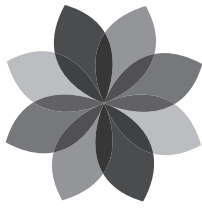


Year A, Volume 3  
Season after Pentecost



# Connections

*A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*

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# Publisher's Note

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

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

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

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

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

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

WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS

# Introducing Connections

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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*General Editors*



# Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JENNIFER L. LORD  
*Connections Editorial Board Member*



Connections

# Trinity Sunday

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Genesis 1:1–2:4a  
Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11–13  
Matthew 28:16–20

## Genesis 1:1–2:4a

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

<sup>6</sup>And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” <sup>7</sup>So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. <sup>8</sup>God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

<sup>9</sup>And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. <sup>10</sup>God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup>Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup>The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

<sup>14</sup>And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, <sup>15</sup>and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. <sup>16</sup>God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. <sup>17</sup>God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, <sup>18</sup>to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup>And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” <sup>21</sup>So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. <sup>22</sup>God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” <sup>23</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup>And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. <sup>25</sup>God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

<sup>27</sup>So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” <sup>29</sup>God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup>And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. <sup>31</sup>God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

<sup>2:1</sup>Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. <sup>2</sup>And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. <sup>3</sup>So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

<sup>4</sup>These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

## Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The creation story in Genesis 1 is not science but poetry, and it is rooted in faith rather than biological facts. God spoke, and creation happened. The author of Genesis 1 did not debate or defend the divine role and presence but simply assumed that there was a God who created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning was chaos, “without form and void.” Then God breathed over the watery mess, and God’s *ruach* (breath, wind, or spirit) moved over and separated the waters. God spoke, and the world appeared. God spoke, and divided the day from the night. God spoke, and separated the water from the land. Out of chaos came order and life.

The description of creation is precisely ordered. In the first three days of creation, God made the spaces: day/night (day 1), heaven and the oceans (day 2), earth and seas (day 3). In the next three days, God filled the spaces with the corresponding items: sun, moon, and stars (day 4), birds and sea creatures (day 5), cattle and earth creatures, including humans (day 6). God did not act alone, but shared the divine power to create with the creation itself. God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living

creatures.” “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind.” God gave the animals and the humans the power to create more life. God gave humankind the ability to make the world a safe place for all God’s creatures.

This beautiful, poetic story has provoked a great deal of conflict over whether the account should be read literally. Did God create the world in six twenty-four-hour days, a mere six thousand years ago, or did the earth and humanity evolve over millions of years? Genesis does not answer those questions, because it is not a biology textbook or a scientific report. Rather, it is literature—albeit canonical literature—that reflects the views and explanations of those who wrote it and edited it, and continue to read it now. This account communicates truth through story and poetry.

Genesis 1 is the first of two quite different creation narratives, which are difficult to harmonize. Most preachers know this, but it can be a significant insight for those who have been taught that there is a single story. Genesis 1:1–2:4a presents an orderly account of God speaking creation into existence in six

## Alert the Ears of Your Spirit

From visible things the soul rises to the consideration of the power, wisdom, and goodness of God, in so far as He is existing, living, intelligent, purely spiritual, incorruptible, and immutable. . . . The origin of things, according to their creation, distinction, and adornment as the work of the six days, proclaims the power of God that produced all things out of nothing, the wisdom of God that clearly differentiated all things, the goodness of God that lavishly adorned all things. . . . Therefore, whoever is not enlightened by such great splendor in created things is blind; whoever remains unheedful of such great outcries is deaf; whoever does not praise God in all these effects is dumb; whoever does not turn to the First Principle after so many signs is a fool. So, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, unlock your lips, and apply your heart that you may see, hear, praise, love, and adore, magnify, and honor your God in every creature, lest perchance the entire universe rise against you. For because of this, the whole world shall fight against the unwise. But on the other hand, it will be a matter of glory for the wise, who can say with the prophet: "For you have given me, O Lord, a delight in your doings, and in the work of your hands I shall rejoice. How great are your works, O Lord! You have made all things in wisdom; the earth is filled with your riches."

Bonaventure, *The Journey to the Mind of God*, trans. Philotheus Boehner, OFM; ed. Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 9–10.

days, culminating in the creation of humanity in God's image. After creation is complete, and pronounced very good, God rests on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3). In Genesis 2:4b–3:24, however, God is more hands-on. God sculpts a human out of dirt, and then later, after creating the animals, makes a partner from the first human's rib.

Genesis 1 uses the word "Elohim" for God, while Genesis 2 refers to God as "Yahweh" or "LORD," which likely points to different authorship. The inclusion of two stories suggests that the intent was not to offer an exact record of what happened historically. Instead, the stories reflect two different visions or explanations of how the world came to be and how God was involved.

The variant worldviews reflected in the two accounts of creation may be explained by their different dating. Many scholars think that though placed first, Genesis 1:1–2:4a was the later account, written about 500 BCE, when the Israelites had been exiled to Babylon. The writers tried to show that, despite the destruction of their country, the God of Israel was stronger and better than the gods of Israel's neighbors and captors.

A Babylonian account of creation describes the thunder god, Marduk, who violently kills a water goddess named Tiamat and uses her broken body to form the sky and earth. The biblical

God, in contrast, creates through speech, not bloodshed, and out of delight, not destruction. Moreover, the repeated declaration of creation as "good" assured the Israelites that though God appeared to have abandoned them in exile, the world was still good and reliable, and the God who created the world was still very much in charge of it.

Placed as the first narrative of the Bible, Genesis 1:1–2:4a frames the stories that follow by placing the creation story in a larger story about the origins of the world called the Primeval History (Gen. 1–11). The creation account acts as the opening scene to the divine-human trajectory that is evident in Genesis 1–11: God made a very good world, but the human beings made it go wrong. As a result, all relationships were affected: between God and humanity, between humanity and the creation, and between the humans themselves. God sent a flood to destroy it and start again (Gen. 6–9). In Genesis 12, God chooses to bless the broken through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, the people of Israel. The rest of the Bible expands on these themes. Original goodness was corrupted, and human beings had fallen into murder and misuse of power, but God continued to love and care for and eventually redeem the world.

The placement of this creation story in the lectionary on Trinity Sunday hints of a theological

claim not necessarily evident in the text. When God said, “Let us make humankind in our image,” did “us” refer to Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Most commentators have argued instead that God was probably referring to a heavenly council of advisors (cf. Job 1–2). The phrase may have also been simply a use of the “royal we,” which highlighted the significance of the creation of humanity. On Trinity Sunday, the preacher might lift up God’s willingness to collaborate and be in relationship, without trying to find evidence for the Trinity where it does not exist.

Other sermon ideas emerge from this intriguing text. For example, the text could be used for Earth Day to encourage delight in and gratitude for the beauty of the earth. When we are busy, tense, and consumed with technology, we might see the intricate and meticulously ordered world as God’s gracious gift to us. God invites us to pay attention to the world, because learning more about the world teaches us about God.

A sermon might explore what it means to be created in the image of God. Creation in God’s image does not simply mean that humans are rational or spiritual, but that they are called to imitate God in the care and nurture of creation.

All people, whatever their race or gender or class, are created in God’s image, which means that each person is to be respected and valued and honored. Forgetting this has led to genocide, war, abuse, and a host of other sins.

God gave humankind dominion over creation, but this responsibility has often been misunderstood as giving humanity the right to strip-mine, to clear cut the rainforest, to dispose of toxic waste in waterways. Instead, dominion means humanity is to care for creation in ways that help the earth and living beings become the best they can be. It is to create safe spaces, not to exploit and dominate.

A sermon might explore the meaning of Sabbath rest. Some people remember Sundays spent being forced to go to church. What if we experienced the Sabbath as a gift instead of demand? What if we let go of our constant need to be productive? What if we took a walk and enjoyed God’s creation? What if we stopped trying to control? Rest could be a sign of grace to a weary world. This complex story of the creation of the world opens up space for a rich discussion of our place in it.

LYNN JAPINGA

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

As pictured in Genesis 1, creation is an act of holy speech giving order to the universe. What God speaks, God brings forth. God’s speech is therefore the *sine qua non* for emancipation, land, exile, vocation, faith, healing, judgment, and resurrection. It is the medium through which faith is given. God redeems us through the Word; so speech is not simply an information delivery device, communicating meaning by narrowing its possibilities. It is the genesis of all life, expanding possibilities. God’s words to Pharaoh, “Let my people go,” initiate the exodus. God’s words to Israel through the prophets announce the end of kingdoms, and later end the exile and restore the people to new life. Jesus heals primarily with words. “Talitha cum,” he says.

The life of the church is centered around the Word, rooting us in the conviction that speech is the primary way that the God of Jesus Christ

is revealed to us. Indeed, every preacher knows the shock of hearing testimony from a parishioner who quits a job, forfeits significant wealth, or chooses a different path—all because of the words of a sermon, God’s word to us on a particular day and time. Speech matters.

Human beings, by virtue of being made in the image of God, reflect God’s creative potential and action. We too speak, create, name, and bless. We have the capacity to speak new worlds into being through the speech that organizes the chaos of activity inside of our brains. It is this human capacity for generating new creation—from art to technology to knowledge itself—that sets us apart from all other creatures. For example, the Declaration of Independence is nothing more than words on a page, yet it brings a new nation into being. The decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 is but

speech in a document, yet it changes lives and communities. Research shows that one of the most important factors in the development of children is reading to them—speech that literally generates exponential possibilities for their future.

Yet the generative outcomes of human speech are questionable. Some geologists have proposed that the first nuclear explosion (code-named “Trinity”) marked a new period in geologic time, the Anthropocene Epoch, meaning the “new human” epoch, characterized by human domination of the earth. As the selection for Trinity Sunday, Genesis 1 therefore compels us to compare and contrast God’s creative powers with our own. What is it that makes God’s creative acts unquestionably good—a description that God repeatedly declares of creation (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)—while our acts are marked by ambiguity? How might we contrast the unquestionably good fruits of God’s creation with our own? Perhaps Genesis 1, in all of its beauty and life and in its declarations of “good,” not only elucidates the contrast between God’s idea of good with that of humans, but also provides a foundational definition for “good” from which all other notions can be judged.

