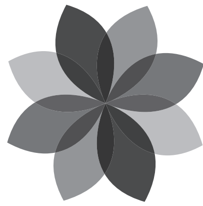
Year A, Volume 1

Advent through Epiphany



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship

Joel B. Green
Thomas G. Long
Luke A. Powery
Cynthia L. Rigby
Carolyn J. Sharp
General Editors

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Contents

LIST OF SIDEBARS ix

PUBLISHER'S NOTE xi

INTRODUCING CONNECTIONS xiii

INTRODUCING THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY xv

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1–5 2
Psalm 122 6
Romans 13:11–14 8
Matthew 24:36–44 12

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1–10 17
Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19 22
Romans 15:4–13 24
Matthew 3:1–12 29

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1–10 34
Psalm 146:5–10 39
Luke 1:46b–55 39
James 5:7–10 42
Matthew 11:2–11 46

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10–16 50
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 54
Romans 1:1–7 56
Matthew 1:18–25 61

Christmas Eve/Nativity of the Lord, Proper I

Isaiah 9:2–7 65
Psalm 96 70
Titus 2:11–14 72
Luke 2:1–14 (15–20) 76

Christmas Day/Nativity of the Lord, Proper II

Isaiah 62:6–12 81
Psalm 97 86
Titus 3:4–7 89
Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20 93

Christmas Day/Nativity of the Lord, Proper III

Isaiah 52:7–10 98
Psalm 98 102
Hebrews 1:1–4 (5–12) 104
John 1:1–14 109

First Sunday after Christmas Day

Isaiah 63:7–9 114
Psalm 148 118
Hebrews 2:10–18 120
Matthew 2:13–23 125

Second Sunday after Christmas Day

Jeremiah 31:7–14 130
Psalm 147:12–20 135
Ephesians 1:3–14 137
John 1:(1–9) 10–18 141

Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1–6 146
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14 150
Ephesians 3:1–12 152
Matthew 2:1–12 157

Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1–9 162
Psalm 29 167
Acts 10:34–43 169
Matthew 3:13–17 173

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 49:1–7 177
Psalm 40:1–11 182
1 Corinthians 1:1–9 184
John 1:29–42 188

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 9:1–4 193
Psalm 27:1, 4–9 197
1 Corinthians 1:10–18 200
Matthew 4:12–23 204

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Micah 6:1–8 209
Psalm 15 214
1 Corinthians 1:18–31 216
Matthew 5:1–12 221

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12) 225
Psalm 112:1–9 (10) 230
1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16) 233
Matthew 5:13–20 238

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
Deuteronomy 30:15–20 242
Psalm 119:1–8 247
1 Corinthians 3:1–9 249
Matthew 5:21–37 253

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18 258
Psalm 119:33–40 263
1 Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23 265
Matthew 5:38–48 269

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 49:8–16a 273
Psalm 131 278
1 Corinthians 4:1–5 280
Matthew 6:24–34 284

Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany
Deuteronomy 11:18–21, 26–28 288
Psalm 31:1–5, 19–24 292
Romans 1:16–17;
3:22b–28 (29–31) 294
Matthew 7:21–29 300

Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 24:12–18 304
Psalm 2 308
Psalm 99 308
2 Peter 1:16–21 311
Matthew 17:1–9 315

CONTRIBUTORS 321
AUTHOR INDEX 325
SCRIPTURE INDEX 327

Publisher's Note

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

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

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

A project of this size does not come together without the work of excellent support staff. Above all we are indebted to project manager Joan Murchison. Joan's fingerprints are all over the book you hold in your hands; her gentle, yet unconquerable, persistence always kept it moving forward in good shape and on time. Pamela Jarvis skillfully compiled the volume, arranging the hundreds of separate commentaries and Scriptures into a cohesive whole.

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

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

WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS

Introducing Connections

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOEL B. GREEN
THOMAS G. LONG
LUKE A. POWERY
CYNTHIA L. RIGBY
CAROLYN J. SHARP
General Editors

Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JENNIFER L. LORD
Connections Editorial Board Member

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1–5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11–14
Matthew 24:36–44

Isaiah 2:1–5

[1]The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

[2]In days to come
  the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
  and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
  [3]Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
  to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
  and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
  and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
[4]He shall judge between the nations,
  and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
  and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
  neither shall they learn war any more.

[5]O house of Jacob,
  come, let us walk
  in the light of the LORD!

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Some people think that there are two beginnings to the book of Isaiah. After all, Isaiah 1 begins with "The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz . . . ," and Isaiah 2 begins with "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw . . ." It seems as if the final redactor of the book of Isaiah forgot to block and delete—and we are left with two beginnings.

Another approach would be to concede these strikingly similar opening verses to chapter 1 and chapter 2 and then to wonder why. The contrast between the two chapters is strong. Reflected in Isaiah 1 is a scene of unbroken doom and gloom. The judgment of God against Judah for wickedness and injustice is described in excruciating detail. Cities are laid bare, vineyards uprooted, princes dethroned—all as a result of God's wrath. The end of chapter 1 is smoky, dark, and wretched. Chapter 2 begins again. It is a fresh start with a decidedly fresh message. Now, the house of the Lord sits on the highest mountain. All the nations of the world flow upward toward that house, and the word of the Lord flows down and blesses the nations.

Rather than being the result of carelessness of a final editor, these two adjacent prophetic words deliver a strong rhetorical wallop that demonstrates editorial skill and intent. Against the backdrop of chapter 1, a chapter of ominous

shadows, chapter 2:1–5 describes the universal reach of God's gracious actions. The juxtaposition of these two "beginnings" of the book of Isaiah is not the only literary device that emphasizes God's divine purposes. In addition, there is considerable *movement* in this text: the mountain will be raised up; people go upward; God's word extends downward; the nations will beat their swords and spears into agricultural tools. The interesting images of "going up" and "going forth" suggest that the nations are drawn to the house of the Lord and that God's blessings cascade down to all nations. The images suggest flow and abundance. There is no one who can hide from the word of God that goes forth. It extends to all the earth.

God's action and intention as revealed in this text challenge some of our contemporary assumptions in interesting ways. In our time, when cultural particularity and context are highly valued, this text insists that Israel's God exerts divine authority over all nations and levels their distinctions. This may strike some of us as old-fashioned. After all, this text does not seem to take seriously particularities that are so important to us, but Isaiah is not burdened with our categories. Instead, he declares God's salvation for all nations as they stream up to the mountain of the Lord. The emphasis on all nations flowing up the mountain, as if they are being drawn by the sheer magnetism of God's divine purposes, is not necessarily a denial of cultural integrity. It is, instead, a claim on the cosmic reach of God's word.

This Advent text contains some of the most famous words of Isaiah. The images of "swords into plowshares" and "spears into pruning hooks" and "neither shall they learn war any more" are embedded in Christian imagination and piety. These images have found their way into both Christian hymnody and antiwar folk songs. They stir the hopes and longings of people exhausted by the senselessness of war and violence. Songs like "Down by the Riverside" contain lyrics that evoke Isaiah 2:4, "Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside, and I ain't gonna study war no more."

The meaning of this text for Advent preaching reaches far beyond the longings for disarmament and universal peace, as deep and profound as those longings are. This text sits in juxtaposition on the First Sunday in Advent with Romans 13 and Matthew 24. The Romans 13:11–14 text sounds notes of urgency, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." The Matthew 24:36–44 text warns that the timing of the Lord's return is inexplicable and famously forecasts eschatological surprises, "Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left." When read in concert with these other lectionary texts for the day, the Isaiah 2 text reveals God's character and intent for restoration.

The primary meaning of the text as revealing the determined gracious intent of God for all nations means that it is not a text of future prediction. Often congregations continue to assume that Old Testament prophecy is a window into the future. The scope of this text is much wider. This text is a breathtaking restatement of God's ongoing promises to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. God promises that God will bless the people to be a blessing to the nations and that God will protect the people of Israel for the sake of God's own mission. Christians understand that this promise is extended to them through Jesus Christ. For them, too, God will bless the church to be a blessing to all people, and God will be faithful to the church for the sake of God's own mission. For many congregations and denominations that are declining in numbers, this is a genuine word of comfort and hope. God is not done with us yet.

Advent hope is not a yearly exercise of playing pretend. Instead, Advent hope is fully aware of what was, what is, and what is to come. Theologian Ted Smith once said,

> For when we are willing to say that we have lived in latter days, indeed, that we live in them now . . . when we are willing to say that God met Israel, kept covenant, in both the First and Second Temples, even if they were ultimately destroyed . . . when we are willing to say that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, even if we ultimately killed that Word . . . when we are willing to say that Christmas has already come, really come, to this world in

> which we live now . . . then *our hope begins to deepen*. . . . Our hope becomes . . . something other than wishful fulfillment. It is for a God whose love for us only deepens in our rejection of that love. . . . It is for a Prince of Peace who reigns even in the midst of war and rumors of war.[1]

The promise of Isaiah 2:1–4, a text set immediately after a description of vast destruction, expands our understanding of hope. Two prominent Protestant thinkers of the last century identified the deep paradox of Advent hope. Peter Gomes once preached an Advent sermon entitled "Humbug and Hope"[2] that questioned shallow understandings of Advent hope. Superficial jollity in a world of suffering and pain is not Advent hope. Joseph Sittler said that honesty compels us to admit that the track record of humanity is very grim, and there is no excuse for chirpy hopefulness. He also admitted that he regularly plants trees. Against all evidence to the contrary, Christians hope.

LEANNE VAN DYK

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

When the typical worshiper settles in this Sunday, there will most likely be familiar sights and sounds: wreath, candles, the color purple, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It must be Advent. Advent is more than the transition from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Advent is more than the beginning of the church liturgical year. Advent is John the Baptist and preparing the way. Cue the sermons on the difference between waiting and preparing. Advent is also an affirmation of living the in-between of the already and the not-yet. Indeed, Christ has come in the child Jesus, and the church again cries out for Jesus to quickly come again. Do not forget the Advent proclamation of the light of Christ shining still amid the world's darkness. Advent is a season boldly to lean into God's future unafraid. The themes of Advent are as familiar as the liturgical decorations and the congregational song. Advent is a kind of comfort food for those who gather for worship, especially those for whom the church feels like home this time of year.

The word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, then, can be understood as a steady refrain in the season that proclaims and affirms God's promise. Isaiah's portrayal of the divine hope strikes familiar notes in the believer's ear about the days to come. He tells of nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord and a peace that transforms the world. Isaiah's vision is less an opening trumpet blast and more like a constant, rhythmic note sounded over and over again to God's people: swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, learning war no more. The preacher has to allow Isaiah to keep playing—not just because it is Advent, but because the kingdom seems so distant, the darkness so intense, the world so far removed from what the prophet describes. Tell us again, Isaiah, about the days to come!

Conversations between pastors and church members (or even strangers) seem weightier these days. Not long ago a member of my congregation that I rarely see in worship stopped me in the grocery store. "So what are you saying to people these days who worry about the state of the world? Thousands of years and we are still fighting and killing each other. It never gets any better!" He went on to tell me he was getting old and the worry was not for him but for his grandchildren. "Is a little peace too much to ask?" he said with sadness and a dismissive wave of his hand as he walked away. He was asking me about what Isaiah calls "the days to come." Our encounter in the milk aisle was less an inquiry about my preaching and more a missed opportunity on my part to offer pastoral care.

Most preachers these days are having those conversations and being asked about the bigger life pictures of strife and what has come to be called "the current climate" of bitterness and

1. Ted Smith, "Later Days, Isaiah 2:1–5." http://Day1.org/5368–later_days.
2. Preached December 4, 2005, at Harvard Memorial Church; https://soundcloud.com/harvard/peter-j-gomes-humbug-and-hope.

divide. A genuine existential angst about the world is being shared with pastor after pastor. An older member, who lives alone, wants a little comfort after reading the morning news. The young parent is looking for a bit of grounding and more than a little care and companionship along the way. A college student is asking for some assurance in the next season of life.

It is a question for Advent. It is much less an inquiry about the calendar and much more a yearning to hear of God's promise. This Advent question about "the days to come" strikes close to the heart for the followers of Jesus. It is that restless spirit that can be answered only by our hope in God. It is a longing that can be soothed only by the comfort of our future in God. The Advent plea comes with a desire for God to teach us again of God's ways. That once again God would lead us in God's path. When the hearers of the Word are overwhelmed by a fretfulness that does not go away, those who rise to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ have the responsibility and the privilege of proclaiming the Word of the Lord from the prophet and giving witness to that voice that is endless.

Years ago on a visit to a mountain cabin far into the woods and away from the busyness of life, one of our children announced at bedtime that it was so dark inside that cabin that he thought it was actually darker with his eyes open than with them shut. A successful search for a night-light or two offered a solution. The child was right. The cabin was really too dark. The wise observation, though, applies in all of life. There are moments when it feels darker with one's eyes opened.

When the nations totter, hatred is on the rise, and peace cannot be found, days can be uncomfortably frightening and overwhelmingly dark for people of all ages. Such a vivid darkness also comes in broken relationships, in conversations with doctors about a diagnosis, in caring for a dying parent. There are other kinds of darknesses in life, and it is so dark at times that it can feel as if you cannot see your hand in front of your face. A mother whose young adult child faces a heartbreak that cannot be fixed experiences a worry that causes many sleepless nights. A person who is rapidly losing independence due to dementia must look into a darkness of helplessness that is beyond description. Any sixth-grader who is convinced that absolutely everyone in the third-period class hates them can so easily slip into the shadow of despair. In every congregation on an Advent Sunday, there is darkness haunting the lives of at least some of those who gather.

Yes: wreath, candles, the color purple, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It must be Advent. For worship planners and preachers Advent comes every year. Advent just will not quit. It keeps coming and coming. That is not a bad thing. It can be part of the Advent proclamation. It is as if God's promise spoken through the word of the prophet has a life of its own. In every season of a person's life, the Advent message can break through, but the Advent promise is bigger than that. In a culture that is so strikingly antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the light of God's grace still offers a flicker of hope that can guide the way. From the most personal to the most global, the prophet's Advent word can bring light. In all the days that come, whatever days that come, the Advent proclamation of God's promise plays on.

