.

When we read or sing this psalm, we are not reading history. We are reading a countervision, a vision of the world that through the act of worship becomes real for the congregation and empowers them to bring the actuality of their brutal world closer to the yearnings of their hearts. Reading the psalm, we glimpse a soul lost in wonder, love, and praise; we taste the gratitude of a people who realize that God “has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip” (v. 9); we feel the extravagance of a heart so overflowing with song and thanksgiving that it sees the divine intention for creation as if it were already fulfilled.

We most faithfully enter the spirit of the psalm through the door of worship, through the door of our own desires to give ourselves unabashedly to the praise of God. I can imagine a sermon that would begin with an exposition of a profoundly beloved

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 224.

Psalm 66:1–9

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We have two options. We can protect our theology by dodging all the “terrible deeds” texts, or we can struggle with this text and confront its uncomfortable message with theological courage and integrity. It is entirely possible that our ideas about God need a good shaking now and then. A text like this is an uncomfortable reminder we are dealing, not with our finest notions of happy and nice, but with a living, terrifying, and utterly holy God, whose ways are beyond knowing and whose deeds may exceed all our standards of propriety. As Gregory himself reminds us, the God of Christian faith, the very one who meets us in Jesus Christ, is nonetheless an inexhaustible mystery, far beyond any human concepts or categories, even categories of good and evil.

Give God “glorious praise! Say to God, ‘How terrible are thy deeds!’” (vv. 1–2 RSV). The rhetorical shock contained in that simple string of words is enough to deconstruct many a sermon, not to mention most recent theology. More than that, it points us to yet another level on which we encounter God, not just in the blessings of life, when there is healing or new birth, but in the moments of destruction and terror, when cities are attacked and dreams destroyed.

Of course, we will never bring ourselves to say that God *does* these things, nor should we. What this text should prompt us to do, however, is to see that our God is met on that plane, where history turns and twists and where worlds change. The terror of our time is not God’s doing; on that, we simply are not authorized to say what this psalm says. However, with courage and hope we can say the terror of our time and of every time is swept up into the awesome majesty of God, whose ways are beyond comprehension but whose mercies are everlasting.

RONALD COLE-TURNER

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be any commonalities in the way we want to praise God, or would our “joyful noise” be more like the cacophony of each individual singing in his or her own style simultaneously, with moments of harmony and dissonance?

Regardless of our varying musical tastes, the emphasis in worship and in this psalm is rightly placed on God, not ourselves. So often we think about worship as something designed to nurture us. We may become discouraged on any given Sunday if we feel like we have not been fed. Worship is about pleasing God, not ourselves, so we have to be told, “Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds!’” (v. 3). We forget that God is the recipient of our worship, the audience of our command performance.

Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish existential theologian, used this same metaphor when speaking about a theater of worship, where the congregation are the actors, stagehands, musicians, and artists, all performing for an audience of One, or in this case Three-in-One. This turns upside down our usual categories of clergy and laity, of professional musicians and pew singers, as we all work together to please and glorify God, our sole patron. Imagine the joyful noise that we could create with this as our goal. We would testify together and separately to God’s working in our lives, knowing that God continues to show up, even when our performance is not the best that it could be.

God has kept us among the living for this purpose. God has not let us “fall down” in the chancel area of worship to embarrass ourselves or to offend the divine ear. We are here so that we can praise and enjoy God forever. Is that not worth singing about?

KATHY L. DAWSON

Psalm 66:1–9

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their power has been put in check. The verse also functions as a reminder that the God being celebrated is not only the God of Israel but also the God of the nations.

In verses 8–9 the psalmist issues a third invitation. The people are called to bless God. The phrase “our God” conveys a tone of intimacy and communicates the sense of relationship. Because God has done awesome deeds on behalf of the Israelites (vv. 5–7), the people now claim God, once again, as their own. The appropriate response to such divine care and goodness is blessing. To bless someone is to make a positive statement about the relationship that exists between the two parties (see, e.g., Gen. 12:1–3; Deut. 7:14–16). Israel’s blessing God is an affirmation of the mutual relationship that Israel enjoys with God, and God with Israel (cf. Exod. 6:7; 19:5). The call to bless God is also a call for Israel to pay homage to God for God’s provision of blessings, namely, the awesome deeds that God has done on Israel’s behalf. To bless and to praise God, then, are interrelated activities. Israel’s God is worthy of such blessing and praise because God has sustained and supported the Israelites throughout their many perils. The image of God not letting the feet of the people slip recalls Psalms 17:5 and 18:36 (cf. Ps. 18:33; see also Hab. 3:19).

In sum, Psalm 66:1–7 is a threefold invitation to the Israelite community to praise and bless their God, who, although shrouded in mystery, has been made known and manifest through wondrous works. Finally, the psalm serves as an instruction: Israel’s God is Lord of creation and Lord of history.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

Homiletical Perspective

hymn of the congregation. Let it be some hymn that, like the psalm, holds up an extravagant vision of the whole creation praising God. Analyze the hymn text at the beginning of the sermon, and then bring in the headlines of the week’s news: for example, the contrast of “Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee” (line 3 of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”) and “Suicide Bomb Kills Twenty-seven.”

Next consider the following question: How does singing this hymn help us to live in God’s broken, bleeding world? There might be some skeptics who would claim that it does not help at all. If anything, singing the hymn adds to the problem, because it leads us to substitute a feeling of piety for shouldering our responsibility as citizens of creation who need to get to work. There are others, though, many others, who can attest that singing the hymn keeps hope alive, revitalizes their visionary capacities, reminds them of a world worth striving for, and thereby empowers them to live their faith day by day. Indeed, hymns and spiritual songs have often fueled and sustained social movements for justice and equality, just as they have also been a source of comfort in times of crisis and grief.

The sermon would then return to the psalm and use the insights gained from examining the hymn as a way of gaining a more deeply appreciative reading of the psalm. The sermon would affirm the centrality of congregational song to worship and to the empowerment of ministry in the world. It would help people to sense anew how, when they sing in church, they are carrying on a tradition that stretches all the way back to the people who first gave voice to the psalm. They are in spirit and in truth joining their voices with the whole company of heaven in the praise of God.

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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

Deuteronomy 30:9–14

⁹And the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

¹¹Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹²It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ¹⁴No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

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What are we to make of the promise of God to make the people of God prosperous because God delights in their prosperity? No sooner do we finish reading these words than alarm bells go off, warning us of the "prosperity gospel" and its superficial connections between our behavior, God's favor, and our material success.

The words of the text are clear. God will "take delight in prospering you" (v. 9). Note carefully, however, that the prosperity God wants to give is not wealth at the expense of others. There is no hint here of God wanting us to get rich by exploiting anyone, much less swindling or stealing. All such pathways to wealth are clearly rejected by the law and the prophets. God's prosperity comes instead through the prospering of the work of our own hands and "in the fruit of your body," meaning, of course, having children and grandchildren. The text goes on to add that God's prospering is found "in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil," promises that no doubt spoke with greater force to an agrarian age than to our own, when most of us never even visit farms.

The key point is not that we must have children, much less that our herds must multiply, in order for us to receive God's prosperity. Without too much of a stretch, may we not extend agricultural effort

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Love God with all your heart and all your soul (Deut. 30:10). This summation of the law sounds so easy, yet it seems to elude us. Moses assures his hearers that God will give abundantly, if they only believe and follow this command. They do not need self-help books. They do not need to buy more stuff. They do not need to continue squabbling with their neighbors. They simply need to turn all their attention to God.

They, and we, are so easily distracted. When the bills are due, when we are out of work, when life seems too difficult, we look for an easy solution to our problems. For some individuals, this may be an escape like drugs, alcohol, or entertainment. For others, it may be immersing ourselves in work, convincing ourselves that if we just work hard enough, we can achieve happiness and wholeness. For others, finding a person that can fulfill all their needs is the quest. As each relationship falls short and becomes broken, it is easy to blame the other for our woes, but again we have failed to grasp the message of Deuteronomy 30.

Only God can satisfy these longings and empty places. We have this commandment as our guarantee, and it should bring us joy; yet we continue to turn to lesser pleasures to satisfy our greatest needs. God has assured us that this

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Exegetical Perspective

Part of the third major section of the book of Deuteronomy and Moses's final address to all of Israel on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho (Deut. 29–32), Deuteronomy 30:9–14 focuses on obedience to God's commandments, which, in turn, will lead to prosperity. The people are being called to embrace a life of obedience to God's word. According to Torah the type of obedience that God desires is more than fulfilling the law. While keeping the law is important, the desirable kind of obedience is an adherence to God and God's ways that flows from an understanding of the law and its purpose (see Deut. 6:1–9; 10:12–22; 30:6) and ultimately, from a "circumcised" heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). For Israel, the law is meant to preserve covenant, covenant is meant to preserve relationship, and relationship is founded and grounded in love (Deut. 7:7–11).

This word, which according to the biblical text is delivered by Moses to the Israelites, reflects, most likely, the time of exile and judgment, when God calls Israel to return to covenant fidelity and right relationship with God and with one another. The text serves as a word of encouragement to the people that, after their time of hardship and suffering, they would indeed return to their God and to God's ways, and God in turn would have compassion on them

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Do you remember from your childhood, or from raising your own offspring, how adept children are at finding excuses for not doing what they were told to do? It is a skill that seems to come effortlessly to all of us during our growing years. We are told to clean our room or unload the laundry or put the casserole in the oven or empty the dishwasher or finish our homework or rake the backyard or put out the garbage. In every case, it is a chore we are fully capable of doing, and it is right at hand. We do not have to travel or make elaborate preparations. All we have to do is dig in and get the job done—but we do not.

When the parent arrives home, the room is as messy as ever, the laundry is still piled in the basket, the casserole is sitting cold on the counter, the clean dishes are still in the washer, the leaves are thick in the yard, or the garbage is still in the garage. When the parent asks why the job was not done, there is always some excuse.

"My room doesn't look that bad to me."

"I forgot where you left the laundry basket."

"I was not sure what temperature to set the oven."

"The dishwasher did not get the plates clean enough, so it needs to be run again."

"The computer will not let me get online for my assignment."

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to any form of hard work and creativity? If so, then the key point is that God wants us to prosper, not by taking from others, but by the creative power of our own work. So many of us today are “knowledge workers” rather than farmers, and we too are included in God’s blessing. Perhaps even today, we too can hear God’s desire to prosper us in the work of our imaginations and our creative minds, through literary and artistic achievements and through social and scientific advances.

The promise of prosperity, however, is conditional. God takes delight in prospering, “when you obey the LORD your God” (v. 10). The link between prosperity and obedience is central to this text, but it can be confusing. Does God bless only the obedient? Can you read the moral condition of the heart from the bank balance or the size of the house? Of course not. Does being a serious-minded Christian lead to success in work? Sometimes, but not always. At the very least, this is clear: success that comes from disobeying the commands of God is not the kind of success God desires for us, but in fact is the opposite of the fullness of God’s blessing.

Notice then how the text almost seems to argue back to God, complaining that it is unfair that prosperity is conditional on obedience. How can we possibly obey your will? It is too hard for us, too far off to understand, too high to achieve. Not so, comes the reply. “The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (v. 14).

With that we come to the core of this text and, indeed, to the heart of the gospel. The God who commands obedience is also the God who creates within us the clean heart, the new and willing spirit. The law of God is now written in our hearts. That is more than mere knowledge, more than an inner moral sense. It is the quiet voice, ever-present and clear, the voice of the living God in the center of our consciousness. If we do not hear it, it is not because it is not there, but because our consciousness is focused elsewhere. Be assured, the voice of God is there, the text says, “if you turn” (v. 10 RSV). In other words, here is the condition underlying the condition: We will be prospered *if* we obey, and we can obey *if* we turn.

Turning, of course, is just a simpler word for repentance. It is a turning away from all that distracts us and, with all our heart and soul, a turning to what truly guides us. As we know all too well, we wander so readily that our turning to God cannot be just a onetime event. There must be

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commandment is not too hard for us, and it is not something we need to continue to search for. It is already ours, in our mouths and in our hearts. How then do we remember and keep it?

At this point one should remember that Moses is not speaking to an individual, but to a people—a people who have been chosen and brought out of slavery, and who have suffered hunger, thirst, and disease. This people would see triumphs over enemies, would acquire and lose lands, would have great and wicked rulers. As adopted members of this people, we share their triumphs and defeats. We also share their memories and testimony.

Testimony is a powerful spiritual practice that is handed on in many ways in the faith community. When we study the record of this people in the Bible, we are reminded that their story is our story. God chose an imperfect people and promised fidelity. This passage from Deuteronomy comes toward the end of Moses’s reminding the people about all that they have been through together. They are to continue to remind each other of God’s working and very real presence in their lives, even when Moses leaves them.

This practice is not just for that ancient people who knew Moses. We continue to serve as reminders for each other every time we share how God continues to work in our lives today. Churches have a wide variety of ways to carry this out. Some will share these times of testimony during the pastoral prayers. Others will do it informally during the fellowship hour. Some will build times of testimony into their weekly worship liturgy. Others will save the practice for certain times of the church year, such as stewardship season or congregation retreats. One thing is certain, if the people are not given the opportunity to examine and confirm God’s working in their lives, they will turn to other sources to fill this void.

One of the best ways the church can nourish this practice of testimony is to encourage the existing small groups in the church to embrace it. This would mean that women’s groups, men’s breakfast studies, youth groups, Sunday school classes, and committees would all be alerted to being attentive to “God sightings,” sharing the ways that God is visible and active in their lives. This may mean a reframing of existing practices. So instead of a youth group sharing high and low moments from the week, they would share where God seemed closest and farthest away this week. Instead of “checking in” at the beginning of a class or committee meeting,

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and restore their fortunes to them. Although God waits to bless the people, the people must take the first step, which means that they must change their ways and refocus their lives on God and God's ways.

In verse 9 the biblical text makes clear that obedience implies observing all of God's commandments, which will lead to prosperity in four areas of life. The Israelites will be prosperous in all of their deeds, and will be blessed with a multitude of children. Their livestock will also be fruitful, and their fertile soil will yield an abundance of crops. These blessings are heard earlier in Leviticus 25:18–19 and in Deuteronomy 28:7–14, where the blessings for obedience are enumerated and the curses for disobedience are outlined (see Deut. 28:15–29:1). Obedience to Torah, then, is for the purpose of experiencing the good life (Deut. 6:1–3; 12:28) to which Deut. 30:9 attests. In Hebrew, "to obey" means "to listen to the voice of." Israel is repeatedly exhorted to "listen," to "obey" (see, e.g., Deut. 6:4). Moses calls on the people to listen with their heart (Deut. 11:13; 13:4; 30:2), which is the primary organ of hearing and not the ears.

The notion that God will "again take delight in prospering" (v. 9) the Israelites suggests a future event and points to the time after Israel has experienced the curses that have been foreshadowed (Deut. 28; see also Deut. 30:1–3). Complementing the idea of "delight" is the experience of covenant relationship that exists between God and the people at the time of the exodus and will be renewed when Jerusalem and the people are transformed and restored (see Isa. 62:4). As God delights in making the people prosper (v. 9), so the people will delight in their God, insofar as they live a righteous life (see, e.g., Isa. 58:13–14). God's benevolence is a gift that God promises to bestow on the Israelites, but this gift has already been given to Israel's ancestors. Thus verse 9 stresses the importance of the continuity of covenant relationship, particularly on the part of God, who bestowed many blessings on Israel's ancestors. Through God's goodness, Israel's ancestors were given land (Gen. 15:18; cf. 26:4), covenant relationship (Gen. 17:19), and the promise of progeny (Gen. 22:17; 26:24), among other blessings. Thus God's delighting in the people spans the generations.

Verse 10 stresses the fact that prosperity and God's delighting in the people is contingent upon obedience, which, for the Israelites, means adherence to God's commandments. The reference to "commandments" pertains not only to the Decalogue but also to the great commandment that calls the

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"Our neighbors borrowed our rake last week, and now they're away."

If you are the child, it is astonishing how quickly and easily the excuses can pour out of you, but if you are the parent, it can be downright exhausting. A lot of our growing up is learning not to make excuses, and yet we never fully outgrow the habit, especially when we take stock of how well we are living the word that God has given us. Every time I read Deuteronomy 30, I imagine a dialogue between the divine parent and us. It sounds as though God is anticipating the excuses we will give for not doing the word of God, as if God can already hear us saying: "Lord, we had every intention of doing your word, but it was just too challenging. We are amateurs at loving mercy, doing justice, and walking humbly with you, and we knew we would never succeed, so we agreed we ought not waste our energy on trying something that is too hard to do."

We might try an excuse like this: "Lord, we considered all the vicious arguments people have had about your word. People have even killed one another over what your word is. Your word may be holy and precious, but it is far beyond human understanding. It seems to us that your word and its true meaning are up in heaven wrapped in layers of mystery, or perhaps you have planted it on some distant shore. If we knew how to get to heaven and back or to navigate our way to that far shore, then we would do your word; but we cannot do a word that is located at such a vast distance from where we live and work."

To all of this God says: "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut. 30:11, 14).

"Lord, all right, we grant you that the word might not be too hard and that it might be in our mouth and in our heart. Frankly we prefer the taste of other words. When someone has wronged us, we do not like the taste of mercy; we prefer the taste of vengeance. Revenge is a far easier word to speak, a far easier action to carry out, than to love mercy. Likewise, when social arrangements of power and wealth favor us, we find justice to be a sour word, not something we are eager to speak and do. We prefer to speak words of accomplishment and success, words that strengthen the rightness of our privilege and position. If you could just make your word more palatable, seasoned with more of our desires and predilections, then we might do it."

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a constant turning away from sin and a constant turning back to God, a perpetual repentance.

Not by our own strength, of course, or by the resolution of our will, no matter how sincere, but by the renewing power of God's Holy Spirit, it becomes possible for us to obey that voice. Not by our own purity, for from experience we acknowledge it is all too common for us to know with clarity what God wants of us, but to refuse to do it. Not by our own stamina, because we also know that even when we want to do the will of God, even when we promise ourselves to do it, we betray our own solemn intentions.

When we are honest with ourselves, we see it is not enough for the voice of God to be vividly present and clearly heard. We still disobey, and with such regularity that it seems inevitable to the point that sinning is no longer upsetting. But hear the gospel: God commands what is impossible, and with the command comes the transformation that makes all things possible. God will be present in the repentant heart and hungry soul, present not just in a voice but with a power greater than our sin or selfishness, a power that gives the power to obey.

Even if it is God's work, our transformation is not yet perfect. We must never claim it as our own doing. If we are left to our own efforts, the text is right: God's command is too high, too far away, too demanding. However, in great mercy God turns us and refocuses us, strengthens and transforms us, and, in ways we cannot imagine, prospers us with every good and perfect gift.

RONALD COLE-TURNER

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participants would be invited to share where they saw God working since they were last together. Testimony is about claiming God's place at the table and in our lives. It is announcing to the world that we belong to God and are willing to live by the reality of God's sovereignty in our lives.

This is a practice not just for our churches, but for our homes as well. How can families conduct these same kinds of conversations? James Fowler, among others, has not only offered the world a sense of how humans develop in their faith lives, but also given us some helpful questions for around the dinner table. "What feelings do you have when you think about God? What do you feel is going on when you pray? Where have you seen God working today? When did you first know that God was real? What do you remember most from the life of Jesus Christ? How did you know today that God loves you? How does the church help your faith to grow?"¹ I wonder what would happen if families would intentionally ask just one of these questions each time they sit down to break bread together.

We can love God with all our heart and all our soul. It is not beyond our reach, but it does involve reframing our memories to acknowledge God's presence in our lives. It is not difficult, because the words we need are already in our mouths and hearts, for God has given them to us. Let us live in the overflowing abundance of God's love!

KATHY L. DAWSON

1. These questions are adaptations of questions designed by James Fowler for research purposes and some additional questions by him. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995 edition), 310–12.

Deuteronomy 30:9–14

Exegetical Perspective

people to love their God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might (Deut. 6:4–5) and their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:17–18). Verse 10 reiterates the point that obedience to God is related to observing God’s commandments and decrees, which can be followed diligently only if one turns to God with all one’s heart and soul (v. 10; cf. Deut. 6:4–5). Thus, verse 10 calls the people to be single-minded and single-hearted.

Finally, to turn to God with all one’s heart and soul is to devote one’s entire being to God. For Israel, the “heart” is the seat of intelligence and the place of the will. The heart is the source of all decisions, plans, and attitudes. The heart is the center for Israel’s ethical and moral life. The heart is also the center of one’s relationship with God. Upon the heart, God writes God’s law (Jer. 31:33).

Verses 11–14 stress that the commandments that God is commanding the people to follow are not something beyond their understanding or capacity. This commandment is accessible and within the Israelites’ reach. The phrase not “beyond the sea” (v. 13) conveys these sentiments and reassures the Israelites that what God is asking them to do is, in fact, possible. The verses remind the people that God’s commandment has been revealed to them; therefore, no reason exists why they cannot follow it. This commandment is both practical and realistic. It is meant to be a guide for human life. Simultaneously, the commandment is a way of life that is open not just to the Israelites but to all people. The objective of the commandment is life, and the people are called to follow it so that they may have abundant life (see Deut. 30:15–20). Ultimately, the commandment is the call to love (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; 10:12–13).

CAROL J. DEMPSEY

Homiletical Perspective

For many earthly parents, there eventually comes the glad and welcome realization that, for the most part, the season of excuses is past. Their children are now taking responsibility for what they do and what they fail to do. When they let someone down, they even have enough grace to apologize. Of course, not a one of us ever completely eschews making excuses. Nevertheless, the fact that we are able to grow toward a deeper, wiser, more mature understanding of what it means to be a responsible human being reveals that God has not only given us a word that is in our mouth and heart, but God has also given us the capacity to grow into doing that word. There is something even greater than this: God has given us Christ to show us what it looks like when, without a single excuse, a human being completely and faithfully lives the word of God.

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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

Psalm 25:1–10

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 25 is a psalm of individual lament from the First Davidic collection. Its poetic form is worth noting, since Psalm 25 is one of only nine psalms composed as an alphabetical acrostic (a poem constructed so that the initial letters of each line proceed through the alphabet). We understand that form and function are mingled in great art, so we must ask, why did the psalmist choose to write this psalm in this fashion? Since the alphabet symbolizes completeness, acrostic psalms may have been a vehicle to show the psalmist's complete devotion, gratitude, or faithfulness, and certainly this literary interpretation would fit with the rich theological themes of Psalm 25.

Those who preach from this lection might explore a theology of prayer, perhaps including what prayer teaches us about God and about ourselves, since instruction seems to be an overarching theme of the psalm. This passage might also allow us to consider the relationship between God's steadfast love and the petitioner, and to examine the question of sin and forgiveness.

While this lection represents roughly half of Psalm 25, its theological themes are representative of the whole. Psalm 25 begins with the designation: "Of David" or "For David," which marks it as a Davidic

Pastoral Perspective

Of the many notable characteristics of the Psalms canon, one of the most startling is the audacious manner in which the psalmist addresses the sovereign Lord. Since our familiarity with these beloved texts might dull their live-wire drama, one way to enter Psalm 25 might be to offer a simple reminder: Is it not a fearsome thing deliberately to evoke God Almighty's attention? Do we really want YHWH's fixed gaze leveled upon the uneven terrain of our lives? Who can bear such fireball scrutiny? It calls to mind a midrash about the high priest who attaches a rope to his ankle before entering the Holy of Holies, lest he need to be retrieved after being struck dead for saying or doing something wrong in God's presence.

This awareness of the hazards of direct contact with all-powerful God is something essayist Annie Dillard also echoes: "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."¹

1. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 52.

Psalm 25:1–10

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 25 is composed as an alphabetical acrostic. The first line begins with *alef* (*'elekha*, “to you”), the second with *bet* (*bekha*, “in you”), the third with *gimel* (*gam*, “also”), and so on, each line beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. A couple of irregularities break the acrostic pattern, and the final line, which changes the subject, stands outside the acrostic. Because Psalm 25's acrostic flaws resemble those of Psalm 34, and because of similarities of theme, some have suggested the two psalms came from the same person.

In simple, straightforward language, the psalm reviews some of Scripture's classic themes. The alternation between petition and proclamation suggests that the psalm presents a dialogue occurring between, or as if between, a worshiper and a priest. Beginning with assertions of humble trust, the worshiper offers a series of petitions, first for vindication in the face of foes, and then for guidance, using the metaphor of “ways” and “paths” to describe the sequence of instruction. Finally, the worshiper asks for mercy, requesting that God not remember youthful sins, but instead remember the person in need of forgiveness.

The priestly oracle that follows in verses 8–10 offers reassurance that God is indeed faithful and

Homiletical Perspective

Day follows day, and without our expecting it, we find ourselves entangled in undergrowth of distress, disappointment, and despair. Dante knew about this and began *The Divine Comedy*: “Midway in life's journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood.”¹

The psalmist of the Twenty-fifth Psalm knows about this also, but the psalmist also knows the way out of the murky forest. The psalmist's comments about enemies (v. 2) and foes (v. 19) appall some cheerful Christians, but only the bland are without opposition. During Franklin Delano Roosevelt's second campaign for the presidency in 1936, he was greeted with banners proclaiming, “We love him for the enemies he has made.” Enemies come with the territory of human habitation. Facing antagonism and distress we become confused. We sit, not knowing which way to turn or whether it would matter if we did know. We overlook what matters most. We forget the deep meanings by which we orient ourselves. We become disoriented.

The meaning of a word you used to know very well slips away from you, and you sit with the

1. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Norton, 1970), 3.

Psalm 25:1–10

Theological Perspective

psalm. Its structure is similar to other psalms of individual lament: the psalmist requests God's rescue from his enemies because of his trust in God, asks to be taught God's wisdom, requests God's steadfast love, and stands on God's promise of covenant relationship. Today's lesson thus suggests a theological understanding of God typical in the psalms of lament, thanksgiving, and trust: "God protects and provides security for the individual, and God delivers those who are hurting from situations of crisis."¹ When the psalmist cries out to God for protection, he expects that God will protect and secure him, since that is what God does for those who trust in God; the psalmist and God are in a relationship in which each has definable roles.

The psalmist's cry to God, however, begins with the opening line "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul," which suggests the lifting of hands in prayer. The entire psalm might be read, in fact, as a lifting up of the soul to God in prayer, in which petitions for help from God and assertions of trust in God are interspersed. The psalmist who trusts in God (v. 2), who waits on God (v. 3), and who seeks to know the Lord's ways, walk in the Lord's paths, and be led in the Lord's truth (vv. 4–5) believes that when he calls upon God, he will be rescued from shame and from his enemies (vv. 2, 3). He also calls for God's mercy and steadfast love, for forgiveness of his sins, and asserts that since the Lord is good and just, he instructs sinners and teaches the humble. All the paths of the Lord "are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees" (vv. 8–10).

What happens when we pray? How does prayer open us to God's wisdom and mercy? How does our faithful call for God to step into our lives offer the possibility that those lives might be changed? We rarely consider the theology of prayer from the pulpit, but this psalm of extended prayer might offer an opportunity to launch such an inquiry.

We understand from the psalm that God responds to us and to our prayers because of God's *hesed* (or *chesed*), a word that appears widely in the Hebrew Testament, but is variously translated into English in different contexts. The King James Version, for example, provides fifteen different terms for *hesed*. Among the terms most used in contemporary translations are "love," "mercy," and "steadfast love," as in the NRSV translation of verses 6–7.

An important theological argument might be constructed around this question of translation. The Septuagint first rendered the Hebrew as the

1. James Limburg, "Book of Psalms," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), CD-ROM.

Pastoral Perspective

Despite incalculable risk, in Psalm 25 our psalmist takes the plunge in confronting God, bringing us along for the adventure. He begins with a plaintive declaration—"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul" (v. 1)—calling to mind the *Sursum Corda* (Latin for "Lift up your hearts") heard at the beginning of the Eucharist liturgy. This opening approach is a naked prayer of acquiescence, denoting utter surrender of one's essence into the hands of God. The psalmist presents this loving offering of submission, but there is a string attached: "In you I trust; do not let me put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me" (v. 2). This is a desperate plea, carrying an urgent sense of adversaries maliciously seeking to gloat over the psalmist's downfall in a very public shaming.

Exploring the theme of shame might prove fruitful in preaching Psalm 25, although the ancient Hebrew world—predicated upon an "honor-shame" code that was tied to social status—is outside the purview of most congregations in today's Western culture. Even so, shame is a universal concept. Of all the burdens we carry into the sanctuary each week, shame is one of the most crippling. Many people come to church on Sunday mornings seeking solace, yet find themselves shifting uncomfortably in their seats—not because of the hard wood pews, but because of damage deep inside: shards of past mistakes, shrapnel of wrongful accusations, cuts of cruel critique, and the incessant gnawing of our perfectionist monkey minds.

We are the walking wounded, and though we know we are in need of the Great Physician, it is a supreme act of faith to join the psalmist in "lifting up" our shamed souls to a God often depicted by religious dogma as a harsh, judgmental king. Since shame is the ultimate silencer, always seeking the cover of shadows, it is difficult to go before pure holiness in that condition.

How electrifying it is, then, that in our text the psalmist boldly names the shame that encircles him like a noose, even as he bets the farm that the judging gaze of God will be more benevolent than the judging gaze of human enmity. A pastor friend of mine says this is precisely the scandal of the Bible: we are found guilty—yet we are pardoned and released! God gavel our trial closed with cheerful alacrity, on account of divine mercy and steadfast love that is "from of old" (v. 6). By trusting God's character so completely, the psalmist's bedrock faith stands in sharp contrast with those who are gratuitously disloyal or "wantonly treacherous" (v. 3), and such faith allows a serenity to wait patiently on God, who will surely act on the psalmist's behalf (vv. 3, 5).

Psalm 25:1–10

Exegetical Perspective

good, and does indeed teach the humble. These remarks are deeply intertwined with the petitioner's requests for instruction. When the petitioner prays, "Your ways, YHWH, cause me to know, and your paths teach me; direct me in your truth and teach me . . . according to your steadfast love remember me; for the sake of your goodness, YHWH" (vv. 4–5a, 7b, my trans.), the response is, "Good and upright is YHWH; therefore, God instructs sinners in the way, directs the humble in justice, and teaches the humble the way. All the paths of YHWH are steadfast love and truth" (vv. 8–10b, my trans.). While the petitioner also repeatedly voices concern over foes and fear about being shamed, these do not enter into the respondent's speech. Rather, responses selectively concentrate on the psalmist's request for instruction, reassuring the petitioner that God does indeed teach the humble. This section, with its concentration on "steadfast love," "faithfulness," "covenant," and "pardon," echoes Exodus 34:6–10, God's self-disclosure to Moses, in which God's forgiving nature is connected with the covenant God agrees to make with Israel. Recalling this foundational moment, the respondent reminds the petitioner to focus attention on following where God leads. The priestly oracle does not predict the granting of the worshiper's petition, but articulates a prevailing faith in the habitual ways of God toward the faithful.

Beyond verse 10, the psalm continues to elaborate these themes. The worshiper again asks pardon in verse 11 and is further reassured in verses 12–14 that God offers prosperity and even friendship to the God-fearing. Evidently emboldened to speak even more plainly, the worshiper voices fears concerning enemies who afflict and trouble, returning in the end to voice trust: "May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you" (v. 21). The final line about redeeming Israel, probably added later, lends a communal reading to what has been up to this point an individual psalm.

The psalm, dwelling on humility, lacks the vivid imagery of many more memorable psalms, such as Psalm 19, with its gaze at the sky and sun, or Psalm 23, with its sustained metaphor of God as shepherd, or Psalm 42, with its deer and tears. The value in Psalm 25 lies in the connections among the themes of divine protection, mercy, and instruction, and correspondingly of human trust, vulnerability toward God, and eagerness to learn. The worshiper is not primarily interested in theology, learning about God in a philosophical or theoretical sense. God is not the object of study. Rather, God is the teacher,

Homiletical Perspective

dictionary on your lap trying to find it; but does *j* come before *k* or after? You remember your song, a little ditty you learned in kindergarten those days when you were first beginning to learn everything: "A-B-C-D." You remember your song and "Aha!" Things begin to fall into place. So it is with the psalmist's gift of his song. It is an A-B-C, an alphabetic acrostic song with each verse beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. You remember that "Mother" song: "'M' is for the million things she gave me; 'O' is for . . ." You know those children's alphabets: "A is for apple, B is for ball . . ." The Twenty-fifth psalm is an A-B-C for beginning again.

We cannot start all over from the very beginning; we cannot begin, but we can begin again. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize-winner Elie Wiesel explains that when God created the human creature, "God gave [us] a secret—and this secret was not how to begin but how to begin again."²

The psalmist sings confidently of beginning again, while at the same time guiding us on the way forward. Because the psalm embraces the organic integrity of the alphabet from A to Z, from *Aleph* to *Taw*, to trim the poem to the first ten verses (as the lectionary does) may be appropriate for use in the liturgy, but for preaching it violates the text. Children will rightly correct grownups who stop right in the middle of the alphabet song; you have to sing it all the way through! To pay no attention to verse 11 is to turn from the poetic, liturgical, and theological center of the psalm. Poetically, verse 11 is the center of the psalmist's literary effort, and the logic of the other verses gravitates around it. Liturgically, though the psalmist prays for many things—assistance, overcoming enemies, guidance, protection—central to all these petitions is verse 11's prayer for pardon. Theologically, the stakes for this prayer for pardon are raised by invoking the Lord's own name, character, and reputation: "For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great." English translations inevitably leave open the antecedent of "for it is great." Which is great: the sake of God's holy name, or our guilt? The way we translate and the emphasis we place in reading the psalm aloud in worship reveals our faith. In this psalm the poet wagers everything on God's reputation for "steadfast love and faithfulness."

Moses asked the Lord, "Show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18)—he asked to see God—but what Moses got instead was that the Lord "proclaimed the name" (Exod. 34:5). "The name" is utterly central

2. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 32.

*Psalm 25:1–10***Theological Perspective**

Greek *eleos* (“mercy”), which has shaped translation choices ever since. Harold Kamsler points out that in Hebrew *hesed* can mean “a mutual relationship between man and man or between man and God,” and he argues that translating the word solely as “mercy,” “compassion,” or “love” reduces the concept to a one-way transaction.² In other sections of the Hebrew Testament, *hesed* clearly means “loyalty,” and Rabbi Kamsler argues for an understanding of the word that suggests faithfulness on both sides of the relationship between God and human beings.

This suggests some significant theological questions. To what degree do we participate in relationship with God? For how much of our spiritual state must we take responsibility? What gifts in the relationship flow solely in one direction? Do we expect something from God as a result of our faith? In what ways does the psalmist’s theology of God’s love and steadfastness to humans match or depart from Christian understandings of grace and God’s intervention in the human sphere?

If this relationship between human and God involves human faithfulness, this involves the questions of obedience and sin. The psalmist asks to be taught God’s truth and be led in God’s paths (vv. 4–5), pleads for God’s mercy (v. 6), asks for his youthful sins and his transgressions to be forgotten (v. 7), and asserts that God instructs those who seek God and leads them into the paths of *hesed* and faithfulness if they will keep God’s covenant and decrees (vv. 8–10). Preachers in some denominations are reluctant to talk about sin; preachers in others seem to do little but talk about sin. Clearly this psalm suggests that sin mars the relationship between the sinner and God, an understanding of sin that most Christians accept. Paul Tillich argued that sin is “estrangement from that to which one belongs—God, one’s self, one’s world”; here that estrangement is suggested to result from a departure from God’s ways, a turning away from the relationship with God.³

What exactly is sin? It is that which separates us from God. How does the psalmist understand this separation? How do we understand this in the Christian tradition? Exploring sin in this lection leads us in the direction of grace, reconciliation, and relationship with God.

GREG GARRETT

2. Harold Kamsler, “Hesed—Mercy or Loyalty?” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 27:3 (1999).

3. Paul Tillich, *The Essential Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (1987; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 166–67.

Pastoral Perspective

Indeed, Psalm 25 offers no depiction of a passive, distant divine king. Rather, there is a clear expectation that God will be active in the ongoing salvation of the psalmist, as seen in the string of commanding verbs of verses 4–7: “make me to know,” “teach me,” “lead me,” “be mindful,” and, of course, the endearingly choppy “do not remember”/“remember.” This stanza (v. 7)—“*Do not remember* the sins of my youth; [but] according to your steadfast love *remember me*”—sweeps over us like a tidal longing: forget, remember, forget, remember. We lift our souls up to you, O God, begging for you to attend to us, but please do so with discernment. We need the selective attention of a loving parent, or we will never survive the exposure. It is the human condition to live in a tremulous vortex of cognitive dissonance, vacillating between wanting to hide from God in our shame, and yet yearning for God’s face to shine upon us (Num. 6:25). In the end, escaping our Creator’s notice is unendurable, because it is tantamount to abandonment. We want to know and be known by our Abba, and Psalm 25 gives us a way to go forward.

Go forward we must. Even as God is active, so must we be as well. In the closing verses of this pericope, we are reminded that the Lord “instructs sinners in the way” and “leads the humble in what is right” (vv. 8, 9). In other words, though we are assured sovereign forgiveness, we must respond by continuing to learn how best to keep God’s covenant and decrees. When we follow the courageous psalmist in trusting God to love us and teach us and guide us, we will be led into a breathtaking vista, a grand new world where all the paths of the Lord are marked by signposts of steadfast love and faithfulness.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON BOSSERT

Psalm 25:1–10

Exegetical Perspective

life is the subject, and the learning is relational. The student who humbly trusts the teacher, and is set free from anxiety over disruptions from both within and without, learns what kind of life is pleasing to God from active participation, from putting one foot in front of the other.

The contents of such instruction are not this psalm's subject either. Content may be found elsewhere, especially in entrance liturgies such as Psalms 15 and 24, in pentateuchal instruction beginning with the Ten Commandments, in Proverbs, and among the prophets. Here in Psalm 25, readiness to learn, freedom from other worries, and a relationship of trust built between God and the worshiper create the optimum learning environment for content found elsewhere.

The psalm suggests much to contemporary worshipers who seek to be disciples of God's ways. Its undramatic presentation of one who despite obstacles seeks not only to live in peace, but to remain under divine instruction, suggests that every adversity can be mined for its educational value, for its possibilities for strengthening human character. Its focus—not on individual circumstances, whether happy or trying, but rather on relationship with God—pares down the purpose of human life. Daily life consists not of more and more victories, or more and more comforts and commodities, or other things people might desire that are not even mentioned. Rather, life consists in the richness of wise and prudent living within the schoolhouse of divine values.

The psalm pairs well with other passages for the day. In similarly plain language, Deuteronomy 30:9–14 says that God's commands are not too obscure, elusive, or distant, but very near, "in your mouth and in your heart" (v. 14). The reading from Colossians presents Paul praying similarly for his audience, "that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord. . . . May you be made strong . . . prepared to endure everything with patience" (Col. 1:9–11). Finally, Luke describes the Samaritan whose path led him without hesitation to save an enemy's life and to become an example for all time of humble, matter-of-fact faithfulness to God's life-giving values.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

to the faith of the Hebrew Scriptures and most particularly the Psalms: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6). This is the self-disclosure of God that the psalmist prays the Lord will remember in verse 7: "According to your steadfast love remember me." Remember me this way, O Lord, in keeping with who you have declared yourself to be everlastingly and forevermore, and do not remember me in terms of who I used to be, when I was a kid, or even just last week.

Their imaginations full of cartoons from *The New Yorker* and bad jokes about Peter at the pearly gates of heaven, many worshipers do imagine that our relationship to God has been determined by "the sins of my youth or my transgressions" on that day when I did the stupidest thing ever in my life. We tend to imagine God's remembering as a paltry, petty thing, endlessly fascinated (as we seem to be) with the sexual indiscretions of young people. Instead, the psalmist invites us to imagine a remembering that is vast and gentle and generous, one that is consonant with the name God gave us, which is abounding in "steadfast love and faithfulness."

The Lord gave us that name so that we might know God and live in a covenant relationship with God. Though we may undermine that relationship with the things we do and forget to do, it cannot be otherwise than that we have been known and named by God. This is basic: A-B-C. This gives us confidence to begin again. Martin Luther announced, "I am baptized and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me."³ God does not leave us to entanglement in the messes we make and in dilemmas we did not earn but "instructs" (v. 8), "leads," and "teaches" (v. 9) in the "way" that will lead us to begin again.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

3. Martin Luther, "Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," trans. Charles M. Jacobs and E. Theodore Bachmann, in *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 35:36.

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

Genesis 18:1–10a

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.”

¹⁰Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Theological Perspective

It is more than a little ironic that in this narrative the messenger of the Lord tells Abraham that he will return “in due season.” The Hebrew here (*ka’et hayya*), repeated in verse 14 (as well as in the similar narrative in 2 Kgs. 4:16 and 17), is unclear. Literally translated, the words mean “about the living time” or “at the time of life.” In addition to the NRSV’s “in due time,” variant translations include “about the same time next year,” “next spring,” and “when the season comes around.”

The announcement itself is about a time that is long overdue, past when the normal season would come around. The season, the timing, the stage of life, no matter how you look at it, comes at an awkward “time of life.”

Biblical timing is often “off.” If we look at the sweep of both testaments, the most significant pregnancies and births take place at awkward moments in the life cycle. They are wondrous events, but the awkward timing creates all sorts of disappointments and social problems for the people involved. There may be a time to be born and a time to die (Eccl. 3:2), but it often is not in the typical stream of time. The story of Sarah is the story of late blessing, very late blessing—a blessing so late that one wonders if the decades-long pause has let the fire of anticipation run out.

Pastoral Perspective

This story occurs at the time when mad dogs come out to play, columns of heat shimmer, the landscape blurs, and you can fry eggs on the rocks. Abraham sits at the entrance to his tent, most probably under an awning, and, perhaps, in a half-doze. Certainly the opening verse makes the bustle and rush that follow all the more striking. Abraham looks up, sees the three strangers, and for the next seven verses is on the go, ninety-nine years old and in the blaze of the day. The reader enjoys a split perspective here. From the beginning, the narrator lets us know exactly with whom Abraham is dealing: “YHWH appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.”¹ Abraham, however, sees only three strangers, wanderers who pop up from nowhere. When he greets them, he uses the polite “good sir,” “my Lord,” presumably addressing one who appears to be the leader.² This split perspective is crucial: the reader appreciates matters both from Abraham’s viewpoint and from out of the narrator’s privileged knowledge. We are prepared for the later disclosure while we watch Abraham “entertaining angels

1. The NRSV gives the conventional translation of “the LORD” for the divine name. The Jerusalem Bible makes the contrast clearer: “Yahweh appeared to him at the Oak of Mamre. . . . ‘My lord,’ [Abraham] said, ‘if I find favor with you’” (vv. 1, 3).

2. The Masoretic Text has “my lords” but then continues in the singular.

Genesis 18:1–10a

Exegetical Perspective

When everything seems hopeless, when God's repeated promise to Abraham and Sarah of having a child of their own seems unrealistic to say the least, an unexpected visit by three strangers in Genesis 18:1–10a offers the gift of new possibilities. Our lectionary reading of this week constitutes a surprising response to an increasingly despondent situation in which God's promise that Abraham and Sarah would become ancestors to a large nation who will serve as a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1–5; cf. also 15:5; 17:4–6) is seriously threatened.

The lectionary selection starts with the same words that appear in Genesis 17:1, "The LORD appeared to Abraham," thereby connecting this week's text to the preceding account of God making a covenant with Abraham. After this reference, one reads how Abraham looks up and unexpectedly sees the three visitors appearing out of nowhere at his tent in Mamre. Throughout this text, as well as in the rest of this chapter, mention of the visitors is alternated with references to God speaking. In subsequent religious imagination, this would serve as inspiration for reflection on God's Trinitarian nature as most vividly illustrated in Rublev's famous icon that depicts the Trinity in terms of three angels sitting around the table eating and drinking.

Homiletic Perspective

The first decision a preacher must make is whether this story of the theophany at Mamre will serve as a thematic sermon reflecting on the image of God in the Colossians reading, or a thematic sermon on hospitality, work, and worship alongside Luke's story of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha. A second decision will be whether to stay with the lectionary and focus on the theophany or whether to extend the lection to verse 16 and focus on God's promise of a son to Sarah. Taken as presented, the story is full of surprises and shrouded in mystery. The sermon could take the form of a thriller building to a dramatic conclusion or be structured more as a series of "unveilings" of meaning.

Setting the Scene. The "oaks [or terebinths] of Mamre" were an important shrine in Palestine, between Halhul and Hebron. The story is set in the heat of the day, a time of rest. Abraham sits at the entrance of his tent, probably a little out of the way, while Sarah rests inside. Not much is going on at such a time and in such a place. It is siesta, that time between sleeping and waking, what the Celtic people might call a "thin time."

The First Surprise. Abraham neither sees nor hears the three men approaching (v. 2). The story does

Genesis 18:1–10a

Theological Perspective

There is a poignant scene in the animated movie *The Last Unicorn* (based on the novel by Peter Beagle). Molly Grue, the careworn common-law wife of a bandit leader, was in her early years an idealistic young woman naively attracted to the romance of loving a woodland fugitive and sharing his life. She spent her youth serving as camp cook for the troupe of bandits, and now in middle age, she seeks a different life and hopes to change her fate. Along with Schmendrick, a bumbling magician, Molly encounters the *last* unicorn, who is herself on a perilous journey. When she finds this mystical creature whom she has yearned all her life to see, Molly is at first enraged. She says to the unicorn:

“No, it can’t be. Can it be? Where have you been? Where have you been? Damn you! Where have you been? . . . [W]here were you twenty years ago? Ten years ago? Where were you when I was new? When I was one of those innocent young maidens you always come to? How dare you! How dare you come to me now, when I am this!”

The unicorn replies, “Well I’m here now.”

Schmendrick is amazed that Molly can actually see the unicorn and informs her that this is “the last unicorn in the world.”

“It would be the last unicorn that came to Molly Grue,” Molly says ruefully. Then she adds, “It’s all right, I forgive you.”

Late blessings are a paradox of miracle and regret. Most of us would rather have our aspirations fulfilled sooner rather than later, when we are fresh and hopeful rather worn out and cynical.

Theologically, we often take this Genesis narrative as a test case of faith in divine promises—even when those promises come late or seem slow to materialize. Interestingly, life-cycle theories can add dimension to the theological interpretation of this narrative. Clearly modern developmental psychology cannot be read back into a premodern story, but a sense of “due season” was a central part of ancient awareness. Modern psychology enriches this narrative because it uncovers the potential that age can bring to new creativity.

Developmental psychology and Jungian psychology both point out that a certain depth of self-knowledge occurs only at or after midlife. When we take the opportunity to look over and rework our past, we can achieve a quality of wisdom rarely possible in the first half of life. An important aspect of this is what James Fowler calls “the sacrament of defeat,” the ability to face the full impact of failures,

Pastoral Perspective

without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). Since Abraham does not realize his guests’ identity until they announce Sarah’s future pregnancy, his integrity as the gracious host is preserved. Abraham is the exemplar of hospitality, not a trembling man who realizes he has God on his doorstep.

The drama of hospitality takes up the bulk of this passage: greeting, footwashing, bread making, meat preparation, service. The business moves along briskly, the narrator emphasizing haste throughout. No one must be left in this broiling sun for a moment longer than necessary, so Abraham runs to greet them, then “hastens” off to Sarah, sets her to baking “quickly,” before running off to the flock and ordering a servant to “hasten” the calf’s preparation. The flurry ends abruptly as the strangers are served, and once again Abraham is still, not sitting but standing, the ready host at hand.

This is a brilliantly economical and vivid presentation of the liturgics of hospitality. What do we learn here about hospitality? Abraham is, for a start, ungrudging. The speed of events serves to underscore this. Abraham does not, as we say, miss a beat between seeing and greeting, and all else follows without a hint of delay. The polite forms also frame Abraham and not the guests as the honored party: “If I have found favor . . .,” “Let me bring you water,” “Allow me to bake you bread.” The ungrudging host welcomes the stranger as a gift, an honor. There is no quid pro quo here, no eye for the advantage; we are a million miles from the dynamic of market exchange. For us, today, this passage describes a little utopia, a freedom of heart and welcome that transcends and judges our economic relations.

Generosity, of course, is an important part of Abraham’s hospitality, and he is, indeed, generous. A veritable pile of bread and a whole calf is more than three could eat and still move. The amount and the quality, though, is not the point. At the heart of it all is a startling self-effacement. The good host does not make the guest *feel* the hospitality. Abraham’s scurry and the spread that appears from nowhere, like the strangers themselves, is not an exercise in display or a theatre of conspicuous consumption. The discourse of courtesy is, again, very telling. Let me get a “little water,” prepare a “little bread” (vv. 4, 5). The understatement, given that everyone knows Abraham is not likely to stroll back to offer half a baguette between them, denies any suggestion that the hospitality is burdensome. The guests do not see Abraham’s larder, whether it is large or small. They do not see him dashing about or the servants falling

Genesis 18:1–10a

Exegetical Perspective

Adhering to the ancient Near Eastern expectation that guests should receive an opportunity to rest, water to wash their feet, food and drink, Abraham offers his guests, who arrive at the warmest time of day, “a bite” to eat. This bite proves to be a glorious banquet—bread of large quantities (three measures of flour), a succulent calf (which would have been considered a luxury item), both fresh milk and curds. This generosity denotes something of Abraham’s social standing, but also points to the radical nature of his hospitality that knows no bounds. The urgency of offering one’s very best to one’s guests is furthermore communicated by the sense of haste created by Abraham being the subject of a series of active verbs: “ran” and “bowed down,” v. 2; “hastened,” v. 6; “ran,” v. 7.

This quintessential story of hospitality moreover demonstrates how blessing is to be found in receiving a stranger as guest when the story ends with a classic annunciation scene in verses 9–10a: the heavenly visitors announce that Sarah will have a child. This surprise announcement is continued in the text immediately following the lectionary text, which offers an intriguing dialogue between God and Sarah (vv. 10b–15) about the impossible becoming possible for this elderly couple.

A number of theological themes emerge from this intriguing text. First, the visit by the heavenly visitors constitutes a powerful image of the presence of God, who is to be found in the midst of people’s everyday lives. Genesis 18 does not imagine a distant, transcendent God, but a God who eats and drinks with people; a God who is intimately involved in those matters that cause concern to people, such as barrenness, insecurity, and fear of the future. Particularly in times when people feel most fragile and insecure, such an image of a God so near may serve as a source of comfort and reassurance.

Second, this text manages to connect hospitality to the stranger with God’s presence. In a story that offers a fruitful means to counter xenophobia, which continues to be a growing concern in our local and global communities, we see that in kindness to and care for strangers, one not only opens oneself up to new possibilities and a surprising turn of events, but that one perhaps may be receiving Godself in the person of the foreigner. This theme of hospitality to strangers is picked up again in Hebrews 13:2, where believers are encouraged to show hospitality to strangers; it is said that by doing this, without knowing it, they have entertained angels. This story of hospitality, moreover, offers a sharp contrast to

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not tell us who they are or from where they came; the first thing we learn is that they are standing near him. However, we already know, or assume that we know, that it is the Lord who is appearing in the form of these three men. There is little to be gained in a sermon by taking side trips to note how unusual it is for YHWH to take the form of three men, how Christian tradition takes this story as an allegory of the Trinity (with no exegetical basis for doing so), how the Lord might be represented by only one of these men (because two messengers proceed to Sodom later), how common it is in ancient stories for gods to appear in human form, and so on.

Interesting though these tidbits may be, the importance of the story is that the Lord appears to Abraham, suddenly, surprisingly, and in the guise of strangers. A more useful riff for the preacher at this point might be to dwell on whether and how we make room for such an unexpected visit.

The Second Surprise. In the exchange that follows, Abraham does most of the talking. Abraham runs to the three men and bows to the ground, begging them to stay. He calls them “My lord” and calls himself “servant” (v. 3). His entreaty is almost overdone, as it is already clear that the men intend to tarry. He offers modest accommodations—water to wash their feet, a place to rest under the tree (v. 4), and a morsel of bread that they may refresh themselves for their continuing journey—in what was probably customary, formulaic speech that nevertheless sounds a little much to our ears. The response of the mystery-men is curt, by contrast: “Do as you have said” (v. 5).

The preacher may want to pause here in order to help the congregation stay with the story. The response of the strangers can sound almost rude or ungrateful, especially in contrast to Abraham’s somewhat flowery entreaties. This matter-of-fact response implies nothing less than acceptance of what is right and proper. These men seem to expect this treatment; they are receiving what is clearly their due, nothing more and nothing less. Is it possible that we might be disappointed or surprised with how ordinary and matter of fact a theophany can be, that a theophany is about God and not about us?

The Third Surprise. If Abraham is disappointed in any way, it does not show. He is aware that he is in the presence of something or someone extraordinary, and his offer of humble bread and water gives way to extravagant preparations,

Genesis 18:1–10a

Theological Perspective

disappointments, and irrevocable choices and commitments.¹

Midlife is also a time to assess false, misguided, and worn-out goals and to replace them with more authentic commitments. According to Fowler, emotional “burnout” often precipitates this kind of “conversion” from the “false self” toward a more realistic self.

“Much so-called burnout in the adult years can be traced to a person’s need to free the self from the parental or child-culture script or program adopted to meet his family’s and social group’s conditions of worth. Healing comes through his being helped to reclaim access to his own suppressed hard and crippled will.”²

In terms of social implications, midlife can bring “principled openness” and an “ironic imagination,” the ability to value one’s social group while also being open to others. Though wisdom is by no means inevitable after midlife, when midlife brings an enlarged imagination, it offers something particular to whatever new projects or late vocations become open to us.

Of course, age and the second half of life do not automatically bring wisdom. There is, as conveyed in the character of Molly Grue, often a tinge of bitterness from whatever defeats and disappointments have come our way. The waiting for life to make things right, and the attempts to make up for the loss, can be costly or even damaging. Sarah struggled to gain wisdom as she waited to see if her hopes would be fulfilled, and she did great harm to Hagar and Ishmael along the way. She was not an exemplar of principled openness.

The lectionary parsing invites us to pause before the narrative is finished, even before the famous “Sarah laughed” text. There is great value in pausing as a reader to consider all the ways the story might play out. This causes us to ask ourselves the question: how will we respond if the fulfillment of a hope or possibility comes very late—when we are no longer innocent and fresh? How will we engage the “sacrament of defeat” before continuing the latter part of our life?

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over each other. They do not see behind the stage to the machinery of hospitality. They see only what is manifest, the ungrudging gift that points away from their host to themselves as the source of Abraham’s delight. His graciousness only appears in the mirror of the grace they are to him as his guests. That is the self-effacement of loving service: the essential form of what Paul means by *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13.

Abraham does not yet know who these strangers are. If he did, it would spoil everything. After all, who would not put on a burst of energy for the Almighty? The reader, though, shares in the theological secret and has the advantage of the hermeneutical catbird seat. The NRSV says, “[Abraham] looked up” (v. 2), but the idiomatic Hebrew expression is quite familiar: “he lifted up his eyes.” To the reader who is familiar with the Bible, this is a theologically loaded phrase. Eyes are lifted up to the hills, to the heavenly place, to God as God comes to us. Abraham lifts up his eyes, sees God, though as yet unaware, and rushes to serve. The reader spots the parable. We see God and, without missing a beat, run to minister to the stranger, the neighbor, the one on whom the day beats hard. This is the reflex between faith and love or, put another way, the dynamic unity of loving God and loving our neighbor.

One task for the Christian imagination is to come up with practices that embody Abraham’s self-effacing graciousness, the hospitality that honors the neighbor, especially the needy neighbor, that one over whom we are tempted to feel superior in our bounty. We must ask ourselves: what does the church look like when it becomes, through God’s presence, the self-forgetful community, the community that finds its delight and its privilege in those it greets?

ALAN GREGORY

1. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 197–98.

2. James Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 114.

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Exegetical Perspective

the antihospitality story of Genesis 19; there the heavenly visitors find their lives in jeopardy when they are unable to find a safe haven in Sodom. This lack of hospitality ultimately incurs the wrath of God.

Third, the reference in verse 9, “Where is your wife Sarah?” is significant. Actually up to this point, even though God has several times promised her husband Abraham that she would give birth to the long-awaited heir, Sarah has never directly been addressed by God. In Genesis 18, her exclusion is glaringly obvious when the text repeatedly draws the line between private and public space. Sarah is said to be in the tent (v. 9); Abraham goes into the tent to ask Sarah to help prepare a feast for the visitors (v. 6), but according to the custom of that time, Sarah does not participate in the meal. Rather, she is standing at the entrance to the tent (v. 10), listening to the conversation going on outside the tent. The visitors are interested to know where Sarah is in her own right—a narrative detail that is continued in the next pericope.

In verse 12 we finally encounter Sarah as a subject whose inner emotions and thoughts are revealed to us. Stating the impossibility of conceiving a child, Sarah laughs, thinking to herself that both she and Abraham are too old. In language marked by sexual references, she disbelievingly asks whether she still would be able to receive pleasure! God’s announcement will finally transform her impossible situation of barrenness when God asks in verse 14: “Is anything too wonderful [extraordinary] for God?” As in verse 10a, God promises that God’s return at the appointed time, in the spring, will give Sarah a son—the reference to spring (literally “at the time when it is reviving”) vividly symbolizing the new life that God will bring to this woman’s insufferable situation of barrenness.

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engaging the whole of his party. While Sarah is kneading cakes (v. 6), he is selecting his finest calf and getting the servant to prepare it (v. 7). He hastens to present it to the strangers with curds and milk, standing by like a good servant while they eat (v. 8). Even the most ordinary exchange with the Lord properly and naturally gives rise to great generosity. A true theophany or encounter with God is liberating, freeing us from concern about whether there will be enough and assuring us of great bounty.

The Fourth and Final Surprise. The men speak for the second time, asking after Sarah and her whereabouts (v. 9). Where did that come from? There is no preamble, no mention of her catching their eye, no previous introductions all around, yet they know her name and her great age, and they know her desire for a child. Then one of them says, in the nature of a promise, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son” (v. 10). Seemingly out of nowhere comes the greatest blessing of all: a reasonable and holy hope for those who had none, a gift beyond measure, unearned, unmerited, not manipulated, totally gratuitous, the essence of grace. This mysterious encounter, which begins in formality, leads to genuine, extravagant generosity and begets unimaginable grace.

This text is rich with possibilities. The preacher could emphasize the importance of hospitality to strangers and entertaining angels unawares, deal with expectations leading to disappointments that in turn inhibit our recognition of grace, or consider the spiritual practice of generosity and stewardship.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

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

Psalm 15

¹O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?

²Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;

³who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;

⁴in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

⁵who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Theological Perspective

The psalmist asks the question, “Who shall dwell in the house of God, and who may live in the holy hill?” The psalm is part of a processional liturgy specifying the moral qualities required for admission to the temple. Both moral values and ways to worship are addressed. Is God’s house our house? The psalm directs us to reimagine the environment of worship and to prepare our moral behavior; the psalm directs us to both physical and spiritual entities.

This psalm is a dialogue between a custodian of the house of God and those who have come to worship there. (The theme and the temple-ascending ritual are repeated in Psalm 24.) In the first verse begins an inquiry to the congregation who seek admission to the sanctuary. This antiphonal, sound-against-sound ritual, divided into two parts, demonstrates the tension between the two representations (priest and worshiper) in this worship procession.

Before getting to the next verses, we ask a question about physical building plans of God—whether tabernacle, house, tent, hill, or high mountain. In this multiple language of sacred space and church architecture, we are entertaining an idea of our mortal body as the living sacrifice of God (Rom. 12:1).

The space of worship may be different from church to church. Its architectural setting and tradition reflect the history, culture, and theology of each

Pastoral Perspective

In her insightful book *The Psalms for Today*,¹ Old Testament scholar Beth LaNeel Tanner does a lovely job of engaging the reader to experience the psalms as both praise and deeply felt prayer. She points to the Hebrew title of the psalms, *tehilim*, meaning, “songs of praise,” and to the ancient title, *tepilith*, which means “prayers,” indicating the purpose of our treasured inheritance. She goes on to point out the way in which, during the Protestant Reformation, the Psalms were sung as a part of public protest and so were also prayers for strength and God’s presence.

The recovery of this tradition, just at this time in the North American “mainline” churches, is vital, I think, for a couple of reasons. First, it is well documented that we live in a post-Christian country. Certainly, any pastor trying to do ministry in the United States today has discovered that we do our ministry in a mission field. The culture no longer speaks the language of “church.” Even in the so-called Bible Belt, coaches can demand Sunday morning practices from their athletes and parents will allow it. Fewer and fewer Americans can answer even the most basic questions about the Bible or Christian teaching, which means that even if we

1. Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Psalms for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), esp. 2–3.

Psalm 15

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 15 is usually classified as an entrance liturgy, a psalm that was performed at the temple gates prior to entering the holy confines.¹ It is often compared with Psalm 24, another entrance liturgy. Particularly striking are the parallels between Psalm 15:1 and Psalm 24:3, which pose the question of who may dwell in the sanctuary, and between Psalm 15:2–5b and Psalm 24:4–5, which answer the question. Whereas Psalm 24 concludes with the opening of the gates to allow the worshipers to enter, Psalm 15 ends with a statement that those who meet the qualifications shall never be moved (Ps. 15:5c).

Psalm 15 falls neatly into three sections. Verse 1 asks who may abide on God's holy hill, that is, Mount Zion, the location of the temple in Jerusalem. Verses 2–5b answer the question by stating the characteristics of those who are worthy to enter. This section is arranged in an alternating pattern of positive and negative characteristics. Verse 2 states what those who are worthy do. Verse 3 follows with a list of wicked things the worthy worshipers do not do. The psalm returns to a positive statement in verse 4, but then ends on a negative statement in verse 5ab. Being worthy to enter the temple complex is not merely a matter of refraining from evil; positive acts

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr., "Psalms," *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:732.

Homiletical Perspective

With such a simple structure—pose the question, answer the question, conclude—Psalm 15 reads more like a high school essay than a song of worship. Its plain sense is quite clear, and it is short enough that listeners can retain all of it in one hearing. We may well ask whether it is necessary to preach on such a passage, whether such a clear and direct word truly needs breaking open; but just as a simple meal can be the most satisfying, this simple text contains riches for God's people.

"Who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" (v. 1) The first thing we note is the particularity of the question. It does not ask how to "get right with God." It asks how to enter a specific place: the temple in Jerusalem. The question assumes that there is a physical location for God's presence, and that we can enter it by following the moral norms of verses 2–5a.

Of course, there is no physical temple in Jerusalem to enter now, but that does not mean we throw out the text or preach it as a set of disconnected moral laws. Instead, we might trust that God is still very much in the world, even physically present, and that we enter God's presence when we live by the norms established in the text. This approach is especially fitting in the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate the physical

Psalm 15

Theological Perspective

community. Twenty-first-century theology teaches us that we cannot predict or control God's presence. God is always, by way of a surprise, shaking us from the foundation. We live in this world of fast-changing space, and nothing is secured as permanent rock. However, the psalm's final verse assures us that the person who follows God's instruction will never be shaken, creating an archetype of the secured house of God where people dwell.

The holy temple and holy hill are vivid visual images of daily living for people who live in mountainous areas. This point of reference gives directional approach and a state of being that represent an unchanging form of security. In times of trouble, people take refuge in the high mountain, seeking hideouts and searching for food to sustain life. In the time when everything is fast moving and constantly changing, God stands firm and unshaken to the people who are seeking their entrance at the gate of the divine presence:

To the high and kindly hills I lift my eyes; where is someone to rescue me in my plight? Truly from the dear Lord above help will come. God is the maker of heaven and earth: all is well. (Ps. 121)¹

Who may dwell and who may live in God's presence? The question is answered in the following verses of the psalm, which portray the moral values of a righteous person. The answer parallels the themes of the Ten Commandments, especially the sixth through the tenth. Are you worthy to enter the gate? Have you practiced justice and compassion toward your neighbor and community? These verses teach that worship requires an authentic commitment to social and personal justice; and the one who does these things has permission to enter the house of God.

To the liturgical setting of space and architecture of God's dwelling, a personal commitment to justice and compassion is accented as part of the call-and-response ritual that marks the entrance into the temple: walk blamelessly; do righteously; speak the truth, speaking no slander, no wrong, no slur; fear God; keep oaths; lend money without interest; and take no bribe.

What a beautiful place to enter with such a zeal and compassion, preparing oneself in this lifetime to meet the requirements of God's righteousness! The beauty is in dwelling and living in the presence of God, drinking, eating, bathing, and playing together:

1. *Come, Let Us Worship: The Korean-English Presbyterian Hymnal and Service Book* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), hymn #121, words written by Song-suk Im and paraphrased by James Minchin.

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can get them into church, we need to teach them the basics.

The Psalms, at their best, do that. To pray (or to sing as prayer) the Psalms is to learn who God is. Take Psalm 15, which is our text for the week. It begins with the rhetorical questions: "O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" (v. 1). The reference is, of course, to Mount Zion. Is this best understood literally, as a moral test used by the priests to determine who should be allowed into the temple?² Is it, rather, a longing for the kind of community the psalm ends up describing and for the kind of God who would be in the company of such people? In the verses that follow those two rhetorical questions, there is a description of just such a community and just such a God.

The winners are those who walk blamelessly and do what is right; those who speak the truth from their hearts. Then the language changes, as if the litany now comes from another voice, across the aisle in the temple. The language moves from describing what the blameless *do* to what the blameless *do not do*. The blameless do not slander their neighbors with their tongues and do no evil to their friends; nor "bear reproach for his kin" (NRSV, "take up a reproach against their neighbors").³ The language then turns back to what the blameless will do (again, as if in litany, across the aisle): despise the wicked while honoring those who respect God, and keep their promises even if it costs them a loss of profit. Finally, one more change in voice: the faithful do not lend money at interest and do not take a bribe against the innocent. To these faithful comes this promise: those who do not do these things shall not be moved, or shall not stumble.

In the midst of the greed on Wall Street and the combination of greed and incompetence in Washington in the early years of the twenty-first century, even unchurched people can look at this list and know exactly what it is saying about whom God wishes to keep company with—not that God is not capable of forgiving. God's love is unconditional, but the psalmist makes clear to all of us that our God's nature and our God's command is that we be just, that we be fair, that no evil falls from our lips. God will work with those of us who fall short.

2. See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2007), 43.

3. *Ibid.* The translation is Alter's, his reproduction of what he describes as "the cryptic formulation of the Hebrew." He argues that its meaning might be that when one's family member behaves badly, one does not silence the reproach simply because it is family (44).

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of righteousness are required as well. The third section of the psalm, verse 5c, summarizes the benefits of those who meet the qualifications of verses 2–5b. They will be allowed to enter the sanctuary; more importantly, they will never be shaken. Leading a worthy life bears fruits in ways far beyond just being allowed to dwell in God’s tent.

The first verse asks the question, who may abide in God’s tent and dwell on the holy hill? The vocabulary used is instructive. The verbs both for “to abide” (Heb. *gur*) and for “to dwell” (Heb. *shakan*) denote remaining in a place for a short period of time. In its nominal form, *gur* refers to non-Israelites who have come to live in Israel for a short period of time, that is, resident aliens (Exod. 12:19; 20:10; 22:21; Lev. 19:33–34; Deut. 24:17). In the same way, the Israelites can come to stay in God’s temple, but only for a short period of time. The tent mentioned in this verse is the tabernacle, the residence of the ark of the covenant, which was brought by David to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:12–19). It was later installed in the temple by Solomon (1 Kgs. 8:1–11). The holy hill is a common way for the psalms to refer to Mount Zion, where the temple was located (Pss. 2:6; 3:4; 43:3; 78:54). The verb *shakan* is also related to the word for the tabernacle (Heb. *mishkan*). The tabernacle, where God comes to dwell with the people, is represented here as the place where the people can come to dwell with God.

Verses 2–5b record the qualifications of those who may enter the temple confines. Although the Hebrew text uses masculine participles throughout (e.g., v. 2, “He whose walk is blameless” [NIV]), the NRSV has used the plural to avoid noninclusive language (e.g., “Those who walk blamelessly”). This obscures the fact that the focus here is on each of the individuals who seek to enter the temple. Perhaps a better translation would be “The one who walks blamelessly,” which preserves gender neutrality while remaining faithful to the Hebrew.