A different focus emerges in the creation of human beings in Genesis 1, which varies from the “rib from Adam” and “garden of Eden” story to come later in Genesis 2. In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word *adam*, meaning “human-kind,” intimates humanity’s close connection to the land, *adamah*. Interestingly, *adam* lacks any explicit reference to gender (1:27). *Adam* is to *adamah* as “earthling” is to “earth.” Rather than issues of gender, the language clearly indicates that the text is more concerned with the close connection between humanity and the earth. This is not to dispute that binarisms are found throughout the creation account (light and darkness [1:4], land and sea [1:9–10], day and night [1:14–18], etc.), but that the focus seems to go beyond our simplistic notions of gender.

The text does argue that God creates humanity male and female, but male and female seem to be contained within *adam*, within “the earthling.” Superiority of one gender over the other is

neither stated nor implied. The text emphasizes humanity’s shared connection between genders reflective of our origin from and connection with the earth.

This emphasis suggests several sermon ideas. This idea of the deep relationship between humanity and the earth helps to clarify the earlier problematic declaration by God that humans should “subdue” and “have dominion” over the earth (1:28). Considering that earthlings are made of earth, domination cannot entail irresponsible desecration and destruction, as the earth’s demise is that of humanity as well. A wise preacher will do well to reflect on how power given by God is not a free-for-all but comes with accountability to values, commands, and regulations.

Second, the idea that both genders are included in the idea of *adam*, of humanity, hints that gender equality was an original component of the good created order. A sermon possibility might explore how things that lessen this original equality move us away from the harmonious world that God created and intended humanity to inhabit. Lastly, a possible topic worth exploring from the pulpit is the notion of harmony. Harmony is reflected in the description of near idyllic relationships between all living things in Genesis 1. A wise preacher might explore what role the church has in helping the world experience or move closer to this harmony, which God built into creation and has gifted to the world: harmony in family life, harmony in public life between citizens and their leaders, harmony between political parties, harmony between workers and owners, harmony among people and cultures.

A final connection emerges at the conclusion of this pericope, when God rests on the seventh day (2:2–3). Though the command to Sabbath rest is still a full biblical book away, the foundations are laid here at the beginning. Those foundations are rooted in God’s action or, rather, absence of action. God rests, and in ceasing from work God “hallowed” the seventh day. In prior verses, creation occurs by God separating matter. Here God separates time itself, setting the seventh day apart from the rest. In her book *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, author MaryAnn



McKibben Dana writes of discovering theologian Karl Barth's statement that "a being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity." Reflecting on her own family's experiment with Sabbath time, McKibben Dana writes, "It seems impossible that restricting our freedom has only increased our feeling of freedom . . . but it has."<sup>1</sup>

This realization is countercultural to the growth-driven world economies that govern so much of our living. We are valued mainly for what we can produce. Beauty and goodness lose value because their contemplation produces no concrete outcomes. God's choice to rest thus challenges the foundations of dominant world orders that overvalue productivity while

undervaluing the priceless nature of the earth and its creatures: the stock market with its indices that never reflect the cost of environmental degradation. More locally, God's choice challenges the church when we fail to value non-productive time together as essential to our life with God: church committees that do not differ in substance from those in government or business, leadership that demotes spiritual formation because it does not contribute to "getting things done." Here in Genesis we learn simply that creation—and we—are complete only when rest is built into the equation. This text invites a reevaluation of our use of time, beginning with our use of time in the church.

ANDREW FOSTER CONNORS

1. MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2012), 151–52.

## Trinity Sunday

### Psalm 8

<sup>1</sup>O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.

<sup>2</sup>Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

<sup>3</sup>When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;

<sup>4</sup>what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?

<sup>5</sup>Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.

<sup>6</sup>You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,

<sup>7</sup>all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,

<sup>8</sup>the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

<sup>9</sup>O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

### Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

God governs the cosmos. This central message of Psalm 8 emerges clearly through the twice-repeated phrase, “O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1, 9). The refrain is an exclamation: “How majestic!” It can also be understood as a question: “How majestic?” The rest of the psalm (vv. 2–8) provides both an answer to the question and an exposition of God’s majesty.

To catalog God’s majesty, the psalm describes the extreme reaches of the cosmos. Ancient readers would have understood the worldview as the psalm moves from the heavens (vv. 1–3) to the lowest points, “along the paths of the seas” (v. 8). In fact, the psalmist places these elements in a hierarchy. God’s glory is “above” the heavens (v. 1). Humans are “a little lower” than God (v. 5). In turn, God puts all things “under” humans (v. 6).

The exposition of these levels of authority begins, appropriately, at the very top. Above the heavens, God sets God’s glory (*hbd*, v. 1). In Hebrew, “glory” conveys a sense of weightiness and power. For God’s glory to reside “above the heavens” (v. 1) suggests that the scale of God’s majesty exceeds humans’ ability to comprehend it. It stands outside our ability to observe it, higher than anything we can see. It is invisible, but nevertheless palpable within the world, for God protects God’s people (v. 2). This paradox of God’s glory as both powerful and incomprehensible is expressed through a unique literary image. The sounds of babbling infants are associated with the strength of a fortress (v. 2). For the psalmist, God’s glory is ultimately unknowable, like the meaning of baby talk, but also strong enough to repulse an enemy.

Meditating on this paradox of God's glory spurs the psalmist to reflect on humanity in the context of God's creation. In verse 3, the psalmist is moving by increments downward, from above the heavens, through the heavens, and then just a little lower, to the humans whose power lies just below that of the numinous beings. Here the psalmist describes them as "gods" (*elohim*). Many Jewish and Christian traditions have taken this verse as a reference to angelic forces (so the KJV: "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels").

In many ancient Near Eastern religions, the heavenly bodies like the moon and stars (v. 3) were understood as persons, deities in their own right with agency and volition. It may be that the psalmist, in naming these heavenly forces, is speaking about "gods" in verse 3. In any case, the psalm understands these beings as fashioned by God and thus controlled by God (v. 4). To be sure, the psalm suggests that the heavens are *not* an object of veneration, as in the rest of the ancient world. Rather, God is "above the heavens" (v. 1). The heavenly bodies only give testimony to the greatness of God (cf. Ps. 19:1) who created them.

Like the Priestly account of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, this psalm is concerned with the role of humanity within the hierarchy of the cosmos. In the Priestly account, humans are created last, on the sixth day, in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). So they represent the Deity in the world, as a proxy for God's cosmic governance. In both Psalm 8 and the Priestly creation account, humans do not have dominion on their own merit, but because of God's overarching authority. Humans have a derived authority. The psalm shows that God has set humans to govern, just as God has set God's glory above the heavens (v. 1) and established the moon and the stars in their proper places (Ps. 8:3).

The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* renders the first and last verses of the psalm "O LORD, our Governor, how exalted is your Name in all the world." Today, it is difficult for many listeners to hear the epithet "governor" as anything but a political designation. Most modern English translations opt for different terms like "Sovereign" or "Lord." Yet for liturgical use the

language of governance should be preserved whenever possible. Calling God the governor reminds the community of the way divine authority supersedes any political authority on earth. Moreover, the repetition of phrase "our governor" in the refrain of the psalm situates all human forms of domination. All governance, governors, and government pales before God's ultimate authority.

Throughout the history of interpretation of this psalm and Genesis 1:24–31, the description of the dominion of humanity has generated extensive comments. In many homiletical and liturgical uses, Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8:6 are removed from their context. Doing so often gives the suggestion that humans, having been granted dominion from God, have impunity to act as they see fit, to exploit natural resources for their own benefit without concern for the world.

The context of each of these passages does not support such readings, however. Genesis 1:24–31 suggests a domination of the world that does not include the killing of animals for food. The human diet described in Genesis 1:1–2:4a is entirely vegetarian. Likewise, the description of humans' dominion in Psalm 8 is encircled with the idea of God as governor. Humans govern the world, but God governs them.

So the question for both ancient and modern communities reading this text is this: What kind of governor is God? If human governing reflects God's government, then we are disabused of any notions of destruction and exploitation of the world's resources for our own good. Certainly, our governing should deny the domination of one group of humans over another. Indeed, God's government is of a different sort altogether. In God's government, the most powerful one is the one who gives up power. God's government reverses the expectations for who is valuable and important. As disciples of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we participate in the paradox of the glory of God. All authority that we have derives from the one who gave up his authority. In our worship of the triune God, we acknowledge and affirm the incompressibility of God's majesty.

JOEL MARCUS LEMON

## Trinity Sunday

### 2 Corinthians 13:11–13

<sup>11</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. <sup>12</sup>Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

<sup>13</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

#### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Taking leave of those to whom one is close is never easy, whether in person or in writing. The last words that one says or writes in such a situation are hugely significant. They echo long after the parting, lingering in the air and in the heart until the next chance to communicate. In letters, over the composition of which one can take time to reflect, the words attain a particular level of significance.

The words with which Paul concludes his Second Letter to the Corinthians are thus hugely important, offering an insight into the final message with which Paul wishes to leave his addressees. They are especially noteworthy, given they come at the end of a letter in which Paul has sternly rebuked the members of the church in Corinth, a church riven with disputes and divisions, which has failed to heed the gospel Paul has shared with it.

Rather than repeating his admonitions and instructions, however, Paul closes his letter with a series of exhortations and encouragements to the body of Christ in Corinth. The tone is conciliatory, seeking not only to rebuild harmony between himself and his audience but also to further harmony between the rival factions in Corinth. The end of the letter is thus shot through with messages encouraging and invoking the pursuit of peace.

The first encouragement that Paul sounds in this peroration, however, is “Rejoice” (13:11, NIV; NRSV “farewell”). Despite all the earlier censuring and warning, Paul concludes by exhorting the members of the church in Corinth to celebrate.

The only reason for this is that there is good news, the good news of Jesus Christ, to which the letter of Paul has earlier repeatedly adverted.

Here is a place where Paul’s lesson might usefully be learned in the present. Our churches are regularly factionalized and divided, whether over matters trivial and local or issues major and churchwide. The fallout can be deep and painful, and such disunity can only cause pain and harm to the church and its witness. Yet here too, the first instruction of Paul would be to rejoice, to follow the words of the writer of this week’s psalm in declaring: “How majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1).

This is not a facile instruction, an encouragement to a shallow and escapist joy that is temporary and unfulfilling, that evades the real grief and injustice of conflict, within the church or between the church and others. Rather, Paul’s command inspires us to bring forth true joy, that profound joy from God that touches every part of our being, from the surface to the deep, framing all our earthly delights and sorrows.