Together, the people of God will still be walking. Those who know themselves to be the body of Christ will be walking in the light of the Lord. Taking their cue from Isaiah and the rest of the Hebrew prophets, they will be reassuring one another and telling the world of the comfort of God's grace. The followers of Jesus will be yearning to hear and proclaim the assurance of God's mercy. They will be crying out again to know of the hope of God's promise. While basking again in God's presence, they are still, and will always be, crying out for more peace. Basking in the light of God's presence and crying out for more peace. It must be Advent.

DAVID A. DAVIS

Psalm 122

[1]I was glad when they said to me,
  "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"
[2]Our feet are standing
  within your gates, O Jerusalem.

[3]Jerusalem—built as a city
  that is bound firmly together.
[4]To it the tribes go up,
  the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
  to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
[5]For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
  the thrones of the house of David.

[6]Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
  "May they prosper who love you.
[7]Peace be within your walls,
  and security within your towers."
[8]For the sake of my relatives and friends
  I will say, "Peace be within you."
[9]For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
  I will seek your good.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

The word *shalom* provides a drumbeat through this psalm, where it is translated as "peace." The word *shalom* is also included in the Hebrew name of God's city, Jerusalem, which means "foundation of peace." In Hebrew, the sound of peace is echoed as the name Jerusalem is read. Isaiah's vision of peace involves people journeying to the mountain of the Lord's house, where they will learn God's ways that they may "walk in his paths" (Isa. 2:3). God's way is a journey of and toward peace.

The sound of peace is not merely the absence of conflict but also the presence of justice, prosperity, and goodness. *Shalom* is also reflected in Isaiah 2, where the prophet proclaims that God shall judge between the nations, and the people will convert their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, tools of abundance and provision. Shalom means we do not have to study war anymore.

Our course of study will not be war, but peace. God's path leads us out into the world, as bearers of what we have learned, so we may teach others of God's peace. "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (v. 3). The Gospel text of the day instructs hearers to "keep awake therefore" (Matt. 24:42), which reinforces the active nature of our preparation, our instruction, and our work as we walk God's paths. These texts call us to see our faith not as the destination, but as an involved and continued journey, where we are always learning, always transforming our violent ways into instruments of peace, abundance, and provision.

Isaiah invites people to "walk in the light of the LORD" (v. 5), which picks up themes in the

New Testament passages assigned for the day. Paul instructs people to "lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Rom. 13:12). Matthew does not mention light, but the instruction to "keep awake" suggests the dangers of darkness, when thieves break in to steal. Advent occurs during the darkness of winter in North America. It is a dark and difficult season for many people. How can we invite people to "walk in the light of the Lord" through the darkness of a season?

Psalm 122 describes Jerusalem as a city that is "bound firmly together" (Ps. 122:3). To the psalmist, perhaps the reference is more about the soundness of physical construction, the strength of walls and fortifications. For us, the psalm offers an image of our connectedness, of being deeply built together, one to another; it may be the image of hope in a fractured world that speaks of peace more than the reminder of military fortifications. How is God binding us together for peace? How are we connected and united across divisions?

As pilgrims, seeking God's shalom, God's peace, we find our common purpose with one another. We are not just journeying on the same road; we belong together. The salvation of the world is a call for "all the nations" of the world to stream to God's mountain (Isa. 2:2). Isaiah's prophecy also calls us to common purpose, across divisions. All nations will stream to God's mountain, where the things that divide us will not be stronger than the call to learn God's ways and walk in God's paths.

Advent, then, begins with a psalm for pilgrims, journeying to God's city of Jerusalem. Not only does it echo the imagery of Isaiah 2, where all nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord's house; it reminds us too of our own journey, our pilgrimage, through Advent. For what is it we are "preparing the way"? What is preparing to begin, to arrive, in our lives through Advent? The root of the word "advent" is the same root found in "adventure." Is Advent something we are excited to experience or something we need to "get through" as we survive the holiday season? These passages help us invite people into a journey that leads us through a season of peace toward the mystery of the nativity.

Our Advent journey is not without a destination. We do not wander in the wilderness with no goal. The mountain of the Lord (Isa. 2) and the house of the Lord (Ps. 122) give us imagery for our destination, as does a stable in Bethlehem. There is also a destination of time, a completion of time, the time for which we are keeping awake, when swords are transformed into plowshares and God's peace can be heard over the sound of God's people, rejoicing.

On this First Sunday of Advent, God might call us to worship through the words of Psalm 122.

Reader 1: I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
Reader 2: May there be peace within our walls.
Reader 1: We gather in prayer for the well-being of our community.
Reader 2: May there be peace within our neighborhoods, beyond these walls.
Reader 1: We gather in hope for the flourishing of the city.
Reader 2: May there be peace within our nation that builds bridges of hope across walls of division.

MARCI AULD GLASS

Romans 13:11–14

[11]Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; [12]the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; [13]let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. [14]Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

While Romans is often viewed as presenting the essence of Paul's theology for all time and people, it is important to remember that it was a letter written in his particular historical situation. In writing Romans, Paul interacted with the followers of Christ in the church in Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire. Despite the plight of humanity, Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul argues God's righteousness is manifested in the gospel—God's saving power through Jesus Christ's faithful obedience (1:16–17). This good news is available for all who believe in Christ regardless of their different human conditions such as ancestry, status, and gender (Gal. 3:28).

After addressing God's impartial saving grace through Jesus Christ in Romans 1–11, Paul provides more practical exhortations in chapters 12–16. Paul begins this latter section with the general appeal that the Roman Christians should present their bodies as living sacrifices. Paul then highlights that the holy place is not limited to the temple, but is where the believers' embodied worship takes place in everyday life (Rom. 12:1). This spiritual worship is communal. Paul indicates, bracketing this entire exhortation section with the same imperative (12:16; 15:5): "live in harmony with one another," or, differently rendered, "be like-minded toward one another."

This teaching is neither an abstract principle nor a simple community ethics. Instead, if one considers the situation of the house churches in Rome, living in harmony in the community is the way they should respond to the outside world. The Christians in Rome, particularly Jewish Christians who returned after Emperor Claudius's expulsion of Jews in 49 CE, faced pressure and intimidation in the imperial capital city. This is the context in which Paul warns that the Christians should overcome evil with good (12:17, 21) and be obedient to the governing authorities (13:1–7).

Paul's emphasis on peace with the hostile society and obedience to the human authorities is closely linked, by the concept of indebtedness, to the following advice on loving one another (13:8–10). Paul recommends them to pay to all what is owed (*opheilē*), whether it is taxes or honor to the authorities (13:7). Yet he continues to argue that they ought not to owe (*opheileis*) anyone anything, except to love one another (13:8). This means, then, that Christians do not owe anything to the governing authorities in principle, but should pay them what is required. Living in harmony and loving one another are acts of resisting the Roman economic system of debt-bondage.

Paul invites the audience to a deeper perception of why they should maintain such a proactive way of life under adverse social conditions: "Besides this, you know what time it is" (v. 11). This "time" is not clock time but *kairos*, the right or critical moment for action. The time is "now." Paul uses "now" and "time" together to indicate "present time" elsewhere in Romans. This "now time" is not only the time to demonstrate that

God is just and also justifies the one who believes in Christ (3:21, 26; cf. 11:5), but is also the time of sufferings that awaits "the glory about to be revealed to us" (8:18). In this strong anticipation, Paul can say that "our" salvation is nearer now than before (13:11).

This approach to our collective salvation is better understood with the metaphors of day/night and light/darkness. This dualistic language describes the contrast between this age and the age to come. While the death and resurrection of Christ manifest the dawn of the new age, or the "incursion of the future age into the old age" in J. Christiaan Beker's terms, the believers live in the overlap of the two ages until Christ's return.[1] This passing age persists with the bondage of sin and death as well as the lust of the flesh (13:14; 8:1–11). Paul demonstrates, however, that the night is almost over and the day is near (13:12a). In 1 Thessalonians 5:5–10, where Paul employs the same dualistic metaphors, he says, "we belong to the day" (1 Thess. 5:8).

Though it is still dark outside, those who live as if it is the day are awake, sober, and "put[ting] on the armor of light" (Rom. 13:12b). This way of living honorably is further defined in contrast with the vices listed as the works of darkness in 13:13 (see also Gal. 5:19–21). However, putting on the armor of light does not entail merely engaging ethical behaviors that the believers should choose; it also describes believers' ontological status as those who put on Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27–28). In the new age, humanity is renewed into Christlike people.

The same word "armor" is used to mean "instrument" in Romans 6:12–13: "Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as *instruments* of wickedness, but present yourselves to God . . . as *instruments* of righteousness" (cf. 12:1). The power of sin and death has not been totally defeated, but believers putting on Jesus Christ are free from their death-dealing power. Many people sense that the night is darkest just before dawn. Romans 13:13 indicates that the day has not fully come: "live [walk] honorably as in the day." One sees the day dawning, not necessarily knowing the exact time of sunrise, and puts on the armor of light that shines in darkness.

In times of uncertainty, especially regarding Christ's coming and the end of the age (Matt. 24:3), what is needed is watchful living. Matthew is the only one among the Gospel writers who uses the Greek noun *parousia* for Christ's second "coming" (also "appearance" or "presence"). Recognizing the critical time of now does not involve knowing the day and hour of his coming (Matt. 24:36). Rather, unpredictability about the day of Christ's *parousia* leads the Christians to keep awake (Matt. 24:42; 25:13), as Paul calls attention to the critical time for the Roman Christians to "wake from sleep" (Rom. 13:11). Staying awake requires believers to discern the dawn of the age and to prepare for the work of the day in their ordinary lives.

"The house of the Lord" on Mount Zion stands for the presence or coming of God in both lectionary readings of Psalm 122 and Isaiah 2:1–5. Psalm 122 expresses longing for the peace of Jerusalem. When the songs of ascent (Pss. 120–134) were recited, however, the audience heard Psalms 120 and 121, which illustrate the situations of alienation, attack, and war. Isaiah envisions the establishment of God's reign in the dark moment of history when Judah was corrupted in the sight of God and under the upcoming threat of Assyria. Looking for the peaceful "days to come" when weapons will be transformed into farming instruments, Isaiah exhorts, "Let us walk in the light of the Lord" (Isa. 2:2, 5).

Jesus came into the world filled with violence, suffering, and death, but his first coming gave the world the ultimate hope of salvation. Anticipating Christ's second coming, Paul says, our "salvation is nearer" (Rom. 13:11). As he envisions the advent of salvation more than ever, he highlights living in harmony with one another and loving one another. Staying awake or living in the divine light in the end times is not an individual or sectarian practice of spirituality. What is the life context in which today's Christians await the coming of Christ? Waiting is not passive but active resistance to darkness.

1. J. Christiaan Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 28.

When it is darkest, hope shines. In times of suffering, people hold together in love. Thus there is a strong connection between eschatological hope and love.

JIN YOUNG CHOI

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

For many of us, our first exposure to Christian eschatology was not altogether pleasant. The idea that Christ was coming again to sweep believers into heaven and bring history to an end was not, in my young mind, good news. I was very much enjoying life as it was in the present: the nurturing love of my parents and family, the bright sun on a summer afternoon, the sweet taste of an apple, the incredible burst of an autumn color on the Allegheny Mountains that surrounded our town, and an abundance of snow to shovel and play with in winter. There was also baseball—the one constant and adhesive that held time together between the end of the season at a World Series, the anticipation of spring training, and then, finally, opening day. Early on I experienced the tension between the promise of future times and the goodness of the present time, between waiting in anticipation and loving life in the world now. This tension remains.

It is not possible to avoid the persistent and pervasive scriptural focus on the future. Both the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Isa. 2:1–5) and the Gospels (e.g., Matt. 24:36–44) look forward to God's promised day of fulfillment. The apostle Paul clearly assumed that the last days and the return of Christ were imminent. To the Christians in the early church in Rome, he urges alertness and invokes the images of darkness and light, night and day. He envisions the mysterious dawn, slowly pushing back the darkness, and a new day with all its promise and potential emerging. "Stay awake! Be alert! Full attention!" Paul insists. "Do not miss it when it happens and, by the way, live in light of its nearness: honorably, soberly, honestly, justly, peaceably." That is good advice at any time and in any circumstance, particularly as the season of Advent begins.

Yet, Paul's timetable was wrong. The early church lived with a clear and urgent sense that Christ would return in the immediate future. In a threatening environment full of very real danger, the idea that the end times were near was good news, because it meant God was about to make everything right again. The first major adjustment the Christian church had to make was to deal with the reality that Christ had not returned and that, therefore, a strategy for long-term survival was necessary. The challenge for the early church was to retain Paul's urgent sense of imminent fulfillment while at the same time facing the reality of living indefinitely in the real world.

That challenge is ours as well. We are still living in the in-between time. The kingdom of God came into history in Jesus Christ, but we still wait for its final fulfillment.

Unhappily, the sense of the nearness of the end times can be a distraction from the task of living faithfully in the world. It can be and has been exploited. The *Left Behind* series of sixteen novels, regaling readers with the drama of a final, bloody end of history, has sold a phenomenal sixty-five million books. *The Apocalyptic* is a popular movie that has also inspired instances of human tragedy, as believers become convinced that the world's end is immediately ahead, leading many to sell all their belongings and wait in unfulfilled expectation.

Bedrock Christian faith trusts that history has a final goal. For in Jesus Christ, God has entered human history to point humanity toward ultimate reconciliation and redemption. Also, God is constantly present in human history—nudging, urging, pushing, prodding, and leading us toward the promised end. Unlike modern purveyors of eschatological nonsense, Paul urges the community to settle in and live responsibly and honorably, avoiding excessive behavior and getting along with one another. He exhorts them to live life as thoroughly as Jesus lived it, instructing them to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" as if it were a new suit of clothing.