Verse 2 characterizes the one worthy to enter as someone who “walks blamelessly.” The word translated “blamelessly” here is *tamim*, which carries the meaning of “completion, perfection.” Although some might be tempted to see this as barring everyone from the temple, because Paul said no one is righteous (Rom. 3:10), OT authors viewed such a state as obtainable. Both Noah and Job, for instance, are described as being blameless (Gen. 6:9; Job 1:1), and numerous psalms speak of people who were blameless (Pss. 18:23; 37:18; 84:11; 101:6; 119:1). Those who wish to enter must also do what is right-

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incarnation of the one who promised to be with us to the end of the ages.

The norms established in verses 2–5a are challenging, but they are ripe for preaching. “Those who walk blamelessly” (v. 2) is one point of entry. Who among us does not carry some blame, some guilt that eats at us? The struggle to be set free from that blame, to be forgiven, is what brings us to worship. Does the congregation yearn for such freedom? Do they experience it in their worship? If not, what prevents it?

A sermon can ask what it means for someone to “speak the truth from their heart” (v. 2b). What makes truth from the heart different from other kinds of truth? Does the light of God’s presence enlighten our hearts in a way that changes our understanding of truth?

The people in God’s presence “do not slander with their tongue” (v. 3a), and this opens the door to a sermon on the sin of gossip, which too often plagues churches. How easy it is to slip from sharing news about a community to speculation and titillation! The text reminds us that gossip, even when it seems harmless, does evil to our friends. Far better to speak the truth from our own hearts and let others do the same.

Verse 4 offers challenging words: “in whose eyes the wicked are despised” (v. 4a). Those who hear the text will remember these words, and a sermon that ignores these words will be ignored as well. How can these words be reconciled with the Christian imperatives to pray for our enemies and love those who hate us? Perhaps we ought to despise wickedness rather than wicked people? A sermon might not be able to resolve this tension, but should at least acknowledge it.

Those in God’s presence also “stand by their oath even to their hurt” (v. 4c). There is a hunger in the world today for this kind of integrity. In an age of disposable promises—political, spiritual, marital—the idea of honoring one’s word above one’s own immediate interest seems more like the stuff of fiction: George Washington and the cherry tree or *To Kill A Mockingbird*’s Atticus Finch. However, that is God’s call, and there is a real-life example given in God’s faithfulness to the promises of Scripture, even when keeping those promises led to the cross.

The moral focus of the text shifts in the first half of verse 5. Up to this point, the emphasis has been primarily on honesty and integrity in speech: truthfulness, honoring one’s word, refraining from gossip. In verse 5 the emphasis is on financial integrity.

Psalm 15

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a sacrament of unity. It involves physical edifices and what is in the heart of people who worship there. In the midst of the call-and-response antiphonal ritual, we recognize the tension between liturgical and personal requirements in preparing oneself to enter God's house.

The theology of the psalm asks the liturgical question and asks for personal devotional preparation. We see the tension: God's house in a temporary tent (reflecting the exodus wilderness period) vs. the secure foundation of a temple edifice on a high mountain (reflecting the royal power of Davidic kingdom). The emphasis is not on one or the other, but both. To worship God in an authentic manner, we are called to find the beauty in a form as well as in freedom, corporate as well as personal, and in truth as well as in spirit. The high liturgical art reflected in the responsorial exchanges between clergy and congregation stands alongside important requirements for personal devotion and for lifetime commitment to justice and righteousness. The tension that holds the opposing dynamic in the multidimensional element of worship is beautifully structured to narrate the role of each worshiper in this praise song.

In response to the Hebrew reading of this week's lectionary, Micah 6:1–8, the psalm corresponds with what to do beyond the ritual: doing justice and righteousness. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8) Moral values are once again emphasized over the blind practices of hiding behind the edifice of institutional jargons. We are asked to live and dwell in God's house, not just be a captive of its building structure. To the question "Who may dwell?" we join the community of believers daring to answer, "We will live, doing God's justice for others!"

PAUL JUNGAP HUH

Pastoral Perspective

Frankly, God has not had much of a choice! God's own nature remains pure, high, and lifted up.

Indeed, there is a longing in these words. Even as the psalmist must know that no one could possibly live up to all of them, there is an aching for what could be, for what should be and is not. Oh, but the psalmist has imagined it! In that sense it does exist. God wants it, wills it, has made it a part of the promise of the commonwealth of God and in that sense has provided for it. In that sense, it does exist: "The kingdom is with you now!"

Learning this kind of hope is another powerful thing that we should be offering to a culture that has forgotten how words can beget worlds. Politicians and pulpiteers alike sometimes diminish the power of words by resorting to simple-minded slogans or vague repetition. We who live under the Bible remember that words *can* make all the difference: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). Genesis claims that the Word created our world and words make a powerful difference, for good or for ill. What the psalmist knows is the same thing the rapper and the jingle writer know: put an idea to rhythm, to song, and you will teach a people something that sticks with them. More importantly, add an inspiring, important idea to that rhythm and song, and now you have gone beyond the level of the advertiser and jingle writer. Now you have taught a people a life-changing idea that they will never forget.

BARBARA S. BLAISDELL

Psalm 15

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teous and speak the truth. All aspects of their behavior must be acceptable.

Verse 3 deals with how those who seek to enter the temple must treat their neighbors. Although the second two clauses in this verse are relatively clear, the first is not. The Hebrew contains the idiom “The one who does not step/walk on his tongue,” which the NRSV renders “Who do not slander with their tongue.” It is unclear whether “tripping over one’s tongue” means something as specific as slander or encompasses a broader category of sins committed with the tongue (cf. Jas. 3:5–12).

Verse 4 returns to a positive statement of what the worthy entrants must do. It features a contrasting pair, as the righteous must both despise the wicked and honor those who fear the Lord, a contrast also found in Proverbs 10:27. The final clause of this verse paints the picture of those willing to do the right thing, even when it is not to their benefit. The righteous will keep their vows, even when doing so will cause them harm.

Verse 5ab brings to a close the description of the righteous, those worthy to enter the sanctuary, by mentioning two rules involving money. The first is a prohibition of taking interest, a proscription that is found throughout the Torah (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:36–37; Deut. 23:19–20). The second forbids the taking of a bribe against the innocent. Because bribes caused a perversion of justice, they were forbidden by the Mosaic law (Exod. 23:6–8; Deut. 16:19; 27:25).

The final clause in verse 5c brings the psalm to a close with a promise that extends far beyond mere entrance to the temple. It promises that “those who do these things shall never be moved.” This is a constant concern in the psalms. Although the wicked think they will never be moved (Ps. 10:6) and look forward to seeing the righteous shaken (Pss. 13:4; 38:16), God will firmly establish those who keep their ways blameless (Pss. 16:8; 21:7; 55:22; 62:6; 112:6; 121:3). Those who are able to enter the temple will be as immovable as the holy city itself (Ps. 46:5; 125:1).

KEVIN A. WILSON

Homiletical Perspective

Those who wish to enter God’s presence do not lend at interest or take bribes. Are we compliant if we refrain from these particular practices, or does the text ask more challenging questions about our faith and the way we use money? Do we obey if we purchase clothing manufactured under abusive conditions, or if the coffee we drink after church was bought at a price that keeps a farmer in poverty?

A sermon might address the idea of God’s presence. The text does not tell us what God looks like, but it does tell us what God’s presence looks like; it looks like a community, a holy company gathered around God. We imagine them, real people who “walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart.” They treat one another with the kindness, mercy, and integrity described in verses 2–5a. Such people are able to enter God’s presence. In light of Jesus’ promise that when we gather in his name he is in the midst of us, we might ask whether this community invokes the divine presence rather than simply entering it.

We might also ask what this psalm tells us about God. It is founded on the idea that God is present in the world, and that there is a place for us with God in the world. Where? How do we experience the holy? Those gathered on the holy hill are guests and are expected to behave accordingly. Are we doing it? If we believe that God becomes present when we gather in the name of Jesus, then we have an even greater responsibility to maintain God’s presence. We become stewards, house sitters for the presence of God. How well are we taking care of it?

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

Genesis 18:20–32

²⁰Then the LORD said, “How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! ²¹I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.”

²²So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³Then Abraham came near and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ²⁴Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” ²⁶And the LORD said, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole

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“Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord,” said Abraham (vv. 27, 31). In the passage before us, Abraham repeats this particular phrase twice, and he speaks up to the Lord a total of six times. There are two key themes worth considering in this narrative: Abraham’s insistence that “the Judge of all the earth do what is just” (v. 25; that is, the specific content of Abraham’s speaking), and Abraham’s daring to speak *to* the Lord and pressing his concern when he is not fully satisfied with the response (that is, the dialogical nature of Abraham’s speaking).

First, let us consider the content of Abraham’s speaking.

Early in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there is a scene between two old friends, Phoebe and Janie, who are reunited when Janie returns home after some time—and plenty of gossip—away. Phoebe brings Janie a plate of food, and Janie thanks her and observes that “Mouth-Almighty,” the gossip wheel, is still working to turn the local universe. She dismisses the gossips with a colloquialism: “If God don’t think no mo’ ’bout ’em than Ah do, they’s a lost ball in de high grass.”¹

Although the context in Hurston’s story is entirely different from the passage before us, the

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937), 16.

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This is an iconic moment in the story of Abraham, one that looks forward to a distinctive characteristic of the relationship between God and Israel and, ultimately, between God and the church. Thus far, the narrator has not prepared us for the role Abraham takes up here, nor for the boldness with which he does it. The conversation is staged by the departure of the two other “men” and a soliloquy in which God supplies the rationale for informing Abraham about the possible fate of Sodom.

Abraham stands at the beginning of a “great and mighty nation” through whom all other nations “shall be blessed” (18:18). That future is conditional on Abraham “doing righteousness and justice” and on his descendants learning from him to “keep the way of the LORD” (18:19). This is, again, a new note in the dealings of God and Abraham: the first time that Israel’s flourishing is wedded to Israel’s righteousness.

Why, though, does Abraham’s duty before God demand that God tell him about Sodom? The obvious answer is so that Sodom’s fate may serve as a warning. God will investigate the “outcry” against evil and will not hesitate to judge and sentence the wrongdoers. This Abraham should know and take to heart, for the sake of the future. Much more, though, proves to be at stake than letting

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place for their sake.”²⁷ Abraham answered, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.”²⁸ Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?” And he said, “I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.”²⁹ Again he spoke to him, “Suppose forty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of forty I will not do it.”³⁰ Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.” He answered, “I will not do it, if I find thirty there.”³¹ He said, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.”³² Then he said, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.” He answered, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

Exegetical Perspective

The lectionary reading for this week opens with God noticing the injustice in the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the cries of their victims rise up to God (cf. a similar image in Exod 2:23–24). In Genesis 18:20–33, God not only hears the cries and sees the misery of the people (v. 21), but also decides to go pay Sodom and Gomorrah a visit. This “visit” by the Lord already has an ominous tone to it, as elsewhere the Hebrew word *pqd* “to visit” used in conjunction with God’s action implies a sense of judgment (Isa. 10:12; 13:11; 24:21)—a suggestion reiterated by the repeated mention of destroying the city in the rest of the pericope (cf. the verbs “destroy,” “sweep away”). God’s proposed visit to Sodom and Gomorrah, moreover, offers a marked contrast to the previous story, where God’s visit in Genesis 18:1–10 (cf. the use of *pqd* in v. 1) has a positive effect in Abraham and Sarah’s life, altering their circumstances in a significant way (cf. also Exod. 3:16 and 4:31, where the term *pqd* is translated as “paying heed,” indicating God’s positive intervention in response to the people’s outcry).

Genesis 18:20–33 offers a remarkable image of Abraham. His close relationship with God, breaking bread together in Genesis 18:8, is continued as he remains standing before God (v. 22). In the rest of the text, Abraham emerges as a prime model of

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The lessons for this day suggest a number of themes to which this passage might speak, including reflections on receiving Christ and what it means to be righteous, articulated in Colossians, or questions about the purpose and practice of prayer and intercession that are raised in the question put to Jesus in Luke 11. Indeed, such themes are also appropriate when the preacher addresses this passage as the main text for a sermon. We must begin by recognizing that however useful the story may be in the service of a sermon on the role of intercessor, the conversation between YHWH and Abraham has more the feel of a theological disputation between rabbis.

A sermon might follow the flow of the argument in the text itself almost as a disputation between theologians, each probing the point of view of the other around questions of justice and mercy, individual and community, righteousness and sin; each testing the limits of the various points of view expressed.

This holy conversation takes place at Mamre (see Gen. 18:1) in the highlands east of Hebron. Sodom would have been visible in the distant valley. The question of God’s judgment would be from the perspective of both height and distance, disengaged in a way, and so a version of that legal and unbiased, objective neutrality that has proven such a modernist

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image of lost balls in high grass is very fitting to the theme of the passage. It is almost as if Abraham is the (self-appointed) Lord's scout, looking for lost (and innocent) human "balls" in the "high grass" of the universe's events. Abraham seems worried that the Lord does not think about hidden lives *as much as* Abraham does, and Abraham brings unnoticed people to the Lord's attention when the latter is about to destroy a city covered in the high grass of sinful inhospitality.

This narrative, with its spotlight on Abraham's compassion, invites readers to think about persons who seem off the radar of the universe, including off divine radar. The implicit message seems something like this: if we think about potentially lost lives as much as Abraham does in this scene, they might no longer be hidden (and therefore lost) balls in the high grass of the human condition.

There is more, however, going on in this narrative. Abraham is not content to be the only one with an eye out for lost balls, so to speak. He wants to be sure his concern is also a divine concern, and he is rather relentless in pressing the Lord toward compassion.

The scenario this passage makes us privy to is the conversational, possibly even confrontational, position that Abraham takes toward God as he persists in pressing divine care for unnoticed persons. Abraham presses his issue six times. Abraham, who describes himself as "but dust and ashes" (v. 27), seems to feel he is being a little presumptuous, and twice he begs the Lord not to be angry; yet he remains bold and assertive before the Lord. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (v. 25).

Although the scene is a somewhat intimate dialogue, it opens outward toward the reader and invites the same kind of robust engagement with divine presence. Most of us do not have the kind of immediate dialogue with God that is shown in this scene, but the narrative also provides a clue as to how we can engage the divine presence, which comes to us through our conversation with the Bible. Sandra Schneiders suggests that when we affirm the Bible as "the word of God," we are speaking truly but metaphorically. "Thus, when we call the Bible the word of God we are not speaking literally but using a metaphor. For some people this immediately evacuates the faith affirmation, suggesting that the expression is either meaningless

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Abraham in on a cautionary tale. As it turns out, God is delivering less a warning than a provocation, an occasion for Abraham to face God in a most alarming fashion and, thereby, take up a dangerous vocation.

The men go away, and then Abraham "comes near" or "steps up" to the Lord (v. 23). The Hebrew verb is often used for someone pleading a case or mediating between offended parties. So the implicit context initially is, so to speak, the "courthouse." Abraham represents the cause of the righteous residents of Sodom, and at the same time he takes up God's cause, because at the moment God appears to have forgotten it! "How can you do this, Lord? You will ruin your reputation, punishing the good along with the wicked. How can the judge of all put himself in the wrong?" God's announcement results in God, not Abraham, getting a warning.

Warning God, indeed, implicitly rebuking God, is a risky business. Abraham is taking his life in his hands. He is polite about it, varying the formulae of abject courtesy: "I am but dust and ashes"; "do not let the Lord be angry." Abraham never forgets who he is addressing, but still he courts the danger. Then, as he responds to God's revised plan, the reader is taken away from the judge and into the bazaar, with Abraham wheeling and dealing as if he is buying a camel. God allows Abraham to take charge. The patriarch, like any good bargainer, never lets on how good a deal he hopes to get. He brings God down in bearable increments, in fives, then tens. In the end, God agrees to save all of Sodom, the wicked now receiving the blessing of the good, for the sake of ten worthy citizens.

Abraham goes out on the most perilous of limbs. In the process, what happens is a new way of being with God. Abraham speaks up for doing justice and righteousness; he speaks out against wrong. This is now a definitive part of his relationship with God: it is now part of Abraham's identity, what it means to be a friend of God, one of the chosen, one of the redeemed. After Abraham, Israel and, through Jesus Christ, the church take on this same freedom and vocation. God calls us into a startling frankness. The boldness of prayer is not license, not impertinence, but friendship. We are more than permitted—we are encouraged—to voice our anger, to be horrified before God, to wail and rail against misery and injustice, including what seems to be God's own silence over evil.

The God whom Abraham addresses is anything but a blind fate or an inexorable will to which we

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bargaining with God—a theological trajectory that will be continued in the example of Job, who refused to acquiesce to the traditional view that there is a direct link between suffering and sin. God’s high regard for Abraham is evident in the verses right before the lectionary text, when God in verses 17–19 contemplates whether to divulge to Abraham his plans of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. God argues that, in light of the promise to Abraham that he will become the father of a large nation in whom the nations of the earth shall be blessed (incidentally once again serving as an implicit confirmation of God’s promise), God ought to share with Abraham the divine plan.

Abraham’s questioning of the divine will in this intriguing text is rooted in an emerging theological position that resists the notion of undeserved suffering. With a likely setting of the exile, Genesis 18:20–33 offers a prime example of what in post-Holocaust Jewish circles would be known as antitheodicy, that is, the refusal to justify somehow as meaningful the traditional explanation of God’s relationship to suffering, particularly when it comes to the destruction of innocents.

In verse 25, Abraham challenges the very notion of “collateral damage,” even hinting that God may be unjust by killing the righteous together with the wicked. As a result, Abraham bargains with God. Starting at fifty righteous, he gains confirmation from God that their presence will cause God to forgive the city (note how God’s response in v. 26 uses the exact same words as Abraham’s request in v. 24). In the subsequent deliberations, Abraham moves down to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty. Eventually the bid closes on ten righteous, the smallest possible group, after which point one would, as in the instance of Lot and his wife and two daughters, be talking about individuals who are worthy of salvation.

One conceivably can ask whether Abraham’s action is not futile, since the subsequent story will show how Sodom and Gomorrah are in any case destroyed. Yet Abraham’s example offers a profound model of faith that refuses to surrender—fighting for what is right, even in the presence of God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Abraham’s reference in verse 27 that he is but “dust and ashes”—which occurs elsewhere only in Job 30:19 and 42:6—indicates an understanding of the vulnerability of the human condition: “All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again” (Eccl. 3:20). Yet this “dust and ashes” human being can also stand before God,

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myth. We know that even human judges cannot fully escape the reality of their circumstance and cultural assumptions, although YHWH appears to be both distant and engaged when he sends two messengers toward Sodom (v. 22). We begin by hearing of an “outcry” (v. 20) or cry for help from those who sense injustice at work. The first task of a judge is to determine whether there is just cause for the complaint (v. 21) and whether the city is wicked or righteous, guilty or not guilty (v. 23). There is no question at this point in the story that the three men who appear to Abraham at Mamre are in one way or another representations of YHWH, even as YHWH appears to remain on the high place while also turning toward the city. At this point in the conversation both Abraham and YHWH assume the guilt of Sodom. They know what their investigation will reveal, and that wickedness and guilt will be confirmed.

Abraham, however, wants to test the basis and the limits of a judgment of guilt. What if the answer is somewhat ambiguous and the city contains a minority of the righteous among a wicked majority (v. 24)? The fundamental assumption of much Israelite law and practice was that any guilt was collective, any taint besmirched the whole community. As a rule, an individual could not be released from participation in community solidarity. Indeed, much of the practice of the sacrificial sin offering was directed toward dealing not so much with individual guilt but community consequence and the miasma of sin. Just so, Abraham is concerned to know, in determining the fate of the whole city, where the balance is between the guilt of the majority and the innocence of a minority.

It will be particularly important in a sermon on this text to avoid simple answers to either/or questions. The debate is more about what we know as a “polarity,” which is something like an axis along which we may find judgment at any point as we move back and forth in our deliberations. The preacher, like Abraham in conversation with YHWH, will want to help a congregation wrestle with ambiguity, rather than rush to the simplicities of either/or thinking that so often leads to injustice.

We see Abraham less as pushing toward some distinction of individuals from the larger community and more pushing toward a slightly refined basis for judgment of the whole city. He does not doubt the righteousness of God’s judgment. He knows that he has little right to speak at all before God. He is “but dust and ashes” (v. 27), and yet he desires to know

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or radically untrue. Such is emphatically not the case because metaphor is perhaps our most powerful use of language, and it always intends the truth.”² It is in the to-and-fro of conversation that individuals reveal themselves to one another, and therefore to call the Bible the word of God is to affirm that we engage in conversation with the Bible for the purpose of understanding who God is. Even as human language only points to the person who is speaking, biblical testimony only points to God. It comes by way of human witnesses, which is not spared human limitation.

Thus, even if we experience ourselves as being directly in the divine presence in the way this narrative describes, we can “take it upon ourselves to speak to the Lord” in our relationship to the Bible. It is in the conversation, rather than merely in the words of the text, that divine presence is experienced. As the scene with Abraham demonstrates, the engagement can be with difficult matters. Biblical scholar Katheryn Pfisterer Darr considers wrestling with the text to be an important form of relationship to the Bible, and she makes a point to “dissuade students who are tempted to ignore [difficult] texts from setting them outside the perimeters of their ‘canon within a canon.’” Making a commitment to engage the Bible involves taking it upon ourselves to speak to the Lord. “One may, after wrestling with a text, conclude that its content is not persuasive or acceptable, but that does not mean that the struggle should have been avoided, or that it was unimportant.”³

Let us take it upon ourselves to speak boldly in the divine presence, even if we know it will be a difficult conversation. If we think about those who seem to be lost in the high grass of systemic sin, and if we call upon God to bring these lost into the divine radar of compassion and justice, perhaps then we are faithful heirs of Abraham.

CAROL LAKEY HESS

Pastoral Perspective

must just bow ourselves in a pious resignation. “How can you do such a thing?” demands Abraham. There is a godly protest before God. God is so free, so righteous, so trustworthy, that he allows his people to hold him accountable. Then, what does that freedom—and it is a great freedom—make of the people of God? How will the people of God, who thus hold God accountable, comport themselves before earthly powers? They will do it, insofar as they take Abraham’s lead, with boldness, clarity, persistence, humility, and, above all, fearlessness. If we are free to stand before God, we need not have weak knees before human beings.

In this story, and especially in the conversation, an interesting logic emerges, a logic that is also the logic of the gospel. How can a just Judge punish the good along with wicked? On the other hand, the question is never put in the reverse: “How can the just judge save the wicked along with the good?” The one is injustice but the other mercy. Abraham’s pleading for Sodom points far ahead, to Jesus. In Christ, the eternal Son unites with humanity, where there are no righteous, to make a human plea for all. “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34 RSV). As in the Abraham story, it is God too who invites this pleading, and who with joy accepts the bargain.

ALAN GREGORY

2. Sandra Schneiders, “Scripture as the Word of God,” *Princeton Theological Seminary Bulletin*, February 1993, 20.

3. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, “Ezekiel’s Justifications of God: Teaching Troubling Texts,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992): 110. For further development of a conversational relationship with the Bible, see Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women’s Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), chap. 6.

Genesis 18:20–32

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implying the audacity to speak up against God, challenging the divine will.

This text raises important theological themes that are relevant for our time. First, Abraham's intercession for the inhabitants of the wicked Sodom and Gomorrah counters xenophobia. Abraham realizes, despite God's assessment and intention to destroy the cities, that not all in these cities are guilty, that not all are evil. This story compels the reader to move beyond narrow stereotypes to see a common connection among humans, to look beyond generalized perceptions that tend to demonize the enemy to value the lives of the humans living in these cities.

Second, this model of a questioning faith offers a vital perspective for people today who are centuries later still struggling to understand God's role in suffering, particularly when a tragedy unexpectedly strikes. Genesis 18 serves as a good example of how the traditionalist viewpoints of the time, according to which the wicked are destroyed and the just rewarded, are not perceived as set in stone or as clear-cut or self-evident as one would have imagined. Abraham's logic interrupts the dominant theological voices of the time, when he asks God with his persistent—and probably annoying—questions, why those who are just would not matter more than those who are wicked. Abraham thus emerges as a spokesperson for the little ones, the ones without voice, offering a model worth emulating. Abraham's example inspires us to continue standing up for those who are overlooked, demonized, and trivialized in terms of some generalized, or popularized, assessment.

Third, one finds in this text a very different image of God that stands over against the traditional portrayal of God as omniscient and omnipotent. Genesis 18 imagines a God who is open to dialogue, who can change God's mind based upon a vigorous debate with a mere mortal. Moreover, God's response and subsequent interaction with Abraham indicate that God is not a distant, detached deity, but a God who cares so much that God comes down to look for Godself wherever God's children are hurting.

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what is more important to YHWH in executing the consequence of judgment: the innocence of a few or the wickedness of many. Where does God draw the line? How are we to know?

As the conversation continues to explore where the balance between justice and mercy might lie (fifty righteous? forty-five? thirty?), it becomes apparent that God's concern for the innocent is enough to ward off the righteous judgment that would destroy the city. Once again the preacher, in order to be faithful to this text, must resist the temptation to try to take the conversation beyond the textual ending. The question about whether God would decline to destroy the city for the sake of ten innocent people, and the answer that indeed the presence of ten righteous individuals is enough to stay punishment (v. 32), is the last word. Abraham does not go on to ask about five or even one. The story does not replace one certainty ("the innocent suffer with the guilty") with another ("the guilty avoid punishment on the backs of the innocent").

Rather than leaving us with an absolute rule for determining appropriate punishment for a city that is clearly guilty, we are left with the question as to what is really important as we make our decisions from case to case, situation to situation. This story leaves us without the means to determine what constitutes acceptable "collateral damage" in a war zone, or the relative punishment for the gang member who pulled the trigger in an assault compared to that of those who merely kicked and punched some hapless victim. Of ultimate importance in this story is YHWH's relationship with the people of the city. In this instance we might draw the conclusion that the fate of Sodom was ultimate justice in light of God's willingness to forgo such destruction. What we learn of God from this dispute is not some absolute answer to the question of when punishment is just and what constitutes such justice; but, rather, we are subject in the end to a God who desires our innocence and values it over our guilt, who puts community before individuals, and for whom both justice and mercy are important. Wherever the preacher decides to go from this text, the sermon will need to acknowledge the hypothetical feel of Abraham's conversation with YHWH and its refusal to allow us to replace real relationship with God with clear-cut rules and regulations.

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

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23

^{1:2}Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

.....
¹²I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. . . .

^{2:18}I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, ²¹because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

²²What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Theological Perspective

Feasting on the wind is an unappetizing concept to anyone who has lived in an area with gusty winds. Winds feed us dirt and gravel and other gritty things—not the usual fare for a feast by any stretch of the culinary imagination.

Yet, according to one viable reading, the writer of Ecclesiastes both describes life as “feeding on the wind” (NRSV “chasing after wind”) and summons his readers to a feast (of sorts) featuring the winds of life. In verse 14 we are told that searching out wisdom is unhappy business for “all is vanity and a [feeding on] wind.” This phrase has a variation in verse 17: “I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but [feeding] on the wind.” The Hebrew roots, most frequently translated as “chasing” or “pursuing,” can also be translated as “feeding” or “desiring.”

What might it mean to feed on the wind? There are at least two meanings that Ecclesiastes offers us: embracing the contraries of life and recognizing that outcomes in life are not in our control.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, or Teacher, thought life was like the wind: sometimes monotonously relentless in its grinding toil, other times chaotic and unpredictable in both its tragedies and its joys. Michael V. Fox translates the first verse: “Absurdity of absurdities. Life is

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“All is vanity.” This is the theme of Ecclesiastes, asserted baldly and boldly at the outset. A shocking thesis, this text will be explicated, defended, and illustrated in the rest of the work, but never qualified, let alone withdrawn. Nothing has substance. Name anything you like—any good, any enterprise, any relationship, any product of hands or minds—and it will witness to futility. The Hebrew *hebel* suggests “breath” or “vapor,” but the Teacher employs it with a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. All things prove empty, as lacking in substance as a wisp of smoke, casually brushed away. Life is going nowhere. There is no solid ground, now or in the future. Not that this is obvious. Indeed, it takes work—the experience, observation, and reflection of a Qoheleth—to grasp the sorry truth of things. The irony is that, while the stuff of life may be no weightier than mist, that mist is perversely powerful.

We go to great lengths to avoid heeding the Teacher. His claim is very scary, and we are desperate not to find it true, which is what gives “vanity” so much power. If we drive any interstate on the way out of any U.S. city, we see and hear a very different proclamation. One billboard after another, every strip mall and outlet, makes promises of substance. It is all here. You can reach out and hold this good and that; you can buy yourself into

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23

Exegetical Perspective

“All is vanity,” laments the Preacher, “All is vanity.” In the fragments from Ecclesiastes 1–2 that constitute this week’s lectionary reading (one would be well served to read these snippets chosen for us in their larger context), the refrain “all is vanity” is repeated at least five times, comprising the Preacher’s comprehensive assessment of life. The Preacher, who takes on the persona of the king in Jerusalem looking back over a long life and career, reaches this conclusion after an arduous process of diligently searching and pondering the meaning of life.

Actually the term “vanity” with which the NRSV translates the Hebrew word *hebel* may not be the best interpretative choice. Literally the term *hebel* means “breath” or “air”—the translation “fleeting” perhaps better communicating the notion that life and everything in it is short lived. Choon-Leong Seow’s definition of *hebel* says it well: “It [*hebel*] refers to anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory. Something that is *hebel* cannot be grasped or controlled. It may refer to something that one encounters or experiences for only a moment, but it cannot be grasped either physically nor intellectually.”¹ The fact that *hebel* is

1. Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 47.

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A preacher approaching any Wisdom literature has the possibility of a thematic or topical sermon, and the lections for today lend themselves to considering what is of ultimate value or worth in a variety of ways. Psalm 49, like Ecclesiastes, points to discovering what matters in times of trouble. Colossians speaks to setting our minds on “things that are above” (3:2). Luke turns our attention to the folly of putting our trust in material wealth. Ecclesiastes can serve a sermon on any of these ideas.

A sermon based on this text can be an opportunity to teach a congregation something about the whole book from which it comes and its theme that all human endeavor is essentially folly and vanity. Early in the book the teacher is identified as Solomon (1:12), a common literary convention, but the prophet is known to us as Qoheleth. He sets about considering what is of worth or value in life through intellectual inquiry (1:13) and through the seeking of pleasure (2:1–11) and concludes that both are vanity. Our reading ends with his determinedly pessimistic conclusion that nothing in life amounts to anything other than vanity, but the prophet goes on to conclude that the best course in life is to get what enjoyment one can, while one can. Wisdom is certainly a path to a well-lived life, but it has no ultimate meaning in itself.

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23

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incomprehensible.”¹ The Teacher notes that “the wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns” (1:6). Life blows around and around, and when we try to understand it, it always eludes us.

Ecclesiastes is on the margins of the communities that call it (often grudgingly) Scripture. W. Sibley Towner wrote that Ecclesiastes has always had a few fans: “skeptics, people with a dark vision of reality, recovering alcoholics.”² Most others, in practice if not in theory, dismiss—or simply ignore—the book. Its place in the canon has always been disputed, although a few fragments of Ecclesiastes are present in the Dead Sea Scrolls. There are no real conclusions or certainties to claim, except that life is incomprehensible. No wonder it stays nestled in obscurity.

Qoheleth proclaims and indulges in the tensions of human experience and human belief. God is utterly present and at the same time utterly absent. We need to face and address the reality of suffering, of which we cannot make sense; yet deep within human nature is a desire for happiness that it is right, good, even moral, to pursue. Qoheleth dizzies us by, on the one hand, forcing us to look at oppression and, on the other, advising us to party when we get the chance.

Feasting on the wind is embracing the contraries of life. It is facing the hard questions and the complicated realities, the intense joys and the searing sorrows. More often than not, most of these are on our plates at the same time. To be sure, there are times and seasons where we lean on one side of a contrary, but we mostly teeter between both sides of the contraries. We weep and laugh, mourn and dance, in the same season. This is vexing, this is painful, this is life. To embrace this is feasting on the wind.

Theologian Karl Barth said that a preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Qoheleth is saying something like this: you live with a Kleenex in one hand and a glass of wine in the other—tears and toasts are the stuff of life. Feeding on the wind is allowing ourselves to see, name, feel, and experience the contraries in life.

This is faithfulness: to let the gusts of delight and the gusts of sorrow sweep us so that we feel each one with the intensity it is due. When we feast on the wind, our certainties are broken apart; that is why

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this image and that life; the flash of “happy ever after” in the advertising photos may be yours now, tomorrow, and always. Oblivious of death, the smiling doctor on the hospital billboard insists, “We save lives.” Always, for ever. This, surely, is solid; this repetition and unbroken concordance of offerings has become substantial. Then if, in an unsettling moment of queasiness, we ask, “But what is it all for, really?” we can tell ourselves we are building a future. Our purchases, our investments, our pursuit of all that is comfortable and agreeable make for better services, better goods, better health, more choices for our children. So they may drive past the same hoardings, the same supersized shops, only bigger. Thus, the Teacher says, with all your toil, you cannot secure the future against folly.

Qoheleth’s sobriety is like a cold wind. We catch our breath and say, with him and Hamlet, “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, seems to me all the uses of this world!”¹ After all, kings and princes should know. The Teacher was “king over Israel in Jerusalem.” He writes out of great privilege. He looks over the whole realm, from the great to the humble; he sends his servants investigating anything and everything; he invites the wise from Egypt, from any court boasting a good sage or two. Qoheleth’s position is what makes his unqualified judgment plausible. He has seen the lot, and found it lacking. If there was an exception out there, the king would have heard of it. However, there’s nothing to any of it, and that even includes education. Ironically, wisdom itself gives no solid hope: however carefully you bring up your children, they may still eat up their inheritance, your labor, in foolishness. So, if the king can find nothing more than vanity for himself, what hope is there for the poor man, standing in his blighted crops with his restless children?

In a way, we share the Teacher’s position. The United States is the richest, most technically advanced nation in history, with global wisdom at a mouse click. If, out of the corner of our eye, or in moments of sober reflection, we see that we are still unsatisfied, still without solid ground, then something has gone very wrong. Either that or, as Qoheleth says, God has set us to a hopeless and unhappy business.

The Teacher’s thesis is shocking, horribly unyielding. We must not rush to object, though; we need to hear him out. The church, the community whose Lord was crucified, has no business jumping

1. “The Meaning of Hebel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 409–27.
2. *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5:267.

1. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 2, lines 133–35.

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used in parallel with the image “chasing after wind” (Eccl. 1:14) further attests to people’s inability to grab hold of life, which has the nagging tendency to slip through one’s fingers.

This realization of the fleetingness of life is responsible for much torment on the side of the Preacher, who calls this inevitability “a great evil” (Eccl. 2:21; cf. also the reference in 1:13 that God bestowed upon people an “unhappy business,” and in 2:23 that people’s labor is the root of much vexation).

What is particularly disconcerting in the mind of the Preacher is that throughout your life you work so hard and then another, who did not work for it, enjoys the fruits of *your* labor. The worst of it is that you do not even know if it is a deserving person in whose hands you are leaving your inheritance. These concerns actually offer a subtle critique of the traditional wisdom’s precepts, according to which hard work is rewarded with all kinds of material benefits.

The notion of laboring endlessly with no apparent reward for one’s efforts calls to mind a classic example from Greek mythology. Sisyphus, as punishment from the gods, was condemned for all eternity to push a stone up the hill, only to have it roll down again (cf. the list of natural phenomena in Eccl. 1:3–8, which makes a similar point about the seeming futility of work, such as the rivers running into the sea without filling it, the wind blowing around and around, and the sun rising and setting in an endless cyclical fashion). The tragic, absurd instance of Sisyphus is picked up by Albert Camus, who uses Sisyphus in a philosophical essay as a metaphor for workers in his day who spend their lives working at dead-end jobs in factories and offices.

So does this assessment of one’s life and work by the Preacher hurl one into a deep depression? If one follows only the lectionary’s choice of verses, one may be left with quite a pessimistic view of the book and of life in general. After all, the Preacher pronounces in no uncertain terms that he “hated life” (2:17; cf. 2:18, in which he says that he “hated all [his] toil”). Yet this text may offer some interesting perspectives for people who find themselves having to live amid the uncertainties and, one could even say, the absurdities of life. Actually the context in which the Preacher wrote was fraught with economic and personal risks. The Preacher’s audience, usually identified with the Persian period, lived in a world where, for instance, wealthy money lenders loaned money to people who sought to buy their own patch of land, charging outrageous interest

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The saying “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die” is a conflation of Ecclesiastes 8:15 and Isaiah 22:13, but nonetheless expresses Qoheleth’s conclusion. Any enjoyment we receive in life is a gift from God and not something that we can earn, conjure, merit, or expect. The Talmud draws a more ascetic conclusion from 12:13–14, arguing that rather than seeking pleasure in earthly things, we should turn our attention solely to things heavenly. A sermon making use of the argument of the whole book will become a consideration of grace, of how there is nothing that we can do to manipulate God, and of how we are dependent on God alone for life. The rest is vanity.

Second, the preacher might choose to move from this text to a consideration of Wisdom literature as a whole. The pessimism of Qoheleth and his conclusions about grace are particularly reminiscent of the story of Job, for example. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10) could be considered the thesis statement of this genre, allowing the preacher to contrast Qoheleth’s view that even wisdom (understood as a personification of divinity in female form; see Prov. 1:20) has no ultimate value.

Third, the preacher could contrast a Hebrew view of wisdom based in law, custom, and living a moral life with the developing views expressed in contemporary Greek philosophical thought, that good behavior is for the purpose of strong families or a strong state, rather than any particular individual happiness.

A fourth option for the preacher is to address this text as it stands, discussing how God has given human beings “an unhappy business . . . to be busy with” (1:13); how all human deeds are “a chasing after wind” (1:14); how inheritance “also is vanity” (2:18–19); and how toil leads to days full of pain and restless nights (2:23). The relentless pessimism of Qoheleth could lead to consideration of how, as in many of the Psalms, our darkest and most despairing moments are still somehow within the provenance of God and can lead, in time, to consideration of what really matters in life, and how God is the source of both life and hope.

Fifth, and also starting from this text, the preacher could offer a sermon on worship as “worth-ship,” orienting ourselves toward that which is of ultimate worth and allowing our lives to be shaped by that. Many worshipers and many planners of worship carry unexamined assumptions about what it is they are doing. A sermon on what we are doing

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12–14; 2:18–23

Theological Perspective

Qoheleth says wisdom brings frustration. A lot of us are in a condition of uncertainty and frustration, but God was never in the certainties anyway. God *is* certain; but God is *not found in* our certainties. God is found more in the wind than in the rock or the left or even the page. Feasting on the wind is an exciting, exasperating search for God in the midst of ambiguities and complexities.

William Brown suggests that Qoheleth is a teacher “who has lived to tell about it all . . . barely.”³ The lectionary passages, indeed, bring us to the brink of despair. “I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun” (2:20). Qoheleth is shaking our belief in our wisdom and actions; he is destabilizing any life philosophy that depends upon specific outcomes. The absurdity of life is such that expected and seemingly logical effects do not occur. The resulting despair makes the process of life rather than the outcomes more important. We have no guarantee that our efforts will produce what we desire or that we ourselves will benefit from what we do. Perhaps the toil is best spent on living the ambiguities rather than on the illusory search for specific truths.

In his novel *A Long Way Down*, Nick Hornby tells the tale of four people who converge on the tower of the same building on New Year’s Eve—with the common purpose of jumping. The gloomily hilarious encounters among these four obstruct all the suicide attempts. The characters, who range from young adult to middle aged, all despair of the fact that the life they had planned to live did not happen the way they envisioned. At the end of the book, all are alive, with loosened grasp, and yet greater hold, on what life offers. Some readers will think the characters have “settled” and given up on important quests. Their strivings may seem minimal. However, Hornby shows us human beings who have embraced contraries, who continue to suffer but who also enjoy fleeting but authentic moments of happiness. They feast on the wind.

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up with the latest deal in false comfort. Looking on the bright side, pointing out just how much fun we can all have, does not heal broken hearts, free prisoners, or give hope to the wretched. We must not be that bouncing person always ready to interrupt unhappiness with the reason it cannot be so bad. “Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, did you enjoy the play?” The church must travel a good way with Qoheleth, see life through his piercing eyes. Not least, he can show us our propensity to obscure life in a cornucopia of distractions.

We must not, though, go all the way with the Teacher. He is tough-minded but oddly forgetful. He has looked everywhere but missed his own title. He is king of *Israel*, but *Israel* is the people of God’s promise. Kings are privileged but also problematic. *Israel* says to God, “we want a king over us.” God’s promise, his guidance, his providential care, comes down from above, but they would have their own way: a way set up from below. All is futile, says the king, all the struggles of men and women to secure themselves, to guarantee a future of their own providing. We may ask what has happened when all that seemed solid to us melts into air, and reveals our lives as an “insubstantial pageant.” When that happens, our terrible and perpetual amnesia is being exposed.

We have forgotten that everything that lives, lives from heaven; that everything that is well ordered, well grounded, though we may well not see it, hangs from the rule of God. We live from above. All that exists is, indeed, insubstantial of itself: its being is gift, its substance continually from God. Using a different metaphor, Jesus warns about the same confusion as to where we may stand: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. . . . And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matt. 7:24–26).

ALAN GREGORY

3. *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 21.

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rates of up to 5 percent per month or 60 percent per year. If the person failed to repay within the said time, the interest rate would double to 120 percent per year. The Preacher's audience would thus have understood quite well the very real possibility of losing everything; people who fell into debt were thrown into jail or sold as slaves.

Within such a context, the reminder that everything is fleeting serves as a reality check that one's best efforts are limited—a valuable perspective when we take ourselves and especially our work too seriously. The oft-quoted cliché, “No one on his or her deathbed will say, I wish I spent more time at the office,” seems fitting. Even more so, this realization of the limited reach of our efforts offers some much-needed perspective when we feel hopeless, that after years of hard work we have not moved the mountain an inch. As Elsa Tamez writes in her commentary on Ecclesiastes, *When the Horizons Close*, “when we accept the limited reach of our own actions, we are better able to take on the present with maturity, effectiveness, solidarity, and humaneness.”² Actually for Camus, at the very moment when Sisyphus realizes the absurdity of his situation, he can reach some sense of satisfied acceptance of his life's work, a feeling of contentedness or, may one even say, happiness.

In this regard, it is important to read the lectionary text together with the verses that follow immediately after. In 2:23–25 our focus is turned to appreciating the small pleasures of life; in the first call to enjoyment, the Preacher, who a couple of verses earlier proclaimed that he hated life, actually emerges as a profound lover of life. Calling on people to literally see the “good” in one's toil, the Preacher encourages people to savor goodness, to taste the fruits of one's labor, to enjoy good food, fine wine, and the company of those one loves (cf. also Eccl. 5:18–19; 8:15; 9:7–9).

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and why could be structured almost as a series of considerations of many assumptions that in light of wisdom could be declared to be vanity. Is it our task to create a moving experience? Vanity. Is it up to us to draw people closer to God? Vanity. Can we convert people to faith? Vanity. Can we provide inspiration? Vanity. All these things are in the purview of God alone. What we can do is tell or enact our story in such a way that everyone engaged in an act of worship is oriented toward what really matters and thus toward God. As with all spiritual practice, times of conscious and chosen, disciplined action free us to become more fully the people we were created to be. The whole of worship may constitute the ultimate spiritual practice for those who would know and be known by God.

Last, following this early part of Ecclesiastes, a sermon could be constructed as lament. The sermon could recognize the sense of loss that accompanies Qoheleth's search for meaning and turn the attention of a congregation to the various aspects of grief and despair that it can engender (2:19), along with questions of meaning (2:21) and the reality that we will sometimes drag ourselves through painful days and be wakeful at night when we really need to sleep (2:23). In the end, that stage of grief commonly called “acceptance” is akin to Qoheleth's ultimate recognition that we are dependent on God for life, even in the face of whatever or whoever it is that we have lost.

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² Elsa Tamez, *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 56.

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Psalm 49:1–12

- ¹Hear this, all you peoples;
 give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
²both low and high,
 rich and poor together.
³My mouth shall speak wisdom;
 the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
⁴I will incline my ear to a proverb;
 I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.
- ⁵Why should I fear in times of trouble,
 when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me,
⁶those who trust in their wealth
 and boast of the abundance of their riches?
⁷Truly, no ransom avails for one's life,
 there is no price one can give to God for it.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 49 is a teaching psalm. This lection omits the final eight verses of the psalm, but seems to present the theological messages important to the psalm as a whole: the hope of God's saving action, death as a common fate for all humanity, and the futility of riches (or, more broadly, of anything mortal) to stave off that fate or offer ultimate meaning. Preaching from this psalm also offers the opportunity to discuss the Christian concept of eternal life and to wrestle with bad readings (and translations) of the Psalms that might mislead congregations.

Psalm 49 contains many of the characteristics that critics of the Psalms have employed to classify Wisdom psalms. It draws a line between the righteous and the wicked, suggests that certain behaviors will lead to abundant life while others will lead to misfortune, and marks a dependence on God as the core of faithful living. Translator and literary scholar Robert Alter notes that no other psalm has "such pronounced Wisdom features" and points out that many of the ideas and phrases we find in this psalm (such as the speaker announcing he is about to pronounce words of wisdom, or the understanding that death is the equalizer between rich and poor, wise and foolish) are characteristic

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The first thing we notice when reading Psalm 49 is that it is meant for all people, "all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together" (vv. 1–2) What we are to learn from the psalmist is not intended for an exclusive audience, rather, it is for all of humanity, whatever our status. The psalmist puts forth what he calls a riddle and says it will be solved to "music of the harp" (v. 4). The riddle is simple: why should we be afraid in times of difficulty, times when our enemies have us in the crosshairs? The psalmist goes on to answer his riddle: everyone—the wise, the dolt and the fool, all—ends up dead.

When human beings find themselves in trouble, the refrain that sings in our heads is often, "Oh, if only I were wealthy, this would not happen to me." We believe that somehow wealth and privilege protect us from misfortune. Such a belief is not held only by those who are poor and vulnerable; the rich and powerful also buy into this way of thinking. Purple has long been the color of royalty and signified wealth and power when worn. In our day and age, the plaid of Burberry or the G and red and green stripes of Gucci loudly declare, "This person has wealth." Today, as well as hundreds of years ago, the way in which we adorn ourselves sends a

Psalm 49:1–12

⁸For the ransom of life is costly,
and can never suffice,
⁹that one should live on forever
and never see the grave.

¹⁰When we look at the wise, they die;
fool and dolt perish together
and leave their wealth to others.

¹¹Their graves are their homes forever,
their dwelling places to all generations,
though they named lands their own.

¹²Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
they are like the animals that perish.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 49 could easily be dismissed as a generalized proverbial series of statements that seem far removed from the lives that genuine believers attempt to live. That would be a serious mistake, for the psalm has much to say to a people desperate to glean meaning from lives that too often appear completely unfair. When two billion of our brothers and sisters in the world try to live on less than \$2 a day, when in the United States more money is spent on pet food than on education, when 20 percent of the world's people control and use 80 percent of the world's goods and services, how can anyone wring a lasting purpose from such grim facts?

The Hebrew psalmists, though they could not quote worldwide statistics, could still carefully observe the world around them. In the sight of God they attempted to find meaning and purpose in the face of similar persistent and grinding inequities. Psalm 49 is one of those attempts. Though the psalm seems on the surface to be quite straightforward, there is more in these lines than first meets the eye.

Verses 1–4 announce that the poem to follow is to be a didactic one; it will teach something that we need to know. The “we” includes “all you peoples, all inhabitants of the world” (v. 1). Verse 2 further defines the audience, as the NRSV translates, “both

Homiletical Perspective

For reading or singing as an element of worship, the first twelve verses of Psalm 49 may be satisfactory. The singer works out a “riddle to the music of the harp” (v. 4). The question is, “Why should I fear in times of trouble?” (v. 5), and the answer is that there is no reason to fear: “Mortals cannot abide . . . they are like the animals that perish” (v. 12). That may not be the most heartening conclusion, but Psalm 49 is not known for its soaring affirmations. Reading further, however, the preacher discovers that this singer means to sing a second stanza that holds within it a haunting surprise.

Unlike psalms sung to the Lord, this psalm's audience is “all you peoples” (v. 1). The singer sings from the wisdom tradition of Israel. “Wisdom,” “understanding,” “proverb,” and “riddle” in verses 3 and 4 make this clear; but unlike most of the wisdom tradition, this is “sung” wisdom, sung to anyone who will listen, “low and high, rich and poor together” (v. 2).

Seldom do we find rich and poor in the same classroom. The rich attend private schools and Ivy League universities; the poor attend public schools and community colleges or drop out of school. So much of our experience persuades us that rich and poor are virtually different species. The singer,

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of sayings in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.¹ Certainly the psalm shows its intention to teach wisdom from its first four verses, in which the speaker names all peoples of the world, rich and poor, and, using the emphatic Hebrew *gam*, calls them to pay attention to the wisdom he will speak, the riddle that will be solved to the music of the harp.

As with other Wisdom psalms, Psalm 49 revolves around the central Wisdom tenet that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Although God is scarcely mentioned in this lectionary reading, God's presence and power are implied by the failure of any other agent to supply meaning or to rescue the suffering. (This reliance on God is made explicit in the final section of Psalm 49, where verse 15 states that God will act to redeem the righteous from the brink of death.) Still, it is clear that God's power and presence are the only antidote to earthly fear (v. 5). In the theological language of the Psalms, which live almost entirely in the here and now, a firm belief in and relationship with God—even a God who does not, at the moment, seem to be answering or acting—is the path of wisdom, helping to make sense of a world that might otherwise seem random, violent, or unjust.

One reason this meaning-making belief in God is vital is because, as this psalm affirms, rich and poor alike will ultimately come to the same end: death. "When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others" (v. 10). Like common animals, human beings all perish, and not even belief in God will change that, although it will alter our lives and perhaps our deaths. The Psalms are unlike later Jewish and Christian texts that foresee eternal life as either a possible or inevitable result of a life lived in faithfulness to God. Passages in this psalm that speak of redeeming the soul from death may merely refer to bodily rescue, rather than salvation and eternal life. The Hebrew *nefesh*, "life's breath," was rendered in the Vulgate translation as *anima*, and by the King James and subsequent translations as "soul," creating in many now-familiar psalms what Alter calls "inappropriately theological language."²

However, some Christian scholars suggest the glimmerings of an eternal life theology in this psalm in the "ransom" analogies given in our lection and in the later verse 15. It may be that—however impossible this might be for mortals to understand or enact—God will continue God's relationship with

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message to those around us. The person wearing the purple robe or plaid raincoat feels the authority that comes with their "pomp."

Maziar Bahari is a journalist for *Newsweek* who was held for 118 days in the Evin Prison in Iran. After his release, he wrote about the message sent by what his tormentors wore. He writes, "I studied his slippers and light-grey socks. In Iran, low-ranking functionaries often wear shabby plastic sandals, and they have holes in their socks. That first day I was hoping Mr. Rosewater was only a junior agent, a flunky trying to make himself sound important. I was hoping to find a hole in his socks. But there wasn't one. His slippers looked as if they had been polished."¹ Mr. Bahari's torturer was dressed as a person of privilege, and his status made Mr. Bahari nervous. Mr. Rosewater's shiny shoes gave him a sense of power; he felt superior to this blindfolded prisoner in shaggy pants. However, the psalmist reminds both Mr. Bahari and Mr. Rosewater that regardless of their adornments they both will die. In some ways it is like the old advice to the nervous public speaker: just picture your audience in their underwear, and your anxiety will go away. There is something about picturing those we fear in their underwear that puts speaker and audience on the same playing field. When speaker and audience are equals, there is no longer anything for the speaker to fear.

The psalmist is really calling us to a deeper sense of faith than simply imagining our enemy in their proverbial underwear. The psalmist would not deny the real fear in Mr. Bahari's situation, nor would he deny the real power of Mr. Rosewater. The psalmist would, however, say to both men, their adornments are an illusion. They are both human, both children of God and mortal. The words of wisdom to Mr. Bahari are that even in this dire place, this dark, frightening prison where he is surrounded by those who would do him harm, he does not have to accept the illusion. He can reject the message of the adornments, the pomp, and be empowered by the sure promise that in God's eyes all are equal.

We may not be able to overcome our persecutors; we may not be able to stop the trouble in our life; but we do not have to buy into the idea that because of wealth and privilege, some people are more valuable than other people. God does not judge us by the purple we wear or the shiny shoes that adorn

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 171–72.
2. *Ibid.*, xxxii.

1. Maziar Bahari, "118 Days, 12 Hours, and 54 Minutes," *Newsweek*, November 30, 2009, 35.

*Psalm 49:1–12***Exegetical Perspective**

low and high, rich and poor together.” The first part of verse 2 says, more literally, “children of *’adam* and children of *’ish*.” The distinction between these two groups appears to be an economic one primarily, as the second part of the verse states explicitly. This is important, because the psalmist asks all, both rich and poor, to listen well to the lessons the poet is about to offer.

The poet identifies with those who are poor, when verses 5–6 ask, “Why should I fear in times of trouble,” when my “persecutors” surround me, those persecutors who “boast of the abundance of their riches?” In other words, why should a poor one be afraid when those who are rich loudly proclaim that their riches set them apart from and above their fellows? The “fear” could mean terror before the power the rich have in fact over others, or the theological fear that God cares nothing for the inequities of wealth and power that life presents.

Such fear is unwarranted, says the psalmist, because of one certain fact: all people die. The rich cannot buy their way out of death any more than the poor can avoid it. “When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others” (v. 10; see Eccl. 3:19–20). The sad refrain of verses 12 and 20 summarizes the thought: “Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish” (NRSV). The poet appears to second the grim truth of Ecclesiastes, as well as Jeremiah’s fierce announcement that King Jehoiakim’s death will be like that of a donkey, “dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem” (Jer. 22:19). However, we need to look again.

The word translated by NRSV “mortals” (vv. 12, 20) is in fact that word from verse 2, *’adam*. If it means there a great one, a rich one, then the summary verses 12 and 20 refer most especially to the rich; it is *they* who need to hear the lesson of inevitable death most carefully. Why? The poor know all too well the pains of death that end an often difficult and troubled life. The rich, however, sometimes appear to think that their riches will save them, help them somehow to avoid the inevitable trip to “the company of their ancestors” (v. 19). Not so, says this poet. There is no escape from death, and you cannot take anything with you (v. 17). The psalm echoes the sadly true poem from Job: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return” (Job 1:21). “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” we say, and money and power have finally nothing to do with it.

Is this all that Psalm 49 has to say? That is, are we to hear only that rich and poor alike die, so rich

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however, does not sing of what is obvious but of what is hidden. “The very rich are different from you and me,” says one character in a Hemingway short story, to which another responds, “Yes, they have more money.”¹ Wealth and power can so enchant those who have them—and those who do not—that the most ordinary facts of life are overlooked. The psalmist will not allow that. The wisdom tradition reminds us that “the rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all” (Prov. 22:2), but this singer knows they have something else in common: they die “like the animals” (v. 12). If money and esteem have dazzled us with their enchantments, the singer sings a song to break the spell.

Our consumer society magnifies both the appeal and the absurdity of attempting to “ransom” life, buy more life, or purchase a “get out of death” ticket. Big Daddy Pollitt in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* recognizes this. Big Daddy is fabulously wealthy, and he is dying, and in his vulnerability wisdom sneaks into his Mississippi Delta mansion. He ponders the matter:

The human animal is a beast that dies and if he’s got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting!—Which it never can be.²

The singer warns the rich and comforts the poor, reminding them that possessions provide no insulation against the inevitability of death: “fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others” (v. 10). Neither wealth nor wisdom can escape the inevitable. As Qoheleth, the “preacher” of Ecclesiastes, observed, “the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other” (Eccl. 3:19), so the psalm singer looks upon “all you peoples . . . all inhabitants of the world” (v. 1) and intones a conclusion to the song: “they are like the animals that perish” (v. 12).

There is no disputing that conclusion and no disputing that the singer’s song ends on that note (vv. 12, 20), but another theme has been sounded—or, to put it more accurately, the singer waits for it to be intoned. The singer has been working out this problem of life and death upon a musical instrument. The preacher in Ecclesiastes made “a test of pleasure” (Eccl. 2:1) and tried to examine

1. Ernest Hemingway, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner’s, n.d.), 72.

2. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions, 1954, 1971), 91.

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the righteous after death, since God's hand is more powerful than the grip of Sheol. A typical reference to divine rescue from physical death would seem to mean little in a psalm that emphasizes the ultimate mortality of all; the context here seems to be that of finding hope amid the specter of universal death. Thus James Luther Mays argues that the psalmist may be advancing the idea "that God, not Sheol, will be the final hope of the souls who trust in him."³

This means that in life—and perhaps after life—faithful trust in God is the only true meaning for human existence. The Gospel reading for today (the Luke 12:13–21 parable of the rich man) suggests that the standards by which the world judges success are meaningless when death comes—and before. Jesus' caution in the Gospel against greed and the idea that life consists of the accumulation of possessions is prefigured in this text, where "those who trust in their wealth and boast of the abundance of their riches" (v. 6) cannot ransom their own lives from death and ultimately give up their hard-earned wealth to others and dwell in the grave forever. So the rich possess only finite power to harm others, and no power at all against death.

If this is true, then not only is the pursuit of wealth (or, by implication, any earthly pursuit except the pursuit of God) meaningless in the face of our common end, but it cannot grant one power or glory beyond the bounds of one's own life. In verse 5 and again in verse 16, the psalm reminds all its listeners not to fear those with wealth and resources, which is consistent with the theology of the Psalms on this point. While persecutors, enemies, and the unrighteous may menace us in one way or another, God will rescue the faithful and be present in their suffering.

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our feet. When all is stripped away, we are equal, "like the animals that perish" (v. 12).

The psalmist wants us all to hear his riddle and his solution. He wants us to shatter the illusion that the pomp and circumstance of others somehow make us inferior. Today, just as in the time of the psalmists, this is a very hard illusion to break. Those with wealth and privilege do adorn themselves with symbols of power—the power suit, the killer stilettos, the Rolex watches, and the diamond bracelets. They all scream, "I am privileged—you are not; I am superior—you are inferior."

This message pervades the religious community as well. When people visit a church, they can't help but take note of whether the paint is peeling in the Sunday school rooms or the sanctuary sports the latest in technological equipment. When pastors gather at clergy functions, the get-to-know-you question is often, "How many do you have in worship? What is the size of your congregation?" We talk about "big-steeple" preachers, and we make assumptions about them and their congregations. Even within congregations, there is a language used to describe large donors; elders and pastors alike are frequently urged not to upset the "big givers." It is very difficult to heed the words of the psalmist, in the world and in the church.

If we are indeed able to hear the psalmist's words and give thought to the solution of his riddle, the divine reality breaks through the illusion of wealth and privilege, even in the church, perhaps especially in the church. We are no longer pastoral congregations or program congregations. We are just the people of God, gathered for worship and mission. We minister together, the wise and the dolt; and some day together, the dolt and the wise, we are "like the animals that perish" (v. 12).

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3. James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 193.

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Exegetical Perspective

people should not lord it over their poorer brothers and sisters because one fate awaits them all? Not quite, I think. As Walter Brueggemann notes, we need to reckon with the unusual verse 15.¹ Here the poet lays the cards on the table; the poet confesses that trust in God is still necessary and is finally rewarded even in the face of the grim reality of death.

“Surely,” the poet begins with absolute conviction and certainty, “God will ransom my soul [life] from the power of Sheol, because God will receive me” (my trans.). The latter verb is better translated “take.” God does not wait to receive the one who confesses God’s power; God will take that one, ransoming him or her from the power of Sheol. This does not say that right believers will avoid the certainty of death; all die, as the poet has made abundantly clear. What God will do is save the believer from the “power of Sheol.” Like those later words from the apostle Paul—“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55), where the power of death is defeated for the believer—so here the psalmist promises that trusting in the power of God defeats the power of Sheol to create a life of fear.

At the last, death does not get the final word, though it appears to be the final word. At the last, it is God who ransoms our lives from the power of death, and this ancient psalmist knew that truth, in the face of the truth of the inevitability of death.

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everything under the sun; but this singer has another mode of inquiry: music. “I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp” (v. 4), sings the psalmist, and music has its own ways of knowing. Jeremy S. Begbie, of Cambridge and Duke Universities, gives attention not only to the ways music sets tunes to faith but to the way music does theology. The psalmist gives attention to the transitoriness of human life by singing about it, and the music destabilizes his conclusion. Begbie explains:

Music . . . subverts the assumption that transience is necessarily harmful, that fleetingness is intrinsically irrational. Music offers an extremely vivid and particular embodiment of fruitful transience. . . . Music depends heavily for its meaning on finitude at every level. Tones give way to tones. Music is constantly dying, giving way.³

So the singer halts the song, walks to the edge of the abyss, and looks in. Like the animals, the psalmist will perish, everyone will perish. Darkness overwhelms at the abyss, and all is silence. At the abyss nothing can be said. Listening in the silence, many would surrender to despair. The psalmist, however, construes the silence as a musical interval and waits for the next note, waits for the resolution that the music insists must finally be played.

In the darkness, in the silence, this singer hums, “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol” (v. 15). There is no good reason to hope such a hope. The singer does not hope in a promise of life everlasting, because no such promise has yet been spoken. The singer does not anticipate the resurrection of the dead, because that notion is utterly implausible, for the time being. The singer simply waits for God to play the next note and replenish the music and complete the symphony. The singer does not trust—as some commentators suggest—in his or her own faithfulness; rather, the singer simply trusts that God is not yet finished. The song is not finished, and death has no music to perfect it, but God, who is the author of life and ultimate composer of all the music, will not fail to complete the tune.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 109.

3. Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 61, 92.

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PROPER 14 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 7
AND AUGUST 13 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 33:12–22

¹²Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

¹³The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.

¹⁴From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—

¹⁵he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.

¹⁶A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

¹⁷The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 33 appears within the Davidic collection of Psalms, and is included among those classified as acrostic/alphabetical psalms; the number of lines in the entire psalm is the same as the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, a structure that suggests completeness or perfect wisdom. The psalm is also, assuredly, a psalm of praise, for God's qualities are enumerated and greatness explained, and it is lush with theological richness. Bernhard Anderson and Steven Bishop argue that this psalm is one of the most significant examples of movement from praise of God as the Creator to recognition that this God of the Israelites is the Lord of all; it is a hymn "which announces that God is enthroned as celestial King."¹

While it certainly is a hymn of praise, James Mays suggests something even more significant may be taking place; Psalm 33, he says, is a theological lesson in miniature, expressing in human language "the theological vision of reality that belongs to the worshipping community," a vision of a sovereign Lord who sees and controls all levels of reality.² The theological issues in this psalm are explored through its expressions of praise. By recognizing those

1. Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 145.

2. James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 151. The quote in the last paragraph of this essay is from page 149.

Pastoral Perspective

It is tempting to read the psalmist's description of a "happy nation" (v. 12) as a political nation. Twenty-first-century readers may think "America" or "Christianity." However, the writer clarifies a few lines later: "The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind . . . he who fashions the hearts of them all" (vv. 13, 15). All people belong to God; God created them all. The blessed nation, rather than a political entity, is the community that truly hopes in the Lord, a community that trusts in the love of God rather than military might (vv. 16–17).

It is clear that the writer is aware of the power of kings and warriors and the strength that comes with great armies. However, when things get tough, it is not military might that God makes available to us. Ultimately, military victories are not what save us. Ultimately, it is divine love that saves us.

Twenty-first-century readers can identify with the temptation to understand power and strength in terms of political and military successes. Few armies go into battle without believing that God is rooting for them. The medieval crusaders adorned their shields with crosses as a sign that their holy war was sanctioned by Christ. Today we have examples of the belief that God is on our side in war and that because of this, we cannot be defeated. In September 2001 U.S. President Bush referred to the U.S.

Psalm 33:12–22

¹⁸Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
¹⁹to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.

²⁰Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.

²¹Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.

²²Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

Exegetical Perspective

Like many of you I am suspicious when the collectors of the lectionary cherry-pick some of the verses out of an obviously whole piece. One simply cannot read one half of a poem. We really cannot understand verses 12–22 unless we have read verses 1–11. So let me quickly summarize those verses.

The psalmist urges the readers, who are described to us as the “righteous” and “upright,” to praise the Lord (YHWH) with a “new song.” Why should we do that? “For” (because) God’s word is “upright” (the same Hebrew word found in v. 1), all God’s work is done “in faithfulness” (a word from which our familiar “amen” comes), God “loves righteousness and justice,” and the world is quite literally saturated with the “steadfast love of the LORD” (vv. 4–5).

Verses 6–9 describe how God created the world by God’s “word” and God’s “breath,” how God gathered up the waters of the sea in a bottle, trapping the great deeps in storehouses. The psalmist here refers us to Genesis 1 as well as Job’s grand first speech of YHWH (Job 38:8–11). All people’s plans and schemes come to nothing when they fly in the face of God’s counsel, “the thoughts of God’s heart” (vv. 10–11).

So now we may hear the full flavor of the familiar verse 12: “Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people God has chosen for God’s heritage.” Growing up in Phoenix, Arizona, I saw

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Students at the College of William and Mary living in the dormitory across the street from our sanctuary tell me that they can set their alarm clock for 10:55 on Sunday morning and arrive in worship during the first hymn. They do not worry about missing the first few verses. A somewhat similar situation greets the preacher reading the lectionary’s abridgment of the Thirty-third Psalm beginning: “Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD!” Worshipers appear to be singing a patriotic hymn like “My Country, ’Tis of Thee.” The confusion is certainly understandable, but the blessedness of the nation occupies only a small place within the psalmist’s encompassing vision of the sovereignty of God’s steadfast love.

Although the phrase “sovereignty of God” may cause us to think in terms of control or brute power, God’s sovereignty for this psalmist is evidenced in and exercised by “the steadfast love of the LORD” (v. 5). The psalm provides one sermon trajectory: the glorious and global vision of the creation “full of the steadfast love of the LORD” is personally and pastorally appropriated in the prayer that this steadfast love may also fill us (v. 22). From beginning to end, the psalm hymns this “steadfast love,” inviting worshipers to enclose themselves within it. The reason for the threefold summons to worship—“Rejoice. . . Praise. . . Sing” (vv. 1–3)—is that “the earth is full of

Psalm 33:12–22

Theological Perspective

things for which God receives praise in these verses, preachers might go on to explore how God reigns over all the spheres of existence in the heavens and the earth, how God is the sole source of salvation, and how God’s steadfast love is reliable.

The psalm as a whole suggests the existence of four spheres of reality (heaven and earth, the nations of the world, individuals, and, finally, the faithful) and suggests that the God of the Israelites is ruler over each of these spheres. God’s reign over heaven and earth is expressed in verses 6–9, from the section just preceding this reading; God’s lordship over nations and peoples is referenced in verses 10–12, where this reading commences (“Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage”). In the lection proper, God is praised for being God of human beings in general (vv. 13–15) and of those who fear God in particular (vv. 16–19). In all of these things, praise is due to God, who in this catalog is revealed to be the God of all the nations and of all that is.

Given this catalog of spheres over which God is ruler, any attempt to order or control some aspect of existence is ultimately meaningless unless God wills it. God alone can understand the hearts and actions of humankind (v. 15), and God alone acts in salvific fashion. Verse 10 notes how “the LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.” Moreover, the Lord’s plans are eternal and carry to all generations; what the Lord has begun will not be undone. Just as the plans of the peoples are in vain, so also is human reliance on physical might—placing trust in armies, strength and prowess, or war horses “is a vain hope” (vv. 16–17). As Augustine wrote of this verse in *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, “He is deceived, who thinks either that through men he gains salvation received among men, or that by the impetuosity of his own courage he is defended from destruction.”³ Human action cannot save.

Only the Lord has power to deliver humans from death and to keep them alive in the midst of famine (v. 19). The contrast between God’s power as creator, expressed earlier in the psalm, and the impotence of human power to sustain—let alone create—emphasizes that God alone has the power to rescue. The Gospel reading for this day (Luke 12:32–40) reinforces the idea of God’s higher order of power through its hierarchial stories of slaves and masters. It also suggests the futility of placing your

3. Augustine, *En. Ps.* 33.17.

Pastoral Perspective

response to terrorism as a “crusade,” the implication being that America’s retaliation was a holy war, sanctioned by Almighty God. He later apologized for using the term because of its negative connotation, particularly in the Islamic community. We are definitely not unlike the psalmist’s audience.

