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# Ash Wednesday

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Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

Psalm 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Isaiah 58:1–12

## Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

<sup>1</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—  
<sup>2</sup>a day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
    in ages to come.

.....  
<sup>12</sup>Yet even now, says the LORD,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
    <sup>13</sup>rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the LORD, your God,  
    for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
    and relents from punishing.  
<sup>14</sup>Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
    and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
    for the LORD, your God?

<sup>15</sup>Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
    <sup>16</sup>gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
    assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
    even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
    and the bride her canopy.

<sup>17</sup>Between the vestibule and the altar  
    let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.  
Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,  
    and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
    a byword among the nations.  
Why should it be said among the peoples,  
    ‘Where is their God?’”

## Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Joel 2 is set against a chilling description of crisis in Israel. An unprecedented locust plague has struck the land (1:4), laying waste to fields and orchards, depriving the Israelites of food, and robbing them of produce for sacrificial offerings. The destruction is total. With storehouses depleted and granaries empty, joy and gladness fade from the temple (1:16) and the people are left to mourn (1:8, 13). Whether the locust plague is to be understood as an actual event or an extended metaphor for Israel being invaded by a foreign army (see 1:6) is a matter that is left unsettled.

In either case, the trauma pictured in chapter 1 is but a prelude to a greater problem addressed in chapter 2: the coming of the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord refers to a future time when God will decisively intervene in history to right wrongs and restore justice. While not necessarily signaling the end of the world, this is a day of reckoning in which God's enemies are condemned and God's people are vindicated. But the coming of this day is not always good news for Israel; if faithless and recalcitrant, Israel itself will face judgment.

With this latter possibility in view, Joel calls Israel to attention. The blowing of a trumpet (2:1) serves to warn Israel that the approaching Day of the Lord will be one of doom and darkness (2:2). The following verses (vv. 3–11), excluded from the lectionary reading, describe in some detail what this day will be like. It will be a time of cosmic and ecological upheaval. Fires will rage (v. 3), armies will ravage (v. 4), the heavens and earth will tremble (v. 10), and even the sun and moon will cease to shine. It will be a "terrible," or fear-filled, day (v. 11).

Though imminent, God's judgment is not inevitable. The prophet calls the people to return to the Lord with fasting, weeping, and mourning (v. 12), behaviors associated with humility and repentance. In the Old Testament, acts of penitence can be initiated by individuals, but here the process is clearly communal. The whole congregation is called to assemble, young and old alike (v. 16). So urgent is the task that even a soon-to-be bride and bridegroom should interrupt their nuptials to take part (v. 16). The

goal is clear: by rending their hearts (v. 13), Israel hopes that God might "have a change of heart" (v. 14, my trans.), relenting from bringing judgment against the people.

Importantly, the motivation for the people's repentance is not the threat of "fire and brimstone." Rather, it is the promise of God's compassion. In verse 13, the prophet quotes God's self-revelation at Sinai (Exod. 34:6), a text loaded with evocative imagery that describes God's loving nature. The term translated as "merciful" (*rakhum*) is derived from the Hebrew word for "womb" (*rekhem*), suggesting a feminine metaphor that underscores God's motherly love for Israel. The phrase "slow to anger," which more woodenly means "long of nose," is related to a Hebrew idiom that describes anger in terms of one's nose burning. If the nose is a wick that ignites God's anger, then affirming that God is long of nose is another way of saying that God does not have a quick temper. The word "steadfast love" (*hesed*) connotes tenacious loyalty within a covenant relationship, and "relents from punishing" carries with it a willingness to forgive. Taken together, the portrait of God given in Joel 2:13 stands in sharp contrast to popular (mis)conceptions about the God of the Old Testament as an angry, vengeful deity.

If verse 13 offers a rationale for why the people should repent, then verse 17 offers a rationale for why God should forgive. Not only is forgiveness consistent with God's character, it is also vital to God's international reputation. If God were to fail to show mercy to God's own people, the nations would mock God's heritage (Israel) and would derisively jeer: "Where is their God?" Thus, while the experience of forgiveness is highly personal, it also has a public dimension insofar as it bears witness to the world about God's gracious disposition and fidelity.

Starting with Joel 2:18 (absent from the lectionary selection), the language abruptly shifts from the actions required of Israel to the promises offered by God. In response to Israel's repentance, God will remove the locust plague (v. 20), allow agricultural abundance to return (vv. 19, 24), and repay Israel for all that was lost (v. 25). The section concludes with an

## God Invites Us to Peace

“We pray you in Christ’s stead to be reconciled to God”; that is, to be friends with him, no longer to stand in terms of distance; for every habitual sinner, every one that provokes Him to anger by his iniquity, is his enemy: not that every sinner hates God by a direct hate; but as obedience is love, so disobedience is enmity or hatred by interpretation . . . and therefore the reconciling of these [wicked works], is to represent them “holy and unblamable and unreprouvable in his sight.” Pardon of sins is the least part of this reconciliation; our sins and our sinfulness too must be taken away; that is, our old guilt, and the remnant affections, must be taken off before we are friends of God. And therefore we find this reconciliation pressed on our parts; we are reconciled to God, not God to us. For although the term be relative, and so signifies both parts; as conjunction, and friendship, and society, and union do: yet it pleased the Spirit of God by this expression to signify our duty expressly, and to leave the other to be supposed; because if our parts be done, whatsoever is on God’s part can never fail. And secondly, although this reconciliation begins on God’s part, and He first invites us to peace, and gave His Son a sacrifice; yet God’s love is very revocable till we are reconciled by obedience and conformity.

Jeremy Taylor, *The Doctrine and Presence of Repentance*, vol. 10 of *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor, D.D.* (London, 1828), 71.

affirmation of God’s presence with and commitment to Israel (v. 27), as well as the promise that God’s spirit would be poured out on all flesh, whether young or old, male or female, slave or free (vv. 28–29). The promise of God pouring out the spirit on all flesh is cited later by Peter in Acts 2.

Between the promises laid out in verses 18–20 and 24–29, there is a series of imperatives directed at the land (v. 21), the animals (v. 22), and the children of Zion (v. 23). Though different in their formulations, the dual refrains of “do not fear” (vv. 21, 22) and “be glad and rejoice” (vv. 21, 23) bind this minisection together. The picture offered is of all creation joining in fearless praise of a God who has freely forgiven. Though the Day of the Lord is one of doom and darkness, the reality of God’s compassion points to the possibility of peace and harmony.

Two of the lectionary texts paired with Joel 2 echo the sentiment behind the prophet’s call to “rend your hearts and not your clothing” (v. 13). In Psalm 51, a penitential psalm, the worshiper beseeches God for mercy with striking candor. In acknowledging that burnt offerings do not automatically wash away his sins, the psalmist affirms that the sacrifice acceptable to God “is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Ps. 51:17). Similarly, in Isaiah 58 the prophet calls

for a different type of religious fast, one that consists not of outward displays of mourning (Isa. 58:5), but rather of loosening the bonds of injustice, freeing the oppressed, and caring for the hungry and homeless (vv. 6–7, 10). Neither Psalm 51 nor Isaiah 58 implies that outward religious expressions are meaningless or unnecessary, but both underscore that the most meaningful external actions are those that manifest an internal change of attitude. A similar dynamic is true of Ash Wednesday: the imposition of ashes on the forehead is meant to make visible a believer’s repentant heart.

When heard in a broader canonical context, Joel’s appeal to God’s self-revelation at Sinai (Joel 2:13) comes into sharper focus. As a paradigmatic expression of God’s merciful character, Exodus 34:6 is cited in various biblical contexts. In Psalm 86, an individual prayer for help, the psalmist prays Exodus 34:6 back to God (Ps. 86:15) in the hope of urging God to be who God promised to be in a moment of anguish and despair. In Psalm 145, the psalmist prays the same words, but this time as part of a longer litany of unfettered praise. In Jonah 4:2, the prophet cites Exodus 34:6 as the reason he originally resists his call to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel’s archenemy. Jonah, like Joel, knows that the Lord’s compassion and

readiness to forgive extend to all who would sincerely repent. For Jonah, the Lord's compassion and readiness to forgive are an astonishing truth that challenges his narrow view of divine mercy;

for Joel, God's compassionate and forgiving nature is cause for hope in the midst of doom and darkness.

RYAN P. BONFIGLIO

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The question "Where is God?" is a real concern. A great calamity is about to befall God's chosen. An army of locusts is about to descend, bringing a day of darkness and gloom. The prophet Joel fears that God's supposedly chosen people might question God's promise. He fears that in the midst of hopelessness, they may question the God of providence, the God of deliverance. Joel fears reality might contradict the theology that promises God's presence. So the prophet promises that this day of destruction can be avoided, but only if God's people repent and return to the Almighty, for God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Hope is provided in God's covenant with God's people, a hope that even now, when all seems lost, promises the people will be spared. Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, in his classic book *Theology of Hope*, have been influenced by passages such as this.<sup>1</sup> Both Joel and Moltmann base their faith on a God who keeps God's promises in shielding the faithful from such holocausts.

Remembering that we are but dust and that to dust we will return, our salvation from the destruction we are told we deserve leads many to a Lenten period of abstention and self-restraint in hope that God's anger toward us would relent. In spite of our inevitable death, a God of covenant and promise safeguards a future that has meaning and purpose, providing a sense of security and tranquility in the midst of invading armies bent on our destruction. However, what do you do when the God of liberations fails to liberate? When, regardless of our repentance, abstention, or self-restraint, we are still devoured by the vicissitudes of life? When God's promises fall short, theology must

explain why the faithful, in spite of their fidelity to the Almighty, nonetheless perish. How do we understand God's promises this side of the Holocaust?

Maybe once God had made promises to the Jews, but did God's mind change? Has the Christian creation of salvation history provided a new chosen: Europeans? Are God's kept promises now exclusively for this new chosen people? Originally, God's promises to the Hebrews were achieved through the massacre of indigenous peoples in the land of Canaan. So, when God promised Euroamericans their own promised land, manifest destiny required the genocide of Native people. The indigenous peoples of Canaan and the United States were deemed to stand outside of salvation history; thus, their eradication was believed to be God's will. The new chosen becomes the invading army that brings a day of darkness and gloom to those deemed outside of the promise. So, when God's chosen (Jews) face persecution and death at the hands of another chosen (Christians), does it mean God chose others to be the new chosen people? Are Euroamerican Christians right when they write themselves into the historical narrative as the New Jerusalem or the New Israel?

Joel may promise deliverance, but even after repentance, destructive armies still descend. To protect God from a guilty verdict for failing to keep God's original promises would require victims to bear responsibility for their predicament, for their own slaughter. My fear about this form of reasoning is that it absolves Eurocentric Christians from complicity with the Holocaust (and all other colonial massacres) by shifting the blame to the Jew (or the colonized) for lacking

1. See Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) and his *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).



faith in the “true” God. The hearers of Joel’s words might very well have rent their garments and hearts. If the army of doom failed to appear, praise God. If destruction came regardless of the prayers offered, then the slaughtered were nonetheless blamed for their unfaithfulness.

The horrors of concentration camps, where Jews were literally reduced to dust in the crematoria, bear a terrible witness to the failure of God’s promises to materialize. A God of promise becomes theodicy’s answer as long as the promise of redemption is continuously delayed. What good is promise if such promises fail to be realized during our existential reality? Divine promises delayed beyond our lives are unfulfilled promises, obscuring a God who falls short. God would be more just if unsatisfied promises were never made. The problem of linking an eschatology to ethics is that praxis can be ignored as the focus remains on some futuristic utopian hope for which the victims of Christianity wait, long after their bones are literally reduced to ashes by ovens. Hope in some pie in the sky becomes the ultimate opiate numbing the pain of the oppressed by securing the oppressor’s grip on a reality beneficial to the dominant Euro-Christian culture at the expense of others.