Among the influential books in theological education and academia is Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. Its primary objective was to rescue eschatology from fringe fanatics and charlatans and place it at the center of Christian discourse. Moltmann laments the fact that eschatology has become for so many of us today "a loosely attached appendix that wandered off into obscure irrelevance."[2] He argues that relegating eschatology to the end times robs it of its significance both for the church and for individual believers in the present.

Moltmann reminds readers that "Christianity is eschatology, is hope, is forward looking and forward moving and therefore revolutionary in transforming the present" (21). Scripture promises that God gives newness, fulfillment, and hope. In it we are told that God is always before us, out in front of us, bidding us to a new and hopeful future.

People who trust the God of the future will never be complacent about the present. Again, as Moltmann states, "faith, when it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart but is itself the unquiet heart in us. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it" (21).

Instead of patiently waiting to be transported from this world into heaven, faithful people are impatient for justice, fairness, equality, and peace in this world. Because history is moving toward God's goal of the reconciliation of all things, the church is a "constant disturbance in human society . . . the source of continued new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here, in the light of the future that is to come" (22). Hopeful people are troublemakers in the world, and the hope that is in them is the source of vitality, energy, courage, and life itself.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist caught up in World War II, was a survivor of Nazi death camps. After the war he reflected on his experience. In two important books, *Man's Search for Meaning* and *The Unconscious God,* Frankl concludes that the prisoners who survived were those who somehow did not sink into despair but lived with hope. Hope turned out to be a life-giving source. "Only those who were oriented toward the future, toward a goal in the future, toward a meaning to fulfill in the future were likely to survive."[3]

There is a freedom that accompanies trust and confidence that in Jesus Christ ultimate issues have been resolved: that whatever chaos, suffering, and cruelty are happening in the world at the moment, history's final outcome remains safely in God's hands. That freedom allows believers to live thoroughly in the now, awake and alert to the presence of God. As Cynthia Rigby writes: "God's presence allows us to enjoy our experiences on this earth by reminding us that these moments are not all there is. . . . The eternal future, as it breaks into the present, frees us from worrying. . . . Advent is a fine time to remember that the One who is coming is already here, freeing us to be fully present to this very day."[4]

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 15. The next three quotes are from Moltmann, with page source in parentheses.

3. Viktor Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychiatry and Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), 139.

4. Cynthia Rigby, "Meandering Hope," *Presbyterian Outlook* 199 (2017): 46.

Matthew 24:36–44

[36]"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. [37]For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. [38]For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, [39]and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. [40]Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. [41]Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. [42]Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. [43]But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. [44]Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Many in the early church were preoccupied with the question of when exactly Jesus might return. There were speculations about the exact time and manner of Jesus' second coming (*parousia*). Not surprisingly, there were predictions about when exactly Jesus would return and where he might appear (Matt. 24:26–28), resulting in excessive anxiety about the delay in Jesus' return. Such a preoccupation, or a critique of it, is evident in Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians as well as in this lectionary reading, Matthew 24:36–44. In this text, the Matthean Jesus cautions his disciples against allowing themselves to be misled by anyone who might offer false guidance about this major, life-changing event in the early church. A basic but essential clarification here is that, although the words themselves are attributed to Jesus, the concerns and the perspectives expressed in the text reflect the historical context of the Matthean community in late first century.

In the preceding section (24:30–35), Jesus offers the assurance, at least for the elect, that the Son of Man will indeed return. He insists that he will return before that generation passes away, and even gives some clues that will precede and signify arrival of the expected event. However, as the text implies, his audience might still be asking for information about the exact time of his return. They are right to ask how long they will have to wait for an event that has already consumed much of their energy and attention. The Matthean Jesus employs two analogies to address that question, the Noah flood story and the thief who comes during the late night. These two analogies represent two extreme and dangerous attitudes of Matthean community vis-à-vis this climactic and life-changing event.

In the story of flood, the issue is the occurrence of the unexpected and unforeseen event that cost the lives of countless humans and living creatures. People were so focused on their earthly concerns—eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage—that they were caught entirely off guard by the flood. The Noah story also highlights people's preoccupation with their own concerns and sense of normalcy in a manner that made them oblivious to and distant from the ways of the Divine. Their main concern was the earthly dimension (human-to-human) rather than the vertical relationship between God and human. Their all-consuming emphasis on their earthly existence and all its attendant issues made them wicked in the eyes of God.

Matthew then addresses the question of the time of Jesus' second coming by employing an analogy that Paul also employs in First

Obey with the Best Heart We Have

Year passes after year silently; Christ's coming is never nearer than it was. O that, as He comes nearer earth, we may approach nearer heaven! O my brethren, pray Him to give you the heart to seek Him in sincerity. Pray Him to make you in earnest. You have one work only, to bear your cross after Him. Resolve in His strength to do so. Resolve to be no longer beguiled by "shadows of religion," by words, or by disputings, or by notions, or by high professions, or by excuses, or by the world's promises or threats. Pray Him to give you what Scripture calls "an honest and good heart," or "a perfect heart," and, without waiting, begin at once to obey Him with the best heart you have. Any obedience is better than none,—any profession which is disjoined from obedience, is a mere pretense and deceit. Any religion which does not bring you nearer to God is of the world. You have to seek His face; obedience is the only way of seeking Him. All your duties are obediences. If you are to believe the truths He has revealed, to regulate yourselves by His precepts, to be frequent in His ordinances, to adhere to His Church and people, why is it, except because *He* has bid you? And to do what He bids is to obey Him, and to obey Him is to approach Him. Every act of obedience is an approach,—an approach to Him who is not far off, though He seems so, but close behind this visible screen of things which hides Him from us. He is behind this material framework; earth and sky are but a veil going between Him and us; the day will come when He will rend that veil, and show Himself to us. And then, according as we have waited for Him, will He recompense us. If we have forgotten Him, He will not know us; but "blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching. . . . He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them, And if He shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants." May this be the portion of every one of us! It is hard to attain it; but it is woeful to fail. Life is short; death is certain; and the world to come is everlasting.

John Henry Newman, "Watching," in *Selections adapted to the Seasons of the Ecclesiastical Year from the Parochial and Plain Sermons of John Henry Newman* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1900), 36–37.

Thessalonians, of the thief who comes late at night. This analogy heightens the need for believers to be aware and watchful, as well as addressing the folly of trying to predict the exact timing of Jesus' earthly return. Since it is impossible to predict at what point in the late night the thief might come, the owner of the house must focus on being thoroughly prepared for the event, irrespective of when he might arrive. More importantly, he must devote his energies to safeguarding the house against a possible intrusion. An excessive focus on the time of the event is not only futile; it can also undermine a believer's ability to do the necessary preparatory work.

Jesus seems to suggest that his return is both certain and yet unpredictable. Therefore, an excessive focus on when the Son of Man will return entirely misses the point, as it will have the effect of shifting one's attention and energies away from the present into the future. Such an attitude would be the exact opposite of how people responded in Noah's time, in that they were primarily concerned with their present earthly relationships.

Given the difficulty of predicting the time of Jesus' return, the goal for the Matthean community was to be sufficiently prepared for it, so that the exact time of the eschatological event became irrelevant. No believer can know when Jesus will return to earth. Yet believers must be vigilant and remain in a state of preparation for such a grand event. Although the second coming of Jesus is a future event, believers' energies should be directed toward being ready for the event. In other words, the process of preparing for Jesus' return, rather than predicting its occurrence, remains the primary goal for every Christian.

What does this process of preparing for *parousia* entail? Matthew's explicit and consistent highlighting of Jesus' engagement with sociopolitical realities of his own time suggests that the evangelist wants his readers to engage

similar issues of his own time. The social ethic of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and siding with the marginalized is a recurrent theme in Jesus' ministry throughout the Gospel. The metaphor of thief at night indicates the need for a deeper and more sustained commitment to that social ethic on the part of believers. Any precise knowledge of the time of the thief's arrival would allow the owner of the house to prevent an intrusion without necessarily addressing any structural deficiencies that render the house vulnerable to an intrusion.

On the contrary, lack of such precise knowledge would require the owner continually to be on guard and to reinforce the house. Similarly, unpredictability about the time of the *parousia* becomes a positive factor as it has the effect of motivating believers to be constantly committed to a life that is consistent with the values and ethos of the gospel. The Matthean Jesus seems to suggest that, precisely because it is impossible to make accurate predictions about the time of the *parousia*, the best approach for believers is continually to lead faithful lives. Believers need to make good deeds and commitment to horizontal relations with fellow humans the ongoing focus of their lives, rather than a seasonal or momentary exercise. An ethic of communal responsibility and commitment to the welfare of others becomes an identity marker, rather than a phase that one goes through at Jesus' return. Seen this way, the text links the expectation of Jesus' return to certain moral and ethical expectations and shifts the goal of Christian living from eschatology to ethics.

The subsequent section, the parable in Matthew 24:45–47, is about using believers' time and talents to enrich others rather than looking out for oneself. The preparedness of believers is judged by how they work for the benefit of others in the community rather than focusing solely on a future prize and, in the process, losing their souls. Believers are judged not so much by how well they are prepared to enter heaven but by how much they have been attending to the concerns of others in the community. Along those lines, discipleship is not an event or a phase but a constant state of being prepared and committed to fellow humans.

In the story of Noah, people were overly focused on attending to their own matters, but people in Matthew's community, as in many other early Christian communities, were primarily interested in the eschatological event rather than attending to the needs of others. Common to both contexts, however, is the tendency for humans to look out for their own interests rather than be attentive to the needs of others. The lectionary text seems to call for a balance between the two, the here and now and the eschatological. In addition, it offers assurance and certainty about the *parousia* but provides no specificity about the time. The believers are encouraged to dwell in that tensive space between certainty and specificity, but such a space can engender true discipleship as it encourages them to be at their best.

RAJ NADELLA

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

In this passage, we are told we cannot know the time of an event but warned to be prepared for it anyway! The only solution to such a conundrum, of course, is to always be prepared, and therefore it is not that we are to do something out of the normal. Our "being prepared" is supposed to become the new normal! What is called for in this passage, therefore, is nothing less than an alternative lifestyle: living in Advent.

The biblical literature that deals with the anticipation of significant changes in the world is "apocalyptic," based on the Greek term for "revelation" or "something uncovered." The New Testament draws upon the images we are familiar with, not only from the Hebrew Scriptures but even more from the apocalyptic writings of Jewish writers before (and after) Jesus' time. Typical of this genre are bizarre visions

combined with a profound expectation of a coming change in circumstances. Here in Matthew the issue is less the strange symbolism, and more the urgency and unexpectedness of Jesus' return to complete what he started in his first appearance.[1]

Three times in this passage, reference is made to what we do "know"—but more importantly to what we do not know (vv. 36, 42, and 43, from *oida*), and another two times about what we do or do not "perceive" (from *ginōskō*, vv. 39 and 43). In this passage, "no one knows" the time (rendering this as "hour" is a bit of a euphemism; the Greek suggests simply a short measure of time, even a "moment," cf. Gen. 18:14, "set time"; or Sir. 11:27, rendered in NJB as "a moment's adversity"; and significantly Daniel 11:35, given its similar apocalyptic context: "appointed time"; cf. Mark 13:32). The images used in the passage involve unexpected events while living a regular life.

What does being unprepared mean? It is interesting that the flood story is used here to refer to "eating and drinking," as well as to engaging in marriage arrangements. Excessive eating and drinking are associated with the wealthy and oppressive elite in the prophets. Isaiah condemns those whose attitude is not repentance, but rather a refusal to change, to literally go down as defiant gluttons: ". . . eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isa. 22:12–14). Amos bitterly condemns those who engage in what we might call the "lifestyle of the rich and famous" (Amos 6:4–6); Micah bitterly denounces false prophets who say what they are paid (and fed!) to say (Mic. 3:5).

The issue is not merely "eating and drinking" (Jesus, you will recall, describes himself this way [Matt. 11:18–19]; ironically, Jesus is recognized as the risen Lord only when he eats, in Luke 24:30–31), but rather being uncaring in gluttonous overconsumption and focusing only on the things of this world. The point here is that "preparation" or "watchfulness" has nothing to do with obsessing over numbers, signs, and meanings. Rather, it has to do with living in the expectation that the teachings and example of Jesus are the norm! To "fear judgment" is surely another way of trying to live the right way. Luke puts a stronger edge on this thought in Luke 17:33 ("Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it") and then lists a slightly different version of two being together and one being taken. In Matthew, two are in the field, while Luke adds: "on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left" (Matthew refers to sowing "in the field" also in chap. 13). Luke further adds another example to the Noah story mentioned in Matthew: "Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building" (Luke 17:28).

Finally, verse 43 refers to the owner of a house and a thief. These references make considerably more sense when seen in the light of the presumably older version in Mark:

> "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." (Mark 13:34–37)

In this context, then, it is important to note the phrase that appears in the verse just before our passage; Jesus refers to his words not "passing away" (from *parerchomai*, v. 35; cf. Ps. 148:6). This same term for "pass away" appears in Daniel, referring both to imperial decrees (especially from Persian rulers, Dan. 6:12, cf. Esth. 8:8) that are thought to be permanent, but then contrasted with the power of God whose "decrees" and authority truly are eternal (so Dan. 7:14). A similar thought is expressed in that New Testament prophetic work, James, referring to the self-inflated rich folks who

1. Dale C. Allison. "Matthew," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 878.

imagine themselves powerful, but who will "pass away" "like a flower in the field" (Jas. 1:10). In short, the same contrast between the things of this world and the things of God is a biblical theme connected to apocalyptic discussions and social criticism.

It seems to be an especially human trait to be obsessive about what we really want to know, but simply do not (at least not yet). Is that why we love Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and Monsieur Poirot and especially Conan Doyle's Holmes (in all his modern versions in film and television)? Scientists also thrive on mysteries, which drive their work. In religious faith, if anything, we are even more obsessive about what we would like to know! While apocalyptic themes do not occupy major portions of the biblical text, the significance of apocalyptic fervor in troubled times is almost a cliché. Furthermore, however, the sheer persistence of speculation about the end and the relish with which some Christians speak of "end times" are both surely testaments to our capacity to endure difficulty by holding on to some kind of hope—especially a hope for change—and at the same time our incapacity to live without a sure knowledge of what is coming. Interpretations of Christianity that emphasize the imminence of the "end of time" are especially popular among the disenfranchised—affirming Marx's critique of religion as an "opiate" to numb people against their suffering. Yet his famous criticism also reveals a crucial tin ear when it comes to understanding how this perspective can itself be an expression of revolutionary "advent" fervor.