If trusting in God does not mean trusting in kings and warriors, armies and strength, what does trusting in God look like? The psalmist gives us a clue. We are told that we are blessed by God’s watchful eye when we hope in God’s unwavering love to “deliver [our] soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine” (vv. 18–19). Death continues to be a mystery to us, but we are comforted by the sure knowledge that when we die, the grave does not have the final say; we have life in Jesus Christ. The children of God may be assaulted by all kinds of tribulation, even death, but the final victory does not belong to the tomb. Neither the psalmist nor the modern theologian knows what heaven looks like, but all who trust in the Lord understand that God’s breath in us is not extinguished at death. Life in Christ continues.

Famine certainly exists in our world, and most of us have seen disturbing pictures of hungry children halfway across the world. Some of us have even ladled soup at soup kitchens for hungry homeless folk. For most of us, however, famine is not something we relate to in a personal way. The psalmist uses famine as an illustration of dire times, and all of us can relate to a time of catastrophe. Catastrophe is a very ill child or a cancer diagnosis, a serious car accident or being laid off from your job. Catastrophe is a hurricane that breaks the levees or one’s country at war. In times of catastrophe, the psalmist tells us not to trust in political power or military strength, for those are not the ways of God. Rather, trust in the life-giving goodness of God’s love and grace.

The church reflects God’s love and grace when it responds to dire times with acts of love and grace. It is the congregants who arrange meals for the family coping with a child who has cancer. It is the elder who rushes to the hospital to be a source of comfort to the family of a car accident victim. It is the Sunday school class that pools its resources to pay for a member’s much-needed prescription drugs until they can get back on their feet. It is the denominations that use their vast network to send helping hands and resources to a city devastated by a hurricane. These are life-giving acts that ease pain and suffering, acts that reflect love and grace.

The psalmist tells us that God truly has power over all things, but it is not the kind of power that

Psalm 33:12–22

Exegetical Perspective

each day on one of our local television stations this verse at the beginning and end of the broadcast day (yes, TV stations used to go off the air occasionally!). This verse was used, I assume, as an evangelical call that we as a nation should take God as our Lord, and by so doing we would be happy. Since I was not raised in the church, I had no particular connection to this admonition, and I certainly did not know whence it came or anything of the broader context of the poem. When I read this verse now, I hear it quite differently indeed. If my nation, or any nation, is to find true happiness, true joy, it needs to take this particular God, and what that God represents, as its Lord, its ruler.

How that God is to be seen forms the content of the next few verses. The earlier part of the poem called for us to praise God with a new song, because God was creator of the world and was deeply intent on the actions of the nations. Verses 13–15 focus on God’s universal concern for all the nations and all those who live in those nations. Four times the word “all” is used to make that claim clear; God “sees all,” watches “all the earth’s inhabitants,” “fashions (or molds, shapes) the hearts of all” (the heart is the place of will and intelligence for the ancient Hebrews), and “observes all their deeds.” God is plainly God of all the earth!

Now in verses 16–17 comes something of a surprise. The power of kings and the vastness and strength of their armies are “vain hopes” for deliverance or victory. Warriors and war horses, the great weapons of war in primitive battles, are finally of no value when it comes to being saved. Suddenly verse 12 sounds quite different. If a nation is to take this God as its Lord, it must give up the notion that its own strength and power will gain it victory or salvation. As I remember it, that 1950s TV station had both an American flag and a fighter jet superimposed on that verse from Psalm 33. I am certain that they had not read the full poem.

God’s eye is fixed not on a nation’s might, but rather on “those who fear God,” that is, “those who hope in God’s steadfast love” (v.18). Only the fear of God and only hope in God’s *hesed*, God’s unbreakable love for God’s creation, can lead to deliverance from death and survival in famine (v. 19). The poem sharply contrasts the king’s armies and horses with fear of God and hope in God’s love. Frankly, when looked at in such a stark fashion, the choice is obvious. As the World War II song has it, “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition, and we’ll all be free!” This poet rewrites the lyrics: “Praise the

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the steadfast love of the LORD” (v. 5). In the temple the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord and heard the hosts of heaven singing that “the whole earth is full of [God’s] glory” (Isa. 6:3). For the psalmist the whole earth is the theater not only of God’s glory but of “the steadfast love of the LORD.” The song the psalmist calls us to sing invites us to number ourselves among those “who hope in [God’s] steadfast love” (v. 18) and who finally pray, “Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us” (v. 22).

The vision is utterly comprehensive. The psalmist recites creation theology (vv. 6–9) to provide a complete cosmological platform for the preacher to speak the pastoral word that the Lord’s steadfast love may be trusted completely. Paul Davies, an Australian professor of physics, tells of the elemental forces of the universe and asks us to imagine them as tuning knobs on a giant control board. Were the knobs set even slightly different—a one-trillionth more weight to an electron, a one-billionth greater strength to the strong nuclear force—there would be nothing we know. Davies explains, “It seems as if the different knobs have to be fine-tuned to enormous precision if the universe is to be such that life will flourish.”¹ He goes on to wonder that this universe has generated conscious creatures capable of self-awareness and declares: “This can be no trivial detail, no minor by-product of mindless, purposeless forces. We are truly meant to be here.”²

The psalmist would agree entirely and would also go on to elaborate: the reason we are “meant to be here” is to rejoice, praise, and sing, and ultimately trust in God’s steadfast love. The psalmist locates the song in vastness of creation so worshipers may understand there is no place outside the Lord’s steadfast love, including that very place where they stand to sing their psalm. The psalm proposes preaching as spacious and expansive as the cosmos and as personal as a word of encouragement whispered in the pews.

Much argues against such a generous vision, filled with “the steadfast love of the LORD.” Worshipers who have read their newspapers or listened to the television news before coming to morning worship have already witnessed evidence contrary to believing that “the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.” The earth appears, instead, full of the threat of arms; the earth bursts with petty hatreds; the earth brims to overflowing with ancient enmities;

1. Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 200.

2. *Ibid.*, 232.

Psalm 33:12–22

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trust in anything other than God; human beings should pursue “an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys” (Luke 12:33b). As both passages suggest, only by placing trust in God can we hope for rescue.

Although this God is indeed the awe-inspiring creator, and the ruler of all spheres of reality, still the faithful may rely on God’s steadfast love (expressed by the Hebrew *hesed*). Steadfast love is one of the most-often expressed qualities of God in the Psalms; although the term may vary somewhat from translation to translation (NRSV “steadfast love,” KJV “mercy,” NASB “lovingkindness,” NJB “faithful love,” literary translator Robert Alter “kindness”), *hesed* clearly reflects not only that God is the only source of salvation, but that God may be relied upon for salvation by those who fear God.

Hesed appears three times in this psalm. In verse 5, it concludes a catalog of the way of the Lord; God is upright, faithful, righteous, just, and steadfast in love. In verse 18, we learn that God’s eye is on all who “hope in his steadfast love.” In the final prayer, God’s steadfast love is invoked to be upon all those whose hope rests in God (v. 22). These repetitions emphasize that what may be trusted is God’s steadfast love. As James Mays suggests, the crux of this psalm is that “the righteous who live in the world in the midst of the nations as a community in need of salvation trust in and pray for the *hesed* of the LORD.” This hymn expresses God’s greatness, recognizes God’s saving power, and ultimately hopes for God’s lovingkindness to be continually given to the faithful.

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Pastoral Perspective

comes with kings and armies, political entities and military might. God’s power is not seen in making happen what we see fit. It does not matter if we paint crosses on our shields and claim religious righteousness in our conflicts; they are but empty symbols. God sees all sides and loves all people. Military might divides nations and people into “us” and “them” as it attempts to destroy the enemy. God looks at all of humanity as precious and looks for ways to honor life.

Humanity sees the incredible destructive power of military might and is fooled into thinking that might equals right. However, Psalm 33 reminds us that might does not equal right. Trusting in God, hoping in God’s steadfast love means trusting in that which is life giving, not that which is destructive of life. Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, is a simple man, a nurse, and a mountain climber. In the wilds of the mountains of Pakistan, he encountered the kindness of a remote people and decided to honor their kindness with a commitment to build them a school. What began as a dream for one school grew to be a movement to promote peace through education and relationship. Greg Mortenson, in life-giving acts of love and grace, accomplished what the great army of the United States has been unable to accomplish, a respected relationship with the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. “The LORD looks down from heaven” (v. 13) and sees all of humanity, he sees the children of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, and he sees the families of 9/11. He takes in the suffering of the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the courage of American troops. He “fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds” (v. 15). God’s power will never be found in guns and chariots but can be spied in schools and at tables serving tea.

AMY C. HOWE

Psalm 33:12–22

Exegetical Perspective

Lord, trust God's love, and bury the ammunition if we are all to be free!"

The poem reinforces these beliefs in the final verses. We are to "wait for the LORD," who is "our help and shield," once again using a word that ancient warriors would have seen as crucial for victory, a shield. We are "glad" (perhaps "joyous" is better) because we "trust in God's holy name" (v. 21), not in armies and horses. Verse 22 begs that God's "steadfast love" would come upon us just as we are hoping "for you, God, to come."

The lectionary collectors wanted us to look first at verse 12, but I hope we can all see that without verses 1–11 and verses 13–22, we cannot begin to understand just what sort of God this is whom we hope to have as our God. Psalm 33 is nothing less than an alternative reality, calling to all nations to put their trust in God, rather than in princes, in whom there is no lasting help. That is finally the "new song" we are to sing to this God, the God who is help and shield, the creator of the earth, and the provider of that thing that saves, God's wondrous steadfast love, which is the very essence of the God in whom we can always trust.

JOHN C. HOLBERT

Homiletical Perspective

the earth shudders with suspicion and dread. The psalmist of Psalm 33 shouts into the wind, and so also the preacher of Psalm 33 must make a voice heard above powerful competing claims. No preacher is so compelling as to be able to persuade a congregation that nuclear arms in the hands of well-organized terrorists pose no threat, but preachers can pronounce a clear word of encouragement that neither ignores "the counsel of the nations" (v. 10) nor surrenders to it as if it were final.

"The counsel"—or enmity or threat or power—"of the nations" is not the ultimate reality that will claim our allegiance, but rather "the counsel of the LORD" (v. 11). "The counsel of the nations," including our own nation, will come to "nothing" (v. 10). The wise preacher will anticipate the grave danger of identifying any national agenda with God's plan. Happy is the nation that can discern God's counsel, but unhappy and creating vast unhappiness is the nation that assumes its policies are nothing less than the epitome of God's design. Far from a patriotic paean, "Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD" (v. 12) sings not of our goodness or piety or patriotism but of God's counsel: "the people whom [God] has chosen" (v. 12). The psalmist's confidence rests in God's covenant steadfast love.

If the psalmist's confidence is not limited by national borders, neither is it bounded by threat of death. Those who fear the Lord and trust in God are assured their hope is not in vain. With only the unrelenting "steadfast love of the LORD" to provide a theological foundation, the psalmist dares to preach that the Lord will "deliver their soul from death" (v. 19). Preachers standing on this side of Easter have the advantage of knowing this "steadfast love" enacted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, his descent to ransack hell, and the triumph of his ascension. We have heard things about this steadfast love that the psalmist could not possibly know; the challenge for a preacher is to emulate the psalmist's confidence and to speak as boldly.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

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**PROPER 14 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 7
AND AUGUST 13 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 15:1–6

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” ²But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” ⁵He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Theological Perspective

This lection from Genesis appears within the patriarchal narrative of Abraham’s journey away from his family and home, and represents a turning point in the relationship between Abraham (here, still Abram) and God. After setting forth from his native land with his wife Sarah and nephew Lot, Abraham has settled in Canaan. While he seems to be prospering, growing in wealth and power, Abraham has sired no heir and begins to question the covenant with the God who called him out of Haran, where his family had settled, and into the unknown.

This lection wrestles with several preachable themes. How do we understand the will of God or receive revelation from God? What does it mean to be in faithful relationship with God? How do doubt and uncertainty fit into the life of faith? The life of Abraham, perhaps the most important human character in the Hebrew Testament, offers us a window into these theological questions, and the opportunity to ask how our experience resembles—and differs from—his as we work to be in righteous relationship with God.

In the twelfth chapter of Genesis (vv. 1–3), God calls Abraham to go forth “from your country and

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In the beginning, there was Presence but no precedence. In the beginning, there were no cairns of creeds along the dusty plains of Haran, no hagiography of saints, no solace of temple liturgy to glean guidance from. In the beginning, there was just the mysterious divine voice that said to the man Abram, “Go!” Despite the lack of proof, God’s call demanded a response: believe, or not? Earlier in Genesis (chap. 12), Abram and his wife Sarai answered God unequivocally, leaving everything to follow an unfurling promise of fruitfulness multiplied.

We know this story. We know that a simple nomad named Abram was through his faith reborn as Abraham, a towering exemplar of faith and founder of a nation. We know this story’s happy ending of laughter amid diapers, and offspring who grow strong on the milk and honey of a land so lavishly foretold. We know that barrenness will be filled by God’s power, although preachers would do well to remain cognizant of this text’s emphasis on biological children as a preference, since infertility may be a painful struggle for some in their congregation. (A pastoral approach might include mention of the Bible’s expansive ideas of family found in Genesis

Genesis 15:1–6

Exegetical Perspective

Genesis 15 is part of a narrative, preserved in Genesis 12–22, constructed around God’s promises to Abram and Sarai. First there is a promise of progeny (12:2) and of land (12:7); then another promise of land (13:14–17). In 15:1–6 the promise of progeny is repeated, as is the land promise in 15:7, 18–21. Progeny and land are joined in 17:1–8, but progeny is the main concern in 18:1–10 and 22:15–18. The story continues in Genesis with the promises (both of land and progeny) reiterated to Isaac (26:2–4) and to Jacob (28:13–15). The overall narrative structure is significant in interpreting the unit under consideration, for Genesis 15:1–6 represents theological reflection on the received tradition.

Among biblical scholars the unity of Genesis 15 has been much debated. There is no question that verses 1–6 and verses 7–21 constitute two separate sections of the chapter, but there is no agreement as to the “authorship” of either. Earlier scholarship (following the Wellhausen documentary hypothesis) tended to assign verses 1–6 to the Elohist and verses 7–21 to the Yahwist, but current scholarship has largely abandoned such a view, choosing rather to emphasize the function of promise as noted

Homiletical Perspective

The preacher of the twenty-first century confronts an ancient but perennial challenge: how to tell the story of Abram. The saga of Abram is unquestionably central to the faith of the Hebrew Bible and to the Scriptures of the early Christians, but reading the texts that establish its centrality, we recognize their variety as well. Biblical scholars roughly agree that Genesis 15:1–6 is the original form of the promise to Abram. These verses, however, are found within the longer narrative that extrapolates from and expands upon the primal promise. Christian readers of the text are particularly aware of how the story continues to expand to include all kinds of people of faith. The concluding judgment, that Abram “believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness,” only begins Christian retellings of the Abraham story (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:5–18; Heb. 11:8–16). In the Gospel of Luke that verse drives a narrative identifying daughters and sons of Abraham (Luke 13:16; 19:9–10). Abram’s story can be told many ways, and many of these retellings are told in contrast to the competing narratives in Genesis.

Of particular interest to preachers is that Genesis 15:1–6 tells Abram’s story as an encounter with “the

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your kindred and your father's house" to a land God will show him, and God promises to make of Abraham a great nation, blessed and a blessing to all the earth. God offers various course corrections to Abraham in the chapters before today's lection, which twice describes how "the word of the LORD" came to Abram. This formula, "the word of YHWH," is common in the Hebrew prophetic literature, but unique to this passage within the Hexateuch; thus, it draws our attention to the theological problem of revelation. How does God speak to us today? Can we hope for a vision or dream such as seems to have been granted to Abraham? Where do we hear God's voice?

This passage offers the opportunity to preach on the various forms of revelation recognized in your tradition, which might include some form of individual revelation (perhaps as understood through the discernment of a faithful community), revelation through the Scriptures, revelation through preaching and theology, revelation through art and music, and other ways in which God might reach out to us and say a word. How do we discern what revelation is truly from God? How much credence should we place in revelation, particularly in our society, when people often claim to be speaking for God?

Once we have some understanding of what God may be asking us to do, we can focus on the theological question of what it means to be faithful to that call. Gerhard von Rad writes that Abraham is exemplary in his response, since what he is asked to do is so extraordinary; modern readers "must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bond was to expect of ancient men almost the impossible."¹ Abraham does as God tells him and enters into covenant relationship with God. What does this covenant entail? How does being in relationship with God work?

In part, it means to believe the promises that God makes, and that those promises will work in God's time, not at our convenience. Some time has passed since Abraham left home, following God's promise that he would be father to a great nation, and he and his wife Sarah have begun, as we will see, to have doubts that this will ever happen. In part, the relationship with God is about trust, rather than doctrine. Abraham is not given a set of faith assertions to which he must agree; he is asked simply to trust God. It is this trustworthiness that must be at the heart of our own relationship with God as well. Rowan Williams makes this trustworthiness the

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), 161.

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48:5, Romans 8:15–17, and, of course, the relationship of Jesus and his father Joseph.)

Our familiarity with the arc of the Abrahamic story makes us susceptible to imagining today's Genesis 15 passage as simply a recapitulation of God's earlier promise of great reward. However, a careful reading of the text offers a nuanced disruption of Abram as a flannel-felt Sunday-school icon. Things are not as straightforward as they seem.

The passage begins in standard fashion. In verse 1, God comes to Abram offering reassurance and once again magnanimously reminds Abram of providence: "Your reward shall be very great." Then things sharply diverge. If Genesis 15 were a screenplay, a beat or two of silence would surely be written in before Abram's answer. If we allow ourselves to imagine this hesitation, we may then be better able to hear Abram's response as the surprise that it is. After years of unquestioningly following YHWH's oblique directives, Abram appears now to deviate from the script. He answers, "O Lord God, *what* will you give me?" (v. 2). One wonders about Abram's intent in this answer; different possibilities open up different trajectories for the preacher.

Perhaps Abram is answering God sarcastically. To be sure, reading a biblical text can carry the same challenge as reading e-mail today; tone can be hard to ascertain. Is Abram actually answering petulantly? If so, one might be inclined to feel empathy. After all, God's proclamation of blessing seems cruelly unrealized, because in Genesis 12:7 God unambiguously states, "To your *offspring* I will give this land." All these years later in chapter 15, Sarai is still barren. Abram could be forgiven for thinking: "Sure, God, I have heard that promise before. Tell you what, forget it. Looks like a slave's baby is all I have, so why not end this little charade!"

Another possible response is more endearing. The conversation does have the feel of a common Hollywood movie trope, in which a son makes excuses for an absentee dad after another birthday unacknowledged or event unattended. "OK, Dad, I know how busy you are. I do not need a gift anyway." In this approach, perhaps Abram is simply trying to let God off the hook by speaking aloud another option, what he might now perceive as his inevitable future. Without a son, Abram realizes his estate will soon enough revert to his steward, Eliezer, a crushingly disappointing end. Like a little boy trying to protect his father, Abram appears resigned to accept reality.

Amid all the richness of Genesis, this amazing interchange between Abram and God in today's text

Genesis 15:1–6

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above.¹ Current scholarship dates the final form of the material to sometime in the late seventh century BCE, after Judah's population had been decimated by the Babylonian armies and serious questions about the power and care of God had been raised.

The limits of the unit are clear. Verse 1 begins with "After these things," which indicates a break with what has preceded. Verse 7a provides a transition to connect verses 7b–21 with verses 1–6. The literary structure of verses 1–6 consists of an initial word from God (v. 1), a "complaint-like" response by Abram (vv. 2–3), and a restatement of the divine promise (vv. 4–5). The unit concludes with a reflective observation by the narrator concerning the theological significance of Abram's behavior (v. 6). Essentially the same literary structure is found in verses 7–21, though the two sections are quite different in content and style.

There is one textual difficulty to be noted. The translation of the second portion of verse 2 ("and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus") is quite uncertain. As it stands, the text of verse 2b cannot easily be translated. The Hebrew has *ben-mesheq bethi* (which translates roughly "a son acquired of my house") with the then-added *hu' dammeseq 'eli'ezzer* (which translates "he is the Damascan Eliezer"). All of this probably arises from glosses to the text seeking to identify the unnamed slave mentioned as Abram's heir in verse 3b. This difficulty does not detract from the substance of the passage, but it does warn the interpreter not to make too much of the otherwise unknown person Eliezer.

Following the initial transitional words of verse 1, the narrator announces that "the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision." Two aspects of the phrase are especially noteworthy. First, the phrase "the word of the LORD came," while very similar to terminology found in the writings of the prophets (e.g., Isa. 38:4; Jer. 1:2; 11:1; Mic. 1:1), occurs nowhere else in the Pentateuch. This is one reason scholars suggest a later rather than earlier dating for the unit. Second, the Hebrew term *bammakhzeh* (literally "in the vision") is a term related to *hozeh* ("seer"). In the only other places the term is found (Num. 24:4, 16; Ezek. 13:7) some form of ecstatic behavior is implied. While nothing of that sort is suggested here, this term does provide an additional link to prophetic speech.

1. For an interesting discussion of the issues of dating and particularly of the collection of promises, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, SJ (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 216–17.

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word of the LORD" (vv. 1, 4). We might assume that this was nothing more than an inflated, loquacious way of saying that Abram heard the Lord, except that the narratives of Genesis seldom slip into such careless garrulousness. Another narrator will explain later that in the days of Samuel and Eli "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (1 Sam. 3:1). So also they were rare and not widespread in the days of Abram. That "the word of the LORD" should come "to Abram in a vision" is not a pious commonplace. Nothing like this has happened previously in the accounts of the Lord's dealing with people, and in spite of what we may expect from the Bible, it does not happen with much frequency anywhere in the Scriptures.

The regularity and glibness with which we speak of "the word of the Lord" works against the preacher. Here "the word of the LORD" intrudes suddenly and surprisingly. How can we alert our worshipers to the unprecedented and unexpected intervention of "the word of the LORD"? Abram is addressed by God. Do we dare trust that we also might be addressed? Martin Buber explained that we are indeed addressed but deftly dismiss "the word of the Lord":

Each of us is encased in an armor whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite; living means being addressed. . . . But the risk is too dangerous for us . . . from generation to generation we perfect the defense apparatus. All our knowledge assures us, "Be calm, everything happens as it must happen, but nothing is directed at you, you are not meant; it is just the world, you can experience it as you like, but whatever you make of it in yourself proceeds from you alone, nothing is required of you, you are not addressed, all is quiet."¹

Into the accustomed and therefore, comfortable silence "the word of the Lord" irrupts, speaking our name. In spite of the pleasant pieties of our liturgy—"This is the word of the Lord," "Thanks be to God!"—this is not what we expect. It is not what Abram expected. He does not dismiss it. He does not evade the word of address. But he does have questions.

Actually Abram has challenges: What good are a shield and great rewards without an heir? Mortality calls into question all the goods that life has to offer: "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20). An obituary trumps a

1. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 10–11.

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central thesis of his book *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. “Christianity,” he writes, “asks you to trust the God it talks about before it asks you to sign up to a complete system. . . . [O]nce you have taken the step of trust, the actual teaching, the doctrine, flows out of that.”²

As we examine the preceding chapters of Genesis, we see that the relationship between God and Abraham—this human called out by God to be the father of a nation who follows God—has not been marked by any demand that Abraham conform to some express doctrine. In fact, although Abraham has spoken with God and has just met with (and been blessed by) King Melchizedek of Salem, the “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18–20), he has yet to be asked to believe anything other than that God will do what God has promised.

It is important to note that faith and faithfulness can be and perhaps should be marked by doubt and questions. Up to this point, Abraham has silently done as God directed. In this lection, we have Abraham’s first words spoken back to God: “You said I was going to be the father of a nation, but Sarah and I are now old, and where is my heir? Is my steward Eliezer going to inherit all I have? How will I even be remembered if I have no children?” As Bruce Feiler writes, now “the silent one finally speaks, and his first words to God are words of desperation, even doubt.”³ (For her part, despite the assurances of this passage, Sarah also has doubts that God can deliver on this promise, and in Genesis 16 she induces Abraham to sleep with her slave Hagar so that Abraham may have a son from somewhere.)

In some of our religious traditions, people of faith are encouraged to believe in God without doubting; yet Abraham, who is recognized in all three Abrahamic faiths as the most faithful of human beings, questions God here and elsewhere in Genesis. If God is trustworthy, what is the role of human doubt? What can we learn from Abraham and his story about how to be thoughtful and faithful alike?

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rises like a flare to illuminate the volatile fault lines of what it means to be faithful in the face of uncertainty. Abram is most compelling, not when he is depicted as being in blind lockstep with the Lord, but when his trembling voice battles doubt. In this pericope, we see the misgivings of a man and his wife who desperately want to believe that their Creator can yet rescue them from the canyon badlands of deserted hope. Who among us today has not felt desolation at being kept waiting by God, and who has not defined that waiting as being forsaken? Waiting feels like refusal. Most of all, waiting feels like barrenness.

Of the many spiritual lessons offered to us by our Scriptures, perhaps none cuts to our core as deeply as this notion of grappling with God’s apparent absence, impotence, or flat-out refusal of our deepest longings. We are not told what exactly has gone through Abram’s mind as he has wrestled with his disappointment in those long years of childlessness, and we are not privy to Sarai’s anguish during long nights sitting at the kitchen table as she has waited for Abram’s safe return from the battles he fought in Genesis 14. We do see the depleted faith in Abram’s question posed in verse 2, even as we witness the beauty of God’s clear response. God pulls back the tent flap and leads Abram outward under the wild nocturnal sky, and says, “Look at the heavens! If I can do this, is there anything I cannot do for you?” In the end, that is enough. Our text says simply, “And he believed the LORD” (v. 6).

In times of our inevitable but sorrowful fallow-ness, when there seems to be no life or creativity or second chances anywhere, may we leave the twisted sheets of our feverish anxiety and step outside into the fresh night air, seeing truly the same stars that caused Abram to fall in love with God all over again, and stick with God right down to the end of the line. May we find solace in the starlight, as we follow Abram and make our own righteous choice . . . to believe.

SUZANNE WOOLSTON BOSSERT

2. Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), viii.

3. Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: Perennial, 2004), 63.

Genesis 15:1–6

Exegetical Perspective

The word announced to Abram from God (v. 1b) has the ring of an oracle of salvation (see Isa. 41:10, 14; 43:1, 5; et al.). Abram need not be afraid, because YHWH will be his protection, his defense, his “shield” (see Deut. 33:29; Pss. 18:3, 31; 84:2; 144:2; et al.). The announcement concludes with the assurance that Abram will be greatly rewarded.

Abram responds with an accusation against God: “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless” (v. 2a). Literally the Hebrew reads “I go stripped” (*holek ariri*) but this is clarified in verse 3a, where Abram asserts that God has given him no “seed,” no offspring. Abram’s complaint, of course, refers back to the promise God made to Abram and Sarai in 12:7 to give land to their “seed.” Indeed, since they “continue childless,” since they have no *yoresh* (“heir”), any talk of “reward” is pointless, perhaps even mocking (v. 3b)!

An immediate response comes via the word of the Lord (v. 4a): “This man,” a reference to the “slave born in my house” (v. 3b), “shall not be your heir” (v. 4b). The issue of “heirs” and “offspring/seed” is directly addressed. God’s assurance is that one of Abram’s “very own issue” (lit. “one from your loins”) will be Abram’s heir (v. 4c)! To underscore this promise, God instructs Abram to go out and count the stars in the heavens, because so innumerable will be Abram’s “seed” (v. 5).

In very cryptic language the narrator brings the unit to a conclusion with a simple, yet profound, reflection: “And he believed the LORD; and the LORD [Heb. text “he”] reckoned it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). The JSPV translation is: “And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit.” The NIV reads: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” The Jewish Publication use of the term “trust” for the Hebrew *he’man* is preferable, for trustfulness rather than rational assent is the force of the Hebrew root *mn* (“confirm, support, stand firm”). JSPV’s choice of “merit” as opposed to “righteousness,” however, is not as helpful. *Tsedaqah* in Hebrew describes an act that is appropriate in a given relationship (see 7:1; 18:23–26; 38:26). Abram is “reckoned” (a term reflecting the priestly duty of declaring an offering as properly made; see Lev. 7; 18; 17:4; better than NIV “credited”²) by God as “righteous.” The narrator’s judgment is supported centuries later by several New Testament texts (see Rom. 4:3–5; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:18–26).

W. EUGENE MARCH

2. Terrence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:445.

Homiletical Perspective

stock portfolio every time—unless there is an heir. Abram’s question concerns an heir, but his objection is a piece of a larger challenge to trusting “the word of the LORD”: things are not right in the world, and the disorder and deadliness of it all call into question a trustworthy One at the heart of the matter. This is the college sophomore in Philosophy 201 confronting the dilemma of how a good God can manage a world that includes evil, but it is also a personal matter. It is Abram’s heir, your sister’s cancer, the ongoing threat of terror, the horror of children born with unspeakable defects, and I need not go on. How can we trust in any shield or any good fortune when so much looks so vulnerable and so badly broken? Abram has a point here at the beginning of his story with God, and it is one we recognize.

The Lord does not answer Abram’s quite reasonable objections. Instead “the word of the LORD” addresses Abram a second time, promising that “no one but your very own issue shall be your heir” (v. 4b). That promise made, the Lord explains nothing but takes Abram out under the stars and invites him to count, if he is able. The stars cannot guarantee the promise. How could they? What has the vastness and the immensity of the stars to do with the infinitesimal intimacy of a human ovum beginning to grow? This display anticipates God’s answer to Job from the whirlwind (Job 38–41). Job also is a righteous man; the narrator and the Lord agree to this judgment (Job 1:1; 1:8; 2:3). Like Abram, Job trusts God (Job 2:10), and like Abram, not all is well with Job. Job has lost his heirs and his health. Whatever shield covered him has disappeared, and his reward is torched and lost. Like Abraham, Job asks the Lord to inspect the situation. Again, the Lord points to the stars (Job 38:31–32) but also to the sea, to rain and clouds and rivers, to mountain goats and ostriches.

The appeal—insofar as Abram, Job, and we can fathom it at all—is an appeal to wonder and amazement. No answer appears, no explanation is offered, but only the hint that behind all that we can see, that is so marvelous, there is One more marvelous still, who means to shield and reward beyond our imagination.

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**PROPER 15 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 14
AND AUGUST 20 INCLUSIVE)**

Jeremiah 23:23–29

²³Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? ²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. ²⁵I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" ²⁶How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ²⁷They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. ²⁹Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Theological Perspective

This passage from Jeremiah 23 appears within a poetic section of the book wrestling with the question of false prophecy, one of the major themes of Jeremiah. Living in the last days of the southern kingdom, Judah, after the northern kingdom of Israel had already been swept away by the Assyrian Empire, the prophet Jeremiah spoke his prophecies at a time of great turmoil, both religious and political. These prophecies strike out against religious and political targets in Judah, while reinforcing the idea of God's providence and continuing care for his faithful. These theological ideas may be found in our lectionary passage for today, a passage that centers around the omnipotence of God, the question of how God is revealed to us, and faithful service to that God who rules all.

Like the psalms of praise in the previous weeks of Year C, this passage from Jeremiah begins with the affirmation that God is all seeing and the Lord of all. Unlike local gods, who cannot see or control other areas, God is revealed as a divinity with power both nearby and far away (v. 23), a God who not only fills heaven and earth, but pays attention to what happens in those realms (vv. 24–25). This affirmation of God's power is a part of a larger theme in Jeremiah, the hope in God's plan of redemption.

Pastoral Perspective

The psalmist tells us that wealth and privilege and kings and armies will not ultimately save us from that which seeks to destroy us (Ps. 33:16–17). In Jeremiah 23, the prophet adds another piece to the conversation. Religion, when offered by false prophets, may be as much of an illusion as the power of wealth and military strength and also as tempting to put one's trust in.

Jeremiah begins this passage with the pronouncement from God that God is both very near and very far. When prophets speak the authentic word of God, God is very near. However, when false prophets claim to speak the word of God, God is very far away: not in their mouths, not in their dreams, and not in their prophecies.

Jeremiah is trying to tell the people that they have strayed from God's ways, and trouble is coming. Judah will fall. However, his words have competition. Some prophets in the kingdom offer soothing words of comfort: "Do not listen to Jeremiah, the prophet of doom and gloom. All will be fine. The king is doing everything right." These words are like music to the ears of king and countryperson alike. Who wants to listen to someone announcing the end of the world, so to speak? Do we not just walk by the person on the corner holding the sign "The world is coming to an end"? Do we prefer politicians who

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Exegetical Perspective

Jeremiah's forty-year ministry witnessed the steady decline and final collapse of Judah and Jerusalem. The brief kingship of Josiah, ending in his death in battle in 609 BCE, was a short respite in Judah's fall, but from that year until the final destruction at the hands of the Babylonians in 587/586 BCE, Jeremiah saw little save disaster. So much of his prophetic work was given over to a struggle to understand exactly what the God of Israel had in store for the chosen people in the midst of historical tragedy, and how God was communicating God's will for those people. Jeremiah 23:23–32 encompasses those two central themes.

The primary concern here is, which prophet can you trust? In chapter 28, Jeremiah records a prophetic conflict between himself and Hananiah, both claiming words from the Lord concerning Israelite exile into Babylon. Hananiah announced that Israel's time in exile would be brief and none too painful. Jeremiah completely disagreed, prophesying a lengthy and difficult loss of their homeland. The struggle to differentiate between true and false prophecy was acute during these troubled days. The book of Deuteronomy, perhaps contemporary with Jeremiah, adds to that struggle in two places. In Deuteronomy 18:22, the author attempts to answer the question of how one can tell true from false

Homiletical Perspective

The word of the Lord is a tough business to be in, and no one knew this better than the prophet Jeremiah. He initially tried to disqualify himself (1:6); he was acutely aware of looking and sounding like a buffoon (20:7b); he was doomed to ineffectiveness (7:27); and he complained bitterly about being required to preach (20:8–9). The sketch of the prophet presented in the heavily edited book of Jeremiah is painfully familiar to many preachers. Here Jeremiah's complaints about the capriciousness of other prophets (23:9–22, 25–40) wrap around a pair of verses that pose the inscrutable mystery of the Lord's presence and absence, God's immanence and transcendence (vv. 23–24).

To the question, "Am I a God near by?" other prophets, tuned to temple and palace theologies, answer with a confident "Yes!" We have all preached the sermon that "God is with us!" As a matter of fact, the Lord told Jeremiah: "I am with you to save you and deliver you" (15:20). "I am with you" is good news; "I am with you" is the good news that underscores and gives foundation to the church's preaching of the good news (Matt. 28:20); "I am with you" is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from answering affirmatively the Lord's question, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (v. 24); but "I am with you" can also be preached in such a way that

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Theological Perspective

While Jeremiah is sometimes remembered as the wailing prophet, the prophet of Judah's fall and Jerusalem's destruction, he must also be remembered as the prophet of hope. God's omnipotence means that wherever God's faithful are taken, God's eyes and ears will still be upon them. Earlier in chapter 23 we find a prediction of restoration and one of the two nearly identical prophecies in Jeremiah related to the coming Messiah. The day is coming when God's faithful will know joy again, even if Jeremiah's faithful proclamation of coming destruction and exile holds true.

A God with the power both to see and to shape reality is a God worthy of praise, but how are we to know how to effectively serve such a God? How are God and the desires of God revealed to human beings? Different contemporary Christian traditions privilege different forms of revelation, whether scriptural, sacramental, or spiritual; for Jeremiah and others of his time, God's desires and inclinations were known through prophecy. Prophets were singled out by God (often very much against their will) to bring God's message to the faithful. Unfortunately, in Jeremiah's time, as in ours, those claiming to bear a message from God did not always bear identical messages. Sometimes, as with Jeremiah and the prophets of false hope indicted in this section, the messages were diametrically opposed to each other.

In chapter 23, in both the previous (and perhaps older) poetic section of Jeremiah and this prose section, we hear God inveighing in first person against those who were not called to divine service and who have not heard God's words. In our reading for today, God denounces the false prophets "who prophesy lies in my name" (v. 25) and says that they actually seek to make God's people forget God's identity through their misleading words. While the Hebrew Testament speaks elsewhere of ways one may know a true prophet from a false prophet, Jeremiah suggests in this section of the book (23:9–40) that one way we may know in the present who bears real revelation from God is that the true prophet often speaks challenging and countercultural words to the people of God. As Robert Davidson notes, this section of Jeremiah argues that "prophets who proclaim a word that presents no challenge to the conscience of the nation stand in no relationship to God and have no access to his word."¹ When they suggest falsely,

1. Robert Davidson, "The Book of Jeremiah," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 347.

Pastoral Perspective

tell us how bleak the future is or ones who offer hope in difficult times? In these passages, Jeremiah is challenging the false prophets and declaring that God's presence is not in them. The news Jeremiah proclaims may not be comforting, but it is the truth; it is the very word of God.

Human beings are drawn to rules and doctrines, policies and beliefs that fit comfortably into our reality. We like to hear sermons that extol our virtuous Christian nature; we are offended by sermons that call into question our lifestyles or belief systems. Pastors learn early on that they must walk softly around topics deemed controversial. The Matthew scripture that says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:24) may be heard differently in a wealthy suburban church than in a poor urban church. We rarely like our lifestyles to be truly challenged. So religion, or the church, can become complacent in the illusion. It is precisely this complacency that Jeremiah is up against.

The God-fearing want to hear that because God is on their side, all will be well. Because we are Catholic or Presbyterian or Christian or Islamic, we are part of the in-crowd. We are the chosen. Nothing bad can happen to us because we are on the side of the righteous. We seek power in our religious reality. We make clear that if you are one of us, you are "safe." Religion can create an "us" against "them" mentality. You are fit to take Communion; you are not. You are deserving of ordination; you are not. You may marry in our church; you may not. We are comforted that we are one of the "us." We like "prophets" that affirm our beliefs about "us" and "them."

The problem is that feeding a false sense of righteousness leaves us ultimately empty. The Lord, through Jeremiah, asks, "What has straw in common with wheat?" (v. 28). They may look similar, but in the end they are very different. Although straw may make lying down more comfortable, it cannot nourish the human being. The prophecies and dreams out of the mouths of false prophets are like straw; they do not nourish us. In fact, they leave us empty. False prophets nurture the illusion that religious piousness saves us. This is an illusion that we are all too happy to accept, an illusion that makes us feel safe and even powerful, a distraction to the gnawing feeling we have in our empty spiritual stomachs.

Jeremiah winds up this passage with a powerful description of the word of God: "Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (v. 29). A true prophet's

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Exegetical Perspective

prophets: “If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken.” Such an argument is less than helpful, since none of us has a crystal ball in which to see which words spoken will in fact be true or false!

Deuteronomy 13:1–3 adds another wrinkle to the debate. There we are told that even if the “omens or portents” promised by prophets who “divine by dreams” should come true (take place), and if they then say, “Let us follow other gods,” you must not heed their words. True prophets speak only what has been spoken to them by the only God of the universe.

Jeremiah in our passage steps into this debate. In 23:16–17, he has poured scorn on any prophets “who speak visions of their own minds,” who keep saying “it shall be well with you” and “no calamity shall come upon you.” Earlier in his prophetic career, Jeremiah warned those who cry “Peace, peace, when there is no peace” (6:14). With the Babylonian army knocking on Jerusalem’s gates, only those who do not know God at all would make such pleasant claims for the will of God.

“Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off?” (v. 23) The passage begins with a crucial and revealing question. Lying prophets are fond of speaking on behalf of a God who is “near by,” one close and available, one ever ready to confirm what these would-be prophets already believe. I find it revealing that the most popular picture of Jesus I find in many churches today is “laughing Jesus,” the convivial teacher and friend who enjoys a joke like the next fellow. This portrait is a long way from the one “who stands at the door and knocks” or the one who wrestles with God’s demanding will in the Garden of Gethsemane. This laughing Jesus is near by. However, if God is “far off,” is in truth the God who “fills heaven and earth” (vv. 24), that God’s plans may not include the maintenance of things as they are. Prophets who speak only smooth words may discover that at times the word of God is less than smooth.

Jeremiah is a master of sarcasm; he loves to portray his scorn through repetition. In his famous temple sermon of chapter 7, he warns would-be temple worshipers who have forgotten the “weightier things of the Torah” (Matt. 23:23) that they should not trust in their absolution for their wickedness when they enter “the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” (Jer. 7:4). So here in verse 25 he heaps similar scorn on those

Homiletical Perspective

God’s promise of closeness cozies up so comfortably into the contours of our complacency that every distinction between God and ourselves collapses into a heap of self-congratulation. Jeremiah counters this contentment with the message of “a God far off” (v. 23), who may know how we “hide in secret places” but whose own hiddenness is vast and inscrutable and finally, unspeakable. That, of course, is the problem of speaking the word of the Lord.

Preachers may have an advantage reading the Lord’s charges against the prophets. Commentators writing with appropriate scholarly reserve may express some bafflement regarding what exactly is at stake in Jeremiah 23:25–32, but preachers recognize the dilemma immediately: we have to say *something*. The purity of perpetual silence is a luxury prophets and preachers are not afforded. They must speak. The business of the word of the Lord is an oral/aural transaction. The people expect it and the king demands it: “Is there any word from the LORD?” (37:17). The answer to that question is seldom clear. If the Lord is “near by,” we have not heard the whisper of God’s utterance; if God is “far off,” we have not “stood in the council of the LORD” (23:18) to eavesdrop on the celestial deliberations.

We have to say *something*, and the easiest thing is to say what everyone else is saying, because if everyone else is saying it, it must be right, right? That was the assumption of some prophets in Jeremiah’s day, and although Jerusalem’s walls crumbled centuries ago, that temptation remains intact. Another solution is to shrink the message to something personal. “I have dreamed!” (v. 25), said the prophets, pruning the word to fit their own capacities. This is the sort of shriveled message that begins with the preacher telling us how she or he felt when first reading the text and continues with cute things the children have said; all is heard with generous approval because it is personal and common and homey.

The word of the Lord is none of those things—“What has straw in common with wheat?” (v. 28)—it is fire scorching us or a hammer shattering us. The word of the Lord is not the summary of what everyone is saying, it cannot be extrapolated from available information, and it is vastly beyond how we feel about it. This word comes from a different realm, the council of heaven (23:18, 22)—if that image is too remote, from God’s holiness utterly beyond us. That is the word of the Lord we need, the word we yearn for, though we can scarcely articulate our ache: the word that is not more information, but

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Theological Perspective

for example, that God will not harm God's chosen people, they ignore the reality of God's judgment—and the corresponding aspect of God's mercy, which Jeremiah predicts will be visited upon a people returned to faithful service.

Perhaps this is one way in which God's accusation—that the false prophets attempt to obscure who God really is—might be interpreted and how we might recognize, even in the present day, a theological import of bad teaching, preaching, and prophecy. When those who speak about God do not do so faithfully, any revelation of the true and living God through human agency is affected. As R. E. Clements notes, false prophecy is not simply a threat to those who proclaim a true word (although it is that, as the life of Jeremiah aptly demonstrates); it also “serves to undermine the force and clarity with which the word of God is heard.”² Before and after his passage, Jeremiah argues that the prophets are making up their prophecies. It is still too easy to speak a supposed word from God, with the hope of being elevated or respected, when the actual word of God will challenge and perhaps anger those who hear it.

Chapter 23 of Jeremiah strongly denounces the religious leadership (as elsewhere he denounces the political leadership). God's word is perfect and just, yet is not being spoken by these other prophets, who substitute their own words or dreams for holy visions and revelations. Jeremiah likewise contrasts himself with those who have something to hide or some masked ulterior motive (however futile that might be with a God who sees all). In this passage, we see that our relationship to this praiseworthy God must also be that of faithful service (as illustrated, perhaps in the person of Jeremiah himself). Verse 28 demands that those who are given a dream proclaim it—as a dream—and those who are given God's word speak it faithfully. While this word is indeed like fire and a powerful hammer (v. 29), God commands that anyone to whom it is given deliver it accurately. Faithful proclamation remains at the heart of what we are called to do.

GREG GARRETT

Pastoral Perspective

words come to us like fire. They disrupt our safe realities. God's word must be like a hammer, strong enough to break up the stones of our illusion. Jeremiah's audience did not want to hear Jeremiah's prophecies. They did not want to hear that their safe, comfortable world would be turned upside down. They did not want to consider a reality that challenged their lifestyles and belief systems. They preferred the soft, soothing words of the false prophets to the hammer of Jeremiah's insights.

We hear from the psalmists that wealth and military might seek to divide people. They are destructive powers in the world. They give an illusion of power; in reality, their power is contrary to divine power, the kind of power that is born in a manger and crucified on a cross. Religion too, when espoused by false prophets, can become destructive. It divides the people of God. It forgets the inclusive love of that manger and that cross. When the church speaks in divisive language, a rhetoric that creates an “us” against “them” mentality, it no longer speaks the authentic word of God. Jeremiah warns his audience of the emptiness of a false prophet's words. Beware of the prophet who tells you what you want to hear. Beware of the prophet whose words caress your ears but ring hollow. God's words come as fire, as a hammer that will break up stones. Jeremiah's words are a warning to contemporary audiences as well. The authentic word of God may not be what we want to hear, but it is what ultimately feeds us and saves us.

AMY C. HOWE

2. R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 143.

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Exegetical Perspective

who proclaim, “I have dreamed, I have dreamed!” Their dreams are only lies, says Jeremiah. More dangerously, by these lying dreams that they repeat to one another, they “make my people forget my name,” just as when earlier so-called prophets turned the people to the worship of Baal (v. 27).

They may repeat these empty dreams if they want, but let those who would speak God’s word “speak my word faithfully” (v. 28). After all, “What has straw in common with wheat?” God’s true word is not like a dream; rather, it “like fire . . . like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” (v. 29). Jeremiah summarizes his case against these dreamers by saying that God is “against the prophets . . . who use their own tongues and say, ‘Says the LORD’” (v. 31). As a result, they “lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or appoint them; so they do not profit this people at all” (v. 32).

Jeremiah’s characterization of the false prophets as purveyors of “lies and recklessness” is important. The former word is common in Hebrew and bears the connotations of deception, disappointment, and falsehood. These prophets speak what they claim to be God’s very word, but in reality they speak only their own word but attempt to give their own ideas the divine seal of approval. Their hearers expect a word from the Lord but receive something completely different. The latter word, “recklessness,” is a rare word. In Genesis 49:4 it is used to portray Reuben as “reckless” sexually, since he slept with Bilhah, his father’s concubine. In Judges 9:4 the monstrous would-be king, Abimelech, gathers around him “foolish and reckless fellows” as his henchmen. These prophets are the same: wanton and reckless speakers of lies. Empty and easy truths are cheaper by the dozen, but God’s true word brings life and hope to a troubled people.

JOHN C. HOLBERT

Homiletical Perspective

a word shattering our ordinary time and bearing us up—if not into the council of the Lord, at least into the wisdom and counsel of the One who fills heaven and earth.

Although Jeremiah directed his criticism solely against other prophets, the preacher is afforded little opportunity for such an intramural conversation. We have audience. The consumer-driven society in which we carry on the business of the word of the Lord persuades us to cater to our listeners. Jeremiah is by no means naive about market-driven prophecy. Elsewhere he makes it clear that the people have not only tolerated the vacuous pronouncements of their preachers but delighted in them:

An appalling and horrible thing
has happened in the land:
the prophets prophesy falsely,
and the priests rule as the prophets direct;
my people love to have it so. (Jer. 5:30–31)

Prophets and preachers can hardly blame listeners for not being able to tell true prophecy from false if they have not attempted to teach their listeners how to discern the difference. Jeremiah provides a hermeneutical key likening the Word of God to wheat, fire, and a hammer: Does the word the prophet speaks nourish us, or is it ear candy? Does the message merely warm us or does it scorch away impurities to fire us for God’s justice? Does it shatter our customary categories, so that we hear something new and compelling from the counsel of heaven? Deuteronomy tests prophecy, saying if “the thing does not take place or prove true” (Deut. 18:22), the prophecy is false; but that can take forever. We must note, however, that Jerusalem’s most renowned prophet was named Hananiah (Jer. 28). There is no book of Hananiah in our Scriptures, but we do have the book of Jeremiah.

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PROPER 16 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 21
AND AUGUST 27 INCLUSIVE)

Isaiah 58:9b–14

- ^{9b}If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

Theological Perspective

This passage is divided quite clearly into two parts that need separate attention theologically. The first part, ending with verse 12, speaks with extraordinary directness to the situation of our nation today.

Indeed, it continues the message of the early part of the chapter. God calls for righteousness rather than for religious observances.

Two forms of righteousness are highlighted here. The first has to do with personal relationships, perhaps especially with those that are public. People were pointing their fingers at and speaking evil of one another (v. 9b). How familiar this sounds today! Accusations fly back and forth in Washington and around the country. It is difficult in many towns to hold a public discussion, because some citizens are committed to disrupting them. No doubt every public figure is deserving of close scrutiny and careful criticism, and the writer is not opposing that, but apparently what went on in Israel when Isaiah wrote went far beyond reasonable criticism. Certainly what is taking place in this country on our television and radio goes far beyond that. A nation in which it is not possible to seek solutions for real problems through civil discourse will not prosper. This was a truism in Isaiah's day. It is a truism today. Truisms are not to be avoided. Our churches should raise their voices today, as Isaiah did in his day.

Pastoral Perspective

The starry splendor of the night sky is often obscured by the ambient light of metropolitan activity or simply by the weather. Rare and welcome are those occasions when the sky is clear and the constellations in their brightness command wonder. In Isaiah 58:9b–14, the sky is clear and the constellations of truth are bold. For a moment, at least, the accumulated haze of two and a half millennia of cultural distance recedes. There is no hermeneutical ambiguity here; the offer is distinct and compelling. The preacher's job, primarily, is to point toward the sky and stay out of the way.

How does the pastoral perspective contribute to our staying out of the way of this text? It does so by raising at least two questions to be considered during preparation. Here is a text in which God's promised blessing is conditional, requiring both personal and social righteousness from those who would be blessed. "If you remove the yoke . . . offer your food to the hungry . . . satisfy the needs of the afflicted . . . then your light shall rise" (vv. 9b–10). The very first question concerns this conditionality. How will people hear this invitation to receive a blessing of which righteous living is a prerequisite? The issue here is not how the preacher integrates conditionality into her or his own theology; the question here is not what the preacher believes

Isaiah 58:9b–14

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

¹³If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
¹⁴then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Exegetical Perspective

This passage from the latter prophecies of the book of Isaiah offers clear-cut guidance for obedience to God's will and for the right actions of social justice. The larger context of Isaiah 58 shows how humanity can return to God and find a new way to live according to God's desires. This section of the chapter turns the prophet's general ideas into specific instructions. The first verses offer five keys to right action.

The first is to remove the yoke (v. 9). This is an agricultural image. Yokes are placed on draft animals to harness their energy and convert it into useful labor. However, people should not treat other humans in the same way, turning people created in God's own image into animals to be used. The injunction seems to focus on the economic sphere, in which humans turn others' labors into profits. In the modern world such exploitation may take a different form than in the ancient, but it is no less abhorrent to God. The first step toward living in God's law is to stop taking advantage of other people.

The second key to social justice is to stop pointing the finger (v. 9). Biblical scholars have expressed uncertainty as to the precise meaning of this phrase. In our contemporary culture, "pointing the finger" can mean concentrating on someone else's failings instead of our own, or placing

Homiletical Perspective

In one of her essays in *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor wrote that if you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs as you, you can talk in a normal tone of voice and not have to strain to get your point across. However, if this is not the case, if your audience is hostile or just indifferent to what you are saying, you may have to resort to more drastic tactics to get a hearing. In O'Connor's words, "you may have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."¹

The preacher may be invited to place today's words from Isaiah 58 in this category. If you read the opening verse of this chapter, you can hear YHWH's use of such shock tactics in the opening command to the prophet: "Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!" The reason for this blunt approach is Israel's rebellion and sinfulness, but in this instance, Israel does not even recognize there is a problem. Israel thinks—or wants to think—things are just fine on its part. As a matter of fact, the people are wondering why YHWH is so blind to their fasting and prayers: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (v. 3).

1. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 34.

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Theological Perspective

The other form of righteousness for which the writer calls is responsibility to other members of the community. Earlier (vv. 6–7) a variety of human problems has been mentioned: injustice, oppression, hunger, homelessness, lack of clothing. Here these are all included under “the needs of the afflicted,” with only hunger lifted up for special attention.

There was a period in recent American history when our churches recognized this prophetic challenge. The theology that moved them was called the social gospel. It was taken directly from passages such as this and especially from the form this message took in Jesus’ teaching. The days of the social gospel were also the greatest days of ecumenism and world missions in American Protestantism.

Our denominations have not ceased to call for justice and the alleviation of the suffering of the poor. However, these concerns seem no longer to be at the center of our corporate and personal lives. We urgently need to listen again to the voice of the prophets culminating in Jesus. If most of the energy of those with wealth and power goes toward pressing for their private interests regardless of the critical needs of their fellow citizens, our nation will continue to lose ground. Without unity of purpose the nation will suffer greatly from global warming and other natural catastrophes, and it will bring these calamities to the rest of the world as well.

Nevertheless, in this passage Isaiah is not proclaiming doom. He is pointing to the positive possibilities. If the people of Israel, or of contemporary United States, will treat one another in a civil way and take responsibility for one another, meeting the basic needs of all, then they will prosper. In this passage, Isaiah spends more time on the promise than on what is required for it to be realized. Perhaps, if we as a people envisioned the wonderful possibilities that still lie before us if we follow God’s way, we would enthusiastically make the changes that this passage calls for.

The second passage (vv. 13–14) is somewhat more problematic. The writer here is calling for a return to right Sabbath observance and makes this a condition of God’s blessing. There are other prophetic utterances that seem to run quite contrary to this. Indeed, the author of the first chapter of Isaiah rails against “new moon and sabbath” (v. 13). Jesus was harshly criticized for violating Sabbath laws. He responded that the Sabbath was made for human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath. For both Jesus and Paul, this meant that

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but what the hearer hears. Will the hearer receive this text as simply a reaffirmation of the common assumption that people must earn God’s favor?

Perhaps we will need to explain the difference between a narrowly personal salvation and the restoration of a community where “ancient ruins shall be rebuilt” and the “foundations of many generations” must be restored (v. 12). Personal choices have social consequences. One brief reference to “recycling” will reinforce the reality that the choices of many individuals collectively create—or diminish—prospects for the earth’s restoration. Many faithful interpreters of the gospel have labored to convince congregations that God loves the unlovely and saves us by grace alone. Isaiah’s text is not the enemy of such preaching but its companion. God also blesses those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). Faithful living creates an open space for light to fill.

A second question also requires careful thinking about how the congregation hears the text. Where will the members of the congregation locate themselves in relationship to the social righteousness required by the promise? Will they more or less reflexively locate themselves as the masters who place the yokes, as the accusers who point the finger, as the speakers of evil? Will some among our hearers identify themselves as the yoked, the accused, the spoken against? Very many worshiping congregations around the world—and even in North America—are not composed primarily of the ruling elite. True, some of those who occupy our pews every Sunday exercise considerable power over the lives of others. True, average church members who are also managers or consumers or citizens of representative democracies exercise power and influence. It is hard to feel powerful, though, when you are unemployed or uninsured, when you are carrying a huge education debt, or when your mortgage is under water.

Be careful of liturgical confessions of sin in which the victims of social or economic injustices are expected to confess to the sins of which they are victims. Those of us who enjoy the modest privileges of the professional clergy know intuitively that we must locate ourselves among those who share responsibility for removing yokes. We must take care not to project upon our congregations our own sense of having been compromised by our participation in status and power.

All of this notwithstanding, it is true that our congregations are among the wealthiest, most privileged, and most powerful believers in the

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Exegetical Perspective

responsibility for some problem on someone else. Even though some commentators find reason to think of this phrase as referring to a specific pagan religious practice in ancient Israel, the context suggests that the contemporary meaning may not be far off the mark. Social justice requires us to take responsibility for our own actions, and to avoid accusing others. At times, we may accuse others inaccurately and unjustly. At other times, we may accuse in order to deflect attention from our own faults, and such actions damage the opportunities to work for reconciliation and restitution. We need to acknowledge our own responsibility and act on what we can change in ourselves.

Third, this prophet calls us to refrain from speaking evil (v. 9). Wrong speech is a frequent topic of biblical Wisdom literature in both Old and New Testaments, in texts such as Psalm 34:13; Proverbs 4:24; 8:13; 12:19; 21:6; 26:28; and James 3:6–8. Speech, when it is careless or deceitful, can be destructive and injurious. Our words can also lead others into evil actions. All of these kinds of evil speaking must be avoided in order for society to flourish and social justice to come into being.

The fourth key is to offer your food to the hungry (v. 10). In this way, God calls us to meet the most basic of human needs. Note that this verse specifically calls us to give *our* food to the hungry. Social justice requires self-sacrifice. The prophet stops short of calling us to give away *all* our own food, but does demand that we share and that we give up some of what we have learned to call our own.

The last of these five keys is to satisfy the needs of the afflicted (v. 10). Perhaps here we can discern one of the most enduring principles of social justice. Our work is not only to stop the affliction that we ourselves have caused or to prevent other powerful people from afflicting others. Indeed, our call is more than helping the afflicted or solving their problems. Isaiah's instruction is to satisfy the needs of the oppressed. This requires paying attention to how afflicted and disadvantaged people define their own needs and letting them set the criteria for deciding whether our help is effective.

If we do these things, God will satisfy our needs (v. 11), giving us food and water as well as purpose for life. God will give us what we need but also provide us with a task. God promises that our ancient ruins will be rebuilt (v. 12a), but then explains that we will be the ones to accomplish this rebuilding (v. 12b). We will repair the holes in our

Homiletical Perspective

Through the prophet, YHWH proceeds to reveal Israel to itself, casting light on the behavior that fasting attempts to conceal, how on fast days YHWH's people serves its own interests, with those in power oppressing their workers, with others engaging in quarrels and fights. YHWH lays out what is desired from Israel twice (vv. 6–7 and 9b–10a), and then offers a vision of a more promising response from YHWH (vv. 8–9a and 10b–12). Then there is a call to take up once again the practice of the Sabbath, to come rest in the Lord and know YHWH's commands. We will consider these three moves and their relevance to our own day.

The structure of today's reading is an "if-then" call to renew the covenant: *If you do this, then* YHWH will respond. How YHWH's people treat each other is at the heart of the renewal of the covenant, for to care for and respect others is to honor the creator and redeemer of Israel, who called Israel into being as a people, liberated Israel from slavery, and called it into a covenantal relationship. The fundamental choice is between living as an autonomous being, whether as an individual or as a community, and living as a covenantal being, also whether as an individual or as a community.

So the prophet begins to hold up the mirror so Israel can see itself and hear YHWH's voice calling for its conversion. This response demands lifting the yoke of oppression—economic, political, social, or religious—from any person or group, especially the poor and the homeless, now under that yoke. It includes not making false accusations or speaking evil of anyone, and it especially means attending to basic human needs like hunger, thirst, nakedness, sickness, or any other affliction. Fasting is no substitute for responding to those in need.

If this call to conversion is heard, *then* Israel will become a light in and for the world. Israel will be a watered garden, a newly built city, transformed into a people who repair what has been broken and destroyed. YHWH will dwell within its light, guiding, nourishing, strengthening. "If . . . then. If . . . then"—that is the drumbeat orchestrating Israel's return to holiness. The movement is from self-interest to selflessness, from turning inward to turning toward, from building fences that exclude to building bridges that join, crossing the divide into unity. Conversion is about making the necessary moves, not sinking into solipsism.

The prophet concludes by inviting Israel once again to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not taken up by Israel on its own initiative; it was a gift

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Theological Perspective

obedience to rules was not the way in which their followers should express their faithfulness. Later, the church ignored their wisdom and developed new rules for behavior on Sunday. Some of us grew up with those rules and now laugh about their triviality and arbitrariness.

It may be time, however, to consider once again the positive meaning of the Sabbath and what the author of this passage here affirms: the Sabbath is meant to be a delight. There is no indication that he is calling for a complex set of rules governing behavior on the Sabbath. Whereas the critic of Sabbath observance in chapter 1 mentions the Sabbath along with other forms of ceremony and animal sacrifice, the author of this passage says nothing about ceremonial activity of any kind. There may be no contradiction after all.

What does it mean to this author to honor the Sabbath? Earlier in the chapter he complained that “you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers” (58:3b). He mentions only one requirement for proper Sabbath observance, and he states that twice: “Refrain . . . from pursuing your own interests” (vv. 13b, 13f). He calls us one day each week to direct our attention toward God and the community as a whole.

We Americans can observe how far self-interest has come to be seen as an acceptable, even approved, motive of action. We may need to consider whether there can be a cultural change toward concern for others without time being set aside each week to focus on that. To call for such reflection is not the legalism that Jesus and Paul opposed or the legalism that many of us older Christians experienced in our youth. Nor is it a matter of trying to win God’s blessing by performing ceremonial actions. The need is to find a way in which we can interrupt the unending pursuit of private gain and help all to understand that we are members one of another, a community in which none can truly flourish when we do not give sustained attention to the needs of “the least of these.”

JOHN B. COBB JR.

Pastoral Perspective

church’s history. They need to hear this text. They participate in systems that give advantage to some and disadvantage to many. People are infinitely creative in finding ways to participate with plausible deniability, with anonymity, but the text calls us out, names us for who we are. We are God’s people, subject to covenant responsibilities.

These covenant responsibilities are underscored as the text turns to Sabbath observance: “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight . . . then I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth” (vv. 13, 14). Sabbath observance marks us as God’s people, but many modern families will find this a difficult mark to wear.

This is a challenging theme to tackle on one of summer’s last Sundays. The kids will be back in school in a few days. The professional football season opens two weeks hence. There will be Sunday soccer matches in many school systems. Let the preacher add to the list from local experience. Does a “family day” honor God’s Sabbath? Does an hour of worship secure the promised blessing? Pastoral humility is required here, but also pastoral courage. Help the congregation imagine an observance of Sabbath that might truly be called a “delight.”

Finally, though we are considering it somewhat out of sequence, there may be congregational settings or occasions in which verse 11 will provide the controlling theme and image for the message: “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” When one has chosen to embark on the path of righteousness, God’s promise includes guidance, strength, and endurance. This path is not one of grim and Spartan obedience, for “you shall be like a watered garden.” Just as the Sabbath is a delight, so shall every day hold fullness of life. From the preacher’s reading and experience, illustrations of this journey will arise. Individuals and congregations dwelling in dry places find unending wellsprings of refreshment and renewal as they choose again and again to be God’s instruments of justice and compassion.

THOMAS EDWARD MCGRATH

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Exegetical Perspective

city's walls and structures; people will know that we are the ones who made the streets safe again (v. 12).

Thus, the prophet turns back to another list of what we must do (v. 13), this time in eight quick parts. (1) We must stop trampling the Sabbath. This is probably another economic instruction, calling us to reduce our economic activity in order to allow room for others to live. (2) We must stop pursuing our own interest on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day for taking care of God's people. (3) We need to call the Sabbath delightful. God's day of rest for us should be an occasion for celebration. (4) We need to call the Lord's Day honorable. In other words, we need to see God's plan for Sabbath as something that the world needs, and that it is right for us to respect. (5) We need to honor the Lord's Day. We must do more than respect the idea of the Sabbath. We need to participate in acts that honor the day by demonstrating social justice in what we accomplish. (6) We must refrain from going in our own directions. In other texts, this self-centered setting of our own direction is categorized as pride. This is not a rule only for the Sabbath day; it is a larger command to let God set our priorities. (7) We must refrain from serving our own interests. (8) Lastly, we must refrain from pursuing our own affairs. In both of these final injunctions, our Sabbath practices fill up the rest of our lives, as we leave behind our own advantages and the pursuit of our self-interest, in order to give our lives fully to God's plan for healing the world.

With these acts of social justice and these commitments now fully inscribed in our hearts and habits, we can find delight, because we have become part of what God is doing in the world.

JON L. BERQUIST

Homiletical Perspective

from YHWH, drawing the people into a weekly embrace from a loving God who says, "Come apart from the world and its worries, and rest with me. Taste the goodness of your God. Dwell in my holy temple."

Is it possible for a preacher to make the case for a Sabbath rest in today's world, to get people to rest in the Lord, even to delight in God, as a way to deeper conversion? One recent study shows that among Catholics (this author's tribe), there is now only 23 percent regular attendance at Sunday mass. Yet the average time spent daily on the computer is three hours. When you add in television, a recent statistic estimated that the amount of time spent daily with our technology is about eight and a half hours.

The words of the prophet invite preachers to reflect with the community on how it is living out its covenant with our God, who created and redeemed us in Jesus Christ, the embodied good news of God's commitment to us. These words hold promise, offer hope, and suggest one concrete path to a renewed relationship. *This* day YHWH calls out, "If you care for those about you, you will be a light and I will care for you. You will know again the tender love of God."

A recent movie called *The Messenger* tells the story of two soldiers assigned to deliver the sad news of death to families that have lost a loved one in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The older soldier instructs the younger one, recently returned from Iraq, that they are simply to deliver the message of death—no additional words and, especially, no touching. However, when an elderly couple collapses on the floor at the news of their son's death, the young man kneels down beside them and places an arm around each of them. It is a beautiful moment of outreach and compassion.

God's word through an unknown prophet summons preachers to call today's community back to a life of compassion for others. In Jesus we are drawn into God's embrace. Through us the world may also come to know it. This is a message to shout about.

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PROPER 16 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 21
AND AUGUST 27 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 103:1–8

- ¹Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
- ²Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
- ³who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
- ⁴who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- ⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- ⁶The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- ⁷He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- ⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Theological Perspective

In a spirit of profound gratitude, the psalmist confesses to the beauty, goodness, and greatness of God and proclaims, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (v. 1). This spirit of gratitude continues in verse 2, coupled with a series of reasons why God is to be blessed (vv. 2–5). The deeply personal tone that the psalmist uses in verses 1–5 becomes more general in verses 6–8. Here the psalmist celebrates the compassion and steadfast love of God (vv. 6, 7) while recalling God's wonderful deeds in the past that led to the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and their journey through the wilderness to the promised land (v. 7). Psalm 103:1–8 begins a series of Praise Psalms (Pss. 103–106). The psalmist's personal and confessional tone makes Psalm 103:1–8 distinctive from the other psalms in its group.

Many psalms of praise open with a choir or a worshiping congregation praising God for God's wondrous deeds (e.g., Pss. 95; 96; 97; 98; 99). Psalm 103, however, opens with the psalmist calling upon his own soul and all that is within him to bless the Lord (v. 1). The term “soul” is derived from the Hebrew word *nephesh*, which can mean “breath,” “breath of life” (Gen. 1:30; 2:7; 1 Kgs. 17:21; Job

Pastoral Perspective

How are we to understand this passage pastorally? Several things leap out. First, the word for the sick: that the Lord “heals all your diseases.” Is that really so? Can we pause by the bedside of a cancer-ridden hospital patient and say, if you will but pray harder and have enough friends pray for you, your disease will be cured? I do not think so. The patient may or may not survive. The cancer may go into remission, temporary or permanent. We hope so. However, it may continue, inexorably, until death brings release. In the end, all of us are going to die. Still, there is an important difference between being “cured” and being “healed.” Being cured marks the end of a disease, which may or may not happen. Being healed is being made whole spiritually. From a pastoral standpoint, being healed is always a primary objective, available for all, even in the face of disease and death.

In fact, much of this passage addresses that deeper spiritual dimension as it speaks of how God “redeems your life from the Pit.” The Pit symbolizes a life in despair, one who has lost hope. Partly that is because of the iniquity, for which the psalmist seeks forgiveness. One can imagine that the psalmist is thinking of how “iniquity” is a dead-end street.

