

# **THE STEWARDSHIP COMPANION**

Lectioary Resources for Preaching

**David N. Mosser**

**Foreword by William H. Willimon**

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## Foreword

*William H. Willimon*

*“The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”*

(Ps. 24:1)

This claim of divine ownership is axiomatic for anything we say about Christian stewardship. The earth is the Lord’s. God creates and owns all of it. Whatever we have, including life itself, is on loan. This Christian life is one long process of learning that we don’t “have” anything of any value and that anytime we use the word “mine” we are on shaky ground. Life, time, possessions, family, nature, pension funds, friends—all are held in trust by us, all are on loan from God to us. God graciously gives, but God does not let go of what God owns. Our God is a “jealous God,” as the Scriptures sometimes put it. This God is gracious, but at the same time possessive. Learning to acknowledge God’s claim upon us is the beginning of wisdom.

Furthermore, Jesus tells us that we are held accountable for everything we have received—every cent, every minute, every thing. God loves us enough not only to give us good things but also to hold us accountable for the gifts. As the Germans say it, every gift (*Gabe*) is an assignment (*Aufgabe*). God’s grace is both free and costly. There is, with this gracious God, always that time, sometime, when we are asked simply, “What have you done with what you have been given?”

David Mosser knows all this. He brings a pastor’s heart and a preacher’s skill to

the task of biblical interpretation. He pours a lifetime of stewardship education into this book. His interpretation of the Revised Common Lectionary's pericopes demonstrates the fruitfulness of reading Scripture from a distinctive perspective. In all too many cases, many of us pastors have been trained to read Scripture in the mode of the academy—keep detached from the biblical text, attempt objectivity, keep as great a distance as possible from the text, read hoping for intellectual understanding rather than expecting divine obligation. When Mosser looks at a given text from the standpoint of stewardship, he sees both gift and assignments everywhere. Mosser playfully, obediently listens to each text confident that he will hear a contemporary discipleship claim from it. He reads not only to understand but also to receive a God-given task that may cost something.

I was invigorated by Mosser's insights, time and again surprised by unexpected stewardship implications of the biblical texts. I also got a sense that God's stewardship expectations of us are not onerous burdens but rather gracious gifts. God graciously treats us as if we were the responsible disciples we have been called to be. In Jesus Christ we become coworkers with a creative God. Whatever God is doing in the world, God chooses not to do it alone. Something good is left for us to do. Our little lives are swept up into the grand drama of God's redemption of the world. In reading Mosser's commentary I was freshly reminded that the ability to know God's will and to join in God's work is surely one of the greatest of God's good gifts.

A friend of mine says that the whole gospel can be encapsulated in the phrase "God is going to get back what belongs to God." A major means of getting what God wants in the world is through our stewardship of what God has given. Stewardship is a primary way that good news is enacted and embodied. As a good steward, David Mosser repeatedly brings something new out of something old, he locates the gospel in your congregation and mine, he hears what we have failed to hear before, and he gives us all something good to say on Sunday, something good that is not of our own devising.

Well done, good and faithful steward.

William H. Willimon  
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## Introduction

The chief focus of this stewardship commentary, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for any preaching occasion called for by the church's liturgical calendar. More creatively, this commentary may also engage those teaching stewardship to particular groups, such as administrative boards, church councils, sessions, stewardship committees, Sunday school classes, or even a church staff. An in-depth, churchwide study on what the Bible relates concerning a Christian's use of possessions might be another profitable application. Pastors or other church leaders might also use this commentary to craft letters, parish bulletins, or other communication forms that highlight our use of God's gifts—time, treasure, and talent. Churches could base their annual budget campaign on this resource—clearly the book's most pragmatic use.

Across denominational and nondenominational lines, most pastors understand stewardship both theologically and biblically. Troubles arise, however, when preachers or leaders try to articulate faith in God and its accompanying discipleship via stewardship. Too often preachers and church leaders carry a concealed anxiety that laypeople will raise those old well-worn defensive chestnuts: "All the

church talks about is money” or “The church needs to focus on spiritual matters, not on money matters.”