Apocalyptic interests in future changes often go hand in hand with a clear critique of the present. In his fascinating work about the early twentieth century, for example, James R. Green argues that socialist movements in parts of the United States (e.g., Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas) are hardly ever associated with political radicalism today. Green notes the frequency with which apocalyptic-minded Pentecostal movements fed directly into socialist activism![2] Christian concern for the future need not be hopelessly otherworldly. Matthew calls on us to live in the world precisely because we are in the advent of Christ!

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

2. See James R Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1–10
Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19
Romans 15:4–13
Matthew 3:1–12

Isaiah 11:1–10

[1]A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
[2]The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
[3]His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
[4]but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
[5]Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

[6]The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
[7]The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
[8]The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
[9]They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

[10]On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

A friend reports to me that whenever he reads Isaiah 11:1–10, he weeps. His eschatological longing is so deep that the motifs of the peaceable kingdom in this familiar text move him to his core. These images of the lion and the lamb, the child and the snake, the wild bear and the domesticated cow, have profoundly moved others as well. Nineteenth-century American painter Edward Hicks created more than a hundred depictions of this text; more

than sixty survive. John Buchanan notices that Hicks portrays the animals looking straight at the viewer with wide-eyed wonder. "Peace is startling. You don't see it often, maybe ever. In the middle of the picture is a child, a little girl or boy, with eyes also wide open as if startled by this unlikely reality."[1]

The peaceable kingdom portrays unlimited inbreaking of the kingdom of God and harmony between humans and animals. These are clearly images that reflect an expansive hope for justice, good order, and the well-being of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Children will not be hurt. Those vulnerable ones will be protected. Transformations and reversals abound.

This text was written by representatives of a people facing impending doom by Assyrian conquerors coming from the north. Situated most likely in the eighth century BCE, the authors used words that evoke hope and longing for a Davidic king who would rescue the threatened people. This stirring text of hope, however, was set in a thematic structure that begins with words of devastation in 10:33–34: "Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall."

The hope and promise of Isaiah 11:1–10 cannot be understood apart from what precedes it in chapter 10. The Lord judges all the nations. The destruction referenced by these verses includes Judah and the surrounding nations who put their trust in invading armies and political alliances. Yet even in these grim images of punishment and wrath, a hint of promise sounds: the prophet says there will be a "remnant" who "will lean on the Lord" (10:20–21). Both the promise of a remnant and the scorched-earth judgment of the Lord are the thematic precursors of the Isaiah 11 text. Isaiah, here and always, is a prophet of both cleansing judgment and gracious restoration. The metronome of Isaiah ticks back and forth between these two motifs of judgment and hope.

The lectionary text is identified as Isaiah 11:1–10, although the boundaries of the text are likely verses 1–9; verse 10 is a later addition. Nevertheless, the inclusion of verse 10 gives the text a reference to Jesse both at the beginning and the end. There is some exegetical debate about these two references. Verse 1 refers to a tender shoot coming from "the stump of Jesse" and verse 10 refers to "the root of Jesse." Many commentators conclude that these are rough equivalents. Some see interpretive movement between the two terms. One commentator suggests that the first reference, "stump of Jesse," indicates a Davidic king who will serve as a deliverer empowered and commissioned by God and that the second reference, "root of Jesse," indicates the restored postexilic community.[2] It is unlikely that such an exegetical debate would be fruitful in the context of a sermon, but the possibility of a progression in meaning from Davidic ruler to restored community is intriguing.

The bookends of this text, then, refer to some God-appointed person or community. The middle of the text is an extended elaboration of the results of empowered action by the spirit of the Lord. The repeated parallel phrases in verse 2 establish with growing intensity the agency of God, through the spirit of the Lord. It is God who acts with intent to restore and renew. The ruler is a means, an instrument of God's initiative. The action of the spirit of the Lord does not make the ruler a mere pawn; genuine work is accomplished by the ruler. Indeed, the ruler is busy; the ruler judges, decides, and metes out reward and punishment (vv. 3b–5), but it is the spirit of the Lord that animates and empowers the ruler.

It is also the spirit of the Lord that endows the ruler with an impressive list of capacities and qualities. Wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord will all qualify the ruler. The list of qualities of the leader (v. 2) and the resulting actions

1. John Buchanan, "Preaching the Advent Texts: Hope, Peace, Courage," *Journal for Preachers* 34, no. 1 (2010): 10.

2. Jacob Stromberg, "'The Root of Jesse' in Isaiah 11:10: Postexilic Judah, or Postexilic Davidic King?," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 4 (2008): 657.

of the leader (vv. 3–5) are both expansive and particular. The scope of this God-appointed leader is broad and ambitious as well as attentive and perceptive. The leader pays attention to the meek and the poor; this requires a level of care and patience that reflects the care and patience of God toward all of God's creatures. The leader is effective in the work of righteousness (*tsedeq*) because God's righteousness has equipped him. In Isaiah 11, as throughout all of Isaiah, the author and initiator of restoration is God.

Close regard of several phrases or words add to the texture of this text. The first verse refers to a shoot that emerges from a dead stump. A tender shoot is frail hope for new life. This evocative phrase reminds the reader of a similar image from Isaiah 42:3, referring to the Suffering Servant: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." The images of frail shoot, a broken blade of grass, and a barely smoldering candle wick are all precarious signs of life. This image from Isaiah 11:1 demonstrates how much God can do with so little. Another word that bears a closer look is the word "signal" in 11:10. Other close English equivalents are "banner" and "sign" and "standard." The Hebrew word is *nes*; it has connotations of declaration and announcement. The root of Jesse, whether this is the messianic leader or the restored community, broadcasts the knowledge of the Lord to all nations. This proclamation is comprehensive and universal; it goes out to all peoples.

The relationship of Isaiah 11:1–10 with the other lectionary texts for the Second Sunday of Advent can be identified in a number of ways. One thematic link is that of divine gracious initiative. Psalm 72:18 restates the theme of Isaiah 11:1–10 by saying, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things." Another thematic link is that of harmony and peace, versions of the peaceable kingdom. Romans 15 is an extended benediction of Paul, urging the believing community to take up patterns of harmony and hospitality. Romans 15:12 quotes the Isaiah text, drawing explicit connection between the "root of Jesse" and our "joy and peace in believing" (Rom. 15:13). One more thematic link is the longing and expectation of God's Messiah. In the Matthew 3 text, John the Baptist comes crashing into the Second Sunday of Advent, with blazing heat and intensity. Although very different in tone, the messages of Isaiah 11 and Matthew 3 both look forward with expectation for the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

LEANNE VAN DYK

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

When it comes to Advent and biblical texts, it may not get any more familiar than this. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." The spirit of the Lord rests on him through discerning wisdom, strong counsel, and knowledge that drips with the fear of the Lord. Delight in the worship of God! The poor are judged with righteousness. Fairness shall abide with the meek. Upon the earth, evil and wickedness will be brought to ruin by his word and breath. Word and Spirit along with righteousness and faithfulness will surround him. Young animals will curl up together. Cows and bears will graze in the same place. Even the lion will eat straw. The nursing child will play with venomous snakes. There will be no hurt or destruction in God's holy mountain.

More than just an Advent text, these words of Isaiah represent the soundtrack of a lifetime of Christmas Eves. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signpost for the people. All the nations will seek him out, and his dwelling place will be glorious. The evils of war, violence, and oppression shall be stomped out. The most vulnerable, whose lives are threatened by the lack of health care and poor education, shall experience the bounty of the world's resources. The poor will be lifted as God's righteousness abolishes poverty and all the hungry are fed. God's kingdom on that day will be a land full of wisdom and understanding. God's peaceable kingdom is

God's eternal dwelling place. According to Isaiah, it is more than peaceable. It is glorious.

Glorious! That is what Isaiah's audience ought to be saying as they wrap their imagination around the prophet's vision. Of course, for Isaiah and the rest of the Hebrew prophets, it was never about an audience. Prophets do not look for spectators. They do not seek to attract a crowd of bystanders motivated by a spirituality of self-interest. They are about creating, shaping, pruning, sending a kingdom people. They are calling God's people to do the work of justice and righteousness and sculpting God's people to be servants. Prophets send people to further the mission of God, working to bring about the promise of the peaceable, glorious kingdom.

Edward Hicks was the early-nineteenth-century Quaker who created the famous painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*. The painting is a memorable portrayal of the biblical scene with all the animals together in the forefront in such bright colors and with such vivid features. One finds a lamb at the feet of the lion and a child in their midst. The painting was posterized in churches and homes long before the word "posterize" made it into the urban dictionary. Hicks actually painted more than sixty different versions of the peaceable kingdom. Art historians think he probably painted more, but just over sixty exist today. One wonders if his persistence was about an artist trying to get it right or someone with a Quaker heart trying to decorate a lost world with as many visions of peace as he could.

One of the features in most (if not all) of the "peaceable kingdom" paintings is a contemporary scene to the left of the animals, sort of in the background, just beyond some body of water. Interpreters say it is most often a depiction of William Penn and associates making peace with a group of Native Americans. The stunning animal scene dominates the foreground of the painting with a depiction of the artist's nineteenth-century concept of peacemaking off to the left. Of course the twenty-first-century viewer should question the artist's understanding of true peacemaking in that scene of Native Americans and Quakers and place it within the truthful context of history.

Yet Hicks's numerous attempts at the peaceable kingdom cast a vision of the prophet's promise of shining a light on humanity's world. The artist sees around him the peacefulness of a new creation spilling into the world. The eternal hope of a glorious kingdom gives perspective to and even injects hope into a present reality always marred by the reality of human sin. Hicks offers a visual depiction of the prophet's "already and not yet." While waiting for that promised glorious kingdom to come, God's kingdom people are called to point to, work for, shout out, and claim the reign of God now. Maybe this is not a bad definition of Advent—an understanding of Advent that offers a vision of Christ's promised kingdom that sheds light on the world in real time; the peacefulness of God's new creation, which is yet to come, spilling into the here and how; the eternal hope of Christ's glorious kingdom inspiring, informing, and guiding the life of God's people in the present.

Early one morning, my wife and I were driving through Grand Teton National Park. It was not that long after we had passed through the gate that we came upon a park ranger standing smack in the middle of the road with one of those bright orange vests on. Facing us, he was rather energetically pointing to his left. I thought he was telling me to pull over, but this was a narrow road in a national park. Also, there was no berm to the road at all. So I just stopped and rolled down my window. Before I could say a word, the ranger blurted out in the loudest of voices, "You can't miss this!" He tossed his arm to the side like a referee signing first down. We turned to look in that direction. There was a moose, just off the road, taking a bath in a beaver pond. The moose was completely unruffled by the ranger's booming voice. They must have been friends. Without his clarion call we certainly would have missed it.

Sometimes the prophet's message can be communicated in the subtlety of a renowned artist's lasting work. At other times Isaiah's kingdom song comes in the complexity of the Hebrew Bible and is to be studied with the best tools of scholarship: history, theology, and language. Every now and then God's kingdom people have to stand with the prophet smack in the middle of the road, pointing and shouting, "You can't miss this!"

Some Advent seasons, a cantata just is not enough. With the help of Isaiah, the preacher can help the people of God look around at the world. The exhortation then is to stand up with Elijah and point to the eternal hope of Christ's glorious kingdom that sheds light in the world now.

However, pointing is not really enough, because prophets are not interested in spectators. Prophets are not interested in Christians who sit in the pew and say the church should stay out of politics. Prophets are not interested in self-absorbed believers who have concluded that it is really all about them and their punched ticket to eternity. Prophets call people to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with their God (Mic. 6:8). Prophets inspire people to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). Prophets tell of the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God who stood up in the synagogue and unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. Prophets proclaim the Messiah and his glorious kingdom. Prophets are about pruning, shaping, sending, creating, empowering, inspiring, encouraging, and calling a kingdom people. God's kingdom people are willing to point and shout and work and serve and love.

DAVID A. DAVIS

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

[1]Give the king your justice, O God,
 and your righteousness to a king's son.
[2]May he judge your people with righteousness,
 and your poor with justice.
[3]May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
 and the hills, in righteousness.
[4]May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
 give deliverance to the needy,
 and crush the oppressor.

[5]May he live while the sun endures,
 and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
[6]May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
 like showers that water the earth.
[7]In his days may righteousness flourish
 and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
. . . .
[18]Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
 who alone does wondrous things.
[19]Blessed be his glorious name forever;
 may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 72 is described as a psalm "Of Solomon." It is a psalm full of hyperbole and exalted description of his kingship. We hear the hope for the king to "live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon" (Ps. 72:5) and wonder if this is a messianic description, one of a king who is to come. Solomon did not, of course, endure as long as the moon. Robert Alter, in his translation of the psalms, writes, "The poem itself offers no compelling evidence for that reading. Court poetry everywhere revels in flattering hyperbole."[1]

The psalmist's description of the king is lush; he is like the rain that falls on the newly mown grass (v. 6), nourishing the earth. In his book *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, William P. Brown writes: "The image of steady rain, moreover, targets the constancy and potency of royal rule, its benefits and its promises. The rain sets the stage for the 'flourishing' of righteousness and peace, as if the moral order were a crop to be harvested."[2]

If Solomon is the king described in this psalm, he is a king of justice and righteousness, causing the very earth to serve as benefit for his people. The mountains yield prosperity and the hills yield righteousness. "In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more," declares the psalmist, who then offers praise to God, "who alone does wondrous things" (v. 18). The king is described as an actor on God's stage. He does the work given

1. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2007), 248.
2. Willliam P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 127.

to him by God (v. 1), yet the praise does not go to the king, but to the Lord. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things" (v. 18). We are not to confuse the created with the Creator. The good works we do reflect back to God, the source of our blessings.