Psalm 103:1–8

Exegetical Perspective

The first eight verses of Psalm 103 appear alongside Isaiah 58:9b–14 in the complementary readings accompanying Luke 13:10–17 and Hebrews 12:18–29. Other combinations of verses from Psalm 103 appear during Epiphany and ordinary time in Years A and B. The only verse common to all these times is the central verse 8: “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” This verse is already foreshadowed in verse 4, which describes God as one “who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,” or as other translations put it, with “faithful love,” “loyal love,” “compassion,” or “tenderness.”

The hymn begins with a repeated parallel self-exhortation to “bless the LORD / bless God’s holy name / bless the LORD.” Complementing these three imperatives is the double negative in verse 2b: “do not forget.” The exhortation “bless the LORD, O my soul” recurs at the very end of the psalm, after a threefold call to larger and larger realms to “bless the LORD”: to angels, to hosts, and to “all God’s works, in all places of God’s dominion.” Furthermore, as if inspired by these words, the psalm that follows, Psalm 104, likewise begins with “Bless the LORD, O my soul,” before going on to explore in admiring concrete language all God’s works in the natural world.

Homiletical Perspective

This is a beloved psalm of thanksgiving to God for the divine love and care that has been personally experienced. It is meaningful for the lives of Christian believers also, since we know the realities of which the psalm speaks, made real in Jesus Christ.

The psalm opens with an exhortation to praise (vv. 1–2) because of God’s goodness to the psalmist (vv. 3–5). This is followed by praise for God’s love and compassion (vv. 6–14) and a conclusion (vv. 15–22).

Homiletically, this psalm offers the preacher the opportunity to proclaim who God is, what God has done, and what God continues to do. These dimensions open within the psalm, which has a personal and a communal focus. God’s person and actions are the source of praise, for both what we as God’s people experience individually and what we experience collectively as the people of God, now the church.

Call to Praise (vv. 1–2). The call to praise God here begins on a comprehensive note: “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” The totality of the self is to rise in praise and blessing to the Lord God. We cannot imagine a wider or deeper call to express the praise of God with the totality of our being. While this verse has

Psalm 103:1–8

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27:8; Prov. 29:10), “person” (Gen. 12:5; 27:25; 46:18). The term includes a person’s whole range of emotions and experiences (e.g., Pss. 42:6; 88:4; 119:28; Isa. 61:10; Job 30:25). To “bless the LORD” implies not only speaking well of God (Ps. 104:1) but also performing acts of worship, praise, and thanksgiving (Ps. 115:17–18).

In verse 2 the psalmist repeats his exhortation to his soul but now calls upon his soul not to forget all of God’s gracious deeds. Throughout their history as a people, the Israelites have often forgotten their God (Isa. 17:10; 51:13; Jer. 2:32; 3:21; 13:25; 18:15; Ezek. 22:12; 23:35; Hos. 8:14). Torah called them to remember their God and God’s mighty deeds done on their behalf (Deut. 4:9, 23; 6:12; 32:18; see also 1 Chr. 16:12; Pss. 77:12–13; 105:4–5). Remembrance of God and God’s goodness is also related to obedience. The Israelites’ forgetfulness of God and God’s beneficence was directly related to the people’s transgressions and their breaking of covenant (Isa. 57:11), which brought not only divine chastisement (Ezek. 16:43) but also disaster (Isa. 17:10). Remembering God and God’s goodness was also a central activity of the cult. Remembering formed the basis for thanksgiving; it supported and sustained the people’s faith, especially in times of hardship, and it strengthened the people’s confidence in God (Deut. 8:18–19; Josh. 1:13).

In verses 3–5, the psalmist provides a catalog of God’s wondrous deeds that his soul needs to remember. Here the psalmist becomes deliberately self-reflective, addressing the “soul,” but actually addressing himself. This God, whom his soul is called to bless and remember, has forgiven the psalmist’s iniquity and healed him of all his diseases (v. 3), has redeemed his life “from the Pit” and crowned him “with steadfast love and mercy” (v. 4), and has satisfied him with good continually so that his strength is renewed like that of an eagle (v. 5, cf. Isa. 40:31). Theodoret of Cyrus, one of the early church fathers, highlights the regality of the eagle and compares it to the divine and regal character we have received in our creation.

The psalmist’s sequence of six verbs—forgive, heal, redeem, crown, satisfy, and renew—captures how God’s actions encompass the whole of human life. These verbs also paint a vivid picture of Israel’s God, who is compassionate toward sinners (Mic. 7:18–20), who heals all infirmities, especially those that prevent one from maintaining right relationship with God (Jer. 33:6–8; Hos. 14:4–7). In the ancient biblical world, sickness and disease were associated with sin. If one were ill, the illness was looked upon

Pastoral Perspective

Without God’s mercy, we are trapped in this pit of despair so that the vitalities of life are not renewed.

In a church I served some years ago we had a healing service on Wednesday evenings for a small group in a side chapel. Not much of the service was devoted to cures; much more had to do with spiritual healing. I recall one night when a young man knelt and asked for prayers in the midst of his despair. He just was not worth anything, he said. His life amounted to nothing. I engaged in prayer with him; then I took him by the shoulders and said, “Your life does matter. God cares for you very much.” Perhaps he needed something more in the way of psychological therapy; but the spiritual word, spoken in faith, can also be a dimension of the larger healing.

Here it must be added that real pastoral service is a communal matter. We tend too often to think of the “pastoral” as a pastor in a one-on-one counseling relationship with somebody in need. I do not want to denigrate the importance of that, but is there not a sense in which an entire congregation, the whole community of faith, is rendering pastoral service? “We share our mutual woes; our mutual burdens bear. And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear,” as the hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” puts it. Then continuing, “when we are called to part, it gives us inward pain; but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.”¹ The pastoral includes the outpouring of a congregation in time of need—flowers or covered dishes brought to a bereaved family, and other expressions of deep caring. That is possible even in a large congregation.

During years of service in a large urban church, I made it a practice during services to note people in special need, such as in a hospital or mourning the death of a loved one, or experiencing special joys, such as a wedding or a birth. Then I would ask for a volunteer from the congregation to make contact to express the support of the whole congregation. This was not a substitute for pastoral service by clergy; it was a way of symbolizing that we all belong together. In ten years in that church, there never failed to be such volunteers.

How are we to interpret the line “the LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed”? This is a sharp reminder that when people are made to suffer by unjust institutions and social practices, that is also a pastoral concern. The Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church produced a substantial document, *Gaudium et Spes*, published in

1. John Fawcett, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 306.

Psalm 103:1–8

Exegetical Perspective

The usage of “blessing” is somewhat unusual. More often in the psalms, praise and thanks, rather than blessing, are offered to God. Throughout Scripture it is almost always people and animals who are blessed, usually by God. The first blessing in Genesis is bestowed by God on the fish and birds (1:22), even before humans are created and receive God’s blessing in verse 28. The Sabbath day itself is blessed by God in Genesis 2:3. Here the blessing is returned to God.

The reasons Psalm 103 gives for blessing God are the blessings that have come from God in the first place, which are pointed out by the psalmist. God is the one who

forgives iniquity,
 heals diseases,
 redeems life from destruction (lit., the Pit),
 offers steadfast love and mercy,
 satisfies with good throughout life,
 renews youth,
 offers vindication and justice to the oppressed.

In other words, it is God who surrounds every living person with compassion, and those needing it most with extra measures.

Most of the actions attributed to God in verses 3–6 echo themes found elsewhere, especially in the Psalms. Psalm 25:11, using the same Hebrew words for both “forgive” and “iniquity,” pleads, “Forgive my iniquity, though it is great” (NIV). Divine healing is requested or affirmed frequently in the Psalms (Pss. 6:2; 30:2; 41:4; 107:20; 147:3). Both divine redemption (Pss. 19:14; 69:18; 74:2; 77:15; 78:35; 106:10; 107:2; 119:154) and the “Pit” (Pss. 16:10; 30:9; 94:13) are frequent psalmic motifs, though this is the only place where they appear together. God’s satisfying with good, especially for the hungry, is likewise a recurring psalmic theme (Pss. 65:4; 104:28; 107:9), applying not only to humans but to all creation, and the image of renewing strength like the eagle’s closely resembles Isaiah 40:30–31. God “works righteousness” also in Psalm 99:4, and executes “justice for the oppressed” in Psalm 146:7.

Finally, this highly referential psalm sums up the list of divine actions by referring back to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness (v. 7). Verse 8 not only summarizes all the rest of this psalm’s descriptions of God’s justice, forgiveness, healing, and self-revelation. It also repeats a saying describing God that is first introduced on God’s own lips in Exodus 34:6–7. After the episode of the golden calf, when Moses begged God’s forbearance toward the people, and God acceded, Moses asked that God show him God’s ways and God’s glory. God passed before him, proclaiming:

Homiletical Perspective

a personal focus, because the psalms are communal acts of praise and thanksgiving, this is also a call to the community to praise God with all the will and resources gathered among the people.

The preacher can remind the congregation that the praise of God is at the core of our Christian experience, as it was for Israel. Praise of God is one thing we do for its own sake. We do not praise God in order to gain God’s favor or to amass good works. We do not praise God to get God to do something to help us. We praise God for the sake of praising God. We praise God for who God is. Our whole being praises God because God has blessed us in the totality of our lives. So hymns of praise begin worship services to gather people of faith together and offer deepest praise to the One who has created us, sustains us, and blesses us.

The second verse amplifies this call to praise by repeating the command: “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.” This verse stands as a gateway to the expressions of God’s goodness that follow. Here the call to praise focuses on what God has done. This too is the source of praise. The people of Israel knew this from their history: God’s liberating power in freeing the people from slavery in Egypt, God’s preservation of the people through the wilderness, God’s providing for forgiveness of their sins (see v. 7). Praise for Israel—and for us—emerges from who God is and what God has done. The gracious deeds of God are to be remembered. They are not to be “forgotten,” which would mean not simply letting them slip from memory but deliberately ignoring them. The preacher can challenge the congregation not to let God’s “benefits” be ignored in their lives. The old line “You say you are my friend, but what have you done for me recently?” does not apply to God. God’s blessings and benefits continue with our every breath!

Proclaiming God’s Benefits (vv. 3–5). God’s goodness and benefits are enumerated by the psalmist. God forgives and heals (v. 3); redeems our lives from death; gives us steadfast love (Heb. *hesed*) and mercy; fills our lives with good things; and renews our youth, giving us strength and vitality.

This listing of God’s benefits will not be strange to a local congregation. These elements, known to the people of Israel, are known to us—specifically through Jesus Christ. God continues to forgive our iniquities (sin) and does so in a range of ways, all through Christ. As John Calvin said, “Reconciliation with [God] is the fountain from which all other

Psalm 103:1–8

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as a direct consequence of sin committed either by the one suffering or by his or her parents (see, e.g., Exod. 34:6–7).

The Pit is a synonym for Sheol and the “nether world,” the place of the dead (Ps. 16:10; Prov. 1:12), where the wicked go (Pss. 9:17; 31:17; 49:14; 55:15; 141:7). God is not worshiped in Sheol (Ps. 6:5), but God has complete power over Sheol (1 Sam. 2:6). The psalmist knows that he has been richly blessed by God, and that without God, he is nothing and has nothing. He owes his life to the compassion and steadfast love of his God, who has continued to love him into deeper life despite his weaknesses and sinfulness. For the psalmist, God’s love is not only sustaining but also life-giving and transformative.

In verses 6–8 the psalmist continues to enumerate why God should be blessed. The psalmist addresses these verses to the community, and thus the focus shifts from the particular to the general. Here the psalmist acknowledges God’s deeds throughout history. These deeds strengthen the psalmist’s case as to why God should be blessed. In addition to being forgiving, compassionate, forever loving, and life sustaining, Israel’s God exercises justice on behalf of the oppressed (Isa. 25:1–5; Joel 3:19–21; Amos 4:1–3; Mic. 2:1–11). Israel’s God enters into the human condition and makes known the divine ways as they were revealed to Moses (e.g., Exod. 3:1–22; 6:1–13; 14:1–25; Lev. 6:1–7:38; Num. 1:1–2:34; Deut. 31:14–29) and to the Israelites in general, especially through the prophets (e.g., Isa. 8:1–15; Jer. 22:1–10; 12:14–17; Mic. 3:1–12).

The psalmist closes this portion of his poem with an allusion to Exodus 34:1–7. For the psalmist, God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (v. 8), a proclamation based on God’s wondrous deeds. This God is the one who freed Israel from Egyptian oppression and Babylonian exile, whose love remains constant (see Hos. 11:1–9; 14:4–7; Joel 3:17–18; Amos 9:11–15).

The psalmist has made a strong case as to why his whole being should bless God: God has worked wonders not only in the psalmist’s life but also in the life of the psalmist’s community. The same God continues to grace all people and all creation with an enduring love that is at once just and at best compassionate.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Pastoral Perspective

English as *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. The document was a perceptive statement on issues of social justice, and we can be grateful that it was designed specifically as “pastoral.” A part of being pastoral for the oppressed is to express solidarity with them, to help the oppressed to understand that their hurt is felt by God.

Part of being pastoral is also devoting time and energy to efforts to resist oppression. In that sense, the American civil rights movement was a profoundly pastoral endeavor, led, in fact, by persons of faith who sought to overturn racial discrimination. Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders of the movement had a clear insight that this was a service, not only for the racially oppressed, but also for the oppressors. For oppression in all its forms is spiritually damaging to oppressors.

We generally understand oppression to be institutional in some form—including social institutions like businesses and churches as well as governments. Oppression can also be more subtly cultural in character. As portrayed in the New Testament, Jesus confronted stigmas placed against Samaritans, lepers, and, in a different way, women, who were assigned secondary roles. A prominent aspect of Jesus’ ministry was to identify with such people, directly resisting the cultural stigmas they faced.

What about our times? There continue to be racial stigmas—despite the important and undeniable progress in American society. The feminist movement has enjoyed substantial success as well. However, what about those we call gays and lesbians, who have felt social ostracism in direct as well as subtle forms? Is our challenging these stigmas not also a significant pastoral ministry, both for clergy and for congregations? Evidence mounts that large numbers of gays and lesbians are leading quite normal lives, often functioning creatively and successfully in economic, political, and artistic life. Even so, the yearning for full acceptance expresses a deep pastoral need.

J. PHILIP WOGAMAN

Psalm 103:1–8

Exegetical Perspective

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod. 34:6–7)

Since God had just been shown displaying quick and somewhat impetuous anger, the storyteller described this quality of mercy and grace as an acquired, developing taste, even for God. In fact, in Numbers, when God grew impatient with the people for standing on the border of the promised land and plotting to return to Egypt, Moses repeated this formulation, reminding God of God's own intentions (Num. 14:18). Throughout the Psalms this formula is repeated (Pss. 86:15; 111:4; 145:8), as well as in the prophets (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

If these qualities are worthy of God's cultivation, they are worthy of human cultivation as well. Over and over the book of Proverbs commends being slow to anger. Those who are slow to anger calm contention (Prov. 15:18). They are better than the mighty (Prov. 16:32). They have good sense (Prov. 19:11) and great understanding (Prov. 14:29). In fact, further on in this psalm, divine compassion is explained through a comparison with parental compassion: "As a father has compassion . . . so the LORD has compassion" (v. 13).

What an apt companion text this is for both Isaiah 58 and Luke 13. In Isaiah, the prophet shows that the foundation for a prospering society is compassion itself—not just divine compassion for all God has made, but human compassion. Those who open their hearts to the hungry and provide for the afflicted will shine like the noonday sun, says the prophet. They will be guided by God.

Similarly, in Luke 13, Jesus' compassionate, healing response to a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years is cause for celebration for the woman herself. However, for the leader of the synagogue, who witnesses the healing, there is no cause to celebrate, since in his view Jesus' compassion breaks the rules against working on the Sabbath. If Jesus breaks the rules to offer healing mercy, how much more does God do so, breaking through human restrictions concerning who is deserving and how much is sufficient!

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

blessings flow."¹ Healing comes from God, healing that is beyond what medical science can do. Many forms of healings from sicknesses of different sorts come from the divine Physician. As with all else, not every prayer for specific healing is answered in the way we hope or want, but God's ongoing power for healing and help is experienced by Christians in countless and unexpected ways.

The other actions of God are also known to us. Our lives are redeemed from death (the Pit) as God is active to raise us up after many kinds of calamities. God's "steadfast love and mercy" now have a face: the face of Jesus Christ.

The preacher's proclamation of God's ongoing benefits can be important reminders to all who need these memories brought to mind.

God's Mighty Acts (vv. 6–8). The God who provides benefits also has done acts that show the people of Israel God's power and care. The phrase "acts to the people of Israel" refers to God's work of salvation in liberating the people from Egypt while God showed Moses what God planned to do. God's ongoing acts are as the Lord "works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed." These are acts in which the people of Israel could participate, with their concerns for a society that gives justice to those with no rights or power or with no one to defend them. God's liberating acts for God's people are to lead to acts of liberation for those oppressed in the land. As Christians, we too must participate in these acts of God, given our own liberation by Jesus Christ.

The final verse (v. 8) is one of the strongest Old Testament witnesses to God's nature. God is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." What a source for praise! The conclusion of the preacher's sermon can draw together what has gone before with the affirmation that all praise is due to the God whose acts of kindness are grounded in the divine character of love and mercy.

DONALD K. MCKIM

1. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 6, *Psalms 93–150* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974).

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**PROPER 17 (SUNDAY BETWEEN AUGUST 28
AND SEPTEMBER 3 INCLUSIVE)**

Sirach 10:12–18

- ¹²The beginning of human pride is to forsake the Lord;
the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.
- ¹³For the beginning of pride is sin,
and the one who clings to it pours out abominations.
Therefore the Lord brings upon them unheard-of calamities,
and destroys them completely.
- ¹⁴The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers,
and enthrones the lowly in their place.
- ¹⁵The Lord plucks up the roots of the nations,
and plants the humble in their place.
- ¹⁶The Lord lays waste the lands of the nations,
and destroys them to the foundations of the earth.
- ¹⁷He removes some of them and destroys them,
and erases the memory of them from the earth.
- ¹⁸Pride was not created for human beings,
or violent anger for those born of women.

Theological Perspective

This passage has just one theme: human pride leads to catastrophe. But this one theme is well worth our reflection. What is meant by “pride”? How are pride and catastrophe related? “Pride,” like most important words, has multiple meanings. I was brought up to think that pride was always bad. Then I encountered the vast psychological literature that tells us that the absence of pride is humanly devastating. Children need to be proud of themselves, and it is the parents’ role to encourage them to feel that way. Without pride in themselves, people are not able to function well or to give real support to others. Is this a direct contradiction of the passage that we are considering? I think not. Pride in these psychological writings refers to self-acceptance, self-assurance, self-esteem, and personal confidence. To a large extent it is connected with affirmation by parents and other authority figures. If children do not feel the approval of their parents, they may never be able to affirm themselves in a healthy way.

Sirach is not talking about these psychological matters. For him pride is connected with departing from the Lord and forsaking the Creator. What do these phrases mean? If we stay with the Lord, who is also the Creator, our lives are oriented to conform to God’s purposes. For many Jews, this conformation is a matter of obedience to God’s laws. For Christians,

Pastoral Perspective

Whether or not it is wise pastoral practice to consider the seven deadly sins in a sermon series on consecutive Sundays will be left to the reader to decide. The practice of lectionary preaching does not easily accommodate such a topical series, which is probably one of the positive assets of lectionary preaching. Nevertheless, if the preacher has been considering even an occasional presentation of this theme, Sirach 10:12–18 offers a place to start.

Pride begins in departing from the Lord; this departing is sin (vv. 12–13). From this beginning come “unheard-of calamities” and utter destruction (v. 13). Pride is a deadly sin! As the church has affirmed, pride is a cardinal sin, the word “cardinal” having its roots in the Latin for “hinge.” Pride is a hinge opening the gate for a host of destroyers to come marching in. Because pride is so perilous, the preacher will strive to identify, unmask, and describe this danger with clarity and precision.

What does pride look like? What do our congregations understand it to mean? The words “pride” and “proud” are used to express a wide array of attitudes and behaviors, some of which seem quite positive. In some contexts, actions attributed to pride seem more silly than sinful. Consider the person who hurts her back moving the piano so she can dust before the cleaning service arrives. Consider

Sirach 10:12–18

Exegetical Perspective

Protestants may find themselves unfamiliar with the book of Sirach, since this book is part of the Catholic and Orthodox canons but usually not recognized as canonical by Protestant churches. The churches that do not accept Sirach as part of their canon will refer to the book (and several others like it) as “apocryphal” (literally meaning “hidden”) or “deuterocanonical” (belonging to a secondary canon). However, Jews and Christians have known about the book of Sirach for more than two millennia and have valued its instruction.

Sirach is also known by two other names. Sirach is the author’s name in the Greek versions of the text, but the Hebrew versions call this author Ben Sira, which means the son of Sira. Thus, both “Sirach” and “Ben Sira” have been names for the book, sometimes preceded by “The Wisdom of” as an apt description of the content of the book. Latin traditions often call this book Ecclesiasticus, which refers to its nature as a book of the church and reflects its popularity among early Christian churches.

The book of Sirach was almost certainly written in about 180–175 BCE in Egypt. The first writing was in Hebrew, but a later Greek translation survives in its entirety, so we have the text in Greek, not Hebrew. The book is an ode to wisdom, similar in content to the book of Proverbs, but more self-

Homiletical Perspective

One of the first maxims I remember hearing as a child was that pride goes before a fall. Usually spoken in a cautionary tone, it had its desired effect by deflating any pretense of my being better than anyone else, usually my younger brother. In the intervening decades, the wisdom of this old maxim has proven true many times over, especially among those who have reached a certain lofty prominence in their particular fields and have begun to act as if they were “above it all”—“it” being the rules, regulations, and laws that govern the rest of mortals struggling to live together in this world.

How else can we explain the “fall” of various political figures on both national and local levels? A recent posting on the Internet began by asking whether the viewer thought the facts to be disclosed referred to the NFL or the NBA and then went on to list such statistics as how many people have been accused of spousal abuse, arrested for fraud, charged with writing bad checks, involved in bankrupting a businesses, imprisoned for assault, refused credit card due to bad credit, arrested for shoplifting, accused in lawsuits, and arrested for driving while intoxicated in the last year. Scrolling down, the reader discovered that all of the above applied to members of the current U.S. Congress.

Sirach 10:12–18

Theological Perspective

it may mean participating in Jesus' faithfulness to God. In either case, it decenters the ego. Persons do not find the meaning of life in advancing personal goals of fame, wealth, and power. They find meaning, instead, in conformation to God's purposes, which are oriented to the common good.

Does this involve lack of healthy self-esteem? That is a quite different issue. Whether a person has low or high self-esteem, Sirach calls them to orient their lives to God rather than to self. We might properly add that the person with high self-esteem can contribute more to the community than can the person with low self-esteem. We can rightly suspect that Sirach did not think much about this. These psychological concerns may ultimately prove less important than the one about which Sirach writes. Whatever our psychological condition, the *most* important issue may be whether the world revolves around us or around God.

Even those for whom it revolves around God will be very concerned about themselves and their families. God cares for all and wants all to care for themselves. It is hard indeed to help persons who make no effort to care for themselves. A world in which people were so oriented toward others that they did not care for themselves would soon fall apart. To care a great deal about what happens to oneself and one's loved ones does not separate one from God.

There remains a crucial difference between the life of pride and the life centering in God. If our lives center in God, then as we work for our own well-being and that of our families, we also consider the effects of our actions on others. We are especially responsible for those closest to us, but what we want for them we want also for others, because we know that God wants the good for all of us. We want our own well-being to contribute to the common good.

If life centers in what we suppose is our own well-being, we are almost certain to view this as in tension, if not in direct conflict, with that of others. We are likely to measure our success by our comparative fame, wealth, or power. Our quest for good is in competition with the good of others.

American society has all too much encouraged this separation from the Lord our Creator. Sadly, it is not only those outside the church who have adopted the view that their worlds revolve around them. Some attend church and talk about God, but concern themselves even with God in a way that revolves around their personal wants and hopes. As we listen to debates in Congress, it sometimes seems that the common good of the

Pastoral Perspective

the person who will not ask directions or, more consequentially, says he will not go to the doctor. Whether or not this is what we mean when we preach about the sin of pride, this is what many of our folks hear.

Dr. Karl Menninger's book *Whatever Became of Sin?* though published more than thirty-five years ago, still offers a helpful summary of the cardinal sins. Particularly helpful is his discussion of pride in its multiple manifestations. Among aptly quoted sources is Reinhold Niebuhr's description of collective pride, particularly relevant to the text we are considering:

Collective pride is . . . man's [*sic*] last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence: The very essence of human sin is in it. This form of human sin is also most fruitful of human guilt, that is, of objective, social and historical evil.¹

If, as the text seems to require, we consider pride as a sin of the community, a collective transgression, still no single meaning emerges from its variety of applications. It might be useful to invite the congregation to think about this with you. Offer a list of phrases or mottos and ask hearers to assess them as positive, negative, morally neutral, or sinful. Your list might include "school pride," "gay pride," "team pride," "the few, the proud, the Marines," "national pride," "race pride." One could spend a few minutes with this exercise, or many Sunday mornings.

To be pastorally effective, we will need to move toward a working consensus with our hearers on what constitutes sinful pride. Like others of the seven deadly sins, pride may be understood as a distortion of an otherwise good gift. Lust is sinful, not because human sexuality is evil, but because lust perverts God's gift of holy desire between covenant partners. Gluttony and envy are sinful not because it is wrong to desire food, clothing, and shelter (see Matt. 6:25–33), but because gluttony and envy so exaggerate the importance of material necessities that such become the reigning lords of daily living.

So what good gift does pride distort, pervert, or exaggerate? One may answer this question from several vocabularies. From a psychological perspective, the good gift is a healthy self-confidence, a mature sense of one's worth and dignity as a person. From a sociological perspective,

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted in Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973), 127.

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Exegetical Perspective

consciously celebrative of wisdom as God's gift. Sirach reflects a Jewish community dealing with issues of diaspora and pluralism. These faithful Jews lived as a minority in Egypt, which itself was experiencing vast cultural influences of Hellenism. Thus the book deals with the questions of how to be Jewish in a Greek-Egyptian context.

To deal with life in this cultural setting, the book of Sirach calls its readers back to traditional Jewish values, especially the fear of God and the importance of keeping God's commandments. These emphases provide the background for the verses in this week's lectionary, which focus specifically on the problem of pride. Pride begins with forsaking God; this assertion should remind the reader of the repeated assertion that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). To forsake God is the opposite of fearing God; likewise, a life of pride is the opposite of a life of wisdom. Sirach exhorts us toward both wisdom and fear and condemns the opposite combination of forsaking and pride.

When people forsake God, they no longer follow the path that God has set for humans to walk, the path known as God's law or instruction. Devoid of this guidance, humans stumble through life. When we reject God's guidance, our actions become self-centered, and soon our deeds become wrong and even abominable (v. 13). Without God's ethics of justice to regulate our steps, we substitute pride and belief in ourselves, leading us to actions that take advantage of others instead of providing the justice to which God calls human life. Life without God's law becomes self-destructive, because it violates the principles for which we were created. Our lives turn into an infection on the earth. Not only does pride consume our own lives, but our wrongheaded, self-centered deeds damage others around us. To save the world, God must stop the proud before their infection spreads further to harm God's world and God's people even more. We might understand this with medical metaphors; God's actions are like medications that drive the unhealthy organisms from our bodies or like surgery that carves away the deathly parts to allow us true life.

Sirach observes that people will see God's actions as reversals in the apparent order of social life. Such reversals are common images in biblical literature. For instance, Hannah sings to God a song of praise (1 Sam. 2:1–10), explaining how God will reject human pride (2:3), stop military might (2:4), change the patterns of fertility (2:5), and give riches to those who have been poor (2:8). Consider also Mary's

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Such failures are not limited to politicians, of course, but include religious leaders (who should know and act better), financial experts (who should be skilled in counting costs), and various sports figures, singers, and movie and television personalities of all ages (who should be attuned by now to the pattern of destruction that fame often brings). Something about the heights seems to make people lose their balance, forget their limitations, and tumble from the pedestal others put them on, often unfairly for all concerned. However, today's reading from Sirach offers a deeper explanation for pride.

The reading from the book of Ben Sira or Sirach, who taught and wrote at approximately 180 BCE, directs the preacher's attention to the pride characteristic of those who exercise power unwisely, forgetting the source of all power, in whose place and name they govern and to whom they are answerable. This tract on government begins in 9:17 and concludes with today's verses. Sirach points out both the theological roots and the results of arrogance and pride, which leads to the corruption and injustice that have so frequently marked the world of governance:

The beginning of pride is to forsake the Lord;
the heart has withdrawn from its Maker.
For the beginning of pride is sin,
and the one who clings to it pours out
abominations. (vv. 12–13)

Sirach then goes on to list what results from such pride, naming ways that God punishes those acting out of pride: loss of power ("the Lord overthrow[ing] their] thrones," v. 14), the loss of their land in war, the loss of life, and erasing their memory. For this author, immortality is found only in being remembered and in having descendants; so when pride rules, its punishments will remove any possible legacy. He concludes by noting that pride was not part of God's plan in creating the human person.

For Sirach the wise make the best rulers. However, Israel has few kings to boast about, even when taking both kingdoms, the north and the south, into account. Only a few leaders measured up to this ideal. David, Hezekiah, and Josiah come to mind; they recognized that sovereignty belongs to God. Not even Solomon could be included in the end: "For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David" (1 Kgs. 11:4).

Sirach 10:12–18

Theological Perspective

American people takes a back seat to the political aspirations of our legislators. The vast system through which corporations influence legislation and its bureaucratic implementation also seems little concerned for the common good.

Sirach thinks that this centering around individual interests, rather than in God and the common good that God wills, will lead to calamities. His words sound prophetic today as we face chaotic changes in weather and frightening shortages of fresh water in many parts of the world. As a nation, the extreme concentration of wealth and power in a tiny part of our population and the worsening condition of the rest of us portend problems of many sorts. What was once American global leadership has become global dominance and has resulted in an empire that is already crumbling. The productive national wealth has been exported, so that we live now precariously in a virtual economy produced by a parasitic financial system.

Even if we agree that Sirach's prophecies for the Israel of his day are on target for the United States of our day, our "modern minds" may resist the theological language that Sirach uses. For Sirach, it is "the Lord" who brings unheard-of calamities. Perhaps he saw no direct connection between the social consequences of widespread egocentrism and the corrosion of society. Perhaps he supposed that human behavior has no direct consequences in society, that it is important only because it leads God to intervene and punish. If that is so, we cannot agree with him.

However, it is doubtful that Sirach was blind to the more direct connections of widespread human sin and terrible consequences. He saw the Lord as working in and through historical circumstances. The Lord has introduced a certain orderliness in the course of history. In the Lord's world, separation from the Lord leads to self-destruction. It did so then. It does so now.

JOHN B. COBB JR.

Pastoral Perspective

the good gift is the sense of belonging, the security of being part of a family, a team, or some other valued network of relationships that bestows social meaning and overcomes isolation. The good gift is the gift of human community.

Most importantly, our biblical and theological vocabularies establish the good gift to be our standing as heirs of the covenant of promise. We are created in God's image, redeemed by God's grace, and sustained by God's indwelling Spirit. Our confidence, security, worth, meaning, and membership in community are God's gifts to us. To seek confidence, security, worth, meaning, or community elsewhere is to "depart from God."

Sinful pride, then, consists in distorting these good gifts by disclaiming God as their source and claiming instead that they belong to us by right or by merit. Sinful pride exaggerates self-confidence to the point where honest self-appraisal and healthy self-criticism are impossible, thus separating us from the God who forgives our faults and enables our progress toward wholeness as God-imagined persons. Sinful pride perverts the gifts of belonging in community precisely at the point at which pride in "our family," "our team," or "our people" sets us apart from and over or against other families, teams, or peoples. By creating distance from other persons or peoples (who are also God's creation), sinful pride separates us from God.

However, it is not enough simply to identify this pride that separates us from God, not enough to admonish the proud. The pastoral objective is to encourage a humility that returns God's people to God and to one another. Let the preacher here imagine what a community of return might look like. Picture the team spirit of the Special Olympics, where athletes take pride in one another's achievements. Tell a story in which teenagers from Israel and the Palestinian territories are brought together to share their stories. Consider how the creation of a church garden of native, low-maintenance plantings may restore both creation and the gardeners themselves.

THOMAS EDWARD MCGRATH

Sirach 10:12–18

Exegetical Perspective

Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), a song of praise with clear connections to Hannah’s song. Mary also sings that God has scattered the proud (1:51) through removing powerful persons from their high social positions (1:52) and through reversing the patterns of hunger and satisfaction (1:53). Likewise, Sirach’s poem calls on God to remove rulers from many nations and replace them with the lowly and humble (vv. 14–15). These words tell of God’s intervention in the world to overthrow human expectations and to reestablish the proper order after people have perverted God’s desires with wrong attitudes.

According to Sirach, pride is not natural for humans. God did not create us for pride. Instead, we must recognize our own place in the world as channels of God’s grace and as followers of God. Then our actions will be ordered not by some perceived self-interest but by our commitment to God’s law and intentions. God’s law, and the life of wisdom that comes from following it, is what God intends for humanity. We have been created for the law, and God’s instruction shows us the right way to live.

In the last verse, Sirach connects pride with anger and violence. Pride reorients our sense of the universe, warping our perception so that we think the world revolves around us. With such skewed perception, we miss the steps that God has set in front of us. Nothing makes sense; as soon as we forsake God and install ourselves in God’s place as the reason for existence, we find ourselves frustrated by the way the world does not bend to our will. This frustration leads to anger and then to violence, as we struggle against a world we think is stubborn in its refusal to bow down to us, and as we oppose God’s created order in ever more fruitless attempts to force the world into our own image. Pride and self-centeredness may give us temporary gain, but ultimately they lead to frustration, anger, and resistance. God’s own created order will reestablish itself, reversing the gains we think we have earned, in order to bring all of the world back to the sensible order for which God intended. We may forsake God, but God will not forsake us or God’s world.

JON L. BERQUIST

Homiletical Perspective

Because arrogance is hateful both to God and to humans—“pride was not created for human beings” (v. 18)—this warning about pride is not just for kings and those in government. Essentially, pride is supposing we can do anything without God and then proceeding to act from that supposition. The Bible shows it at play from the very beginning, when our first ancestors chose to eat the fruit forbidden by God because they wanted to be like God, knowing good and evil. That pride began with the human desire to live *like* God, rather than *with* God, and led to Adam and Eve’s forsaking God. When God came seeking them out, Adam said to God, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Gen. 3:10). Centuries later, the desert father Evagrius classified pride as a type of thought that befogs the mind and proves to be an enemy of the soul, that derives from self-love and a wrong notion of God.

Today’s Psalm 112 is a fitting complement to this reading, offering a profile of the wise person as one marked by fear of the Lord. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus is eating at the house of a Pharisee, where he calls for humility, shown through not choosing the first places at table and in inviting to one’s table the lowly and the least. Even this place of gathering for community can become an arena for displaying one’s pride in oneself by jockeying for positions of prestige and hoping to participate in greatness by proximity to it. But in the reign of God, which begins even now, hospitality will cast out all honor seeking, and the gracious hand will replace the grasping one.

In Jesus we find one who models the wise teacher, exhibiting a new type of leadership, embodied in one who rules by serving and who calls his followers to service that is shown by reaching out to the powerless and poor. There is no place for pride unless it is the just pride of recognizing that all things are done by the power of God in those who serve.

JAMES A. WALLACE, C.S.S.R.

Psalm 112

¹Praise the LORD!

Happy are those who fear the LORD,
who greatly delight in his commandments.

²Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

³Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures forever.

⁴They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

⁵It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.

Theological Perspective

At the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry and three other students set out on a dangerous obstacle course that leads two of them into the hands of the wizarding world's archenemy, Lord Voldemort. Harry emerges safely, but his schoolmate Cedric Diggory perishes. Cedric shines throughout the book as a noble student fervently committed to ideals much like those espoused by Psalm 112—he is generous, merciful, and kind. When he becomes the first of Harry's close circle to perish, because he will not convert to the prejudiced and violent ideals of Voldemort, his memory becomes inspirational to Harry in the fight for the triumph of tolerance, mercy, and justice over evil. Near the end of the book, headmaster Albus Dumbledore says to Cedric's friends and classmates: "Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave."¹

The Harry Potter stories show how an individual's decision to live a righteous life can make others aware of their choice to do the same. This seems to resonate with the emphasis of Psalm 112,

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2002), 724.

Pastoral Perspective

A bumper sticker declares, "The only way they will take my gun is to pry it from my cold, dead fingers." Of course Psalm 112 has nothing to do with the debate over the private ownership of firearms. It does, however, have something to do with the resistance encountered when people are asked to surrender that to which they believe they are endowed by right to own. An honest encounter with the psalm may compel the surrender of that which is often ferociously guarded: a worldview, an armory of cherished opinions.

We are accustomed to thinking of the book of Psalms as the church's prayer book, and it is. We are less accustomed, perhaps, to receive it as a declaration of principles for the ordering and reordering of human communities. As we shall see in considering particular verses, those who fear the Lord and delight in God's commandments are also generous and just, fearless and firm hearted. They participate in the establishment of a new reality, a reality that anticipates Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God.

How is this psalm a declaration of social principles? At first glance the text seems to be descriptive, not proscriptive; it describes how the righteous live and how they are blessed: "Their descendants will be mighty in the land" (v. 2);

Psalm 112

- ⁶For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered forever.
- ⁷They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.
- ⁸Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
- ⁹They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever;
their horn is exalted in honor.
- ¹⁰The wicked see it and are angry;
they gnash their teeth and melt away;
the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Exegetical Perspective

Many of the psalms offer images of prosperity and good fortune, even in the face of enemies. Psalms like these can prove troublesome for the interpreter or the preacher, because of ways in which such images can be misused in our modern context. Too easily, the church has read these psalms as invitations to celebrate triumph and vengeance over enemies or as promises of this-worldly gains over others as a sign of God's favor. Psalm 112, however, provides the reader with several helpful cues to avoid such errors of interpretation, offering instead a glimpse of the enduring value of following the path of God's instruction.

The psalm begins with words of praise and happiness (v. 1). People who fear God are happy and will be happy; other translations use the word "blessed" to describe this blissful state. This fear of God is a frequent expression in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and Wisdom literature such as the book of Proverbs. Despite its frequency, the fear of God remains a hard concept to understand and explain. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). Fear of God is not dread or a sense that God will hurt us. This fear of God does not expect God to do anything bad or evil, but it does recognize God's power and unpredictability, a combination that theologians

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Psalm 112 begins boldly, asserting, "Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments." It is a fitting companion for today's reading from Sirach, who cautions against pride. Psalm 112 states that human persons who fear God will find happiness. The preacher might consider this frequently sought-after, and just as frequently elusive, condition of happiness.

Was it the Declaration of Independence that got Americans so caught up in the pursuit of happiness by declaring it an "unalienable right"? If you go to the online bookstore Amazon.com, you can find a listing of the top fifteen books on happiness, with such titles as *Choose to Be Happy*, *Happy for No Reason*, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, *Happiness from the Inside Out*, and *Stumbling onto Happiness*, to name but a few. Even the Dalai Lama weighs in with *The Art of Happiness*, and Robert Ellsberg has given us *The Saints' Guide to Happiness*. Advice on achieving happiness certainly has market value.

Years ago there was a musical, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, based on the comic strip *Peanuts*. At the very end of the show, the various characters are lined up on the stage, singing the final song, "Happiness." Charlie Brown, Linus, Lucy, Schroeder, Sally, and, of course, Snoopy, each name something that defines happiness for them, such as

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which might be best summarized as follows: Live in fear of the Lord if you desire prosperity and joy. Indeed, the benefits to those who follow the divine mandate reach far beyond riches and happiness—they will have fulfilling relationships with the Divine, their descendants will be blessed, and they will triumph over their foes. In contrast, those who do not fear the Lord will first become disgruntled and then disintegrate into nothingness.

Before proceeding to overarching theological issues in the psalm, it is essential to consider what the psalmist means by the phrases “righteous” and to “fear the Lord.” To live righteously (*tsedeq*) might be best understood in the context of the psalm as a stance that is committed to existing in the fear of the Lord (*yareh et-YHWH*). That fear involves living in a way that is simultaneously ecstatic and terrified, for it recognizes that the Divinity is an overwhelming presence that deserves awe and respect. Not recognizing God and the way in which God’s omnipresence influences all aspects of life is confluent with wickedness. Judaic scholar and rabbi Martin Samuel Cohen writes that from the perspective of this psalm, happiness arises “in a human breast when an individual possesses both the fear of God and a willing readiness to worship with focused intensity, passion, and fervor.”²

Two points for theological reflection arise in light of the psalm’s content. The first is the way in which the consequence of living “in the fear of the Lord” affects the intersection of theological anthropology and memory. Verse 6 makes clear that one of the consequences for people who live righteously is that they will survive beyond the grave in the form of memory. This occurs because their righteous acts perpetuate themselves in the form of the words and actions of their contemporaries and younger generations. As biblical scholar Lisa Davison writes, “Future generations will remember the generosity and justice reflected in the actions of the wise.”³

The significance of this anthropology is that, from God’s perspective, human identity is bound not by the body but rather by ethics, by the decisions humans make. Those actions then become that aspect of individual identity that lives on even after death. In other words, this psalm contributes something vital to a theological understanding of identity in the afterlife, namely, that humans

2. Martin Samuel Cohen, *Our Haven and Our Strength: The Book of Psalms* (New York: Aviv Press, 2004), 364.

3. Lisa W. Davison, “Psalm 112,” in *New Proclamation Year C 2010* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 194–95.

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“wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever” (v. 3). However, the righteous are also “a light for the upright” (v. 4). That is, those who do fear the Lord and delight in God’s commandments illuminate a path for the rest of us, a path we should follow, a standard we should strive toward. When we consider more closely the course of the path on which the righteous lead us, the social implications come into view.

Consider, for example, that the righteous are “gracious, merciful” (v. 4). What does it mean to be gracious and merciful to undocumented immigrants crossing national borders in search of work, security, a better life? “It is well with those who deal generously and lend” (v. 5). What may a generous lender require? Can a lender ever foreclose? Who should regulate borrowers and lenders? Do we not need to ask these questions if we take the psalm seriously? The preacher will not ordinarily have the training or credentials to speak authoritatively about banking law or fair-credit practices, but that does not mean that no standards apply.

Consider that those who are righteous have “distributed freely, they have given to the poor” (v. 9). Again, when we ask how their example lights a way for us, specific questions inevitably arise. Who are the poor? What do they need? Why are they poor? What are the most effective means to provide for the poor, or to prevent their poverty in the first place? If there are answers to these questions, they are not easy answers, nor are they easily accessible to pastors and congregations. What the psalm offers are standards, directions, principles of character and conduct: generosity, mercy, justice.

Here the pastoral dilemma arises. We do not speak our words into empty auditoriums but into the midst of gathered congregations. Our hearers bring their attitudes, prejudices, and opinions with them when they come, and so do we. Opinions may be well informed or otherwise. Attitudes may be shaped by experience thoughtfully considered or by misinformation carelessly acquired. Prejudices may reflect inherited misconceptions or simply ignorance of the facts; but the opinions, attitudes, and prejudices, as well as the values that shape them, are owned; they belong to us and we, in some sense, belong to them. At the first mention of amnesty for undocumented workers, or minimum-wage/living-wage laws, or global justice for the poor, force fields of resistance are activated.

The pastoral challenge then is to enable hearers to loosen their grip on cherished opinions at least

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have sometimes called God's sovereignty. God is completely out of human control. Human attempts at control of or rebellion against God are doomed to failure. For the psalmist, however, this fear of God is not cause for worry or distress. Instead, the fear of God is a chance for us to realize God's true extent and to place ourselves within the will of God.

For the psalmist, delight is the natural consequence and companion of the fear of God. Our delight should be in the following of God's commandments (v. 1). We do not know if this psalmist was thinking of the Ten Commandments, all of what we know as the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), or some other specific expression and summary of God's teaching. Perhaps the psalmist was thinking in much more general terms about how God instructs humanity and guides human steps in the right path. In any case, the psalm celebrates how God makes guidance available to ordinary humans and sees in the law a chance to find our way in the midst of a confusing world. For this, we give thanks, but more than that, we enjoy the steps of this path.

The combination of fear of God and delight in God's commandments leads to numerous benefits in the experience and enjoyment of life. This includes many children, wealth, and long life (vv. 2–3). Such enjoyment begins to sound like the prosperity gospel, in which adherence to God's plan leads to this-worldly rewards in abundance. However, the psalm places such material blessings in a different context. The psalmist understands worldly gains as an opportunity for virtue and generosity. Those who fear God and delight in God's law will have an opportunity for wealth and leisure, but the righteous do not lead careless lives of excess. Instead, the righteous awake early in the morning to be a light for others (v. 4). They conduct their lives to provide justice for others, which includes generous practices of helping others financially (v. 5).

God's benefits never provide an excuse for excess or a cause for hoarding; when God gives resources to righteous people, God's generosity allows them to give to others. They provide public examples of righteousness through generous giving (v. 5). The righteous have a long-term security that cannot be undermined (vv. 6–7). The psalmist does not promise a life full of ease; indeed, the psalm recognizes that there will be days of bad news (v. 7), which presumably includes natural disasters and economic collapse, just as the news does in the contemporary world. God gives no promise that the righteous will be exempt from difficulty, but the righteous know

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sausage pizza, learning to tie shoes, and whistling. At the heart of the song is this conclusion: "Happiness is anyone and anything at all that's loved by you."

The preacher might invite listeners to consider what makes for happiness, for happiness is a very fluid category. The answer from the song, that happiness is "anyone and anything that's loved by you," can be quite transient over time. What made us happy as children gave way to what made us happy as adolescents, as young adults, as middle-aged, and so on. The psalmist offers one constant in the profile of what makes for happiness: becoming a wise person, both delighting in and becoming like God.

At the start, the psalmist puts before us the reality that those who fear the Lord are happy. Living in a constant state of fear may not strike many listeners as something to be desired, especially in a time when there is so much to fear already in our world. To add fear of God to the list might not garner much enthusiasm. Furthermore, when so much recent preaching has been given to promoting God as loving father and mother, faithful lover, gentle friend, good buddy, and so on, anyone who begins to promote a fearful God will be in for something of a hard sell.

Nevertheless, this is the situation that the psalmist places squarely before us: "Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments" (v. 1). Happiness rests on having a relationship with God that is marked by reverence, obedience to God's commands, and awareness of God's sovereignty over all creation, including us. Not only are we to obey God's commands; we are to delight in them. Only in doing so shall we become like God. What Adam and Eve tried to do on their own, becoming "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), we are invited to do in partnership with God, by being faithful to God, delighting in his commands, trusting God to accomplish things—in, through, and with us.

This will not always be easy. Some people have lived upright lives, done all they thought God wanted them to do, honored God, looked out for others, and yet have suffered—or worse, have seen their loved ones suffer terrible things: sickness, violence, loss of property and financial security, even death. For many people, it is much easier to settle on going to church, working hard, enjoying life as much as possible, and keeping one's heart out of any prolonged transaction with the Divine.

However, Psalm 112 puts into the mouths of those who dare to pray it these words that happiness

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continue to live on by the example they set and the memory that persists because of it. The psalmist drives home this point by repeating the following phrase in verses 3 and 9: that those who live according to God’s mandate will find that “their righteousness endures forever.”

This is a particularly intriguing insight in light of human experience, which often shows the ironic reality that those who seem to live righteously often do not experience the kind of abundant life the psalmist describes. This raises up the issue of theodicy: in regard to the problem of evil, the reader may be left wondering why people who exhibit all the traits the psalmist describes as indicative of righteousness—such as mercy, generosity, and faith—often find themselves facing great adversities. The psalmist implicitly responds by suggesting that happiness may be experienced in many manifestations—including after death. In this way, the writer encourages readers to recognize the myriad ways in which God works to help humanity to flourish; whatever the case may seem, God will not let the righteous go unrewarded.

The second theological point of relevance is the role free will plays in the psalm. Within Jewish tradition at the time of the psalm’s composition, it would have been accepted that humans have the ability to make a choice to embrace ways of wickedness or ways of righteousness and justice; right up until the moment of one’s death, a person could make the choice to return from an evil mind-set and live justly in the overpowering presence of the Divine. Just as the narrator in C. S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* learns that in order to ascend to heaven, one must make the choice to be in relationship to God, so the psalmist reinforces this same belief by implying that those who live in fear of the Lord are not coerced, but rather freely undertake that lifestyle. Hence, the tone of Psalm 112 becomes one of persuasion, in which the psalmist lays out the benefits of living righteously and the dangers of deserting God’s path: those who choose the former will become, as Albus Dumbledore said, examples of people who chose what was right instead of what was easy.

These two theological points coincide in the following form: when individuals make the choice to live according to God’s commands, their mortal journeys become inspirational for others. In this way, their memory persists into future generations and becomes a light that will guide others down an otherwise dimly illumined earthly path.

DANIELLE ELIZABETH TUMMINIO

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to the extent that they are able to entertain the possibility of some new perspective. Psalm 112 helps us through this challenge in at least three ways. First, the opening words of the psalm, “Praise the LORD!” (v. 1) establish whose we are. We belong first not to a party, social class, or political philosophy. Praise and obedience are due to the Lord. The principles of mercy and justice by which the righteous engage the world are all subsumed under the affirmation of praise to God. The righteous participate in a new reality, a true reality that “endures forever” (v. 3) and will “never be moved; they will be remembered forever” (v. 6). Pastorally sensitive preaching will confess that we all cling to opinions and “realities” that, in our best moments, we understand to be only conditional, subject always to the unconditional grace and purpose of God.

Secondly, Psalm 112 is helpful in that it emphasizes righteous conduct. How we actually live and act is primary. Inevitably people of good conduct may still hold different opinions about particular policies or programs. Our congregations and communities are not only polarized; they are often atomized, scattered haphazardly across the spectrum of opinion and experience. Psalm 112 envisions a community in which such diversity is acceptable. It is not conformity of opinion but our common loyalty—“Praise the LORD”—and our common striving toward righteous conduct that overcome the differences among us.

Finally, it is helpful that Psalm 112 anticipates resistance to the witness of the righteous: “The wicked see it and are angry” (v. 10). Conflict is not a sign of failure. While we may exercise reluctance in labeling those of different mind as “wicked,” we are not surprised at their anger. Tex Sample’s *Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus* may offer a model for pastoral ministry well beyond the particular cultural group in his study.¹ Sample seeks to understand his subjects’ resistance and even to honor it. Resistance becomes an opportunity for dialogue. Not all resistance is wicked, but where wickedness competes with God’s righteousness, the outcome is not in doubt. “The desire of the wicked comes to nothing” (v. 10).

THOMAS EDWARD MCGRATH

1. Tex Sample, *Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

Psalm 112

Exegetical Perspective

that their security lies not in any worldly wealth but in God's grace and in their own willingness to follow God's path. When the righteous have wealth, they become more giving than ever, fulfilling the law of God and surpassing in their generosity, especially by giving their wealth freely to the poor (v. 9). God's law leads to benefits in this world, and the righteous give those benefits away to others.

The righteous see victory over their enemies (v. 8). Again, the interpreter faces a danger here, because it is easy to read this psalm as triumphalist, celebrating the enemies' defeat. However, the psalm provides clues to avoid such exegetical mistakes. The psalmist's enemies have desires that come to nothing (v. 10). These wicked people object to the path of God's instruction, but they are not punished for their recalcitrance and misguided self-direction. Instead, they find that their own paths are dead ends. They face frustration, not God's wrath. The wicked become angry, and their anger consumes them (v. 10). The righteous see the way that the ungodly destroy themselves, but their self-destruction never becomes a cause for the righteous to celebrate. If the righteous are watching the ruin of their enemies, there is only one logical response: the righteous must give to their enemies.

Perhaps this is the triumph of which the psalm speaks. Righteous people give their goods away to the needy, and in the end the wicked become the needy through their own self-destruction. The righteous, who have followed God's path from the start, become the benefactors for the fallen, to help them stand on their own once more. Once the enemies can stand again, it becomes possible for them to follow God's law, as they should have done from the start. Such a happy ending to the psalm, where the God-fearers and God's opponents walk together in the light of God's law, is not guaranteed, but it lures us forward as a tantalizing possibility, in which God's law becomes a delight for us all.

JON L. BERQUIST

Homiletical Perspective

can be found in living in a relationship with God, a relationship marked by fear, delight, trust, care for God's creation—human and otherwise. This relationship includes extravagant promises of descendants, wealth, security, freedom, and, for good measure, a steady, firm, and fearless heart. Indeed, those who have a relationship with God will become like God; they will be wise. Is praying this prayer an act of courage or merely an exercise of hyperbole?

Remember that, with God, hyperbole yields to history: a ninety-year-old hears he will be the father of a great nation; a group of slaves becomes the promised people; a shepherd boy becomes king; a child born in a backwater town to an illiterate peasant girl is the Messiah and Son of God. These are the stories on which we build our faith in the God of Israel.

The choice is this: what will you choose to fear—God or evil? If you choose to live in God, have reverence for God, and delight in his laws, you will become righteous like God, free like God, wise like God, a source of light for others. You will become so like God that others will know God because you have chosen to be gracious, merciful, and righteous. There is something else about this light. It is a symbol for joy. Living in God leads to joy, and that is the deep source of happiness. Fear and joy are a strange combination! That, however, is the promise for those who go with God's program. That is the way to wisdom.

The alternative is to live among those whose lives are fueled by anger, who are in a perpetual state of gnashing-of-teeth, who exist in a "melting away" condition (v. 10), their desires dissolving into darkness. It is not that much of a choice when you think about it, but still a choice that needs to be made.

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PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11
AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)

Exodus 32:7–14

⁷The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” ¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Theological Perspective

When we try to think about divine-human relations, we naturally reach for social analogies. Which one we choose can make a big difference to our understanding of who God is to us and who we are to God. Moreover, because each analogy partly highlights and partly distorts, the Bible mobilizes many analogies—now one, now another, now one on top of another—to communicate God’s character and expectations of us. Thus YHWH is father and Israel is God’s firstborn son; YHWH is mother who leads with cords of compassion and bands of love; YHWH is king and suzerain; YHWH is potter and Judah clay to be formed and reformed in God’s hands. Exodus 32 features another model that seems less edifying: YHWH is the cuckold husband and Israel is the faithless bride. Like any jilted bedouin male, YHWH is furiously angry, can scarcely be contained from destroying the harlot on the spot. Suddenly thrust into the role of marriage broker, Moses has to work overtime for several chapters to calm YHWH down and make sure that the contract gets signed and the marriage consummated after all.

Taken straightforwardly, this image and its story might function to put the fear of God into us and send us looking around for a Moses-like mediator. It might drive us to understand Christ as the go-between for sinners and an angry God, and so to

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It had to be the most extraordinary sight of all time: 600,000 men on foot, plus women and children, flocks and herds (Exod. 12:32, 37). As they hurried toward the banks of the Red Sea, Pharaoh and “all the chariots of Egypt” were in hot pursuit. Suddenly the pillar of cloud that guided Israel came between the two groups, keeping them separate as the Lord drove back the waters by a strong east wind throughout the night. God allowed the Israelites to walk through the dry sea bed. Just as they reached the safety of a new land, God sent the waters roaring back. The Egyptian army was turned away. The exodus, the journey away from generations of slavery in Egypt and into the land God had promised, was under way.

Even after this miraculous demonstration of God’s love, steadfastness, power, and providence, the Israelites grumbled and grew impatient. That impatience reached its crescendo with the building of the golden calf, a god the people could see, touch, and reduce to their own level of understanding. The Israelites believed Moses had been on Mount Sinai too long. They approached his brother Aaron, saying to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the *man* who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (32:1).

Exodus 32:7–14

Exegetical Perspective

This text belongs to a larger literary context, Exodus 31:18–32:35, centered on the theme of the golden calf. The passage also recalls another episode with the same topic in 1 Kgs. 12:25–33 (see esp. v. 28).

Exodus 32:7–14 has the literary form of a prophetic lawsuit: YHWH presents an indictment (vv. 7–8), then a sentence (vv. 9–10), followed by Moses’s intercession (vv. 11–13), and the outcome (v. 14). The whole unit shows a movement from accusation (vv. 7–9) to a request by God, “let me alone” (v. 10), to a refusal by Moses, “No, I won’t let you alone” (vv. 11–13), to a change of opinion (v. 14). Even though the passage presents YHWH and Moses as the main players, the whole account has the people as the central character; the people are referred to six times, the LORD, five, and Moses, three. The reference to exodus, four times—“bringing up” (twice) and “bringing forth” (twice)—communicates a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty: Who is the one responsible for the exodus? Is it Moses (v. 7)? Is it the gods, that is, the golden calf (v. 8)? Is it YHWH (vv. 11–12)?

According to verses 7–8, the people of Israel have become alienated from YHWH by disobeying the course of life and conduct that God has commanded them to follow. They have forsaken YHWH by worshipping an idol and by having acknowledged

Homiletical Perspective

Brevard Childs points out that in Exodus 32 Aaron and the people of Israel are not guilty of all-out idolatry but of semi-idolatry, creeping idolatry. The golden calves are false images of false gods, borrowed perhaps from their Canaanite neighbors. However, when Aaron leads the Hebrews’ first golden calf festival, he announces the event in properly pious terms: “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD” (Exod. 32:5). It is this semi-idolatry, quasi-faithfulness that brings down the wrath of YHWH. “Now let me alone,” God says to Moses, “so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them” (Exod. 32:10).¹

It will not be hard for the preacher to find in our time the signs of a piety that mixes worship of YHWH with idolatrous devotion.

In the United States, at least, the line between patriotism and fidelity is blurred time and again. National leaders of all political persuasions seem bound to end their public addresses, “God bless the United States of America.” Sanctuaries and meeting houses prominently display the American flag, sometimes “balanced” by the Christian flag, both of them sometimes easier to spot than the discreet cross.

1. For the discussion, see Brevard Childs, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 566–67.

Exodus 32:7–14

Theological Perspective

represent Christ as friendlier to Adam's fallen race than God the Father, whose wrath has to be spent destroying something, notably, the flesh of Jesus, who dies on the cross.

Happily, this stretch of the Exodus story does not *have* to be read this way. The Bible's God recognizes our natural tendency to squeeze divine-human interactions into familiar social frames. Sometimes, even often, the Bible's God puts on an elaborate "as if" performance, role-plays certain human scripts, the better to ease communication with chosen leaders and to train them up into the roles God has assigned them. Thus, in Genesis 18:17–33, YHWH meets Abraham as friend to friend, lets Abraham in on the divine plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and enters into a dialogue in which Abraham dares to give YHWH friendly advice.

Are we really to think that Abraham was more merciful than YHWH to start with and that Abraham—through a remarkable mixture of tact and *chutzpah*—was able to persuade YHWH to adopt a less harsh policy? Is it not rather that YHWH is "acting out" the friendly consultation—in which Abraham suggests ever lower numbers of righteous needed for the wicked cities to be spared, and each time God concedes—to allow Abraham to measure and remeasure the height, depth, and width of the divine bias toward mercy?

Likewise, Exodus 32 does not really intend us to see YHWH as a jilted husband, incandescent with rage, ready to destroy and remarry as soon as Israel's infidelity is known. Only two chapters later, when YHWH grants Moses's wish to see divine glory and to know the divine name, YHWH tells him that it is "YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and *faithfulness*" (Exod. 34:6). Rather, YHWH role-plays as a divine strategy to mature Moses as a leader.

Good leaders have to proceed by double identification, on the one hand with the persons or principles or causes on whose behalf or toward which they are leading, and on the other with the people they hope to lead. Good leaders have to win people's trust in order to move them toward shared commitments. Standing over and against them stirs resentment, while overidentification acquiesces in their status quo and fails to bring them anywhere new.

When the story starts, Moses's identification with YHWH is weak: he turns aside to see the bush, but claims not to know God's name, finds God's offer too bad not to refuse, and vigorously resists taking the job (Exod. 3–4). Where Israel is concerned,

Pastoral Perspective

Exodus 32:7 picks up the story with a sense of irony. How quickly the Israelites had forgotten that it was God who delivered them. God instructed Moses, "Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely." Thus began one of the most interesting and challenging dialogues in all of Scripture. God was so angry that he instructed Moses to "let me alone" (v. 10) so that appropriate punishment for this most grievous violation of the first three commandments might be dispensed. Moses, however, refused to budge. Moses argued his case before God, giving credit where credit was due: "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" (v. 11). Moses then suggested that God's reputation, cemented when his superiority to the Egyptians gods was demonstrated during the exodus, would be ruined, should God choose to kill them at the base of Mount Sinai. He further reminded God of his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses was so persuasive that God's mind was changed.

How can a pastoral analysis of this unusual passage inform the life of the church? Three interrelated themes emerge. The first is the peril of idolatry. The second is God's grace given through intercessors on our behalf. The third highlights the benefits of an intimate relationship with the living God.

Idolatry is tempting because it externalizes our encounter with what we find to be divine. The transcendent and immanent God of all creation is so far beyond our comprehension that we try to reduce the Deity into something we can manage. For the early Israelites, it became a golden calf they could see and touch. We are just as likely to create our own gods—money, power, popularity, fame. That is why the First Commandment, on which all others rest, is that we "shall have no other gods before [God]" (Exod. 20:3). It is followed by "You shall not make for yourself an idol." We are made in the image and likeness of God; never are we to reduce God to *our* image and likeness. We, like the Israelites, grow impatient when anything takes too long. We panic when our insecurities rise to the surface in challenging situations. Yet God is still in control. God's time is not our time; God's way of resolving challenges may not be what we expect. We are called to trust in the God who is "wholly other," believing even when we cannot see.

Exodus 32:7–14

Exegetical Perspective

other gods to be their liberators. As a consequence, YHWH is not Israel's God or the people's covenant partner. Israel is now Moses's people, and Moses is their redeemer. The only way that the people of Israel avoid destruction is by the action Moses takes in response to YHWH's decision (vv. 9–10). Moses's responsibility is, according to verse 10, not an easy one. YHWH knows Israel very well—"I have seen this people" (v. 9)—and concludes that there is not a way out for Israel. So YHWH gives two proposals to Moses: (1) "let me alone" (v. 10a), do not interfere in what I am about to do; (2) I promise you to "make of you a great nation" (v. 10b).

For a radical and firm decision, a daring response is needed; and that is exactly what Moses decides to offer: "O, no, Lord, Israel is not my people, it is *yours!*" The moment is so solemn that Moses's response is said to be a prayer of imploring, begging a change of mind from YHWH (v. 11). After giving YHWH two strong reasons to pardon Israel—(1) the people of Israel are, indeed, your people, and you were the one who brought them forth out of Egypt, not me (v. 11); (2) thus, it is your reputation that is in jeopardy; do not give the Egyptians motive to embarrass you! (v. 12a)—Moses dares to challenge God's decision with three imperatives: "turn" from your anger, "repent," and "remember." In Hebrew, those three words belong to the biblical theology of "conversion." What Moses is asking from YHWH is nothing but conversion: The people's salvation is God's conversion! This is exactly how the passage ends (v. 14).

This brings to mind Psalm 90, another great prayer attributed to Moses. In that prayer, Moses concludes that the only way to reverse God's decision to "turn us back to dust" (v. 3; see Gen. 3:19) is YHWH's conversion (v. 13: "Turn, O LORD!"). That also happened when Jesus "changed his mind." A Syrophenician woman challenged Jesus' refusal to answer her pleading because she was not a member of "the children of Israel" (Mark 7:24–30). It was because Jesus "turned" or "changed his mind" that the woman's daughter was healed.

It is most interesting to read the text (vv. 11–13) and find no justification for Israel's conduct or defense of the people's acts. Moses, the intercessor, centers his attention on YHWH's deeds and being: The people are yours, not mine—says Moses—and you brought them out from Egypt. You are their savior, and you are not going to turn your back to them. You are a God who keeps promises, and you will not allow the Egyptians to embarrass you.

Homiletical Perspective

Christians who live in nations formerly behind the iron curtain rejoice in the religious freedom that has come from the West since the end of the cold war, but they regret the consumerism that has come with it. Christian freedom gets confused with the freedom to own more and more, and the joy of believing gets lost in the joy of acquiring.

Of course preaching on creeping idolatry easily shades into creeping self-righteousness, and many of us in the pulpit are sheltered from the prosperity gospel only by the reality of the marketplace: we are not that well paid partly because we are not that highly valued. Preaching on this text will want to concentrate more on the true God than on the distracting idols. The true God *is* the one who has brought us out of whatever land of Egypt held us captive, and the lust after idols is just the longing to return to slavery again. We fight slavery by picturing freedom, and we fight idolatry by naming, showing, and delighting in the one true God.

In this story the one true God pretty much has to be cajoled, shamed, and nagged into compassion. There is no question here that God changes God's mind, and God changes God's mind in large measure because Moses intercedes. While it may be metaphysically correct that God is unaffected by human wishes, hopes, curses, or prayers, when we move from metaphysics to the biblical narrative, we notice that God sometimes flat out repents—in response to human pleas.

Moses's plea appeals both to God's pride and to God's self-consistency. Appealing to God's pride Moses suggests that YHWH does not want to become a laughingstock in the eyes of the Egyptians. If God has brought the Israelites out of bondage only to destroy them in the wilderness, the Egyptians will find ample reason to taunt God. Moses reminds God to hold fast to God's own honor.

Also Moses begs God to remember God's own promises. "Remember how you swore . . . by your own self" (v. 13). God promised to be the giver of life; now God cannot wage death without contradicting God's own self. A God divided against Godself is no God at all.

None of us can pretend to know the mind of God, and we certainly cannot pretend to know God's emotional life. What we do know is that in this story (and not in this story alone) God "changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (v. 14).

There is a close parallel in the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24–30. She

Exodus 32:7–14

Theological Perspective

Moses is an outsider, whose earlier attempts to settle Israeli disputes went so badly that Moses fled to Midian (Exod. 2:11–15). The ten plagues strengthened ties enough for Moses to lead and Israel to follow through the Reed Sea all the way to Sinai. However, forty days on the mountain are enough to convince Israel that Moses has abandoned them (Exod. 32:1). For his part, Moses has been shouldering the work but still thinking of Israel as *YHWH's* people and of the entire project as *YHWH's* idea. The golden calf gives YHWH the perfect opportunity to put Moses through some leadership-development exercises.

Playing the cuckold husband, YHWH puts Moses to the test. Moses enjoys divine favor. Why not let YHWH destroy Israel and transfer the promises to Moses's line? Stepping into the role of YHWH's friend, Moses warns YHWH against such a disastrous betrayal of divine integrity (vv. 11–13). Moses then goes down to discipline the people and put them through works meet for repentance (vv. 21–29). By the time Moses returns, he has cast his lot with Israel: "Either forgive them, or blot us both out of your book!" (vv. 30–34). YHWH continues to play "hard to get," the better to cement relationships. More theophanies in the tent of meeting deepen Moses' friendship with YHWH (33:7–11). Vigorous intercession combines with discipline to stir the people's trust in Moses and longing for YHWH (33:4–11). Moses's own double identification is manifest in his refusal to accept substitutes to accompany them on the journey to Canaan: YHWH's favor consists in YHWH's going with them, with Moses and YHWH's people, and it is this that makes them distinct from other nations (33:16). This shift from "us versus them" to "we" is exactly what will be needed to get them all—YHWH, Moses, and Israel—through the hardships of forty wilderness-wandering years.

MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS

Pastoral Perspective

Do we deserve punishment when we fall into idolatry? Absolutely. Do we receive it? Not from God. God invites our love rather than forcing it. God initiates, but it is up to us to respond. Idolatry can become punishment in our lives, because those who worship money ultimately discover that no amount of homes, cars, spouses, or possessions can bring true happiness. Those who worship popularity or fame find themselves bereft when its acquisition leaves them feeling empty inside. Through our intercessor, however, God offers grace.

In the encounter on Mount Sinai, Moses acted as the people's intercessor. Christ is ours. God will never give us the punishment we deserve. All who believe in Christ as Lord are clothed with his righteousness. We do not need to behave perfectly; we simply need to believe and trust.