Nonetheless, a quick perusal of the Bible should lay these threadbare allegations to rest. In fact, my best stewardship teachers have been discerning laypeople who understood the weighty connection between what we profess and how we live that profession. People who have mastered Christian stewardship principles know far too much than to confuse a congregation’s annual budget drive with a genuine biblical understanding of stewardship. Our stewardship reaches into every corner of our life of faith, which of course includes but is not limited to our purses. I hope that this stewardship commentary can further conversation about the nature of stewardship and the claim that God has laid on us as stewards. Many of God’s gifts and claims will be discussed within the pages of this commentary.

Twenty-five years ago I inherited a remarkable little book by Roy L. Smith titled *Stewardship Studies*. The inheritance came from the library of a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Floyd Diehm, by way of his son Ken, a United Methodist minister. Smith’s book contained about 235 short sermonic essays on biblical stewardship from Genesis to Revelation. It was a gift that changed my ministry. Over the years as I contemplated how to preach stewardship to congregations in Corsicana, Burleson, De Leon, Georgetown, Graham, and Arlington (all in Texas), I realized the book’s value but also its relative obscurity. I thought that Roy Smith’s book might be a great asset to other preachers. Yet the book needed substantial updating.

Mindful of these matters, I approached the always approachable and even more patient editor at Westminster John Knox Press, Jon Berquist. I asked Jon about writing a twenty-first-century version of Smith’s earlier work. Jon gamely agreed to take it to the editorial committee. He soon returned the committee’s positive affirmation but with one major stipulation in the guise of a question: “Do you think you could write about stewardship, but use the Revised Common Lectionary as a guide?”

Of course I said yes—what was my alternative? But as I mulled over my agreement to the task, I realized that I had been given a tall order. Yet as I discovered reading and writing through the three-year lectionary cycle, the task was not as difficult as I first imagined. Stewardship is a mainstay of the Christian life. Therefore, Scripture is shot through and through with diverse perspectives on what Christian stewards do with what God has loaned us by way of gifts and graces. In fact, on many preaching days multiple stewardship themes emerge from the lectionary’s four readings for preaching occasions. I have merely scratched the Bible’s surface on the manifold stewardship themes found therein.

While this book is written under the rubric of the Revised Common Lectionary, it need not be used exclusively by lectionary preachers. Each entry stands alone with its text. For this reason, both lectionary preachers and non-lectionary preachers can reference this commentary. Preachers can address

today's vital stewardship topics with material that comes straight from the Bible. Each of the three lectionary cycles in this commentary has about sixty-two or so entries. This variance between the years occurs because several preaching days in the liturgical calendar, Ash Wednesday for example, have an identical set of readings for each year in the three-year cycle. Even so, this commentary addresses no fewer than 180 distinctive biblical texts that provide a broad range of preaching possibilities. I have taken care to cover not only the Gospels but also the Hebrew Bible texts, the Epistles, and the Psalter. I have tried to attend to the full reach of the Bible.

Within the matching liturgical day in all three cycles, I selected texts from different genres of the options for the day. That is, over the three-year cycle on a given day—for example, Easter Day—the commentary text explores the Epistle (Year A), Acts (Year B), and the Psalter (Year C). For another example, the commentary on the First Sunday after Christmas Day covers the Gospel (Year A), the Epistle (Year B), and the Psalter (Year C). Although the text selections may appear random, I chose them in order to support preachers who want to use the entire Bible when addressing one of the Scripture's most elemental themes.

Year C has a higher incidence of commentary devoted to Gospel lections because of Luke's paramount concern with people and their relationship to possessions. This also accounts for the many texts from Luke's book of Acts as well.

I would like to thank a dedicated group of laypeople at First United Methodist Church in Arlington, Texas, for sacrificing more than a few long Saturdays to explore Christian stewardship in the context of both Scripture and modernity. Specifically, my appreciation goes to the late Clancy Morris, as well as to Carrie Palmer, Cynthia Ellis, Dick and Joyce Kahler, John Bradshaw, Joy McKee, Lannie Forbes, Lynda Sherrieb, Pam Cunningham, Sara Marshall, Suzy Lundquist, and Beth Kelly. This collection of bright Christians helped move stewardship from an academic and ecclesial field into real life, where God is incarnate.