Hope can be sustained and maintained through faith, a belief that imposes meaning on a lineal progression of history. Hope can be embraced as long as we proclaim knowing how history ends. Because we accept without question an eschatological hope, our focus on a glorious future obscures the repressive reality of the present. What if there is no rhyme or reason to the movement of time?

For those of us who think in Spanish, we recognize that hope (*esperanza*) is derived from the word *esperando*, waiting. To hope in Spanish connotes a sense of waiting. *Esperar*, to wait, does not ensure that what we are waiting for will end up being good or bad. In a real sense, waiting can lead to nothingness. We

who are familiar with deprivation, or grew up in marginalized communities, are used to this. To wait can encompass the eventual arrival of the invading army. Waiting for salvation from invading armies may end with death. Waiting for our prayers and rituals to work can become tiresome. Hence hope, in Spanish, contains this element of the hopeless.

To join white Christians who appropriate passages such as these in Joel so as to embrace the hope of a God of promises would be to suffer from the curse of Eurocentric privilege, which can lead to an overacceptance of the present, an acceptance based on a life filled with God; but what happens when life is cut short? When life is relegated to genocidal oppression, suffering, deprivation, and, yes, hopelessness? Because a life in abundance is denied to those falling short of the white ideal, hope of promises yet fulfilled is problematic for them, and all who are massacred by those who rely on the divine forgiveness of sins that promises hope for eternal life. Belief in a future holds little for those on the margins.

What we notice is that hope in promises that forestall our return to dust, as expressed by the dominant Christian culture, more often than not has led to a false comfort in the present, not in future possibilities. If we are going to insist on hope, let it not be the utopian hope found in “no place” (the English rendition for the Latin word *utopia*). Any hope proclaimed must be tied to a real space and to the now. Because too many bodies of the innocent have piled up to the heavens, the hope of future promises is obscured by the tang of rotting flesh ensnared in the nostrils of God. We should be repulsed by Eurocentric futuristic fantasies based on religious ideologies constructed to provide peace in the midst of massacres caused by invading armies. Instead, we should claim a hope for those on the margins that is not based on unanswerable questions.

MIGUEL A. DE LA TORRE

## Ash Wednesday

### Psalm 51:1–17

- <sup>1</sup>Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- <sup>2</sup>Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- <sup>3</sup>For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- <sup>4</sup>Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- <sup>5</sup>Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- <sup>6</sup>You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- <sup>7</sup>Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- <sup>8</sup>Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- <sup>9</sup>Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- <sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- <sup>11</sup>Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- <sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- <sup>13</sup>Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.
- <sup>14</sup>Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- <sup>15</sup>O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- <sup>16</sup>For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
- <sup>17</sup>The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

## Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 51 is the psalm appointed for Ash Wednesday in all three years of the lectionary cycle, always as a response to the Old Testament text from Joel. The Joel passage begins, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!” (Joel 2:1a). In the twenty-first-century church, trumpets are usually associated with Easter, not Ash Wednesday, and with celebration, not penitence, but here in Joel the trumpets are sounding an alarm (vv. 1–2), an alarm so important that all must hear it and respond: the aged, the infants, even the newlyweds in their wedding tent (v. 16). The Day of the Lord is coming, and it does not look good. The call is to “return to the LORD, your God,” and to “rend your hearts and not your clothing” (v. 13). The response of the psalm is the quintessential plea of Ash Wednesday: “Create in me a clean heart” (Ps. 51:10).

The heart, to the ancient Hebrew population, meant much more than the seat of emotion or even the physiological heart. For the Hebrew people, the heart was considered the core of their humanity—the center of the will and of the intellect, a representation of who they were in their very beings. To pray for a clean heart was to pray to be recreated; even more than a prayer of penitence, it was a plea to be made a completely new and better person.

This psalm is attributed to David in response to the whole affair with Bathsheba and Uriah, but it is probably even more powerful outside of that context. The psalm stands on its own as a plea for a new beginning, a true repentance, a chance to start again. It is more than a prayer for mercy, though it certainly is that (vv. 1, 9, 11, 14). The psalmist does not deny the sin; to the contrary, we read, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). Nor is punishment questioned: “so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment” (v. 4). Throughout the psalm there are an expression of confidence in God’s mercy and forgiveness (vv. 1, 7, 9) and a pledge to live an exemplary new life: “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you” (v. 13) and “my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance” (v. 14).

The trumpet turns up again in the Gospel reading from Matthew, but this time we are told not to use it. Matthew 6:2 exhorts, “Do not sound a trumpet before you”; rather, give alms and pray in secret. The people are to turn to God in private, even in secret, so that the turning is known only to God. This direct and individual relationship is echoed in verse 4 of Psalm 51, “against you, you alone, have I sinned.” This might suggest a homiletical direction a bit different from the typical Ash Wednesday sermon. Certainly, all the texts call for turning away from sin and back to a godly life, but in the Matthew text, the epistle, and the psalm, there is a contrast between an outer, more public life, and an inner life in relationship to and with God (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18, 20; 2 Cor. 6:8–10).

Happily for worship planners, the liturgical possibilities for Psalm 51 practically leap from the page. The text itself can provide a call to worship using verses 10–13 or a confession using verses 1–4. The psalm has been set as a sung confession, and as a Kyrie. Even better might be to sing a metrical or responsive version of the psalm in response to the Joel reading. There are literally hundreds to choose among, ranging from texts by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley to more recent works, such as David Gambrell’s hymn, “Have Mercy, God, upon My Life” and Michael Morgan’s setting of Psalm 51 found in the *Psalter for Christian Worship*. Many of these resources appear not only in English but in Spanish, Korean, Xhosa, and other languages.

There is a variety of anthems that the choir could offer. For example, “The Morning Trumpet,” arranged by Timothy Paul Banks, is a choral piece from *The Sacred Harp* and uses a hand drum in place of a trumpet to call the world to be delivered from sin. Another accessible choice would be “Create within Me a Clean Heart,” written by Alison Adam of the Iona Community and suitable for choirs of all levels. It can be done with a handbell ostinato, or the choir could hum or sing on “oo” while Psalm 51 is read above the choral parts. After the conclusion of the reading, the choir sings in English or in Latin. Larger choirs might sing “Create in Me” by Michael Larkin, a beautiful choral piece

that highlights verses 10–12 of Psalm 51; the motet “Create in Me a Clean Heart (Schaffe in mir, Gott)” by Johannes Brahms is a standard setting of Psalm 51 that is well known in the choral repertoire. Another choral choice would be “Thou Knowest, Lord” from the *Requiem* by Bob Chilcott. This piece reflects on the essence

of Psalm 51, making it a good choice for Ash Wednesday.

Psalm 51 is surely the perfect beginning for the journey through Lent and speaks to and for every one of us in a way that is both exquisitely simple and deeply profound.

DAVID A. VANDERMEER

## Ash Wednesday

### 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

<sup>5:20b</sup>We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

<sup>6:1</sup>As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup>For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! <sup>3</sup>We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, <sup>4</sup>but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup>beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; <sup>6</sup>by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup>truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; <sup>8</sup>in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; <sup>9</sup>as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup>as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

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

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent, a period of forty days in which Christians reflect on Jesus’ life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. As we remember that his death on the cross freed us from sin and death, the hope is that we are also compelled to the act of repentance. Ash Wednesday sets in motion a spirit of deep-seated contemplation and sorrow as we think about the sacrificial act of Jesus on the cross. The season also prompts gratefulness tempered with repentance, lest we boast as we, in our sinfulness, ponder God’s unmerited gift of Jesus. Many Christians honor this time of reflection and seek a renewed relationship with God through the acts of fasting and prayer. The lectionary text for this day highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining a good relationship with God and others despite the trials and tribulations we may experience. The sacrificial work of Jesus makes this relationship possible. This focal text for Ash Wednesday highlights

the importance of remembrance, repentance, and reconciliation.

The designated passage for today begins with a strong exhortation to “be reconciled to God.” A look at the broader literary context, particularly the previous chapter, is warranted in order to understand both the historical context and the author’s instruction. To be reconciled to God means to be put in right relationship with God. Sinful beings are unable to do this on their own. Because of God’s unconditional love for us, God sent Christ to aid in this effort (2 Cor. 5:18). We are able to be in relationship with God, to approach God with our prayers, solely due to God’s grace. For this reason, a proper response is not only repentance, but also to offer this “ministry of reconciliation” to others (5:18) as “ambassadors for Christ” (5:20).

The community in Corinth is undergoing persecution and suffering, but they are encouraged not to “lose heart” (4:16). The psalmist says, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy

cometh in the morning” (Ps. 30:5 KJV). In the same way, Paul urges the hearers of this text to remain steadfast and faithful in the midst of their suffering. They are able to do this because God is with them and will welcome them into God’s “heavenly dwelling,” as “guaranteed” by the Spirit God has given them (2 Cor. 5:2, 5). He supports his exhortation by reminding them about the suffering they knew they would incur in their earthly bodies (5:1–4); but they should not fret, because God has already prepared them to handle it (5:5). Thus, they shall “always be confident” (5:6). As they suffer, they should act accordingly as faithful Christians, not only because their “aim” is to please God, but also because everyone eventually will have to “appear before the judgment seat of Christ” and deal with the consequences of their actions (5:9–10). They are, therefore, without excuse, and have been forewarned.

Paul has provided the community of believers with a great incentive to offer reconciliation to those who persecute them (5:18–20): salvation. Just as Christ suffered in order to bring them back into right relationship with God (5:20), so too must they extend reconciliation to others as they suffer (6:4–5). Not only is their offering of reconciliation to be nondiscriminatory, as was the sacrificial act of Jesus; they are also not to retaliate. “Through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships,” and with the “power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” (6:4–7), they shall receive salvation, which is “now” (6:2). In other words, salvation is already and not yet. This ambivalent state is further expounded as the author says they are “dying . . . [and yet] are alive; . . . punished, and yet not killed; . . . sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; . . . having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (6:9–10). As they remain faithful through their suffering, while offering reconciliation to their persecutors, they have also already obtained salvation, the benefits of which they will experience in full when they are “at home with the Lord” (5:8).

As we usher in this season of Lent, however, a word of caution is in order. As we embark on the liturgical part of the year when we focus on the promise of salvation due to the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, we must also temper the

message of being like Christ in our suffering. The text provides a warning regarding what we do—how we respond—when we suffer by reminding us that each of us will face judgment for our actions “whether good or evil” (5:10). What are the implications of this message for those who seek to defend or protect themselves when they suffer abuse or harm? Would they no longer be in accordance with what Paul suggests here? Will punishment be the consequence for those who seek to protect their bodies, which the author refers to as “the temple of the living God” (6:16)?

What about the temporal issue of when salvation will come? The text says that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (5:17). But when? A person who is suffering *in the now*, in the body that is “away from the Lord,” is still experiencing pain and trauma (5:6). What has been made new? How has their reality changed? Is it theologically sound and pastorally beneficial to preach a message of endurance because of *future* salvation to someone who is *presently* undergoing distress? What are the ethical implications of this message to endure suffering and, at the same time, offer reconciliation to those bent on harm, instead of eliminating various forms of interlocking oppressions, which they have the power and the means to do?