Psalms are often filled with evocative images communicating God's steadfast love and mercy toward God's people, images that draw us toward a vision of a heavenly kingdom that is ordered differently than our human kingdoms. These images often come from mundane, familiar objects, envisioned with unfamiliar purpose. Psalm 72 is filled with trees, branches, mountains, rain—all images that would be very familiar to people who live on the land.

Imagery from nature continues in the lection from Isaiah 11. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa. 11:1). Stumps are not usually signs or images of life. Stumps remind us of what used to be there. In this case, it hearkens to rulers of the past, mainly David and Solomon. While we cannot water, prune, or nurture a dead stump to become a tree again, God can send a shoot from the stump, a branch to grow from its roots. Whether we expect to become messianic branches from kingly tree stumps or not, the image of being rooted in God's wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, and knowledge is pertinent to us all. Can our Advent journey be one of grounding?

This branch from the tree of Jesse will be a ruler like the one described in Psalm 72, girded with righteousness and faithfulness. The spirit of the Lord will rest on this branch, which makes clear that this leader is an agent of divine goodness, not the source of goodness and mercy. It is human nature, perhaps, to bestow our hopes on, and credit our successes to, human leaders. Both of these texts make clear that even the most righteous rulers point us to the steadfast love, mercy, and justice of God. Our praise is misdirected if it does not point toward God.

Isaiah paints an image of a new creation, with a new arrangement of relationships. Wolves and lambs live together. Predatory animals change their diets and become vegetarians, grazing next to former prey. Children will safely play with snakes. God's new day is one where every person and every animal is safe. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord (Isa. 11:9). The prophet and the psalmist encourage us to make our Advent journey be one of renewed commitment to creating safer communities and safer relationships as we work for God's new heaven and new earth. Used together, these texts also lend themselves to a call to worship.

Reader 1: A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
Reader 2: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.
Reader 1: Holy Spirit, rest on us this day; bring us your spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and might.
Reader 2: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.
Reader 1: May we create a world where the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.
Reader 2: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.
Reader 1: Blessed be God's glorious name for ever; let us worship in peace, hope, and love.

MARCI AULD GLASS

Romans 15:4–13

[4]For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. [5]May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, [6]so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[7]Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. [8]For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, [9]and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name";
[10]and again he says,
"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";
[11]and again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";
[12]and again Isaiah says,
"The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope."

[13]May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The hope of Advent is not unwarranted. Paul finds "endurance" and the "comfort" of the Scriptures (rendered "steadfastness" and "encouragement" in the NRSV, respectively) as the basis of Christian hope (Rom. 15:4). He argues that hope that is seen is not hope; thus we are required to wait for what is not seen with patience, aided by the Spirit's intercession (8:23–25). During the time of waiting, the Spirit is the pledge of the new age that is already at work through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Although we hope for what we do not see, hope has another tangible foundation, that the teachings of the Scripture were written not only for God's people in the past but also for those in the present days. Paul argues in Romans 13:9 that the law is summed up in this commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31; cf. Lev. 19:18). Just before our passage he quotes another Scripture speaking about the insults and shame King David experienced because of his zeal for God's house (presence), as well as his hope in God (Rom. 15:3; Ps. 69:9). Applying this biblical text to Christ's example, Paul now argues that the Roman Christians must follow his example in pleasing their neighbors rather than pleasing themselves (Rom. 15:2–3).

Paul's argument is consistently that the purpose of the Scriptures is to encourage Christians to love one another as they hope for their salvation. Actually, the source of the endurance and comfort is God, and that gift is for us, again, to "live in harmony with [or be like-minded toward] one another" (v. 5). This "life together"

involves glorifying God in unison, which is extended to this worshiping community's practice of welcome (vv. 6–7).

Paul uses Christ's example one more time to explain how this welcoming of one another serves the glory of God. Christ, as a Jew, was born in human form and was killed by crucifixion. Christ's faithful obedience and righteousness in the sight of God resulted in the Gentiles' access to the promises that were previously given to the patriarchs of Israel like Abraham (v. 8). Paul integrates hope into the promise of the Scripture and the hope of glory through the ministry of Christ. Just as Christ's welcoming of Gentile believers led them to glorify God and abound in hope, they must welcome one another and build up their neighbors (15:2, 7–13).

Worshiping God cannot be separated from welcoming others. These are essential components of Advent hope as Christians eagerly wait for the Day of the Lord when all the nations—usually translated as the "Gentiles" in English—will worship God together. Accordingly, this concrete vision of a future inclusive community inspires believers to practice welcome. Actually, for Paul, welcoming one another is neither a trivial nor a new issue in a church in which the Gentile and Jewish Christians coexist. His exhortations of mutual acceptance bracket 14:1–15:13.

> 14:1–12 Welcome those who are weak in faith (v. 1); God has welcomed them (v. 3).
> *Christ died and lived again* (v. 9).
>
> 15:7–13 Welcome one another; Christ has welcomed you (v. 7).
> *Christ has become a servant of the circumcised* (v. 8).

Between these two passages, the same message is repeated. In 14:13–23, Paul admonishes primarily the so-called strong in faith not to judge the weak, whose faith led them to uphold Jewish traditions such as observances of dietary regulations. According to Paul, *Christ* died for the weak who might be offended by those strong enough to exercise freedom based on their faith. Even more important than strong faith is "peace and mutual upbuilding [*oikodomē*]" (14:19). Similarly, in 15:1–6, while including himself among the strong, Paul reiterates that they must not please themselves, for Christ did not please himself. Instead, they are to please their neighbor (a singular noun, and thus indicating the weak) for the good purpose of "upbuilding [*oikodomē*]" them (15:2–3).

In practicing mutual acceptance and building up the community, the burden is more on those in the strong position to accept those in the minority position. In the same manner, Paul has associated "living in harmony [*to auto phronein*] with one another" with the lowly rather than exalting oneself over others (12:16). For Paul, it is clear that this particular practice of welcome is "in accordance of Christ" here in Romans 15:5. The Christ hymn provides the same foundation: "be of the same mind [*to auto phronēte*], having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. . . . Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:2, 5). Practicing the same mind and the same love as Christ displayed on the cross is not limited to the members in the community. When Paul speaks about the same mind and the same love, he starts with brotherly/sisterly love (*philadelphia*) and then extends it to the love of strangers (*philoxenia*, Rom. 12:9, 13, 16).

Yet Paul is speaking about more than communal ethics. Accepting one another in the mixed assemblies of Jews and Gentiles testifies to the hope in Christ, who will consummate the gathering of the nations. Paul is determined to describe this future hope when he quotes various Scriptures in 15:9–12 to describe the Gentiles' joining with God's people (Pss. 18:49; 117:1; 2 Sam. 22:50; and Deut. 32:43). Again, remember that it is in the Roman imperial context that Paul is quoting the Isaiah passage (Isa. 11:10): "the root of Jesse"—a Davidic Messiah will rise to rule the "nations"; in this crucified Messiah the nations shall hope (Rom. 15:12). This prophecy has been now fulfilled as God fills the Roman Christians with the same hope and the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

Such a claim, though cited, is already subversive enough that Paul does not describe the full picture of Isaiah's prophetic vision of God's reign. However, he must know that on that day Christ will judge the wicked with truth and justice (most frequently translated as "righteousness" in Paul's

letters), while vindicating the poor and the meek (Isa. 11:4–5). Furthermore, justice will come along with a peace and harmony that is extended to nonhuman creatures. Isaiah depicts “living in harmony with one another” in the cosmic vision of transformation of domination and violence into restoration and harmony (Isa. 11:6–9).

Psalm 72, attributed to Solomon, also depicts a similar vision of the just peace that the king of Israel is commissioned to establish by judging the oppressor and liberating “God’s poor” (Ps. 72:2, 4). While our lectionary passages so far employ the images of the Davidic Messiah to describe the eschatological hope of God’s reign with justice, what is also highlighted is the future glory of God (Rom. 15:9; Isa. 11:10c; Ps. 72:18–19).

The Matthew reading affirms the inclusivity of salvation, redefining the significance of Abraham as the ancestor of all, as Paul does in Romans 4. Such a reading resists using the antagonism expressed by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:7–10 to legitimate anti-Judaism. Rather, following the prophetic tradition, John both speaks to the powers from the political and religious center and restores people in the wilderness. In this marginal space, those who do not have any privilege are freed from the bondage of sins. Above all, John prepares for the way of the Lord (Matt. 3:3).

Today’s readings extend the scope of the eschatological vision, connecting the promise of the past and the hope of future glory. In our welcoming of others, the future global worshiping community is anticipated. In this welcoming, we have a foretaste of flourishing justice and abounding peace (Ps. 72:7).

JIN YOUNG CHOI

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

“We’re not frayed at the edges—we’re ripped at the damn seams,” the cover of *Time* announced. Nancy Gibbs introduced her editorial in the December 11, 2017, issue:

> The Pew Research Center found that across a range of issues—immigration, race, security, the environment—the partisan split is now greater than differences in age, race, gender and income. The center has all but vanished. . . . You could conclude that the U.S. is so deeply divided that our name is little more than wishful thinking.[1]

American culture has been divided before but never this bitterly since the Civil War. The preamble to our Constitution makes a huge assumption in its first three words:

> We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Notice the words the authors capitalized for emphasis: “People,” “Union,” “Justice,” “Tranquility,” “Welfare,” “Blessings,” “Liberty,” and “Posterity.” It is a litany of the founders’ values as well as their hopes and aspirations that the people of this new nation would be a community. Of course they themselves fell short of their own high aspirations. Many of them were slave owners, and few of them paid much attention to the displacement and sometimes extermination of the native peoples who were already here. Nevertheless, “We the People” implied a connection, a unity, a promise to attend to one another’s welfare.

Writing in the first century to the early Christian church in Rome, it seems that Paul is also speaking to us: people, churches, individual Christians living in the first decades of the twenty-first century. We are profoundly divided politically, socially, economically, racially. Indeed, our divisions reach all the way down to

1. “How We Deserted Common Ground,” *Time* 190, no. 24 (December 11, 2017): 23–27, 23.

Let Us Purify Our Spirit

If . . . those of this world celebrate the birthday of an earthly king . . . for the sake of the glory of present honor, with what solicitude ought we to celebrate the birthday of our eternal king Jesus Christ, who in return for our devotion will bestow on us not temporal but eternal glory! Nor will He give us the administration of an earthly honor, which comes to an end when someone else inherits it, but the dignity of a heavenly empire which has no end. . . . Let us seek, then, to be found before Him proven in faith, bedecked with mercy, and arrayed in virtues. And whoever loves Christ more devotedly is more shiningly intent upon the observance of His commands, so that He may really see that we believe in Him when we so shine on His feast day; and the purer He sees us the happier He is.

Before many more days, then, let us make our hearts pure, let us cleanse our consciences and purify our spirits, and, shining and without stain, let us celebrate the coming of the spotless Lord, so that the birthday of Him whose birth was known to be from a spotless virgin may be observed by spotless servants.

Maximus of Turin, "Sermon 60: To Be Given before the Birthday of the Lord," in *The Sermons of St. Maximus of Turin*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, OP, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: Newman Press, 1989), 144–46.

our communities, our churches, and even our families.

Paul was writing to what apparently was a number of small gatherings of believers in the capital city of the Roman Empire. Scholars surmise that these small groups, perhaps organized on the basis of race, social class, and/or geographical proximity, came together to celebrate the Lord's Supper. For these believers, this important event had caused conflict and divisiveness. So Paul stressed the essential unity believers have in Jesus Christ, a unity that transcended everything that was dividing them. In the first few verses of chapter 15, Paul especially urged the strong to put aside personal opinions and preferences and principles in order to affirm and empower the weak. He pointed to the example of Christ, who did not "please himself" but emptied himself in service to others. The surprising purpose, Paul wrote, is the "building up of the neighbor." Could it be that the apostle was looking beyond the small groups of believers to the vastness of the entire city of Rome, the Roman Empire, and the world?

In verse 4 Paul arrived at a crucial point in his message. Unity, caring for one another's welfare, being responsible to and for one another is not merely an exercise in niceness and good feelings. Its bold purpose is for the whole church to glorify God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, "with one voice" (Rom. 15:6).

The unity of the young church is central to Paul's teaching. There is no walking away from one another in Christ. Of course, individuals will disagree with one another, have different opinions and convictions on a variety of issues, including religious beliefs and practices. Beginning here, with the earliest church, this essential unity is threatened by individuals insisting that their way is the only way. As for Paul, however, unity comes first. Separating from one another, for whatever reason, is not an option in the church.

In her book *When in Romans*, Beverly Gaventa observes that "being members of one another means there is a relationship from which there is no exit plan."[2] Paul's radical ecclesiology, which claims the primacy of unity and community as Christ's gift to the church, transcends our Western obsession with individualism and judges and challenges the contemporary churches, all of whom seem to reflect the profound divisions in American culture. Mainline churches have recently experienced the tragedy of disunity and separation as hundreds of congregations have voted to leave the denominations over disagreement about doctrine and church policy. If anyone is guilty of sacrificing unity in Christ on the altar of individualism, individual opinions,

2. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 105.

convictions, commitment, interpretations of doctrine, and Scripture, it is us.

Paul's hope for the church was that it might glorify God in one voice. Paul understood not only the power but also the evangelical imperative of unity in Christ. Perhaps Paul knew that Jesus himself, on the last night of his life, prayed for his disciples: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. . . . As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:11, 21). Jesus desires that something of God and God's love be reflected in the oneness and unity of the church of Jesus Christ.

What a powerful witness we would be in this divided nation, culture, and world if somehow followers of Jesus remembered the essential importance of their unity in him, if somehow they showed the world that human beings can remain together in spite of their different politics and religious convictions.