When Paul moves to further instruction, he offers words aimed at building up the Christian community in Corinth from its current fractured existence to a new integrated whole. Thus he charges the Corinthians to mend their ways, to encourage one another, to agree with one another, and to live in peace. He assures them that the God of love and peace will be with them.

There are three connections that seem important at this point.

The first is to the way in which Paul's instructions are directed at the community *as a whole*. In contrast with the way in which our culture—and, at times, our churches—can tend toward a highly individualistic approach to the Christian life and to Christian instruction, Paul speaks to the church at large. This involves a renewal and edification both of the community as community but also of each member as individual by the community. Even in the church, community is not just a collective noun but a collective task. We are to take care of each other and watch out for each other.

The second is to the way in which Paul's instructions are not directed toward a peace that represents a mere cessation of hostilities. Again, in our own culture and churches, it can be all too easy to declare peace or agreement on the surface without ever embracing genuine reconciliation. For Paul, peace is more than this; it is not simply a cease-fire, but a new alliance, a fresh commitment, a striving together and moving forward in which there is deep common purpose born of and forged by the gospel. Such a peace is not as the world gives, but a peace that only the Lord can give.

The third is to the way in which Paul's instructions are followed by a resolute affirmation that the Corinthians will not be left on their own in their journey, but that the God of love and peace will be with them. In situations of rancor and division, whether in Corinth or around us, the mending of divisive ways is only possible because the God who is in Godself love and peace will be there with us and for us, recreating and restoring our relationships in order that the community of God might reflect God's own peace and love.

God not only desires the community to be at peace. God is the God of peace: the source, meaning, and goal of peace. God promises peace; even in situations where reconciliation seems humanly impossible, it becomes possible by the power of God. Certainly we are called to participate in the work of peace, but it is a work that God inspires, God effects, and God concludes.

Paul ends his letter with a threefold blessing that has passed into common usage in the

church. The reference to the grace of Jesus Christ indicates the sheer unmeritedness of the work of reconciliation between God and humanity effected in the cross of Jesus Christ. The reference to the love of God illuminates the ground of this reconciling work in the being of the God whom Paul has already described as the God of peace and love. The reference to the communion of the Holy Spirit highlights the new work being done by God, tearing down barriers between people and creating and sustaining fellowship, both vertically, between the believer and the Spirit, and horizontally, between believers.

What Paul offers here, then, is a compressed summary of the way in which God achieves salvation and of the way in which Christians experience that salvation. The gifts of grace, love, and communion lie at the heart of the Christian life and of the Christian church, in Corinth and today. All these blessings are said to be with *all* the Christians in Corinth, without exception—in spite of the troubles and difficulties in that church, let alone the idolatry and transgressions of its members. Then as now, the promise and presence of God are true for all believers without exception.

This blessing has played a significant role in the history of Christian reflection on God, particularly in discussions of the Trinitarian identity of God. In this respect, it is similar to a text in this week's passage from Matthew: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Some scholars have sought in such passages to find the doctrine of the Trinity, though such attempts seem premature, given that neither text details the relations of Jesus Christ, the Father, and the Spirit in the way that the doctrine does. However, the 2 Corinthians text does clearly articulate a distinction between the three spiritual gifts invoked and their givers, and in this way serves (and did serve) as a starting point for further reflection on the Christian experience of the being of God as triune. Thus at least the roots of that doctrine are nonetheless clearly discernible here.

PAUL T. NIMMO

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

These few verses from the very end of 2 Corinthians are included in the lectionary readings for Trinity Sunday for a clear reason: Paul refers to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in his benediction of this congregation with whom his relationship has often been tense and stormy. These few verses heard alone veil a letter charged with stern admonitions, strong emotions, and Paul's defense of his ministry. Were congregations to hear all of 2 Corinthians 13, they would likely be surprised by the juxtaposition of Paul's warnings to the Corinthians, his clear call for self-examination in regard to faithfulness, his claims to be using his God-given authority to be severe with them, and then these words of prayer for peace, love, and communion (*koinōnia*).

Perhaps the most important learning from these verses is not to convince ourselves that Paul had a concept of the Trinity anything like the postconciliar confessions that shape later theology. The most important word for us comes precisely in the juxtaposition of Paul's blessing in the name of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and the tension he experiences with these early Christian communities.

Paul knows something very important: without God's Holy Spirit, our *koinōnia*—community, communion, fellowship—is impossible. In the power of God's Holy Spirit, it is possible for us to live together in our differences. Indeed, it strengthens and grows us as Christ's body to live together in our differences.

Even though not all of 2 Corinthians 13 will be read on Trinity Sunday morning, the tension between Paul and the Corinthians (or at least some of them) is implied even within our short passage in verse 11. A string of present imperative verbs reminds the Corinthians and us that much continues to be required of us. The verbs carry the weight of urging folks to continue to rejoice, to continue to put themselves in order as if God's Holy Spirit served as a metaphysical chiropractor to realign this out-of-sync group. They are to continue to be either comforted or admonished by Paul, or both. They are called to share the ethos of Christ and to live in peace. The triune blessing is not somehow to fall upon

them, but rather to infuse them and empower all they will yet become.

How much vitality we might identify within our own congregations if we imagine God's unfathomably vast and intimate life flowing among us! The blood of Christ is the blood of God, infusing and enabling our very life.

Krister Stendahl identified the "love" extolled by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 as a kind of elasticity—the amount of stress and strain a community's relationship could take without breaking. Love must stretch to hold us together precisely when we *feel* least inclined toward it. Love then is a commitment and a gift rather than a feeling. It is this love, twice mentioned in these verses, that is with us, often unrecognized. Love is the field in which we exercise our lives together with all those whom God has called. The Corinthian correspondence highlights the difficulties of such a life together—then and now.

It is hard not to think of all the ways in which our contemporary lives have become disordered, fractious, and out of order. It is so much easier for us to cut off those with whom we disagree by ignoring them, deriding them, or simply moving on. Am I thinking of politics? Racism? Faith communities of various sorts? Am I thinking of family life, marriage, partnerships? Am I thinking of our relationships with medical personnel and retailers? Yes. We go quickly to where we think our best advantages lie. Remaining in the field to rumble it out with someone, being vulnerable to learning that may challenge us or even hurt us, seems a quaint notion.

Yet it is precisely the notion Paul claims as part of the life of a people who are one body. In 2 Corinthians 4:1–2, Paul offers a model for how persons within communities of the faithful are called to live and work together. Again in a few words, Paul highlights our reality: God's mercy and continued engagement with us surround us in our interactions. There is an egalitarian quality to commending the truth before the conscience of everyone: all are called to speak the truth together, all to hear, and finally all to live and act in the sight of God.

It is in such a life that we find ourselves realigned as one body, sharing the peace of God. It takes continuous practice, for each new truth we learn opens us to more and more. God casts a much bigger net of love than any of us can spread out on our own.

What does this look like in real life? In a gripping book, *Enrique's Journey* by Sylvia Nazario, the author tracks people who are desperately trying to escape from Central America, such as one young man who is determined to find the mother who left her family to seek work in the United States. Nazario does not sentimentalize the lives of those left behind, life in the States, or even the life her lead character has to rebuild with his mother when he finds her. Love is the driver, the call to make painful decisions with long-term consequences. It is also the field in which human beings try to live and grow.

A secular, citizens' group launched in 2016, Better Angels, works to bring self-acknowledged "red" and "blue" Americans together to find ways to talk together. It is demanding work, but the goal—to help us hear each other as real people with deep concerns and passions, as people who are capable of love and growth, though we differ in how to express these things—is more than worthy. It is essential.

Our country cannot belong to just one group. The challenges that face us require all of our best thinking, all of our financial contributions, all of our goodwill. How might we speak our truth remembering that we are blessed by

God to do so, blessed by God to love even in the midst of tension?

Our congregations likewise are in sore need of that kind of open and honest speech that Paul uses *and* for which he also provides checks and balances in 2 Corinthians 4. The only conformity Paul calls for is to give up the assertion of being right, in order to hear other voices.

If your congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper, that is what you are doing. Communion, the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit of God, is grounded in God's blessing in the heart of our differences. God invites us to this feast and gathers us at table so that we all receive, together. We are all in need, together. It is a feast shining with the light of cross and resurrection, reminding us, in-forming us really, that God never gave up on life for God's creatures. Neither do we give up on each other when the going gets tough.

That is what Paul models with this generous benediction by God's power for God's argumentative and self-seeking people—and that would be all of us, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes not! Patiently receiving the blessing of realignment (or a "blood" transfusion), in order to be Christ's body, requires us to hear each other's truth and by small steps learn to embrace one another when we agree *and* when we do not, knowing that God's entire being has chosen to love us and "those others" for the restoration of the world.

SARAH S. HENRICH

# Trinity Sunday

## Matthew 28:16–20

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The Revised Common Lectionary follows the Western liturgical calendar in designating the Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday. In Year A, the readings express this theme most clearly in Jesus’ command to baptize “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19, CEV). Luke’s references to Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ in Acts 2:38; 8:16; and 10:48 show that in the first century baptismal customs differed. Paul’s response to reports about factions among the Corinthians based on baptismal formulas indicates that sharp divisions could occur (1 Cor. 1:10–17). With the development of Trinitarian theology and the creeds that gave voice to it, Matthew’s language became standard for Christians everywhere—even if the shaping of the creeds also gave rise to sharp divisions that continue to affect the body of Christ.

In light of these divisions, one approach to preaching on the Gospel for Trinity Sunday in Year A is to focus on what holds Christians together and affirm the need for continued ecumenical dialogue. In the first century, the phrase “in the name of” defined the limits and boundaries of groups, both in Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural settings.<sup>1</sup> Though Matthew 7:21–23 suggests the community from which the Gospel of Matthew emerged experienced divisions over who evangelized “in the

name of the Lord,” Jesus’ words in the day’s Gospel directed his followers to expand their boundaries, not limit them.

The epistle for the day helps us see this, for in his farewell and benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:11–13, Paul uses Trinitarian language to emphasize the attributes of God that inform his appeal for order, unity, and peace within the Corinthian community: “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” He is concerned with defining the community with respect to the nature of God and not with marking its boundaries.