Ash Wednesday, also known as the Day of Ashes, is symbolized by the rubbing of ash on the believer, most often in the form of a cross on either the back of the hand or the forehead. The forehead is the most noticeable location for the ashes, and the most popular. Believers who wear these ashes are not only signifying Christ’s salvific work for themselves, but also readily identifying themselves as followers of Jesus Christ to those who see the ashes on them. The symbol of the ashes is like a blinking light that causes others to zero in on Christians to see how they comport themselves through suffering. Will they behave in a Christlike fashion in the midst of tribulation? If one falls short of this behavior, one’s Christian status may be called into question. Perhaps this is what Paul was trying to prevent: a negative portrayal of Christians by others. Although the text does not state that believers bore the symbol of Christ’s death on

their foreheads in ash, the marks (both physical and emotional) that they bore during their suffering functioned as their Christian identification—especially when they did not seek vengeance.

As we reflect on Jesus' death on the cross and the benefit of being reconciled to God because of it, let us also humble ourselves and repent for our sins. Paul reminds us that we do not have to

go through this process of remembrance, repentance, and the ministry of reconciliation alone, as indicated by the use of the plural pronoun "we": "As *we* work together with [God]" (6:1). On this Ash Wednesday and throughout the rest of the Lenten season, let us set our individual and communal intention on reconciliation to God and to each other.

SHANELL T. SMITH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

This stirring passage from Corinthians begins with the call to be reconciled to God, yet it is difficult to imagine how we could be reconciled to God without first acting on the injunction in Matthew 5:23–24 to be reconciled with others before approaching God. Seeking reconciliation with family, friends, or community members can be challenging, but in many situations, we have the ability to address the issue directly and suggest options for change. Addressing the large-scale social issues that fracture and polarize our societies, however, seems a daunting task. We often feel that our efforts are inadequate and can have little impact on the situation.

It is instructive for Christians to remember that as our faith spread over the centuries, it often traveled hand in hand with European colonialism. Although it is difficult to acknowledge, the spread of Christianity was deeply enmeshed in the economic and political aims of the conquerors. More troubling still, Christian theology was used to justify genocide, the destruction of languages and cultures, the appropriation of land and resources, and the enslavement of human beings. While we rightly celebrate our sacred traditions, we must also acknowledge that we have inherited the legacy of many centuries of violence.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. often asserted that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour for Christians in the United States. More than fifty years later, this is still the case. Despite our moral and ethical commitments, we Christians have not learned to transcend the racial tensions of the society

at large. King articulated his vision of building the Beloved Community—a just and equitable society in which all share in the wealth of the earth, racism and discrimination have been abolished, and conflicts are resolved nonviolently—in a process of reconciliation. Although it may be painful, educating ourselves and accepting our history is a necessary step on the road to developing mutual compassion for and with others, which itself is a precursor to true reconciliation.

In what ways have Christians led prophetic efforts to undo the harms of colonization and dismantle entrenched racism?

The liberation theology movement that emerged in Latin America in the 1960s is known for its insistence that God is on the side of the poor. As theologians, pastors, and activists brought this movement to life, they struggled against the political, socioeconomic, and cultural systems that trampled on the rights of vulnerable people, but they also turned a critical eye toward their own churches. In what ways had their churches sided with the wealthy and powerful, conspiring to ignore the needs of those who were hurting? Perhaps more insidiously, in what ways had the churches justified their actions using distorted theology?

In Brazil, the Roman Catholic bishop Pedro Casaldáliga spent the decade of the 1970s working with the landless peasants and the indigenous peoples in the interior of the country. Although he had long known of the role his church had played in the conquest of the Americas, he became conscientized to its

ongoing neglect of indigenous communities. Bishop Casaldáliga worked with a team of collaborators to compose a liturgy of repentance, the *Missa da terra sem males* (Mass of the Land without Evil). This liturgy is a Catholic mass with an extended penitential rite that explicitly names the harms the church has perpetrated against the indigenous peoples, asks for forgiveness, and pledges to walk in solidarity with these communities in the future. The following year, Casaldáliga wrote a similar liturgy, the *Missa dos Quilombos*, addressed to Afro-Brazilians. These extraordinary liturgies are public statements that model a three-part process of reconciliation: acknowledging the harms committed, seeking forgiveness, and proposing concrete actions toward healing.<sup>1</sup>

In 1985, a group of South African theologians issued the Kairos Document criticizing apartheid and the failure of the church to denounce it. The authors believed that God stood with the politically oppressed and that the churches shirked their moral responsibilities when they advocated a superficial reconciliation. Reconciliation, they insisted, requires repentance and justice. Drawing on this history, Kairos Palestine is a Christian Palestinian movement that advocates for ending the Israeli occupation and calls on all Christians everywhere to engage in nonviolent resistance against injustice and apartheid and to work for a just peace.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, the Society of Friends (Quakers) sponsors the Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples Project, which creates educational resources and offers presentations in educational, church, and civic settings. Paula Palmer, the project's director, researched the Quaker Native American day schools and boarding schools to uncover the church's role in the forced assimilation of Native children and produced a video and presentation on this topic for use with congregations.

In the 2008 documentary *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, filmmaker Katrina Browne tells the story of her New England ancestors, a wealthy and powerful slave-trading family. Ten descendants of the family travel to Rhode Island, Ghana, and Cuba, retracing the steps of the Triangle Trade and reflecting on the healing and transformation still needed. The Unitarian Universalist Association created an extensive discussion guide for use with congregations.

A different, but no less important, vision of reconciliation emerges in the theological exploration of moral injury, especially as it pertains to military veterans. Moral injury is the harm done to one's conscience or moral sensibilities when a person violates core moral beliefs or ethical codes of conduct. For example, in the context of war, soldiers might be directly involved in killing or harming others. As a result, they may judge their own behavior negatively and feel unable to regard themselves as decent human beings, which can cause depression and lead to suicide.

For those experiencing moral injury, learning to trust themselves and others is an important aspect of healing. The Soul Repair Center emphasizes the importance of community in this process and offers training to congregations to help them support veterans struggling with moral injury.<sup>3</sup> Through outreach efforts, preaching, and ritual action, churches can play a role in helping individuals suffering moral injury to be restored and reconnected to the community, to themselves, and to God.

In this Ash Wednesday reading, Paul entreats us to be reconciled to God. The Lenten season gives us an opportunity to reflect on our lives, to evaluate how we are doing, and to work toward reconciliation. For some, this might be a time to reflect on personal spirituality; for others, an opportunity to strengthen interpersonal relationships; and for still others, an opportunity to contribute their efforts to large-scale social

1. The original Portuguese texts of these liturgies can be found on the Servicios Koinonia website: <http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/Casaldaliga/poesia/index.html>. Conrado Berning's 1979 documentary on the premiere of *Missa da terra sem males* is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBNqtK-VF5g>, as are other performances of both liturgies.

2. The Kairos Document is available on the South African History Online website: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/challenge-church-theological-comment-political-crisis-south-africa-kairos-document-1985>. Information about Kairos Palestine can be found on their website: <https://www.kairospalestine.ps>.

3. The Soul Repair Center is a project of Brite Divinity School. More information is available at <https://www.brite.edu/programs/soul-repair/>.



activism to uproot racism, sexism, economic exploitation, or environmental destruction.

In each of these scenarios, reconciliation is long and hard work, but the passage assures us that God has promised to listen and help us. We may be asked to put aside mistaken notions

and acknowledge our own failings. We may be asked to make compromises. We may be asked to embark on a long journey toward healing.

Despite these challenges, Paul reminds us: now is the acceptable time!

ANN HIDALGO

## Ash Wednesday

### Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

<sup>1</sup>“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. . . .

<sup>16</sup>“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>19</sup>“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Our Gospel lesson today consists of three sections that follow the same outline, its pattern predicted by 6:1, warning against using one’s religious practices to impress other people. These sections, which deal with almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, tell readers that when they engage in these activities, they should not do so in a way that calls attention to themselves. If they do, then that attention will be their only reward. Instead, they should do it anonymously, with the result that God the Father who sees in secret will reward them. The KJV says that reward will be given “openly,” but that word is not in the oldest manuscripts; it is now generally assumed that the reward will be given when the kingdom of God (or, as Matthew has it, the kingdom of heaven) comes and the rewarded one will have eternal life.

These three sections have as their source what scholars call M, meaning the source on which

Matthew draws for his Gospel that is neither Mark nor the ancient source Q. There is no reason to suppose that it does not derive from actual teaching of Jesus and the expansion of it in the community from which the evangelist comes. These sections are interrupted in 6:7–15 by the insertion of the Q material containing the Lord’s Prayer, which thus becomes the center of the Sermon on the Mount. This important insertion is left out of our reading for today, undoubtedly because of the occasion of this reading. Our Gospel and the other lections are to be read on Ash Wednesday, one of the few midweek services in the calendar commented on in this series. This holy day is focused on penitence, as is the section from M into which the evangelist has inserted the Lord’s Prayer material. As important as the Lord’s Prayer is, it interrupts the penitential flow of the M material and would thus distract from concentration on this day’s theme.

Each of these three sections offers a vigorous statement involving hyperbole and caricature. The persons who do what the reader is told not to do are called hypocrites, a Greek word that had as one of its original meanings an actor on a stage. Thus, the whole performance is exaggerated. All three of the sections share one basic message: the activity is not about the person playacting; it is about God—and to behave otherwise is damnable.

While the three sections share a common message, how that works can be seen by examining them separately to see how each reaches a common goal. The first section, on almsgiving, describes the effort to call attention to one's donations as like having a horn blown to call attention to the achievement. While many fund-raising activities today seem to use similar techniques to encourage gift-giving, sounding a trumpet in a synagogue or even the street is not something that was actually done; it is instead a hyperbolic analogy to ways attention was called to the donor. The reward of hypocrites was to have people admire their great generosity, as though they bought admiration with their gifts. That is all it bought. The description of the proper alternative also involves exaggeration for emphasis: one's hands are not conscious, so one could not know what the other was doing.

The section on prayer (vv. 5–6) condemns hypocrites who stand and say prayers ostentatiously in a synagogue or on a street corner. This seems not to refer to officiants at liturgy but to individuals who want to appear pious. This discussion of prayer seems to suggest that only private prayer can be sincere, that one needs to go into a private space to do it; the real distinction, however, is between opposite motivations for saying prayers: showing off versus relating to the Holy One. As Eugene Boring has said, "One can also ostentatiously call attention to going to the inner room to pray."<sup>1</sup>

The next verse, which is not in our lection, seems at first to follow the pattern of the sections of our passage, calling on readers not to do something in the way others (in this case, Gentiles) do. However, this is just a way of preparing for the introduction of the Lord's Prayer.

This material resumes and is completed in verses 16–18. The issue here is fasting. Originally the Jews had only one fixed fast day, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Other fasts may have been added to their liturgical calendar by Matthew's time; in addition, the believer could fast voluntarily, and Mondays and Thursdays were considered good days for doing so. These could be days of "sackcloth and ashes," which could add to people's efforts to prove how holy they were by excessive fasting. Matthew summarizes this playacting as "disfiguring their faces," which he contrasts with the sprucing up done by those who are fasting for God, rather than for show.

Our lection ends with a contrast between storing treasure on earth and storing it up in heaven: the contrast between showing off or doing things hypocritically and devoting ourselves to the service of God. The latter is required to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Something of the significance of our reading can be understood when it is seen in context in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew starts with narratives about Jesus' infancy and ends with an account of his crucifixion and resurrection. In between are five sections, beginning with a biographical section that is essentially based on Mark's account and ending with speech based on material from Q and M. All this was edited by Matthew for his own purposes. Since early days in the church's history, a comparison has been made between the Pentateuch—the five books of Law (Torah) in the Old Testament—and these five parts of Matthew. Yet Matthew's emphasis is not on the teaching but on the narrative, with the speeches related to the theme of the narratives. For instance, the initial part from which our reading comes has to do with the beginning of Jesus' life and ministry. It ends with Jesus' calling the Twelve and beginning his ministry in Galilee. The Sermon on the Mount is the introduction (theirs and ours) to the teaching of Jesus; there has been no teaching before this.