I also want to offer my heartfelt thanks to Susan Patterson-Sumwalt, David Jones, and Bill Obidil for several helpful suggestions along the way. Bill brought to my attention a superb book by Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (revised edition, 1994). Hall suggests that "steward" is a metaphor that approaches in depth and adequacy our whole relationship with God, "a summing-up of the meaning of the Christian life." Further, Hall suggests that many outside the church have a more positive and holistic understanding of stewardship than many inside the church, where the church tends to retain a technical and institutional framework for fund-raising.

Bill told me, "Your commentary, which speaks of the stewardship of all the gifts of God to us, provides a preacher with resources to speak to the under-churched in authentic biblical terms that resonate with the postmodern spirit." Bill is an example of parish pastors who are faithful in their stewardship understanding and who grasp the need to communicate the good news and our part in it.

Through all the drafts of the commentary, Sandra Boedeker searched for typos and unparallel construction, but most of all she asked highly penetrating theological questions about my biblical interpretations of Holy Scripture. All of these people, in their own distinctive ways, made this a better book.

David N. Mosser

February 2, 2007

The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple



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**YEAR A**

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# Advent and Christmas

## First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1–5

The High Cost of War

*“The nations . . . shall beat their swords into plowshares.”*  
(Isa. 2:4)

Today’s text from Isaiah launches Advent and links Israel’s obvious prophetic tradition to the torah tradition. Although Christians often interpret the word *torah* as “law,” its earliest context defined the term just as accurately as “teaching.” Consequently, Isaiah stresses God’s teaching from the mountain. This teaching is so vital to both Israel’s and God’s identity that “many peoples shall come.” Thus, God’s people steward God’s teaching, preserving it for “the nations.”

The text’s original focus consists of God’s promise “in the days to come.” When that day is, Isaiah does not say, and perhaps we await the fulfillment of this promise even today. Regardless, the prophet’s confidence rests in the promise maker. What is unusual about Isaiah’s prophecy is that the promise precedes the denunciations of Judah (see, for example, Isa. 3). Internal and external threats

menace Judah and Jerusalem, from Isaiah's perspective. The internal menace consists of a people, the residents of Judah and Jerusalem, who have deserted the Lord's ways. The external threat to Judah, now posed by the adjacent national superpowers, continually bedevils both Judah and Israel, as it has for some time. But before Isaiah turns to the prophetic denunciation of the people, he first offers the divine promise—the assurance today's text offers.

The promise resides in the Lord's power or the teaching from Zion. The teaching is so persuasive, at least in Isaiah's vision, that the nations (or Gentiles) will flow up to the mountain to receive such divine instruction. Not only will God arbitrate between nations so that people no longer deem war as necessary, but God will teach all people to turn their implements of war into implements of agriculture. Equipment previously used to make war now will serve to feed hungry people, plainly Isaiah's vision of "a peaceable kingdom."

More than one social commentator has observed that the twentieth century was the most violent in humankind's history. No up-to-date evidence suggests that our present century will be any less inhumane. Nations wage war at the expense of those least able to bear its burden—the children, the poor, and the elderly. This particular segment of a nation's community bears the disproportionate weight of war. Those nations and leaders who wage war are poor stewards of God's bountiful resources. Isaiah's vision reminds Judah and Jerusalem that although things are as they are, "in the days to come" God will present a better passageway to abundant and vital life.

Advent, at least in one significant way, celebrates and teaches believers "why" God sends the world a messiah. Unless we learn from God the divine purpose of creation, which is to till and keep God's garden, then a perpetual battle for national pride, land, and natural resources will persist. Yet Isaiah's prophetic vision of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks triggers our memories, faint as they may be, regarding God's intention at creation. God created people to live in a community based on mutual respect and peace—a community that is bent on feeding its members from the least to the greatest. Faithful stewards continue to preserve this teaching of the Lord. The First Sunday of Advent holds up the promise that when the Messiah comes, God will bring the divine intention for God's people to fruition.