This accords with the immediate context of the baptismal saying in Matthew, Jesus’ last words to the disciples. The center of the passage is commonly referred to as the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20), a saying that opens another way into preparing a sermon on the day’s Gospel. Its core is “making disciples.” The means of carrying it out are “baptizing” and “teaching.” By placing this commissioning at the end of the Gospel and representing it as Jesus’ last words, the author of the Gospel of Matthew emphasizes the importance of the commission; and by declaring that the disciples are to teach obedience to everything Jesus had commanded them, the author sends readers back through the Gospel to discern just what it is Jesus taught.

1. See Lars Hartman’s article “Baptism” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:583–94.



Matthew introduces the passage with the observation that when the disciples saw Jesus they “worshiped him,” noting, however, that “some doubted” (v. 17). These are not two different groups, believers and doubters. For in Matthew many stories about the disciples link worship and doubt. This is borne out in its account of the stilling of the storm (14:22–33) and the description of the disciples as “you of little faith,” in reference to Peter in 14:31 and to the other disciples in 6:30, 8:26, and 17:20. Significantly, in all of these passages Jesus encourages those of little faith; he does not belittle them. Later the disciples who doubted when they saw the resurrected Jesus were among the disciples who were sent to make disciples. Thus, it should be reassuring for both the preacher and the congregation that worshipping on Trinity Sunday does not require full understanding of Trinitarian theology. Worship that recognizes the grace, love, and communion that define the triune God is more than enough to sustain us both to be and to make disciples—but there is more.

Jesus’ very last words in the Gospel for the day express similar reassurance, for they exhort the disciples, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20). Jesus’ presence in the community of faith is an important theme in Matthew, as the first prophecy of Jesus’ birth, drawn from Isaiah 7:14, makes clear: “‘They shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (1:23). In 18:20, Matthew applies the notion of Jesus’ abiding presence again, this time in a saying that appears only in Matthew: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Referring to Jesus as Emmanuel also introduces us to Matthew’s first interweaving of terms that foreshadow the baptismal formula of the Great Commission, for in 1:20–23 we see the work of *the Holy Spirit*, the prophetic word of *the Lord*, and the naming of *the Son*. Matthew uses a similar configuration at the baptism of Jesus in 3:13–17: the *Spirit* of God and God’s *heavenly voice*, declaring, “This is my

*Son*, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17). It appears yet again in the account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (4:1–11), where *the Son* of God, led by *the Spirit*, overcomes temptation by his worship of *the Lord [his] God*.

Finally, in 12:18–21 Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1–4 and 9, using terms similar to the ones in the Great Commission and linking them to a mission to the nations: The Lord declares, “Here is my *pais* [“servant” or “child”], whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put *my Spirit* upon him”—to “proclaim justice to the Gentiles” and in whose name “the Gentiles will hope.”<sup>2</sup> This list of references to three (varying) terms for the identity of God is not meant to suggest Matthew has a fully developed notion of the Trinity, but only that its author is aware of multiple ways God engages the world—and how this informs and sustains discipleship.

Matthew first mentions discipleship immediately after Jesus’ baptism and temptation, with Jesus saying to Peter and Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (4:18–22). Then, after a brief summary of Jesus’ first tour through Galilee, Matthew introduces the teachings that define the essence of discipleship, the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7). “The cost of discipleship” is high in Matthew, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes clear in his classic study of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>3</sup> Instructions on how to fish/make disciples follow in chapter 10, based on Jesus’ compassion for the crowds (9:35–38). Then in chapter 13 he explains the parables of the kingdom of heaven, concluding that as scribes “trained for the kingdom of heaven” they must “bring out of [their] treasure what is new and what is old” (13:51–52). In chapter 18 Jesus teaches the disciples about organizing and administering a community of disciples, but here only after teaching them about true greatness in the kingdom of heaven, which means becoming humble like children, welcoming others in his name, not harming little ones, and forgiving brothers and sisters

2. The NRSV uses “Gentiles” in 12:18 and 21 and “nations” in 28:19, though the same Greek word appears in all three verses.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

from your heart—all of which complement the themes of the Sermon on the Mount.

Making disciples grows out of being disciples. Matthew makes this clear by placing the

Great Commission at the end of the Gospel, *after* his readers (we) have learned what discipleship means.

OLIVER LARRY YARBROUGH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Many churches throughout the world read Matthew 28:16–20, one of the most well-known passages in the New Testament, on Trinity Sunday. Its inclusion in the lectionary, no doubt, was to provide congregations the opportunity to reflect on and affirm the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. This is apt and fitting, as this special Sunday follows on the heels of Pentecost, where we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the gathered community, which is recounted in Acts 1:8 and 2:1–4. Like these passages in Acts, Matthew 28:16–20 affirms the continuing and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit following Jesus' ministry and the truth of Jesus' promise that his followers will not ever be left alone. It is, for today's churches, a resounding confirmation of God's enduring presence in a world full of challenge and change, in a time when many churches find themselves navigating new and uncharted territory.

As then, so now, change is underway, and no one can predict precisely what the church will look like in the future. The current growth of churches in the Global South signals an important historic shift, the movement of the center of Christianity from Europe and North America. These constant shifts and changes remind us that the church is formed, shaped, and informed by human diversity and diverse contexts. At the same time, steadily declining church attendance in the United States, and tensions within denominations and between so-called conservatives and progressives underscore particular challenges facing American congregations.

Despite the transformations and challenges, wherever the church is found, it will continue to be called to live into the gospel it proclaims and to address the human need in its midst. Given the many crises that congregations today face, including climate change, hunger, disease,

violence, economic and racial injustice, global inequalities, and more, the scale of human need is easily overwhelming. Matthew's assurance of God's presence at the close of the Gospel is a much-needed and very welcome word. A sermon on any of one of these individual crises in light of God's assurances would be worthy topics of discussion at the pulpit. Moreover, considering the increase in isolation and loneliness today, a preacher would do well to reflect on Jesus' assurances of companionship.

Written in a time of great challenge and change itself, the Gospel of Matthew was likely composed in 80–85 CE, in the wake of the Jewish War, an event that culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The Gospel of Matthew can therefore be seen, in part, as a response to the cataclysmic losses and devastation incurred by the protracted conflict. Thus this text provides an opportunity to discuss current conflicts—personal, ecclesial, or national—and the role of the people of God in mitigating the suffering. Matthew does not directly address the war or the religious upheaval it generated, but he does place great emphasis on the church's identity and future, an idea that is worthy of thinking about anew. No wonder it is this Gospel that includes Jesus' instructions for how the church (*ecclesia*) is to live. Writing in the aftermath of war, Matthew aims to share the gospel and shore up his readers' certainty about the future.

Thus in his concluding verses Matthew confirms the promise of Jesus' continuing presence with his disciples. The narrative's ending, incorporating what is commonly known as Jesus' Great Commission, is best interpreted in relation to all that precedes it in the narrative: The pericope's reference to Galilee fulfills Jesus' sayings in 26:32 and 28:7; the focus on Jesus' authority in heaven and on earth echoes 11:27;

Jesus' closing words, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age," recalls the Gospel's early reference to Jesus as "'Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'" (Matt. 1:23); his directive to the disciples to "make disciples of all nations" is reminiscent of earlier references to what the whole world will hear and remember (24:14 and 26:13). Matthew's ending thus prompts the reader to recall the entire Gospel as the story of divine presence in a world besieged by the powers that would oppose it.

In so doing, this text pushes us to ask, What in our current context acts as an opposing force to the manifestation of divine presence? More importantly, the text urges us to think about the role of the church in the manifestation of God's continual presence. Just as Matthew's birth narrative includes Herod's brutal massacre (2:16–18), the story of Jesus is immersed, from beginning to end, in violence and injustice. Yet, as Matthew insists, it is rooted in the profound truth of God's ongoing presence, especially in the trenches of human existence. As churches today seek to respond to the overwhelming needs they face, Matthew reminds us that there is nowhere that eludes God's presence. The people of God are never alone as they seek to live into the gospel in the midst of the world.

Matthew's conclusion (28:16–20) is also very much forward looking, functioning as a bridge to what Matthew broadly envisions as the future. In sharp contrast to the Gospel of Mark's original ending, Matthew notes that the disciples did indeed follow Jesus' instruction that they go to Galilee to meet him after the resurrection (28:16, cf. 26:32; 28:7; and 28:9–10). Even when the disciples see Jesus, where some "worshiped him; but some doubted" (28:17), the emphasis focuses less on their response and more on Jesus' authority to commission them to the work for which he has prepared them. His postresurrection appearance thus serves as the validation of all he has done and taught,

concluding Jesus' ministry even as it points to the future activity and leadership of his disciples.

Matthew not only underscores Jesus' authority (v. 18); he also illustrates the authority that Jesus confers upon his disciples, such as the curing of disease and sickness (10:1). Most importantly, in 18:18–20, Jesus establishes a circle of followers to carry out his vision for all the world. The one whose name means Emmanuel, or "God is with us" (1:23), is also the one who, having fulfilled the promise to meet the disciples in Galilee, will always be with them, "to the end of the age" (28:20). So this text offers an ideal moment to reflect upon the church's identity as part of Jesus' inner circle, to whom he gives such great power and authority. Indeed, this passage also provides an opportunity for the wise preacher to reflect upon the disconnect between Jesus' great promises and our lived lives, in which loved ones and friends still suffer from and succumb to disease and illness.

This conclusion to Matthew's Gospel serves as a powerful word for Trinity Sunday. As churches throughout the world celebrate the triune God, they acknowledge both the intrarelatational nature of the Divine and the relational nature of God's interaction with the community of faith. The name Emmanuel emphasizes that God is with *us*, and Jesus' presence is made known where "two or three are gathered" in his name (18:20). Jesus' followers are neither unflawed nor imbued with any authority of their own. They are called, and they are called *together*. The authority they come to inhabit derives only from Jesus, who abides with them. For according to Matthew, it is Jesus who animates and empowers the church in all its diversity. As congregations live into their calling to proclaim the gospel, they may be assured of the divine presence that will remain ever with them, even in the trenches of responding to the world's great challenges.