The Sermon begins with the Beatitudes, which elucidate the traits that will enable disciples to be a part of kingdom of heaven. Jesus then compares the disciples to salt, light, and

1. "Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 8:201.

a city on a hill. He continues what he has to say about living in the eschatological community by showing how it is a greater righteousness than that of the Law, offering illustrations in relation to anger, adultery, and divorce, and then in relation to swearing, revenge, and one's attitude toward enemies. This is followed by today's Gospel reading about not showing off in almsgiving, praying, and fasting; this material is intersected by the model of prayer in the

Lord's Prayer, the center of the Sermon. Jesus then continues with other statements about life in the kingdom, culminating with the Golden Rule, and then concludes with warnings about the dangers of not living according to the view of life in the kingdom that been described in the Sermon. Thus, the newly called disciples have been well instructed in the life to which they—and we—are called.

O. C. EDWARDS JR.

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

In today's readings from Matthew we are presented with three spiritual disciplines: giving, praying, and fasting. The act of giving presupposes that the giver has resources that can improve the recipient's present condition. This brings into view a range of activities—from the small acts of kindness of giving food, clothing, or money to the poor and destitute to providing an endowment so that a school, library, or hospital may be established and maintained. The act of giving may also serve to point us to those places where our social and economic structures are broken or inadequate and in need of repair.

Conventional wisdom says that giving someone fish will provide food for a day but teaching that person to fish will provide food for a lifetime. In this proverbial statement, one finds a view of giving that goes beyond a charitable and short-term commitment. Rather, one is challenged to move beyond passive acceptance and maintenance of the status quo, to seek ways to cultivate wholesome living, to enhance a community's life, and to optimize human potential.

Preachers can draw on the teachings of Jesus to represent giving as doing righteousness, acting rightly, and making things right (Matt. 6:3; 7:21; 25:37–40). The focus of giving cannot be the giver but rather the work of righteousness that is divinely inspired, enabled, and sustained. Jesus steers us away from giving that is energized by self-congratulation or the adulation of others. Genuine giving is an unrelenting commitment to righteousness and to the perennial work of making things right in the world. The person who seeks recognition for his or her gift

celebrates human endeavor and diverts attention from the divine work of the giver of all good gifts. In a world where others are dependent on the kindness of patrons, it is easy to forget that the earth is the Lord's (Ps. 24:1). Above all else, giving is a response to God, a celebration of God's blessings, and an act of honor and thanksgiving. From this perspective, we serve as instruments of God's generosity, benevolence, and providential care in the world. Giving is living out one's sense of identity, calling, and relationship in community to the giver of all good gifts.

The second spiritual practice, praying, may be viewed as recognition and acknowledgment that one is invited into relationship with God in every moment of life. Praying provides multiple ways to sense that divine invitation and to engage the relationship through gratitude for divine favor, sorrow at one's neglect or falling short, and supplication for help in one's life. When we pray, we may learn something about how we are connected to the Divine and to all of God's creation. We may learn that as we draw nearer to God through prayer, we also draw nearer to our fellow human beings through our love and service. We may also learn that our self-aggrandizement, pride, and self-centeredness are antithetical to our desire to be in relationship with God.

Preachers can show how genuine prayer enables one to be seen by God, whereas the hypocrites pray to be seen by others. God sees us in the totality of our beings, including our failures and successes, our grief and joy, our fears and

hopes. In prayer, we may encounter God as the One who sees our misery (Gen. 16:10–13), hears the cries of those who are oppressed or enslaved (Exod. 3:7), and draws near to us. We acknowledge God as the center and sole focus of our prayer as we seek to discern how God is working in our lives and in the world. In prayer, we acknowledge God’s initiative and self-revelation in secret spaces where God is glorified and away from those spaces that offer self-promotion or public display of our piety (Matt. 6:6).

Preachers may observe that when prayer seeks to go beyond the bounds of personal piety, we may be afforded the opportunity to transcend our own images of God, and our preconceived theological postulations. We may find that prayer transports us to spaces where we fully experience love, forgiveness, healing, acceptance, joy, and life in ways that go beyond our understanding and our cognition. Prayer that is designed to display one’s piety so that others may revere the supplicant or be impressed is unable to channel God’s work of revealing, inspiring, touching, and transforming.

Prayer that calls us into relationship with God is prayer that is orchestrated by God and whose content moves us beyond the need for “empty phrases” or “many words” (Matt. 6:7). In reflecting on the teaching of Jesus, we are invited to reexamine our practices and understandings of prayer; we are also called to embrace prayer that changes our perception, attitude, and behavior. Such changes may bring new ways of being in God’s presence, addressing divine mystery, touching and handling things unseen. We embrace the transformations that are possible as we also are embraced by divine presence, ineffable mystery, overflowing love, transfiguring light, healing, and abundant mercy. Not only are we invited to discern how God is at work in our lives and in the world, but we are also invited to participate in God’s work. Through prayer we learn and experience the role, value, and efficacy of prayer.

The third spiritual discipline in today’s reading is fasting. In this practice, one goes without some measure of food or drink for a certain period. Traditionally, fasting has been linked with other practices such as abstinence from

other activities, including sexual intimacy. It is not difficult to see that this demand on the physical body may send the message that the body needs to be subdued if we are to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage. The view of the body as a burden for the journey, the dwelling place of vices, disposable for the good of the soul, can lead to extreme practices such as self-flagellation.

However, one may also adopt a perspective that draws no distinction between the physical and spiritual. An individual does not come before God as differentiated and disconnected components but as a whole and unified being. One stands before God not as mind, spirit, soul, or body but, rather, as the totality of our thoughts, emotions, experiences, our weaknesses and strengths, our vices and virtues, our aversions and delights. Fasting may help us recognize and confront the challenges that we face in the totality of our being and enable us to acknowledge the assaults on our dignity and humanity from insults, addictions, stress, injury, or trauma, among other things. Further, because we cannot go for long periods without food, fasting may remind us of the contours and parameters of our human experience. We confront our limits and boundaries, and become more acutely aware of our finitude and our mortality.

These three spiritual practices have ancient roots across a range of religious traditions, and in every expression the practice calls attention away from the visible to the invisible, the mortal to the immortal, or the human to the Divine. In Matthew’s Gospel, we are presented with an earthly and heavenly orientation (6:19–21), and these three spiritual practices enable the right orientation toward God. The earthly is transient, destructible, and insecure and includes our self-centered projects and our pride. The heavenly is permanent, indestructible, and secure, and includes our devotion to God and the correct orientation of our hearts. The spiritual practices of giving, praying, and fasting are matters that focus one’s heart on the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (6:21).

LINCOLN E. GALLOWAY

## Ash Wednesday

### Isaiah 58:1–12

<sup>1</sup>Shout out, do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.

<sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments,  
they delight to draw near to God.

<sup>3</sup>“Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.

<sup>4</sup>Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.

<sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

<sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

<sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.

<sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.

<sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

## Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Isaiah 56–66 are set in the Judean homeland, the Persian province of Yehud, to which the Babylonian exiles have returned. In the wake of the return, tensions develop between returning exiles—many of whom represent and therefore have the support of the Persian Empire—and the people who were not exiled and so remained in Judah after the Babylonians conquered Judah in 587 BCE. Chapters 56–59 reflect the acrimonious conflict among various factions within the house of Israel. The material is driven by wrenching questions: Who is a true Israelite? How will the community determine membership? Will these membership standards be more inclusive or more exclusive, so as to preserve one community's particular traditions? What constitutes righteous behavior and practice? Which values represent the core of Israelite identity?

The messages of consolation and hope in Isaiah 40–55, set in the Babylonian exile, give way in Isaiah 56–59 to oracles of judgment. The accusations of injustice echo those of the preexilic prophets. Isaiah 58:1–8 in particular reintroduces themes and tropes from the first chapter of Isaiah (Isa. 1:10–20). In both texts (Isa. 1 and Isa. 58), the prophet rhetorically creates a disjunction between the ritual activities that the people perform and the oppressive social, economic, and legal practices that they sanction. That said, the passage concludes with promises of salvation that recall Isaiah 40–55. Here, however, the promises pertain to only one group within Israel.

The writers of the Hebrew Bible depict their God in different ways and often those depictions stand in direct opposition to one another. Some texts portray a God of order, while others insist on a God who disrupts order for the sake of redemption. In some texts, we see a God who works with the powerful and is affiliated with the temple and the monarchy; in other parts of the canon, we hear about a God who sides with the oppressed and the marginalized, who wants to roam wild in the wilderness and chafes at the prospect of living in “a house” (i.e., a temple). The prophets, who prefer traditions associated with the liberation from Egypt, the Mosaic covenant, and economic and social justice, see cult-related practices such as fasting as attempts to manipulate or domesticate YHWH. The friction between these two testimonies is particularly heated in Isaiah 58:1–12.

Chapter 58 begins with God commanding the prophet to announce judgment against God's people with a voice like a *shopar*, a ram's horn that was blown for a number of different reasons, including to inaugurate a fast but also to announce the beginning of a battle. Despite the bellowing warning, the people are delighted with themselves. The Hebrew word *khpts*, which means “delight, pleasure, desire,” appears three times in verses 2–3. In verse 2, the prophet says, “Day after day they . . . *delight* to know my [God's] ways,” as if they were a righteous nation and did not forsake the justice of their god; “they *delight* to draw near to God.” In verse 3, the

people ask why God is not impressed with their fasting, and the prophet responds by repeating the word “delight,” but this time without God as the object: “on the fast day, you seek *delight* and oppress your laborers” (my trans.). The implication is that the delight they seek has nothing to do with God. Their search for pleasure is intimately tied to the oppression of their workers; they are able to pile up material delights because they pay cheap wages. Their self-interest is disguised as piety, and that is nowhere more evident than on the day of the fast.

Fasting served a number of purposes in the ancient world: to prepare themselves to encounter YHWH, to express grief, or to assuage an angry god. The prophet Isaiah rails against ritual acts of fasting, because to him they suggest YHWH can be mollified and manipulated. Further, he insists that YHWH cares about those who are truly hungry—rather than those who are hungry by choice—and is not impressed by the elites’ attempts to symbolically express their humility. YHWH demands that humility and solidarity with the poor, who are always hungry, be enacted—not symbolically but materially and actually. The elites’ decision to fast, to refuse the food they have in abundance, while the hungry remain underfed, represents an egregious affront to these hungry people.

In short, YHWH says to the fasters, fasting designed to draw attention to you and your performance of humility will not draw my favor (Isa. 58:4–5).

In verses 6–7, there is a shift from accusation to plaintive admonition in the form of a series of questions. Isaiah urges the people to remember what they know deep in their bones, namely, that YHWH chooses to loose the bonds of justice, break every yoke, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked.

Once the people reorient themselves to their god and to their neighbors, “then,” YHWH promises, “your light will break forth like the dawn” (v. 8). The language here recalls images in Second Isaiah, where Israel is called “a light to the nations” (42:6; 49:6), and anticipates Isaiah 60:1, in which Israel is invited, “Arise, shine; for your light has come.”

If the people will do what God commands (58:6–7), “Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am’” (v. 9). The words of hope here allude to the well-known response of Isaiah (“Here I am,” *hinneini*) to God’s question, “Whom shall I send?” (6:8). Here the roles of the caller and the responder are reversed; “you” (probably prophets working in the mode of Isaiah) will call, and God will respond—faithfully—as Isaiah did: “Here I am” (*hinneini*).

The images of hope in the final verses in this passage may be an attempt not merely to console the ones who consider themselves righteous but also to address the division in the community. While the rhetoric in verses 1–5, and to some degree in verses 6–7, could be seen as exacerbating the internal rift, the tone and imagery in the second part of the passage provide some hope for reconciliation.