Paul had a huge, cosmic vision for the gospel. Early Christianity was a Jewish project in an overwhelmingly Gentile world. The looming issue for the early church had to do primarily with boundaries between Jews and Christians. The pressure for the church to push out into the Gentile world was enormous. Would it imply the rejection of Judaism and individual Jews? Paul thought long and hard about this and came up with a graceful and gracious metaphor. He did not envision a boundary or a wall of separation, but rather a graft onto a living vine. Israel is the vine; the church is the graft (Rom. 11:17–24). Paul knew very well that God had not rejected a chosen people, realizing that Jews continued to be loved, cared for, and sustained by God. As Christians, we are grafted onto the solid, robust, growing vine that is Judaism.

In his collection of essays *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, rabbi and theologian Irving Greenberg offers these words about Jewish-Christian relationships: "The group that would bring the message of redemption to the rest of the world had to grow out of the family and covenanted community of Israel. But the community was not intended to be a replacement. . . . Christianity had to start within Judaism, but it had to grow into its own autonomous existence."[3]

Paul had a magnificent vision of God's universal love poured out on the whole creation, a vision of humankind bound together in that universal, holy love. It all rests on the strong, deep, profound "root of Jesse," father of David the king, the many-times great-grandfather of Jesus.

JOHN M. BUCHANAN

3. Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 22.

Matthew 3:1–12

[1]In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, [2]"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." [3]This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

> "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
> 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
> make his paths straight.'"

[4]Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. [5]Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, [6]and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

[7]But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? [8]Bear fruit worthy of repentance. [9]Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. [10]Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

[11]"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [12]His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In the previous chapter, the scene of action shifted rapidly from one location to another. It started with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and moved to Jerusalem and then to Egypt, before finally ending in Nazareth, where Jesus and his family settled down. This chapter marks an abrupt shift in location to the Judean wilderness, where John has been preaching a baptism of repentance.

John's baptism is often described as a mark of initiation into the movement that would usher in the kingdom of heaven. The Matthean John, unlike the Markan John, does not offer a baptism that leads to forgiveness of sins. Matthew seems to be reserving that privilege exclusively for Jesus. Matthew does not yet specify what the emerging kingdom will look like. The readers will learn later that the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus will ensure that the poor, the blind, the lame, and other marginalized groups will have a place at the table. The people who respond to John's ministry in this story are not ones at the margins of society. Instead, it is the Sadducees and the Pharisees from Judea and Jerusalem who respond to John in great numbers.

John is calling on the religious and political elite from Judea and Jerusalem to repent. The Greek word *metanoia* literally means taking on a new mind-set. It has the connotation of making an about-turn and changing course. John is suggesting that participation in the new kingdom requires a new worldview. It also requires them to turn their backs on everything in which they have been participating and from which they have been benefiting. John is inviting those in positions of power and privilege to cease their

complicity in oppressive structures and to turn their backs on structures of exclusion that have become prevalent in Judea.

This pericope highlights John's role vis-à-vis Jesus. However, John is not simply preparing the way for the Lord, as verse 3 seems to suggest. He is also showing the way. He is modeling for the many, especially the Judean elite, how to become a part of the new kingdom of God that is at hand. As John has demonstrated by example, participation in the new kingdom entails a radical change in one's lifestyle. John has turned his back on the Judean society in several ways. He has established a residence in the wilderness and has adopted a new way of clothing and a radically new food diet of locusts and honey. Several commentators have observed that John's hairy mantle resembles that of prophets in the Old Testament, especially Elijah's (Zech. 13:4). Like Elijah, John is challenging the ethos and corrupt practices of political and religious leaders.

In this context John's call to the religious elite to repent becomes especially significant. Are the religious leaders taking on a new mind-set and turning their backs on their privilege and their complicity in oppression? Are they simply seeking to join the emerging kingdom so as not to be left out? John seems to assume the latter when he calls them a "brood of vipers." The religious elite have been poisonous to the society and have been undermining its health. Can they suddenly change course and be transformed? Can they take on a new mind and turn their backs on the very systems that have served them well?

John is refusing to offer them the easy absolution the Judean elite might have hoped for. In a somewhat paradoxical suggestion, he is making it clear that it is by turning around and being transformed that they can retain their status as the children of Abraham. From his perspective, acting in ways that are consistent with the new mind-set and turning their back on an old lifestyle are much more important than physically leaving Jerusalem and going into the wilderness.

Matthew's use of the Isaianic quote (Isa. 40:3) also depicts John the Baptist as one who will "make straight paths for him" (Matt. 3:3). Although this call to make his paths straight is given in the wilderness, the meaning is primarily metaphorical and pertains to a very different location.

It is aimed at people who live far from the wilderness and is intended for those living in urban areas of Judea such as Jerusalem. Accordingly, the paths that need to be straightened exist in the royal courts and the power corridors of Judea.

John is not simply calling on people to join the new kingdom. He is also inviting them to a new space that he has embraced and made home: the wilderness. Several scholars have noted that wilderness functions as a liminal space in the history of Israel. It was where the Hebrew community spent a considerable amount of time after fleeing Egypt and before entering the promised land. Later in Matthew's story, the readers will learn that Jesus will spend a formative period of forty days in the wilderness. Within the context of Matthew's Gospel, wilderness is also an alternative space, one that espouses values that are diametrically different from the civilizational values of Roman cities.

Wilderness is also depicted as a safe space. When Jesus hears about the death of John and goes into the wilderness with his disciples (Matt. 14:13; Mark 6:31–33), it becomes an act of escape from the violence Herod had unleashed against his critics. On an intertextual level, there are parallels to the Israelites fleeing Egypt and Jesus going into the wilderness to be tempted. When the crowds in Matthew learn that Jesus has withdrawn into the wilderness, they follow him by foot. One of the key aspects of this story is the idea that when people in urban areas were terrorized by the empire, they fled into the wilderness, supposedly looking for a safe space. Rome depicted its cities as citadels of civilization and took pride in them. Therefore, Matthew's suggestion, that wilderness became a place of refuge for those escaping the city's barbaric violence, would have been an explicit challenge to the empire's claims that its cities represented enlightenment and civilization.

The feeding miracles in Matthew also take place in the wilderness, away from the Judean capital (14:14–21; 15:32–39). In a context where food was scarce, and given the urban ethos of hoarding, convincing people to share their basic resources was a miracle. Matthew's audience would have known that cities in the

Roman Empire were both symbols and locales of the empire's oppressive economic practices. They played a key role in perpetuating Rome's practice of systematically moving resources from peripheries to imperial centers. Matthew 14:3–17 highlights a paradox whereby a Roman city—a seat of civilization—becomes the location of John's murder, while the wilderness becomes a place of refuge and compassion for the masses. In doing so, the Gospel affirms the wilderness that was marginal to Rome's imperial imagination but central to its worldview and ethos.

Matthew's emphasis on the location of John's ministry highlights the extent to which people's ideologies may be connected to, and influenced by, the spaces they inhabit. Those living in marginal locations like the wilderness have the capacity to be compassionate and are inclined to challenge the powers in ways that those inhabiting the center are not. What happens when those at the margins move closer to the center? Can they live in Roman cities such as Tiberias and Rome and not be influenced by their oppressive ethos and values? Will they still have the capacity to resist the empire? As the church becomes increasingly urban and moves into metropolitan spaces, will Matthew's audience espouse imperial values, or will they remain committed to challenging them?

RAJ NADELLA

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The standard ceremony of symbolizing God's choice of a monarch (and occasionally other officials) was anointing the person's head with olive oil. Thus the rise of the association between "the anointed one" and the "Messiah" (for references to anointing, see 1 Sam. 2:10, 35; 12:3, 5; and Ps. 2:2; for references to Messiah as the anointed one, see Isa. 45:1 and Hab. 3:13). Old Testament reflections about the future of the people of God ordered under a kind of monarchical restoration are based on three interwoven themes: (1) that the rule of the Davidic line will end with the exile (although there was clearly speculation around Zerubbabel [Zech. 1–6], it came to naught); (2) that the line of David will continue to rule in perpetuity, as God promised David (2 Sam. 7:16); and (3) that the line will be restored as a fulfillment of the promise.

It is clear, however, that notions of the restoration became complicated in the centuries after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the Judean exile, with some ideas surrounding a heavenly being descending from heaven. In Daniel 7, for example, we are told of an angelic one "like a son of man," which most likely refers to Michael the archangel. In Enoch, God sends a figure that is judge-like; chapter 48 refers to one who will be a "light to the Gentiles" (though this might be a later Christian interpolation). In Second Isaiah, God even uses a foreign ruler, Cyrus the Persian, who rather surprisingly is called a "messiah."

One idea closely associated with the coming of an anointed person leading a restoration, a messiah figure or a similar figure, is that this person would have a forerunner. The purpose of the forerunner is to announce the anointed one's imminent arrival. In Malachi 3:23–24 (NJB) (the final sentences of the Protestant Old Testament) that person is explicitly identified as Elijah: "Look, I shall send you the prophet Elijah before the great and awesome Day of Yahweh comes. He will reconcile parents to their children and children to their parents, to forestall my putting the country under the curse of destruction."

The traditions surrounding the return of Elijah grew in both Christian and Jewish writings, starting already in Sirach (48:1–11) and into the noncanonical Jewish tradition (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Exod. 6:18). In her helpful overview, Christine Joynes notes how often Elijah is mentioned in the Gospels combined with notions of his "coming" or having "appeared."[1]

1. Christine Joynes, "The Returned Elijah? John the Baptist's Angelic Identity in the Gospel of Mark," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 4 (2005): 455–67, 456.

Elijah's ability to return, of course, is directly connected to his having been "taken up" to heaven without dying, according to the tradition (see 2 Kgs. 2:11; Enoch; and Gen. 5:24, which led to speculation about Enoch's capacity to return). He is thus available for return duty!

Matthew, from Mark, picks up on this tradition of early Christian interest (and probably historic relationship) to John the Baptist and his reforming movement. It is normally supposed by New Testament scholars that many of the Jewish followers of John then joined the Jesus movement.[2] The Synoptic tradition (Mark 1:3; Matt. 3:3; Luke 3:4) rather powerfully associates John/Elijah not only with the prophetic forerunner, but also rather clearly with the "new exodus" language of Isaiah 40:3, a "way in the desert" (language of "desert," "way," "path," etc.; cf. Exod. 13:18; Deut. 1:19; but esp. Ps. 107:4).[3] That John the Baptist is associated with the desert, then, is not only representative of his "fringe" and "outsider" status (again, like Elijah, who is contrasted with, say, a Nathan or Isaiah, who served close to the king and probably lived rather comfortably), but also closely connected to liberation language associated with the exodus under Moses.

Key terms here recall biblical themes of change: the wrath of God, ax to roots (Mal. 4:1), and burning fire (Isa. 33:14). We should not miss the challenge to "the establishment" represented not only in John's wilderness location (to which the people come in startling numbers: "all Judea and the whole Jordan district," my trans.) but also using the Hebrew symbolism of washing impurities (throughout Leviticus, but see especially Ps. 51:2). The wilderness represents leaving the places where power structures are firmly in place. The sociological term is liminal space—that is, an "in between" place where change is possible because, we would say informally, it is a place where "all bets are off"—a place undefined and unconquered and, more to the point, not under control. This, then, is combined with the Levitical symbol of purity—washing—as a way of further symbolizing a rejection of the former reality ("dirty") for the new (now "clean"). The combination of the two makes this a socially and politically threatening act.

That is why John attacks representatives of the "old power structures," who clearly show up to examine how serious this threat may be. John spits an insult at them, calling them the "offspring" of poisonous snakes ("brood of vipers" is the traditional term, but brood is less common in modern American English). The reference is probably to snakes from the genus *Echis* (itself derived from Greek, as opposed to "asp" or Egyptian cobra in Ps. 140:3), the modern viper found also today in Asia and the Middle East, which is highly poisonous.

Finally, not to be missed are two themes associated with Jesus in this powerful reading of John the Baptist's symbolic movement. First, Jesus (in contrast to John's Levitical purity symbolism) is associated with "the Holy Spirit" and "fire." The Holy Spirit is virtually always associated in the Hebrew Bible with the turbulent, raging lives of the prophets, and fire is a frequent symbol of judgment associated with the prophets (with Elijah, 1 Kgs. 18; see Amos 1:4, 7, 12, etc.; Isa. 33:14). The second theme is separations—separating good from bad—thus the references to agricultural separations of grain from stalks.

The themes of judgment suggest change. The Chilean biblical scholar Pablo Richard has written a number of works on Revelation and has noted the popularity of the book of Revelation among Latin American peasants! Whereas themes of judgment are often upsetting to North Americans, these same themes are relished by the poor. It is not difficult to determine why: judgment is upsetting only when you think the judgments will go against you, rather than in your favor! The poor clearly hope for "their day in court," whether it is a world court of human rights, or the heavenly court of God. It is important then to read these words with the appropriate joy in the hearing about coming judgment and Christ as the judge who

2. Dale Allison Jr., "Matthew," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 844–86.
3. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, trans. Wilhelm Linss, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

will vindicate the righteous. Do we imagine that "all Judea and the whole Jordan district" were streaming into the wilderness for fear of judgment or to celebrate the coming change? Clearly the latter; Jesus represented revolutionary change. What we see is that evil prospers. What we anticipate—what we literally live for, in Advent—is the fulfillment of the transformative justice of the kingdom, when right will be vindicated as right, and wrong clearly identified as wrong.