MARY F. FOSKETT

# Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28 inclusive)

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Isaiah 49:8–16a  
Psalm 131

1 Corinthians 4:1–5  
Matthew 6:24–34

## Isaiah 49:8–16a

<sup>8</sup>Thus says the LORD:

In a time of favor I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you;  
I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages;

<sup>9</sup>saying to the prisoners, “Come out,”  
to those who are in darkness, “Show yourselves.”

They shall feed along the ways,  
on all the bare heights shall be their pasture;

<sup>10</sup>they shall not hunger or thirst,  
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,  
for he who has pity on them will lead them,  
and by springs of water will guide them.

<sup>11</sup>And I will turn all my mountains into a road,  
and my highways shall be raised up.

<sup>12</sup>Lo, these shall come from far away,  
and lo, these from the north and from the west,  
and these from the land of Syene.

<sup>13</sup>Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the LORD has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

<sup>14</sup>But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me.”

<sup>15</sup>Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.

<sup>16</sup>See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

## Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

People living in deep despair and grief often lose their ability to envision a more hopeful future for themselves. Isaiah 49:8–16a is addressed to the Israelites who had been carried off to exile in

Babylon and forced to live under their political enemies. They lost their land and their homes. Their temple was destroyed. They assumed that God had abandoned them as punishment for

their failure to obey the covenant. The prophet, however, announces otherwise. God has not left them. Rather, the Israelites have underestimated the God of Israel. The prophet offers several images of salvation that encourage the Israelites to plan for the future and remain hopeful.

Isaiah 49:8–16 immediately follows a Servant Song, one of a series of prophecies about a Suffering Servant of Yahweh (Isa. 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13–53:12). As such, Isaiah 49 is bifurcated in terms of gender: it moves from an image of the male Suffering Servant at the beginning of the chapter to that of the suffering maiden, Zion, at the end. Zion, another name for Jerusalem, was frequently imagined in the biblical texts as a female (Hos. 2; Jer. 3:8; Isa. 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 62:11). With the destruction of Judah, Zion was imagined as a woman bereaved of her children (Isa. 49:21). In the passage for this Sunday, God assures Zion that she and her children have not been forgotten.

The prophet asserts that though the Israelites may be in exile, this is part of God's larger plan to make Israel a light to the nations, a channel for God's salvation to reach to the ends of the earth (49:6). The Israelites may have been tempted to passively wait for God to act. Instead, God invites the Israelites to take initiative and move themselves out of their difficult situation. To the prisoners, God says, "Come out." To those cowering in darkness, God says, "Show yourselves" (v. 9). This is puzzling, because prisoners cannot usually free themselves, and people who feel trapped in darkness cannot simply move into the light upon command. Perhaps the prophet is thinking of people who have been so beaten down, so demoralized, that they prefer the dark, safe place that they know to the risk and challenge of light and freedom. To the Israelites, and to all of us who are afraid, God offers liberation and help.

God also encourages active participation. Use your voice. Come out of the darkness. Tell your story. Resist injustice. Do not allow yourself to be imprisoned by guilt, fear, and shame. It is scary to move into this future, so the prophet assures the Israelites that God will care for them just as sheep are cared for by a loving shepherd. God will give them food and water,

protect them from the wind and sun, and lead them on a smooth road (vv. 9–11).

The prophet also encourages the Israelites to rejoice in the Lord's compassion and to trust in God's ability to return them to the promised land. Here, however, the radically hopeful promises for a better future hit the wall of grim present reality. Zion was having none of this: "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me" (v. 14). To put it more colloquially, the people reply to God, "We are in exile and are miserable! God must have abandoned us. There is no salvation in our future. Do not give us false hope."

God responds to this cry of despair and hopelessness with a powerful image: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" (v. 15). The answer to this powerful image and rhetorical question is obvious. Women who have experienced the uncomfortable, even painful fullness that results when feeding is delayed would have said, "No, we cannot forget!" Women who find after delivery that they love this child more than they ever imagined possible would have said, "No, we cannot forget." So also God's love is equally permanent. God, the mother, cannot forget. God, the mother, will not abandon.

This is a relatively rare example of a feminine image for God in the lectionary. Liturgical language for God, probably reflecting the patriarchal context of the Scriptures, has generally been overwhelmingly male. Words like "King," "Lord," and "Father" can suggest that God is more like a man than a woman, and that women do not reflect the image of God as much as men do. This text offers the opportunity to help people begin to expand the metaphors they use to speak of the Divine. God can be compared to a nursing mother, just as God can be compared to a loving father. Both metaphors say something true about God.

Envisioning God as a mother as Isaiah does here offers a profoundly intimate picture of the Divine as sheltering, nurturing, and giving birth to a child, then feeding and caring for it. It goes against our assumption of a distant, mysterious, demanding, and punishing God. God is both immanent and transcendent, both approachable and mysterious, but the distant God may ironically seem safer and more familiar. A God

who is too close for comfort brings her own challenges. We may find that she is as fiercely protective as a dangerous mother bear (Hos. 13:8). We may find that we cannot escape the intensity of her love (Ps. 139:1–18).

Isaiah 49, interestingly, is paired in the lectionary with Psalm 131, which also offers a feminine image of God as a mother of a weaned child. They provide interesting metaphors for different moments in a relationship with God. A nursing child needs the mother for survival and is often eagerly, even desperately, seeking the food she can give. A weaned child takes solid food and is no longer dependent on the mother's body for sustenance. The weaned child is content to sit on the mother's lap without need of anything but her comforting presence. Similarly, there are times when people feel desperate need for divine intervention and help, and other times when they are content to be in a relationship with God based more on gratitude and delight. Both are good and appropriate at different stages of life and spirituality.

The Gospel lection continues the themes of divine immanence, intimacy, and tender care. God is compared to a heavenly father who feeds and clothes his children. Fathers have

usually been the ultimate source of these necessities, since they have done the paid work and “brought home the bacon.” When it comes to the actual purchase, preparation, and delivery of food and clothing, mothers have been the more common providers.

In a final image of perpetual care and connection in the Isaiah text, God says that the Israelites have been inscribed on the palms of God's hands. Imagine God stretching out her palms to the tattoo artist, to be repeatedly pricked with a needle that would spell out the name of God's own people. God would never forget that tattoo, any more than a mother would forget the infant that she carried and birthed and nursed and raised to independence.

God with a tattoo, God as a mother, God as a father. These metaphors can never capture the fullness of God, but they speak profound truth about the God who will never forget, never give up, never sever the tie to God's people. When it is difficult to hear good news because we feel abandoned, when we cannot sing for joy, when despair and grief make it difficult to envision a hopeful future, these intimate images remind us that we belong to God, who will never let go.

LYNN JAPINGA

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Isaiah's vision of return from exile articulates a future vision of God's restoration, rooted in God's record of faithfulness from the past. One way to think about these various points of location is to organize them into the categories of character, time, and place.

Scholars have long pointed out the difficulty of precisely identifying the Servant in Isaiah 49. Rather than an obstacle to be overcome, this ambiguity opens up the possibility of multiple and diverse connections with the Servant in the text. When we locate ourselves in the role of Servant, emulating (but not erasing) traditional identification of the Servant with Israel, we gain a greater clarity on the process and nature of Christian vocation. Vocation is rooted in the strong verbs of God's activity: I answered you,

I helped you, I kept you, I gave you (Isa. 49:8). These verbs authorize the Servant's purpose: “to establish the land, to apportion the heritages,” that is, to transform into the kind of shepherd-like leader that eventuates in the homecoming of the people who will return from the suffering of their exile. Just as the word “vocation” is rooted in the verbs “to call” or “to speak,” so Christian vocation rises from the voice or call of God.

From the vocation of the Servant flow extraordinary promises—so extraordinary that the heavens and the earth will break into song (v. 13)—for the transformation of the people under the Servant's compassionate charge. According to this passage, when we find our true vocation, not only does God use us to

accomplish more than we imagined but also we experience deep joy. This is as true for individual disciples as it is for the church. When the fruits of our vocation contain neither transformation nor joy, we do well to reexamine our calling for signs that God might have us be elsewhere.

Though the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 49 is unidentifiable, the church has seen in the Servant a prefiguration of Jesus. If we follow this reading, Jesus as the Servant brings hope to a sometimes beleaguered church that is apt to echo the words of Zion in verse 14: “the LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” The promises of restoration (49:8ff.) assure the people of God not only of God’s steadfast love, but God’s commitment to change our present into a different future marked by joy, compassion, and community. Yet even here, the poetry allows for more than just God’s established family to find their liberation in God. The prisoners and those who are in darkness (v. 9) receive a word of liberation and inclusion. Isaiah’s hope seems to outsize even the best dreams of God’s faithful. A sermon could recall points in a local congregation’s history when God’s blessings surpassed the church’s expectations. A different sermon could challenge notions of supersessionism, offering a basis for interfaith generosity through God’s blessings that expand beyond the bounds that we recognize or establish.

Another point of connection is Isaiah’s notion of time: past, present, and future. The future is the focus of Isaiah, as evidenced by the sheer number of promises that reside there. “They shall feed,” “they shall not hunger or thirst,” “I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up,” “I will not forget you,” and others. The future is bright and promising. It can be enlightening to examine the life of a congregation to see whether we spend as much time speaking about the future as we do longing for the past or worrying over the present. The future is where possibility resides.

This does not mean that the past is unimportant. Indeed, we can trust that future because of what God has done in the past: “I have answered,” “I have helped,” “I have kept” and “given” (v. 8). However, the past is not where

the church lives. Rather, the present is where most of the activity of human agents occur. It is where the Servant announces good news to the prisoners and those in darkness (v. 9). The volume of human activity certainly pales in comparison to God’s movement in the text, reflecting the order of power in the relationship between God and human beings. Even so, the importance of human activity need not be minimized. Human activity is essential to Isaiah’s vision, precisely because God calls forth human proclamation and compassionate leadership. The effects of this activity are multiplied exponentially by God’s power. Our faithful work in the present is not insignificant. It is validated and vindicated by God’s covenantal faithfulness.

These shifts between past, present, and future are not entirely linear. This selection from Isaiah ends in verse 16 with yet another assurance brought to mind from God’s activity in the past: “I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” Rather than completely disentangling past, present, and future, we can observe God’s movement through time: the past to remind us of God’s promises and the future to assure us of where God is leading, both edifying us to live with joy in the present in spite of our limitations.