Those who practice what we might call a “justice fast” live out their commitment to justice and serve to model something for the rest of the community. The images of restoration depict the people living in a state of *shalom* in such a way as to provide sustenance and succor to others. In the language of Isaiah, they will be like a light in the darkness (v. 10)—not only to the nations (42:6; 49:6), but to their own kin, from whom they have become estranged. They will be “like a watered garden” (58:11; see Jer. 31:12), a place that will grow fruit and provide sustenance, and “like a spring of water” (58:11; see Isa. 41:18), a vital and consistent source of life. They will be called “the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (58:12), because they will have attended to the fissures and fractures in the community. Their role is not only to judge the hypocrites among them but also to model something more satisfying to those people who have not yet learned to find their delight in YHWH. The final verses suggest that the deep fulfillment—the lasting delight—they will gain from living in accordance with YHWH’s justice will not only serve the poor and the oppressed; it will also serve to ease the strife within the community.

AMY ERICKSON



## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

There may be times when a preacher's voice is like a soft, cool breeze on a blistering hot day, but there are also times when it should be raised up "like a trumpet" shouting out the word of the Lord to a numb people. Like music, not all sermons are in a soft register; sometimes the gospel needs to be a loud blast of truth! This is what Isaiah calls out from preachers, if we are willing to tell the truth in another righteous register. If a preacher cannot tell the truth on Ash Wednesday, when we remember that we are dust and to dust we will return, then when can we tell the truth out loud?

The words of this pericope ring out with a variety of possibilities for preachers. It is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten journey. Not only do the faithful often have ashes imposed on their foreheads as symbolic of repentance, but they may "impose" different spiritual practices on their lives to foster self-reflection during this liturgical season. In general, one might hear some aim to "give up" something during Lent—chocolate, Facebook, watching TV, or a beloved habit or activity. Lent is often portrayed as a liturgical time of "giving up," when people give up something as a sign of giving themselves up to God. One prominent spiritual discipline used to give up is fasting.

The spiritual practice of fasting, mentioned in Isaiah, is a popular practice during this season. It is a fast diet, a worship diet, where one abstains from food in an attempt to improve one's own spiritual life before God and remember one's humanity and mortality, and whose daily bread sustains us. It is no surprise that this text is used to begin Lent on Ash Wednesday.

Israel engages in this type of fast as good religious people do. They abstain from food and wear sackcloth and ashes as a sign of mourning and penance. They are liturgically literate and ritually right. They want to draw closer to God, and this is the way they know how to do it. This is how they have worshiped for years, but they seem to move further from God as they dive deeper into themselves and deeper into their own worship pattern. They cannot figure out why their fasting will not work this time: "Why do we fast, but you do

not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (Isa. 58:3).

Israel cannot figure out what is wrong with their fast diet until God speaks: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. . . . Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?" (58:3–5). The preacher might explore how God brings a serious liturgical critique against Israel because their fast diet is an abstinence, not just from food, but from others. They delight in God but despise God's people. They abstain from loving their neighbor and feed on a worship diet full of their "own interest."

A ritual ethic has become disconnected from a righteous ethic in life. Their fasting leads them toward ethical negligence, because religious ritual without a social outlook can become only self-serving. Israel reveals how tempting it is to believe that performing holy acts like fasting or the imposition of ashes makes us holy. This prophetic text raises a cautionary note about our religious practices and how God requires more than right ritual practice.

Another avenue for consideration as a preacher might be to problematize the usual idea of "giving up" something during the season of Lent. What Isaiah reveals is less an emphasis on "giving up" and more on "giving to" others and definitely not "giving up" on love of neighbor. In fact, the preacher might explore how the liturgy and its associated practices are connected to the liturgy after the liturgy, that is, living in the world. How is worship linked to social witness?

This is the challenge God offers when God refashions the meaning of fasting to include such things as letting the oppressed go free and sharing bread with the hungry (vv. 6–7). How does one live out Lent in the world? Why do we fast? This is an important question. Is it to be drawn more into oneself or to be drawn out toward others? Isaiah emphasizes the latter (vv. 3–4). In some way, Israel's story and liturgical approach may have become a congregation's practical theology of worship: believers may think that a particular spiritual practice encompasses the

totality of what it means to worship God, and that it is all about “self-maximization”<sup>1</sup> and our “own interest.” Preachers could explore a church’s worship diet—whether it is deficient, thin on God’s love for the least of these (Matt. 25:31–46), or more robust and integrated.

For Isaiah, it is clear that fasting, worship, is service, the church doing the mission of God in the world. If Christian worship services become severed from service in the world, then we lose liturgical integrity because our creeds do not match our deeds. God’s fast challenges believers to see worship as ethics, fasting as action. Worship as a verb. If there is any abstention in this form of fasting, it is the abstaining from indifference and inactivity and egotism, because right worship is righteous living committed to others, especially the least of these. In his sermon “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?”<sup>2</sup> Preachers should ask their congregations: What are *we* doing for others?

This becomes a critical socioethical question for Christians, because God redefines fasting by moving beyond the practice itself to include the freedom of and provision for other people, such as sharing bread with the hungry and clothes

with the naked. In God’s own words through the prophet, God calls for worship as service in the world, in which one’s lip service matches one’s life service, reframing fasting, therefore worship, as a way of life, not a particular day or a singular practice. God-centered worship will lead to a deeper sense of community in which people work toward the flourishing of all people.

The rich opportunity for preachers on this day is to lift up how loving God is connected to loving one’s neighbors, how our healing is linked with the healing of others, because we are part of the interconnected web of humanity and all of us are truly dust. When the breach of brokenness in a society is bridged and healed, the light of God shines on all. Where there is reconciliation, God is and God’s light shines. This is God’s promise to us—that when we work to repair the breach between us and our neighbors by repairing the divide between our worship practices and mission in the world, God is present, restoring what was damaged and ravaged to create an eternal communal harmony where all are made whole in the process. We may ask, “Why do we fast, but you do not see?” basically asking God, “Where are you?” Look where the ruins are rebuilt and breaches bridged; there we will find God saying, “Here I am.”

LUKE A. POWERY

1. Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 27–40.

2. Martin Luther King Jr., “Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-6>.

# First Sunday in Lent

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Genesis 9:8–17  
Psalm 25:1–10

1 Peter 3:18–22  
Mark 1:9–15

## Genesis 9:8–17

<sup>8</sup>Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup>“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. <sup>11</sup>I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” <sup>12</sup>God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup>I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup>When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup>I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup>When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” <sup>17</sup>God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Genesis 9:8–17 marks the conclusion of the flood story. After three chapters and many days of deluge and destruction, the rain ceases and the water begins to abate (Gen. 8:2). Eventually, Noah, his family, and the animals disembark (8:18–19). Noah’s first act on dry ground is to build an altar to the Lord so he can offer a sacrifice (8:20). Smelling the pleasing odor of the burnt offering, God vows never to destroy God’s creatures again (8:21–22) and blesses Noah and his family (9:1–7).

In the scene that immediately follows (9:8–17), God ratifies God’s promise through the making of a covenant. Though biblical covenants can take various forms, their primary function is to serve as a formal commitment between two parties. Covenants establish, or recognize, a relationship. In the case of Genesis 9, that relationship is between God and all of creation, including Noah and his family (vv. 9–10). In contrast to God’s covenant with Moses, the covenant with Noah is one-sided.

The promise never again to bring destruction does not hinge on certain stipulations being followed, nor is there any mention of blessing for obedience or curses for disobedience. Rather, the integrity of the covenant rests solely on God’s fidelity.

After describing the substance of the covenant (vv. 8–11), this passage shifts to the question of the sign of the covenant (vv. 12–17): the setting of God’s bow in the clouds. Traditionally interpreted as a rainbow, God’s bow (*geshet*) is arguably the most iconic element of the flood story. That the sign of the covenant is a rainbow and not a cloudless sky is instructive. Though breathtaking and beautiful, a rainbow is a meteorological phenomenon that emerges only in the midst of, or just after, a rainstorm. Given the circumstances, the rainbow is an apt symbol of this covenant. In Genesis 9, God is not promising the complete absence of loss and destruction in the future. Rather, Genesis 9 promises life after loss, hope after destruction. A

similar theme reverberates throughout the New Testament. Especially as we enter the season of Lent, we are mindful that the promise of the gospel is not life without death, but resurrection from the dead.

There is another possible interpretation of the sign of the covenant. While many translations render the Hebrew word *qeshet* as “rainbow” (e.g., NIV, NCV, NKJV, NLT, *The Message*), in the Old Testament this term more typically refers to an archer’s bow. Used by warriors and hunters, the *qeshet* is a deadly weapon. In ancient art, a drawn bow is often found in the hands of Ashur and Ahura Mazda, the chief deities of the Neo-Assyrians and Persians, respectively. Some Old Testament texts depict the Lord in the mode of a divine archer, with a drawn bow position (Zech. 9:13–14), yet in Genesis 9 one does not find God’s bow in use. Rather, it is hung in the clouds, undrawn (the curve of a rainbow approximating the shape of an undrawn bow). Understood in this fashion, the sign of the covenant is an image of demilitarization. When God sees the divine bow in the sky, God calls to mind God’s promise never to take up that weapon against creation again (Gen. 9:16).

While the waters of the flood are sometimes thought to anticipate the waters of baptism (see 1 Pet. 3:18–22, another lectionary text for this Sunday), Genesis 6–9 never describes the flood’s purpose in terms of washing away sin. In fact, as a comparison of Genesis 6:5 and 8:21 reveals, the human heart is just as inclined to evil after the flood as it was before. If understood as a form of cleansing, the flood has not worked. The story of the flood, much like the story of the entire Bible, is not primarily about how humanity’s heart changes for the good after encountering God. Rather, it is a story about how God covenants to remain with God’s people despite the inclination of their hearts to evil.

The covenant described in Genesis 9:8–17 is rooted solely in the gracious and unmerited action of God. In 8:1, we learn that God “remembers” Noah and all the rest who were in the ark. While we think of human remembering as a mental process that entails calling to mind something from the past, divine remembering is of a different sort. It is about attention and

intervention. It bespeaks God’s commitment to be in relation with sinful humanity, to deliver out of destruction those who are not yet inclined to do good, and to suffer with, and sometimes because of, a broken world. That God is a God who remembers is the only thing that ultimately holds back the waters of the flood, and it is the only thing that makes new life possible.

The story of the flood is situated within the broader context of the primeval history (Gen. 1–11). These chapters trace the drama of God’s involvement with a world marred by the intrusion of sin. In this context, the flood can be seen as a type of undoing of God’s initial act of creation (1:1–2:4a). As the flood narrative unfolds, clouds hide the light of the sun (reversing days one and four), plant and animal life is destroyed (reversing days five and six), the dry ground disappears (reversing day three), and, as the rain descends and seas rise, the distinction between the waters above and the waters beneath is effaced (reversing day two). At the height of the flood the earth is once again a “formless void” (1:2).

In the midst of such chaos, God once again sends a wind (*ruach*)—a word in Hebrew that can also mean spirit—to bring life and order (8:1; cf. Gen. 1:2). From here, creation begins afresh. The sun shines through the clouds, the waters are separated, dry ground emerges, and plant and animal life returns. Likewise, humanity is commissioned to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (9:1, 7; see 1:28). While the first creation account ends with God at rest (i.e., the Sabbath), the story of re-creation in Genesis 6–9 ends with God’s bow at rest in the clouds. Adding to this parallel is the fact that Sabbath keeping is referred to as a “perpetual covenant” (*berit ’olam*) in Exodus 31:16. The same Hebrew phrase is used in Genesis 9:16 to describe the nature of God’s covenant with Noah (NRSV “everlasting covenant”).