## Second Sunday of Advent

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19

Leadership in God's Realm

*"In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound."*

(Ps. 72:7)

Stewardship is, by definition, the management of an owner's household. Christian stewards are people who manage any number of households. A "household" contains the talents we possess that God has loaned us while we are among the

gathered people we call “the church militant.” Some of the stewardship households we manage consist of our caring, education, giving, praying, spiritual discernment, and the like. A pragmatic understanding of stewardship teaches that all Christians have households to manage.

The church gives over the second Sunday in the liturgical season of Advent to describing the odd behavior, not to mention the odd diet and apparel, of John the Baptizer. John was a prophet and cousin of Jesus about whom Matthew writes, “Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3:4).

Psalms 72, however, is the text we will explore here. Israel’s hope had faded for David and David’s kingdom. Of course, many historic circumstances accounted for Israel’s demise. Israel was a people in trouble. Yet the nation began to look to the future. God and the people of Israel tie that future to the coming of a new king. Perhaps for this reason the superscription over Psalm 72 bears Solomon’s name. Could someone like Solomon provide hope for Israel?

A friend who worked for IBM once disclosed to me that a reason for the company’s phenomenal success was that it controlled every aspect of the business, from the boardroom to the distribution centers. He went on to say that IBM had exhaustive job descriptions for every employee. This was true from the corporation’s top to its bottom.

A job description lists the broad functions and tasks of a position. Usually job descriptions include to whom the position reports, details such as the qualifications required of the employee, and the position’s salary range. The job description also explores the areas of knowledge and skills needed for the job. Job descriptions help working stewards focus on their tasks.

Psalms 72 is essentially “a king’s job description,” originally for a sovereign with sensitivities to God’s will. However, our Christian tradition has appropriated this kingly job description and fashioned it into a prayer for the expected Messiah. This Messiah we both announce as Jesus and wait for with anticipation.

The church has always been adept at adapting. What if Christians took the job description for a king and adapted it as a mandate for a stewardship of leadership? Leadership is clearly a “household” that many Christians manage. Often this leadership is within the confines of a congregation, but the church also produces leaders in its community. What would our communities look like if our political leaders would “defend the cause of the poor” and “give deliverance to the needy”? What would our schools look like if our educational leaders imparted to students the need to let “righteousness flourish and peace abound”? What if, in our criminal justice system, we created a judiciary that arbitrated cases “with righteousness”?

Faithful stewards have the mandate to take the job description of a king and put it to use for the King. Perhaps this is our Advent call to be disciples and stewards.

### Third Sunday of Advent

James 5:7–10

Patience Is a Virtue

*“The farmer waits for the precious crop . . . , being patient with it.”*

(Jas. 5:7)

Today’s lectionary text counsels its recipients to “be patient . . . until the coming of the Lord.” In an odd way, as most current churches celebrate Christ’s impending birth at Advent, James provides a word for those who wait for the Parousia, the coming of the Lord. Because James wrote his epistle several decades after Jesus’ death, he may mean “the second coming,” which is often the meaning of *Parousia* in Christian theology. Yet this idea is uncommon in the New Testament (see John 14:3; Heb. 9:28). Thus, as the modern church anticipates Christ’s birth, James adds an element of ethical guidance for those who wait for Jesus as judge and savior.

For conscientious and diligent people who wait, there could be no more painful expressions than “killing time” or “wasting time.” Yet how do people who wait for something as anticipated as Jesus wait with useful expectation without wasting or killing time? In other words, how does the believer wait as a good steward of time?

James offers some principled advice concerning how the church lives while waiting “for the coming of the Lord.” As James frequently does, the letter speaks to grumbling speech and an unbridled tongue (1:26; 3:5–10; 4:11). By avoiding grumbling against one another, believers evade divine judgment. In addition, James furnishes the prophets as exemplars of those who suffered with patience.