A connection with place is also evident in the text. The Servant is assured that the covenant between God and the people for a homeland is secure. God will “establish the land,” and “appoint the desolate heritages,” which may be a reference to the ruined temple and other places of historic significance to the people. This specificity challenges the church to hear in Isaiah more than simply a heavenly “spiritual” vision detached from the particularity of land and place. Isaiah has in mind a specific land, a specific location, with specific people. The promises of God are realized in the life of human beings. While the images allow for strong metaphors of healing and homecoming, those metaphors are rooted in physical nourishment and restoration: food, springs of water, comfort, compassion, and a child feeding directly from her mother’s breast. The promises of God are more than metaphor. These promises must be seen in history, but can also grow beyond it. Particularity is important.

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## The Spirit Bestowed on Us by God

If one reads the extraordinary examples of glorious virtues which have shone forth in individual Christians, one can only be deeply moved by them. What an ardent love of God it was that caused Christians to hasten toward the most horrible martyrdom rather than be terrified by it when confession of their dear Savior was at stake! How fervent was the love among themselves when they not only called one another by the endearing names of “brother” and “sister” but also lived in such a fraternal fashion that they were ready, if need be, to die for one another! . . . The condition of the early Christian church puts our hot-and-cold condition to shame. At the same time it demonstrates that what we are seeking is not impossible, as many imagine. Hence it is our own fault that we are so far from deserving similar praise. It is the same Holy Spirit who is bestowed on us by God who once effected all things in the early Christians, and he is neither less able nor less active today to accomplish the work of sanctification in us. If this does not happen, the sole reason must be that we do not allow, but rather hinder, the Holy Spirit’s work. Accordingly, if conditions are improved, our discussion of this matter will not have been in vain.

Phillip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 84–85.

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A strong connection point is with the Lord’s Prayer, which speaks of daily bread, forgiveness, and God’s will that is done “on earth,” that is, here in this specific place.

While Isaiah’s concept of place is strongly rooted to the specific, the church can also find strong encouragement to embrace the places where congregations are sent. While mission has come to be known in recent years by its Latin root, “sending,” perhaps another way to view our vocation is through the metaphor of “homecoming.” What would it mean to view the lands where we have been sent as concrete signs of God’s covenant to the people? How would we better care for those lands if we viewed them as the actual place to witness and anticipate God’s healing blessing? What would it mean for our

warming planet and many of our neglected communities if, instead of viewing Isaiah’s vision of homecoming as “somewhere else,” we anticipated it where we actually live?

A final point of connection is with the pathos of God. This text offers a strong antidote to the Marcionite heresy expressed by many Christians who speak of the Old Testament God as wrathful and judgmental, while the New Testament God is loving and compassionate. Here in Isaiah, God is compared to a breastfeeding mother, the human being least likely to forget her child. This personal, compassion-driven God, who does not forget, is good news to anyone who feels forsaken or forgotten. We have been inscribed on the palms of God’s hands (v. 16).

ANDREW FOSTER CONNORS



## Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28 inclusive)

### Psalm 131

<sup>1</sup>O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.  
<sup>2</sup>But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a weaned child with its mother;  
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.  
<sup>3</sup>O Israel, hope in the LORD  
from this time on and forevermore.

### Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

The lessons for this Sunday, Psalm 131 and Isaiah 49:8–16a, call upon images of motherhood to encourage the community to trust in God. Together, these texts invite us to hear the voices of women in prayer and to imagine God as mother.

**A Woman's Prayer and Exhortation.** A prayer lasting just three verses, Psalm 131 gives us a glimpse into how an ancient Israelite woman would have expressed her faith. The text begins with the psalmist's portrayal of her own disposition (Ps. 131:1–2) and concludes with an address to the community, a call for Israel to rely on Yahweh (v. 3).

Initially, the psalmist characterizes herself by saying who she is not. She does not have a proud heart (v. 1a). Neither does she look about with haughty eyes (v. 1a). She does nothing to suggest that she has an overblown estimation of herself (v. 1b). The verb that NRSV translates "occupy myself" (*hillakti*, v. 1b) comes from the root *hllk*, meaning "to go, walk." Thus, another viable translation would be "to walk around constantly doing things." The psalmist presents a picture of someone moving here and there,

striving for unachievable greatness. To be clear, that is *not* who she is. Instead of frantically running around, she rests. Instead of aggrandizing herself, she remains quiet.

The psalmist describes her calmness in verse 2b with a metaphor, one that hinges on the difference between a weaned and a nursing child. Children who have not been weaned will, of course, root around restlessly when with their mothers. They quiet down only when they are nursing and have found nourishment. Weaned children, by contrast, can sit at ease in their mothers' laps. Since the child no longer relies on her body for basic sustenance, the child can benefit from her presence in other ways, by embracing her and being embraced by her, by learning from her and receiving other forms of support. So, while the imagery in verse 2b conveys a sense of maternal care, it also suggests a certain level of maturity on the part of the child.

It is worth noting that verse 2b presents many difficulties for translators.<sup>1</sup> Some have suggested that the words of the psalm come from a mother's mouth.<sup>2</sup> Other translations do not go so far in identifying the psalmist as the mother of "the weaned child." Despite these challenges, most

1. See Melody D. Knowles, "A Woman at Prayer: A Critical Note on Psalm 131:2b," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 385–89; and Brent A. Strawn, "A Woman at Prayer (Psalm 131:2b) and Arguments from Parallelism," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 124 (2012): 421–26.

2. Strawn, "A Woman at Prayer," 421. See Marianne Grohmann, "The Imagery of the 'Weaned Child' in Psalm 131," *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium* 238 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 513–22.

scholars agree that this psalm does in fact give us access to a woman's voice in prayer, however fleeting and incomplete.

What starts as a prayer ends as an exhortation, one that stands at odds with the patriarchal milieu of the text and with the psalmist's own self-description in the previous verse. This quiet, reserved woman lifts her voice to address the whole assembly of Israel in verse 3. She encourages everyone to wait on Yahweh, to hope (*yahel*) in God day in and day out. By appending this word of encouragement to her prayer, she suggests that her own disposition—her calmness—can serve as an example for the community to follow. Her demeanor is an expression of her trust in Yahweh.

**Imagining God as Mother.** Metaphors open up possibilities, creating networks of associations that can surprise and challenge us. Psalm 131 introduces the metaphor of the psalmist as a weaned child. The reader wonders, if the psalmist is the weaned child with its mother, who is its mother? The psalm does not say, at least not directly, yet, as the psalmist affirms her quiet reliance God in verse 3, we are invited to imagine God as mother in the metaphorical world that the psalm creates.

Picturing God as a mother might be unfamiliar for some, accustomed as we are to masculine imagery for God throughout the Bible and the Christian tradition. Yet maternal imagery for God appears in Isaiah 49:14–15 as well, where Israel is not the weaned child, but the nursing child, and Yahweh, Israel's God, appears as its mother.

The prophet asks, "Can a woman forget her nursing child?" The answer, of course, is no. It is painful for a mother not to nurse her child. Her body will not allow her to forget the fruit of her womb. So it is between God and God's people, here described as "Zion" (Isa. 49:14). In the world of images that the prophet creates, God is a mother with engorged breasts longing to nourish the ones whom she loves.

**Women's Voices Today.** To be sure, there are challenges in highlighting the ways that these texts employ feminine imagery. Because

the texts reflect the patriarchal milieu in which they were written, they essentialize womanhood as motherhood. Of course, the experience of motherhood is not universal among women today, nor was it ever. Moreover, the mode of femininity found in Psalm 131 is problematic. It idealizes meekness and quietness as a woman's primary virtue. The text could also be used to tell women to content themselves with their marginal status and never to be concerned with "things too great" or "marvelous." In other words, one could read this text as a warning for women not to transgress the social boundaries that limit them to the sphere of child rearing and other domestic duties.

Yet these texts also work against their patriarchal milieu in subtle but powerful ways. It is important to recognize that the prophet's description of Yahweh as a nursing mother pushed against predominant notions of masculinity and femininity within the ancient Near East. Likewise, in Psalm 131, even as the text affirms an ideal of femininity as quiet and reserved, it upends these ideals by having a woman's voice address all of Israel, encouraging Israel to trust in Yahweh.

Thus we must proceed with care when utilizing these texts in worship. We should highlight their unique portrayals of God and women, while not reinforcing the patriarchy endemic to the ancient world from which the texts emerge. Indeed, we must break down the patriarchy that still exists today. On this Sunday especially, we should not shy away from referring to God as mother. Such references appear in the lectionary readings. We should be sure that women lead worship in all roles, just as a woman leads the worship of God in Psalm 131. This service—and all services for that matter—should include music and hymns composed by women. Many mainline denominations have produced indices of hymns with texts and/or music written by women. So programming this music is not hard. Of course, we should elevate the voices of women within the liturgy. Throughout the centuries, these saints have guided the church's understanding of what it means to trust in God. Women are leading the community of faithful today.

JOEL MARCUS LEMON

## Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28 inclusive)

### 1 Corinthians 4:1–5

<sup>1</sup>Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. <sup>2</sup>Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. <sup>3</sup>But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup>I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup>Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

#### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

What does it mean to be a servant of Christ and a steward of God's mysteries? For the apostle Paul, facing a church in Corinth that was beset by different factions, sexual immorality, and downright idolatry, and that scrutinized and questioned his authority, this is no hypothetical question. Rather, it is a question posed in a volatile and pressing situation where there has been a direct challenge to his ministry. So too for those working in and for churches today, this same question is often posed in the heat of pressure and conflict. Thus now—as then—it is a question that demands clear answers, and Paul's guidance in this regard is as relevant for us as it was for the Corinthians.

Before turning to Paul's insights, however, it is important to acknowledge that Paul's language here is not without conceptual freight. The language of servanthood typically bespeaks a hierarchical relationship in which obedience is demanded and independence of thought, initiative, and action is discouraged. Even where the basic idea is softened into the more gentle language of stewardship, there are attendant risks of disempowerment and dehumanization looming close to the conceptual surface. This language demands careful handling, therefore, in order to make clear the very precise way in which it is here being used by Paul, and the way in which our inherited concepts of servanthood and stewardship are reformed and transformed in the process.