Exodus states that only Moses could approach God on Mount Sinai and live. Moses therefore enjoyed a more intimate relationship with God than did the others. When the temple was built, a special curtain protected the Holy of Holies, the temple's inner sanctum, where the Israelites believed God dwelt, which could be entered only once a year by the high priest. The Gospel of Matthew describes how that curtain was torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death (Matt. 27:51). Matthew portrayed how each of us, through Christ who intercedes on our behalf, can enjoy direct access to God. We can converse—even argue—with God. The irony-filled dialogue between Moses and God shows that God has a sense of humor and appreciates ours. More than our piety, God wants our honesty and candor. God calls us to talk, listen, wrestle with our emotions, and be honest about our problems. Those direct interactions change us . . . and sometimes they even change the mind of God!

CATHERINE F. YOUNG

Exodus 32:7–14

Exegetical Perspective

Moses's boldness is in a way motivated by two words from YHWH: (1) YHWH acknowledges Moses as Israel's liberator and the right of ownership (v. 7); (2) YHWH decides to offer Moses the possibility of being "the father"—like Abraham—of "a great nation" (v. 10). The Hebrew word used here for "nation" is not the same used for "people" in the other six times the word refers to Israel as YHWH's covenant partner. The reader is pressed to consider whether the use of the word *goy* ("nation") instead of *am* ("people") is caused by God's desire to avoid any covenant commitment with the new nation, or is just an attempt to promise Moses a radical new beginning. That decision is not senseless; the whole passage tells about two radically different reactions as a response to Israel's sin: YHWH vows punishment, but Moses vows forgiveness. Moses's daring attitude is, it seems, motivated by a sense of solidarity on behalf of his people. It is a firm option for solidarity, the force that moves mountains and even moves God to repentance. God joins with a human leader in a single cause of redemption. Thus, Moses's daring action becomes a parable of God's incarnation, when humanity and divinity are joined in the person of Jesus Christ for our redemption.

Since the golden calf is the main theme of the whole unit, a word should be said about it. The bull was an important figure in Near Eastern religion, a symbol of strength and fertility and, for that matter, of deities. In Canaanite religion the bull was the attribute of both El and Baal. According to some archaeological findings, the bull was not in fact an image of the Deity but an animal on which the invisible deity rode. That seems to be the case both for the cherubim in the temple of Jerusalem and for the bulls in 1 Kings 12:28–29. For both Exodus 32 and 1 Kings 12, it was a blunt apostasy and a breaking of the first and second commandments.

EDESIO SANCHEZ

Homiletical Perspective

intercedes on behalf of her sick daughter, as Moses intercedes on behalf of the idolatrous Israelites. Jesus is not angry at the woman and her daughter, as YHWH is angry at the children of Israel, but Jesus' mission statement seems to omit any attention to Gentiles. It is not a voice from heaven that changes Jesus' mind, nor a sudden softening of the heart based on his own compassionate nature. It is the persistence of the woman who takes his parable of children and dogs and uses it to best him.

No doubt excellent theologians can help us wrestle with these stories of God changing the divine mind and Jesus changing his messianic one. What the stories say is that people intercede on behalf of other people, and the intercession is effective.

Preaching this text from Exodus, we can learn from Moses's audacity. In our praying and in our acting, we are invited to come before God energetically and honestly on behalf of others. In the older liturgies we sometimes introduced the Lord's Prayer with these words: "We are bold to pray, Our Father . . ." In different ways both Moses and the Syrophenician woman are bold to pray. "Lord," prays the woman. "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (v. 13), prays Moses. Be true to your divine self.

Of course the story also reveals who that divine self is. YHWH does have a change of mind and a change of heart, because YHWH remembers what kind of God YHWH really is: the God who promises life, not the God who threatens death.

In the Gospel reading for today, Luke 15:1–10, Jesus enriches the picture of that life-giving God. The God we worship, the God who transcends and criticizes all our idolatries, is the God so devoted to each person that like a shepherd God will leave aside all safety and security to reach each person God loves. The God we worship is so energetic and spendthrift in devotion that like the woman with the lost coin God will scour and sweep and search to reach each person God fears to be lost.

For Christians, Jesus himself will live out Moses's prayer in Exodus 32. In Jesus, God turns away God's wrath; God remembers God's promises, and God honors God's own name.

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**PROPER 19 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 11
AND SEPTEMBER 17 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalm 51:1–10

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.

Theological Perspective

With a contrite spirit of remorse and repentance, the psalmist calls upon God to have mercy, to forgive, to purge, to wash, to create a clean heart, to restore, and to sustain. The words being spoken and the petitions being made are from the perspective of one who has fallen out of right relationship with God on account of transgression. Psalm 51:1–10 is part of a larger psalm (vv. 1–19) known as a lament or a Penitential Psalm. This portion of the psalm consists of a request for forgiveness (vv. 1–2), a confession of sin (vv. 3–5), and a second request for forgiveness (vv. 7–10). The tone of the poem is somber and contrite.

Trusting in God's steadfast love and abundant mercy, the transgressor cries out, "Have mercy on me, O God" (v. 1a). The Hebrew word for steadfast love, *hesed*, connotes undeserved love, as in the case of the prophet Hosea and his unfaithful wife Gomer (see Hos. 1–3). God's mercy can also be compared to the love a parent has for one's own child (Ps. 103:13; Hos. 11:1–9). The psalmist's first imperative is followed by several others: "blot out my transgressions" (v. 1b); "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity" (v. 2a); "cleanse me from my sin" (v. 2b). For the psalmist, God is full of compassion, with power to

Pastoral Perspective

The deep pastoral issue posed by Psalm 51 is the almost overwhelming realization of human sinfulness. "My transgressions . . . and my sin [are] ever before me" (v. 3). The psalmist is consumed by guilt. Perhaps there are people who do not experience guilt in this way. Sociopaths may not experience it at all (though that is a judgment we will have to leave to psychologists), but the sense of personal wrongdoing is pretty universal, even among those who do not believe in God.

The psalmist, however, is far from being an atheist. His guilt is an offense before God, which is to say that God is righteous and that God intends for human beings to be morally upright. We are not; so the psalmist appeals to the mercy of God, asking God to pardon past sins, to cleanse, and to give a "new and right spirit" (vv. 9–10). That is an expression of desire to become a good person, to be relieved of the burden of sin, not just past sins but future wrongdoing as well.

Read carefully, the psalm appears to present a contradiction. The psalmist has sinned, has done evil things, has transgressed. There is here acceptance of personal responsibility; moreover, the sin is against God, and God is entirely justified in

Psalm 51:1–10

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

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.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 51:1–10 accompanies the alternate first reading, Exodus 32:7–14, God’s discussion with Moses of the people’s sin at Mount Sinai, worshiping the golden calf immediately after hearing from on high, “You shall have no other gods. . . . You shall not make for yourself an idol” (Exod. 20:3–4). God intends to destroy the people and start over. However, Moses pleads with God for patience, citing not the people’s value or future but God’s own promise to Abraham. There is no repentance, but there is forgiveness and forbearance. The Gospel reading similarly poses reconciliation as initiated by God, as a shepherd finds a straying sheep, or a woman a straying coin (Luke 15:1–10).

Other than here, there is not all that much repentance in the psalms. Even in the seven so-called Penitential Psalms of Christian tradition, only Psalm 51 portrays its author in the act of confession. Psalm 38 pleads for forgiveness and healing without dwelling on the sin. Psalm 32 recalls a moment of confession in the past. Others reflect on human need for divine forgiveness (Pss. 130 and 143) or pray for healing or deliverance from distress (Pss. 6 and 102).

Nor is human initiative highlighted in the story, to which the psalm’s superscription (“A Psalm of David,

Homiletical Perspective

This psalm is one of the seven Penitential Psalms and has been associated with David, particularly after his sin with Bathsheba. It is an intensely personal plea for forgiveness (vv. 1–2), confession of sin (vv. 3–5), and restoration of spiritual fellowship with God (vv. 6–10). These three elements are components of the Christian doctrine of sin and the Christian experience of the consequences of sin, repentance, and the desire for sin’s forgiveness and the sinner’s renewed relationship with God.

Given this cluster of elements relating to sin and its pervasiveness, repentance, forgiveness, and our relationship with God, sermons on this passage can be both general and specific. They can outline the broad contours of this segment of Christian faith: humans are sinners in need of confession; God hears and forgives sin. Alternatively, they can focus more directly on specific sins and those attitudes and practices for which the community needs to confess and seek God’s forgiveness, with a plea for “a new and right spirit” (v. 10). One can think of sinful situations such as acts of war, the pollution of the planet, racism and hatreds, and acts of violence, to name a few. Prophetic sense and pastoral sensitivity will be the guides to ways this passage is preached and taught in local congregations.

Psalm 51:1–10

Theological Perspective

forgive sins and to transform life (see, e.g., Pss. 32:5; 65:3; Jer. 31:34; Mic. 7:18–20).

Words of petition lead to words of humility (vv. 3–5). The one guilty of transgressions is fully aware of wrongdoing (v. 3) and candidly acknowledges that the failure of right relationship has been against God directly (v. 4a). Although the sin is not named, quite possibly the transgression was idolatry, one of the most common sins against God in biblical times (see, e.g., Isa. 2:8, 20; 10:11; Ezek. 14:5–7; Hos. 4:17; Mic. 1:7). Fully aware of his sinfulness, the poet further acknowledges that God is totally justified in administering a sentence and blameless in passing judgment (v. 4d). The poet stands ready to accept the consequences for sin, and envisions God as a just and righteous judge (cf. Pss. 7:11; 67:4; 72:2; 96:13; 98:9).

For the poet, sin was a deed, a state of being, a predisposed condition that began in the womb (v. 5). Here the poet hints at intergenerational sin (see, e.g., Exod. 34:6–7). Church father Theodoret of Cyrus sees transgression as something committed from the beginning by people's forebears, which results in persons' giving birth to children like themselves and their forebears. The reference also indicates a belief in total depravity that is determinative for human beings from the beginning of their existence (Gen. 8:21; Job 14:4; 15:14; 25:4; Ps. 143:2). Passages such as this one and its cross-references have been used to establish the doctrine of original sin. Thus awareness of one's sinfulness has led not only to a deep understanding of God but also to a sober understanding of one's self.

In verse 6, the poet once again addresses God indirectly and makes clear that God desires truth in one's inner being, especially truth with respect to one's sinfulness—in particular, one's sinfulness against God, as in the case of Achan, who confessed his failings to Joshua (Josh. 7:20–21). Those who speak truth from the heart are worthy to abide in God's holy tent and dwell on God's holy hill (Ps. 15:1–5). To embrace truth in one's inward being is to be godly (cf. Isa. 45:19).

Knowing truth to be virtuous, the poet asks to be taught by God: “teach me wisdom in my secret heart” (v. 6b). For the ancient biblical people, the heart was the center of an individual's human life. The heart embraced the physical, psychic, emotional, intellectual, and moral powers attributed to it. It was the seat of the desires, emotions, thoughts, and plans that determine the human character and its activities. The heart was, and is, the primary arena where one meets God and reciprocally, where God

Pastoral Perspective

punishing the sinner. Please do not punish me, the psalmist pleads.

What are we to make of the line that reads, “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (v. 5)? If we are born sinners, is that not a condition for which we have no personal responsibility? It is not anything we have done ourselves. Perhaps our mother is guilty (“a sinner when my mother conceived me”), but she was also born in sin—and so on through countless previous generations. Here we seem to have a recognition of original sin. How do we square the personal guilt for deeds we have done or left undone with the inborn guilt we seem to have inherited?

That is a question that has vexed theologians and ethicists for centuries. Reinhold Niebuhr's interpretation of original sin may be the most productive, both theologically and pastorally. According to Niebuhr, original sin is not something inherited biologically; nor, in any real sense, is it an inheritance from Adam and Eve as portrayed in Genesis 3. That story does at least emphasize the importance of the “knowledge of good and evil,” which Adam and Eve are said to have gotten through eating the forbidden fruit. Niebuhr suggests an understanding of original sin that is not dependent upon taking Genesis 3 as literal fact.

To Niebuhr, it is a part of our human condition to be driven by anxiety. Uniquely among creatures, so far as we know, human beings are capable of thinking in universal terms. We can contemplate endless space and infinite time. We are, in that sense, able to transcend the immediacy of our location in time and space. We are also aware of the fact of death. We are aware of boundless space and endless time, but we know that we are fated to lose everything through death. That draws us into a pit of anxiety and leads us to seek, fruitlessly, to save ourselves. We are fundamentally self-centered. Our efforts to “make” our lives transcend the fact of death express that self-centeredness and give rise to sin. Sin can take the form of exerting oppressive power over others, or greed for the acquisition of wealth, or a drivenness for fame and prestige. In the process, we can do harm to others or to the environment, but we ourselves are the first victims of our sin. So there is here a clear linkage between sin as an inherited condition and sin as attitudes and actions.

How are we to escape this entrapment? Ultimately anxiety over our finite limits can be overcome only by trust in the power of a loving God who has no limits. Thus we are drawn into being and feeling

Psalm 51:1–10

Exegetical Perspective

when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba,” not included above) refers. “I have sinned against the LORD,” the cornered king finally admits (2 Sam. 12:13), after a lengthy denunciation of his deeds. The pairing of this and several other psalms with episodes in David’s life occurred secondarily, exegetically, perhaps as a Second-Temple reflection on the inner life of faith, rather like songs inserted into the script of a musical, placed to stop the action and draw out the moment’s significance.

Certainly “against you, you alone, have I sinned” (v. 4) does not apply in David’s case. He did sin against God, as he said, but also against a universe of others: his general Uriah; his general’s wife, Bathsheba; her unborn child; her father Eliam and grandfather Ahithophel, who would later commit suicide; the army as a whole; several other soldiers needlessly killed in the attack on Uriah’s life; Joab, who would never see David the same again; David’s sons Amnon and Absalom and daughter Tamar, and later Adonijah, who would all in one way or another be caught up in the aftermath; and the nation as a whole, drawn into this family affair. Sin is rarely against God alone, but against the web of all whose worlds rely on ours. Except for the confession “I have sinned,” this psalm fits poorly with the David story.

The psalmist turns to God alone, voicing repentance that would become emblematic of all such prayers, taking responsibility, admitting guilt, pleading for undeserved clemency, offering only a broken heart and better intentions for the future, putting the self firmly in God’s hands. The first several words (“Have mercy on me [*hanneni*], O God, according to your steadfast love [*hesed*], according to your abundant mercy [*rakhamim*] blot out my transgressions,” v. 1) locate the prayer in the vocabulary of God’s own self-declaration, offered first to Moses in Exodus 34:6 and repeated many times after in Scripture: “The LORD, the LORD, / a God merciful [*rakhum*] and gracious [*hannun*], / slow to anger, / and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness” (cf. Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17, 31; Pss. 86:15, 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Like Moses, who pleaded that the sinners not be blotted out (*makhah*, as in Exod. 32:32–33), the psalmist asks that the sin itself be erased (*makhah*, Ps. 51:1, 9). Almost every word in the first line reflects the exodus story.

We will never know what misdeed inspired this psalm. We do recognize the self-accusation, the shame, the stain, the total immersion in guilt that only God can wash off, the resort to pleading metaphors when actions cannot heal or compensate for

Homiletical Perspective

The three segments of the passage can provide a homiletical structure that can lead to preaching that is general or more specific. In all cases, Christian theology points to the same component structures: the plea for forgiveness, confession of sin, and prayer for cleansing and renewal.

Sin. Sin is one of the central categories of Christian faith. The divine-human relationship, portrayed as glorious harmony in Genesis 1, is radically disrupted by human disobedience in Genesis 3. The ongoing results of this narrative, which now mark human identity, are portrayed through the rest of Scripture.

The story is told of Grace Coolidge, wife of President Calvin Coolidge, asking the president what the preacher had preached on at church. “Silent Cal” responded, “Sin.” To which his wife asked, “What did he say?” Coolidge replied, “He was against it.”

Christian preaching has always been “against sin,” since this is the name given to that which separates humanity from God and the fellowship God desires with those whom God has created. A number of biblical images describe the “condition” of sin: disobedience to God’s word, missing the mark of God’s desire for human life, guilt for breaking the law of God, self-centeredness, and so on. Theologically, what unites these diverse images is they share the same characteristic of being *contra*-God.¹ Whatever acts or moves “against God,” in whatever way, is sin. As God is “against sin,” so the nature of sin is to be “against God.” As we are used to observing, we need only check the latest news to find expressions of the sinfulness of human activity in relation to the will and desires of God for communal and personal life.

Prayer for Forgiveness (vv. 1–2). The psalm begins with a plea for mercy (v. 1). This is where all forgiveness must start, with the recognition of sin and the desperate plea for its forgiveness. This prayer is addressed to God, the psalmist recognizing God as the only one who can—and will—forgive human sin. It is God’s mercy and “steadfast love” (Heb. *hesed*) that emboldens the sinner to pray to the God whose character it is to show mercy and to act in constant covenant love with graciousness and faithfulness to covenant promises.

The prayer is for a blotting out of “my transgressions” and a washing from “iniquity” and cleansing from my sin. These point to sin’s different biblical dimensions: breaking God’s law, rebellion against

¹ On this, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 237–39.

Psalm 51:1–10

Theological Perspective

works to cause change, enlightenment, and new life. Oftentimes the heart was used figuratively to refer to a person's inner life and the place where a person kept the deepest and most personal secrets and thoughts (Judg. 16:17; 1 Sam. 9:19). Finally, the heart is the center of one's relationship with God (Deut. 30:14; 1 Kgs. 3:9; Pss. 27:8; 28:7; 44:21; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26). The wisdom that the poet desires to be taught in the secret heart is nothing less than insight from human experience, and here perhaps insights associated with transgressions and oneself.

Complementing the poet's request to be taught wisdom by God is an additional series of petitions that have as their purpose the reestablishment of the poet's right relationship with God and personal transformation (vv. 7–10). In verse 7 the poet asks to be purged with hyssop, to be washed so as to be made clean and whiter than snow. Implied here is the desire to be forgiven one's sins, which cause a deathlike state for a person. Once forgiven, life is renewed, symbolized by the ability to hear joy and gladness and feel the tingle of life once again in one's bones.

The notion of God hiding God's face from one's sins, as the poet requests in verse 9, has a rich background. The ancient biblical writers often communicated God's displeasure with humankind through the metaphor of God's hiding God's face from the people. This situation usually happened because of the people's sin or sinful state (Pss. 13:1; 27:9; 69:17; 88:14; 102:2; Isa. 30:20; Mic. 3:4). With a similar understanding of the metaphor, yet now with a twist, the poet in Psalm 51:9 petitions God to hide the divine face from the poet's sins. Here the poet is asking God not only to deny the sins' existence but also to wipe the sins out: "blot out all my iniquities." The poet asks for a clean heart and a new and right spirit. God once renewed the house of Israel, giving it a new heart and spirit (Ezek. 36:16–37); now the poet desires the same renewal. The psalmist's confidence and trust in God and God's deeds is grace filled and an enduring testimony to divine benevolence.

CAROL J. DEMPSEY, OP

Pastoral Perspective

"at home" in the universe, for it is God's house and God loves us. Death is no longer final, and sin is no longer necessary as an empty cure for our anxiety.

In other words, we are cleansed by the power of God's grace. We are accepted, even in our state of sinfulness, by God, the center and source of all being. We can, in the psalmist's words, "hear joy and gladness" (v. 8). Even in our brokenness we can rejoice.

The pastoral word in this is an affirmation of that grace to people in their brokenness. Can the word of grace always be heard? Clearly not. The word has to be conveyed with deep understanding of the brokenness. Sometimes that brokenness is thinly disguised as economic or political power; often the arrogance of such power is but a compensation for inner insecurity. So pastorally there has to be what an older generation of evangelicals would speak of as a "conviction" of our sin—that is, a recognition of our anxiety and the sin it expresses. So we are driven to the reality of grace, if it can be portrayed convincingly. Sometimes that can be done in words, aptly chosen, sometimes by encounter with people who manifest that newness of spirit in their own lives.

Niebuhr was sometimes criticized for not addressing people who, far from being driven to the futile quest for power or prestige, have been so beaten down that they no longer can cope. That too, though, is an expression of the condition of anxiety and can therefore also be characterized as sin.

A final word: acceptance of God's grace is not license to continue sin. It cannot be presented as what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." For cheap grace does not relieve us from the profound anxiety that gives birth to sin. Still, grace is, in a larger sense, not just "cheap." It is *free!* In the new joyfulness, grace empowers us to love and to do good. To be fully cleansed.

J. PHILIP WOGAMAN

Psalm 51:1–10

Exegetical Perspective

what is done: “wash me; cleanse me; I was born guilty; purge me; wash me; heal me; blot out my iniquities; create a clean heart.” Literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote concerning this psalm and the experience it reflects, “Where I absolutely do not coincide with myself, a place for God is opened up.”¹ Where my intentions collide with my actions, where I can no longer help myself: that is where faith grows (which he further defines as need and hope, non-self-contentment, possibility), the consciousness of myself as someone who is not only completely dependent on grace, but who is actually, miraculously, “an other for God,” someone who is on God’s mind. There repentance gives way to hope and trust.

Such repentance as the psalmist articulates strikes a chord in us. It is something we see as beautiful, not because it is abject, and certainly not because of the sin that triggered it, which could have been quite ugly. We admire it because another human being, courageous enough to express humility, invites us likewise to leave off pretending that we have anything to offer from within our castle walls. It invites us likewise to welcome mercy from without. Though the psalmist sees only self-accusation and suffering, we see someone who cares enough about his or her effect on the world and the consequences of terrible deeds to suffer over them. We see someone who is self-aware, as if gazing into an unexpected mirror. We see the possibility that our own self-recriminations too might be opened up, aired out, blotted out like tears, leaving only humble receptivity to the grace of God and others, a firmer place to stand than public self-sufficiency marred by hidden doubt.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

and rejection of God, and the need for being clean from sin’s pollution.

Preachers will stress the complete turning over of one’s self to God, a total reliance on God’s mercy and constant love as the beginning of the forgiveness process. No excuses; just prayer.

Confession of Sin (vv. 3–5). Knowledge of one’s sin is the beginning point for articulating a confession of sin. The psalmist acknowledges that all sin is ultimately against God. We do sin against others; but beneath these actions that are established and upheld by God is the *contra*-character of acting against God.

This entails recognition too that God is right in judging the sinner and that all judgment is deserved. Preachers can stress that sin cannot be “explained,” only “confessed.” When we try to “explain” our sin, we seek to justify ourselves in God’s eyes. This strategy can never work. God is “completely correct” (v. 4 CEB) in issuing judgment on our sin.

We also cannot escape the rightness of judgment by recourse to the recognition that we are “born guilty” and are “a sinner when my mother conceived me” (v. 5). This is a classical text for the doctrine of original sin. Humans are sinful in our origins. Preachers can explain this Christian doctrine, but it can never be used as an “excuse” for our personal sin.

Prayer for Restoration (vv. 6–10). The following verses express, in various ways, the psalmist’s desire for cleansing and spiritual renewal. The images include restoration through teaching, purging, washing, hearing, and the wiping away of all guilty deeds. The culmination is the prayer for a clean heart and that God will “put a new and right spirit within me” (v. 10). The desire is for forgiveness, to be set right with God so that newness of life can follow. This is repentance, the confession of sin and desire to walk in new ways of life. Without this commitment to new living, forgiveness is not complete. The future can be different only when a renewed relationship with God leads to renewal of all life. The word “right” here translates a Hebrew word meaning “steadfast, firm.” So this is “a spirit that is constant in its devotion to God.”²

The preacher finds here an anatomy of sin and forgiveness. This can be proclaimed in all seasons.

DONALD K. MCKIM

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 144.

2. Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyburn, *A Handbook on Psalms* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 472.

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**PROPER 20 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 18
AND SEPTEMBER 24 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalm 113

¹Praise the LORD!
Praise, O servants of the LORD;
praise the name of the LORD.

²Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time on and forevermore.

³From the rising of the sun to its setting
the name of the LORD is to be praised.

⁴The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens.

Theological Perspective

When it comes to the psalms, the genre itself packs a theological punch. Psalms were written to be sung in public liturgies. Arguably, liturgy is a drama that uses symbols (words, music, gestures, costumes, and choreography) to construct a social world. Participating in liturgy gives implicit consent to the legitimacy of its norms and covenants to live by them. Thus, liturgical singing pledges allegiance to live in the world represented by the content of the song.

In biblical religion, there is meant to be a gap between the ordinary lived world of the worshipers, the social world organized by merely human beings, and the kingdom of God. The divinely sponsored world stands as a regulatory ideal over against which human society is judged. To worship is to commit oneself to work with God to transform human society in subtle and radical ways, all in a more Godward direction. Given the gap, identifying the present world order with the kingdom of God (an ever-present temptation that sometimes seduces the powers that be in Bible stories) is idolatrous and perverts liturgy into a vehicle by which we confirm our commitment to maintain the status quo.¹

1. Walter Brueggemann makes this sort of argument in his book *Israel's Praise: Daxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). He traces to Sigmund Mowinckel the idea that liturgies are dramas that construct worlds.

Pastoral Perspective

Gratitude begs for expression. Psalm 113 was probably written for liturgical use by the gathered community to articulate the praise that flowed from hearts bursting with gratitude to God. It is the first of a short (Pss. 113–118) series of Hallel Psalms (*hallel* means “praise” in Hebrew) sung on joyous occasions by the Israelites. Judaism incorporated the Hallel Psalms into most of its major holidays. Psalms 113 and 114 are traditionally sung before the Passover meal, which then concludes with Psalms 115–118. Jesus’ observance of this custom can be found in Matthew 26:30, as the disciples conclude with a hymn the Passover meal during which Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper.

Psalms is the prayer book of God’s people. While the emphasis in much of the Bible is on God’s word to us, the psalms articulate the prayers of the people to God. They express the full range of human emotions while stressing the centrality of God in our daily lives. Despite their influence on our lives as Christians, it is important to remember that they are Jewish prayers. The psalms articulate Jewish ways of thinking and claims about faith. The biblical Israelites have been called the most God-intoxicated people the world has ever known. Because of the psalms, we are able to pattern our faith lives after theirs, in the sense that God belongs at the absolute center of our lives.

Psalm 113

⁵Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
⁶who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
⁷He raises the poor from the dust,
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
⁸to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
⁹He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!

Exegetical Perspective

The psalm is framed by the expression “Praise the LORD!”—in Hebrew, *halelu yah*—(vv. 1 and 9), indicating that, whatever the hymn tells about the interaction between the Deity and humans, YHWH is the one who deserves to be worshiped. The main body of the psalm is divided in two parts: invitation to praise YHWH (vv. 1–3), the statement that the incomparable Lord is a merciful God (vv. 4–9).

The first part is fully concentrated in the topic of praising YHWH: four times as the verb “to praise” and one time as the verb “to bless.” The title “LORD” is quoted six times in these verses, and it is traversed by the phrase “the name of the LORD” (vv. 1, 2, and 3). The ones summoned to worship YHWH are called God’s “servants,” that is, those who have entered into covenant with YHWH, and whose duty is to “serve” God. However, the command to praise YHWH is also extended to the entire universe both in time and place (vv. 2–3). The psalm makes it clear that “the name of the LORD” is the object of praise. Thus it is affirmed through the use of “the name” that the worshiper is praising the one God whose presence and essence cannot be fully comprehended, but who is there in majesty (vv. 4–6) and mercy (vv. 7–9).

The second part (vv. 4–9) has an A-B-A’-B’ structure: Verses 4 and 7 (the A units) emphasize the idea of height. YHWH is “high above” nations and

Homiletical Perspective

Sometimes we can preach on a psalm like this in order to help describe what faithful praise looks like. Sometimes we can preach on a text like this in order to provide material for a theology of thankfulness. Perhaps most powerfully we can preach on this text in order to elicit praise.

The way the psalmist elicits praise is by inviting us to join in poetry; in its original setting the psalm probably also invited its hearers to join in song. The preacher is invited to think poetically about this poem.

Some preachers will be skillful enough to construct poems on the basis of this psalm that are both aesthetically rich and readily accessible (not simple-minded; accessible). More of us will want to find poems or hymns that do the poet’s work for us.

We are often wisely warned by wise preachers not to rely too much on poetry in the sermon itself. Many a sermon has wandered with T. S. Eliot into *The Wasteland* only to lose most of the congregation along the way. Most often, great and especially complex poetry can provide inspiration for the preacher without producing lengthy quotations for the sermon. However, portions of at least two fairly modern poems may be appreciated. Both help call the people to praise. The first is e. e. cummings’s poem “i thank You God for most this amazing/

Psalm 113

Theological Perspective

As the first hymn in the Passover praises, Psalm 113 is part of a wider liturgy that co-opts us to become citizens of the world celebrated by that feast. Which world? First and foremost, it is one in which YHWH's glory is unsurpassed and permanently unsurpassable. The sky may be the limit for other beings, but YHWH outclasses them all (vv. 4–5). Glory has to do with reputation, but it is supposed to reflect *worthiness* of honor and therefore to be a measure of how much there is to someone. Other Passover psalms echo this point. Psalm 114 expresses how there is so much to YHWH that even the forces of nature—earth, hills, and sea, as well as any pint-sized deities that may dwell in them—writhe in terror when YHWH passes by. Psalm 115 even suggests that in comparison to YHWH the gods of the nations might as well be inanimate and insentient, immobile and inert (Ps. 115:3–7). These psalms do not explicitly confess YHWH as creator, but they do proclaim YHWH as omnipotent: no other power in the universe can hold a candle to YHWH!

Given the chances and changes of Israel's experience and ours, unsurpassable power might seem to be just what is needed to make good on the bad things that beset us. Yet, precisely because it is power unsurpassable, we might hesitate to covenant into such a world without knowing more about the character and policies of its possessor. The theology of Psalm 113 is often associated with that of the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), both of which—like the Passover narrative itself—embrace a theology of double reversal, in which God sees to it that good guys and bad guys, haves and have-nots, swap roles. Not only do the hungry feast, but the well fed do without! Not only do the poor become rich, but the rich become poor! However satisfying this prospect might seem to those who find themselves on the underside of human society, it would be suicidal for the powerful and prosperous to sing such songs, for they would be contracting into a regime under which they would be cast “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42, 50; 25:30).

More importantly, double reversal will not bring in the kingdom, because—generally speaking—today's victims are not made of better stuff than their oppressors. The difference is more one of power and opportunity. Witness how many of today's oppressors were yesterday's victims! Utopia requires everyone to be safe and well supplied with

Pastoral Perspective

The book of Psalms, like all of Scripture, is very tightly written. Any repetition is noteworthy. Psalm 113 begins and ends with praise; the word “praise” is repeated three times in the first verse. Praise is an expression of gratitude, an act of worship thanking God for all that our loving Creator has done for us. Praise should flow from our hearts not only during specific times of prayer, but throughout the day, when positive things happen or we witness the magnificence of God's heart and splendid creation. When we live in ways that are God-centered, the sight of the ocean or a hummingbird or a flower in full bloom should evoke praise from our lips or heart. When we're gifted with “holy coincidences,” good news, or acts of kindness, we should pause to thank God. When we are moved to help people around the world who are in need, we should praise God for our food, clothing, shelter, and utilities. The apostle Paul echoes the psalmist when he writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16–17, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Psalm 113 then turns to its second general theme: the sovereignty of God. The story of the garden of Eden makes clear that people have always struggled with the desire to be like God. That is why the sovereignty of God must be our focus as we worship, work, live, and breathe. The word “sovereign” means supreme, excellent, paramount, or absolute. It implies freedom and autonomy. God is the sovereign creator of the universe and all that is in it. All good theology begins with God. In my opinion, the three greatest components of our understanding of God's sovereignty are having a faith that (1) is God-centered, (2) is full of reverence and awe for God, who is wholly other, and (3) acknowledges the freedom of God to do what God chooses to do.

Psalm 113 goes on to name and give thanks for what God often chooses: reversals in the lives of the faithful. The poor, the needy, and barren women all experience a diminished quality of life. The plight of barren women becomes a focal point because this psalm so closely parallels the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Children were considered one of the greatest gifts of God. Families yearned to have children, particularly sons, to whom they could pass down land and legacy. A woman who was unable to conceive was unable to experience this great gift and share this joy with her husband. There are several stories of barren women in the Bible, and all demonstrate that it is God who gives life, that children are God's gift, not a product of human

Psalm 113

Exegetical Perspective

heavens (v. 4), and the poor and needy are “raised” and “lifted” (v. 7). Verses 5 and 8–9 (the B units) have as their central issue the verb “to seat.” YHWH who “is seated” on high (v. 5) is the one who seats the poor and needy with the princes of the nation and lifts up the lowly. The poem gives not only a very strong message about the being of God—majestic and merciful—but also a lesson for those in power, those who are “seated on thrones.” Psalm 113 shows how YHWH, who is worthy of worship, who is above all nations and heavens, and who is seated on high, is the one who “lowers down” (v. 6) God’s self to look at the poor, the needy, and the barren woman. In that “lowering down,” the most exalted Lord raises and lifts the most humiliated and oppressed people. The psalm ends with a joyous and celebrating spirit, so that the invitation to “praise the LORD” is indeed a most happy celebration of worshiping YHWH, who is the God of justice, the God of the poor. Seen as a whole, Psalm 113 is a movement from praise to the name of YHWH, to the cosmic transcendence of YHWH, to the historical immanence of YHWH.

On the one hand, Psalm 113 introduces a group of Psalms (113–118) called the Egyptian Hallel (praise), songs that were sung during the three main festivals celebrated by the Judaic community after the exile (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). As a matter of fact, this psalm has an important place in the long Judaic and Christian liturgical traditions and has been considered the Magnificat of the Old Testament. On the other hand, Psalm 113 can be considered a fitted conclusion of Psalms 111–112. The three psalms highlight the practice of justice as an act both of YHWH and of God’s people. As will be stressed below, social justice and worship go hand in hand.

The use of Psalm 113 during the Passover celebration puts it directly in relation to the exodus theme. This central theme becomes more accentuated when one finds that the whole group of Hallel Psalms (113–118) includes the topic of deliverance from distress.

This psalm is closely related to the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10) and, as a consequence, to the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46–55). Considering these three different literary contexts, it can safely be said that the message of this psalm becomes central in the liturgical context of God’s people as well as in the prophetic proclamation and the theology of the incarnation.

From the point of view of genre, Psalm 113 belongs to this group of Psalms known as psalms of

Homiletical Perspective

day”¹ and the other is Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “Pied Beauty.” The first line (and title) of the Cummings poem and the portions of the last stanza of the Hopkins poem—“All things counter, original, spare, strange. . . . He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change. Praise him”—are sufficiently comprehensible and comprehensive to catch something of the wonder of the psalm.²

Even when more literary poetry seems too complex for our congregations, the preacher can follow the example of the Gospel of John (1:1–18) or of the apostle Paul (for instance, Phil. 2:5–11) and draw on hymns the congregation already knows. More deeply than we may acknowledge, the hymns we sing provide the ground from which both praise and faithful understanding grow. Any hymnal will be filled with appropriate songs of praise—“For the Beauty of the Earth,” “Now Thank We All Our God”—the list goes on and on, and the familiar words can help move the sermon from being a treatise on praise to being an act of communal praise.

In preaching this psalm, the preacher might also want to draw on the joys of the congregation. Many of us count on the “sharing of joys and concerns” to enrich the time of congregational prayer. There is no reason we could not also use shared narratives or images of joy to fashion a praise-full sermon. The preacher can use a whole variety of methods, both high-tech and low, to gather from members of the congregation motifs and themes to be incorporated in the sermon. The preacher can simply pay attention and draw forth from her own theologically sensitive observations a kind of litany of the places where God is at work in the lives of the people.

There are three particular calls to praise in this psalm that might enrich the sermon.

First, the sermon acknowledges the utter steadfastness of God’s care. The psalmist expands on what Hopkins says: “He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.” For the psalmist, God’s name is to be blessed now, but also forevermore. God’s name is to be praised when the sun rises and when the sun sets. Faithful people can take Sabbath from a thousand duties, but never from the joy and duty of praising God. The faithful God may take Sabbath too, but not a Sabbath from God’s own watchful care.

Second, the sermon blends the immeasurably great power of God with the astonishing affirmation of God’s tender care. Professor Marilyn McCord

1. e. e. Cummings, *Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 464.

2. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” online at <http://www.bartleby.com/122/113.html>.

Psalm 113

Theological Perspective

the necessities of life. Society cannot be ideal unless everyone has access to meaningful activities and satisfying relationships. So long as there is a division of haves and have-nots, resentment, envy, jealousy, and greed will sustain the nasty competition with which we are so familiar.

Happily, the double reversal in Psalm 113 is different. According to its plot, it is not human and superhuman haves who are put down, but YHWH who voluntarily stoops—in the manner of Psalm 8:4—to pay attention to the human condition (Ps. 113:6). Moreover, as Francis loved to tell, given how much there is to YHWH and how little there is to the grandest of us, God will have no reason to prefer the company of kings and nobles. Instead, God takes a special interest in the “dirt poor” and in sterile women. God focuses on people who have such scant social usefulness that they are counted human refuse, fit to be consigned to sewers and garbage dumps. What YHWH does when YHWH notices them is to “lift them up” and reintegrate them into society. Princes do not have to be excluded or degraded to make room. YHWH’s house has many rooms (John 14:2). In YHWH’s reign, each and all will enjoy the security of an honored place (vv. 7–8). What we forfeit when we say or sing Psalm 113 is not our place or provision, but rather our demand for privileged access and competitive advantage.

MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS

Pastoral Perspective

endeavor. Hannah’s most fervent prayer for a son was answered by God; her firstborn was Samuel, the great human bridge between the period of the judges and the kings. As a God-centered and faithful woman, she expressed her gratitude in a song that is quoted, in part, word for word in Psalm 113–7, 8a: “He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes.”

In Mary’s song of praise in Luke 1:52–53, known as the Magnificat, she echoes the ideas of both Hannah’s song and Psalm 113 as she thanks God for confirmation that the son she is carrying in her womb truly is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Mary’s heart overflows with gratitude, and her words echo the theme of reversal: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

With God, all things are possible. Even in our darkest moments, we need to remember that God lifts up the needy. When our faith is filled with hope, our hearts are increasingly filled with gratitude. God is not only sovereign; God deserves to be at the very center of our lives. As we learn to be grateful for God’s presence in all of life, we will increasingly appreciate our blessings. Meister Eckhart, the famous fourteenth-century theologian and mystic, summed up the importance of gratitude with this simple statement, “If a man had no more to do with God than to be thankful, that would suffice.”¹ To God be all glory and praise.

CATHERINE F. YOUNG

1. Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 27*, in *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treatises*, trans. and ed. M. O. Walshe (Longmeade, England: Element Books, 1987), 1:209.

Psalm 113

Exegetical Perspective

praise and thanksgiving. One of their common traits is the presence of imperatives (see, for instance, the seven imperatives in Psalm 100). These imperatives are directed not to the Deity, but to the people, who are the ones summoned to join in to praise God. Even though the “servants of the LORD”—that is, those who are, in the liturgical occasion, both the celebrants and the participants—are the main focus of the invitation to worship, the whole of the world cannot be unaware of this festive praise to YHWH (vv. 1 and 3).

The central message of the psalm makes it clear that worship and justice go hand in hand. The God who is worthy to be worshiped is YHWH who is just. Thus the theme of the exodus is joined here together with one of the central subjects of prophetic proclamation. In all these instances, the singularity of YHWH is joined to the topic of social justice (see Deut. 10:12–21; Isa. 1:10–17; 57:15; 66:1–2; Amos 5:21–24). In the New Testament Jesus’ singularity is also manifested in his undeniable option for justice, for giving the poor and the ostracized central place in God’s kingdom, and for “seating” them in place of the powerful (Luke 6:20; 13:10–17; 18:14b).

EDESIO SANCHEZ

Homiletical Perspective

Adams of Christ Church, Oxford, often includes in her lectures and sermons the affirmation that “God is very big and we are very small.” The astonishing discoveries of the astronomers in our lifetime have shown that God is even bigger than we thought. The universe itself is unimaginably large, and the God who created the universe greater yet. The psalmist points to that. God’s glory is above the heavens, and from God’s transcendent glory God looks down on heaven and on earth. This is not the “man upstairs”—this is the God of gods, beyond up and down, beyond the galaxies, beyond our mind’s guessing, much less grasping.

This same God cares for the poor and the needy and provides children to those who long for children. The greatness of God includes both God’s grandeur and God’s closeness. A God who cares only for us is much too small; a God who cares for us not at all is also much too small.

However, here the preacher needs to be most candid and most careful. How delighted we are that the psalmist can declare that God makes the poor sit with princes and makes the barren woman the mother of children. In our congregation there will be the poor who struggle to achieve a living wage—forget a princely one. In our congregation there will be men and women who have prayed for biological children, or sought to adopt children, or longed for some other kind of particular human relationship, but who have apparently prayed in vain.

The psalmist here sounds like Mary in the Magnificat, where she praises God for what God has not quite yet done: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:52–53a). That is still an eschatological hope and not entirely an empirical description.

We praise God, not only out of gratitude for what God has done, but out of hope for what God intends to do. God is still fathering-forth, and we wait with eager anticipation, praising God and longing to praise.

DAVID L. BARTLETT

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PROPER 21 (SUNDAY BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 25
AND OCTOBER 1 INCLUSIVE)

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

¹Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.
.....

⁴Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;

⁵who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;

⁶who drink wine from bowls
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

⁷Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Theological Perspective

Despite shreds of hope (in 5:4, 6, 15, and 9:8, 11-15), Amos is predominantly a prophet of doom. In no uncertain terms he declares that God is creator (4:13; 5:8; 9:5-6); that sin spoils creation; and that God's response to sin is judgment—not only accusation but sentencing, not only pronounced sentence but promised execution. Amos is sent to deliver the stark message that the God who creates is also the God who will destroy (5:8-9; *passim*)!

What will God destroy? Amos's imagery is occasionally cosmic (8:9 refers to the eclipse of the sun). More often the wreck of the environment is threatened: famine (4:6), drought (4:7-8), blight and mildew (4:9-10), plague (4:10), locusts (7:1-2), scorch and burn fire (7:4), overall reversals that turn earth's garden into a desert waste. The fundamental thrust is that God will destroy human societies: first, Israel's enemies—Damascus (1:3-5), Gaza (1:6-8), Tyre (1:9-10), Edom (1:11-12), the Ammonites (1:13-15), Moab (2:1-3); then Israel's sister Judah (2:4-5); finally Israel herself (beginning from 2:6-16). Indeed, God's elect are the principal target: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (3:1-2). Intimacy with God is two-edged, because it makes Israel (if possible) even more exposed to divine judgment and punishment than other nations.

Pastoral Perspective

Jesus spoke more about the perils of money than any other topic except the kingdom of God. Biblically, money and wealth are never criticized in and of themselves. They're seductively dangerous, however, because they can so easily become the central focus of life. Instead of worshiping God, people idolize money. As they do so, individuals and societies become self-centered and indifferent to the needs of others.

The human tendency to put self-interest before God has been present since the garden of Eden. The Old Testament prophets called people away from false gods, injustice, and self-centeredness so they could worship God, living in a covenant relationship with their loving Creator. Amos, who describes himself as a simple shepherd from the southern kingdom of Judah, addressed his prophecy to the northern kingdom, yet today's passage addresses the wealthy and indifferent in both kingdoms: "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion [Jerusalem, the southern kingdom's capital and religious center], and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria [the center of the northern kingdom]" (v. 1). Speaking to the upper classes of both nations, he condemns those who are indifferent to the needs of God's people ("the ruin of Joseph," in v. 6) as they indulge themselves with rich food, drink, and entertainment. They will be judged,

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Exegetical Perspective

Amos 6:1a, 4–7 speaks about the upper class in Israel's society during the first part of the eighth century BCE, mostly during the reign of Israelite king Jeroboam II. This was a time of utmost material success—not for everyone, but for the 10 percent of the Israelite population that lived in the walled cities. The other 90 percent of the population was made up of laborers and peasants living, most likely, in small, unprotected villages. Politics, military force, and religion were subordinated to economy. Therefore, Amos directed his attacks against the rich and wealthy, those “to whom the house of Israel come!” (v. 1 RSV).

The unit has an A-B-A structure. At the beginning (v. 1) and at the end (v. 7) Amos pictures the recipients of the cry “Alas” (also known as the “woe-cry oracle”), those who are at ease, those who feel secure, the notable men, the first, and those that sprawl. In the central part (vv. 4–6), Amos describes the action of the upper class by using seven verbs: lie, stretch, eat, sing, invent, drink, and anoint. The text has three clear discourse markers: the word “alas” that opens the whole unit and gives it its literary character, the statement “but are not” (v. 6b) that closes the seven actions describing the evildoers, and the word “therefore” (v. 7), which normally introduces the judgment sentence.

Homiletical Perspective

The first clue to preaching this text is to ask where the preacher stands in relation to the text and to the congregation. A preacher I know well once prepared to use the text to excoriate the congregation for living in an island of upper-middle-class comfort in the midst of city of poverty-stricken despair. Wisely a close relative of the preacher reminded him that they too lived in that same island and that their home and salary were provided by those same comfortable people.

For most of us—not for all of us, but for most of us—it is bad faith to try to stand with Amos over against the people to whom we preach. Amos is written to be heard, by the preacher as much as by the congregation.

Most of us, in North America at least, are relatively at ease in Zion. What we love about Zion is that it is both a pleasant place and an officially holy one. We can thoroughly enjoy the benefits of our position, secure in the fact that God has been promising Zion to God's people for years—so surely we are here because we belong.

Not only do we enjoy our benefits; we show them off. We are masters of conspicuous blessedness. We sleep comfortably (see “beds of ivory,” v. 4). We eat well (see “lambs” and “calves,” v. 4). We love music and the instruments or sound systems or iPods that

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Theological Perspective

How will God destroy? To hear Amos tell it, God's preferred instrument is warfare, which indiscriminately and ruthlessly slaughters populations, deports or kills kings and nobles, uproots dynasties, destroys cities, and smashes the infrastructures that held the society together. Though other nations will themselves be punished for it, they are effective weapons in the Creator's hands. Worse still, God will withdraw from Israel, cut her off from the divine *esprit de corps* that makes her somebody. There will be a famine "of hearing the words of God" (8:11)!

What sins spoil creation? Where Israel's near neighbors are concerned, charges include breach of covenant, raids and landgrabs pursued with wanton violence (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1). With sister Judah, it is the rejection of God's law (2:4). If other prophets put idolatry, the worship of other gods at (royally) disapproved places, front and center, there are only ambiguous hints of this in Amos (2:8; 5:26). No, where Israel is concerned, for Amos the crime is social injustice—the yawning gap between rich and poor, produced and preserved by dishonest business practices, bribery, and corruption, which deny the poor any remedy for their complaints (4:1; 5:11–12; 6:4–7; 8:4–6). Amos lambasts luxury living and lavish consumption funded by economic exploitation. There is also the suggestion that God (or at least Amos) disapproves of cultural assimilation that adopts Canaanite fashions in furniture and table manners (ivory couches, reclining while eating, drinking wine from bowls; 6:4–7). Finally, God rejects their cult (3:14, 4:4–5; 5:21–23), which—Amos promises—has no power to divert God's attention from blatant social inequalities (5:21–24).

According to Amos's logic, the punishment fits the crime. The reason is easy to supply. Human beings are not very good at organizing themselves socially and politically. Fear of death and shortages means that humanly devised social systems inevitably spawn systemic evils, structures of cruelty that privilege some while degrading others. Systemic evils are deeply rooted in the fundamental organizing principles of society. Divine commands point to corrective compensations and adjustments. When these are persistently ignored, there is nothing left but to destroy the society whose infrastructures enforce the inequalities.

Exile represents the death of the nation, an end to its embodied existence in land and institutions. The exiled remnant will be a wraith, not only

Pastoral Perspective

Amos promises, becoming the first to go into exile. (The upper classes were, in fact, the first to go into imposed exile, both when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom and later when the southern kingdom came under the rule of the Babylonians.)

Amos's message could easily be addressed to us, living in prosperity and ease compared to so many of the world's citizens. Billions of people around the world continue to subsist on less than a dollar a day. Personal wealth is distributed so unevenly across the globe that the richest 2 percent of adults own more than 50 percent of the world's assets while the poorest half hold only 1 percent.¹ Within our own nation, there is tremendous inequity and serious poverty. To observe the suffering of others and do nothing is morally wrong and counter to the will of God.

Acquiring wealth through hard work in ways that are just and honest is a great gift from God, but that wealth must be shared with others. The overarching theme of Amos 6:1a and 4–7 is the sin of indifference. We are well aware that differences between people and nations can lead to serious and long-standing problems, but indifference is an even greater peril. Through the Old Testament's great leaders and prophets, through Jesus Christ and the apostles, and through all the saints of Christian history, God has stressed the commandment to love others as God loves us. When we become indifferent to God's people and creation, we stop caring and sharing that love. Indifference to others renders us less than fully human as we focus only on self-interests.

Perhaps no one has written more articulately about the problem and consequences of indifference than Elie Wiesel, the famous Holocaust survivor, author, and Nobel laureate. Wiesel was fifteen when he and his family were arrested by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz, where his mother and younger sister died. Wiesel and his father were then transferred to Buchenwald; his father died shortly before the camp was liberated in 1945. Wiesel has written extensively on the sin of indifference. In a White House lecture, he said that, etymologically, "indifference" means "no difference." Indifference is a "strange and unnatural state in which the lines blur between light and darkness, dusk and dawn, crime and punishment, cruelty and compassion, good and evil." Wiesel described how indifference reduces people to an abstraction. "Therefore,

1. *The Financial Times*, December 8, 2006, quoting a study done by the World Institute for Development Economic Research of the United Nations University.

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Exegetical Perspective

Several explanations have been given to clarify the use of the woe-cry “alas” expressed by the Hebrew word *hoy*. First of all, this word is found only in prophetic sayings and is normally followed by descriptions of what people are doing. Second, it is used in contexts in which a wail of grief is pronounced over the dead. In this context, what the prophetic proclamation conveys is the destruction of those living lives of luxury and leisure that cause violence and oppression—a total debauchery.

There is no question that the complacency and security of the upper classes meant insecurity, hard work, oppression, and marginalization for the poor. Besides the peasants who worked in the fields of the landowners or who rented lands from the rich, there was an important group of workers who did not live inside the cities, but near or on top of the city walls. Those workers—the prostitutes, butchers, entertainers, slaves, barbers, and so forth—were also oppressed, and although they performed important tasks for the benefit of the wealthy, they suffered ostracism and stigma.

Verses 4–6a further define who the rich evildoers are by describing what they do and how they live. Each verb is followed by words that portray their luxurious way of life far, far away from the lives of those living in the unprotected villages: the beds and couches in which they rest and sleep are the best furniture normally found in royal palaces—framed with fine woods inlaid with carved ivory. Their meals had as a main course the best meat: choice lambs and calves raised in especially designed stalls where they were well fed, with little space to move, so their meat was the most tender available in the market. While the upper class in Samaria was eating that succulent food, the majority of the population in Israel seldom ate meat. Most ate meat only three times a year, during the major yearly festivals, if they could afford it. The rich had so much time for leisure that they were able to spend hours making instruments and singing their improvised songs. The exaggeration of their opulent feasting is described by their use of bowls for drinking. People normally drank wine from a cup, but here the affluent drink in huge gold, silver, or bronze bowls usually found in temples for the presentation of offerings. While the wealthy imbibed huge quantities of costly wine, people were suffering from shortage of water (4:7–8). To further describe the lavishness of the affluent, Amos mentions the amount of money wasted on costly perfumes and ointments.

Some studies suggest that what Amos portrays in 6:4–6 is a religious event known in the ancient

Homiletical Perspective

bring music to us. The only reason we do not drink (really good) wine in bowls is that bowls have gone out of fashion.

Our problem is our inability to grieve. For Amos, “Joseph” is a portion of the people of Israel in serious trouble, while the comfortable are comfortably at ease. For the United States and Canada and most of the middle-class members of the industrialized world, there are Josephs everywhere. I write these words in part because it is more comfortable to read Amos than to watch Haiti, living out the terrible wound inflicted by an earthquake.

There is much here to ask God about, but Amos also calls us to ask ourselves. How did this neighbor become so outrageously poor, its infrastructure so fragile, that an earthquake that would cause trouble for California causes utter devastation there? In some ways we are better neighbors than the priest and the Levite of the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. In the face of this terrible crisis we are not passing by on the other side of the road.

However, we were pretty much missing in action when it came to asking how the poor Haitian people could be so vulnerable, so easily victimized, so beaten.

On the home front, in the wake of considerable economic turmoil, the nations rush to restore stability to comfortable retirees and luxury to entrepreneurial financiers, and all the homeless, hungry Josephs of our own nations wander wounded just off stage.

What is perhaps hardest of all is that among the luxuries we most enjoy are the luxurious churches. I have pushed capital campaigns to endow more beds of ivory and to hire world-class harpists for our music ministry.

So how do we preach Amos 6? We can simply describe our world as Amos described his, acknowledging that most of us preachers are neither prophets nor prophets’ children, and that we stand entirely judged by the judgment Amos pronounces in YHWH’s name. Amos accuses us of forgetting how to grieve, and perhaps it is a valid purpose for a sermon sometimes to inflict grief upon us. Grief here means opening our eyes and opening our ears and paying attention.

We acknowledge the reality of judgment. Amos does not just scold Israel; he predicts, promises banishment and the end of revelry, a final bonfire of the vanities. Nothing in our faith and nothing in a careful reading of history suggests that self-indulgence

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Theological Perspective

geographically dislocated, but spiritually dissociated. Even “lucky” individuals who escape the sword suffer a social death. Who are we, what do we mean, when our social system crashes and burns? When social change or relocation or retirement uproots us from the roles we played, the performances for which we were recognized, the positions in terms of which everyone identified us?

Happily, if God is both creator and destroyer, God is also the one who resurrects. Less than two centuries later, when it was Judah’s turn to fall and be hauled into exile, rabbinic Judaism was born in Babylon. Forcibly stripped of what she could not let go of, exiled Judah was more malleable, readier to reorder priorities, to restructure community life in godly ways.

Amos’s invectives “hit home” for us, who live in the lap of luxury, in a wealthy “developed” nation that abandons millions of people to live on the street, that resists adjustments to guarantee health care to everyone, that withholds funds for public education, that drags its feet when it comes to doing our share to meet the crises of climate change. To the extent that we define ourselves in terms of our social positions and functions, these injustices are rooted in the core of who we are. Is there still time for us to repent and to make midcourse corrections? Are we too deaf and too late? Will God have to let our way of life “go to smash,” to strip out our privilege-centered identities, to make us fit for the coming reign of God?

MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS

Pastoral Perspective

indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor—never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees—not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.”²

The fall is typically the time of year when the church focuses most on stewardship. For many parishioners, stewardship is synonymous with annual giving campaigns. It is a topic they would prefer to ignore. Nonetheless, stewardship is a critical theme in all of Scripture, because God calls us, as human beings, to be stewards of all creation. Everything we have—time, talents, money, health, air, water, wealth, and relationships—is a gift from God. We are to be stewards of all those gifts, using them for God’s purposes and sharing abundantly.

This passage from Amos is a powerful reminder that those who hoard their wealth and are indifferent to the needs of others bring punishment upon themselves. When we fail to share what we have with others, we violate God’s will for our lives and never experience the joy of giving. If we turn away from those in need, we slowly and insidiously diminish the quality of our own lives. When we grow apathetic, we deny the fullness of our humanity. God blesses us so we can be a blessing to others. By caring and sharing, we can each make a difference in our own lives, as well as the lives of others.

At times, the needs of others seem overwhelming. Our resources—be they time, talent, or money—are limited. We cannot help everyone, but all of us can help someone. That will make all the difference. The nineteenth-century author and minister Edward Everett Hale left us a legacy of wisdom: “I am only one, but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”³

CATHERINE F. YOUNG

2. Elie Wiesel, “The Perils of Indifference,” delivered on April 12, 1999, Washington, DC.

3. These words are engraved on Hale’s statue in the Boston Public Gardens and come from his book *Ten Times One Is Ten* (1870).

Amos 6:1a, 4–7

Exegetical Perspective

Near East as a *marseah* banquet. If this is true, then what we have here is not only the depiction of the extravagant life of the upper classes that results in injustice to the poor, but also an act of idolatry. This, in fact, is what other parts of the Old and New Testaments confirm time and time again: injustice and idolatry go together. Those in power were able to practice this type of pagan or idolatrous religion because they were the only ones who could enjoy expending so much wealth in Israelite society. Thus Amos implicitly tells readers that the whole of the Decalogue has been violated by the rich and powerful: the commandments to honor God and neighbor.

Verse 7 gives the verdict that “the first” (v. 1) in society will now be the first to go into exile; those who lived in extravagant indulgence will experience what the “day of disaster” has in store for them, and they will know what mourning really is. In a way, verse 7 is good news for the poor who are the victims of the affluent. This message is echoed in Matthew 5:3–11 and Luke 6:20–26, where those who inherit God’s kingdom of peace and justice are the poor and those who practice justice and solidarity with them (see also Matt. 25:31–46).

EDESIO SANCHEZ

Homiletical Perspective

can ever endure unpunished or that self-absorption is ever the way to real blessedness. Sometimes preaching judgment means looking ahead. Sometimes preaching judgment means looking around. If faithful people have not noticed a deficit of compassion in our middle-class society in recent years, we simply have not been looking carefully enough. Our souls would be entirely grieved at Joseph’s wounds, had we not so diminished them by selfishness.

The good news is that God gives a damn. The good news is that we are not permitted to ignore the suffering around us indefinitely and without consequence. The good news is that God cares so for the poor that God intends to right their wrongs; the good news is that God cares so for the comfortable that God has no intention of letting us get away with being selfish. If our transgressions do not matter to God, we do not matter to God. To stand under God’s judgment is to stand under God’s love.

In March of 1965 Martin Luther King Jr. spoke on the steps of the Alabama state capitol speaking of judgment and hope.

I know what you are asking, “How long will it take?”

I say, not long, because you reap what you sow.

I say, not long, because the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.¹

Faithful preaching trusts that God is God and will be God. Faithful preaching urges us to grieve for the wounds of Joseph: to notice them, to attend to them, and insofar as God grants, to begin to heal, to serve the justice that is, after all, God’s justice.

Faithful preaching may begin by inducing grief. Faithful preaching moves on to induce responsibility. William Sloane Coffin used to paraphrase Cain’s dialogue with God. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “No, you are your brother’s brother.” We are Joseph’s brothers and sisters; Joseph’s wounds are our mission.

DAVID L. BARTLETT

1. Quoted in Arthur Howe, Open Salon Web site, <http://open.salon.com> (January 19, 2009).

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**PROPER 22 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 2
AND OCTOBER 8 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalm 37:1-9

¹Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
²for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.
³Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
⁴Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

⁵Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.

Theological Perspective

Imagine reading Psalm 37 in a different context, one in which it was presented simply as the elegantly written poem that it is. As readers we would not be likely to categorize it as part of a worship service. There is no word directed toward God or any outstanding feature that would identify it as a liturgical text. The poem consists of kindly advice to a fellow traveler on the way. It is an impartation of wisdom, written by someone who perhaps has gotten burned and learned the hard way that those who prosper by carrying out evil devices do not succeed in the long run. For that reason, the poem represents an expression of pastoral concern to remind the more naive among us that success in this life is not all that the touts might want us to believe.

Psalm 37 is not primarily a poem or an advice column for the distraught, although it serves those purposes extraordinarily well. By its inclusion in the book of Psalms, we know that it is a hymn meant for worship. In other words, this psalm provides guidance on how to live one's life in praise to God. Living according to the precepts of the psalm is in itself a form of worship. When we abandon our fretting, envy, jealousy, anger, and wrath, we not only enjoy a better life personally, but we glorify God. Our life and the way we live it from Monday to

Pastoral Perspective

A recent book by journalist Shira Boss, *Green with Envy: Why Keeping Up with the Joneses Is Keeping Us in Debt*, is a revealing portrait of how the grass is often not nearly as green on the other side of the fence as we suppose. In fact, her journalistic exploration shows that not infrequently what appear to be lives of comfort and ease are full of pretense, anxiety, and thinly veiled despair. The "green" in the phrase "green with envy" turns out to be an image not so much of wealth as of illness. Her point is that our envy is both misplaced (because it is directed toward a mirage) and dangerous (because it seduces us into life patterns that are destructive).

Psalm 37 is similarly attentive to misplaced envy. While the psalm has in view apparent prosperity, it adds a moral dimension to the equation. The envy against which it warns, beginning in the very first verse, is an envy of prosperity that follows from evil and wickedness. Thus the issue with which it contends is even more complex than the one Shira Boss uncovers. It probes more deeply into our psyches and souls, forcing us to reckon with one of the most haunting questions hanging over the human experience: shall we live our lives assuming that the last word is that evidenced in the prosperity and power of the wicked; or will we be bold and

Psalm 37:1-9

⁶He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.

⁷Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

⁸Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

⁹For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Exegetical Perspective

This psalm about fear, rage, and doubt bears remarkable timeliness for believing communities in the United States today. Fear, rage, and doubt are common reactions to simply looking around at the world. If we read further ahead than the assigned lectionary passage, to verses 12–14, we find the psalmist writing about some of the same concerns we have today. Today, as in the psalmist’s time, the wicked prosper, plot against the righteous (v. 12), draw the sword, bring down the poor and the needy, and kill those who walk uprightly (v. 14). To people who seem to have lost complete confidence in the justice of God, this psalm urges renewed trust.

Often called a Wisdom psalm, Psalm 37 is didactic in style, like the book of Proverbs, as it divides groups of people into polar opposites: the righteous and the wicked. Its principal teaching is that God will bestow life, abundance, and justice upon the faithful, who will “inherit the earth.” The psalmist assures readers that this inheritance will come to them because God loves justice (v. 28).

One of the more interesting features of this psalm is it that it is an acrostic poem or hymn. Acrostics arrange literary material in alphabetical order. The forty verses of this psalm devote two verses each to the sequential letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The acrostic may function as a mnemonic device or serve

Homiletical Perspective

Some theological traditions refuse to preach from the Psalms. They embrace the role of the Psalms, exclusive of their homiletical impulses. For most of my ministry, the Psalter has rarely made its way to the pulpit, but has regularly contributed its liturgical and musical voice to worship.

Recently, the worship team in the congregation that I serve decided to spend a summer guided not only by the liturgical and musical voice of the psalter, but also by its homiletical potential. It was a rich experience for preacher and people as we feasted on this remarkable ancient collection of songs of praise, lament, petition, wisdom, intercession, and thanksgiving. With liturgy, music, proclamation, and sacrament crafted in response and in conversation with a psalm each Sunday, both preacher and congregation were richly blessed. This was a worship experience that I commend to any preacher/congregation ready to be challenged to delve deeply into the theological beauty and complexity alive within the Psalter.

A good starting point for a homiletical focus on the psalms in worship would be this portion of Psalm 37, a Wisdom psalm that addresses those trying to remain faithful to God despite temptations to the contrary. As modern preachers address the beleaguered faithful filling church pews in the

Psalm 37:1-9

Theological Perspective

Saturday are a fundamental part of our worship of God on Sunday. Life, done well, is worship.

The psalmist provides us with a stark contrast between those who do life well and those who do well in life. To do well in this life nearly always requires a compromise of values. Furthermore, doing well by earthly standards never lasts long, as the psalmist notes. The grass and herbs fade back into the dirt from which they came; how much more so will the wicked someday rot away atop their polluted lifestyle. In verse 9, the psalmist reminds us that “the wicked shall be cut off.” Their lives and the sum total of their striving will come to naught. In a warning that is more terrifying even than insistence on the ultimate failure of their striving, the psalmist implies that they will be cut off *from God*. For an Israelite, such banishment was a fate worse than death. In Jewish theology, heaven is not a location but a condition in which one enjoys the full presence of God. Hell is to be cut off from God. That will be the fate of all who seek to thrive by relying on worldly, wicked routes to power.

True thriving, that is, life done well, is to be with God. The psalmist helps us understand that being with God is not just acquisition of real estate in God’s immediate vicinity. To be with God is a way of living, as we trust (vv. 3 and 5), take delight in (v. 4), commit our way to (v. 5), wait patiently for (vv. 7 and 9), and are still before (v. 7) the Lord. These ways of being in God’s presence conjure up feelings of peaceful calm, assurance, contentment, and bliss. They are in stark contrast to the other ways we might choose to live: fret (vv. 1, 7, and 8), envy (v. 1), anger (v. 8), and wrath (v. 8). Each of these modes of being evokes images of discontent, distress, agony, and tempestuous rage.

The word translated as “fret,” from the Hebrew, *charah*, is much more evocative of anguish and violence than the English implies. Although it is translated as “fret” three times in Psalm 37, and a fourth time in a similar context in Proverbs 24:19, elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Scriptures it refers to anger or jealousy so strong that one ignites oneself over it. In the many places where it appears, it is translated in one or more combinations of the following: to burn, to kindle with anger, to be incensed, and to heat oneself in vexation.¹ This is not your garden variety of fretting, as in a parent fretting about a child’s messy room. It refers to an

Pastoral Perspective

faithful to assume that the decisive clue is found in the providence of God?¹

It is especially telling that the psalm links this problem of envy to exhortations not to “fret.” In these nine verses the warning is repeated three times, signaling the danger that our consciousness can be captured and dominated by the prosperity and success of those who proceed not on the basis of compassion and mutual obligation but simply on the basis of self-serving greed. The problem is that it seems to work exquisitely well so often. How can we not “fret” about it, and yes, even (silently?) envy it?

What head of household trying to make a decent life for her or his family does not take note of stories of ruthlessness that have led some few to great wealth, exempting them from all the ordinary strains of “making ends meet” in everyday life? Having taken note of it, who is not simultaneously tempted to envy the ill-gotten gain and to grow deeply angry about the injustice of it all? The psalm acknowledges the claim that such unrighteous behavior leading to obvious success has on us. It warns us that it leads to blind alleys of both “frustrated envious vexation and destructive anger.”² Indeed, the culminating danger in this passage is an anger and wrath stemming from envy that paradoxically embroils the envious in evil themselves: “Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil” (v.8).

Interwoven with the prosperity of the wicked through these nine verses are counterpoint themes of the endurance, security, vindication, and inheritance of the righteous. By weaving these themes into the tapestry of the psalm, the writer unfolds assurances and promises ultimately grounded in the promise to Abraham. Twice in these verses the promise of the land is invoked explicitly (vv. 3 and 9). This offers an alternative consciousness to those of us tempted to allow our imaginations to be dominated by the success of the wicked. It is the consciousness of a long, unfolding story of a place of security and well-being intended as the dwelling place for God’s people.

Whereas the ephemeral quality of the success achieved by the unjust is described—fading like the grass, withering like green herbs, being cut off (vv. 2 and 9)—the long-term vision for life in the land is depicted as enduring security and solid inheritance. The point for the psalmist is that everything is a question of the future. In the providence and plan of God, unrighteousness, evil, and wickedness

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 354.

1. See James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 158.
2. *Ibid.*, 159.

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Exegetical Perspective

to encompass available information, as if gathering up all possible advice from A to Z within its verses. Perhaps, as I prefer to think, the alphabetic arrangement expresses the psalmist's effort to contain fear, rage, and doubt; the structure suggests that these feelings can be gathered, contained, and healed within the psalm itself.

Today's reading from Psalm 37 stops at verse 9, but these verses form a comprehensive introduction to the larger text. The passage divides into five parts of two verses each, following the first five letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Within that acrostic structure appear three repetitions of the psalm's opening command, "Do not fret" (vv. 1, 7, 8). This command creates a frame around the middle verses that, in turn, command positive behaviors: Do Not Fret (vv. 1-2); What to Do and Why (vv 3-7a); Do Not Fret (vv. 7b-9).

Do Not Fret. The Hebrew word translated "fret" in verses 1-2 means "to burn," to get "hot with anger." The triple occurrences of the imperative against fretting (vv. 1, 7, 8) suggest that the psalmist's readers face deeply troubling matters that make them upset, disturbed, and angry because of the actions of the wicked. The text also prohibits envy. Envy against prosperous wrongdoers is a waste of energy, because the wicked are as ephemeral as grass, about to fade and wither in the hot sun (v. 2).