Just as core themes in the flood story reach back to the opening chapters of Genesis, so they also reach forward to the closing chapters of the book of Revelation. Within its description of a new heaven and a new earth, Revelation 21:1 notes that “the sea was no more.” This reference draws on a widely held symbolic association between the primordial forces of chaos on the

one hand and the sea and floods on the other (e.g., Jonah 2:1–6; Ps. 74:13–15). In the vision of Revelation 21, the one who makes all things new ultimately overcomes death and chaos, such that “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev. 21:4). Read in light of Revelation 21, the covenant God makes in Genesis 9:8–17,

never to bring destruction on creation again, is a foretaste of this final act of restoration. Put differently, Genesis 9 captures in miniature what is writ large across the canon: through the promise of God’s covenant, the sea and the flood—and all that they symbolize—will not have the final say.

RYAN P. BONFIGLIO

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The world was inundated. Life as previously known had ceased, as the corpses of animals and humans floated on the still waters surrounding a microcosm of a world that now was contained in an ark. In the midst of the apocalypse, hope and grace were the promises made by God to the remnant after this global catastrophe. After the destruction of the earth through water, the occupants of the ark must wait for the land to be dry again in order to disembark. A new earth awaited them, and all creatures, as on the first day of creation, were called to be fruitful and multiply so as to fill the earth again. Among the first acts of Noah was offering his deity several clean animals as sacrifices. As the sweet savory fragrance of the burnt offerings reached God’s nostrils, the Almighty was so pleased that God swore never again to destroy the earth by water. While God makes a covenant never to curse the earth again and never to strike down every creature due to the evil found in the hearts of humans, the new creation has not brought forth newly contrite human hearts. Evil tendencies continue to flourish in a postdeluge world.

Humans did not change, but maybe the God who never changes changed. Humans will ceaselessly continue to partake in evil; but God makes a covenant nonetheless. In this new world order, humans need not fear extinction. They can rely on a new relationship with a deity who will be more patient and merciful. The covenant God makes with Noah and his descendants is the first legal agreement made between humans and their God. Unlike the future covenants God would make with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and with Moses at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19–24), this covenant with Noah is not exclusively for the people of Israel. It is a covenant

made with all humanity and, just as important, all of creation. The well-being of humans will forever be intertwined with the well-being of the planet and all the forms of life it contains.

The covenant will be known by God’s war bow set on the clouds, what we call today a rainbow. God will see the rainbow whenever it rains and remember the covenant and thus not destroy the earth by flood. We too will see God’s war bow and be comforted by God’s promise. Even though the bow is an instrument of war, the unstrung bow in the sky testifies to God’s pledge never to make war on humans again. However, before we get too comfortable with God’s promise, some, including the author of 2 Peter 3:5–7, insist that the promise was limited to a watery destruction, leaving open the possibility of a fiery apocalypse on the day of judgment.

Although speculation about God destroying the earth in some future apocalypse may sell books and novels, the real question we should be wrestling with is whether God can be trusted to keep God’s promises. After all, God promised to make the people of the covenants with Abraham and Moses a chosen people who would not be abandoned. Yet in a post-Holocaust world we cannot ignore God’s absence. God’s promise to God’s chosen people becomes problematic with the overwhelming proof of the abandonment of some six million people with whom God entered into covenant. So before we place too much hope in the covenant made with Noah, in the shadow of Auschwitz we must ponder what happens to a hope and grace based on God’s promises when God fails to keep those promises.

Hope cannot be reduced to wishful thinking; rather, it is an expected joy that God’s will shall

come about, according to God's purposes. This is a hope based on Noah's God, a God who is faithful to God's covenant with humanity and thereby becomes a God of the future, a God who remains a step ahead of humanity, making all things new. Covenant promises work if a salvation history (spiritual or secular) is adopted. Modernity has taught us that we, as a species, are moving toward utopia, say, by means of capitalism (a rising tide will raise all ships) or communism (the eventual withering away of the state). Both share a salvation history. Hope exists that the future, thanks to God or science or human ingenuity, will be more forward thinking and more egalitarian than the past. However, what if there is no salvation history? What if the pre-modern view (history made by God) and modern view (history made by the human subject) are both wrong? What if the historical dialectic that moves history in an upward spiral is but an optimistic construct forced on a very select history?

Dark ages of ignorance can follow spans of enlightenment, creating at times downward spirals, at other times upward spirals, yet at other times unrelated and unconnected events—in other words, a nonlinear disjointed, multidimensional passage of time. What exists is a permanent historical discontinuity, where history is not defined through triumphant metanarratives, but instead is a kaleidoscope comprised of contradictory and complex untold stories and struggles of the very least among us, who remain unnamed. History is full of stories of evil vanquishing good, brutality crushing peace. The world is not getting better for the globally marginalized. Due to the widening wealth gap, many are experiencing an economic situation that is getting worse. Billions are born into poverty and die because of its consequences, so that a privileged chosen can enjoy first-world status. The marginalized offer up their lives as living sacrifices, so that an elite can be saved and live well.

Hope in God's covenants can be sustained if it remains a product of salvation history. We can therefore optimistically believe that the arc of history bends toward justice; but if the past and present are reliable guides, the existence of such an arc is a faith statement assumed without proof. All too often, hope becomes an excuse not to deal with the reality of injustice. For those struggling to survive, destitution and death await. The reality of reading our daily newspapers confirms that for many on the margins of society, there is no hope.

The oppressed of the world occupy the space of Holy Saturday, the day after Friday's crucifixion and not yet the Easter Sunday of resurrection. This is a space where some faint anticipation of Sunday's good news is easily drowned out by the reality and consequences of Friday's violence and brutality. It is a space where hopelessness becomes the companion of used and abused people. The virtue or audacity of hope become a class privilege experienced by those protected from the realities of Friday or the "opium" that is used to numb that same reality until Sunday rolls around.

Regardless of the optimism professed in rainbows in the sky, the disenfranchised, their children, and their children's children will more than likely continue to live in an ever-expanding poverty. The situation remains hopeless. Covenants that the world will not be destroyed again—rainbows supposed to signify to the drowning marginalized that they will not perish—become a cruel imposition for those whose life, a world unto itself, continues to be destroyed, whether from rising waters or some other threat.

What then is the word to preach in the hopeless bleakness faced by the majority of the world's marginalized? We struggle for justice, not because we hope that in the end it will all work out, or so that we can obtain some heavenly reward. We struggle for justice because it defines our faith and our humanity.

MIGUEL A. DE LA TORRE

## First Sunday in Lent

### Psalm 25:1–10

- <sup>1</sup>To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.  
<sup>2</sup>O my God, in you I trust;  
do not let me be put to shame;  
do not let my enemies exult over me.  
<sup>3</sup>Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;  
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.  
<sup>4</sup>Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.  
<sup>5</sup>Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.  
<sup>6</sup>Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.  
<sup>7</sup>Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!  
<sup>8</sup>Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.  
<sup>9</sup>He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.  
<sup>10</sup>All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

### Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Because Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem in Hebrew, it is often suggested that it is rather disjointed in its English translation—a bit staccato rather than legato—lacking narrative flow. It is nevertheless poetic in its structure and compelling in its meaning. Although it is written in the first person singular, it is not so much a personal prayer as a generic plea for learning: “make me to know” (Ps. 25:4), “teach” or “teaches” (vv. 4, 5, 9), “instructs” (v. 8). It is a prayer for learning that can come only from God, spoken to the God whom the psalmist completely trusts.

The attitude of prayer begins in the first verses, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.” Throughout the psalm, the writer is asking not for changes in personal circumstances, but rather changes in self, making it particularly appropriate for the beginning of the

Lenten season. This reading for the First Sunday in Lent ends with verse 10, “All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God’s covenant and God’s decrees.” This ties in beautifully with the reading from Genesis 9:8–17, the story of God’s covenant after the flood. Unfortunately, the flood story is often reserved for the children’s Sunday school, despite its vital importance in a world where steadfastness and trust are rare, and in some cases unknown.

The bow, unstrung, hanging up in the clouds, is not really for us, but rather is intended as a sign to God, to indicate the end of retribution, and specifically to ask God to “be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old” (v. 6). In the twenty-first-century world it might be as important to assure adults as it is to assure

## Come to the Immortality of Baptism

The beloved generates love, and the light immaterial the light inaccessible. “This is my beloved Son,” He who, being manifested on earth and yet unseparated from the Father’s bosom, was manifested, and yet did not appear. For the appearing is a different thing, since in appearance the baptizer here is superior to the baptized. For this reason did the Father send down the Holy Spirit from heaven upon Him who was baptized. For as in the ark of Noah the love of God toward man is signified by the dove, so also now the Spirit, descending in the form of a dove, bearing as it were the fruit of the olive, rested on Him to whom the witness was borne. For what reason? That the faithfulness of the Father’s voice might be made known, and that the prophetic utterance of a long time past might be ratified. And what utterance is this? “The voice of the Lord (is) on the waters, the God of glory thundered; the Lord (is) upon many waters.” And what voice? “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This is He who is named the son of Joseph, and (who is) according to the divine essence my Only-begotten. “This is my beloved Son”—He who is hungry, and yet maintains myriads; who is weary, and yet gives rest to the weary; who has not where to lay His head, and yet bears up all things in His hand; who suffers, and yet heals sufferings; who is smitten, and yet confers liberty on the world; who is pierced in the side, and yet repairs the side of Adam.

But give me now your best attention, I pray you, for I wish to go back to the fountain of life, and to view the fountain that gushes with healing. The Father of immortality sent the immortal Son and Word into the world, who came to man in order to wash him with water and the Spirit; and He, begetting us again to incorruption of soul and body, breathed into us the breath (spirit) of life, and endued us with an incorruptible panoply. If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead. Wherefore I preach to this effect: Come, all you kindreds of the nations, to the immortality of the baptism. I bring good tidings of life to you who tarry in the darkness of ignorance. Come into liberty from slavery, into a kingdom from tyranny, into incorruption from corruption. And how, says one, shall we come? How? By water and the Holy Ghost. This is the water in conjunction with the Spirit, by which paradise is watered, by which the earth is enriched, by which plants grow, by which animals multiply, and (to sum up the whole in a single word) by which man is begotten again and endued with life, in which also Christ was baptized, and in which the Spirit descended in the form of a dove.

Hippolytus of Rome, “The Discourse on the Holy Theophany,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), 236–37.

young people that they are beloved children of God, and that nothing they could ever say or do can change that.

So this prayer from the psalmist to the God of Noah is to a God who instructs, and leads, and teaches (vv. 8–9). It is also to a God who is notably nonaggressive. In this psalm, unlike many other psalms, the writer does not ask that his enemies be injured or done away with, but only that they be ashamed, even those who are “wantonly treacherous.” This seems very different from the world of “an eye for an eye” or from today’s world, where some are taught that

if a person accidentally bumps into you, the best response is to turn around and knock them over! It could well be that the treacherous enemies the psalmist has in mind are really enemies within, perhaps more likely to have power over us than any external enemy could possibly have.

The writer of the psalm is asking to be taught—taught the ways of the Lord, taught the paths of God, taught God’s truth, God’s mercy, and God’s steadfast love. The writer is asking to be made new, just as God made creation new in the flood, and just as all who follow Jesus are made new in the waters of baptism (cf. Mark 1:9–15).



Both the Old Testament reading and the Gospel passages for the First Sunday in Lent are also connected through the biblical number forty. Noah experienced forty days of rain, the Lord's path for the Hebrew people took them forty years through the wilderness, and this week's Gospel text includes Jesus spending forty days in the wilderness. In like fashion, we begin the forty days of the season of Lent.