The first connection that we might draw between Paul's time and our own time relates to the one to whom the service is to be addressed, Jesus Christ; and to that over which stewardship is to be exercised, the mysteries of God. This latter term refers to the revelatory events of the life of Jesus Christ, particularly his crucifixion, in which the secret of the reconciliation of God with human beings is hidden. In view, then, is no earthly master or lord, but the eternal Lord of creation. The good news is that this one is the mediator between God and humanity.

The one whom we are called to serve is thus the same one who emptied himself and became a slave for us (Phil. 2:7). Herein lies a radical subversion of our notions of the hierarchy that is at the center of the concept of service: we do not inhabit an ordinary Lord-servant relationship, but a relationship without parallel or likeness. Our Lord, who is the greatest of all lords, comes as a servant who is least of all. Hence our conventional notions of what it means to be a lord or to be a servant are shattered by the event of Jesus Christ and the reversal that event brings. As fuller exploration here might develop, it is precisely in our *service* of Jesus Christ that there arises—paradoxically—our own true *freedom*, a radical freedom of rehumanization and empowerment.

A second connection between the text and our world relates to the qualities considered desirable in a steward. In almost proverbial fashion, Paul

declares that stewards must be trustworthy, but this deserves further unpacking. On the one hand, a steward is an important figure, a valued functionary with major responsibility and even privilege. This indicates that as stewards we are answerable for the mysteries of God, having the honor of representing these mysteries to the world. What might this mean for Christians today, to be stewards of such wonders? It would mean proclaiming the gospel in our particular contexts, building up the church and each other in faith, and living a life of witness to the glory of the God revealed in the gospel.

On the other hand, a steward has such responsibility only as is delegated to them. They have no significance or authority of their own, but only as they are the presence and representative of their superior. Their success or failure is measured by only one thing: the extent to which they are held trustworthy by their superior. For us, that means seeking in all things fidelity to the gospel—not our own advancement or reputation—in obedience to Jesus Christ. Our stewardship is not about our wisdom, our eloquence, or our effectiveness, but only about our *faithfulness*.

A third connection between this letter of Paul and the church of today relates to the evaluation of Christian servants. Paul is under no doubt that he is there to serve the church in Corinth. He is also quite clear that his service in this capacity is not to be judged by that church. As he reflects upon his ministry, he declares that the only authority qualified to judge his performance is the Lord, that same Jesus Christ whom he is serving as steward. The time of that judgment will be at the return of that Lord.

Thus, even though the language of accounting and judging in this passage is related to the drama of the courtroom, the irony is that the courtroom to which Paul is referring is no earthly courtroom. We will be judged only by the one who sends us and whom we serve. The judgments of others—whether our congregations, colleagues, friends, or families—are only

penultimate. Moreover, we will not ultimately be judged *by ourselves*. We can be our own worst advocates and our own worst critics, and neither is salutary or helpful in the Christian life. There is, of course, a place for self-reflection—just as there is for friendly or collegial evaluation!—but it is neither the first place nor the last place.

The key lesson of this passage is that our service of the gospel will be judged instead by Jesus Christ. This should strike us as both challenge and comfort. It is a challenge because our steward is no ordinary earthly superior, but the Lord of heaven and earth, who rules over all things and who will bring to light the hidden secrets of our hearts and our invisible deeds in the darkness. However, it is also—and to a far greater extent—a comfort, because we will not ultimately be judged by the collection plate or by the attendance roll, by our worst enemies or by our anxious consciences. Instead, we will be judged by the one who gave himself for us, and who justifies us so that we do not need to justify ourselves. This note of grace is made explicit in this week's reading from Isaiah: "The LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. . . . I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:13, 16).

On the day this Lord returns, those stewards who have proven themselves to be trustworthy will receive commendation from God for the faithfulness of their service. In the interim, we are freed from the need to judge (or be judged) by the Judge who was judged in our place.

This lesson is crucial, not only for those in ordained ministry, for whom it may regularly be necessary to go against the grain of popular culture, or to offer a word of criticism that raises hackles, or to venture a prophetic intervention in the face of injustice. It is also crucial for all Christian believers, who are just as surely called to be faithful stewards of the gospel mysteries, yet who also labor in the same, sometimes harsh and inhospitable fields, with the same dedication and selflessness.

PAUL T. NIMMO

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

In a recent essay, David Brooks asks the question “What holds America together?” He turns to Walt Whitman (1819–92), who had every reason to be pessimistic about the future of his beloved, war-torn country. Despite noting that there was never “more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States,” Whitman still had hope. That hope was that the shared commitment of the American experiment dedicated to the “full flowering” of each person might be rediscovered in a religious and social, even “mystical” purpose. Or faith.<sup>1</sup>

Whitman and Brooks sound a bit like Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians, both longing and demanding that they look to the mystical center and faith in God’s purposes to shape their lives, to shape even the way they imagine the world and its realities. In these few verses from 1 Corinthians, Paul wove together three threads: the mysteries at the heart of a Christian’s life, trustworthiness in sharing those mysteries in life together, and the ways in which judgment can undermine our confidence when we worry about the wrong judges.

This passage from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians follows three chapters in which Paul called the Corinthians to a new life as people both sanctified and still in process of being sanctified. The fractiousness and many divisions among the Corinthians, springing straight out of their patronage culture, ran counter to their new reality as one body of Christ. Their lives as sanctified members of Christ’s body deteriorated when their shared commitment to God’s gifts was no longer at the center. Competition for status, value, and honor was a way of life among the Corinthians and most of the ancient Greco-Roman world. In this letter, part of a web of communication among early Christian communities in and around the newly rebuilt Roman city, competitive strife was front and center. It remained so for decades, at least. Corinthian fractiousness was still a matter of note when Clement of Rome wrote in about 90 CE (*1 Letter of Clement of Rome*, esp. section 46).

Paul insisted that the “mystical center” of the Corinthians’ lives was Christ and the “mysteries” of God (1 Cor. 4:1). Paul used the word *mystērion* relatively frequently in 1 Corinthians, precisely as a reminder of the flawed self-perceptions in the Corinthian worshiping communities. In 1 Corinthians 2:1, 7 Paul reminds his hearers that such mysteries, now proclaimed, come only from God. The gift of God’s wisdom is not understood, let alone meted out, by “rulers of this age,” whose ways are not God’s ways. No human can become a patron of these mysteries, of God’s wisdom, handing it out to the highest bidder, so to speak. A Christian is a servant of the mysteries or an overseer at best. Self-aggrandizement through claims to be the franchised distributor of God’s mysteries is the gravest of errors and makes one “nothing” rather than something (13:2).

In none of our sociopolitical arrangements in the United States are we an overtly patronage culture, but we know something about the importance of “who you know” and the attractions of power. In every arena—be it our country, congregation, family, own self-understandings, schools, or Wall Street—we are smitten by leaders who we believe “can fix it,” forgetting that all human “fixing” is limited in scope and effectiveness. Choosing and allying with such leaders offers an old, old model when we forget the “mysteries” at the center of life and our call to steward them. Paul reminds us that such a human model of leadership in which the “fixer” draws us into a web of obligation subverts trustworthiness. Neither self-aggrandizement (forgetting that one is a steward of God’s reconciling work) nor allegiance to such a person is our human calling.

Trustworthiness for all of us requires clarity about oneself, thoughtfulness about what is needed for repair or restoration, and willingness to subordinate one’s personal popularity to a greater cause. It also requires the ability to see and take whatever small steps are possible toward human thriving, no matter who takes notice and judges.

1. David Brooks, “What Holds America Together,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/opinion/what-holds-america-together.html>.

Paul knows about trustworthiness at such a deep level it almost takes us by surprise. For assemblies of worshipers to be commendable (11:2, 17) is for them to abide in the great mysteries of God's love, freely given, of God's Son given to live among us and for us, of God who created all that is calling us all home. When the body is divided by claims to better truth or more powerful leaders or an inside position vis-à-vis God, it no longer discerns the body. It despises the gathering and humiliates others (vv. 22–29).

Trustworthy stewardship of our central truths and values allows all of us to hope to be a part of this body of people. It allows those who have been penalized again and again for marginalized status to continue to hold us all accountable to the truths we affirm. Trustworthiness in stewardship of such truth is at the very heart of a community. When folks are no longer able to trust that values are held in common trust, there are dire repercussions. Recall the deep grief and anger over betrayal by those particular Roman Catholic priests and bishops ordained to protect their people. Keep in mind the traumatized lives of those abused by parents and relatives they trusted to have their well-being at heart. In such cases, “the center cannot hold,” and the community crumbles around its wounds.

“Whose judgment matters to us?” we should always be asking. If it is God's judgment that matters—not because we are frightened of it but because we are in a relationship of love and respect with God—that love and respect is at the center of our lives in a complex and diverse world. The regard for self and others founded on

God's love of each of us and all of us is the very heart of life together in all our relationships.

Paul writes to move the Corinthian believers to a richer, deeper discernment of how Christ-discipleship speaks to them in their complicated world of diverse social and economic realities. He reminds them of the privilege of belonging to Christ. This is a privilege that fills us, as Brooks says, “with gratitude and humility. That privilege unites us across division and disagreement. It calls forth great energies.”<sup>2</sup>

Can acknowledgment of the privilege, the sheer mystery of belonging to God through Christ, unite us in these days? As an epistle lectionary reading appearing only some years here or late in Epiphany (Epiphany 8, Year A), Paul's words may seldom be on our preaching radar. Yet what a powerful reading for emphasizing who Jesus is and how lives bound up in his are different from the lives we often unconsciously live. This passage is powerful proclamation that Jesus the Lord is at the very heart of our lives, neither distant nor neutral. We are empowered and called (sanctified and in the process of being sanctified) to be trustworthy stewards of the great love and mercy God has given us in Christ. Paul reminds us that our lives are truly judged not by the passing standards of the day but only by Christ. Thus, he concisely opens to us our need for repentance, that is, for turning to God again from a world that draws us away.

How does the God-given privilege of being loved and called into new life shape our imaginations today?

SARAH S. HENRICH

2. David Brooks, “In Praise of Privilege,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/opinion/privilege-gun-control-rally.html>.