What to Do and Why. In verses 3-7a, the psalmist gives the antidote to fretting and envying the wicked: shift the focus of life elsewhere, gaze upon God. The second unit of the psalm continues with strong imperatives: trust, do good, take delight, commit, and trust. They call for absolute loyalty to God: "trust in the LORD, . . . take delight in the LORD, . . . commit your way to the LORD." These actions will quiet the fretting, cool off anger, and bring peace amid turmoil over unjust and dishonest social relations. The psalm does not simply demand readers to do these positive things; it also provides reasons to do them. It motivates them to reset their attentions from the prosperity of the wicked to right relationship with God: from this realignment toward God, all else flows.

The psalm advises the hearer to trust God so that you "will live in the land, and enjoy security" (v. 3); to delight in God to receive "the desires of your heart" (v. 4); and to commit your way, that is, dedicate your whole being to God—trust, and God will act (v. 5). These commands and their

Homiletical Perspective

twenty-first century, they are speaking to those who struggle to hold on to their faith amid a culture that worships prosperity, a morality that settles for sheer expediency, and a rampant cynicism that refuses to trust in anything, most especially God. Psalm 37 speaks a surprisingly contemporary word of theological challenge from an ancient, and some would contend arcane, voice.

In an age of anxiety, in which we are waiting for a better economy, waiting for a winning lottery ticket, waiting for the acceptance letter, waiting for the next job, waiting for the chemotherapy to start working, in Psalm 37, the psalmist invites us to "wait for the LORD" (v. 9). Those who wait for the Lord share at least two faith traits. First, unlike Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*,¹ those who wait for the Lord are not fools, looking for the arrival of someone who will never come. The faithful do not know when or how, but those who wait for the Lord know that the Lord comes, has come, and will come, and so trust in the truth of the closing refrain in Revelation 22: "See, I am coming soon." Second, those who wait for the Lord are not passive pedestrians waiting for the crossing guard to tell them when to walk and when to stay put; they live confidently in the present and are engaged in God's work in the world, risking, loving, witnessing, always believing the psalmist: "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act" (v. 5).

No matter how strong her rhetoric, the psalmist knows that she is climbing a steep hill with nine verses of imperatives imploring the righteous to remain righteous while faced with injustice and surrounded by the seductive lures of ill-gained prosperity. Throughout the psalm, she argues for what is true over what is apparent. What is eternally true is that God is sovereign and just. What is temporarily apparent is that the wicked succeed and the unjust prosper. The psalmist challenges her readers to "take delight in the LORD" (v. 4), even when life is neither delightful nor fair. Writing in a similar vein from the pain of exile, the prophet Isaiah sings, "Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isa. 40:31).

Later on, the most righteous, crucified one will teach the community from the psalmist's and prophet's song of trust in God. Offering his own

1. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).

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older notion of fretting as a torment that slowly devours one's heart and soul, from the Old English *fretan*, "to eat" (OED). The Hebrew *charah* does not refer to an action that occurs subtly, but in a way that is fiery, violent, and all-consuming. In other words, it is hell. It is a life cut off from God. When we fret because evil people succeed through nefarious ways, we suffer the same fate that they do. Our road to hell may be less immediately obvious, but it will happen all the same. We end up no better off than they are, in a burned-out existence estranged from God.

Fortunately this is a pastoral psalm, not a judgmental one. The underlying message is one of hope. By leaving the wicked to their self-imposed path of imminent destruction, we are freed to enjoy the peace and contentment of a life with God. Like that band of Hebrew slaves long ago, we are released from the bondage of evil to live fully in the presence of God. The shorthand term that the Israelites use to indicate living in God's presence is "the land" (*ha'aretz*). Geographically the term refers to Palestine, but the psalmist is speaking theologically about the unceasing goodness that God's presence entails. Through the evocative phrase *ha'aretz*, the psalmist immediately triggers images from Deuteronomy, such as 8:7-10, about the richness of the land, and most importantly 11:12b: "The eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." Living in the land means enjoying God's continuous presence. Life done well frees us to live in the land without being cut off, liberated for a life of worship within the arms of our bounteous God.

REBECCA BLAIR YOUNG

Pastoral Perspective

have no future. They are quite literally "nothing." They will not abide. The abiding future is the one that has animated the story of God's people from the beginning, a promise of dwelling in peace and security.

The real problem with the envy that the psalm attacks is that it occludes this promised future. With one's consciousness held captive to the image of the prosperity of the wicked, there is no imaginative space left open for our minds and hearts to be captivated by the promise of God's future. So the psalm begins to wedge open just such imaginative space in its call to "trust in the LORD, . . . take delight in the LORD, . . . commit your way to the LORD, . . . be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him" (vv. 3, 4, 5, and 7). This trusting, delighting, committing, and waiting does not take place before a vague and unknown God of indeterminate intentions. Instead, it is a standing before the God who intends to "make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday" (v. 6). It is a waiting before the God who from the time of Abraham has promised an inheritance of land, livelihood, and security to those who will commit themselves to life patterned on the love of God and neighbor. This is the future that has substance and will endure.

Psalm 37 thus offers an antidote to the fretful and angry envy arising from our preoccupation with the prosperity of wicked. It is the spiritual discipline of focusing our attention, not on the ephemeral success of unjust practices, but on the promised inheritance of land—a place of life and security—that God intends for all those who trust and delight in the good ways of God. With our minds and hearts fixed there, we can be at ease.

D. CAMERON MURCHISON

Psalm 37:1-9

Exegetical Perspective

motivations set out a spirituality of trust in face of massive injustice and turbulent life. The final motivation, the basis for the trust and the source of hope, receives an entire verse of its own: God will “make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday” (v. 6). God is the one who acts and will bring justice. Human willfulness and mental games cannot overcome fretting, worry, envy, or anger. God is the one who will do these things, because God loves justice (v. 28).

If that is so, then what is the hearer to do? The next verse summarizes the psalmist’s commands in an explicit call for a posture of trust. “Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently” (v. 7). Being still and waiting patiently is not to do nothing; it is not passivity in the face of wickedness. Being still and waiting patiently are acts of supreme trust that involve a gathering up of life’s energies, a focusing of devotion in an active and continuing decision to live in the presence of God. It means to hold fast to the tradition, to keep priorities clear, and to trust that the universe is not ruled by evil, chaos, or divine indifference but by an observant and just God. This is what it means to trust God. Because God loves justice and keeps safe the faithful ones (v. 28), they should not “fret.”

Do Not Fret. The third unit, verses 7b–9, closes the frame around the call to right living and reprises the theme of the triumph of the wicked. Fretting “leads only to evil,” so do not do it. Eventually, the “wicked will be cut off,” so give up fretting and replace it by waiting for the Lord. The Hebrew word translated “wait” carries nuances of expectant hope. To wait for God is to live in hope. This is an active, obedient means of setting life on the right path.

In the midst of a world where political, economic, and religious systems seem to be falling apart, where personal sureties fade from sight, this psalm calls for a spirituality of confident trust in God, who seeks justice for all people.

KATHLEEN M. O’CONNOR

Homiletical Perspective

interpretation of Psalm 37:11, “But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity,” Jesus announces, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). Expanding the psalmist’s plea in 37:7b, “do not fret over those who prosper in their own way,” Jesus warns, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Expanding on the psalmist’s instruction in 37:3, “Trust in the LORD, and do good; so you will live in the land and enjoy security,” Jesus promises his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

This text confronts afresh preachers and congregations, who are wrestling with the perennial question: where do I place my trust? This is not just a theoretical, theological quandary; it plays out directly in choices of how we live in the world. The temptations to live a “wicked” life are far more real than the caricature that the faithful often make of the “wicked.” James Mays captures the spiritual predicament about which this psalm warns when he writes, “The addressees of the imperatives at the psalm’s beginning are not spoken to as the self-confident righteous. They are people who are in danger of falling into frustrated envious vexation and even destructive anger (vv. 1, 7, 8). . . . Their consciousness has been captured by the success of people who do not follow the way of the LORD.”²

In a society that calls for trust in almost anything other than God, this psalm, and this portion of the psalm, offers a fine starting point not just for sermons from the Psalms, but for Christian lives shaped by the fundamental theological convictions of the Psalter.

GARY W. CHARLES

2. James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 159.

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**PROPER 23 (SUNDAY BETWEEN
OCTOBER 9 AND OCTOBER 16 INCLUSIVE)**

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." . . .

⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

⁸But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the

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The book of 2 Kings includes a number of stories about Elisha the prophet. He assists a widow, resurrects a child, feeds the hungry with food to spare, and, in this narrative, heals a leper, reminding us how Jesus' care for the marginalized poor is a continuation of the Hebrew prophets' long established practice. In the wider context of God's way of working, this narrative repeats a common theme: God's will is done through the intercession of a slave on foreign soil. In the book of Exodus, Joseph is betrayed by his brothers but becomes a hero in Egypt. Here we have a girl betrayed by her people, in the sense that Israel's unfaithfulness to God causes her to be taken into slavery. The Arameans capture her and bring her to Aram, where as a slave she becomes a hero to their commander in chief.

In describing Israel's enemies, the author of this passage does not reduce characters to stereotypes. The commander Naaman may be a powerful enemy leader, but the author reminds us that he is an honorable man to whom the Lord has given victory in battle. The passage starts off with a list of praises for Naaman, including the significant detail that God allowed him to defeat Israel in battle. The Israelite audience for this passage would immediately perk up their ears. Later in this story we see that Naaman, despite fits of vanity, is willing

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The story of Naaman and Elisha is replete with contrasts between the high and mighty and the meek and lowly, between the agents of oppression and the objects of that domination, and between grand gestures for healing and simple acts that cleanse. In and through these contrasts, the community of faith that attends to the story is taught about the variety of human needs and about the ways of God's healing presence.

Naaman is introduced in the story with some pathos. He is a distinguished, effective, and faithful servant of the king of Aram whom even YHWH seems to have favored. However, this "mighty warrior" suffered from leprosy. Right at the beginning of the story, readers are reminded that there is always more than meets the eye in human experience. There is no person, however successful and accomplished, who does not have demons with which to contend or difficulties to overcome. Though this story will draw readers' attention to lowly figures almost immediately, it begins with a sympathetic look at a mighty one.

In so doing, it invites anyone inclined to believe that "successful" people do not contend with life's hard places to think again. While it may be a part of human nature, most clearly revealed by the commandment not to covet, always to assume that those whose lives seem more fitted with the

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Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.”

¹¹But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” ¹⁴So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

¹⁵Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

Exegetical Perspective

This story from the Elisha cycle invites many avenues of reflection for the preacher. It touches on limits of hope, on nationalistic blindness, and on the role of the least important people in revealing the power of God to bring healing to all people without price.

Naaman, an Aramean military man, not an Israelite, is one of the principal characters in this reading. Aram, present-day Syria, invaded and controlled Israel (2 Kgs. 10:32), so it is not surprising that nationalistic impulses find expression in this story. Naaman is a close ally of the Aramean king and a highly regarded figure in the land, but he suffers from the dread disease of leprosy. Leprosy was a term for many skin diseases in the ancient world, some of which were considered highly contagious and lethal. Lepers were often cast out of society and forced to ring a bell and cover their faces as others approached them.

Although Naaman’s illness is the primary problem in the story, a servant girl taken into captivity from Israel moves the plot along in important theological ways, despite having a very small part. In the text’s opening scene (vv. 1–3), the unnamed girl is a servant to Naaman’s wife. She confides to her mistress that Naaman might be cured of his leprosy were he in the presence of a prophet from Samaria. The lectionary skips the next four

Homiletical Perspective

Characters in great stories cannot be easily reduced to stereotypes, and the account of Naaman’s healing in 2 Kings is a great story. The preacher who thoughtfully engages Naaman’s troubles, listens to the voices of the Israelite servants, and observes Elisha’s understated actions will, in the end, come to know something of the chief “character” behind it all: the God of Israel. Creative sermon possibilities come from asking questions of these characters and allowing them to ask questions of us.

The first set of questions concerns boundaries. When it comes to a relationship with God, who is “in” and who is “out”? Who is in need, and who has something to offer? The very introduction of Naaman in 5:1 immediately muddies the answers to these questions. Although Naaman is an Aramean, not an Israelite, he is YHWH’s instrument. Although he is a great man, wielding power, control, and influence with the king of Aram, he lacks control over his own body. The attention of the servant girl to his plight suggests that his leprosy casts a pall over his otherwise flourishing household. Naaman is, in other words, a living contradiction: mighty but needy, outside the chosen people yet favored by God.

In contrast to Naaman stand the servants. If Naaman is a historical winner—to use a contemporary phrase—they are historical losers, serving

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

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to heed the advice of underlings, including a slave girl and his own servants. He is not a bad man but one whom the Lord sees fit to bless with military accomplishments against Israel. Clearly we see the fundamental Jewish belief that even their defeats are orchestrated by God through flawed but redeemable outsiders. Through this perspective they implicitly acknowledge that God can bless non-Jews. In fact the entire story hinges on the idea that God not only blesses but heals (i.e., saves) people outside Israel, just as the slave girl promises Naaman's wife.

Yet another theme is that the mighty are brought down and the small are lifted up, here in the context of disease and healing. All Naaman's might and military honor cannot save him from disease. The things Naaman enjoys—military victory, his king's favor, the spoils of war, and the pick of slaves from the prisoners of war—are precisely what ought to give a person great popularity. However, of all the diseases a human can suffer from, he suffers from one that ostracizes him from society. He cannot relish his current status as hero, because his skin makes him repulsive to be around. Since Naaman's leprosy is not just personal but apparently constitutes a problem of international diplomacy, his king agrees to write a formal letter to a neighboring king and send precious metals worth about 2.5 million dollars in today's market. Talk about governmental overexpenditure for health care!

Without an audible laugh track to the Bible, one might miss the humor of the scene when Naaman first visits Elisha. Naaman arrives at Elisha's house in his fine chariot with its bevy of servants and horses, but he does not get down. He expects Elisha to come out to him. The setting encourages us to imagine Elisha glancing out the window as he contemplates what instructions befit his petitioner's haughtiness. Naaman meanwhile grows frustrated as he envisions how Elisha should be by the chariot, casting a magical spell on Naaman seated high above him.

Instead, Elisha sends a messenger with instructions for healing that are unique to the Scriptures, which is why they seem tailored to Naaman. He is to lower himself seven times into a muddy creek, as it is decried by an appalled Naaman after hearing Elisha's instructions. Through the prophet's command, God literally puts down the mighty from their seat. All humor aside, Elisha's intent is not to display his wizardry but to have Naaman bring himself down to a human level and to do so seven times. Seven is a biblical code word for completely, so he must do so with his heart, mind, and soul.

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trappings of attainment and success get a free pass with respect to suffering, Naaman's plight is a reminder that it is likely never so. Thus compassion for fellow humans is obligated to move in all directions, not only to the lowly in their pain, but to the mighty in their afflictions as well.

If the story introduces Naaman with pathos, it introduces the servant girl of Naaman's wife with considerable irony as she attends to this mighty one in his affliction. That she would do so seems remarkable. She serves in this household because she has been taken captive in the course of a raid by the Arameans into Israel. We might easily forgive her if she kept to herself her knowledge of the prophet who could cure leprosy. She does not. She sympathizes with her captor and volunteers the knowledge that may set Naaman free of his disease. One wonders if this servant girl may have embraced Esther's challenge in reverse (Esth. 4:14), coming not to "royal dignity" but to servitude "for just such a time as this."

As odd as it may seem that one who has endured captivity and indentured service would see her own plight as opportunity to witness to God's unfolding plan for the well-being of her overlords, the story makes plain that she acts to share liberating knowledge with them. This servant girl thus reminds us that even the negative movements in our own life stories can lead us to places where we can give voice to the power of God to cleanse and free others. To put it another way, notwithstanding deprived circumstances we can share what we have learned about the power of God to make life flourish, even for the authors of our own deprivation. Such possibilities are glimpsed in our own experience when persons who have known calamity turn out to be the ones who articulate most clearly for us how God may be at work in our own points of need.

While Naaman is introduced with pathos and the servant girl with irony, the king of Israel is introduced into the story with comedy. The comic effect is achieved through the delivery, to the doorstep of the king, of a letter intended for the prophet. Not recognizing he is not the primary audience for the letter, the king blusters in his panic: "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me" (v. 7). Surprisingly, his bluster is theologically insightful, in that he rightly identifies God as the true sovereign over life and death, a confession of faith whose actualization is about to unfold in the

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

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verses, in which the king of Aram sends Naaman to Israel with a letter to Israel's king, asking him to cure Naaman's leprosy.

This request terrifies the king of Israel, who tears his clothes in response to the letter in an act of mourning. The Israelite king has no way to cure the Aramean officer; only God has power over life and death, and the king knows he is not God (v. 7). He assumes, instead, that the Aramean king is looking for an excuse to "quarrel" with him, so he fears the consequences of his powerlessness over sickness. The king's response heightens the difficulty of the situation as he imagines hidden threat from a foreign power.

The next scene (vv. 8–10) resumes the story of the prophet Elisha. Unnamed by the servant girl originally (v. 3), Elisha is the "man of God" of whom she spoke and the successor to the prophet Elijah. Elisha receives word of the king's clothes-tearing ritual and knows its significance. "Why have you torn your clothes?" he asks the king, (v. 8). When the king offers no reply, the text shifts attention to the prophet's authority: "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel" (v. 8). Elisha, not the king, is directly connected to God in this story about prophetic powers. The prophet of Israel will be stronger than prophets in Aram. Because of his connection to the God of Israel, Elisha alone can claim authority over life and death, illness and healing.

What happens next continues to bring out the nationalistic elements of the story (vv. 9–15). Accompanied by an entourage of horses and chariots that show Naaman's high rank, the Aramean general comes to Elisha's house. He neither dismounts from his chariot nor enters Elisha's house. Nor does the prophet go out to meet him. Elisha ignores his visitor's importance by sending a messenger with a verbal prescription to restore Naaman's health. Naaman must ritually wash himself seven times in the river Jordan. After cleansing in that Israelite river for the perfect number of times, "your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean" (v. 10).

Naaman, the foreign enemy, doubts the value of this proposal, and he does not believe in the superior powers of the Israelite river, of Israel's prophet, or of Israel's God. He has been insulted by not gaining an audience with the prophet himself. He had expectations about how healing should take place. The prophet would "call on the name of . . . his God" and "wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy" (v. 11). Naaman has narrowed the possible

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Naaman's household because their people have lost in battle. It also may seem that they have lost YHWH's favor—or have they? Despite her status, the servant girl of verse 2 has a powerful word to proclaim: there is healing with God's prophet in Samaria. Similarly, when Naaman refuses Elisha's cure in an arrogant and ethnocentric snit (vv. 11–12), the servants again rebuke him and persuade him to return to the source of real healing. Even in their captive, lowly, needy position, the Israelite servants have something to offer: recognition of how YHWH acts through the prophet. In the end, they are not servants of Naaman; they are witnesses to the one true God, who has power over life and death, sickness and health, war and peace.

In the story, then, greatness and weakness are turned on their heads. That is what God does! In composing a sermon, the preacher might explore how God is at work among us, disrupting the categories that we use to classify or categorize one another. In God's own order, the powerful are needy receivers, and the captives are powerful preachers. Depending on the spiritual state (and social location) of the congregation, the preacher may want to investigate the ways we become so focused on status and belonging that we fail to see God at work. How, the preacher may ask, does God break into our world through people and situations we do not expect?

The second preaching possibility could concern the means through which Naaman is healed. Healing comes through the word of God's prophet Elisha, and the contrast between Elisha and Naaman could not be more stark. Naaman's great display of power and wealth—his horses and chariots—is met with understated response on the part of the prophet. He speaks through a messenger and tells Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan and be clean. It is an easy thing to do, yet Naaman is angered by the simplicity of the command. He wants a cure fitting his status, and he wants a show: "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!" (v. 11). It is a revealing moment: Naaman, the commander, wants control over his cure. He is not yet willing to receive the simple healing that God offers through the quiet word of the prophet and a bath in the humble Jordan.

It is tempting for preachers here to hold Naaman up as a negative moral example. This is not who we should be as people of faith. We should be more humble. However, the truth is that most of us

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

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The result of Naaman’s willingness to come down from his mighty seat is expressed most poignantly in the author’s choices of two sets of words. First, the passage begins with Naaman being advised by *na’arah qetannah*, a young girl. At the end of the passage, after Naaman is healed, the author says that his skin was like that of *na’ar qaton*, a young boy. The parallel is unmistakable: Naaman’s healing makes him physically resemble the slave girl. The second remarkable choice of words also sets up a similar parallel. The first verse describes Naaman’s relationship with the Aramean king using the word *panim*. The literal translation is “before, with, or at the face of,” as in, being with, in full view of, engaged in dialogue with, or someone who is fully present to the other. Thus we are told Naaman has the ear of the king. In verse 2, the description of the slave girl uses the word *panim* to describe her relationship to Naaman’s wife; she is the wife’s compassionate companion, who imparts advice on how to help cure the husband’s distressing illness. In the next verse, the girl uses the same word, *panim*, to posit how Naaman can be cured: by being fully present to the prophet of Israel. Naaman neglects the girl’s advice when he first arrives at Elisha’s house and demands to be served, rather “being with” Elisha.

Finally, in verse 15 the story comes to a satisfying resolution. Not only does Elisha *shub*, or “turn around,” that is, repent of the error of his ways and go back to speak to the prophet, but the author uses the term *panim* to describe how Naaman was fully present to Elisha as he confessed his faith in Israel’s God. By the end of the story, Naaman has come to resemble the faithful servant girl both physically and spiritually. His healing, far beyond skin deep, has profound meaning for the way he conducts his entire life, and leads him to confess faith in the Holy One of Israel.

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experience of Naaman.¹ Thus the comic figure of the king reminds us that, even in our human confusion and panic, we sometimes may speak truths of God almost unaware.

As the story moves to its central scene between Naaman and Elisha, the prophet is introduced as one who is thoroughly understated with reference to the healing power of God. As it turns out, he is also unimpressed with the pomp and splendor of the “mighty warrior” who has come to his house. A band of chariots and horses noisily arrives at his door, and he apparently does not even get up to look out the window! Instead he sends a servant with simple instructions: “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean” (v. 10). Another level of fulminating comedy comes to expression in Naaman’s response. This man of pomp and might is looking for substantial liturgical language and impressive ritual to call down the healing power of God: “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy” (v. 11). Only the entreaty of his lowly servants prevents Naaman from returning home in anger, bereft of the healing power of God.

Fortunately for Naaman (and us), those servants prevail. He accepts the audacious claim that God’s restorative power can work through the simplest elements to achieve the profoundest effects. He immerses himself in the Jordan and is cleansed. So the church immerses believers in the waters of baptism and feeds them with the bread and wine of the Lord’s Table, trusting simple things and everyday acts to bear God’s cleansing and healing power.

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1. See Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 178.

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

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avenues of healing and thinks he knows the ways God would work through a prophet, that is, with bodily gestures and by the power of imprecation. He doubts greatly that the Jordan is any more potent than the rivers in his homeland of Damascus (v. 12). He leaves in a huff.

Again intervention comes from the least expected source, from Naaman's servants, who, as is often the case, turn out to be wise advisors to their close-minded and prejudiced master (vv. 13–14). They have the courage to approach Naaman and to ask if he would not have followed Elisha's instructions if they were complicated and difficult. "How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'" Perhaps this is another way of asking, "What have you got to lose by following these simple instructions?"

Of course, when he does immerse himself seven times in the Jordan, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (v. 14). Naaman is not only healed of his illness, but his flesh is enlivened and renewed like that of a youth. Clearly this river of Israel, this prophet of Israel, and this God of Israel are the true sources of healing, new life, and cleansing. It is not clear whether Naaman's recovery indicates that his body is simply clean of leprosy or he is clean of some other pollution, perhaps even of sin.

Naaman may be an enemy and a foreigner, but his healing brings him to faith in Israel's God. "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (v. 15). When he offers to give Elisha a present, the prophet refuses. The healing and life-giving power of Israel's God is not for sale. It is, like grace, freely given, but in this text, it is given through the prophet for the benefit of all, even enemy foreigners, not just Israel.

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struggle with being receivers of God's grace, which comes to us in simple, often undramatic ways: in the word of forgiveness, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, in the waters of baptism. Often, people wonder: is it really enough to receive those things? Should we not be doing something more, some good work, perhaps, to really demonstrate that we are saved? Should not real worship, saving worship, be showier, more fitting to our status as highly intelligent, technologically adept, twenty-first-century Christians? In other words, like Naaman, we often want to command how salvation happens.

In this story, however, the good news is that the real God heals when, where, and through the means that God chooses. We can be thankful that we cannot control it. If we did, our egos, not God, would be sovereign. In the end, Naaman receives Elisha's word, obeys it, and receives his healing as the gift that it truly is. The preacher might reflect on how God now offers life through simple means in our midst. What are the "seven baths in the Jordan" that God offers us? What happens when we let go of our need for control and receive what God has to offer? Here the preacher has the opportunity to point to the ways God is already at work in the life of the community.

The final set of questions that might arise from this particular text involves the question of healing. After all, this is a healing story, and many in the congregation will hear it through their own need for healing. The story indicates that the healing of Naaman's skin is only preliminary to the most important outcome: faith and trust. Along the way, Naaman's ethnocentricity and his need for power and control are also healed. The preacher might ask, are there ways in which we are spiritually or socially sick, illnesses that we do not even see? Are there ways that we have experienced God's healing beyond physical cure?

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**PROPER 24 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 16
AND OCTOBER 22 INCLUSIVE)**

Genesis 32:22–31

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

Theological Perspective

The story of Genesis 32:22–31 takes place when Jacob is a middle-aged man. Throughout his life Jacob has struggled, using means that often appear deceitful but are never criticized by the biblical authors. A general impression of his life prior to this nighttime wrestling match is that of a loner. He fights his uncle for twenty years to marry the woman he loves, working alone to improve his flocks. Beginning with this passage, however, we are reminded he is no longer alone. He is blessed with wives, assistants, and numerous children. His future is assured and his descendants will fulfill the promise made to Abraham for a family that matches the stars. Furthermore, in this passage Jacob is on his way to reunite for better or for worse with his estranged brother.

Nevertheless, something is missing. Looking at the extended narrative of Jacob's story in Genesis 25:19 to 49:33, there is something conspicuously absent for someone deemed a beloved patriarch on par with Abraham, Moses, and David. Unlike the experience of these three, who encountered God on a regular basis, Jacob's story up to this point is notable for the lack of divine interaction. Jacob seems to have gotten to where he is completely on his own. Except for one night on his knees in dread of meeting Esau, there are almost no prayers, no intimate conversations, no singing, or any of David's

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Jacob was on his way to a "come to Jesus" meeting with his brother Esau when he had a "come to Jesus" meeting with God. This strange story is inserted abruptly into the larger narrative just as Jacob has resolved to seek reconciliation, or at least accommodation, with Esau, from whom he fled after receiving the blessing from Isaac in Esau's stead. It suggests that reconciliation between these two brothers will be possible only on the basis of Jacob's prior encounter with God.

Jacob wants to live fully into the promise he believes has passed from Isaac to him (cf. 32:12), but Esau stands in the way. Jacob will have to make peace with Esau for the promise to continue. So with dread and trepidation he lays elaborate plans to approach Esau with generous gifts to ward off his brother's anger.

What happens next is shrouded in mystery but certainly makes plain that Jacob cannot make peace with Esau without first struggling with God. Even the identification of his riverbank adversary as God is indirect and ambivalent. The story itself refers only to a "man" with whom he wrestles all night. This "man" is humanlike in the fact that he does not easily "prevail" over Jacob and seeks to leave the field of combat as day breaks. Yet this "man" is Godlike in that he eventually (though not

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Exegetical Perspective

The reading for today marks a turning point in the Genesis story of Jacob. In it, Jacob receives the name Israel, and through it, a place gains its name, a dietary law receives its roots in theological events, and Jacob becomes a transformed character. At its heart, the story is a theophany, an appearance of the Divine that alters and gives significance to everything in the story. It is a story of blessing.

The setting of the dramatic events of Jacob's meeting with the unnamed stranger is critical. Jacob has run away from family and his furious brother Esau after stealing Esau's birthright. After sojourning for twenty years in the home of Laban, he now leaves there a rich man with four wives, thirteen children, and many animals. As the story in today's reading takes place, Jacob is about again to encounter his estranged brother, with no idea how things will proceed. He approaches the meeting in fear and trembling, carrying the memory of their past conflicts and wondering if he and his household will survive the encounter planned for the next morning.

"The same night," that is, the night of the day in which he prepared his household for the dangerous meeting, he takes his family and everything he has across the Jabbok River. He is alone, but the text reports cryptically, "a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (v. 24). The story pulls readers in by

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Great sermons often emerge from moments in a Scripture text that seem mysterious, theologically problematic, or just plain quirky. The famous story of Jacob wrestling with God by the Jabbok is full of such moments.

The first such moment is how the "man" with whom Jacob wrestles appears almost *ex nihilo*. "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (v. 24). That is the only introduction we get of this "man." The narrative until this point has prepared us for a confrontation of brothers. Jacob, having stolen Esau's blessing, is preparing to confront his brother—and his own past. Esau is on the way to greet him with four hundred men, and Jacob is terrified. Wily and resourceful, he divides his property into two companies, so that if one is routed, another may survive. Three flocks of livestock have been sent ahead as pacifying gifts, with plenty of space between them to buffer his brother's presumed anger. Jacob has planned. He has prepared. He sends his family and property over the Jabbok and then is left alone when the real confrontation comes, not at the hands of an angry brother but at the hands of a nameless stranger.

By the end of the narrative, we know that this man is God. Plans and schemes cannot protect us from the living God, who breaks into our world

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exuberant dancing before God. Jacob might be called a lot of things but pious is rarely one of them.

The predominantly secular nature of his life is what makes Jacob's night of wrestling more remarkable. Jacob rises in the night, in spite of having undergone a day's long journey, and sends his entourage and baggage across the river. We are not told why, but the author makes it quite clear that Jacob faces his darkest hours devoid of familiar companions or possessions, separated from them by a river that might as well be an ocean. If we missed the point, the author states explicitly in verse 24: "Jacob was left alone." The passive construction suggests that this was not Jacob's choice but his fate.

Suddenly the figure of a man appears and wrestles with Jacob for the remainder of the night. Jacob prevails over his mysterious opponent until the figure executes a maneuver that puts Jacob's hip out of joint. In spite of this move that exposes heretofore hidden powers, the stranger cannot extract himself from Jacob's powerful embrace and must ask for Jacob to let go. Jacob refuses without getting something in return.

At this point Jacob does not know who his challenger is, yet he asks the stranger for a blessing. Jacob needs to have something to hold on to before he lets go and watches the figure walk away in the darkness, leaving Jacob alone again. He has the impression that the person is holy, because he asks the figure to bless (*barak*) him. The figure responds by asking for Jacob's name to use in the blessing. By answering the question straightforwardly, Jacob is being honest about who he is. His name means a combination of heel and sneak, references to his birth, when he tried to sneak out of the womb first by grabbing his twin brother Esau's heel. Offering absolution in reward for Jacob's honesty, the figure tells him he is free of his old name and will be known as Israel, which means "God contends." In the context of what has passed between the two of them, the name could be translated, "God wrestles." It is Jacob's first clue that his opponent is more holy than he had imagined when requesting the blessing.

To give Jacob further insight into what is happening, the figure explains the name: "You have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (v. 28). Then Jacob, full of experience as a trickster himself, has to double-check his facts. In verse 29, he says to his opponent, "Please state your name for me" (my trans.). He is not asking a question, and his statement is not a gesture of politeness. He wants to confirm that

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initially) gives the blessing Jacob seeks by bestowing on Jacob the new name of Israel. Whereas his old name represents the treachery and supplanting that characterized his deceit with Isaac and Esau, his new name represents the ruling, preserving, protecting, promise-keeping power of God.¹

Of course Jacob/Israel does not leave this nocturnal field of battle unscathed. When by almost unnatural might Jacob withstands the physical onslaught by this "man," the mysterious assailant strikes "him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip [is] put out of joint as he [wrestles] with him" (v. 25). While the concluding verses speak of Jacob's exultation about having seen God "face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (v. 30), they also offer a poignant depiction of him limping past Penuel toward his rendezvous with Esau "because of his hip" (v. 31). Ringing the changes on Frederick Buechner's naming of this whole event *The Magnificent Defeat*, Walter Brueggemann suggests as an alternative "The Crippling Victory."² Jacob/Israel prevails in the struggle with God, but not without cost. He is able to move on to the encounter with Esau, but he will never again move without a limp.

Jacob begins this journey back home from Haran as the same Jacob who left in haste years before. He assumes that by guile and planning he will reconcile with Esau, just as by guile and planning he earlier alienated Esau. What he learned at the river Jabbok, and what he teaches us, is that any reconciliation on the human plane involves a prior—and costly—reconciliation with God.

This strange story is worth pondering in terms of the unreconciled relationships of our lives. Every family is likely to have some version of the disruption represented by Jacob and Esau. Even when one person does not so dramatically supplant another in the favor of parents or the benefits of the family connection, there is not infrequently a jockeying for position and prestige (however subtle) that leaves some enraged and others anxiously clinging to precarious advantage. We might be inclined to think that the key to reconciliation in such circumstances is for one who has gained advantage to seek out the other and try earnestly to set the relationship on a new footing of generosity and mutual respect. Surely an honest, direct meeting aiming to put the relationship on a new basis is the correct first step.

1. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 268–69.

2. *Ibid.*, 270.

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withholding significance. It tells events and only later interprets them. The wrestling match continues all night. The “man” sees that he cannot prevail against Jacob, but he wounds him, knocking his hip from the socket. Jacob bears evidence in his body of this all-night struggle. The struggle of this night serves as an explanation of the Jewish dietary prohibition against eating the thigh muscle of the sciatic nerve of animals (v. 32).

Much larger personal and national blessings are at issue in these verses. The man demands that Jacob release him, but Jacob refuses and makes a counterdemand. “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (v. 26). The blessing Jacob wrests from the stranger comes first in the form of a name change, the importance of which is underscored by a question and answer between the man and Jacob. The man asks for Jacob’s name and Jacob provides a literal answer, “Jacob” (v. 27). The name Jacob identified him formerly as one who supplants (25:26). Then the man gives him a new name and a new identity. You shall be called “Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (v. 28). The stranger’s granting of a new name marks a pivotal event in the life of Jacob. No longer “the supplanter,” he is now “the one who strives” or “the one who struggles.” His name honors the hard events of his life. He has struggled with his brother, his father, his father-in-law and family, and now the stranger, identified, at last, as God.

Jacob’s wrestling match symbolizes his life, and from this wrestling in the night emerges more than one blessing. He does not encounter the bitter, angry brother whom he fears may be waiting to ambush him. His night agonies bring him an encounter with the mysterious divine being who deigns to struggle with him.

Even though readers can infer that the stranger is God—he has “striven with God”—the stranger refuses to disclose any name. Rather, God remains unnamable, beyond his grasp, beyond Jacob’s capacity to know fully. The stranger asks a strange question that highlights this otherness: “Why is it that you ask my name?” (v. 29). Why not? After battling with the man all night long, would he not want to know his name? However, there is no fully adequate name to reveal who the Divine is. The name is “beyond every name.” The encounter itself is blessing.

Another blessing, also left unspecified, reinforces the divine identity of Jacob’s opponent: “And there he blessed him” (v. 29). Readers can learn the blessing’s meaning from the larger story of Jacob.

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and wrestles with us. The mysterious appearance of “the man” seems to suggest that there is no way to outmaneuver God. The real danger, as it turns out, is not Esau; the real danger is seeing God face to face. The real danger, as it turns out, is not Esau; the real danger is God! So too, real life comes, not from trying to survive the angry brother, but from wrestling with the God who takes enough interest in our lives to interrupt our plans and force a fight.

Any pastor will be familiar with the ways that congregations (and persons) try to live by their own wits, with plans to keep the disaster at bay. Pastors also know well the phenomenon of practical atheism that pervades our communities (and, to be truthful, our ministries). Homiletically, the preacher might try to do with a congregation’s struggles what the story does with Jacob’s: introduce God as a wily, active, interested player. What changes when we see our struggles as wrestling, not with one another, not with our “brothers,” not with our past, but with God? In the midst of plotting his own survival, Jacob’s fear grows; but out of an actual struggle with his real opponent comes blessing. There is good news in that.

The second surprising element of this story is the outcome of the wrestling match. By daybreak it appears that Jacob has prevailed; the stranger asks to be let go. The man names him Israel, because “you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (v. 28). This is theologically odd fare for those who are accustomed to thinking of God in terms of omnipotence and greatness or who are used to thinking of human beings as those who constantly fall away from God in sin. Prevailing means refusing to let go until a blessing, a good word, is spoken from the mouth of the Lord. How is the refusal to let God go stamped on our identity?

This strange element of the story is further complicated by the detail of Jacob’s dislocated hip. Jacob prevails in the wrestling match, but the fact is that he cannot run away. At the end of this story, we are left with the image of a man who has struggled and prevailed but nevertheless goes forth limping. He is marked with a physical reminder that his own schemes are not invulnerable. He will go forward, but never as the person that he was before. The Israelites are commanded never to eat the thigh hip socket meat as part of their communal memory. They are to eat in certain ways to remember: they too are a people who have struggled with God and thus have been irrevocably claimed by God.

The preacher who is trying to consider how to preach this aspect of the story might consider

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he has correctly interpreted the stunning piece of information he just received. Jacob is saying, “Please tell me it is really You.”

Instead of answering, the figure asks Jacob why he needs to know. This response resembles the opaque one that Moses will receive when making a similar demand of the Lord (Exod. 3:13–14). Nevertheless the figure, whom the readers along with Jacob have just recognized as the God of Israel, grants Jacob his wish. After a lifetime of wrestling, Jacob receives the divine blessing he longs for. At the same time, Jacob lets go of any doubts about his challenger’s identity. In his joy, he determines a way to declare his good news to the world for posterity. He names the site of his blessing Peniel. For the rest of his days he proudly boasts, “There I met God face to face, and survived both in spite of and because of it” (v. 30, my paraphrase).

The reason for Jacob’s exuberance is not victory in one night’s wrestling match with the Almighty. The blessing that Jacob receives that night is the realization that throughout his life he has never been alone. That is why this story has held such theological importance for its Jewish hearers. Their collective history seems like a never-ending night of wrestling. In the light of Jacob’s story, however, they know that their challenger is the same One who blesses them as the chosen people of Israel. This is also the reason that the passage ends abruptly with a dietary regulation. For the Israelites it is a constant reminder that they are descendants of Jacob. What happened to him has happened to them. They too walk away from life’s struggles with a limp, reflecting how the Lord simultaneously blesses and challenges them, yet they are never alone.

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However, Jacob’s wrestling match raises an indispensable caution. Before we can approach that distant family member with integrity, we must be open to a forceful encounter with God. Whether by prayer, meditation, or straight-out conversation with God, we need a “come to Jesus” meeting with God before we have that “come to Jesus” meeting with our family member. As it was for Jacob, it should be an encounter in which we are willing to contend with God, expressing as clearly and coherently as we can our good intentions for reconciling such broken relationships.

As was the case with Jacob, it will be for us also an encounter in which God will uncover our weakness and make us confront it. In the encounter we will have to let God expose our own pretensions to uncomplicated goodness, identify our own tendencies to seek advantage over even those we love, and uncover our self-deceit about what we may be aiming at even with gestures of reconciliation. Such an encounter cannot escape being painful, because we will be renamed in the process. Just as renaming recalled the deficits in Jacob’s existing name and identity, we will be reminded that we often are less than the “best selves” we imagine ourselves to be. Consequently, we will move forward with a limp.

Just as renaming offered Jacob a new identity full of hope, safeguarded by God’s power and promise for the well-being of all creation, so we will be summoned to imagine new possibilities for those broken family relationships, now less contaminated by our old selves. Buoyed by the new name God bestows on us in Christ, we can turn to our meeting with those family members shorn of a disabling fear and aware of possibilities our wrestling with God has opened for us.

Perhaps there is no better place for this wrestling with God than in the liturgy of baptism. There we are reminded of the sin and evil from which we need to turn. There we are invited to turn afresh to God in Christ. There we are given the new identity that reconciles us to God and opens the path of reconciliation to one another.

D. CAMERON MURCHISON

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Exegetical Perspective

Through this encounter with God, Jacob learns the depth of his calling. He is the eponymous father of Israel, the patriarch of the twelve tribes who form the nation named after him. Across the rest of the book of Genesis, the nation's story will also be one of conflict and striving with both God and humans. As with Jacob, that striving will threaten to pull the nation apart, but it will survive, as does Jacob.

Jacob then names the spot where his wrestling with God occurred and another blessing comes to the surface of the story. He called the place Peniel, a name that means the "face of God." Once again in this book of origins, a place name reveals the importance of events that happen there. Jacob interprets his night struggles when he explains the meaning of the name: "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (v. 30). More than an etiology or an explanation of a name is at stake in his claim. He states with certainty that the stranger is God and expresses awe that he has survived the encounter. Survival too is a blessing. He has no doubt about the stranger's identity when he acknowledges the overwhelming nature of his experience, the power of which leaves him wounded in body and astonished to be alive face to face with the Divine. The encounter transforms him.

That Jacob is different after this intense night of struggle becomes clear in the next chapter of Genesis, where he meets his brother Esau in humility, respect, and with expressions of gratitude for all God has done in his life. The two meet and reconcile, for Esau too is an altered man, offering his hand in forgiveness.

Jacob's calling is the calling of believers: to meet God, to struggle with God, to seek God's face in the anguishes of the night and struggles of the days. It may be that living a life of faith is a painful wrestling that leaves us wounded, even as it may bring us the overwhelming blessing of God's presence.

KATHLEEN M. O'CONNOR

Homiletical Perspective

building a pastoral sermon aimed at hearers who are, on some level, already consciously struggling with God. Preachers know who at least a few of these people are, and know that many, many more keep their struggles private, out of fear or shame of being less than faithful. What good news it might be to hear that those who struggle may indeed be blessed—precisely as strugglers. What good news that the wounds may not, in the end, keep us from moving forward, but will instead serve as signs to others of God's passionate involvement in our life.

The third unique element of this passage is the new name. Of course, this is not the first time someone in Scripture gets a new name, and it will not be the last. However, it is the first time that the name is corporate. Not only will "Israel" name a man who struggled with a stranger by the Jabbok; it will name an entire nation whom God has elected. Israel (literally "one who struggles with God") is the people who will wrestle with God through their history and who will yet never let God go.

Although the church cannot claim the name Israel directly—we have been grafted into the promise by grace—this corporate naming does open some homiletical doors. As North Americans, we are well versed in how to imagine individual struggles in the light of God's mercy and grace. We are less adept at thinking of ourselves as a community. To preach on this part of the passage is an opportunity to think of how we as a society (or as a church) struggle with God, how we too must face "brothers" whom we have wronged, and how yet there may be blessing possible for us. White congregations, for example, might be invited to consider the ways that we have stolen the birthright from African Americans and Native Americans. How does God make himself known as we wrestle with that truth?

KIMBERLY M. VAN DRIEL

PROPER 24 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 16 AND OCTOBER 22 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

²My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

⁵The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

⁶The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.

⁸The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Theological Perspective

The setting of this psalm is the subject of considerable conjecture. It has been argued that the author penned it in anticipation of going into battle; that the author composed it as he was about to set out on a journey; that this psalm was chanted by the people as they went up to Jerusalem to the feasts.

Made of four couplets, the structure of this psalm suggests that it may have been sung in a call-and-response fashion. Each couplet addresses in a highly poetic way themes that were critical in Israel's cultic life. Theologically the structure of the psalm seems to fit the possibility that it was employed as the people approached a sacred moment and a sacred space.

Verses 1–2 affirm that as God's people we receive our help from the Lord. We are admonished to look in the appropriate place for the source of our assistance. The hills referred to in this passage could have been the hills upon which the temple was established. This couplet affirms the transcendence of God. God is not to be found always in the immediacy of our situation, but as the One whose face we seek as we elevate our gaze. This couplet implies that as human beings we stand in constant need of divine assistance, but not just any help. The help called for must proceed from the One who created the very hills. Theologically this couplet suggests that only the one who is Creator can finally be relied on to be Redeemer.

Pastoral Perspective

There is a big difference between having and keeping. For instance, I might *have* a favorite sweater. It is my possession. However, I *keep* my puppy dog. He is not merely a possession; he is my beloved dog. He is dear to me. Therefore, I watch over him not for my sake, but for his. I protect him from harm because if he suffers, it hurts me too.

Likewise, God does not merely have us. God keeps us. We are God's beloved, and immeasurably dear to God. We are not merely possessions in the eyes of the Lord, because if we suffer, it hurts God too. Psalm 121 celebrates the fact that Lord is our keeper.

This short psalm uses some form of the word that means to keep (*shamar*) six times in the course of merely eight verses. English language translations vary in their word choice for *shamar*. The NRSV uses the words "keep" and "keeper." The New Jerusalem Bible uses the language of "guarding," and of God being a "guardian." The NIV uses the language of "watching over" as well as of "keeping." The KJV uses the words "keep" and "preserve."

The psalm appears to be set in the context of a pilgrimage. The psalmist looks to the hills, which may be Mount Zion, God's holy mountain and the place of the temple. Presumably it is not an easy journey, and the opening verse cries out a stark question, "From where will my help come?"

Psalm 121

Exegetical Perspective

In Psalm 121, the psalmist seems to be on, or about to embark upon, a journey. In fact, the Songs of Ascent (Pss. 120–134) probably originated as a pilgrimage collection. Not coincidentally, it seems, the opening sequence of Psalms 120–122 moves the psalmist from a location outside the land (Ps. 120:5) toward “the hills” (Ps. 121:1) and finally into Jerusalem (Ps. 122:2). By way of an encounter with Psalm 121, perhaps the ancient psalmist and the contemporary worshiper can become, in some sense, fellow travelers.

The exact referent and precise significance of “the hills” in verse 1 are unclear. Given the context of Psalm 121, it is possible that among “the hills” in the distance, the psalmist can see Mount Zion, the destination of the pilgrimage. In this case, the mention of “the hills” alludes to the source of “my help,” which the psalmist asks about in the second part of verse 1. On the other hand, for one about to set out on a journey, “the hills” could well conceal a host of difficulties and dangers, thus explaining why the psalmist needed to ask, “From where will my help come?”

Most commentators prefer the former interpretive option, but the latter has much to commend it. Karl Plank suggests that Psalm 121 be read intertextually with a rabbinic midrash in which Abraham

Homiletical Perspective

Somewhere along the way an editor named Psalm 121 “A Song of Ascents.” As such, it could be a song sung by pilgrims on their way to the sanctuary in Jerusalem—the dwelling place of God—for one particular festival, or another. Perhaps “I lift my eyes to the hills” is similar to saying, “Tomorrow, I leave for Jerusalem.” Once again, a psalm that becomes a psalm of the community begins as a psalm of the individual.

It seems safe to say that even if overused, to think of life as a journey is a true and helpful metaphor. One day God’s Spirit breathes us into life, and one day we will breathe our last. In between, we meet people, visit places, grow and develop, and have experiences of all kinds. Folks from the Reformed tradition like to talk of life as a journey of sanctification whereby, one day beyond death, we will be fully formed into the image of Christ. This larger journey is made up of an untold number of smaller journeys, each of them contributing to our eventual wholeness.

For the person who is at least trying to heed the call of God, to follow Jesus, and to attend to the Spirit’s prompting, each of these smaller journeys, as well as the lifetime journey, is begun in God. It is as if God runs slightly ahead of us on the path of life and waves at us to come and join God.

This presumes that there is always some distance between where we are standing and where God is

Psalm 121

Theological Perspective

Verses 3–4 affirm the constancy of God. God is steadfast, sure, faithful, and dependable. Theologically the constancy of God's nature has normally been affirmed as an attribute over against God's acts of mercy. The problem with this juxtaposition is that the nature of God and the acts of God both must be discerned in the experience of the faithful. John Calvin thus lifted up the notion of the invisible constancy of God. From the human perspective, one can only point to the constancy of God with the invisible evidence of faith and hope. Further, this constancy is demonstrated in the fact that God is the firm ground on which we stand (God will not let our feet be moved under us) and in the fact that God is the one who watches over us. Constancy is not just a feature of God's nature; it is also the reason for God's vigilance. This constancy has both spatial and temporal manifestations. God is not only the ground of our being, to use a phrase from Paul Tillich; God is also the guardian of our hope.

Verses 5–6 affirm that God is also keeper. God's function as keeper highlights the fact that Israel requires protection from nature itself. Without delving into questions of theodicy, the psalmist declares that the very sun that gives light by day can be dangerous, and the moon that gives light by night can be perilous. Humanity cannot rely even upon nature as if nature did not need redemption. The presence of God assures Israel that they shall not be smitten by sun or moon. These words can provide great insight into the being of God for persons whose experience suggests that nature itself has conspired against them. Its theological message is that God's sovereignty extends to the natural realm. Whether one confronts the demons of the day or the nemesis of the night, God's presence is affirmed.

Verses 7–8 affirm that God is also preserver. In God's role as preserver God's protection extends into the realm of the unknowable; that is, the realm of evil. In preserving the psalmist from evil, God also preserves the soul of the psalmist. There is a clear theological connection here between the menace of evil and the endangerment of the soul. Theologically speaking, the protection that God provides is portable. God as preserver attends both to one's going out and one's coming in. Finally, it is important to note theologically that this preservation is not limited temporally. From this point on, declares the psalmist, God's protection will follow him.

In each of the couplets that comprise this psalm, the nature of God is gradually revealed. God is majestic helper, faithful keeper, and preserver. This

Pastoral Perspective

Even if modern readers do not catch that this psalm takes place in the midst of a pilgrimage, nothing is taken away from the power of the psalmist's cry for help. On a gut level, we know what it means to lift our eyes to the hills in search of help. Inevitably we have all made this cry at challenging times in our lives.

Western culture in the twenty-first century promotes individualism and self-sufficiency, but at some point we all have to face the reality that we simply cannot be our own gods. If we try to be our own gods, life will remind us otherwise sooner or later. We will have to look to the hills and ask for help.

Some people feel closest to God in the midst of good times, when everything seems to be going well. These people get discouraged when they hit challenges. Others, however, find a greater closeness to God in the dark and challenging times. This is because their protective guard comes down, and they have no choice but to recognize their place in relationship to the Almighty. They have no choice but to acknowledge the limits to their own power.

There is a blessing given in the moments when we become aware of our powerlessness. In a sense, these are not so much moments in which we are more powerless than usual. Rather, these are moments when we are more informed than usual about how little power we possess. These are moments when our illusion of power is stripped away and we are blessed to suffer the reality that we need help beyond ourselves. Though it is an uncomfortable realization, it is a blessing to be able to live in the truth, after all, and it provides a footing for our sincere cry to the Lord.

Psalm 121 begins at this point, with this realization of need. It opens with the question, "From where will my help come?" The rest of the psalm is a response to this initial question. The first verse is preparation for all that is to follow. Without a moment's hesitation, the psalmist proclaims an answer to the question, saying, "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (v. 2).

The psalmist then dwells on the ways in which the Lord is our keeper and is worthy of our trust.

First of all, the psalmist reminds us that the Lord comes with some credentials, having made heaven and earth. In the next breath, the psalmist goes from the celestial realm to the immediate physical realm, saying "He will not let your foot be moved" (v. 3). God will not sleep on the job, as it were (vv. 3–4). God will protect us both day and night (v. 6). Finally, the Lord keeps both our going out and our coming in (v. 8). In other words, God will watch over

Psalm 121

Exegetical Perspective

recites Psalm 121:1 at the very point at which he has raised the knife to kill his son Isaac (see Gen. 22:10; note that the OT Lesson for this Sunday, Gen. 12:1–4, features Abraham, who is about to depart on a journey). As Plank concludes:

Assurance means little where no anxiety can exist. . . . The psalm places a human being before hills whose liminality may encourage, but which also must include the dismay of Abraham at Moriah. . . . Lifting eyes to *this* horizon brings to one's lips the genuine question of help and bids those who answer it honor the anxiety of the questioning voice. "Help comes from YHWH, who made the heavens and earth," the psalm proclaims. "But who can speak it without pause?" the midrash replies—a cautionary word of which perhaps the psalmist, too, was aware in the silent space between question and answer.¹

Hearing verse 1b as a "genuine question of help" is especially appropriate for a Lenten reading of Psalm 121. It puts contemporary readers in touch with our own anxieties and our own authentic neediness, making it more likely that our Lenten journeys will be less about ourselves and our own accomplishments (for instance, what we might manage to give up) and more about our fundamental dependence upon God and God's help.

Repetition of "my help" in verse 2 opens the psalmist's response to her or his own question. This instance of step-like repetition is well suited for a poem about a journey, which in the ancient world would have been undertaken one step at a time (see additional step-like repetition involving "keeps" and "slumber" in vv. 3–4 and "keep" in vv. 7–8). That help comes from God is a frequent affirmation in the Psalms (see 22:19; 33:20; 54:4; 63:7; 70:5; 115:9–11; 124:8). The description of God as the one "who made heavens and earth" is characteristic of the Songs of Ascent (see 124:8; 134:3). It is especially reassuring, given that one of the threats to the journeying psalmist involves major creational features, the sun and the moon (v. 6).

A different voice speaks in verses 3–8, offering further assurance to the psalmist. The change of speakers suggests an original liturgical or life setting, perhaps a farewell ritual at the beginning of a journey. Verses 3–4 contain the first two instances of a Hebrew root that occurs six times. It is translated "keeps" in verses 3–4, where the focus is on God's constant protection. The reference to a "foot" that

Homiletical Perspective

beckoning. Frequently the journey between our standpoint along the way and God's is not entirely smooth sailing. The view where God stands may be spectacular, but getting there nearly always calls for more courage, skill, confidence, and gifts than we currently feel we possess.

The journey could be to leave one job for another or to re-create and reimagine the job one already has. It could be to go to school, to pursue some soul yearning, or to risk giving voice to some deeply held belief. It could be to move to another city and country or to give up some addiction that is holding one hostage.

For a community of faith, the journey could be to develop a new ministry; to engage a social issue; to add, subtract, or breathe new life into the liturgy; to expand or reduce the staff; to sell a building; or to take in a homeless family.

Whatever the particulars, the thing that turns these journeys into journeys of ascent is that a church or an individual perceives that to embark upon them is to respond to the God who calls us to leave one place for another. Perhaps the original destination was Jerusalem, Zion, the city of God; but if we let Jerusalem represent the place where God is, then this psalm can be about all our going out and coming in—our births and our deaths, our hellos and good-byes, our expanding and our decreasing, our risky adventures and our safe returns home.

This psalm begins at the point of departure. A destination is in sight, and it looks to the pilgrim as if God is calling for him, or he at least hopes to find God at that destination. The pilgrim sees the hills but is a little intimidated at the challenge. He cannot make this journey alone and wonders where to look for confidence and support. He remembers the stories of his faith, the testimonies of his friends and family, and his own experiences to date. Like Joshua stating whom he is going to serve, the psalmist places all his eggs in one basket: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth." Confidence is established because he is heeding the call of the one who made the world and imagined all the possible journeys one might take, along with their dangerous passages and holy stopping places.

Then a wonderful thing happens. A host of voices rises up to affirm his confession. A brave pilgrim embraces the call of God, and her friends rush to surround her with reminders, blessings, and their own statements of faith. It is a good thing to be immersed in a community that encourages those decisions that lead to life.

1. Karl A. Plank, "Ascent to Darker Hills: Psalm 121 and Its Poetic Revision," *Literature and Theology* 11/2 (June 1997): 163.

Psalm 121

Theological Perspective

psalm must have been the source of great encouragement to Israel, and it still carries the potential to bear up those whose journey through life is filled with uncertainty and danger. To know that God is one “who sits high and looks low” celebrates the majesty of God without sacrificing the sense of God’s loving-kindness. To know that God is one who is under our feet and over our head celebrates the fact that God’s love is evident both from below and from above.

The structure of the psalm hints at a final theological possibility. It has been suggested that the first verse of each couplet was not originally a declaration but a question, to which the second verse was the answer. The possibility that the psalm was originally a series of questions and answers highlights the fact that the reality of God is sought and found amid the challenges of life as well as the wonders of worship. The notion that the psalms may present not only jubilant answers but also troubling questions for the faithful is a key to their theological durability.

Psalms have often provided the content of African American sacred music. More and more, they provide the content of contemporary Christian music. This type of music, often called “praise and worship” music, is focused on creating a sense of joy and even euphoria in the presence of God. This way of construing the message of the psalms often accompanies the preaching of a “prosperity gospel.” While the dimension of praise legitimately belongs to the Psalms tradition, what is often overlooked is its interrogatory dimension. A careful reading of this psalm, and others of its ilk, reveals a balance in the life of the believer. This is the balance between the tough questions of life and the deep answers of faith.

JAMES H. EVANS JR.

Pastoral Perspective

all the motion of our life. The Lord’s protection is all-encompassing.

What a shock this must be to those in the pews who think they are keeping their own lives! They balance their own checkbooks; they stay on top of their own medical appointments; they do their own shopping; and they generally take personal responsibility for their own well-being. The idea that they have a keeper who watches over them and protects them may be tough to understand, let alone to accept.

Having a keeper is a two-way street. For all that we gain, we must first give ourselves to the one who offers the protection. We gain protection, but we lose a sense of total independence. In other words, the singular theme of Psalm 121 may not sound like great news to everybody. It may sound like an enormous encroachment on our lives.

Return for a moment to the simple notion of caring for pets. We do not have them, but we keep them. We provide for them. We take care of them. We do this because of the bond we feel for them.

It is as hard to accept that the Lord is my keeper as it is to accept that the Lord loves me, but these two facts are intertwined. That is the key to understanding not merely what the Lord does for us, but why. God’s love is the very foundation of God’s trustworthiness. God loves us, and therefore God keeps us.

ROBERT W. FISHER

Psalm 121

Exegetical Perspective

will not be “moved” fits well with the setting of a literal journey, but the verb occurs elsewhere in the Psalms to describe more generally God’s protecting, even life-saving, work (see 16:8; 55:22; 62:2, 6, NRSV “shaken”; 66:9, NRSV “slip”; 112:6; see also 125:1, where Zion “cannot be moved,” and 96:10, where “the world . . . shall never be moved”).

The key word is again featured in verse 5a, which is at or very close to the center of the psalm. The subject, “the LORD,” precedes the verb, giving it additional rhetorical emphasis. A traveler on foot would have needed protection from the sun (see Isa. 49:10). As for the moon, its light was apparently viewed as dangerous (see Matt. 4:24; 17:15 where the Greek underlying “epileptic” is more literally “moon-struck”; note that the English word “lunatic” is derived from the Latin word for moon).

Three more occurrences of the key word are found in the final section. Each occurrence of “keep” in verses 7–8 extends the reach of God’s protecting presence, effectively broadening the image of a journey beyond any particular journey. The real journey becomes “your life”; and on this journey, God will “keep you from all evil . . . from this time on and forevermore.” The promise is comprehensive. It is appropriate, therefore, as James Limburg points out, that Psalm 121 is used liturgically in the Lutheran tradition in both services of baptism and services of burial. Limburg calls Psalm 121 “a psalm for sojourners,” because it ultimately portrays life as a journey and suggests that we people of faith are always on the way.²

As Jesus reminded his followers, and as we remind ourselves during the season of Lent, the way of following Jesus leads to a cross (see Mark 8:34). To read Psalm 121 on our Lenten journey is to claim and celebrate the good news that even as we face that evil of all evils, God is and always will be our keeper.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

Homiletical Perspective

You cannot read this psalm without being struck by the repetition of the various forms of the word “keep.” A sermon about what it means to be kept might be powerful. As easy as it seems to lose our grip on God, it is nice to know that God does not lose a grip on us. Our security as a community of faith and as individuals is not ultimately resting on “getting everything right.”

God has already decided we are not throwaways. Someone has already assumed a certain amount of responsibility for us and stays vigilant even when we sleep and even when we slip. We can release ourselves into rejuvenating rest, partly because we know God’s watchful eye and creative hand never cease. This notion also finds expression in John 10:28, when Jesus reminds his disciples that those who belong to him can never be snatched out of his hands.

A recurring theme of Scripture reminds us that, when we are busy following where God leads us, God assumes responsibility for our safety and our shade. Maybe more accurately, God assumes responsibility for our lives. The psalmist makes a general statement in the first measure of verse 7 and then thickens the statement in the second measure: “The LORD will keep you from all evil,” and what I mean by that is that “the LORD will keep your life.” There may be some pain in this journey—and even death—but it will not be meaningless pain or meaningless death, and you will not experience it alone. There will be resistance and there will be danger, but the Lord will be with you. So, light out. There is good stuff to be found on the way.

DAVID M. BURNS

2. James Limburg, “Psalm 121: A Psalm for Sojourners,” *Word and World* 5/2 (Spring 1985): 180, 185–87.

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**PROPER 25 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 23
AND OCTOBER 29 INCLUSIVE)**

Sirach 35:12–17

- ¹²Give to the Most High as he has given to you,
and as generously as you can afford.
¹³For the Lord is the one who repays,
and he will repay you sevenfold.
¹⁴Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it;
¹⁵ and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice;
for the Lord is the judge,
and with him there is no partiality.
¹⁶He will not show partiality to the poor;
but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.
¹⁷He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,
or the widow when she pours out her complaint.

Theological Perspective

Ben Sira writes his book of wisdom for those “living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law” (from the last sentences of The Prologue to Sirach). This book proverbially describes wisdom for nearly every imaginable life circumstance for Jews living “abroad,” that is, outside their homeland. Wisdom and learning were necessary for helping Jews remain law-observant and faithful to God when they lived among non-Jews.

In chapter 35, Ben Sira teaches about the relationship of God’s generosity to our generous giving. One who keeps the law and heeds the commandments makes many offerings in response to what he or she has received from God. Ben Sira says to give “as generously as you can afford” (v. 12). It is unclear exactly how much ought be given, but the implication is to give as much as possible, cheerfully and gladly (see v. 11), yet within one’s means, in gratitude to God, who has already given generously. God repays the generous giver sevenfold (v. 13).

If, however, a giver seeks to offer a bribe (presumably an insincere gift or a gift given only to receive the sevenfold repayment), God will not accept it (v. 14). The giver’s intent, then, is crucial to God’s acceptance of the offering. The

Pastoral Perspective

Every fall, churches return with oxymoronic regularity to the “season of stewardship” (as if stewardship were an annual fiscal matter of concern for Christians, synonymous with a financial funds drive). Competing with appeals from public radio and television, the Red Cross, alumni/alumnae associations, the Cancer Society, and many other organizations soliciting funds, each autumn the church asks its members to view their money not as owners, but as stewards. The critical distinction is not easily understood or embraced in the modern American psyche.

Owners are those who see all money as rightfully belonging to them, a possession to do with as they so choose, based on personal preference, wise investment, charitable impulses, and/or strategic advantage. People of faith, however, are called to see all money as rightfully belonging to God, part of the treasure chest that God calls them to steward. So, whatever the faithful do with money, it is always in keeping with how they understand the gracious intent of God. For Christians, then, disposition of one’s money or the church’s money is less a matter of personal and/or institutional preference or strategic positioning, and more a matter of responding faithfully and wisely, joyfully and generously, to the extravagant grace of God.

Sirach 35:12–17

Exegetical Perspective

The author of Sirach, as do we, lived in the midst of enormous social upheaval. A major shift in political power was taking place. The Seleucids of Syria were challenging the Ptolemies of Egypt for dominion over Judea and the surrounding area. Great changes were looming on the horizon. The situation was much more than the back-and-forth swing of Republicans and Democrats in the United States. The impact on the average person was not immediately clear, but there was a growing uncertainty about the future and what lay ahead. The situation before the author of Sirach was not yet dire, but it was unsettling. Thus Sirach sought to calm the people and help them focus on what was basic to religious observance and obligation, to offer resources for sustaining personal as well as communal stability and a sense of purpose. Many in our churches today need and deserve such words of encouragement and direction.

Sirach is a useful resource in several different ways for assisting people of faith to meet such concerns. First, consider the relationship between faith and stewardship. There is perhaps no clearer statement in the Bible on this issue than that provided here. In times of uncertainty people often become afraid and unwilling to share with others. That is not the proper attitude. According

Homiletical Perspective

Many preachers' initial reaction to this wisdom from Sirach might be renewed appreciation for the Reformers' decision to exclude this book from the canon and the Revised Common Lectionary providing it as one of three OT readings for this Sunday. "Give to the Most High as he has given to you, and as generously as you can afford. For the Lord is the one who repays, and he will repay you sevenfold" (vv. 12–13). "Give to get back seven times as much as you give" is not a stewardship theme that most preachers would explicitly embrace, even if they could count on God to reward such giving motivated by personal gain in the way that Sirach seems to suggest. Yet many congregations approach stewardship as fund-raising and attempt to demonstrate that giving to the church is a good investment. Though they do not promise "cash back," many congregations promise givers a good return on their investment, in terms of congregational ministries, the good of the community, or the furthering of the gospel in the world.

Should the preacher be tempted to sidestep money and talk about giving something spiritual, like our love or devotion, Sirach's call to give "as generously as you can afford" (v. 12) makes clear that we are talking about cold hard cash. So Sirach surely provides an occasion to explore our

Sirach 35:12–17

Theological Perspective

“New Consecration Sunday Stewardship Program”¹ is an example of a current application of this understanding. The program emphasizes giving, not out of the congregation’s need to receive, but out of the giver’s need to give (see also 2 Cor. 9:7; Jas. 1:17).

The above discussion of motivation for giving raises questions of justice and fairness present throughout chapter 35. God’s justice is not only about what is right and fair, but also about generosity, mercy, and grace. Therefore, God’s justice does not always coincide with “fairness.” Parents and teachers bring this principle into play when helping children negotiate. For example, when an older child is unwilling to relinquish a toy to a much younger child, the situation calls for a responsible adult to help the older child understand that although it is not “fair” that she must hand over the toy, it is right for her to do so, because the younger child does not yet understand fairness and sharing. God’s justice calls for more than fairness; it calls for generosity and a preferential option for the most vulnerable.

God cannot be bribed and shows no partiality; Ben Sira says that God does not even show partiality to the poor (vv. 15–16). God, however, “listen[s] to the prayer of one who is wronged” (v. 16) and hears the supplications of the orphan and the widow (v. 17).

A strong emphasis on the necessity of keeping the law and making generous offerings indicates Ben Sira’s emphasis on responding to God’s generosity. God, in turn, repays givers many times over. In his Prologue, Ben Sir writes that those who read and study his book “might make even greater progress in living according to the law.”

In the lesson for this Sunday from Joel 2:23–32 in the other track of Hebrew Scripture readings, God’s gifts are freely given in response to repentance. The prophet Joel reminds the children of Zion that if they return to God with all their heart and repent (2:12–17), God will vindicate or redeem the people (2:23). God’s blessings of grain, wine, and oil will be abundant (2:24). “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28). Sons and daughters, old men and young men, male and female slaves are all included in God’s generosity (2:29).

In the Gospel text for this Sunday, Luke 18:9–14, we hear yet another nuance on the proper attitude before God. Jesus tells a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee, a keeper of the

1. Herb Miller, *New Consecration Sunday Stewardship Program* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

Pastoral Perspective

Even so, neither those who see money as their rightful possession nor those who see money as a sacred trust from God are exempt from the seductive power of money. In the musical *Cabaret*, the emcee and the cabaret star, Sally Bowles, sing a dark and cynical ode to the power of money, “Money makes the world go around.” Sally sings about the pastor who advises you to “love ever more.” However, “when hunger comes . . . See how love flies out the door.”¹

Many years earlier, Ben Sira, the author of Sirach, sang a much wiser and much more compelling song about the stewardship of one’s life, including money. Regrettably, the lectionary shortchanges the “wisdom” of Ben Sir by beginning this reading in midthought. The thought actually begins in verse 8 with the imperative to “honor the Lord with generosity, do not stint the first-fruits you bring” (NJB). According to Ben Sira’s calculus, money does not make the world go round. God does that. Money is the means by which we express our faithfulness and expansive gratitude to the generous grace of God. We bring gifts to God not as charitable owners or as sly negotiators with God (v. 14), but as humble stewards grateful for all occasions to share God’s gifts with thankful hearts. Humble stewards do so with the very best they have to offer; they do not “stint” their gift giving.