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

Contributors

CHARLES L. AARON JR., Co-Director of the Intern Program, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, TX

MARK ABBOTT, Director of Hispanic Distributed Learning, Asbury Theological Seminary-Florida Dunnam Campus, Orlando, FL

STEPHEN B. BOYD, J. Allen Easley Professor of Religion, Wake Forest University, Department of Religion, Winston-Salem, NC

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, Pastor Emeritus, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, and Retired Editor/Publisher, *The Christian Century*, Chicago, IL

PATRICIA J. CALAHAN, Pastor, Cornwall Presbyterian Church, Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY

CHRISTINE CHAKOIAN, Vice President for Seminary Advancement, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA

GARY W. CHARLES, Pastor, Cove Presbyterian Church, Covesville, VA

JIN YOUNG CHOI, Associate Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, NY

SHANNON CRAIGO-SNELL, Professor of Theology, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

DAVID A. DAVIS, Pastor, Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, NJ

JOSEPH A. DONNELLA II, Pastor, St. Mark's Lutheran, Baltimore, MD

SHARYN DOWD, Baptist Pastor, Decatur, GA

JILL DUFFIELD, Editor, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Richmond, VA

JAMES H. EVANS JR., Robert K. Davies Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and President Emeritus, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, NY

KEN EVERS-HOOD, Pastor, Tualatin Presbyterian Church, Tualatin, OR

STEPHEN FARRIS, Professor Emeritus of Preaching and Dean Emeritus, Vancouver School of Theology and St. Andrew's Hall, Vancouver, British Columbia

JAMES D. FREEMAN, Pastor, Broadmoor Presbyterian Church, Shreveport, LA

TOMMY GIVENS, Professor of New Testament Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA

MARCI AULD GLASS, Pastor, Southminster Presbyterian Church, Boise, ID

DEIRDRE J. GOOD, Faculty of the Stevenson School for Ministry (Diocese of Central PA), Harrisburg, PA

CAROLYN BROWNING HELSEL, Assistant Professor of Homiletics, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX

JOHN C. HOLBERT, Lois Craddock Perkins Professor Emeritus of Homiletics, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX

CHRISTOPHER T. HOLMES, Director of Curriculum Development, Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, Atlanta, GA

SALLY SMITH HOLT, Professor of Religion, Belmont University College of Theology and Christian Ministry, Nashville, TN

CHRISTINE J. HONG, Assistant Professor of Educational Ministry, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

PAUL K. HOOKER, Associate Dean for Ministerial Formation and Advanced Studies, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX

TODD B. JONES, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN

ERIN KEYS, Minister, Capitol Hill Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC

ERICA KNISELY, Director of Programs for Education Beyond the Walls, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX

MICHAEL LODAHL, Professor of Theology and World Religions, Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, CA

SCOT MCKNIGHT, Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary, Lombard, IL

ERIC TODD MYERS, Pastor, Frederick Presbyterian Church, Frederick, MD

RAJ NADELLA, Assistant Professor of New Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

ANNA OLSON, Rector, St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Los Angeles, CA

SONG-MI SUZIE PARK, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX

ZAIDA MALDONADO PÉREZ, Professor Emerita of Church History and Theology, Asbury Theological Seminary, Clermont, FL

SANDRA HACK POLASKI, New Testament scholar, Richmond, VA

EMERSON B. POWERY, Professor of Biblical Studies, Messiah College, Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, Mechanicsburg, PA

MARK RALLS, Senior Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Hendersonville, NC

GAIL RAMSHAW, Professor Emerita of Religion, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA

STANLEY P. SAUNDERS, Associate Professor of New Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

MATTHEW L. SKINNER, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, Professor of Old Testament, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA

KRISTIN STROBLE, Pastor, Eastminster Presbyterian Church, East Lansing, MI

PATRICIA K. TULL, A. B. Rhodes Professor Emerita of Old Testament, Louisville Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

LEANNE VAN DYK, President and Professor of Theology, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA

ROBERT W. WALL, Paul T. Walls Professor of Scripture and Wesleyan Studies, Seattle Pacific University and Seminary, School of Theology, Seattle, WA

RICHARD F. WARD, Fred B. Craddock Professor of Homiletics and Worship, Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK

LAUREN F. WINNER, Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

Scripture Index

Scripture citations that appear in boldface represent the assigned readings from the Revised Common Lectionary.

OLD TESTAMENT

Genesis

1–2 112–13
1–3 174
1:1 109
1:26–28 266
4 254
4:8 67
5:1 174
5:24 32
12:3 180, 274
17 83
18:14 15
21:20 50
26:24 57
30:8 193
32 83
39:2–3 50
39:21 50
39:23 50
42:32 49

Exodus 82

2–4 66
5:1 227
6:7 131, 179
6:18 31
13:18 32
13:21 307
14:31 57
16:10 307
16:35 274
17:6 274
19 221
19:9 307
19:11 307
19:16 307
19:20 306
19:25 306
20 259, 306
20–23 306
20:1–17 253
20:13 254
20:14 254
20:17 254
20:21 307
21:22–25 271
21:24 269
22:26–27 269
24 304–6, 309–10
24:1 307
24:1–11 304
24:6 307
24:8 307
24:9 304
24:11 304
24:12–18 **304–7**, 312, 315
24:13 315
25–28 305
25–32 306
25:8 142
30:23–32 159
30:34 159
32 305
33 115
33:9 142
33:9–10 307
33:18 143
33:20 143, 304
34:5 307
34:29–35 312
40:34 142
40:34–38 307

Leviticus 307

2:1 159
2:13 238
17–26 263
19 258–60, 263
19:1–2 **258–62**, 269
19:2 266
19:8 24
19:9–18 **258–62**, 269
19:12 255
19:18 264, 266
19:20–29 260
19:34–36 259
24:7 159
24:19–20 271
24:20 269
26:11–13 227
26:12 131

Numbers

6 126
22 66, 212
22–24 210
24:17 158
25:1–15 210
28:19 238
31 66

Deuteronomy 307

1:19 32
4:34 82
4:37 243
5–6 288
5:1–21 253
5:6–10 288
5:15 82
5:17 254
5:18 254
5:21 254
6:4–5 288
6:16 54, 66
7:6 243
7:6–7 243
7:7–8 317
7:19 82
9:5 243
9:19 32
10–11 288
10:12–11:32 288–89
10:15 243
10:16 289
11 293
11:2 82
11:18–21 **288–91**
11:19–22 295
11:22–25 290
11:26 295
11:26–28 **288–91**, 295, 300
11:29–32 290
12–26 288

Deuteronomy (*continued*)
14:2 243
19:21 269, 271
20:19 244
23 243
24:1–4 254
24:12–13 269
24:17–18 227
26:8 82
28 82
28:29 66
30:15–16 255
30:15–20 **242–46**, 251
30:17 255–56
30:19 300
30:20 257
32:43 25
34:1–4 221

Joshua
3:7 50
4:19–5:12 210
6:27 50
24 289

Judges 307
1:19 50
1:22 50
2:18 50
6–8 196
6:15 49
6:16 66
6:36 66
6:39–40 66
7:2–7 66
8:24–35 67
9 67
13:5–7 126

1 Samuel 289
2:3 217
2:10 31
2:35 31
3:19 50
12:3 31
12:5 31
18:12 50
18:14 50
18:28 50

2 Samuel 289, 307
5:2 158
5:10 50
7:5 57
7:8 57
7:12–16 51
7:16 31, 63
22:50 25

1 Kings 289, 307
3:4 210
18 32
19:19–21 205
22 47

2 Kings 289
1 47
2:11 32
2:20–21 238
15:29 204
16 54
16:1–20 50
16:7–9 50
18:7 51
18:13 210
18:13–16 51, 67
19:32–37 51
20:1–11 66

1 Chronicles
11:9 50

2 Chronicles 307
1:1 50
13:5 238
15:9 50
17:3 50
24:9 57
28 50, 54
28:4–8 51

Nehemiah 307

Esther
8:8 15

Job 289, 307
5:10–11 42
5:14 66
6:6 238
19:25 146

Psalms 82, 307
2 63, 101, **304, 308–10**, 312, 315
2:6 31, 221
2:7 173–74
2:8–9 316
3:4 221
8 266
8:4 312
8:5 313
9:14 83
15 **209, 214–15**
15:1 221
15:2–5 222
15:3–5 218
18:49 25
23 96, 131, 274, 276
27 197–99
27:1 **193, 197–199**
27:2–3 197
27:4–9 **193, 197–199**
27:10–14 197
29 **162, 167–68**
31 301
31:1–5 **288, 292–93**
31:5 295
31:19–24 **288, 292–93**
31:21 295
31:23 290, 295
33:6 141
34 222
37:11 224
40 189
40:1–11 **177, 182–83**, 189
40:12–17 183
44 114
46:10 305
51:2 32
51:10 250
62:1–5 83
68:30 48
69:9 24
72 151, 157
72:1–7 **17, 22–23, 146, 150–51**
72:2 26
72:4 26
72:7 26
72:10–14 **146, 150–51**
72:11 147
72:18 19
72:18–19 **17, 22–23**, 26
80 51, 55
80:1–7 **50, 54–55**
80:2–3 55
80:5 55
80:17–19 **50, 54–55**
82:5 313
89 82
96 **65, 70–71**, 87
96–97 102
96:10–13 68
96:12–13 73
97 **81, 86–88**
97:11 95

98 **98, 102–3**
99 **304**, 305, **308–10**, 312
107:4 32
112 239–41
112:1–10 **225, 230–32**
112:5 237
112:9 237
113:5–9 165
117:1 25
119 82, 247, 264
119:1–2 255, 257
119:1–8 **242, 247–48**
119:2 251
119:4 255
119:7 255–56
119:33–40 **258**, 259, **263–64**, 270
120 9
120–134 9
121 9
122 7, 9
131 **273, 278–79**, 280, 284
131:1 281
131:3 275
122 **2, 6–7**
137 180
140:3 32
145:9 281
146:5–10 **34**, 36, **39–41**
147 136–37
147:1–2 135
147:12–20 **130**, **135–36**
148 **114, 118–19**, 120, 125
148:6 15
148:7–8 119

Proverbs 87, 286
8:22 217
8:22–31 243

Ecclesiastes
9:2 245

Isaiah 57, 162–63, 194, 307
1–39 98, 147
1:1 2
1:2 210
1:4 195
1:5 6
1:8 83
1:23 226
2 99
2–3 6
2:1 2
2:1–5 3, **2–5**, 10
2:2 9
2:2–3 147
2:2–4 239
2:3 6
2:4 196
2:5 9
2:12 281
3:13–15 195
3:15 226
3:23 90
5:1–7 195, 250
5:8 226
5:20 226
5:23 226
6:1 68
6:8 183
6:9 147
7–8 50
7–9 205
7:3 51
7:7–9 50
7:10–16 **50–53**, 57
7:12 66
7:13 63
7:14 51, 55, 62, 66–67
7:20 51
7:23–25 51
8:5–8 51
8:8 51, 66
8:9–10 51
8:10 51
9 55, 71, 197–99
9:1 67
9:1–2 195, 204
9:1–4 **193–96**
9:2 55, 78, 205
9:2–7 **65–69**, 71
9:5 196
9:6–7 73, 205
9:7 196
9:8–21 66
9:8–10:4 65
10 18
10:1 226
10:1–5 66
10:2 226
10:21 66
10:26 66
10:33–34 18
11–12 66
11:1 23, 126
11:1–10 **17–21**
11:4–9 26
11:9 23
11:10 25–26
12:1–2 92
22:12–14 15
25 99
25:6 100
25:8 100
28–33 35
29:14 216
29:18 66
33:14 32
34–35 35
35 36–38, 40
35:1 43
35:1–10 **17, 34–38**
35:4 38
35:4–10 43
35:7 43
35:9 36
40 98
40–53 273
40–55 98, 146–47, 164–65, 226
40:1 99
40:3 30, 32, 82, 188
40:4 274
40:6–8 141
40:31 48, 146
41:10 51, 66
42 180, 183
42:1 100, 139, 173–74
42:1–9 **162–66**, 168
42:3 19
42:4–7 174
42:6 31, 154, 174
42:7 66
42:8 164
42:16 66
43:2 174
43:16–21 174
44:9–20 195
45:1 31
45:14 51, 66
45:15 317
48:10 226
49 183, 274
49:1–6 278
49:1–7 **177–81**, 189
49:6 100, 274
49:7 179
49:8–15 278
49:8–16 **273–77**, 281, 284
49:15 285
49:16 281
49:18 146
50:4–9 217

Isaiah (*continued*)
51:1–12 98
52 102–3, 274
52–53 57
52:3 99
52:7 57
52:7–10 **98–101**, 103
52:11 274
52:12 227
53 218
53:1–9 217
53:6 276
55:10 136
55:10–11 141
56–66 115, 147
56:7 100, 147
56:10 115
57:13 115
57:19 115
58 226, 235, 237
58–59 148
58:1–12 **225–29**, 239
58:6–10 241
58:9 115
58:9–10 147
58:10 241
58:11 115
58:14 227
59:1 115
59:3 115
59:10 115
59:20 146
60 146, 148–49
60:1 150, 157
60:1–4 152
60:1–6 **146–49**
60:2 115
60:4 153
60:6 158
60:14 146
60:19 115, 147
60:22 147
61 48
61:1 194
62 86, 88
62:4 94, 115
62:6–12 **81–85**, 100
62:7–9 82
62:8–9 93
62:10–11 84
62:12 94
63 125, 116–16
63:7 120
63:7–9 **114–17**, 119
63:7–64:12 114, 120
63:10 115
63:10–19 115
63:15 115
64:1 115
64:7 115
64:8 115
64:12 114
65:5 115
65:17–18 94
65:24 115
66:1 68
66:3–4 115
66:10–13 250
66:24 147

Jeremiah 82, 226
3:17 83
4:31 83
5:17 131
5:23 131
6:7 131
6:16 131
6:23 83
7:3 131
7:23 131
9:23–24 217
11:4 131
16:16 206
16:19–21 206
23 301
24:7 131
26:13 131
27:5 82
29:5–7 131
29:11 132
30–31 132
30:22 131
31 126, 131–32, 134
31:7 137
31:7–14 **130–33**, 135, 143
31:8 136
31:10 136
31:11 137
31:12–14 136
31:15 128, 134
31:17 132
31:33 131, 147
31:38–40 132
31:40 133
32:17 82
40:1 126

Lamentations
2 83

Ezekiel 226, 307
3:28 123
9:11–12 217
10:18 221
11:23 221
14:11 131
37:27 142, 190
43:24 238
48:35 83