From a liturgical perspective, two of the most helpful phrases in the psalm are to "wait for [the Lord]" (Ps. 25:3) and "for you I wait all day long" (v. 5). This waiting motif is incorporated into many hymns, such as "Wait for the Lord"; "For You, My God, I Wait"; "For You, O Lord, My Soul in Stillness Waits"; "I Waited Patiently for God"; and "If Thou But Trust in God to Guide Thee." Waiting is a frustrating activity for many people, and the idea of "waiting for the Lord" might be interesting to explore. Other hymns based on the psalm include "Lord, to You My Soul Is Lifted," a twentieth-century text set to a Renaissance tune, and "Lead Me, Guide Me," an African American gospel song.

As with most psalms, the text itself can easily become a liturgical element. Verses 1–2 or 8–10 make excellent opening sentences, and verses 6–7 can be used as a part of a confession sequence. It would also work well to use any of the verses related to teaching as a part of a prayer for illumination. There are also many anthems related to this psalm. "I Waited for the Lord," from the cantata *Hymn of Praise* by Felix Mendelssohn, is scored for two solo sopranos and four-part choir. "Teach Me, O Lord" by David Hurd is accessible for choirs of all levels. As the piece closes, each singer moves independently at will from note to note in an undulating pattern. This continues until the final chord from the organ. One can easily imagine that this effect musically illustrates the up-and-down flow of the Lenten journey.

This psalm has two major themes, both vitally important as we move through Lent. To ask to be taught by God, and to wait patiently for that teaching, suggest a path that all of us might well choose to follow.

DAVID A. VANDERMEER

## First Sunday in Lent

### 1 Peter 3:18–22

<sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup>in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

On this First Sunday in Lent, we continue our time of reflection on Jesus' life, ministry, and especially his suffering and death. Jesus' resurrection is omitted here. During the Lenten season, oftentimes we as Christians are uncomfortable spending time with Jesus in the trauma and pain of his suffering. Instead, we want to tread ever so lightly over this sad time and jump to the joy of Easter Sunday. The lectionary text for this day compels us to reside in this place of discomfort, not only with regard to Jesus' pain, but also with regard to the pain of the early church and ultimately our own pain.

Jesus' death on a cross was God's unmerited gift of grace to us; this sacrificial act helped reconcile us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). Because of this, Christians also look inward to reflect on their sinful nature and are led to repentance. During the Lenten season of forty days, which signifies both the number of years the Israelites spent in the wilderness (Num. 33:38; Deut. 1:3) and the number of days Jesus fasted in the wilderness during his time of temptation by Satan (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13), Christians should observe a heightened period of spiritual discipline and focus.

The author of 1 Peter places special emphasis on Jesus' suffering, which Christians are to emulate. His readers (specifically, enslaved believers) are to suffer "because Christ also suffered

for [them], leaving [them] an example, so that [they] should follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21). Written for Christians in the five Roman provinces of Asia (1:1), who are facing tribulation (1:6; 2:12, 19–20; 3:14–17; 4:1, 4, 12–19; 5:9–10), they are told to expect to suffer as Christ did (2:21–24; 3:17–18; 4:1–2, 12–14). In fact, the author describes their suffering as a calling for which they will receive a reward (3:9), to which I will refer below. It is said of Jesus that "when he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten" (2:23). Similarly, enslaved believers are not to retaliate. They are not to "repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse"; rather, they are to "repay with a blessing" (3:9). In so doing, they will have God's approval (2:20).

In addition to returning violence or hatred with a blessing, this early Christian community is advised to rejoice despite, and in the midst of, suffering (1:3–9). The irony here is that the text does not mention Jesus' expressing joy about his suffering and imminent death. If they are to follow in Christ's example, then perhaps they should ask God to "remove this cup from them" (Luke 22:42). Only an author writing decades after Jesus' death—with a firm belief in the salvific and eternal value of this death for all believers—could tell his audience to rejoice. He knew the benefits that Christians are afforded because of it.

After describing how Christ suffered because of our sins, “the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring [us] to God” (1 Pet. 3:18), he then describes Jesus’ transition from “death in the flesh” to being “alive in the spirit” (3:18). The author’s intent is not to move the believers’ focus from the cross to the resurrection, but rather to remind them of what Jesus’ death granted, that is, salvation. This is the blessing they may inherit (3:9). This salvation is Christians’ “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us],” which the author describes at the outset of the text (1:3–4). This is not an Easter moment. Although the resurrection made salvation possible, the author uses it as motivation for Christians as they suffer, those who are “being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:5).

Jesus’ salvific work on the cross made salvation available to all believers, which they access through baptism (3:21). This focus on baptism is one of the reasons some scholars have suggested that 1 Peter may have originated as a baptismal homily (3:21; cf. 2:2). According to the author, baptism is what “now saves” them (3:21). The author does not include any details as to *how* believers are baptized—such as through immersion or the sprinkling of water—nor does the author explicitly state *when* this baptism must take place (whether the person baptized is an adult or an infant). Instead, he describes the benefits of baptism. Christians are made clean, “not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience,” which has been made available through Christ’s resurrection (3:21). This “good conscience” may refer to the instruction to “sanctify Christ as Lord” in their hearts (3:15), as well as the urge to do everything “with gentleness and reverence,” so that when they “are maligned, those who abuse [them] for [their] good conduct in Christ may be put to shame” (3:16).

What are the implications of rejoicing in one’s suffering for contemporary Christians? Are we supposed to “turn the other cheek” when we are persecuted, even if unjustly, like the first-century audience? What is the “living hope” that

we receive through baptism, “through the resurrection of Jesus” (1:3)? Perhaps it is the hope of salvation spoken to the early church. Nevertheless, the inquiry of the psalmist remains: “How long, O LORD?” (Ps. 13:1). How much are we expected to suffer “for the Lord’s sake” (1 Pet. 2:13), especially since Jesus has made the ultimate sacrifice?

One might surmise that perhaps the early church had similar concerns. Suffer. Because of. Rejoice. In spite of. Really? I assume that enslaved believers must have asked themselves these questions. Later in the text, the author claims that “the end of all things is near” (4:7). Thus, suffering for being a Christian during that time may have been understood as a short-term plight. It may have been a bit easier to hear the instruction: “Live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires [such as retribution?] but by the will of God” (4:2). Maybe it was commendable, a yearning even, to suffer as a Christian in order to “bear [God’s] name” (4:16). Nevertheless, for me, the biblical author’s response is theologically, socially, and ethically inadequate.

Like Christians during the Lenten season, the author of this text focuses on Jesus’ sufferings. Although many Christians, as well as the author, believe Jesus to be preexistent (1:20), it is Jesus’ earthly ordeal that gives us pause. His suffering is what compels believers to set time apart for spiritual reflection, to evaluate our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and to reflect on our own character and behavior, especially when our faith is “tested by fire” (1:7). Jesus’ suffering, which led to his death and his resurrection, provided us with the gift of salvation.

It may be difficult to rejoice and say, “God is good,” while going through trials and tribulation, but it is indeed a blessed assurance to know what God has in store for us. As the author states: “Although [we] have not seen him, [we] love him; and even though [we] do not see him now, [we] believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for [we] are receiving the outcome of [our] faith, the salvation of [our] souls” (1:8–9).

SHANELL T. SMITH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The season of Lent provides an opportunity for us to pause and reflect on the role of faith in our lives. We are prompted to think deeply about the ways in which our beliefs lead us to engage with the world around us and to evaluate how we are living out our Christian values. Despite the peculiar theological connection this text draws between the flood and baptism, it provides a starting point for considering the idea of salvation, as well as the language we use to describe it.

The work of womanist theologians invites us to consider the ways traditional theological language about salvation has been used to put oppressed members of our society, specifically African American women, at risk. In one of the foundational texts of womanist theology, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores Williams warns against the tendency in Christian theology to overemphasize the language of surrogacy—the idea that the suffering of one allows for the redemption of many (as in 1 Pet. 3:18). According to Williams, excessive veneration of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross both displaces attention from Jesus’ life and ministry and risks validating suffering for its own sake. For this reason, Williams consistently attempts to redirect attention from the veneration of the death of Jesus to the life-giving character of Jesus’ ministry.

Williams’s specific objection to the use of surrogacy language in relation to African American women is both historical and contemporary. In the past, enslaved African American women nursed and cared for children who were not their own, while today marginalized women are pressured into accepting caring roles for the benefit of others, due to limited opportunities and the need for income. Williams argues that both surrogacy language and the exhortation to “take up your cross” have been used to justify the subjection of African American women and other oppressed peoples.

This problem, for Williams, can be addressed by reversing our theological priorities. She controversially claims: “Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus’ *ministerial* vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.”<sup>1</sup> The resurrection, for Williams, stands at the core of our faith, not because Jesus died a painful and violent death, but because life—and, more precisely, Jesus’ vision of life lived to the fullest—triumphed over death.

Keeping in mind this valuable critique, we might also note that the first phrase of this passage tells us that salvation is offered “for all” (3:18). Perhaps the generosity of this offer challenges our sensibilities. For example, are there individuals or groups of people whom we consider to be outside the reach of God’s grace? Alternatively, are there actions, thoughts, or feelings for which we cannot forgive ourselves? Have we extrapolated from these concerns that salvation is not available to them or to us?

In East Los Angeles during the late 1980s, Jesuit priest Greg Boyle began working with former gang members in a job training program intended to offer high-risk youth an alternative to gang life. Over time, this effort evolved into Homeboy Industries, a program for gang intervention serving nearly 9,000 people each year through a supportive community, education and job-training opportunities, and a variety of other services to help participants redirect their lives.

Each participant works with a case manager to plan a program that may include academic classes (reading and writing, high school diploma or equivalent credential, or college readiness), life-skills training (parenting classes, anger management), recovery support groups, legal assistance, and tattoo removal, among other offerings. Participants begin their job training with basic building maintenance and can progress into working in a variety of fields, including the on-site bakery and restaurant, farmers’ market, silkscreen and embroidery, electronics

1. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 167. On womanist theology, see also Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

recycling, and solar-panel-installation training. Using this holistic model of recovery, participants are empowered to change their lives and to contribute to the well-being of their families and communities.

In his powerful and poignant book *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Boyle weaves together vignettes drawn from his interactions with the “homies” and a beautifully inclusive theological vision rooted in the expansive reach of God’s love, which Boyle describes as *no matter whatness*. At the heart of this theology is the assurance that God loves each of us intensely—no matter what. We do not have to earn this love. God will never take it away from us. We are precious to God just as we are. Although circumstances we witness and experience in our daily lives might lead us to the conclusion that some lives matter more than others, Boyle insists that God plays by different rules. If we can imagine anyone standing outside the embrace of God’s love, then our vision of God is simply too small and too limiting.

This is a crucial message for the homies, who as gang members and convicted felons have been among the most reviled members of our society, and who now, in order to summon the strength and resilience needed to pursue the difficult path of recovery, need so desperately to know that they are precious and loved.

It is not only the homies who long to hear this message. Boyle explains in the book’s introduction that his purpose in writing is not only to evoke compassion by putting a human face on gang members, but also for us “to recognize our own wounds in the broken lives and daunting struggles of the men and women in these parables.”<sup>2</sup> Although we may not share

the homies’ experiences, each of us has suffered and can benefit from the assurance that we are loved despite our wounds and failings. Boyle’s narratives coax us to admit that although we may give intellectual assent to the notion that God loves us, we, like the homies, sometimes feel unworthy of this love.

It is precisely from these broken, wounded places in our own hearts, Boyle tells us, that we can reach out to connect with the brokenness and woundedness of others. This connection becomes a virtuous circle: acknowledging our own wounds allows us to recognize that we share experiences of suffering in common with others; these shared experiences become the basis of compassion; compassion enables us to expand our sense of kinship and encourages us to build community; and living in community creates a space in which we can accept our wounds and both give and receive support for healing.