With words that the apostle Paul will later echo in his second letter to the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 9:7, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”), Ben Sira urges not only generosity with money, but a glad demeanor and a cheerful spirit in giving (v. 11). What pastor would not want Ben Sira as the leader of the annual stewardship campaign? In these two short sentences, he talks about generosity in giving, giving from the best of what we have to offer (first fruits), and disciplined giving (tithes).

This text from Sirach reminds readers that stewardship is not about courting God’s favor, but responding with extravagant gladness and generosity to God’s favor. In a society where “everything has its price,” Ben Sira reminds owners that God’s grace is priceless. So, if God’s favor cannot be purchased, as Ben Sira contends, then at no time do stewards become owners of their treasures (including money). God is the Lord of life, and all that we are and have is held in sacred trust to be disposed of in ways consistent with God’s will.

1. *Cabaret*. John Kander, composer, and Fred Ebb, lyricist (1966).

Sirach 35:12–17

Exegetical Perspective

to Sirach, there is no greater obligation or privilege than cheerfully to present one's offerings to God (v. 11). Generosity, to the measure that one can afford (v. 12), is the guide and will be met with divine approval and return (v. 13).

By emphasizing generous sharing of one's wealth as a sign of religious commitment Sirach sought to do two things. First, he sought to underscore the need to maintain the faith tradition in which he and his people stood. Sirach knew that in his time there was a necessity to witness overtly, and not only privately, to the God who had led this people for generations. Second, with this emphasis on giving, Sirach was able to direct attention to something each person could individually control. There were many things beyond the power of the common man or woman to affect, but individual devotion was something that each could exercise. There was no more concrete, tangible way to testify to a belief in God's ongoing benevolent guidance than cheerfully and generously to bring gifts before God.

A second issue that Sirach addressed concerned the sincerity of the worshiper. The prophets for several centuries prior to the time of Sirach had chastised the people for their inauthentic worship of the Lord. Amos announced God's rejection of Israel's numerous assemblies and sacrificial offerings (Amos 5:21–23). In Isaiah the false confidence of the people in the trappings of religion was severely criticized (Isa. 58:1–5). In Sirach's eyes worship that was not accompanied by genuine piety and faithfulness in daily life was useless and dangerous. To come before God with an offering while practicing deceit and oppression toward others in the community was tantamount to trying to "bribe" God, trying to appear devoted to God while in fact living in a manner contrary to God's expressed will (vv. 14–15).

Hypocrisy in the church continues to be a major detriment to efforts at outreach. All too often one hears the criticism: church people preach love but practice something quite different. Too many church people get caught up in the program of the church and forget what it is all about. Committee work replaces human compassion. The writer of James reminds us to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive" ourselves (Jas. 1:22). Sirach apparently saw many of his people making this mistake and sought to call them back to a proper stance before God. To claim allegiance to God but to fail to follow God's way was both disingenuous and destructive in terms of pleasing God (34:23, 31).

Homiletical Perspective

motivations and expectations when we make an offering to the Most High. Since we are people of God's Word, exploring our motivations and expectations in response to these words from Scripture will inevitably lead us to consider how we understand the Bible and, even more important, our relationship with God. Are we to take Sirach's words as literally true, and give as much as we can, so that God will give back to us even more? If not, how are we to understand these verses?

As is true about so many difficult sayings in Scripture, the way we understand our relationship with God shapes both how we approach Sirach and how we preach this passage. Since on this Sunday these words from Sirach are paired with Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14), the preacher might ponder that how these two men understand their relationship with God might shape the way they receive this bit of biblical wisdom from Sirach. As Jesus intended these two to be examples for those who heard his parable, the Pharisee and tax collector might help us to reexamine our stance before God as we make our offerings. A sermon that helps people explore the attitude with which they make their offering to God might have a greater impact on congregational giving than simply asking people to give more.

That Jesus tells a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray lends credence to using this parable to approach this reading from Sirach, since the poem in which these verses are found (vv. 6–13), "prescribes attitudes and interior dispositions that the righteous Jew should have when he makes an offering to the Lord."¹ To "appear before the Lord" (cf. v. 6) is a technical term for going to the temple. In their original context, these verses do indeed declare that generosity to God will be rewarded: "For the Lord always repays; you will be repaid seven times over."² Does the way the Pharisee and tax collector of Jesus' parable understand their relationship with God shape the way each might receive this bit of wisdom?

I suspect that in Jesus' parable, the Pharisee, who thanks God that he is not like other people and gives a tenth of his income (Luke 18:11–12), expects God to reward him greatly. We might push this Pharisee's attitude a bit and suggest that the Pharisee trusts God to keep God's word, especially when that word

1. Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 418.

2. John G. Snaith, *Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach*, Cambridge Bible Commentaries on the Apocrypha (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 170.

Sirach 35:12–17

Theological Perspective

law, seems to fit Ben Sira's profile of the generous giver, but in this parable, his fault is his own self-exaltation and his trust in his own righteousness. The tax collector, on the other hand, who knows he is a sinner, asks only for God's mercy. That the tax collector in the parable is neither poor nor wronged would seem to exclude him from God's mercy, in Ben Sira's understanding. However, as God's justice does not always coincide with fairness in Sirach 35, so in this parable, Jesus says the unworthy tax collector is justified. Because he humbled himself and poured out his heart, he will be exalted. On the other hand, the Pharisee, who gave generously and showed great piety, does not return to his home justified, because he looked down on the humble tax collector (Luke 18:14). The justice extended by God is tempered with grace and mercy for those who deserve none.

Martin Luther's understanding that text and sermon speak of both God's judgment and God's grace emphasizes the need for Christians to speak and hear a word of both judgment and grace, a word of both challenge and forgiveness, on any given Sunday.

DENA L. WILLIAMS

Pastoral Perspective

For anyone confused about the character of faithful stewardship, Ben Sira points to God's justice, by which the needs of the most vulnerable (orphans and widows, v. 17) are never neglected but are adroitly stewarded by people of faith. For Ben Sira, good stewards are not those who spend every waking hour accumulating ample resources so that they can dispense selective charity from their excess wealth. Rather, good stewards are those who use whatever their accumulated treasures may be to make sure that the most vulnerable are never ignored. This is due, of course, to the fact that God "will listen to the prayer . . . not ignore the supplication" (vv. 16–17).

The text from Sirach speaks to a yearning that post-World War II German bishop Hanns Lilje names: "To know that with all that we are and all that we have we are God's stewards is the answer to a particularly deep yearning of the time in which we live, namely, the yearning for a *vita nova*, a complete renewal of our life."² The "yearning" that Lilje observes is certainly not unique to his day. Ben Sira would soothe this yearning by inviting us to embrace the vocation of steward, as those who wholeheartedly serve God in all that we do.

A gift that preachers and teachers can pass on from Sirach to God's people is the critical reminder that stewardship is not an annual financial campaign for the church; it is the privilege of living as those who have been given a sacred trust. Stewards are not fundraisers; they are inspired stakeholders in the overwhelming wealth of God's mercy and grace. Stewards are not loud, chest-beating, arrogant financiers, happy to help those "less fortunate than they." Stewards know that they have not earned their vocation or been awarded the vocation of steward on the basis of good behavior. Stewards also know that the sacred trust they hold is not theirs, and so they guard and dispense these treasures with care and humility.

I have been preaching now for over thirty years and have yet to preach the wisdom from Sirach. What an unwise mistake.

GARY W. CHARLES

2. Quoted in T. A. Kantonen, *A Theology for Christian Stewardship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), 1.

Sirach 35:12–17

Exegetical Perspective

A third issue paramount in this passage concerns supplication for and service on behalf of the vulnerable. The matter is set between two primary affirmations. On the one hand, God does not show partiality to the poor over the rich (v. 16). One who is deceitful, whether rich or poor, will find no favor from God. On the other hand, God does hear the prayers of any who are wronged, especially orphans and widows, who are the least powerful and most vulnerable in the society (v. 17). Divine concern for the powerless is well attested throughout the Bible (see Deut. 10:14–19; 24:17–22; 27:19; Ps. 94:1–7; Isa. 1:16–17, 21–25); this is not partiality but rather divine commitment to restoring proper order to community.

Sirach tried to draw a careful path between devout religious practice and ethical sensitivity. All of the sacrifices that any could offer were useless if the intention was somehow to “bribe” God in order to receive favorable attention (34:21–31). Sirach wrote, “The offering of the righteous enriches the altar, and its pleasing odor rises before the Most High” (v. 8). Such sacrifices are always acceptable to God (v. 9). At the same time, however, all should be aware that the prayers of the oppressed do not go unheard. God attends to the cries of those who are wronged. God will judge those who are guilty of exploiting or neglecting the powerless, symbolized by the widows and orphans (vv. 18–25). Some two hundred years later, the writer of James echoed Sirach with these words: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jas. 1:27).

We live in a complex society where it is often difficult to identify how to attend to the “widows and orphans.” Of course, the instruction can be read literally, resulting in appropriate assistance being offered to the orphans and widows in our society. Were Sirach writing today, he would probably express a wider concern. How can we utilize the economic system in which we live to help rather than hurt the vulnerable? How can we work to ensure that our social, educational, and political institutions will care for, rather than exploit, the needy among us? These are serious issues that Sirach encourages us to consider.

WALLACE EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

is found in the Bible. The Pharisee in the parable thinks of God as a faithful contract keeper. The Pharisee gives to the Most High as generously as he can afford (at least compared to other people), expects God to give back, and may very well spend his life calculating to make certain that he receives a 700 percent return on his investment.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he does not, that he cannot give to the Most High as the Most High has given to him. The tax collector knows that the last thing he deserves from the Most High is a reward. He gives as best he can from a truly grateful heart, because he knows God to be loving and merciful. Beating his breast, this tax collector expects nothing in return, but implores God to be merciful to him. Perhaps because this tax collector’s expectations are so low, he is genuinely overwhelmed by the grace, mercy, peace, forgiveness, and love that he receives from the Most High. For the tax collector, Sirach’s words might sound not like a divine contract as much as like the advice of a fellow pilgrim who knew his need of mercy, gave what he could, and was overwhelmed by God’s goodness.

The preacher might read these verses from Sirach and rhetorically ask, “How do you hear these words? Are they silly and unrealistic? Are they a promise or contract? Are they a confession of faith?” The preacher might then explore how the Pharisee and tax collector might hear these words. The good news, of course, is that Jesus called “righteous” the one who trusted in God rather than himself. The preacher might then consider how this good news shapes both these words from Sirach and the whole of Scripture.

CRAIG A. SATTERLEE

**PROPER 25 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 23
AND OCTOBER 29 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalm 84:1–7

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.

Theological Perspective

For understanding the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann proposes categories of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

Psalms of orientation sing of joy and delight in God and God's work. Psalms of disorientation reflect suffering and death. Psalms of new orientation sing of times of deliverance by God from the ills of the human condition.¹ The loss of control we experience in our lives (disorientation) precedes new orientation, new life.

Brueggemann is clear that his scheme requires flexibility—any psalm may fit into more than one category. This certainly seems the case for Psalm 84. Initially, Psalm 84 appears to be a psalm of new orientation, a psalm that offers praise of new life in God's presence. It speaks of a pilgrim's hopeful anticipation of singing his joy in God's home. The pilgrim writer anticipates God's imminent deliverance. He seeks to journey to God's temple, to a new orientation. His current location and condition, however, remain unclear. Wherever he presently finds himself as he writes this hymn, he obviously does not consider himself at home.

Now, the psalm is more like a psalm of disorientation. The psalmist deeply desires to leave

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

Pastoral Perspective

From the Declaration of Independence to the latest commercials on television, we are encouraged to engage in "the pursuit of happiness." Some political thinkers even argue that "happiness" is an entitlement to those who live in a free society. Prosperity preachers take that political philosophy one step further. They argue not only that Christians are entitled to "happiness," but that God's promised happiness takes the tangible form of wealth. For prosperity pundits, Paul only gets the second part of the formula right when he says, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). For prosperity preachers, the unspoken part of Paul's formula is only natural to assume: "Happy are those whose wealth knows no end." Surely God knows that the only way to be a cheerful giver is if we have plenty to give!

Lest the church be tempted to advance such biblical pablum and advocate such shallow theology, we would do well to listen to this psalm as rendered in the New Jerusalem (NJB) and New International (NIV) translations rather than the New Revised Standard (NRSV). In the NRSV translation of Psalm 84, the psalmist argues that "happy are those" who thirst for God and live in devotion to God's righteousness. Not only is "happy" a tepid translation of the corresponding Hebrew (*ashre*)

Psalm 84:1–7

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
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.

Exegetical Perspective

This psalm describes the intense longing of the devout worshiper for the courts of the Lord. The “dwelling places” of God (vs. 1) represent both the precincts of the Jerusalem temple and the enduring intimacy with God that blesses those who worship there. The poem opens with a lyrical exclamation of devotion addressed to God: “How lovely (or, better, “How cherished”) are your dwelling places!” (all translations mine). With the vocative, the poet beckons us into the presence of the Lord of hosts. A striking collocation of words of love and power invites us to cherish the place wherein dwells none other than the Commander of the heavenly armies. Brilliantly, the psalmist configures spiritual desire as both submission to God’s power and a yearning for intimacy with this all-powerful God.

The psalmist continues with poignant language of yearning in verse 2, painting with dramatic strokes the desire of the believer for the place where God may be found. “It longs, indeed it languishes”—in the Hebrew, two verbs and an emphatic particle keep us waiting to hear what the subject is, who or what is so desperate for closeness to God. The subject comes later in the line: “my soul.” In what follows, we witness the all-encompassing nature of spiritual devotion: “my heart and my flesh sing for

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 84 is the joyful praise of a pilgrim who comes to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, probably for the feast of Tabernacles. Arriving at the temple and in full view of the sanctuary, the psalmist pours out his heart to God.

In the verses appointed for this Sunday, the psalmist recalls both his longing for worship in the temple (vv. 1–4) and his pilgrimage to Jerusalem (vv. 5–7), made during the time of the autumn rains (v. 6).¹ While Christian commentators frequently point to the eternal life promised by Jesus—or to Jesus himself—as the goal of the Christian pilgrimage, that destination often seems to be distant and ethereal. Perhaps the psalmist’s praise of and longing for the temple invites the church to contemplate the immediate reality of coming into the triune God’s presence as we worship. As a congregational response to either Jeremiah’s confession of sin or Sirach’s confession to trust, Psalm 84:1–7 proclaims the longing, joy, happiness, and strength of all who trust the grace and mercy of the God into whose presence they come in worship. Sermons on Psalm 84:1–7 might take as their theme either the place of or the pilgrimage to *God’s presence in worship*. The goal of a sermon based on this psalm

1. Robert Benedetto, “Between Text and Sermon: Psalm 84,” *Interpretation* vol. 51, no. 1 (January 1997): 57.

Psalm 84:1–7

Theological Perspective

his present environment in order to journey to Jerusalem, to the temple, the dwelling place of God. He seeks relief from some degree of disorientation. The pilgrim wants to live in the temple, at home with God. He not only longs for the temple; he experiences his disorientation as homesickness. He longs in *soul* and *body* to go home to the place where God lives. Both his *heart* and his *flesh* sing for joy to God. He eagerly anticipates new orientation, happiness in God's house, as he sings God's praise. The location of "home" is a place off in the distance where God lives, a place of joy, a place of happiness, a place of new orientation, far away from present disorientation.

I write this reflection just two weeks after the devastating Haitian earthquake of 2010. The media report that on Sundays, along the streets of Port-au-Prince, some groups of people gather in the midst of the wreckage of houses, in makeshift hovels near the thousands of unburied bodies of their beloved dead, in the absence of food and water and medical care. They gather to sing and pray and listen to God's word as it is read aloud. Surely the eager pilgrim's song in Psalm 84 is not among the texts chosen for this day. Surely these Haitian pilgrims are not able to anticipate new orientation, to offer praise to God. In their desperation, their extreme disorientation, I imagine the people unable even to begin to envision a new orientation, God's home, a place of joy and happiness. There exists a level of despair so far beyond the apparent disorientation of the psalm's pilgrim that his words seem a mockery. It seems possible to be so overwhelmed by suffering, so disoriented, that the singing of songs of new orientation is impossible.

It is easy to overlook the question of suffering hidden in this psalm. The pilgrim provides no details; he leaves us only to imagine the suffering that drives him on a journey to live in God's presence in the temple. Our knowledge of the despair that accompanies millions of people in our world, however, means that we cannot avoid the question of God's role in the lives of those who suffer. As we come into God's presence with singing on a Sunday morning, there exists great temptation to ignore or to romanticize the suffering of people who live in desperate conditions. A careful reading of Psalm 84 calls us to ask honest and difficult questions: Is God at home in Haiti on this day of such suffering? Does God dwell among these grieving, hungry, frightened people? Is the singing in the streets of Port-au-Prince joyful? Is

Pastoral Perspective

and Greek (*makarios*—LXX); it lacks the theological depth of "blessed" as rendered in the NJB and NIV. Happiness is an emotion that fluctuates with one's internal barometer, whereas blessedness is a gift bestowed on one by God in times of both happiness and sorrow.

In the NJB, the psalmist cries, "My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts, My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God" (v. 2). Unlike the cult of personal happiness popular in too much contemporary religious and political thought, Psalm 84 directs us toward a blessed life free from self-obsession and framed by gratitude and steadfast devotion to God. The psalmist suggests that "blessed" are those whose lives are consumed not by the pursuit of happiness, but by the pursuit of a life lived in faithful joy and appreciative obedience to the "living God." About such a blessed community, the psalmist declares, "How blessed are those who live in your house; they shall praise you continually" (v. 4).

According to the psalmist, a blessed life is not one free from obstacles and serious challenges or one that necessarily results in unending days of joy and happiness. A blessed life is one that is lived in the sure confidence that our journey is never a solitary one, "Blessed are those who find their strength in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage" (v. 5 NJB). This pilgrim psalm was probably sung on the way to Jerusalem, but this song has found an audience among pilgrims of faith ever since.

In many ways Psalm 84 is a song for those who are homesick, a tune for those who reach a point in life when they sense a deep longing, a relentless yearning that one more promotion or acquisition or degree cannot satisfy. The psalmist sings of a yearning greater than we can satisfy: "My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts" (v. 2 NJB). In the psalm this deep yearning and sense of longing is for the Jerusalem temple, but the psalmist's song speaks about more than a destination reached—about a relationship realized with "my King and my God" (v. 3). In his *Confessions*, Augustine suggests that the human condition will be one of being constantly homesick until our whole being rests in the blessed arms of God.

Ask pastors, educators, musicians, counselors, chaplains, seminary professors, and most can testify to the homesick condition of the modern soul. However, not heeding the psalmist's prescription, "My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God" (v. 2 NJB), people try to address their rootless reality with medicine chests filled with prescribed

Psalm 84:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

joy,” the psalmist cries, with a passionate intensity that almost makes us avert our eyes.

The standard English translations of *naphshi*, *libbi*, and *besari*—“my soul,” “my heart,” and “my flesh”—cannot do justice to the nuances of those Hebrew words. *Naphshi* and *libbi* are the psalmist’s life force and very being, his longing from the depths of his heart and perception, and *besari* is his embodiment as a mortal creature, the physical place from which he longs for “the living God,” the One who gives life and in whom all living things have their being. The artistic interplay of power and desire is intensified with the poet’s choice of the verb *ranan*, which may be translated as “sing for joy” but also evokes the festal shout of a liturgical procession (see Ps. 95:1). Adoration stemming from the psalmist’s inward being commingles with the public confession of God’s people who gather to praise their mighty Beloved.

These tropes of power and desire are met in verse 3 by images of extraordinary tenderness. It is not only temple leaders and throngs of pilgrims who are granted rest and refreshment at the altars of the God of Israel. Even the tiny sparrow may find a home there, and the mother swallow is so secure in the house of the Lord that she can build a nest for her young. The slight syntactical delay in verse 2 as we wait for the subject “my soul” is mirrored in a syntactical delay in verse 3—this time, there are three full clauses—before we come to the location in which the birds are nesting: “Your altars, O LORD of hosts.” The syntactical delay in the Hebrew draws us, as it were, farther and farther into the temple precincts. Overcome with yearning, we finally arrive at God’s altars, where we hear the climactic shout of the psalmist: “My King and my God!” This poetry has swept us along in the eager ranks of joyful pilgrims to the center of God’s house, where we join in the creedal acclamation of YHWH as Ruler and God.

The psalmist draws us back, then, from the height of liturgical passion, having shown us who we are as God’s faithful people: believers (re)formed in the ecstatic “procession” that we have just made to God’s altars. Verses 4–5 address God in our hearing, helping us to see how powerful is God’s love: “Happy are those who live in your house. . . . Happy are those whose strength is in you!” Those who rest in the power of God’s relational love can only praise God. The spiritually formative nature of this is clear from the metaphor in verse 5, “highways in their heart,” elaborated in most English translations as, “in whose heart are the highways to Zion.” Trust

Homiletical Perspective

might be to bring forth feelings of longing, joy, happiness, and strength to the congregation as it worships.

The psalmist first invites us to contemplate the *place* of our worship—our “temple.” The psalmist exclaims, “How lovely is your dwelling place!” (v. 1). The psalmist then offers wonderful images of the experience of entering into God’s presence in the temple in Jerusalem: the soul’s longing, indeed fainting, for the courts of the Lord (v. 2). Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow lays her young at God’s altars (v. 3). Those who dwell in God’s house are happy (v. 4). For the psalmist, the temple is nothing less than the city of God, the place where all nations and people will come to worship, because it is the place where God is truly present.

As the temple in Jerusalem was for the psalmist, so our worship space is for us, and foremost, God’s “dwelling place,” the place of God’s very presence. The preacher might use the psalmist’s images effectively to cast a vision of the congregation’s worship space as God’s temple, the place of God’s presence. Helping the congregation to see or to rediscover or to be affirmed in their experience that the worship space is a place where God is unconditionally present might change worship from fulfilling an obligation to being a transforming experience of joy, happiness, and longing that comes from basking in God’s very presence. The preacher can accomplish this by naming, pointing to, and perhaps preaching from various points in the worship space—the baptismal font, altar table, pulpit, pew, stained-glass window—and proclaiming what *God* does (as opposed to what *we* do) with and through these things. The worship space becomes more than a place where God’s people gather, remember, praise, and pray to God. The worship space becomes a sign, experience, and assurance of God’s presence and activity in our lives and in the world.

Of course, this sermon may very well make plain any “gap” that exists between the proclamation of the worship space as the place of God’s very presence and what actually goes on when people gather there. Is our worship space a place where “even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself” (v. 3)? Is the worship space truly God’s “dwelling place,” or is it the congregation’s possession? Do we understand what goes on in this space primarily in terms of God’s presence and activity or our comforts and preferences? Why do we—or why do we not—long, indeed faint, for the

Psalm 84:1–7

Theological Perspective

love found there? Do birds find a place to nest and raise their young? Does singing Psalm 84, a song of joy, have any place in a scene of such despair, such disorientation, found in Haiti on this day?

Certainly, the suffering of the people of Haiti, the suffering of all victims of catastrophic circumstances brought about by extreme poverty, violence, or natural disaster, far outweighs the suffering of the vast majority of people in the pews of North American churches on Sunday morning. The quantification and comparison of suffering and joy is a common human activity for us and, apparently, for this psalmist, as he expresses in verse 10 of Psalm 84: “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.” A day in the presence of God is one thousand times better than a day suffered anywhere else. It seems important to address the usefulness or futility of comparing one’s own suffering to that of others—those who are directly a part of our lives and those far removed from our daily experience. Is quantification and comparison of suffering salutary?

We, with the psalmist, dwell in a place of suffering, even as we long for and anticipate God’s presence. The psalmist offers hope as he reflects on God’s strength. We have in our hearts the highway to home where God dwells (v. 5). We have strength from God to leave our present place of disorientation and journey to a new orientation in the courts of the Lord (v. 7). God shows us the way, provides strength for the journey, and welcomes us home. The psalmist concludes his song with words of trust (vv. 11–12). We trust God to give us—and, yes, even the people of Haiti—hope and strength for the journey home in the days to come.

DENA L. WILLIAMS

Pastoral Perspective

and illegal pharmaceuticals to calm the angst of a homesick soul or to offer a temporary fantasy of “happiness.”

In his commentary on the rootless, homesick modern soul, novelist Walter Kirn tells the story of corporate consultant and *very* frequent flyer Ryan Bingham. Early on in *Up in the Air*, we learn that Mr. Bingham’s secret goal in life is not to know the blessed joy of God’s goodness, but to accomplish something far more mundane. His life’s goal is to reach one million frequent flyer miles. When he finally reaches this goal, he is literally “up in the air,” and the pilot and flight crew hold a faux celebration for him.

Far from soothing his sad soul, the achievement of his life’s goal leaves Mr. Bingham still longing for a home that cannot be booked on Expedia. He is still homesick for a relationship that is more enduring than a series of one-night stands. The reader leaves this book with longing that all the Mr. Bingham of the world might discover, whether “up in the air” or with both feet on the ground, that “blessed are those whose strength is in you” (v. 5 NIV).

Psalm 84 has its own particular role within the psalter and in the lives of the people of Israel, but its song sings out across generations and cultures and languages to those looking for home in all the wrong places, who never notice that the most blessed are those who yearn for something more than “happiness.”

GARY W. CHARLES

Psalm 84:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

and praise shape us as believers, creating within us a heart that desires only God.

The prayers and hymns of the gathered community transform all who make their pilgrimage into the presence of God and encourage those living in exile from God's house. Psalm 84 has deep resonance with Psalms 42 and 43, where the longing for God is expressed by one lamenting far from the land of Israel, in diaspora. Some interpreters suggest that the poet is dislocated from Jerusalem. Believers must negotiate times of spiritual drought—the Hebrew “valley of Baca” (v. 6) seems to connote a waterless and unaccommodating place—but joy in God renders every desert a place of springs (cf. Isa 35:6–7), just as the early rains saturate the ground to yield refreshing pools.

Poetic genius! First the psalmist draws us into the temple and into the deepest desires of the human heart. We understand devotion and security as we glimpse the intimacy of the swallow tending her young at the foot of God's throne. Now the poet pulls back, widening the view so that we take in the expanse of human life with its inevitable exiles and losses. Yet this landscape too is safe for us, for devotion to God transforms it into a place of life-giving pools of water. Thus no matter what the circumstance, the faithful go “from strength to strength” (v. 7) in their joyous love for God.

The difficult concluding clause of our lection offers wonderful possibilities. Depending on which emendation one chooses, it could mean that the pilgrim will appear before God in Zion, the pilgrim will see God in Zion, or the God of gods will appear in Zion. The ambiguity is unresolvable and marvelous, for it invites us to see in every dimension of literal and spiritual pilgrimage the holy encounter of lover and Beloved.

CAROLYN J. SHARP

Homiletical Perspective

courts of the Lord? The good news in this sermon is that God is truly present and active in this temple. The sermon can help the congregation celebrate and contemplate both its sanctuary and its worship life.

The psalmist then moves from praising the temple as God's dwelling place to proclaiming the happiness of those who keep the highways to God's presence in their heart (v. 5). An alternative translation is, “Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.”² The psalmist declares that God's blessings are found in the pilgrim's journey to God's temple. The psalmist suggests that those who have their hearts and minds set on the pilgrims' way, who experience great hardship on their way to worship, are particularly blessed. The psalmist describes pilgrims journeying through a very arid “valley of drought” where they find instead “a place of springs” (v. 6). Since the pilgrims are passing through this difficult valley on their way to the temple, God blesses them with power and grace by providing pools of water.

Strictly speaking, Christians are not pilgrims. We do not need to journey to a particular place—one holy city, Jerusalem—to worship God in the temple there. We also need to be careful not to make idols of our church buildings; Christ is most truly present in his body, the church. Nevertheless, with these precautions, inviting Christians to think of and pray for their daily lives as a journey to and from God's “dwelling place” might make us more aware of the ways that God strengthens us in time of hardship and provides pools of blessing along our way. A “pilgrim's perspective” might make the church so aware of a destination—God's “dwelling place”—that it is inspired to renewed hope and purpose and a longing for God's house.

CRAIG A. SATTERLEE

2. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), Assembly Song 84.

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PROPER 26 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 30
AND NOVEMBER 5 INCLUSIVE)

Isaiah 1:10–18

- ¹⁰Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
- ¹¹What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
- ¹²When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
- ¹³bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
- ¹⁴Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.

Theological Perspective

In this passage Israel is being accused, charged, and judged before a divine court. Just as the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah turned their back on the law, so the current rulers of Jerusalem are turning their back on their God-given identity. There is a challenge to the worship of the temple as to whether it is real and transformative. Consequently there is an appeal to the people that they begin to act with justice and so find themselves forgiven, cleansed, and restored. The theological challenges that a preacher might address or allow to inform a sermon on this text include the nature and purpose of the law, the nature and purpose of worship, the nature and purpose of sacrifice, and the nature and purpose of justice.

Underlying the challenge of an accusation in a court of law is the reminder of the origins of the people who are acting like rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah. The law was a gracious gift of identity as the people of Israel were being formed into a people in the wilderness. The law served to hold up what was important to the people and articulated behavior that distinguished them from others whom they encountered. They were the people who

Pastoral Perspective

This passage from Isaiah is strikingly reminiscent of the words of Amos: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” The Amos passage concludes with the ringing words, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21–24). So both Isaiah and Amos are sharply critical of corporate worship, at least when it is a substitute for social justice.

Are there pastoral issues here? At least we are reminded that corporate worship can be a substitute for addressing moral issues in oneself or in the broader community. The sociologist Robert Merton provides us with an interesting sociological parallel. In his volume *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Merton describes what he calls the “ritual function.” When faced with an unresolvable conflict of values, we may choose the values we really care about while “ritualizing” the others. This is a way of doing the one while only *seeming* to do the other. A classic illustration: a member of Congress may want to appear to support environmental programs, but these would be costly, and he or she has other priorities. So the legislator will give enthusiastic support for yet another *study* of the problem. The study

Isaiah 1:10–18

- ¹⁵When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
- ¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.
- ¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

Exegetical Perspective

Isaiah 1:10–18 appears as an alternate reading alongside Psalm 32:1–7; 2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12; and Luke 19:1–10. It seems to be affiliated with the Luke passage, the story in which the rich tax collector Zacchaeus, after meeting Jesus, eagerly proposes to make restitution by giving half his possessions to the poor and restoring fourfold anything he has taken by fraud. Psalm 32 likewise describes the experience of one who at first fails to confess sin and experiences the heavy hand of God, and then confesses the sin and finds forgiveness and restoration.

A danger in interpretation of this combination of passages is that, following centuries of anti-Jewish Christian rhetoric, the Isaiah passage can be taken as an accusation against Jews for hard-heartedly pursuing a system of sacrificial worship, unaccompanied by sincerity, in contrast to the “Christian” believer Zacchaeus, who spontaneously repented. On deeper reflection it should be readily seen that, first, Isaiah’s problem is not with the sacrificial system but with the spirit in which it is being carried out. Second, verse 18 makes clear that the prophet fully expects repentance and renewal to be well within the range of the possible. Third, the pre-Christian, Jewish

Homiletical Perspective

Isaiah 1 introduces us to the preaching of Isaiah. The prophet is a spokesperson or vehicle for God’s communication with the people of Israel in Judah and Jerusalem (v. 1). The chapter is focused on God and recounts God’s “overwhelming anger toward Israel, offers examples of the nation’s rebellious behavior, and then turns to God’s effort to bring his people into obedience.”¹

Verses 10–18 present a blistering attack on the cultic practices in Jerusalem. The problem is that ritual sacrifices, as commanded by God, are being offered, but are considered by God as abominations, empty and abhorrent. For these are “solemn assemblies with iniquity” (v. 13). Like Jeremiah (Jer. 5; 7), and Micah (Mic. 6), Isaiah proclaims God’s disgust with the trappings of religion carried out by those whose “hands are full of blood” (v. 15).

God’s blunt prescription for a reversal is that the people be washed and be made clean (v. 16); “cease to do evil, learn to do good: seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”

1. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 17.

Isaiah 1:10–18

Theological Perspective

had been brought out of slavery and been given the gift of living by grace, putting their trust in God's grace and love, caring for stranger, orphan, widow, and the like.

Those they encountered might worship Baal, engage in warfare, make slaves, and use prostitutes in temple fertility rites; but not so with the people of God, who obeyed the law as an expression of what it means to be righteous or in right relationship with God. The law is fundamentally the gift of identity, a constant reminder of what is of true importance to the people who live by grace.

Scholars debate whether the contempt in which YHWH appears to hold ritual observances, solemn assemblies at new moon, and Sabbath with sacrifices of bulls, lambs, and goats marks a call for a complete ending of the sacrificial system (such as is found in Jer. 7:21–26 and elsewhere), or is a polemic in this circumstance in which people have turned away from the requirements of the law for justice. Either way, the prophet condemns worship that is understood as transaction and the belief that right observance assures God's blessing in some way. Worship can be properly understood as orienting ourselves or being oriented to that which is of ultimate worth, such that we are recalled to what really matters and we allow that relationship to shape our lives. What is being condemned is magical thinking and the avoidance of being challenged or changed through the worship itself.

Sacrifice as a part of the worship of the day is a particular case that lends itself to the accusation of mechanical thinking in worship. The sacrificial system reflected in this passage includes fat offerings, burnt offerings, and food offerings of cereal and the like. There was a variety of purposes for the various offerings (a substitution of an animal to address the miasma of sin of and for the one making the sacrifice was apparently a minor one), but what they have in common is the fundamental action of *offering*. Sacrifice at its best is a costly offering of something that would otherwise be necessary for life; therefore, whatever supplication might be involved becomes an expression of the trust in God for life on the part of the one making the sacrifice. Isaiah makes clear that God has the power to restore a relationship broken by false or wrong offerings, as a response to the people turning again to what really matters. Sins that are as scarlet shall become like snow (v. 18).

What YHWH seeks is repentance, the cessation of evil, and the doing of good, defined as seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and

Pastoral Perspective

appears to be a step in the right direction, but it is much less costly than realistic efforts would be. In fact, the study may well simply produce one more in a series of reports gathering dust on bookshelves.

That way of avoiding painful choices appears now and again in all kinds of institutions—including, of course, the church.

Is it not also a conscious, or unconscious, approach to personal decision making? Here is somebody who is consumed, night and day, with a money-making career. At the same time, this person has a family of growing children who need their parents' attention. So, instead of taking the time to provide the attention, the parent gives expensive gifts. The gifts, in Merton's terminology, are ritual behavior—a substitute for real action.

When I first encountered that analysis some years ago, I rather disliked his choice of the term "ritual," for it seemed too close to church language. After all, the church focuses much attention on all kinds of rituals. Upon reflection, I had to remind myself that even the church's use of rituals can illustrate Merton's point. We can make it easy for people to avoid dealing with the great problems facing our personal and social lives by doing the ritual thing, say once a week, but not changing our everyday lives in the slightest.

Even some church actions can take on this aspect of ritual. For instance, provision of Christmas baskets for poor people once a year can make the givers feel good and can, for a few days, ease the pain of poverty a little. In the long run, this does not do much to face or solve the problem of poverty. The church can sometimes be more realistic by advocating for broad-based social programs that will make a much more substantial difference to poor people. Another illustration: in the decades prior to the civil rights movement, some Caucasian churches sought to deal with racism by inviting the people of an African American church to engage in a pulpit exchange. Perhaps that was helpful, but real change occurred when the churches gave wholehearted support to legislation such as the voting-rights and fair-housing legislation of the 1960s.

The problem, then, is how to help people see that their religious practices can be a technique of avoidance. That may be more art than science. The pastoral approach must focus on real issues, not on superficial forms of religiosity. Even prayer, especially when it does not lead to action, can be little more than ritual.

The Isaiah passage is even more challenging: "I cannot endure solemn assemblies," says the Lord.

*Isaiah 1:10–18***Exegetical Perspective**

psalmist describes in knowledgeable detail the inner dynamics of conflict with one's own moral self and the release that comes with repentance.

Rather, Isaiah's speech here can be seen as part of the tradition of calls to repentance to which both John the Baptist and Jesus belong. Since it is not set as a story, we do not know its effect on hearers, but we can imagine that, like any exhortation, it fell on both receptive and deaf ears.

Isaiah 1 overtures major themes from throughout Isaiah's preaching. It is difficult to separate verses 10–18 from their context, since verse 10 depends for its meaning on verse 9, and verses 19–20 complete the thought. For the beginning of the passage, the preacher can provide brief background information. For the end of the passage, one alternative may be to extend it to the final two verses, as its use on Proper 14 of Year C reflects. However, if the reading ends with verse 18, emphasis remains on the transformation of the sinner more than on the consequences of rebellion or faithfulness.

The passage begins by addressing Sodom and Gomorrah, and the previous verse reveals why. Verses 7–9 had described devastation in the countryside, probably reflecting the Assyrian invasion of 701 BCE, which had left Jerusalem as a walled city standing alone "like a booth in a vineyard" (v. 8) in the midst of an otherwise devastated land (see Isa. 36:1–2). In relief over the close call, someone's voice is heard reflecting that, had it not been for the small remnant of survivors, Judah would have been wiped out entirely, as Sodom and Gomorrah were (Gen. 19:24–25). This comparison with Sodom and Gomorrah appears frequently in Scripture (see Deut. 29:23, Isa. 13:19, Amos 4:11, and Zeph. 2:9). However, in verse 10 the prophet turns this statement back to the audience with reminders not of these cities' destruction but of the wrongdoing that led to it. By asserting that, far from being *almost like* these legendary cities, Jerusalem *is* them, by calling his listeners in Jerusalem the "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah," he asserts that the threat is by no means ended. Without some drastic changes of heart, they may yet suffer Sodom's emblematic fate and, as verse 20 says, "be devoured by the sword."

The heart of the passage proceeds in three parts. First (vv. 11–15) comes a disgusted description of temple practices, as Isaiah imagines God viewing them. Second (vv. 16–17), the prophet lists simply and rhythmically the behaviors desired instead. Third (v. 18, plus 19–20), the prospect of cleansing renewal is previewed.

Homiletical Perspective

(v. 17). Then the sins that are "like scarlet" shall "be like snow" (v. 18).

Preachers will gravitate to verses 16–18 as providing a remedy for the sinfulness of a professed religious faith being carried out while practices of iniquity and injustice are being pursued simultaneously. This is the typical problem of hypocrisy, but in Isaiah it is of such depth that it is denounced in searing language by God.

The specifics of the sins of the people of Israel relate to offering sacrifices without a heart truly devoted to faith and to walking in the ways of God. This is perhaps clarified a bit in Jeremiah. On the topic of burnt offerings and sacrifices, God told Jeremiah that when his ancestors were brought out of Egypt, "I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you'" (Jer. 7:22–23). What God requires is not the sacrificial act itself, but the relationship of God to people and the obedience of the people in following the ways and will of God. This applies in Isaiah 1 where John Calvin says about the people: "All the pains they take to worship God are of no advantage unless they flow from integrity of heart."²

The same circumstances pertain today. Preachers will find contemporary expressions of the outward participation in the things of God, while as Isaiah later said, "people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me" (Isa. 29:13). This verse was quoted by Jesus (Matt. 15:8). While a scolding mold in the pulpit will not be most useful, it will be helpful to indicate—strongly—that all "good works" or religious actions in themselves should be *expressions* of genuine faith, not *substitutes for* genuine faith. The Lord looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), and what is done in the worship and service of God is an indicator of the faith that resides in the heart and the commitment to live and walk in God's ways. This is a message that needs to be heard.

The prescriptions and promise of verses 16–18 can be expressed liked this.

Wash (v. 16). The reversal of Israel's condition can come through a washing to "make yourselves clean," more explicitly, through the removal of evil from

2. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 7, *Isaiah 1–32* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974).

Isaiah 1:10–18

Theological Perspective

pleading for the widow (vv. 16–17). Justice is the circumstance that occurs when God is present or made manifest in the midst of a faithful people. It is both sign and consequence of right relationship, by which the weakest and most vulnerable among the people receive care and concern, or what they need for life.

A brave preacher will see such themes as the theological foundation for addressing stewardship, or the assumption of Scripture that all we are and all we have is a gift from God, entrusted to our care for particular purposes, which include the strengthening and well-being of others. The English word “steward,” which may well come from the title of the pig keeper, the “sty warden,” implies that we are looking after and caring for life-giving goods on behalf of another. Sacrificial giving then becomes the offering of something that the world tells us is what we need for life.

In making such an offering we are affirming and acting on our trust in God as the source of all life. We are engaging in an act of worship, in that we are remembering and enacting the story of ultimate worth or what really matters, shown in the graceful self-giving love of God. We are directing that offering in ways that sustain the communities of our lives in which justice is a value for the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow, playing a part in making manifest the consequence of God’s love in our life. In the words of one commentator on Isaiah’s appeal for true worship: “the grace of God can only be properly understood by someone who knows that he deserved death, and that this death will indubitably overtake him if he rejects the outstretched hand of his God.”¹

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

Pastoral Perspective

God is portrayed as *hating* the religious festivals. Such things have become a substitute for genuine repentance and the seeking of justice. The plight of the orphan and the widow ought to be compelling—not optional, and definitely not neglected—in a religious community that is more focused on its liturgical practices. If the community of faith is not involved in combating the systemic injustices of society, it would be better not to engage in those practices. That is Isaiah’s very strong message.

I cannot leave this subject without applying it even to the lectionary itself! Some people within the church regard following the lectionary as an absolute in the life of the church. What would Isaiah say about that? Suppose a given text does not provide a clear opening into an issue that has emerged in the life of society or of the people in the church. That can happen. Two days after the Gulf War of 1991 began, I wandered into the Navy Chapel on Nebraska Avenue in Washington, D.C., curious to see how the conflict would be dealt with among people most affected by it. The preacher of the day, who was an assistant chaplain, spoke to the text in 1 Samuel 3 about Samuel’s call and his interaction with Eli. The sermon developed the text with exegetical precision, but there was not one word spoken about what was happening in far-off Kuwait. Perhaps even that text could have been developed more relevantly; it would have been a challenge. More important, that day, was to address what was happening in the world with insight and directness. Why important pastorally? To speak a relevant word among people whose lives are affected opens up all kinds of opportunities for pastoral interaction.

Then come the really challenging lines in Isaiah: “Your hands are full of blood” (v. 15e). That is a most difficult thing to hear if one is engaged in religious practices, particularly if one has not oneself killed or wounded anybody; but it is a reminder of our systemic involvements. Whatever society is doing, we are doing, whether we like it or not. We purge ourselves by working for needed change.

J. PHILIP WOGAMAN

1. Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12* (London: SCM, 1972), 17f.

Isaiah 1:10–18

Exegetical Perspective

Isaiah's comparison of Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah agrees with that of Ezekiel, who declared that Sodom and its surrounding cities "had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it" (Ezek. 16:49–50). He begins cleverly with a shocking, attention-grabbing claim: God does not want the many sacrifices being brought to the temple. As the detailed enumeration of practices piles up, we too feel their accumulated, God-wearying burden.

However, the Torah itself, the "teaching" to which the prophet refers in verse 10, had prescribed them. Numerous mentions of rams as burnt offerings are found in Leviticus, along with their "pleasing odor" (Lev. 8:21). The blood of lambs had once been the sign of Passover itself (Exod. 12:5–7, 13). In fact, in commemoration of this event all males were commanded to "appear before God" every year (Exod. 23:17) and never to come empty handed (v. 15). Celebrations of new moon (Num. 29:6) and Sabbath are likewise expected; in fact, according to Genesis 2:2, even God observes the Sabbath. Lest we Christians think that it is the sacrificial system that is being repudiated, verse 15 asserts that even prayer is not acceptable to God under conditions that are about to be described.

Finally, at the end of verse 15, we arrive at the speech's punch line: the hands that are stretched out to God in prayer are full of blood (v. 15). If the verses describing the abominable sacrifices have been excruciatingly lengthy, the clipped, rhythmic, even rhyming speech that follows lays out with excruciating terseness the program God desires. It is this short: "Wash! Cleanse! Remove your evil deeds from my sight! Cease evil! Learn good! Seek justice! Help the oppressed! Defend the orphan! Plead for the widow!" It is all about the poor, the ones whose cause was also, and frequently, brought to the Israelites' attention in the Torah, alongside the sacrificial offerings. When they are neglected, ritual is less than meaningless.

This teaching is found among all the eighth-century prophets (see also Amos 5:21–24; Hos. 6:6; and Mic. 6:6–8). However, Isaiah goes on to envision reconciliation. The analogy in verse 18 to red dyes makes clear that blood-stained hands cannot be washed out with soap. Though a new beginning is contingent on the people's cooperation, it arises from divine mercy, since only God can remove stains as deep as these.

PATRICIA TULL

Homiletical Perspective

God's eyes. Bluntly: "Cease to do evil." This is the removal of that which pollutes us: sin, in whatever forms. This is the commitment to repentance, to be cleansed from sin, and to walk in the directions of new life. Exhortations to find forgiveness and cleansing in Jesus Christ are the contemporary expressions of God's word to the people of Israel.

Learn (v. 17). The cleansing of evil leads to a series of short commands, beginning with "learn to do good." It is important to recognize that our knowledge of what is "good"—as individuals and as societies—does not descend to us fully developed. Our efforts to "do good" must be learned as we seek, in faith, to know and do what we believe God wants of us. "Learn to do good"; then *seek* justice, *rescue* the oppressed, *defend* the orphan, *plead* for the widow. This rich set of commands can be the content of a number of sermons. Together they represent the burning concern of God, expressed in the prophets and in Jesus, for those most vulnerable and in need. This emphasis is a mark of true Christian faith. Strong action on behalf of marginalized people is a missional direction for the church.

Come (v. 18). The expression of repentance in the acts mentioned means those who are "washed" and are "learners" ("disciples") can come to the Lord and find their sins forgiven. The graphic image is that "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Obedience as an expression of faith is possible through forgiveness by the Lord. As Brevard Childs put it, "The purpose of God for his people has always been for salvation."³ Those who live in God's way are invited to "come" and know their sin is forgiven. Their grievous faults, iniquity, and abominations before the Lord are washed away, and their lives are "like snow" and "like wool." Preachers will find ways to express and illustrate what new life in Christ, in obedience to God, will look like, today.

One can impose a Trinitarian structure on these verses: God forgives; sin is cleansed in Jesus Christ; and the Holy Spirit leads us in the ways God desires. While this goes beyond the intent and parameters of the Isaiah text, it does provide a theological expression of the work God has done and continues to do, even with sinners such as us.

DONALD K. MCKIM

3. Childs, *Isaiah*, 20.

PROPER 26 (SUNDAY BETWEEN OCTOBER 30 AND NOVEMBER 5 INCLUSIVE)

Psalm 32:1–7

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Selah

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Selah

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Selah

Theological Perspective

Not that this psalm is not noteworthy. The psalm opens with a twofold repetition of "happy," celebrating the joy of those who forgo spiritual deceit (v. 2) and receive the forgiveness and the divine covering of sin that is the work of a merciful God. I confess that I usually do not think of confession, repentance, and forgiveness as "happy" (v. 1).

The psalmist asserts that unacknowledged sin is a psychosomatic phenomenon (v. 3). Lack of honesty about our transgressions leads to the heavy hand of God upon us, sapping our strength as if it were the blistering summer sun (v. 4). Acknowledgment of sin, confession of transgressions, immediately leads to deliverance from guilt (v. 5).

Thus the psalmist exhorts all the faithful to "offer prayer to you at a time of distress" (v. 6). Presumably this is a prayer of confession. It is here that the psalm most challenges me. In time of distress, when I pray, I pray a prayer of deliverance, a prayer that God will rescue me from that which threatens me, not that I will be forgiven for my sin.

The psalm thus makes a challenging connection between sickness and confession of sin. About the only benefit of being sick (having our bodies waste away, as did the psalmist, v. 3) is that the world does

Pastoral Perspective

The most straightforward reading of this psalm is also the most pastorally problematic. The author looks back upon the pains of illness, praising God for deliverance and announcing what he has learned. When his sin was unconfessed, then his sickness raged; when he repented, God forgave "the guilt of my sin," and the tribulation ended. The final verses, not part of this lection, develop the lesson in words attributed to God. God will teach the righteous one, who should remember that "bit and bridle"—a metaphor for discipline such as the psalmist has endured—are necessary only for dumb animals, those without understanding. The psalm then ends with a final exhortation to rejoice in God. Sickness, therefore, is correlated with sin and with God's displeasure, while repentance is urged for healing of body and spirit. At first blush, this seems a psalm designed to warm the hearts of Job's friends.

Admittedly, the writer does not make this connection between sin and sickness as a general doctrine; he is not arguing the correlation as universal. The disciples in John's Gospel, who ask about a man born blind whether he had his sin or that of his parents to thank for it, appeal to the connection as a theological principle, one that Jesus implicitly

Psalm 32:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

This heartfelt but cryptic psalm gives much insight into sin and forgiveness, even as it conceals information about the psalmist and his circumstances. The psalmist changes perspective in the course of the poem, beginning and ending in third person. At other points he includes direct address to the Deity and to the reader. The lectionary ends the reading for this day at verse 7, where the psalmist offers praise with a familiar divine image of the Deity as a “hiding place.” Because of the shifts in the poem’s perspective, the exact form of the psalm as a whole remains elusive. The psalm contains elements of confession, wise instruction, and thanksgiving. This array of elements opens the psalm for many uses within the church. The lectionary reading concentrates on the psalmist’s wise reflections on sin, his own experience, and the call to praise and worship.

The first two verses pronounce a general blessing on the person (the plural of the NRSV is singular in Hebrew) who has experienced forgiveness. Translators and interpreters of Scripture continue to struggle to convey the sense of the two Hebrew terms for blessing (as a way of praising God, or exulting in the joy of a life lived in relationship to God). Here the blessing (“happy” in the NRSV) conveys the

Homiletical Perspective

The psalmist never tells us in this psalm the exact nature of the sin he needs to confess so badly. The incidentals of whatever it was that he did or neglected to do are unimportant. What is important to him, and to us, is the act of uncovering the sin, speaking it aloud, so that God can cover it up once and for all. So this, the second of the seven Penitential Psalms, turns out to be a hymn to the peace found in confessing guilt.

In a culture in which the consciousness of sin is steeped so deeply, and the invitation to confess it offered so freely, what possible new insight can the preacher bring in a sermon on this text? After all, many of us are old enough to see in our mind’s eye, as we read this psalm, the Jimmy Swaggart of the early 1990s on a stage in front of a televised congregation, confessing his sexual sins and sobbing profusely with obvious pain. This scene has since become the template for public confession, though we often turn away quickly, judging it to be full of hypocrisy and manipulation. We hear in it the implicit message “If I just tell you how awful I have behaved, you have to forgive me and give me another chance!”

Maybe we think of the pseudoconfessions that we have heard in recent years, both private and public:

Psalm 32:1–7

Theological Perspective

not expect sick people to be good. All moral responsibility is lifted from the backs of those who are ill. Sick people are never required to do good work; they are expected only to work to get well. Those who suffer misfortune are defined by that misfortune as victims. Victims are those who are essentially powerless to resist unjust, evil, hurtful forces that overtake their lives. Who expects a victim to be truthful and bold? Victims tend to be consumed with brute survival in the face of their victimization. So we grant a moral free pass to those caught in the struggle for survival, the fight to keep their bodies from wasting away.

All of this makes all the more remarkable the assertion in the first verses of Psalm 32 that it is possible, even salubrious, for those who are sick and “groaning” (v. 3), whose strength is “dried up” (v. 4), to acknowledge sin and to confess their transgressions (v. 5). Psalm 32 commends confession of sin to those whom our culture relieves of all moral responsibility and agency.

I think it a great advance in our care of alcoholism that we learned to speak of alcohol addiction as an illness, not as a moral failure. Nevertheless, what is the first thing Alcoholics Anonymous teaches the recovering alcoholic to say? AA demands that each alcoholic do a searching, honest moral inventory in which the addict begins to take moral responsibility for the addiction.

A friend of mine (you would know him if I mentioned his name) was on a radio talk show with two other religious leaders two days after the September 11 terrorist attack. They were to discuss “Religious Implications of This National Tragedy.” Each person was asked to reflect upon the event from the perspective of his or her faith. “Well, I’m a Presbyterian,” my friend began. “That means that I’m in the Reformed tradition. And in the Reformed tradition we are urged, even in those situations where we have been unjustly wronged, to ask ourselves questions like, ‘How am I responsible here? Is there anything I have done or left undone that in any way contributes to what I am now suffering?’”

With that, one of the other panelists blurted, “That’s terrible! Let’s be clear. We have done nothing, absolutely nothing, that could justify this horrible act. We are in no way wrong; we are innocent victims of a terrible wrong!”

My friend’s efforts to say that the Reformed tradition talked about more than our sin, that great care must be taken in what we say to victims, that confession of sin is one way we become truly free, and so forth, were to no avail.

Pastoral Perspective

denies.¹ This is not the case with the psalmist. His testimony and thanksgiving arise from specific circumstances, however common he may believe them to be. Even so, it is still a theological diagnosis that appeals far too much to our tendency toward a superstitious take on God’s judgment.

One modern version of this, which claims some psychological respectability, recognizes that bodily disorders may accompany or mask acute feelings of guilt. The truth of this, though, should not make us less wary of the ease with which, without any other evidence of guilt, we can slip conveniently from symptom to sin. More importantly, though, the psychotherapeutic context is wholly foreign to the psalm. This song of relief and reflection takes us into the context of prayer, of the faithful who stand before God. It is this unique relationship that is at stake here. To move beyond the linking of sin and sickness, then, we must pay attention to this relationship itself.

The fundamental tone of this psalm is joy. As someone whom God has forgiven, the psalmist is “happy” or, more traditionally, “blessed.” We might catch the passion better, though, with “wildly happy,” or “thrilled.”² This joy, however, is not exhausted in relief, by the alleviation of distress and guilt. There is an abundant joy here, an excess of gladness, that comes from the relationship with God that is now renewed: “shout for joy, all you upright in heart” (v. 11). In four clauses, the author describes those who revel in such delight: their transgression is forgiven; their sin is covered; God attributes no wrongdoing to them; and in their “spirit is no deceit” (vv. 1–2). The last is linked to the verse that follows, which begins the dramatic center of this half of the psalm: “when I declared not my sin [NRSV “kept silence”], my body wasted away.”

The deceit here is self-deceit, the refusal to face one’s own wrongdoing, the waywardness of our will and the crookedness of our deeds. That dishonesty before oneself and God makes life impossible because it contradicts the free gift of our standing in God’s “steadfast love.” When the psalmist hid his sin from God, he hid himself from God, thus turning against himself, cutting himself off from the source of life.

Now we can read the references to sickness as startling metaphors for this misery. The sap of life dries

1. John 9:1–3; cf. Luke 13:1–5.

2. John Eaton suggests “O the sheer happiness of . . .” (John H. Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation*, new ed. [New York: Continuum, 2003], 148).

Psalm 32:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

sense of serenity of one who has experienced atonement with the Deity. This sense of serenity contrasts with the prior turmoil experienced by the psalmist who stubbornly refused to admit his fault and seek absolution.

The parallel structure of the opening lines employs four terms that portray a comprehensive understanding of divine-human alienation: transgression, sin, iniquity, and deceit (vv. 1–2). Although the poem does not present these terms in a narrative context, so that the reader can discern nuances of meaning, the terms suggest different aspects of the human condition. *Transgression* carries the root meaning of rebellion, as when a people rebel against political authority (1 Kgs. 12:19). *Sin* connotes missing a target, failing to develop or follow the correct path. The underlying image of *iniquity* suggests something bent or twisted, distorted from an original or intended shape. Proverbs 12:8 contrasts a “perverse mind” with good sense, one use of this root. The Hebrew term for “spirit” carries the familiar meanings of “wind,” “breath,” or “spirit.” Here the term connotes a person’s moral will. A spirit containing *deceit* acts dishonestly or treacherously, as a business person who cheats consumers (Amos 8:5). The Lord offers corrective for all of the dimensions of human failure. The one who experiences this gracious response from the Lord finds blessing and genuine happiness.

The psalmist relates his own experience, yet writes cryptically, without revealing details of his sin or his illness. Within the three verses (vv. 3–5) where he recounts his experience, he does not even describe the exact nature of his recovery when he confesses. He does not specify whether he committed one particularly egregious sin, or whether he refused to confess a lifetime of sins. His denial led to extreme physical discomfort, but the reader cannot discern whether the psalmist endured a life-threatening illness or the physical effects of a guilty conscience.

He attributes his physical anguish to his refusal to confess his sin. He internalized his guilt, but he also attributes his physical symptoms to the divine “hand” upon him. His body punished his rebellious spirit, but the Lord acted through the psalmist’s guilt mechanisms. The term translated as “body” in NRSV refers to “bones,” suggesting the depth of his suffering. The phrase about the drying up of strength is quite confusing in Hebrew. The word translated as “strength” in the NRSV refers to something juicy, or perhaps tree sap. The image suggests something that should be vital that has dried up. The psalmist does

Homiletical Perspective

“I am sorry you misunderstood my actions and thus were hurt.” This implies, of course, that someone else’s misunderstanding is the root of the problem, not the confessor’s actions or words. “I am sorry that everyone keeps focusing on my little slipup and ignoring what is really significant in life.” Once again, this implies that someone else is at fault for noticing a problem. These kinds of confessions easily become excuses for focusing attention on the confessor. Thus, if any publicity is good publicity, in these scenarios any attention on the one who has sinned is good attention.

Here is where the psalmist offers us a few useful words, even in our culture, which is overly consumed with broadcast confession. First, the point of confession that the psalmist is making is not to shine the spotlight on the confessor. No, the point is to shine it on God—more specifically, on the mercy of God. The psalm opens with an echo of Psalm 1: “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven. . . . Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity” (vv. 1a, 2a). Then at the very center of the psalm (if we ignore the cut proposed in the lectionary at verse 7) is the affirmation, “you forgave the guilt of my sin” (v. 5b). In verse 10 (again ignoring the lectionary boundaries) the psalmist speaks of the steadfast love, the *hesed*, that surrounds those who have faith in God, faith enough to speak out loud to God our most disturbing deeds, our most troublesome words, our most terrible secrets. The claim that God forgives with genuine mercy permeates this psalm.

Further, the point is not to cling to the sin as a toddler clings to a well-loved stuffed animal, but to give it up and put it away by confessing it to God. The psalmist vividly describes the near-universal experience of burying our transgressions deep within our souls: “While I kept silence, my body wasted away; . . . my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (vv. 3a, 4b).

What he does not name is the equally common experience of becoming so comfortable with the familiar burden of secret sin that we can hardly let go of it. It becomes a touchstone at the bottom of our souls that keeps us in our place and reminds us that we are not worthy enough to meet whatever new challenge or opportunity might come our way. It becomes the very definition of who we are, so that we never have to become any better, any stronger, any more faithful. It becomes, at last, our excuse for not serving God and one another with energy and compassion. No wonder that with the psalmist we find our bodies wasting away and our strength ebbing slowly out of our lives!

Psalm 32:1–7

Theological Perspective

When my congregation gathered on that next Sunday after 9/11, what was the first thing we did after singing the opening hymn? I said, “Let us stand and confess our sin to Almighty God.” What an odd, seemingly insensitive thing to demand of those in pain, victims of a terrible injustice! After a tragedy like 9/11, few of us were looking for the honesty, truth telling, and cathartic confession of sin that the psalmist praises in Psalm 32. We wanted comfort, reassurance, finding especial comfort in our national victimhood.

Then we go to church. Even in our yearning for easy comfort and our national claims of innocence and righteousness, the church demands truthfulness. Though we are more adept at national self-deceit than honest confession, the church forces us to repeat the words of an ancient song of truthful confession that is a happy song of praise. These ancient Jews school us to sing a song that does not come naturally to us Americans, and this psalm moves from an affirmation of the sort of God who loves us, to a countercultural demand for how we are to love this God, not only in spirit but also in truth.

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

Pastoral Perspective

up, and strength wastes away; energy fails, and even the day’s ordinary tasks hang heavy like chores in a blistering summer. When we hide ourselves from God, poisoning our prayer by refusing to admit our sin, pretending a peace our heart denies, we endure, the psalmist suggests, a living death. The scary possibility is that perhaps we can persist in this to the point we forget our condition, insensible of its loneliness. That, though, is not the fate of this writer, though it may inspire his urgent exhortation, “therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you” (v. 6a).

The psalmist looks back on this crisis in celebration of God’s mercy. Its resolution is told with a telling simplicity. There is no “wrestling” with God, no agonized pleading or extended mortification: “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (v. 5b). The prolonged drama, the tale of torment, is of the hiding, not the confessing, which is met by God’s immediate and renewing forgiveness. Confession need not be agonized, just frank and honest. The psalmist’s testimony is that one should have no fear of acknowledging sin before God, even when one can hardly find words for it or clearly name it.

The problem lies with our self-deception, the “deceit” that projects upon God a savage anger and vengeance of our own dark imagining. Discovering the truth of God’s mercy, however, as this writer ventures to speak up and ask for it, overflows in witness, in joyful praise to God and counsel to his neighbors. The final verse of this section returns us to the community of worship: “you surround me with glad cries of deliverance” (v. 7b). The community of faith is the company of men and women who tell of their deliverance with joy. When the psalmist shut himself up with his transgressions, then indeed he was alone and out of place. Confession brought him back where he belongs, rejoicing with the people of God, where cries of deliverance are our common speech, and songs of mercy the beginning of freedom.

ALAN GREGORY

Psalm 32:1–7

Exegetical Perspective

not describe his restored physical health after confession, but acknowledges divine forgiveness.

The psalmist uses his own experience to issue a jussive to prayer for the faithful. He does not specify prayer of confession, but a general turning toward the Deity. The image of a rush of mighty waters does not allude to anything previous in the poem. The poet actually compares his situation to a drought (v. 4), but the image evokes memories of exodus and the waters of chaos in the flood. The reader cannot know the exact allusion, but the metaphor conjures emotions of dread and terror. The psalmist's punishment came from internal impulses, but separation from the Lord can lead to unexpected consequences and other forms of the divine "hand."

The understanding of the Lord as a refuge, bulwark, or hiding place occurs frequently in the Psalms (e.g., 27:5). The image connotes protection, safety, and security. The use in this psalm carries some irony. One needs a hiding place from enemies or external threats. The psalmist had hidden mostly from himself! He was his own worst enemy. Nevertheless, his recovery from both guilt and physical symptoms prompted him to praise the Lord as a protection and shelter.

The psalm contains many insights about sin and forgiveness. By piling up images for sin—as rebellion, deceit, twisting out of shape—the psalm leads to reflection on the pervasiveness of sin. By recounting his own experience, after the fact, the psalmist invites self-examination and acknowledgment of defensiveness. The psalm recognizes the psychosomatic unity of human nature, with the interrelationship between physical and spiritual health. The psalmist avoids a simplistic instruction to confess sins simply for the sake of good health, however. By avoiding any description of his recovery, the psalmist focuses on confession of sin for the sake of the restored relationship with the Lord.

If the reader sneaks a peek beyond the lectionary limits and reads to the end, the psalm concludes with joy and praise, not just a healthy body. The psalmist's physical pain prompted his confession, but his exploration of his whole experience gave him the insight that confession and forgiveness opened him to a renewed relationship with the Deity, an end in itself.

CHARLES L. AARON

Homiletical Perspective

The only antidote is to let go of that burden of guilt, whatever it may be. In the preface to the now-classic dystopia *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley wrote: "Chronic remorse, as all the moralists are agreed, is a most undesirable sentiment. If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean."¹ On this point, at least, the psalmist and Huxley agree. The psalmist takes it even further: to unburden oneself before God is to make room for the mercy that makes it possible for us to behave better next time. To speak out loud in the presence of God the thing that we have done to hurt another or ourselves is receive the grace-filled power of God's ongoing love.

One other word might be said. Many Protestants have not incorporated into church life and worship any formal sacraments of penance and forgiveness that give flesh and form to this act of confession. This means that we are often unable to offer to individuals overwhelmed by guilt the kind of release that the psalmist prescribes. So it behooves all of us to find opportunities to confess and to hear confession in ways that lift our souls out of the muck. A friend said to me recently, "Confession, both speaking and listening, should happen in a quiet place over a beer between people who do not take themselves too seriously." While we might quibble about the place or the drink, confession among persons who love God and respect one another can go a long way toward bringing about the happiness of those whose transgression is forgiven.

NANCY CLAIRE PITTMAN

1. Aldous Huxley, "Preface" in *Brave New World* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005), 6.

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**PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6
AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)**

Job 19:23–27a

²³O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
²⁴O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock forever!
²⁵For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
²⁶and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
²⁷whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Theological Perspective

Suffering calls into question all notions of the character of God: Does suffering exist because God does not care or is not aware of it or because God is not all powerful and cannot prevent it? Does God care but chooses not to prevent it, because it is, somehow, necessary or good? These speculations permeate preaching, teaching, counseling, and personal responses to suffering.

In today's reading and throughout the book of Job, Job seems certain God is aware he suffers. Indeed, he attributes his suffering to God. Job does not resolve his question, which is also our question: the "why" of suffering.

Job's friends torment him; God assaults him; his friends and family shun him; his body fails him. So Job describes his suffering (19:1–22). Job's ability to articulate his suffering with such clarity illustrates the acuity of observation that often comes with pain. A spouse who grieves the loss of a partner often longs to share the details of his loved one's final hours or days. A soldier relates the horrible details of her encounter with the enemy in such a graphic way that the listener takes on her suffering. On the other hand, some people who suffer are completely unable to relate details of their experience; they seem able only to relive the horror internally.

Pastoral Perspective

An absolutely essential road sign to observe while driving through the rugged terrain of the book of Job is "Beware of lovely affirmations of faith." With Handel's magnificent oratorio ringing in our ears, this road sign flashes neon yellow when we are approaching Job 19:23–27a, especially verse 25. If we fail to pay attention to the road sign, we will be inspired by Handel but will detour around the rich theological claims and challenges of this perplexing text from Job.

Admittedly, it is hard to stay on the Joban road with all its theological potholes and faded road markings. The detours are much more alluring, because on the Joban road there is so much carnage, so many gruesome sights, so much human agony. This text from Job is a case in point. If we take a detour, we can grab Job 19:23–27a and pull it away from its hazardous context. By so doing, we can turn Job into a revivalist preacher or a bodily resurrection theologian. That is why teachers/preachers need to pay attention to the absolutely essential road sign before driving through Job's rugged terrain. On this issue, Sam Balentine warns, "Despite . . . clues for reading [Job] vv. 21–29 as a whole piece it has long been the practice to isolate vv. 23–27 and to accord them a theological significance that virtually guarantees their relationship to the literary context

Job 19:23–27a

Exegetical Perspective

Smug religiosity cannot stand before the majestic protest of Job. Job contests the right of his friends to distort his character by means of simplistic theological categories. He also contests the terrible silence of God and calls out for a response from the One whom he has honored all his life (1:1–5). In this lection, Job cries out against his abandonment by those who should advocate for him. In his powerful complaint we may hear the righteous fury of all who have been left to suffer on the margins of our communities.

The passage opens with two wishes: “O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book!” (v. 23). The urgent optative exclamation is an important feature of Joban rhetoric. Job is desperate to have his words written in a scroll, nay, engraved in rock forever—perhaps, according to some interpreters, as his tomb inscription. Which words does Job want inscribed for eternity? Likely he means the stirring speeches of protest that he has already uttered in his own defense. The point is preserving his witness for those who can hear. The prophet Isaiah speaks of written scrolls of testimony sealed against the current stubborn generation and saved for those who will understand later (Isa. 8:16–17; 29:11–12; 30:8–11). Similarly, Job dramatically surrenders his hope that any current companion will

Homiletical Perspective

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth” (v. 25). These words, along with verses 26–27, are among the most difficult in the book of Job, because there is no single way of interpreting them. From Job’s mouth, these words sound a certain way. From the mouth of Christ’s church, these words sound very different. Before running too quickly to Jesus—as if that is ever really possible—the preacher would do well to listen to these words from Job’s voice, because Job speaks the good news that many people, both inside and outside the church, want desperately to hear.

Convinced that he will find no respite from God’s attack and no support or encouragement from his friends, Job wants his story to be permanently written down so that future generations will know of his plight, as well as his innocence, and will exonerate him. For Job, “resurrection” equals vindication. His redeemer is a kinsman who will ensure Job’s integrity and reclaim what he has lost. Faced with rejection on every side, Job clings to his belief in this redeemer in order to persevere and fight off despair. When Job declares, “I know that my Redeemer lives,” he expresses confidence that his liberator is alive and waiting for the right time to act.