Daniel 307
2 235
4:8 51
5:11 51
6:12 15
7 31, 317
7:14 15
11:35 15

Hosea
11:1 119, 126

Joel
2:28–32 281

Amos
1:4 32
1:7 32
1:12 32
5:11 82
5:14–21 165
5:18–20 281
5:24 21
6:4–6 15

Micah
1–3 210
1:13 83
3:2–4 154
3:5 15
3:6 66
3:12 210
4–5 210
4:3 196
5:2 158
5:2–5 159
6 218
6:1–8 **209–13**
6:6–8 165
6:8 21, 214, 217–18, 222
6:9–16 213
6:9–7:7 210
6:15 82
7:7 48

Habakkuk
3:7 66
3:13 31

Zechariah
1–6 31
2:10–11 142
8:8 131
13:4 30
14:9 221–22

Malachi
3:10 66
3:19 32
3:23–24 31
4:4–5 318

OT APOCRYPHA

Wisdom
7:26 121
10:15 137
10:20 137

Sirach
11:27 15
15:17 255
18:23 66
24:1 137
24:10 137
24:12 137

3 Maccabees
2:22 48–49

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew 159, 168, 194
1–2 64, 158
1:1–17 51, 51n2, 61
1:2–3 52
1:3 147
1:18–25 **50**, 57, **61–64**
1:20 159
1:20–21 61
1:22 62
1:23 222
2 125–26
2:1–12 **146**, 147, 152, **157–61**, 317
2:12–13 61
2:13 119, 159
2:13–23 **114**, 115, **125–29**
2:18 119
2:19 61, 159
2:19–30 126
2:22 61, 159
3:1–2 173
3:1–12 **17**, 19, **29–33**
3:2 43, 148, 205, 222
3:3 26, 30, 83, 223
3:5–6 173
3:7–10 26
3:11 47
3:11–14 46
3:13–17 **162**, 317, **173–76**
3:17 63, 105, 315, 318
4:1–11 174
4:4 285
4:7 66
4:8 221
4:12–23 **193, 204–8**
4:13–16 194
4:16 66
4:17 42, 173, 222–23
4:18–25 221
4:23 223
5 253
5–7 223, 284, 295
5:1 284
5:1–12 **209, 221–24**
5:1–14 303
5:3–9 241
5:3–12 218
5:6 253
5:8–9 253
5:11 239
5:13–14 257
5:13–16 235, 270
5:13–17 237
5:13–20 **225, 238–41**
5:14 227, 266
5:17 253
5:17–18 255
5:17–20 174, 300
5:19 248
5:20 222, 253, 270
5:21 271
5:21–26 271
5:21–37 **242**, 248, **253–57**
5:21–48 239, 269, 286, 301, 303
5:27 271
5:27–30 271
5:31 271
5:33 271
5:33–37 271
5:38–48 **258**, 259, **269–72**
5:39 254
5:43–48 174, 205
5:44 254, 266
5:45 245
5:47–48 266
5:48 266n2
6 278
6:1–18 301
6:1–34 303
6:2 239
6:5 239
6:10 174
6:12 254
6:16 239
6:19–21 286
6:19–7:12 284, 301
6:22–23 284
6:24–34 **273**, 275, **284–87**
6:26 281
6:30–31 281
6:33 281
7:1–14 303
7:13–27 300
7:15–20 301–2
7:17 250
7:21 222, 295
7:21–29 **288**, 290, **300–303**
7:24 295
7:24–27 300
7:26 295
7:28 48, 223, 295
7:28–29 284
7:29 240
8:1 223
8:20 105
8:21–22 205
9:8 239
9:9 205
9:36–38 206
10:5–6 205
10:16–31 62
10:17 239
10:19 239
10:39 287
11 48
11:1 48
11:2–11 **34**, 36, **46–49**
11:3 43
11:5 43
11:10 40
11:11 43
11:12–15 49
11:18–19 15
11:28–30 224
11:29 194, 224
12:18–21 163, 174
12:22 224
13 15
13:11 9
13:17 254
13:24 222

Matthew (*continued*)
13:31 222
13:33 222
13:44–45 222
13:52 222
13:53 48
14:3–17 31
14:6–11 47
14:13 30
14:13–14 47
14:14–21 30
14:23 221
15:19 255
15:24 205
15:31 239
15:32–39 30
16–19 317–18
16:16 315–16
16:20–23 316
16:21 173, 317
16:24–28 316
16:25 287
17:1 221
17:1–9 **304**, 305–6, **315–19**
17:1–13 313
17:4–8 312
17:5 307
17:9 221
17:22–23 173
18:1–14 205
18:3 222
18:15–20 254
18:21–22 254
18:23 222
19:1 48
19:3–9 254
19:6 254
19:23 222
19:26 274
19:29 224
20:1 222
20:17–19 173
20:20–23 173
21:5 224
21:43 222
22:2 222
22:36 241
22:39 270
22:39–40 241
23 224, 239
24 3
24–25 221, 301
24:3 9
24:9 239
24:22 6
24:26–28 12
24:30–35 12
24:30–44 10
24:36 9
24:36–43 15
24:36–44 **2**, 3, **12–16**
24:42 9
24:45–47 14
25 181, 241
25:1 222
25:13 9
25:31–46 62, 62n2
25:40 222
25:45 222
26:1 48
26:30 221
26:41 250
26:47–52 271
26:61 267
27:1–2 158
27:16 62
27:19 159
27:29 158
27:40 267
28 239
28:16 221
28:16–20 205
28:18–20 52, 62n2
28:19 62, 159, 221
28:19–20 180
28:20 62

Mark
1:2–3 83
1:3 32
1:9–11 152
1:11 105
1:15 42
2:28 105
6:31–33 30
7:21 255
9:2–8 313
9:5–6 312
9:7 307
10:2–9 254
10:9 254
10:29–30 224
12:28–34 251
12:31 24
13:32 15
13:34–37 15
14:51 217
14:58 267
15:29 267
15:34 217

Luke 77, 170, 314
1 158
1–2 78, 76–77
1:1–4 77
1:5 77
1:8 77
1:14 78
1:28 43
1:33 94
1:39 43
1:42 43
1:44 43, 78
1:46–55 **34, 39–41**, 84
1:48 43, 94
1:53 94
2 79, 95
2:1–20 **65**, 66, 73, **76–80, 81, 93–97**
2:6–7 79n3
2:9 67
2:12 66–67
2:29–32 172
2:34–35 94
2:48 94
3:4 32, 83
3:6 172
3:22 105
4 48, 54
4:12 66
4:21 147
5:29 77
6:45 224
7:25 49
7:36–49 77
9:1–6 155
9:28–36 313
9:32 305
9:34 305
9:34–35 307
10 78
10:1–20 155
11:37 77
14 77
14:35 240
15:3–7 276
16:21 77
17:7 77
17:22 254
17:28 15
17:33 15
18:29 224
18:30 224
19:40 84
22 77
22:69 105
23:34 271
23:46 295
24:4 78
24:30 77
24:30–31 15

24:36 78
24:52 78
26:11–12 190

John 113
1:1–14 **98**, 104, **109–13**, 115
1:1–18 **130, 141–45**, 188
1:2–3 121
1:5 131, 196
1:9 131, 190
1:10–11 131
1:15 190
1:16 131
1:18–34 143
1:19–42 188
1:27 111, 190
1:29–42 **177, 188–92**
1:30 111
1:30–34 142
1:34 141
1:39 142
1:46 193
1:49 142
2:11 143
2:19 267
3:18 142
4:23 256
4:29 142
4:54 143
6:14 143
7:40–42 193
8:12 110, 241
8:28 142
10:5 52
10:10 276
10:27 52
10:35 313
11:27 142
12:18 143
12:32 217
13:34 110
14:10 142
15:1–11 250
16:20–21 94
16:22 95
17:11 28
17:21 28
19:39 159
20:8 142
20:14–15 190
20:31 142
21:12 304

Acts 77, 168–70
1–11 8
1:8 154–55
2:21 172
2:42 77
2:46 77
3:6 170
9:1–19 169
10:1 172
10:34–43 **162, 169–72**
11:1–18 172
13:33 63
17 234–35
21:35 298
22:6–16 169
26:12–18 169

Romans 58
1:1–7 **50, 56–60**
1:9 57
1:15 57
1:16 56, 294
1:16–17 8, **288**, 290, **294–99**
1:17–18 57
2 3, 7
2:1–5 9
2:2 7
2:9–11 294
2:16 57, 280–81
3:21 9
3:22–28 290
3:22–31 **288, 294–99**, 301
3:26 9
4 26
4:17–25 281
4:21–25 295
6:1–11 295
6:2 165
6:7 165
6:12–13 9
8:1–12 9
8:1–17 250
8:18 9
8:23–25 18
8:38–39 275
10 57
10:14–15 99
10:14–17 57
10:15 57
10:16 57
11:5 9
11:17–24 28
11:22 295
11:28 57
12–16 8
12:1 9, 295
12:1–2 301
12:3–21 295
12:9 25
12:13 25
12:16 8, 25
12:17 8
12:21 8
13 3, 57
13:1–11 8
13:8–10 266
13:9 24, 255
13:11 9
13:12 7
13:12–13 9
13:13 9
13:14 9
14:1–15:6 56
14:1–15:13 25
14:17 57
15 19
15:1 56
15:1–2 57
15:1–6 27
15:2–3 24
15:3 24
15:4–13 **17, 24–28**
15:5 8, 25
15:16 57, 295
15:18 295
15:20 57
15:24 57
16:25 57
16:25–26 56
16:25–27 57

1 Corinthians 187n2, 200, 235
1:1–9 189, 201
1:3–6 189
1:10 217
1:10–12 280
1:10–13 265
1:10–18 **193, 200–203**
1:11 186, 280
1:12 217, 251, 265
1:17 201, 217, 233
1:18 187
1:18–31 **209, 216–20**, 222
1:27 224
1:31 224
2 217
2:1 234
2:1–5 218
2:1–16 **225, 233–237**
2:3 218
2:12 241
3 234, 259
3:1–4 265
3:1–9 **242, 249–52**
3:9 256, 265

1 Corinthians (*continued*)
3:10 250
3:10–11 258, 265–68
3:10–13 280
3:10–15 280
3:11–15 265
3:13 281
3:15 280
3:16–17 250, 266n1
3:16–23 258, 265–68
3:17 280
3:21 260
3:23 186
4:1–5 273, 280–83, 285
4:4–5 280
4:5 275
4:6 280
4:10 218
4:12 218
4:13 218
4:17 186
4:21 280
6:15 186
7:21 73
8 201, 217
8:6 186, 218
10:1–2 307
10:6 254
11 217
11:17–18 266
11:17–34 280
11:29 266
12 217
12:4–11 250
12:12 186
12:12–27 266
12:27 186
12:31 272
13 201, 217, 234
13:11–14 2, 8–11
15 217
15:23 186
15:51 234

2 Corinthians 200
1:1–9 177, 184–87
1:18–22 281
3:7–18 312
4:6 143, 312
5:10 281
5:17 186
6:16 131
10–13 218
10:10 234
11:5 234
11:16–30 154
11:16–33 218
12 234
12:2–7 234
12:14 218

Galatians 185
1:11–12 154
2 187n2
2:11–14 236
3:27–28 9
3:28 8, 155
5:13–15 266
5:16–26 92
5:19–21 9, 252
5:22 43

Ephesians
1:3 137
1:3–14 130, 137–40, 143
1:4 153
1:5 153
1:7 131
1:9–10 235
1:10 153
2:10 138
2:13–14 153
2:14 139, 155
2:15 139
2:15–16 140
2:19 153
2:21 153
3 157
3:1–12 146, 152–56
3:2 148
3:7–8 148
4:4–6 252
5:15–6:9 138
5:31 254
6:9 72
6:12 138, 140, 154

Philippians
2:2 25
2:5 25
2:5–8 121, 294
2:8 127
2:11 311
4:2 217

Colossians
1:15 123
1:15–16 121
1:15–20 105
1:24 190
1:26–27 138
2:7 250
3:5 256
3:10 92
4:1 72

1 Thessalonians 13
3:13 42
5:5–10 9
5:12–13 280
5:24 280

1 Timothy 74
2:2–10 72
3:1 254
3:5 72

2 Timothy 74

Titus 74
1:12 89–90
2:2–6 89
2:9–10 89
2:10 73
2:11–14 65, 68, **72–75**
2:14 89
3:1–3 92
3:2–3 90
3:4–7 74, **81, 89–92**
3:8 89
3:9–11 89

Hebrews
1:1 132
1:1–12 98, 104–8
1:2–3 121
1:4–13 106
1:5 63
2 125
2:1 105
2:3–4 120
2:6–7 121
2:9–18 107
2:10 115
2:10–18 114, 120–24
3:12–15 105
4:13 281
5:5 63
5:7–8 105
5:12 121
6:1–2 120
6:4–5 120
6:4–8 121
6:10 121
7:1–10:18 107
10:22 120
10:25 121
10:32–33 105

10:32–34 122
10:34 121
12:2 94
12:3 121
12:4 94
12:12 121
12:29 281
13:1–4 108
13:3 105, 121
13:22 105, 107

James
1:1 16
1:1–2 42
1:2–3 42
1:6–7 42
1:8 255
1:9 42
1:9–10 43
1:9–11 43
1:12 42–43
1:13–14 42
1:17 147
1:18 43
1:19–20 254
1:20 42
1:26 42
2:1–13 43
2:2–6 42
2:5 43
2:8–13 43
2:9 255
2:11 255
2:15 42
2:22 43
3:18 43
4:1–10 43
4:2 254
4:6 42–43
4:8 255
4:10 43
4:11–12 42
5:1 43
5:4 42
5:7 43
5:7–10 **34**, 36, **42–45**
5:9 42
5:11 42–43
5:12 43
5:13–14 42
5:16–18 43
5:17–18 43

1 Peter
1:12 254
3:4 224

2 Peter
1 317
1:3–7 311
1:6–7 313
1:12 313
1:16–21 **304**, 305–6, **311–14**
2:1–3 311–12
2:15–19 311
3:13 48
3:15–17 311

1 John
2:1 224
3:15 254

Revelation
1:7 307
15:3 57
21:3 131, 190
21:6 274

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