## Proper 3 (Sunday between May 22 and May 28 inclusive)

### Matthew 6:24–34

<sup>24</sup>“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

<sup>25</sup>“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ <sup>32</sup>For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

<sup>34</sup>“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The Gospel for the day consists of a proverbial saying about serving two masters (Matt. 6:24), sage advice on discerning what matters (vv. 25–33), and an admonition to live in the present—whatever trouble it brings (v. 34). Wisdom sayings like these are drawn from life, distilled to express the essence of experiences humans share and readily recognize. Consequently, they can be as contradictory as human experience. Consider, for example, the proverb “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” and its opposite, “Out of sight, out of mind.” They can both be “true,” but not at the same time or in all instances. Sometimes the meaning of a saying, proverb, or maxim is clear; at other times it is more like a riddle to be solved. So making sense of wisdom sayings requires determining the moment to which they apply and who is authorized to give them voice. Preaching on the

Gospel for the day will require consideration of just such questions, especially with regard to sayings that can be either deeply profound or profoundly empty, depending on who says them, to whom, and when.

In Matthew 6:24a, Jesus’ proverb states categorically, “No one can serve two masters,” clearly implying one must choose. The sharply contrasting phrases hate/love and devotion/despising in verse 24b suggest the choice reflects one’s core values and demands a deeply personal commitment, like the one Jesus makes when tempted in the wilderness (chap. 4). In the application of the parable in verse 24c, however, the choice Matthew presents is not between God and Satan, but between God and wealth. For Matthew, that is, the choice is ethical as much as theological.<sup>1</sup> Strikingly in this saying, the right choice regarding whom one should

1. The Greek text preserves the Aramaic term *mammon* in the application of the parable, which for some ancient readers may have suggested a semidivine agent, like Satan in chapter 4.

serve is so obvious that neither Jesus nor Matthew states it: one *must* serve God.

The sage advice about worrying in 6:25–34 intensifies the choice in the proverb about the two masters in verse 24, surprisingly applying it to basic human needs—what you will eat, and what you will drink, and what you will wear (6:31). How can this be? After all, it is one thing to say, “Do not worry about amassing wealth” (as Luke does), and quite another to say, “Do not worry about where your next meal is coming from,” as Matthew seems to say.<sup>2</sup>

Preaching on these texts is one of those occasions requiring discernment regarding the moment to which the proverb or sage advice applies and who is authorized to give it voice. A sermon on this text will certainly address the “worries” of the congregation to which it is delivered, whether they derive from a crisis or from the general anxieties of contemporary life. However, a sermon attuned to the profundity of Jesus’ teaching in the passage will also be concerned with how a congregation might come to appreciate the “worries” of those whose worries literally concern what they will eat, what they will drink, and what they will wear. The preacher will also tread carefully when the congregation is composed—in whole or in part—of those who have real concerns about what (or when) they will eat. In such cases, the admonition not to worry will sound profoundly empty, if it does not address solutions.

Matthew offers several approaches for preparing a sermon on these issues. The immediate context for approaching them is the Sermon on the Mount, the first and deepest exploration of discipleship in this Gospel. Taking this context into account, the preacher might begin by exploring the language Matthew uses, looking for similarities and differences between key terms and phrases. How, for example, might one compare “worrying” (6:25) and “striving” (v. 33)? Is one healthy and the other not? Is there a point when “striving” becomes “worrying”? In exploring this, it might help to look at other translations—“being anxious about” (RSV) rather than the NRSV’s “worrying about,” for example. Similarly, is “striving” different from

“seeking” (KJV, RSV), “setting your heart on” (NJB), or phrases such as “being concerned with,” “attending to,” or “focusing on”? Unfamiliar translations can sometimes give a familiar saying new meaning.

Another approach to the Gospel for the day might lead one to a sermon on the premise that undergirds the whole of verses 25–33: God cares for creation, and it works. Birds do what birds do; flowers do what flowers do; grass does what grass does; and it is all more glorious than Solomon, a king renowned for his splendid living. The passage also presumes that humans are part of the created order, and that God knows we need food, drink, and clothing every bit as much as the birds and lilies. Life may be more than these necessities, but the necessities are part of life, and God provides them. It is worth noting that the Greek term for “life” here is not the generic term *zōē* but the word that connotes what makes one fully human, *psychē*, something like “life-soul.” It is that life that is more than food, drink, and clothing. *Worrying* or *being anxious* about it does not do much good; but considering one’s life-soul in the context of God’s care for creation does, just as looking at (and relating to) the birds of the air and the lilies of the field does.

Related to this approach is the statement in verse 33 that “all these things” will be given to those who “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” This raises significant questions related to fundamental theological issues well beyond the scope of these brief comments. Within the Gospel reading for the day, however, it is important to note that Jesus says basic needs will be given to those who strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He does not say God will provide “the abundance of possessions.” Similarly, the day’s Gospel ends with a matter-of-fact acknowledgment that both today and tomorrow will have a sufficiency of troubles. They too belong to God’s created order in Matthew’s Gospel. There is no suggestion that striving first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness will change that.

Still, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes promise a reversal of the

2. For Luke’s treatment of these passages, see 12:13–31 and 16:1–13.



created order for the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. The Gospel of Matthew holds both views in tension, acknowledging the mystery of God's providence.

Whatever approach one takes to the Gospel of the day, the preacher will do well to note that Matthew returns to food, drink, and clothing in the last of the parables of judgment in chapter

25, the parable of the Sheep and Goats. Bearing this parable in mind will ensure that exhortations to strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness will call the comfortable to be concerned not only for their own life-souls and basic needs, but also for the needs of those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison, and strangers in the world around them. God's righteousness demands nothing less.

OLIVER LARRY YARBROUGH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:24–34 falls in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, considered by many to be both Jesus' most well-known and most challenging instruction. The Sermon on the Mount lays out Jesus' vision of life lived according to God's vision for the world, which Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven. In the midst of what many churches refer to as Ordinary Time, or the period in which Sundays are numbered in order, Jesus' instruction serves to guide Christians through the ins and outs of the everyday.

The teaching that unfolds in Matthew 6 may seem particularly personal for today's readers. Whereas some might initially think that Jesus' words about marriage and divorce in the Sermon on the Mount constitute his most personal teaching, that may very well not be the case. For in today's world, money and financial status are frequently regarded as at least as private a topic as marriage. In congregational contexts, where money often takes on moral, ethical, and theological meaning, some of the most difficult and awkward Sundays are those that address financial stewardship, annual pledges, or capital campaigns. Talking about money in the church requires people to weigh and consider everything that they value and why.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus probes his hearers about this very question. Earlier in Matthew 6, Jesus cautions his listeners to refrain from storing up treasures on earth, which can be easily lost, and instead invites them to "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19–21). The contrast that Jesus draws

between treasure on earth and that in heaven is inherently a question of values. Rather than valuing the material goods that humans tend to prize most, Jesus exhorts his listeners to focus on the things of heaven, which cannot corrode or be taken away.

The contrast between those that are lasting and those that corrode clearly plays on the distinction between earth and heaven that the Sermon on the Mount assumes. Indeed, the entire Sermon rests on the conviction that the values that correspond with God's vision for the world often oppose conventional wisdom and common understanding of what is desirable and good. Matthew's Gospel argues that those who would be disciples of Jesus are to align their lives with his teaching. For as 6:24 contends, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

This is a difficult word to receive in the current context, when so many of the world's economies and global markets place unquestioned priority on profit making and the acquisition of wealth. By suggesting to his hearers that they must choose between "two masters," Jesus makes use of the metaphor of enslavement, well known in antiquity and utilized by the apostle Paul. Here the metaphor deftly illustrates how we are owned by what we most value and serve. As Matthew's parables of the Hidden Treasure (13:44) and the Pearl of Great Price (13:45–46) suggest, the things to which we devote ourselves indicate a lot about who we are.

Acquiring wealth takes time, intention, and sustained energy. What we possess and how we spend our time over the years reveals our deepest commitments and values. In our time, the metaphor may be even more apt than it was in the first century. Money plays a determinative role in contemporary society, and global markets drive so much around the world that shapes whether and how human beings and environments will thrive or wither. Jesus' word is clear. If we serve money, we are not serving God. This direct statement opens up a space to explore both what serving money and what serving God look like in the current context. Moreover, this passage urges us to ponder the difficult question of how the people of God can have a correct relationship with money and wealth.

Clearly, the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus' teaching reveals, stands in sharp contrast to the values and ways of the world. The way of God that Jesus embodies is to be manifest in individual, as well as collective, thinking and doing. For Matthew, it is an order of being that realizes the vision and will of God for all creation, not for God's own sake, but for the good of everyone and everything that is a part of it. Unlike the present age in which we now live, the future will see the complete and unfettered realization of God's way on earth, a way fully revealed in Jesus' teaching and ministry. As Christian discipleship is about imitating Jesus, so is it also about recognizing and living out the way of the kingdom that he teaches and embodies. Discipleship involves more than following specific instructions. It is about embracing the vision that generates Jesus' teaching, in the first place. Discipleship for Matthew is the practice of life itself.

The implication of Jesus' teaching in 6:24 comes to full flower in what follows in 6:25–33 and 34. The topic at first appears to be that anxiety, with the repeated motif of worrying woven throughout the pericope: “do not worry about your life” (v. 25); “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (v. 27); “And why do you worry about

clothing?” (v. 28); “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’” (v. 31). The concerns that appear in the passage are understandable ones about meeting the basic needs of life, specifically food, drink, and clothing. These are, as all parents know, a baby's very first needs, and they are what all humans depend on for the entirety of their lives. In other words, the concerns that Jesus raises here are fully known to all his hearers.

It is not unusual for readers to take from this passage a sense of shame for worrying at all about such matters and to interpret Jesus' words as a long way of saying, “Don't worry, be happy!” In light of verse 32, “For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things,” the passage is commonly read as an admonition to trust God and a rebuke against those who do not. However, Jesus frames his teaching in a way that reveals a different meaning behind his exhortation to not worry. The key to understanding his meaning occurs when Jesus says, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (v. 33).

The kingdom of God (or heaven) pertains to a new way of being, not just for individuals but also for communities and congregations. Jesus uses the second person plural in 6:33. Striving first for the kingdom of God is a communal act and a collective commitment to the vision that Jesus teaches and realizes in his own being and doing. To seek the kingdom of God is to long for the way of God and to reflect it in our individual and collective lives. Jesus' exhortation not to worry is a call to living as a community that cares for one another and embodies the wisdom and values outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. It is in light of such understanding that we should read Matthew 6:34: “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.”

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