For those who are blameless, yet suffer; for those whose suffering is deemed their own fault; for those

Job 19:23–27a

Theological Perspective

In verses 23–24 Job expresses his longing for a permanent record of his suffering. He wants the story written down, inscribed, engraved. It is important to this sufferer that knowledge of God's role in his suffering be available for all time, for all people. Though the question of why suffering happens seems unanswerable for Job (and for us), a helpful understanding, for those who suffer loudly and those who suffer silently, centers around God's presence. Job's permanent record is not essential. God hears the pain of those who struggle internally, those who seem unable to articulate their pain, with the same acuity as God hears those who announce and record their pain. God is equally present to the noisy and the numb.

It is difficult for Christians to read of Job's "redeemer" in verse 25 without a christological understanding. Job's suffering is not, however, a result of Job's sin. His redeemer, therefore, does not seek forgiveness or deliverance for Job's sin, the focus of Christ's redemption, but seeks deliverance for Job from his suffering. The focus of this understanding of redemption is different but meaningful for Christians. This different understanding of redemption calls us not only to lift up Christ as a forgiver of sins, but also to offer ourselves to work toward the alleviation of suffering in our world. Though it is Christ's role as redeemer to forgive sin, when we act to relieve suffering, we act as redeemers on God's behalf.

Early in chapter 19, Job pleads for pity from his friends, but not from God. Job's need for a redeemer who intercedes for him indicates Job is unable or unwilling to plead for pity from God on his own behalf. The necessity of a redeemer or intercessor to act on behalf of the sufferer indicates Job's vulnerability. He is so overwhelmed by pain he is unable to voice his need to God. Suffering by definition brings vulnerability. Redemption by definition requires sacrifice, something given by the redeemer on behalf of the redeemed. The redeemer offers something of value in exchange for deliverance of the redeemed from suffering. Job, however, offers no clue as to the nature of his redeemer or the redeemer's sacrifice on his behalf, only that his redeemer or vindicator lives and at the last will stand on the earth. Victorious and alive in the end, Job's redeemer, who delivers from suffering, here resembles Christ, who delivers from sin. Redeemers are ultimately well rewarded, it seems, for their acts of deliverance from sin or from suffering.

Pastoral Perspective

will be lost."¹ Beware, the lectionary is leading us off the Joban road, down a more pleasant hermeneutical detour.

In Job's text, "friends" do their best to reroute the lament of Job, get him to confess and then walk down the road of redemption. They have no desire to stay on the Joban road, to shake their fists at God, and wail at the injustice done to Job and his family. The only hermeneutical road they will travel leads to a "guilty" plea from Job and an "innocent" verdict for God. Centuries later, too many people still feel that this is the only proper road to travel as they deem it their responsibility to point out the sins of others and to defend God, even in the face of horrific pain and suffering.

On September 11, 2001, Job sat on the ashes of the World Trade Center and beneath a wing of the Pentagon and in a burning field in Pennsylvania. In January 2010, Job was a Haitian, shouting at God and burying the innocent dead from a devastating earthquake. Job lives on in the domestic abuse victim and the children exploited as street prostitutes and wherever victims are held responsible for their abuse. Job lives on in anyone who has the courage to hold God accountable before the great social and natural calamities of life and plead, "Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!" (v. 21).

What would it mean for preaching, teaching, and pastoral care if the church were willing to stay on the Joban road and not so easily take the easy, glossy theological detours onto roads where Job's laments are not welcome? What would it mean, for those who sit in the pews, if the church stayed on the Joban road, refusing to blame victims for their abuse and courageously calling God to task for divine silence in the face of such gross injustice? Would the church collapse if we were to welcome Job into our sanctuaries, rather than to chastise him for harboring such thoughts; if we were to walk with him down the Joban road, rather than steer him onto "happily ever after" theological roads of our own creation; if we were to shout with him to the very throne of God, rather than veering off onto the pathway of a thin theology in which God is a cuddly chum from whom never was heard a discouraging word? What would it mean for those who suffer if we were to resist being like Job's "friends," about whom Job laments, "Why do you, like God, pursue me, never satisfied with my flesh?" (v. 22).

1. Samuel E. Balentine, *Job*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2006), 293.

*Job 19:23–27a***Exegetical Perspective**

take up the role of advocacy; he would engrave his testimony “with an iron stylus” in hopes that it will endure until a forensic defender might arise.

With emphatic repetition of the personal pronoun “I” (*’ani*, vv. 25 and 27), Job fiercely asserts the continued rightfulness of his claim for moral and spiritual agency. Despite harrowing losses and agonizing afflictions, Job trusts that vindication will be his. Despite the darkness in which he pleads with an unresponsive God, Job refuses to yield. “I know that my redeemer lives!” Who is the redeemer (*go’el*) for whom Job waits? The NRSV offers “Redeemer” with a capital R, signaling that the *go’el* is to be understood either as God or as God’s messiah. Although probably not intended in the original Israelite context in which this utterance was composed, this interpretive reading stands in continuity with a rich and venerable stream of Christian tradition. From the patristic period on, Christians have read this passage as a christological reference and the following verse as concerning bodily resurrection.

If, however, we listen in a different way, we can hear another dimension of the significance of the *go’el* in Job’s rhetoric. The *go’el* was a relative with juridical standing who could buy back property to keep it within a family’s inheritance (Ruth 3:12; 4:1–6; Lev. 25:25), redeem kin from economic slavery (Lev. 25:47–52), and avenge the murder of kin (Deut. 19:6). Job is making a bold claim when he asserts that he knows his *go’el* lives, for such a one could restore Job’s lost property and avenge the children whom God had allowed the Accuser to destroy (1:13–19). In the verses preceding our lection, Job denounces those who should have advocated on his behalf but failed to do so: “He [God] has put my family far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me. My relatives and my close friends have failed me; the guests in my house have forgotten me. . . . I am loathsome to my own family. . . .” (19:13–15a, 17b). None close to Job have done the right thing; hence Job longs for his testimony to be preserved until an intercessor is found to vindicate him.

What will the *go’el* do? The NRSV translation says he will “stand upon the earth” (v. 25), a possible reading, but awkward. The Hebrew word translated “earth” actually means “dust.” The Hebrew phrase *’al-afar yaqum* may be suggesting that this advocate will rise up against “the dust,” a derogatory metaphor for those mortals (made of dust, Gen. 3:19) who have failed to vindicate Job as

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abandoned by friends and loved ones; and especially for those who have erred, made mistakes, and even sinned but have done their utmost to repent, express remorse, and make restitution, the kind of redeemer and resurrection that Job pleads for is no small thing. To be declared innocent, to receive empathy, to be restored to the community, to receive again the love and friendship of loved ones, and especially to be forgiven, are themselves gifts of new life. They are their own kind of grace. For many in our congregations, the good news that God will bring these kinds of resurrection—that God is the kind of Redeemer that Job waits for—is more necessary, more welcome, and more life-giving than the promise that God will bring life out of physical death. As a parishioner once remarked, “There are many things in life so much worse than dying.” From Job’s mouth, these words invite a sermon that speaks of resurrection from the suffering and death that many experience as part of daily life.

The lectionary, in keeping with the way Job’s words are heard from the mouth of Christ’s church, pairs this reading with Luke 20:27–38, where some Sadducees are trying to trap Jesus with a riddle about the resurrection. Clement of Rome was the first to quote Job’s words in the context of resurrection, and Origen was the first to identify the “Redeemer” in Job as Christ. Augustine considered Job’s words to be a statement of the resurrection, and Jerome translated it as such in the Vulgate.¹ This view prevailed through the Reformation and into the nineteenth century. The lectionary invites a sermon on Job’s words in accordance with the way the church received them—as a prophecy and promise of the resurrection. Heard in worship with Luke’s account of the Sadducees’ attempt to debunk resurrection and Paul’s entreaty in Second Thessalonians not to be shaken or alarmed about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, Job’s words are intended to be heard as the church’s confident and triumphant proclamation of Christ’s resurrection—and ours. Oh, that this confession was written down, inscribed in a book, engraved on a rock forever (vv. 23–24), for the whole world to see!

So the preacher could choose to hear these words from Job’s mouth or from the mouth of the church. The preacher might choose to proclaim “both/and” and make resurrection bigger than we think. Jesus sidestepped the Sadducees’ trap by expanding the meaning of resurrection. Confronted

1. James K. Zink, “Impatient Job,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 84, no. 2 (June 1965): 147.

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Job seems to anticipate his death and the sight of God following his death. Whether or not belief in the afterlife was a common notion in Job's day, it certainly is in our day. There is for Job no clear connection, however, between the act of his redeemer and his hope of seeing God, as there is for Christians. The graphic description in verse 26 is the last mention by Job of his death. In chapter 19, Job declares his suffering to be undeserved and himself worthy of redemption. He sees himself not as a suffering man but as one unjustly accused. There is good news for Job, his good fortune is restored, and he lives happily ever after, just as he deserves, for his innocence. There is no discussion, however, concerning the impact of his suffering on the remainder of his life.

With the advent of DNA proof in criminal investigations, a number of unjustly accused people are regularly redeemed by scientific evidence. They too most often maintained their innocence as they suffered incarceration. The challenge for the societal system responsible for their false imprisonment is somehow to make up for the error. All things taken from these victims can never be fully restored. The impact is lifelong, and, of course, in the case of those who are executed, no restoration ever occurs. The end of the book of Job omits discussion of the flaws and weaknesses of such restitution.

Suffering yields complex questions regarding the nature of God. Job has no final answers but offers a story of one man's responses to the pain of suffering. The protest and pleas of an innocent person, Psalm 17:1–9, is a lectionary option for this Sunday. Job's confidence in his innocence and/or his confidence in his redeemer shift his focus from death to life. If we truly believe our redeemer renders us innocent in God's sight, a shift in focus from death to life is possible for us as well. We recall with the psalmist we are the apple of God's eye; we find shelter beneath God's wings (Ps. 17:8).

DENA L. WILLIAMS

Pastoral Perspective

The lectionary rarely travels down the Joban road, and when it does, it treads ever so carefully and selectively. With Job, the church may use this text to shout, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth" (v. 23), and then suggest that Job has had a sudden new self-awareness of the final justice of God; or we can actually listen to Job and all of the Jobs of the world and realize this is not that for which Job is pleading. "In vv. 25–26a, Job describes his certainty that a redeemer will arise and vindicate him after his death. As important as that certainty is to Job, it is not what he most desires. What he desires is expressed in vv. 26b–27, not a postmortem vindication but a vindication that he can experience before he dies, in his flesh and with his own eyes."²

It takes good shock absorbers to drive on the Joban road for any period of time. It requires openness, not only to the voice of God, but to the voices of those who suffer. It also demands that we do what the friends of Job never once considered: trust that Job may be speaking the truth. To do so will not ultimately explain God's role in human suffering, but it will communicate, to those who suffer for no apparent reason, that the church can sit quietly and compassionately with them or shout relentlessly with them for justice from God. It will demonstrate to the most broken and vulnerable that it is far more important for us to stand with them in their suffering than to defend the inscrutable integrity of God.

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2. Ibid., 479.

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Exegetical Perspective

they ought to have. (Compare the NJPS translation of 42:6, where Job confesses to “being but dust and ashes.”) Alienated from his family and browbeaten by his friends, Job responds that his own *go’el* will rise to judge those who should have worked for his vindication.

Support for this forensic reading is strong in the following line. The NRSV translates in the passive voice what happens to Job’s skin (“after my skin has been thus destroyed”), but an implied indefinite subject is not the best reading of the Hebrew verb. A better reading: “for after they have thus stripped off my skin, and [stripped it] from my flesh,” referring to those around Job who have harmed him with their accusations. This reading is confirmed by an earlier reference to the friends being insatiable for Job’s flesh (v. 22) and by Job’s warning of judgment for his interlocutors (vv. 28–29).

Far from pining for an eschatological messiah and resurrection from the dead, Job is holding his kin responsible for defaulting on their obligation to him in the here and now. He is ferociously asserting his right to justice in this life, in the midst of his community, and before his God. Even in utter brokenness, Job will not relinquish his own subjectivity: “I will see God; I will see for myself; I will see, and not another” (vv. 26–27, my trans.). If Christians have found Job to be prophetic in foretelling the coming of Christ, we may hear his discourse as prophetic in another way as well. In the trenchant style of Amos, Job convicts his community for failing to uphold his integrity as one disempowered, degraded, and unfairly accused. Job’s indignation illuminates an essential dimension of the Christian proclamation, namely, the holy obligation to stand in solidarity with those who suffer. Enduring testimony has been inscribed in a book, after all: Job invites us to glimpse the very face of Christ in those who cry out for justice.

CAROLYN J. SHARP

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by the question of which of her seven husbands a woman would be married to in the resurrection, Jesus answered, “Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35). Resurrection is bigger than what we expect. Following Jesus’ example, preachers might expand our understanding of the power of Christ’s resurrection in ways that bring good news for both this age and the age to come.

The preacher might first boldly and clearly proclaim the victory of Christ’s resurrection. Christ will bring life out of death. We will be raised. Even after our skin is destroyed, we will see God in our own flesh and with our own eyes. The preacher can then proclaim that the victory of Christ’s resurrection is more than a future event. The power of Christ’s resurrection is at work even today. Just as there are many kinds of death, so Christ brings many kinds of resurrection. The preacher might then turn to Job’s confidence in a Redeemer who rescues us from isolation, relieves us of shame, reconciles us with loved ones from whom we are estranged, restores us to community, and raises us from sin to forgiveness. The preacher might help the congregation to see how Jesus’ entire earthly ministry of preaching, teaching, welcoming, forgiving, and healing was, in a very real sense, a ministry of resurrection. The goal of this sermon is that the members of the congregation will join the church throughout the ages in proclaiming, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth” (v. 25). Their proclamation does not come from intellectual assent to a doctrine. It is grounded in their experience of seeing Christ exercising the power of the resurrection in their own lives and in the lives of those around them. From this perspective, the last day, when we see our Redeemer standing upon the earth, is just one more day of resurrection.

CRAIG A. SATTERLEE

**PROPER 27 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 6
AND NOVEMBER 12 INCLUSIVE)**

Psalm 17:1–9

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

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

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

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

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

Theological Perspective

Active language reveals God as active and able to relieve suffering. An appeal to God to hear, vindicate, see, visit, test, answer, love, guard, and hide one who seeks refuge from adversaries, Psalm 17 is a song of disorientation, according to Walter Brueggemann's system of organization.¹ Psalms of disorientation reflect suffering, loss of control, the misery of the human condition. The disoriented one pleads with God for restoration to new life and often proclaims his innocence. Although the composer of Psalm 17 seems confident of himself and God, a tone of desperation permeates this personal lament.

For relief from difficult circumstances, the psalmist pleads to a God who he believes can hear him and can act directly in his life to bring him from disorientation to new life. He prays for deliverance, and he trusts God to hear and respond to his need. Such an understanding of prayer can empower people of faith to move through despair and fear. The problem arises in hindsight, when God seems not to hear and answer prayer. Assurance to those disappointed by God's apparent deafness and inactivity might include an understanding that God is present to sufferers in times of disorientation, even when the outcome is not what was asked for

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 17 is an example of what I love about the Psalter. It takes faith seriously, in all its complexity. It does not represent a neat and tidy faith, devoid of personal need and deep yearning. Psalm 17 is not the most eloquent prayer in the Psalter. It does not contain the poetic elegance of the Psalm 23 or the awesome cadence of assurance of Psalm 121. It is not a cosmic prayer, but a personal, specific, and confident prayer. It is a not a prayer that tries to balance God's justice with God's mercy; it is spoken by someone assailed by her enemies, and she wants them stopped.

In Psalm 17, the psalmist may appear arrogant in the claim that "my feet have not slipped," but the real arrogance abides in the opponent who fears no repercussions for accosting the innocent. Psalm 17 is not a terribly self-reflective prayer, but few prayers are when one is embattled or attacked. In the end, this prayer is not about the spiritual state of the psalmist, but about the psalmist's trust that the "steadfast love" of God has yet to fail the one who prays to and trusts in the one true God.

This psalm is a frank conversation partner for church life, which is so often covered with a thin veneer of politeness. Far too often, our prayers must leave God dozing off, as we pile vapid phrase upon vapid phrase, asking for little and expecting

Psalm 17:1–9

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

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

⁸Guard me as the apple of the eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings,

⁹from the wicked who despoil me,
my deadly enemies who surround me.

Exegetical Perspective

This psalm's Hebrew text is very difficult, replete with awkward spellings and unusual grammar. This means that we cannot always be fully certain what the details of the text actually mean. However, that should not stop us from addressing the meaning of the psalm as a whole. It is clearly a psalm of complaint or lament. The psalmist urges YHWH (the LORD) to act on behalf of the suppliant out of divine justice and righteousness (vv. 13–14) and to confront those ever-present enemies who attempt to thwart both the actions of God (vv. 4, 9–14) and the right actions of the poet (vv. 1, 3–5). Because God is ever vigilant to protect those who act rightly, and ever ready to save them from those who do not act rightly, the poet fully expects to “behold [God's] face in righteousness,” after “awakening,” perhaps after a night of prayer and supplication in a holy place (v. 15).

The psalm may be divided as follows: opening cry (vv. 1–2), the innocence of the psalmist (vv. 3–5), conviction of and call for God's answer (v. 6–7), the dangers of the enemies (vv. 8–12), call for God to act (vv. 13–14), certainty of God's presence (v. 15). The turning point of the whole psalm is verses 6–7: “I call upon you, because you will answer me, O God; turn your ear to me, hear my words. Show the wonders of your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge at your right hand from

Homiletical Perspective

Many years ago I had a deep conversation with an attorney about legal processes, not about any particular case, but about the law as an institution. I have never forgotten the attorney's reflection. Although I did not take down the words, I remember quite precisely the substance of the lawyer's statement: “The law is absolutely necessary. Without it we would be killing each other or taking advantage of one another, and there would be no human recourse to set things right. But the law is a terribly imperfect instrument. Its solutions are never completely satisfying. People are always left wanting something more.”

The attorney's words return to me as I read Psalm 17:1–9. The speaker wants legal vindication, and wants it from God, no less! “Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry” (v. 1). This is the language of someone who knows that she or he is utterly and totally innocent: “if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me” (v. 3). The psalmist moves from legal language to the vivid imagery of walking in the way of God: “My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped” (v. 5). The psalmist is desperate for a hearing that will clear away an unfounded accusation: “I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words” (v. 6).

*Psalm 17:1–9***Theological Perspective**

in prayer. It is difficult to believe at such times when faith is tested. The psalm does not reveal the outcome for this petitioner, but closes with a strong statement of faith: “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness” (v. 15). The psalmist is satisfied with the sight of God’s presence.

The psalmist pleads that God hear, see, and visit him, in order that God can be witness to his innocence. He even challenges God to test his innocence (vv. 1–3, 6). The proclamation of innocence may bring to mind a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. When asked how she likes a play, the queen responds: “The lady doth protest too much, methinks” (act 3, scene ii, line 230). Lengthy protestations of innocence, however, are not out of the ordinary in the Psalms (e.g., Pss. 10, 34, 35, 36). Job (who relates his suffering in an optional lesson for this Sunday), describes himself as just and blameless (Job 12:4). By Paul’s understandings of sin, Job and the psalmist are not perfectly without sin. However, sin, for believers, does not preclude innocence or the desire for God’s vindication.

For example, the legal language applied to people who cross the border from Mexico into the United States does not indicate guilt or innocence in God’s sight. Those who, in order to find better lives for themselves and their families, are forced to break the law and cross into this country are called “illegals.” The expression “illegals” or “illegal immigrants” implies that those who break the law are, somehow, illegal people. If that is the case, then all citizens of this country are “illegal,” as all of us break laws on occasion. A person, indeed, cannot be “illegal” or “legal”; only actions are illegal or legal. An immigrant may be documented or undocumented. Sensitivity to language used to describe the innocent children of God brings sensitivity and God’s love to relationships.

The psalmist follows his pleas for God to hear, vindicate, see, visit, and test him with pleas for God to answer, love, guard, and guide him (vv. 6–9). God the savior, the one who vindicates, is now called upon as a source of love and protection, specifically, protection from adversaries whose activities and appropriate punishments are described in verses 10–14.

“Guard me as the apple of the eye” or “Guard me as the pupil, the dark center of the eye” is paired with “Hide me in the shadow of your wings” (v. 8). God’s protection of the psalmist, of all God’s children, reflects the protection of a most vulnerable part of the body—the pupil. The pupil is in need of such diligent protection that the body has a built-in

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less. Psalm 17 is not one of our petty prayers. It wants justice and expects to receive it from a God who is a “savior of those who seek refuge” (v. 7). The psalmist has no use for our tepid prayers that ask God to help us out, if God is so inclined. No, the psalmist states her case as a righteous follower of God, calling on God to be God, to address the injustice perpetrated by her enemies while providing her unimaginable comfort: “hide me in the shadow of your wings” (v. 8). As Michael Morgan captures so well in his lovely paraphrase, Psalm 17 is a psalm of deep passion, often raw and heartfelt, anticipating a just future that God will no doubt accomplish:

Keep me, LORD, in Thy protection,
As the apple of Thine eye;
Shelter me beneath Thy shadow
When my hour of death draws nigh.¹

Psalm 17 closes with a prayerful reflection on what gives satisfaction in life. The psalmist contrasts her hunger for righteousness that will result not only in justice, but in satisfaction, with the hunger for more stuff than may leave people satiated, but never satisfied. In Matthew 5:6, Jesus announces: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied” (my trans.). How tempting it is for churches to get lost in the seduction of our super-sized society: more numbers, bigger budgets, larger buildings. How hard it is for churches to listen to the psalmist and the call of Jesus for a different kind of hunger and another type of thirst that have nothing to do with stuff or size.

The Tuesday afternoon prayers for justice and peace from *The Iona Community Worship Book* include this prayer from Mother Teresa: “Make us worthy, O Lord, to serve the men and women throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them, through our hands, this day their daily bread, and by our understanding and love, give peace and joy.”² Like Psalm 17, Mother Teresa’s prayer is not pretty, nor is it vapid; it understands God to be a God of justice and mercy who will not be idle before the treacherous opponents of poverty and hunger.

In an increasingly secular and post-Christian society, I hear more and more new Christians wanting to know how to pray. I count Psalm 17 as a marvelous teaching tool about prayer, not

1. Michael Morgan, *The Psalter for Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 1999), 27.

2. *The Iona Community Worship Book* (Glasgow, Scotland: Wild Goose Publications, 1991), 58.

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their adversaries” (my paraphrase). I have slightly altered the NRSV translation for easier access to the meaning. The last line of verse 7 calls on God to place the suppliant at God’s right hand, the usual place of those whom God favors (e.g., Matt. 25:33) for protection against the adversaries.

The psalmist feels confident in the request for God’s protection because of the psalmist’s right living. The poet announces this fact with a series of metaphors that precede the central request of verses 6–7. In verse 1 the psalmist claims “lips free of deceit.” This same figure is found in Psalms 52:4 and 109:2, as well as in Micah 6:12. Uses of the metaphor attempt to describe both those who speak evil against others directly and those who claim to be supportive but are in fact speaking falsely, hypocritically. Then, in a phrase that resonates with the well-known Psalm 139:23–24, the poet says that when (if) God should examine the heart during a night visit, should test the poet, no wickedness would be found (v. 3). The poet cares nothing for the actions of others, since the poet has always “avoided the ways of the violent” (v. 4). The word “violent” here is not the one employed in Genesis 6:11 and elsewhere to describe a diversity of violent acts; it is rather a more specific word meaning “robber” or “murderer.” This psalmist is free of any wickedness, having always “held fast” to the paths of God (v. 5).

Then, after the central call in verses 6–7, the poet asks for specific protection from God, because the psalmist is “the apple of God’s eye” who deserves to be hidden “in the shadow of your wings” (v. 8). The first figure is extraordinary. The psalmist claims nothing less than to be the very iris of God’s own eye; in short God’s eye is literally filled with this exemplary poet! Because that is true, the vast and enfolding wings of God (an ancient metaphor; see also Ps. 18:10) are summoned as cover against those who oppose the psalmist.

Who are these adversaries? They are generally “the wicked who despoil” and “surround me” (v. 9). The word “despoil” can also be translated “assault” or “devastate.” The fact that they “surround” the poet paints a picture of marauders who surround a house and threaten to destroy it and those in it. Furthermore, these wicked ones “close their hearts to pity” and “with their mouths speak arrogantly” (v. 10). Unlike the deceit-free lips of the psalmist (v. 1), the mouths of these wicked are for arrogant and assaultive speech: “They set their eyes to cast me to the ground” (v. 11). Again the portrait is quite physical and personal, thieves and murderers who

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The opening six verses of the psalm are poignant. Anyone who has ever been unjustly accused knows the fear and desperation it can place in the human heart. I think of all the news stories I have read and continue to read of people who were found guilty in a court of law, only later to be released, after years of serving time, because new evidence came to light that exonerated them beyond the shadow of a doubt. I imagine that this is a psalm they would understand with their complete being. “Hear a just cause, O LORD” (v. 1).

While pleading for vindication, the psalmist has a passionate yearning for something even greater than a verdict of innocence: “Wondrously show your steadfast love. . . . hide me in the shadow of your wings” (vv. 7a, 8b). The attorney’s words return to me again: “The law is a terribly imperfect instrument. Its solutions are never completely satisfying. People are always left wanting something more.” The attorney was talking about the human instrument of law, and the psalmist is talking to God, but I believe there is a dynamic fundamental to the human condition that is manifest in both the attorney’s reflection and the psalmist’s prayer: namely, we seek justice, and we are right to do so, but justice alone is never adequate to the hunger of the human soul. If the verdict goes our way, we still “are always left wanting something more.” It is the human condition to ache for a reality that is more than any court can calculate and deliver. That is true whether we are dealing with the human institution of law or facing the Lord of the whole creation. Our hearts will not settle for divine vindication alone; we need God’s “steadfast love.”

We know that Christ as a devout Jew was immersed in the Scriptures, including the psalms. The Gospel writers often picture him quoting from them. Although he does not quote from this psalm, this psalm can help us to understand what it means when we say that Christ is the fulfillment of the law. Jesus says that he has come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17); the law has value and is not to be ignored. When the rich man asks Christ what he must do to inherit eternal life, Christ’s first response is to quote from the law (Mark 10:19). The law matters. As Paul says, “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12). For all its holiness and justness and goodness, however, the law is not adequate for filling the deepest hunger and thirst of the human heart, the hunger and thirst that drive us to pray as the psalmist, who begins by asking for vindication but

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system to keep it safe. The eyelid and the muscles and nerves that trigger blinking provide instant, spontaneous, uncontrollable protection—the same sort of protection the psalmist expects from God. The psalmist asks God to hide him under God’s wings. This verse is often used to emphasize the feminine nature of God. There are, however, many species of birds in which both parents actively care for and protect the young. Canada Geese, spread throughout North America, are one example. Yellow fluffy goslings are constantly herded carefully to keep them physically between their parents on the water and on the shore. This verse might better serve as an indicator of the genderless nature of a God who protects and cares for the children of God as parents do, as both mothers and fathers care for their children.

The “dark spot of the eye” (the psalmist) needs protecting, and the “shadow of wings” (God) provides this protection. These images provide abundant opportunity to connect light and darkness with the metaphors for God.

Protection extended by wings protects the psalmist from “the wicked” and “deadly enemies.” He is “surrounded” by danger (v. 9). Our world seems increasingly dangerous to most human inhabitants. Ravaged by earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes, tsunamis, and unnatural assaults by violence and pollution, the earth often seems a dangerous place. The psalmist makes clear that he expects God to protect him from danger. Much danger to the earth is certainly the result of human error, neglect, and wastefulness. Some Christian leaders seek to explain natural disasters as God’s warning to a fallen and sinful world. The psalmist, though, recognizes a God willing to vindicate him, to overlook his sin, to see him as innocent. He needs and finds a God who is his savior—one who protects him from wickedness and evil of all sorts, even from “young lions lurking in ambush” (v. 12). He knows a loving God who dwells with God’s people.

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because of its soaring rhetoric, but because of its spiritual candor. Despite feeling assailed by unnamed opponents, the psalmist does not feel alienated from God. On the contrary, the psalmist prays, “Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand” (v. 7). The psalmist prays to a God who is both imminent and powerful. She neither discards God as the last, great hope nor cowers before God as a divine tyrant. Hers is a prayer of trust in a God who can be counted on, even more than the finest friend.

What would it mean for the church to pray with this kind of urgency, intimacy, and poignancy? What would it mean truly to call upon God to “deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13 NIV), as Jesus would later teach his disciples to pray? What would it mean for the church to pray “give ear to my prayer” (v. 1), confident that God is listening with the attentive care of a loving parent and the good instincts of a trusted judge? What would it mean for the church to know that “when I awake I shall be satisfied” (v. 15) has nothing to do with our strategic goals or collective avarice and everything to do with trust in a God to whom we can pray with the psalmist, “Hide me in the shadow of your wings”? What would it mean to pray like that?

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threaten to destroy. They are like lions “eager to tear” and “lurking in ambush” (v. 12). Obviously, this poet is helpless against such powerful foes and needs the greater power of divine protection to survive their onslaughts.

So now the poet calls on God to “rise up” and “confront” them, to use the great divine “sword [to] deliver” the poet’s life from these wicked ones (v. 13). Unfortunately, verse 14 is extremely difficult to interpret. It certainly is a continuation of the psalmist’s demand that God defeat the wicked and humiliate and possibly attack both them and their children, but the grammar obscures the exact figures used.

Verse 15 suggests that this entire psalm is in fact a liturgical act in which the suppliant has come to the holy place (perhaps the temple in Jerusalem), has spent the night there in prayer, and after the long night of crying out, fully expects to “see God’s face in righteousness”; that is, the righteous psalmist will be approved in his cry for protection by the very presence of God, God’s very likeness. This appearance of God will in the end “satisfy” the poet. Exactly how God will appear is left uncertain, since the holiness and mystery of God are always to be protected.

This psalm announces that a genuine suppliant with genuine concerns for safety and protection may come to God and ask for divine help. That help will come for those who ask out of real need. This One who acts out of “steadfast love” for all who “have held fast to the paths [of God]” (v. 5) is ever eager to hear.

JOHN C. HOLBERT

Homiletical Perspective

concludes by naming the greater reality that alone can bring him ultimate satisfaction: “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness” (v. 15).

I think of how litigious our society is and how the law always leaves people “wanting something more.” I think it wrong for preachers to deprecate the work of lawyers, because, as my attorney friend said, “The law is absolutely necessary. Without it we would be killing each other or taking advantage of one another, and there would be no human recourse to set things right.” However, we do need sermons that explore the process of the psalmist’s prayer, how it unfolds from a desire for vindication to an affirmation that the profoundest satisfaction is to be realized in beholding God’s face.

I believe that affirmation has consequences for the way we relate to all systems of law, be they secular or religious. It reforms the expectations and attitudes that we bring to our participation in communities of law. We are grateful for the good that law can achieve, without placing on it the full burden of the soul’s insatiable hunger for a reality greater than law can deliver. This insight applies not only to law but to any human instrumentality that seeks to calculate and control things, such as technology or the bureaucracies of government. All are necessary, and all have the potential to accomplish much good, but their potential for good is diminished, not amplified, when we expect of them what we can find in God alone. Of course, we pray with the psalmist, “Hear a just cause” (v. 1), but we also acknowledge that our hearts will never be stilled until we are hidden “in the shadow of [God’s] wings” (v. 8).

THOMAS H. TROEGER

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PROPER 28 (SUNDAY BETWEEN NOVEMBER 13
AND NOVEMBER 19 INCLUSIVE)

Malachi 4:1–2a

¹See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ^{2a}But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.

Theological Perspective

Malachi 4:1–2a is an appropriate text for a Sunday near the end of the liturgical calendar. Not only is it the final text in the Christian version of the Hebrew Scriptures; it is also a text that deals with last things. Three theological themes are particularly important in these two verses and in the book as a whole: theodicy, God's righteousness, and eschatology.

Theodicy. The first, theodicy, is reflected in both the form and the content of the text. Malachi consists of six oracles or disputations between God and God's people concerning God's justice (2:17) and the people's unfaithfulness (3:5). On the one hand, Israel protests that God seems not to care whether or not people live according to the covenant. Those who fail to keep the covenant and do evil seem to do so with impunity. They are "good in the sight of the LORD" (2:17). God, on the other hand, accuses the people of despising God's holy name and profaning the covenant by refusing to live according to the commandments (3:5), by committing idolatry by marrying the daughters of a foreign god (2:11), and by robbing God of the tithe (3:8).

This disputation between God and the people is a form of theodicy. In its classical form theodicy is the problem of how to affirm both God's omnipotence and God's goodness in light of the reality of evil. It

Pastoral Perspective

Tertullian called the book of Malachi "the skirt and boundary of Christianity." A short skirt it is, consisting of a mere three pages leading up to the New Testament in Protestant Bibles, yet there is something refreshing and unique about the book of Malachi. The language and style of the writing is striking and contemporary, and the narrative structure is like a modern play. There is action, reaction, resolution, and promise. A preacher would be well advised to read the entire book before exploring the meaning of these two brief verses.

Malachi's chief concern is right worship, giving to God God's due. We can infer from the charges God lays against them that the Israelites have been cutting corners when it comes to tithes, offerings, reverence, and obedience. Instead of giving God their firstfruits, they have been giving God the leftovers, and the Lord has had enough. Malachi delivers the news that God has seen it all and will no longer overlook the sins of the people. The resolution comes in the last verses of chapter 3: "Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name" (3:16). Apparently, some of the people responded to Malachi's warning and returned to God. The two verses of our text

Malachi 4:1–2a

Exegetical Perspective

We must treat carefully this brief, powerful text, with its vivid imagery. Without such care, the text can simply feed self-righteousness and present a distorted understanding of God. Understood in context, and within the canon of the Old Testament, these verses make an important statement about God's justice and the validation of patience among God's people, especially in difficult times.

The two verses employ creative metaphors and similes to convey both God's justice and God's vindication of the righteous. God's justice resembles a clay pot used as a portable oven for cooking. Hosea 7 draws upon the same imagery. In Hosea, the heat of the oven represents the intensity of the infidelity of the people. Here in Malachi, the heat of the oven burns thoroughly the "arrogant" and the "evildoers." The Hebrew term for "arrogant" implies "insolent" or "rebellious." The oven burns so thoroughly that only stubble remains. Because the fire leaves neither root nor branch, those judged will have neither foundation nor fruit, neither stability nor productivity. The fire destroys, from the very bottom of the plant to the ends that continue to grow. In stark contrast, the righteous, those who revere the Lord's name, experience healing from the sun of righteousness. This second verse co-opts imagery from Israel's neighbors, who often portrayed God

Homiletical Perspective

In the semicontinuous Hebrew Bible lectionary, Malachi 4:1–2 is the reading for Proper 28. This passage is paired with Luke 21:5–19, where Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple and warns his hearers about coming signs and persecutions. Some pastors use these texts as the basis for hellfire-and-brimstone sermons that are designed to persuade through fear of punishment and persecution. Other pastors, who prefer to emphasize the gentle and loving side of God, tend to shy away from these passages altogether. This essay encourages preachers to avoid these extremes and to look for a word that speaks to the hearts and minds of their congregants.

Listeners tuning in to radio or television preachers get a heavy dose of the prosperity gospel these days. In this context, Malachi 4:1–2 and Luke 21:5–19 offer balance and a fitting reminder that life will not always be abundant and that we will all be held accountable for the choices we make. Preachers will find that Malachi has much to contribute to these themes of accountability and the struggle for justice and fairness, especially when the lectionary verses are examined in their larger context.

It is likely that Malachi was written after the Babylonian exile, a difficult time in Israel's history. The Second Temple had been completed, but messianic hopes had not been fulfilled. As the

Malachi 4:1–2a

Theological Perspective

would seem that if evil is indeed a reality and not an illusion, then God cannot be both omnipotent (setting aside what that might mean) and good and loving. Either God is omnipotent but for some reason unwilling to destroy evil and hence is neither good nor loving, or God is good and loving but unable to destroy evil and hence not omnipotent. In Christian faith, however, theodicy is not merely a logical conundrum. The question of God's justice is something quite different in covenantal theology than it is in philosophical theology. In covenantal theology, the reality of evil and the questions it raises about God are not just a matter of abstract notions of power, goodness, and justice. The issue is not only God's justice but, even more importantly, God's faithfulness, whether God keeps promises and is faithful to the covenant with Israel.

This disputation between God and Israel is perhaps most familiar today in the "protest theodicy" that has emerged in response to the Holocaust. Jewish writers such as Elie Wiesel and Emil Fackenheim have "put God on trial" for God's apparent abandonment of the Jews. As Fackenheim puts it, if God has abandoned the covenant by allowing millions of Jews to perish for no other reason than that their grandparents were faithful to God's commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28), why should Jews continue to be faithful to God, especially if in so doing they risk exposing their children and grandchildren to a repetition of the Holocaust?

God's Righteousness. Malachi answers that question by means of the second theme in this text: God's righteousness, justice, and judgment. These are certain. If not now, then in God's good time, on that Day of the Lord, that day "when I act, says the LORD of hosts" (4:3), that day that will surely come when those who revere the Lord, those whose names are written in the book of remembrance (3:16), will be spared and the wicked will be uprooted and consumed (4:1). God will in God's good time vindicate those who keep the covenant and destroy those who do not.

Of course, this emphasis on God's righteousness raises serious problems for many contemporary Christians. In both testaments the Bible strongly emphasizes not only the grace, love, and mercy of God, but also God's holiness and righteous judgment. Some Christians today, however, are more comfortable with God's mercy than with God's righteousness. Some modern theologians argue that God's grace, love, and mercy take precedence over

Pastoral Perspective

are God's promise in response to the people's faithfulness. "See, the day is coming," says the Lord, when all the hard work of being faithful will pay off.

God's promise reveals the heart of the problem: the Israelites are beginning to think that faithfulness goes unrewarded. The evidence speaks for itself: "Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape" (3:15). What good is faithfulness if it is the wicked who prosper?

This question was more pressing because of the time in which Malachi wrote, during the Persian domination, when the Israelites were "without solid economic resources or hopes" for the future.¹ When times are tough and money is tight, doing the right thing seems less important than getting ahead or making ends meet.

Looking around the world today, it seems that we are in a similar situation, and not just economically. Financial executives whose greed brought the economy to its knees have received excessive bonuses. Ballplayers who used steroids are record holders. The Center for Academic Integrity survey revealed that 80 percent of college students have cheated at least once on a test. Where is the reward for faithfulness and integrity?

One Halloween, as we made our way through the neighborhood trick-or-treating, my son and I came to a house where there was an unattended bowl of candy on the steps and a sign that read, "Please take only one." At first, my son grabbed a fistful of candy, but then he thought better of it. I beamed with pride as he chose one piece and left the rest. No sooner had we returned to the street than an older boy ran up to the house, dumped the entire contents of the bowl into his bag, and ran off. We stood there in stunned silence. Then I said to my son, "You did the right thing." He replied, "I'd rather have the candy." In a world where the wicked get the candy, what is a faithful person to do?

The text suggests two different approaches. First, this reading appears in the lectionary at the end of Ordinary Time, when we move from the common events of Jesus' life into the extraordinary events of Jesus' birth. Malachi's words underscore the theological reality of the approaching season of Advent: the world will not always be this way. Indeed, "the day is coming." Furthermore, the location of the book of Malachi in the Bible reminds us that, from a Christian perspective, the day *has*

1. Eileen M. Schuller, OSU, "The Book of Malachi," is *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 8:848.

Malachi 4:1–2a

Exegetical Perspective

as a winged solar disk. For similar imagery, see Psalm 84:11. The verses portray both judgment and grace as sources of heat, one destructive and one life-giving. The lectionary reading does not include the delightful image of leaping calves (v. 2b), but that part of the verse captures well a scene of unselfconscious joy.

These verses are a good example of late prophetic eschatology, an understanding of how God will act in the future. One strand of biblical material promised God's blessings in this life, as prosperity and victory over enemies (see Deut. 8:6–10). By the very end of the Old Testament period, the writers spoke of God acting beyond history to bring vindication and justice. The hope of resurrection in Daniel speaks to God's action beyond this life (Dan. 12:2). This passage seems to push right to the edge of the apocalyptic eschatology of Daniel, but does not go over that edge to promise God's action beyond history. Nevertheless, the verses do not promise the Lord's actions in ways consistent with how we experience life. The Lord will act decisively and immediately to bring total judgment and total healing. By speaking in poetic language, the prophet does not describe exactly what he has in mind. How and when will the arrogant be burned up? How and when will the diligent experience healing? The prophet affirms that justice and righteousness, reward and punishment, are the Lord's will, but does not describe the exact mechanism for accomplishing that will. These verses seem to be a kind of bridge between the idea of God's actions within this life and eschatology beyond history.

The Day of the Lord is a familiar idea from the Minor Prophets. Amos reverses the expectations of the people who long for the Lord's intervention. According to Amos, the Day of the Lord will be judgment against Israel, not Israel's enemies (Amos 5:18). Joel also portrays the Day of the Lord as judgment (Joel 1:15).

The depiction of harsh punishment for the wicked answers a specific question within the book itself. The book of Malachi centers around disputation between the Lord and the people. The Lord accuses the people of insincere worship (1:7), corrupt leadership (2:8), economic injustice (3:5), and lack of faith (2:17). The people accuse the Lord of not really loving them (1:2) and allowing the arrogant and evildoers to prosper (3:15). These two verses in chapter 4 are the prophet's answer to the question of the prosperity of the wicked. The people believe that they have trusted the Lord, only

Homiletical Perspective

Israelites labored to rebuild their society, preexilic leadership structures struggled to unify the people as they faced the realities of life as a small, poor corner of the vast Persian Empire. Pamela Scalise suggests that

the government's demands for taxes and tribute seemed more pressing than the requirements for sacrifices in the temple (Malachi 1:8). The imperial power to do them harm seemed surer than Yahweh's authority. The empire was tangibly present. In comparison, divine rule seemed invisible in their world, absent in both blessing and judgment. Reverence for God, and the ritual that expressed and preserved it, had declined as hope had receded.¹

The people began to doubt the value of their faith. They became cynical and turned their backs on God and their rich salvation history. Worship of YHWH, which should have been the unifying center of the community and could have been a source of life and hope, had deteriorated into rote and meaningless duty. In this context, Malachi's primary purpose was to win the people back to God.

The prophet sought to reach the Israelites through a series of six interactions or debates. Each of the six segments is composed of an assertion or question by the prophet, a response from the people that refutes the opening query, and an explanation from the prophet that reaffirms the initial assertion. Today's text is the conclusion to the sixth and final unit, which serves to call the doubters and evildoers to repentance and to comfort those who have lived righteously.

The final unit of the book opens in 3:13, when Malachi charges that the people have spoken against YHWH by stating that it did not profit them to serve God. Some in Malachi's audience believed that if God was just, God would take care of those who worshiped God. Traditional Jewish wisdom taught that a righteous lifestyle should result in material benefits. Paul Redditt asserts that the people of postexilic Judah expected God to keep his [*sic*] promises given through Second Isaiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zechariah. To many, who saw the wicked prospering, it was clear that God had not kept those promises.²

In today's text, 4:1–2a, the prophet refutes the complaints of the people by stating that justice will

1. Pamela Scalise, "Malachi 3:13–4:3: A Book of Remembrance for God-Fearers," *Review and Expositor* 95 (1998): 571–81.

2. Paul Redditt, *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering, 1995), 182.

Malachi 4:1–2a

Theological Perspective

God’s righteous judgment and that the latter must be understood in the larger context of the former. In this perspective, God’s righteous judgment is not vindictive but serves the larger purpose of the correction, restoration, and renewal of sinners. Karl Barth, for example, has argued that God’s mercy and righteousness are dialectically related. God’s mercy is an exercise of God’s righteousness, and God’s righteous judgment is always merciful. This does not, however, seem to be Malachi’s understanding. On the day when God acts (3:17; 4:3), when the sun of righteousness rises “with healing in its wings” (4:2a), those who have revered the Lord and been faithful to the covenant will be healed. They shall go “leaping like calves from the stall” (4:2). They shall rise up, while the wicked shall be cast down under the feet of the righteous and become like ashes.

Eschatology. The justice that Israel seeks is not a justice it can create, but a justice only God can provide. God’s righteous judgment, which for Malachi is the only answer to Israel’s question about God’s justice, is thoroughly eschatological. It has become fashionable in contemporary theology to insist that the eschatological and apocalyptic claims in the Bible are not about some “pie in the sky” event that takes place elsewhere than in this world (in “heaven,” for example) and in some remote future. The Day of the Lord is about the transformation of this world in the present and not in the future. Malachi, however, may hold out a different vision. As with Mark’s Gospel, much depends theologically on where Malachi’s text concludes. If verses 4–5 are, as many biblical scholars believe, a later addition to the text, they do take the sting out of verses 1–3 by suggesting that God’s righteous judgment on “the great and terrible day of the LORD” will not destroy either the righteous or the wicked but will renew them, that God “will not come and strike the land with a curse” (4:6). If Malachi ends with verse 3, then a different theodicy is suggested, and the hermeneutical challenge becomes harsher, starker, and more difficult. God will indeed heal the righteous, but the wicked, who once prospered, will be reduced to ashes.

GEORGE W. STROUP

Pastoral Perspective

come. Jesus, God with us, has come into the world. Now we have a companion and a guide on this journey, someone to encourage us when being faithful seems unrewarding.

The second approach we can take is to focus on the present rewards of righteousness. “Character Counts,” proclaims a banner in the local elementary school. When I asked my daughter what that meant to her, she said, “It means that what you do when no one is looking still matters to you.” That is true, because doing the right thing takes practice. Every time we do not take all the candy, do not file false tax returns, forgive our enemies, and love our neighbors—every time we choose God’s way—makes the world a holier place.

Malachi’s text is also an opportunity to explore the nature of eschatological hope, a subject we tend to avoid. The truth is, most mainline congregations are filled with people who are living a prosperous, middle-class life. Even in difficult economic times, many of our parishioners are getting by without too much hardship. This is why it is difficult to preach about eschatology: when life is good, there is little reason to think about the “end times.” In a church I once served, there was a wealthy couple whose teenage daughter was out of control. When I called on them, they told me all the ways they had tried to alter their daughter’s behavior, but to no avail. No punishment seemed to have the power to change her course. The father said wryly, “Children with trust funds don’t scare easily.” We are like children with trust funds. We see no urgency to examine the meaning of “the Day of the Lord.”

The wonderful thing about this text is that it paints a picture of the eschaton that holds judgment as well as promise. There will be no trace or sign of those who have done evil in the sight of God; they will be utterly destroyed. For those who have done the painful and sometimes unrewarding work of living a faithful life, there will be healing. Greed, injustice, and loss will not have the last word—thus says the Lord.

SHAWNTHA MONROE

Malachi 4:1–2a

Exegetical Perspective

to suffer because of it. The prophet affirms that God will act to unite and purify the community through a “messenger” (3:1). If the people cannot end their corrupt worship and cynical practices, the Lord will act within and among them to enable the community to be what it has been called to be, the Lord’s special possession (see Exod. 19:5). These verses in chapter 4 are the Lord’s actions to vindicate the righteous and judge the arrogant and evildoers.

The contemporary exegete and preacher must decide how to interpret these harsh words of judgment. The threat of burning the wicked into stubble in an oven can leave contemporary hearers with a distorted image of God, if the preacher does not balance them with words from the rest of the Old Testament. Genesis describes clearly the mission of Israel to be blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). In various places in the Old Testament, the writers repeat the affirmation that “the LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps. 103:8). All depictions of God’s wrath must be balanced by these affirmations of God’s healing, redeeming love.

As harsh as these verses in Malachi sound, the preacher can draw significant affirmations from them. For contemporary congregations who despair at the proliferation of evil and violence, the preacher can affirm from these verses in Malachi that God is not weak in the face of sin and wickedness. God will judge and defeat the evil of the world, including the evil in us. We take comfort in knowing that God notices the suffering caused by arrogance and cruelty. Even if our efforts at faithfulness do not seem to result in much progress, God will vindicate our work. These verses serve as a call for endurance in faithfulness in the midst of the evil of the world. God’s response to that faithfulness may not be immediate, but it will be redemptive and decisive.

CHARLES L. AARON

Homiletical Perspective

indeed come, the faithful will be rewarded, and the wicked will get their due. However, the prophet is clear that while the day is coming, it has not yet arrived. There is no promise that the people will see a change in their present circumstances.

In congregations where people are seeking to remain faithful despite ongoing injustice and trials, Malachi and Luke offer a word of hope and encouragement to remain strong and committed in the midst of their current circumstances. Yes, things are difficult now, and they may get worse, but “the day is coming” (4:1) when they will experience healing and release.

Other preachers will find themselves in congregations with hearers, similar to those in Malachi’s day, who feel entitled to prosperity and God’s blessing. These hearers, many of whom have experienced very little actual persecution or hardship, can become cynical and doubt God when they feel God has not met their needs and wants. In this context, today’s passages can serve as a corrective to the arrogance of the prosperity gospel. Pastors may also remind more privileged hearers of their responsibility to use the means they do have to work for justice for all people and the coming of the kingdom now, even while they wait for the fulfillment of the end of time.

Preachers who wish to pursue the prophetic themes in this text are wise to proceed with caution. Throughout Christian history, the title “sun of righteousness” in 4:2 has been given a messianic interpretation. We sing this interpretation in the third verse of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”: “Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, ris’n with healing in his wings.” Although this is beautiful imagery, it was probably not Malachi’s intent. In the ancient Near East, the sun was commonly pictured as a winged disk, so this image would have been familiar to Malachi’s original hearers. Although meant as a metaphor for God’s theophany, it is not believed to be a christological reference.

Used alone or as a complement to today’s Gospel text, Malachi has much to offer preachers in a variety of proclamation settings. The themes in this book are as relevant today as they were centuries ago.

TRACY HARTMAN

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PROPER 29 (REIGN OF CHRIST)

Luke 1:68–79

⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate
us.
⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

Theological Perspective

Those who were previously muted—a pregnant, unmarried woman and a speechless old man—burst into song during the second half of Luke’s first chapter. People on the bottom rung of society, people who were once powerless and silent, now sing.

Just as Mary opens Luke’s Gospel with a defiant song of praise (1:46–55), now an aged priest takes up the cry: Blessed be the God of Israel, who has acted in a mighty way to save God’s people. Surely Luke means for us to ponder the irony of the old man’s song. God’s “mighty savior” comes as a poor child born in a manger. Salvation is announced by those on the margins. Luke is busy rearranging our worldly notions of power and might.

While this gospel reading is used in Advent (Second Sunday of Advent, Year C), it is well that we read it at the Reign of Christ, one of the church’s most politically charged Sundays. Sorry, if you think salvation is something vague and spiritual. Here “salvation” is poetically depicted in ways that are frankly this-worldly and political. The salvation that dawns is no escape from the present but is rather a pushy, bold claim of the activity of God here and now. Old Zechariah sings a song that rehearses some of the grand highlights in the history of Israel’s redemption,

Pastoral Perspective

Luke presents these verses as a prophecy inspired by the Holy Spirit and given to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. As it stands, the passage gives praise to God for the redemption of Israel but also expounds John’s role in relationship to Jesus, the coming Messiah. The song is familiar from its liturgical use as the *Benedictus* or Song of Zechariah. Its role as a canticle, though, tends to fix it in our minds as something that stands alone as a seamless whole. The preacher, though, needs to see it within the larger context of Luke’s Gospel. Scholarly debate continues as to the origin of Zechariah’s prophecy. There is some consensus, however, that we have here a Jewish Christian hymn to which Luke has added the verses referring to John (vv. 76–77) and possibly the conclusion (vv. 78–79).¹

The hymn is announced as a prophecy, which is hugely important, as Luke thereby joins Zechariah’s words to the weight of witness extending back into the Old Testament. He also brings that witness into the present, which is announced as the time of fulfillment. Applied to John and Jesus, therefore, this is

1. For a survey of the debate, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible 28 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 375–78.

Luke 1:68–79

⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Exegetical Perspective

Christians rightly wish we had more information about John the Baptist, the fiery, compelling, uncompromising preacher who prepared for the ministry of Jesus. Only Luke provides background on John's childhood. Luke's creative narration and poetry have limited historical value, but they complement the interpretation of John's ministry from the material about his adult preaching and interaction with Jesus. Luke does not give the church (or scholars) more information about the historical John, as fascinating as that would be, but Luke gives one bit of interpretation of John's life and ministry lacking in the other Gospels. Luke identifies John's father as the priest Zechariah, whose initial doubt (even if it might strike the reader as understated) may reflect the longing of the people for God to act and their growing uncertainty about when God would respond. Zechariah may represent those who, after centuries of waiting, had begun to doubt the messianic expectations. The poem exhibits Zechariah's faith after the doubt. Starting in verse 65, Luke tells the reader the reaction to the poem before he presents the actual poem in verse 68. The reaction of the people creates a sense of anticipation for the poem and indicates its importance.

Homiletical Perspective

Zechariah, whose name means “God has remembered,” challenged the angel Gabriel, who visited him in the “sanctuary of the Lord” (1:9) with news that he was going to be a father. Gabriel called the challenge disbelief and struck Zechariah dumb. He must have been struck deaf as well. After all, when his son is born and his mother names him, the people “began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him” (1:62). They would make hand gestures only if they thought he was without hearing as well as speech.

So for the nine long months of his wife's pregnancy, Zechariah was enwombed in silence. He had no voice and apparently heard no words. He was left to ponder the meaning of his original question to the angel: “How can I be sure of this?” (paraphrase of 1:18). He was left to watch, mutely, the slowly developing belly of his old wife, Elizabeth. He was left to feel, noiselessly, the drumming of his son's feet against her stomach as the child grew within her womb. Zechariah did not believe the unbelievable and for his skepticism was stripped of sound.

We too struggle with skepticism here in the early years of the twenty-first century and find ourselves without words. However, too often it is not good

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when God unreservedly took up Israel's cause against the enemy. Zechariah's Benedictus is a joyous shout of praise for the God who redeems, sends mighty prophets, saves from enemies, keeps promises, and engages the enemy in order to guide us in the "way of peace."

A theological claim is being made in this song, a theological claim that has here-and-now political implications. Israel's God is not only a God who loves, but is love in action. God not only speaks through the mouths of the prophets (v. 70), not only "remembers" holy covenants made with Israel (v. 72), but raises up "a mighty savior" (v. 69).

The challenge set before us preachers in proclaiming this Benedictus of Zechariah is primarily theological: *is the church yet able to proclaim God in action?*

Many contemporary commentators have charged that the predominant theology of mainline, liberal North American Protestantism is "moralistic, therapeutic Deism." We have reduced the gospel to some plan of action that we are to execute. Moralism: the good news is presented as something that is salubrious for us as individuals, a psychological boost that will make us feel better about ourselves. Therapeutic: the God who is being rendered in our preaching is one who allegedly created the world and then retired. Deism: this "god" allegedly loves but does not actually get around to any loving activity.

Therefore, expect resistance if you decide to join with Zechariah and sing of a God who hears, acts, redeems, and saves. A liberal democracy is essentially atheistic. We attempt a polity in which the people are now the practical equivalent of God. In order to get the modern world going, we first had to remove the possibility of an interventionist, intrusive, active, saving God. The modern nation-state is nervous about the possibility that there is any greater sovereignty than the modern state. It is up to us to stir ourselves, take matters in hand, and save ourselves, or we will not be saved. We are bombing Afghanistan only for the most noble of reasons.

Is our political imagination bold enough to join with Zechariah's pushy poetry and dare to assert a "mighty savior" who is a "child" who guides us "in the way of peace"? Is it possible that the story of our salvation begins, not in the alleged centers of political power—Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and London—but on the margins in backwater Bethlehem?

Of course, some will respond to these theologically based claims of divine redemption by pointing to lack of empirical evidence that the world has been redeemed. Caesar still sits secure on the throne. The marginalization of the Zechariahs of the world has

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a prophetic interpretation of the history of Israel's prophetic testimony: Zechariah's prophecy names the events of the beginning of Luke's Gospel as the substance and hope of all the prophets. So, in what may well also be a Lukan addition, we have "as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (v. 70).

The force of the song, therefore, is, first and foremost, that salvation is from the Jews, an insistence that is established in form as well as content. Formally, the hymn is a catena of Old Testament passages, creating a chain of texts concerning God's faithfulness and promises of salvation. The quotations themselves range more widely than the prophetic writings and include phrases from the Psalms, Genesis, and the historical books. God's salvation, therefore, is unintelligible except as the fulfilling and enlargement of God's "holy covenant" (v. 72b) with Israel. This is, at the least, a reminder of the importance of resisting tendencies within the church that marginalize or slight the Old Testament, even the more innocent ones, such as preaching exclusively or narrowly on Gospel readings.

If salvation is from the Jews, for whom is God's work of redemption? To whom is given the gift of that "dawn from on high" (v. 78)? There is a shift of focus in the hymn, introduced by Luke's handling of it. The first verses praise God for looking "favorably on his people" (v. 68b) and interpret God's promise as "that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us" (v. 71). The vision here is of Israel surrounded by hostile nations, invaded and oppressed by the powers of empire.

A significant enlargement of this statement occurs in the Lukan additions. John the Baptist is born to be a prophet and will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (v. 76b), the context suggesting that "Lord" here refers to Jesus. John is not the bringer of salvation himself but of the "knowledge of salvation . . . by the forgiveness of their sins" (v. 77). These distinctively Lukan phrases open out the meaning of salvation beyond the political and, in the context of the Gospel, beyond Israel to all who labor under the burden of sin, who sit in the darkness where death's shadows prevent the knowledge of God. Into that deathly gloom, Jesus will shine as the "dawn from on high" (v. 78).

A major theme of this passage is God's faithfulness, which culminates in John's prophetic ministry and in Jesus, who comes as the Messiah. The hymn takes the faithfulness of God, his persistent love for Israel and therefore his preservation of their

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When Zechariah begins to speak, he does not hold back! Verses 68–71 offer blessing to God and celebrate several divine actions revealed in the birth of John and the anticipated birth of Jesus. The action verbs tumble from John’s mouth. The request that the Lord look favorably on the people (v. 68) reflects the recognition that the divine presence often remains hidden. In a lament psalm, for example, the speaker will plead for divine favor in response to difficult circumstances in which the Lord has seemed to hide or turn away (e.g., Pss. 85:1; 86:17). The metaphor behind “redemption” refers to purchasing freedom from slavery, perhaps for a next of kin. The poem shifts to the language of the Lord as a holy warrior who fights against the enemies of the people (see Exod. 15:1–3).

The Christian concept of salvation has one root in the idea of saving from defeat in battle. These verses call to mind the ways the Lord acted on Israel’s behalf throughout its history. The Lord redeemed the people from slavery in Egypt and protected them from their enemies. The Lord looked favorably on them during various crises. The prophets spoke the divine word to enable the people to understand God’s actions and their expected response. These actions of speaking, redeeming, and protecting formed Israel into a people and established their relationship with the Lord. These first few verses tie the divine action through John and Jesus to Israel’s experience of the Lord throughout their history.

In verse 72, the poem begins a shift toward explaining the purposes of God’s favor, salvation, and redemption. The allusion to the covenant with Abraham reminds the reader that God’s purpose for the prosperity and protection of Israel was to produce a blessing for all people (Gen. 22:17–18). The divine actions on behalf of Israel result in the freedom bravely to serve the Lord and exhibit holiness and righteousness. These terms suggest the set-apart nature of Israel’s existence and the right relationships (including justice) among the people and God. Up to this point, the poem has interpreted the anticipated arrival of Jesus.

The focus shifts in verse 76 to the newly born John, whom the poem addresses directly. John embodies the prophetic tradition in Israel’s history. His boldness calls to mind Elijah, the model for prophecy that confronts abuse of power and idolatry, providing instruction for the people. John’s role includes preparing the people for the coming of Jesus and his ministry. Consistent with verse 77, John’s ministry includes baptism “of repentance for

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news that leaves us speechless. It is the daily drip of bad news—the gunshots at malls and movie theaters, the threat of chemical weapons used by a dictator against his own people, the intransigency of those who refuse to find common ground on which to build common good, the banal meanness of those who grab what they want from those too weak to hold onto it. We are mute as one act of violence surpasses another. We wish that we might also be deaf, at least for a moment, to the sounds of bullets ripping flesh and words tearing out hearts.

So we may well sympathize with an old man who wants some certainty about a promise that something good might actually happen when all he may have known is the same bad that we live in. After all, he lived in the time of the Roman Empire, which held captive the people of Judea and had the power to control or disrupt all aspects of human life through its soldiers, tax collectors, merchants, and prefects. Would we not also wonder how something so delightful as a baby could happen in a time of such predictable evil? Would we not also find the promise of a son born to an elderly couple somewhat nonsensical? Would we not also question the claim that this son “will be great in the sight of the Lord” (1:15), when we can barely conceive of his existence? Do we not also find the punishment of nine months of silence to be too much for such an understandable distrust of a promise that so patently flouts the laws of nature?

Might we, instead, find the silence a welcome respite? Perhaps as Zechariah watched his wife deal with her pregnancy, watched her younger cousin also great with child arrive at their home, watched the daily cycles of ordinary life wheeling around him, he found rest—and time to remember and consider what God had done in the history of Zechariah’s people and the covenant of salvation God once made with them. Maybe he found space within himself for something else besides a disbelief that God can act in surprising ways.

In any case, after nine months of silence, Zechariah was at last filled with the Holy Spirit and in his first words offered praise and blessing: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel” (v. 68a). After the long dumbness, he sang of God’s mercy in the past and pointed toward God’s redemption in the present with the birth of a mighty savior. He spoke of the fulfillment of a promise that the people of Israel would be rescued from all who hated them and saved from their enemies, even their Roman ones, in the advent of this child born in the house of David.

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not been defeated. Surely there were those prosaic, politically unimaginative people who countered Zechariah's jubilant victory song with scoffing disbelief. I expect that there was someone nearby who urged the old man to pipe down, to be "realistic" about the limits of divine intervention, and to accept the political status quo: "The leaders of occupied Israel have achieved a relatively secure power-sharing arrangement with our Roman overlords. Accept the political facts."

Christ the King is a wonderful time to expose the politics behind some forms of disbelief. One way that the powers that be retain their power is by attempting to seal off the political from the theological. One way that the oppressed challenge the oppressor is by eschewing pleas for political realism and practicality and instead engaging in pushy, prophetic poetry.

Let us therefore neither analyze nor argue Zechariah's song in the face of worldly, godless opposition. Let us rather take up the beat, forgo government-sponsored prose, and joyfully engage in mind-blowing poetry that blesses a God who acts and dares to stand and sing a song more true than the national anthem.

I am grateful that sometimes our celebration of the Reign of Christ occurs right after a national election season. In the aftermath of so much secular political activity, what a wonderful time to ask fundamental political/theological questions! Who is in charge? Who reigns? Who works within history to bring history to its purposeful culmination?

So many contemporary Americans are disillusioned with the democratic political process, refusing even to vote, disgusted by the false promises of politicians, and convinced that our society may be ungovernable. This gives us preachers a grand occasion to stand and deliver the good news that God, not nations, rules the world. Having succumbed to the idolatrous delusion that we have the whole world in our hands, that we are able to make history turn out right on our own, the Reign of Christ offers us preachers a God-given opportunity to turn secular political disillusionment into a hymn of faith in a God who not only loves but also saves.

WILLIAM H. WILLIMON

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role in his final lordship over Jew and Gentile, all the way back to Abraham. This is God's constancy: the remembrance of "his holy covenant" (v. 72b), by which God is true to his word. As to what God promises, salvation establishes a people free and graced to "serve [*latreuein*, "worship"] him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (vv. 74–75). God keeps faith with his people by renewing them as a community in which the length and breadth of life is an offering to God, a reflection of the glory of that "dawn."

As regards the future, Zechariah's song receives a double focus: an ultimate one and a penultimate one. The final horizon is eschatological; the hymn looks to the day of God's peace, his irreversible and blessed kingdom, in which there is no enmity, and life is an abundant fullness. In the foreground of the song, though, is the "way of peace," the path onto which Jesus guides his disciples. This changes the implication of what it means to serve—or, rather better, worship—"without fear." Living "in holiness and righteousness" does not—in these penultimate days—mean living without enemies. In Luke's Gospel, the "enemies" (v. 74) are those who reject Jesus and persecute the gospel and its witnesses.

Thus, as readers of Acts know, the renewed community of God's salvation has its table "in the midst of enemies" (Ps. 23:5). Through the Holy Spirit, however, men and women may live "peacefully," as makers of peace in a world tormented by hatred. The church, therefore, answers God's faithfulness by reflecting his grace in its own constancy. Persistence in love; endurance in hostility; patience with the mean spirited, the weak, and the indifferent; courage in forgiveness and love of enemies; refusal to leave the place where love is needed; a gentle determination never to stop telling of God's salvation: these are marks of the church as they are intimated in Zechariah's prophecy.

ALAN GREGORY

Luke 1:68–79

Exegetical Perspective

the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). Forgiveness of sins constitutes a recurring theme in Luke (24:47). The metaphor of light coming to those sitting (or walking) in darkness can be found in Psalm 107:10, 14 and Isaiah 9:2. If the metaphors in the beginning of the poem speak of the divine warrior, these verses speak of the divine mission of healing and hope. Ironically, even though John does offer a baptism of forgiveness, his preaching famously contains much judgment and confrontation (3:7, 17). These verses remind the reader that even with the role of warrior and the reality of confrontation, the ultimate divine goal remains salvation and peace.

Within the Gospel of Luke and within Christian theology in general, the promises of the poem, on the surface, stand in tension with John’s imprisonment and death (9:9) and with Jesus’ crucifixion. The ironic taunts of the onlookers, the soldiers, and one of the criminals that Jesus cannot save himself (23:35–39), contrast with the promises of the poem that God has raised up a Savior, who will protect the people from their enemies (1:69). The poem begins the process, however, of redirecting messianic expectations from military victory and political freedom toward forgiveness and salvation from sins. The freedom God offers through Christ is the freedom from fear and freedom for service. However, the verses within the poem about protection from enemies remind the church of the political dimensions of salvation.

This poem gives the preacher much material for reflection on Reign of Christ Sunday. The poem begins by enumerating the hopes and expectations of the people for political freedom and a display of divine power to lift the oppression of foreign rule. The poem then moves to a reinterpretation of those expectations in the form of promises for freedom to worship and serve without fear. God’s actions in Jesus bring light in the experience of darkness and lead to peace. The preacher can draw upon both the theology of the poem and the rhetorical strategy of reshaping expectations. On the cross, Luke’s Jesus displays the eschatological power of forgiveness. The church embraces that promise, but Zechariah’s poem reminds the church of the realities of political oppression and injustice, for which God acts as Savior.

CHARLES L. AARON

Homiletical Perspective

He pointed toward a life of holy and righteous service to God that is at last free from fear—even the fear of angels who appear in the sanctuary unexpectedly with astoundingly good news of a baby to be born to an elderly couple.

This, of course, is where the infant John comes into Zechariah’s song of blessing: “You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (v. 76). In this verse of his song Zechariah recognized not just the name that Elizabeth has given the boy but also his true identity as the forerunner of Jesus, the proclaimer of dawn in the midst of darkness and the arrival of peace in the shadow of death.

Nine months before, in that one doubting moment in the sanctuary, Zechariah forgot the covenantal character of the God he worshiped and the faithful response required by covenantal relationship. In his long silence, Zechariah, the one named “God has remembered,” finally remembered that the God of Israel is a God of covenant. He remembered also, to borrow Alan Culpepper’s words from the *New Interpreter’s Bible*, that “we are a covenant people, saved and rescued by God’s hand.”¹ Only then did he have the capacity to hope again for the peace that his own son would announce and to sing of its completion in the coming of Jesus. Only then did he have the insight to speak of a time when all people could live in holiness and righteousness, free from fear.

All of which makes me wonder what we might remember, if only we were silent for more than a few minutes.

NANCY CLAIRE PITTMAN

1. R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 9:59.

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