James’s effective icon for faithful waiting inheres in “the farmer” image. Societies have long recognized farming as an endeavor that epitomizes patience. Farmers prepare the soil, plant the seed, and then wait for nature to take its course. There is no way to speed up the natural process. Growth happens when it happens. The farmer can only wait—and hope for rain or no locusts and the like. James, in addition, uses the phrase “the early and the late rains.” This phrase signifies the hope that the farmer clings to, for without the rains, the whole farming enterprise devolves into dust. Significant rain came commonly twice to Palestine. Deuteronomy too recalls “the early rain and the later rain” (11:14). James surely drew on this awareness. The promise of rain relies on the goodness of God, whose promise the faithful farmer counts upon.

I once asked a peanut farmer what he did while waiting between the time of planting and the time of harvest. I showed my ignorance by this question, no doubt. But he good-naturedly explained all the things he did between planting and harvest. He said that he readied himself for the next planting season by determining which crops to plant and which fields he would let lie fallow, buying the suitable seed to plant, maintaining his farming machinery, and studying the latest techniques of farming. In other words, he put his time to good use and did his homework. This farmer was a good steward of the time he had. I assumed, as

the uninitiated, that farmers did not have much to do. In fact, good farmers are always busy anticipating the next planting cycle.

James's admonition to his hearers was that they be good stewards and redeem their time prior to the Lord's return. Like the farmer, they were to use the time at hand for faithful pursuits and leave to God the things that only God provides. Being a community that understands suffering and patience makes us more faithful believers. Perhaps James's guidance is a good one for us moderns too as we become better stewards of the time we have until the Lord returns. Advent is an annual reminder that as God is patient with us, so too may we be patient in waiting for the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

Salvation as a Gift

*“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”*

(Ps. 80:3)

At this late stage in Advent, few congregants have not directed their attention completely to Christmas. Christmas's focus varies depending upon whether one ponders the meaning of Christmas in a more cultural sense or, as Christian stewards, in a firmly theological sense. However, the concept of gifts and gift giving may help us bridge this perceived dichotomy between the cultural and the theological.

Psalm 80 is a prayer for the gift that only God can give—the gift of salvation. Here the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary have offered a psalm that reminds us, among tinsel and brightly colored lights, that the true circumstance under which humans toil is a condition that is nothing without God. Clearly this psalm carries the plaintive cry of a people who feel distant from God. Readers sense this emotional content when we read Psalm 80's question, “How long will you be angry with your people's prayers?” The prayer's deepest yearning is for reconnection with God. The evidence for a reformed bond between divinity and humanity is the state of salvation. Salvation here not only means redemption but also conveys God's making the people whole and well. Those who pray want well-being, which they perceptively understand comes only from God's hand.

Throughout Psalm 80 the refrain “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” rings out (vv. 3, 7, 19). God's face shining upon the people is nothing other than an indication of divine favor. This divine favor is what the prayer seeks. In an optimum understanding of Christian theology, salvation is a gift—given without an agenda and without an angle. For a gift to be truly a gift, the giver offers the token without stipulation—free and clear. Psalm 80 explicitly prays for the gift of salvation.

Stewardship is all about gifts and gift giving. In this sense, perhaps, we can speak of God as a steward of God's good gifts. The psalmist believes in God's ability to deliver the gift of salvation, and trusts in the efficacy of prayer. The psalmist

prays three times, “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” The prayer counts upon God’s grace to bestow a gift that only God can provide.

Believers need two functional attributes in order to exercise their stewardship. The first is possession of the wherewithal to offer the gift. The second is possession of a heart to give. Psalm 80 understands that God possesses the gift of salvation, and thus the prayer is a plea that God furnish this gift to God’s people.

On this last Sunday of Advent, as we stand at the edge of Christmas, we “cultural” Christians tend to be preoccupied with gifts and gift giving for those on our “lists.” However, after all the selling and buying that dominates this season, we remain needy human creatures. Our relationship with God—the ultimate steward of divine grace—is the only gift that can offer us what we need. In other words, perhaps one of the gifts that this psalm offers us is the truth that we need God’s grace and mercy just as much in Advent as we do at Lent.

We are tempted during Advent (and Christmas) to overlook our human condition. This human circumstance necessitated God’s sending Jesus in the first place. Advent is an excellent season to remember Paul’s words: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Perhaps God, too, is a steward.