Boyle reminds us that “the desire of God’s heart is immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure.” In his characteristic storytelling tone, he continues: “It is precisely because we have such an overactive disapproval gland ourselves that we tend to create God in our own image. It is truly hard for us to see the truth that disapproval does not seem to be part of God’s DNA. God is just too busy loving us to have any time left for disappointment.”<sup>3</sup>

As part of our Lenten practices, may we be attuned to God’s abundant love and grace. May we strive to refine the language we use for the sacred so as not to harm the most vulnerable among us. May we extend compassion to those who have been excluded, remembering that God loves us all. No matter what.

ANN HIDALGO

2. Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), xv.

3. Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 27.

## First Sunday in Lent

### Mark 1:9–15

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

To understand anything in the Gospel according to Mark, it helps to remember several things. The first is that the literary genre of gospel was invented by Mark. Various literary forms have been compared to it, but none is precisely like Mark’s Gospel, which offers a narrative argument for the identification of Jesus as the Son whom God the Father has sent into the world to reclaim it. So Mark had to figure out how to do what he felt called to do. His education was limited, and he did not know how to write in a polished literary manner. Indeed, he seems to have been someone more aware of how to do public speaking than of how to write elegant prose. Many scholars have talked about his oral style, pointing out that this applies to the Gospel as a whole as well as its general prose style. Some confirmation of that is found in the way some public speakers have memorized the entire Gospel and recite it as a single performance—a little long for a speech today but not for speeches through most of Western history.

The next thing to be remembered is that Mark’s Gospel begins with Jesus’ baptism. While Matthew and Luke begin with stories of Jesus’ birth and infancy, and John begins with a theological prologue, our reading begins with Mark 1:9, and the first eight verses of Mark exist

to prepare the way for our story. The first verse seems to be a title for the Gospel, designed to lead into the beginning of the story. It is followed by a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> Verse 1 has already identified the genre of the work, giving it the name still used for the genre Mark invented: “Gospel” (*euangelion*)—making him the first evangelist, although Mark probably just means “good news,” rather than the genre of his work. Most translations of this verse end it by describing Jesus the Christ as “the Son of God.” While that final phrase does not appear there in all early manuscripts, it appears often enough in the rest of the Gospel as to leave no doubt that Mark accepted that title of Jesus as genuine and appropriate. Yet that identification of Jesus appears to be treated as inside information; it may have been shared by Mark and his readers, but was not common knowledge during Jesus’ life.

Then verses 2–8 introduce the reader to John the Baptist and his ministry; this section ends with John identifying his main significance as being to prepare for the greater one who was to come. Yet John was important in his own right: verse 5 tells of the crowds he attracted from Judea and Jerusalem. An important detail easily missed is in the description of John’s clothing,

1. Mark claims that he is quoting Isaiah, but his first verse is from Malachi.

an apparent allusion to what 2 Kings 1:8 has to say about that of Elijah, whom Malachi 3:1 identifies as the messenger to be sent to prepare the way of the Lord. That Mark accepted that identification of John with Elijah is made clear in Mark 9:13.

All of this has set the stage for the three events in our reading for the day: Jesus' baptism with its heavenly voice, his temptation in the wilderness, and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. John's baptism is for "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4). Many through the ages have wondered why the Son of God would need or want such forgiveness. A number of interpreters, the other Gospel writers among them, have suggested possible reasons. Matthew 3:14, for instance, has John say that it would be more appropriate for Jesus to baptize him; Mark had already taken care of that by having John say that one greater than he was to come and that while he baptized with water, the one to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). Such lacks of explanation, such as this one about Jesus' decision to be baptized by John, are common in Mark; he gives only information that helps him make the points he intends to make.

The point that Mark wishes to make here is, of course, the theophany that occurs when Jesus is coming up out of the water. The significance of the event is indicated by the way the heavens do not just "open," as earlier translations had it, but are "torn open" (NIV) or "torn apart" (NRSV). Another difference between Mark and the other Synoptics is that for Mark, the descent of Spirit is *like* that of a dove, while for the others it comes *as* a dove. For them it lands on Jesus, but for Mark the Spirit descends *into* Jesus (Gk. *eis*).

Another difference between the way Mark treats this event and the ways Matthew and Luke do is that in Mark, only Jesus is aware of the voice from heaven proclaiming him to be God's beloved Son. This is consistent with the way Mark limits to himself and his readers those who understand that Jesus is the Son of God. During Jesus' ministry, not even the disciples have a full appreciation of who their leader is.

This is what scholars call "the messianic secret," a theme that is more central to Mark than it is to Matthew and Luke.

All of this has generated much discussion concerning whether Jesus was aware of his identity before this event. Is he then driven into the wilderness to reflect on the implications of his calling? This is just another one of our questions that Mark does not answer.

Mark does say, however, that while Jesus is in the desert, he is tempted by Satan— although "tested" may be a better description of what happens. "Tempted" suggests a desire to do the proffered thing. Mark does not specify what the temptations are; he simply says that the entire forty days are a time of testing. There is a lack of specificity about the testing; Mark says only that it is done by Satan, that it takes place in a wilderness in which there are also wild animals, and that angels "waited on him" (1:13). While it is impossible to know what Mark means by this setting, a history-of-religion approach could understand it as an environment of great uncertainty and indefiniteness, where Jesus is to decide what he will make of the world.

This is very different from the three specific temptations that Matthew and Luke have drawn, according to many scholars, from the ancient source known as Q. Incidentally, this reference to the temptation is probably the reason that our pericope was chosen as the Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent for Year B. The importance of that connection is borne out by the fact that the accounts of the temptation in Matthew and Luke appear on this Sunday in Years A and C. While it is generally not a good idea to compare the acts and attitudes of parishioners to those of Jesus because of differences in role and capacity, doing so seems indicated here. This then would be a good time for the preacher to quote Hebrews 4:15, observing that Jesus is "one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

The final verses of our Mark reading announce the moment toward which everything so far has been leading: the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

O. C. EDWARDS JR.

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

In today's readings from Mark's Gospel, we are invited to witness and be transformed by the drama at the intersection of two different spheres. The first sphere is represented by tangible and concrete entities such as Nazareth of Galilee, the river Jordan, the wilderness, and wild beasts. The second points us to supernatural figures and events that include the image of the heavens torn apart, the Spirit, a voice from heaven, Satan, angels, and the kingdom of God. From both spheres we find images and metaphors for the life and witness of the faith community.

As Jesus is ascending from beneath the water and the Spirit is descending on him, the event of Jesus' baptism is transcribed for us on a vertical axis with water below and the heavens above, the baptized body below and the divine Spirit above, the natural elements below and the supernatural above. In this moment, the river Jordan, a natural source of life-giving water, has become the realm of the extraordinary and supernatural.

The river Jordan holds religious significance as a place that the children of Israel crossed to enter the promised land. As Joshua led the people to cross the Jordan "and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still," and the people crossed over on dry ground (Josh. 3:14–17). Many centuries had gone by when enslaved people on plantations in the United States lifted their voices to pay homage to a river forever transformed by the power of the supernatural. They visualized a new reality that was full of promise when they sang, "Roll, Jordan, roll."<sup>2</sup> The Jordan had become a symbol of freedom, hope, and renewal. As one spiritual declares, "Deep river, my home is over Jordan. Deep river, Lord. I want to cross over into campground."

For the enslaved in the cotton fields of the South, when the opportunity came to break free of their shackles and when the promise of freedom was realized through uprisings, rebellions, or the Underground Railroad, every water

crossing was their Jordan, and they could sing words of encouragement: "Wade in the water! God's gonna trouble the water!" For those seeking freedom from slavery, water was more than a metaphor; it was their salvation. Water symbolized life-giving energy and also the sphere where God acts to bring about liberation and deliverance, healing, and wholeness. Those seeking healing could identify with the many blind, lame, and paralyzed persons lying in the porticoes waiting for the moment when the pool is stirred up (John 5:1–9).

The image of "the heavens torn apart" suggests a *kairos* moment that points to the inbreaking of the divine into the human sphere, the colliding of the supernatural and the natural, and the point at which heaven touches earth. Such moments mark beginnings and inaugurate a new identity, relationship, or vocation. In this passage it is the occasion of a baptism, and for faith communities there are other rituals such as confirmation, consecration, or ordination that mark a new sense of identity or a call to leadership, ministry, and service. In each case, we are reminded that our call is attributable to a work from above and an awesome and timeless moment of divine activity breaking into our ordinary spaces and our human sphere.

The image of "heavens torn apart" provides an awesome divine drama and choreography designed to reveal, affirm, and declare Jesus' identity. The voice from heaven announces it: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10). It is so because the heavens declare it and the Spirit bears witness to it. In the same way, our call stories and rituals of baptism, confirmation, consecration, and ordination remind us of our identity. We belong to the realms of body and spirit, the earthly and heavenly, the natural and the supernatural.

A new image comes into view of the Spirit descending like a dove upon Jesus. It does not just touch Jesus and anoint him with a heavenly benediction; it stays with him. The Spirit hovers, surrounds and envelops him, enters and

2. "Roll, Jordan, Roll" and other spirituals discussed in this essay may be found in Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I've Seen: The Big Book of Negro Spirituals* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2003).



abides with him, uplifts and sustains him. Our images of the Spirit's work also influence our spiritual journeys and our common life together from our call stories, our leadership, our proclamation, and our worship.

The image of a dove evokes a sense of beauty, grace, gentleness, peace, and serenity. There is also the image of the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness to begin his ministry in complete reliance on the Divine. One hymn writer invokes the Spirit in this way: "Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free."<sup>3</sup> A spiritual reflects the human response to the Spirit's prompting: "I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing."

The Spirit's freedom, gentleness, invitation, guidance, and persuasion are all reflected in the life and witness of our congregations. Enabled by the Spirit of gentleness, our worship is introspective or contemplative, designed around moments of meditation, silence, and reflection. Enabled by the same Spirit, we open ourselves to a mighty rushing wind that removes barriers to communication, calls forth prophetic speech, and creates melodies and rhythms for shouting and dancing. Enabled by the same Spirit, we are equipped for works of justice that bind us together across cultural differences.

Finally, the divine drama moves to the wilderness. In faith communities, the image of the wilderness functions to convey loss, temptation, barrenness, grief, desolation, brokenness, and alienation in one's spiritual journey. We focus on those parts of our lives that seem to be arid, uncultivated, and lacking vitality and energy.

We are reminded that God led the children to Israel from bondage by way of the wilderness and provided them with water and their daily bread. We also recall that it was the Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness so that he too might focus and learn to rely exclusively on divine guidance, strength, and provision.

The wilderness experience may also be seen positively as a place away from life's indulgences, a place of simplicity, retreat, and renewal. As we live with sparseness and scarcity, away from distractions and modern amenities, we learn to rely on God's providential care. One hears anew the call to be good stewards of God's creation, and we lament our own participation in systems and structures that are oppressive and destructive. In the wilderness, we may see and marvel at heavens that are torn apart, valleys that are exalted, mountains that are brought low, and crooked paths that are made straight. In the wilderness, we learn how to traverse the paths of righteousness and how to participate in the work of divine liberation from all that would enslave and oppress us.

In the wilderness, we feel the gentle breeze and the mighty rushing wind of the Spirit, reminding us that the Spirit is not ours to contain, restrain, or domesticate. In the wilderness, we may learn again how to be attentive so that our lives may be open and receptive to the angels sent to minister to us. In the wilderness, we may be affirmed, filled with the Spirit, and we may hear anew the good news that heaven has touched earth and God has come near.

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3. "Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness," by James K. Manley, in *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), #286.