### Christmas Eve (A, B, and C)

Titus 2:11–14

Responding to the Gift of Salvation

*“[Jesus] gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”*

(Titus 2:14)

I suspect that most preachers would claim that among the many difficult days to preach the gospel, Easter and Christmas Eve are among the most demanding. One likely reason is that worship attendees on these two liturgical occasions little expect that the preacher can supply any surprises. After all, the preacher’s message “He is risen” or “He is born” lacks astonishment. Most of us have heard these words for years.

On Christmas Eve the candlelight and recognizable music carry the worship freight. We all know that people bring more emotional and fewer rational expectations to Christmas Eve worship than usual. Despite this reality, Titus offers preachers a text that furnishes ample theological content for Christmas Eve worship. It is worth noting that the lectionary employs only one lesson from Titus during its three-year cycle—and Christmas Eve is the occasion. One of Titus’s premises is that God’s promise enables us to live as redeemed stewards. Only the redeemed can truly be stewards.

When Titus writes that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation,” he is referring to the appearance of Jesus. Jesus for this writer embodies God’s grace. Moreover, the appearance of grace means that God offers salvation to

God's people as a gift. Whether one subscribes to different generation's doctrine of etiquette, both would urge a small gift for the host on the occasion of a visit to that person's home. In a sense, when God visits God's creation and creatures, God sends the gift of Jesus for the occasion. Thus, when Jesus arrives as the incarnate Christ, God offers the gift of salvation. Gifts are signs and symbols of a solid relationship. In the reading from the Psalter for Christmas Eve, Psalm 96:8 instructs the people to "ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts." Our gifts represent an emblem of our firm relationship found in God's prior gift of Christ.

With Psalm 96's concept of bringing offerings in mind, we learn from Titus that even more is involved for the believer. The text's final verse gives a theological rationale for what those receiving the gift of salvation can return to God. In the first mention of God's appearance in Christ (v. 11), we recognize that God brings salvation as a gift.

Later we read that Jesus "gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." This is the text's second allusion to Christ's coming—an assertion fusing theology and ethics. Jesus redeems people from iniquity by "buying them back," just as people emancipated slaves in biblical times. As a result, Jesus saves us from all iniquity. Paul too uses redemption language: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23–24). People are redeemed from the slavery to sin and death, and this is an aspect of salvation.

Even so, there is an even more positive aspect related here in Titus. Beyond redemption from iniquity, Titus offers believers a proactive way of living in the world. Titus writes that Jesus creates "a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." Thus, as God redeems us *from* sin, God also redeems us *for* good deeds. The Christian life is more than a belief system; it is a way of living in God's world. People being "redeemed from" and "redeemed for" work in concert in God's realm. God's promise enables us to live as redeemed stewards.

## Christmas Day

*[See Year B]*

### First Sunday after Christmas Day

Matthew 2:13–23

The Stewardship of Dreams

*"Joseph got up, took the child and his mother . . . and went to Egypt."  
(Matt. 2:14)*

Many Christians picture stewardship as pertaining to material substance. For example, we readily understand stewardship in terms of our financial resources



or our use of time. This concrete understanding clearly limits the concept of stewardship, for stewardship encompasses all the households we manage as gifts from God. Included in these households may be a believer's power of persuasion, prayers, or even modeling faith. There is something intangible in the notion of stewardship. Yet this intangibility endows stewardship with a great deal more power than we might otherwise normally grant it.

Have you ever considered a dream as a gift? The dreams in Matthew's Gospel lesson are no doubt unsettling. Even so, the three dreams in this lesson, which all come to Joseph, visibly guide the steps of the Holy Family. In what respect could we suggest that God guides us through the agency of dreams?

In recent decades psychologists and psychiatrists have given dream interpretation a "born again" prominence. Modern scholars take Jung's work in dream interpretation with a fresh seriousness, and scientific research has been conducted into nature's dreaming function.

But the modern scientific study of dreams merely supports what biblical writers long ago knew. Dreams played a major role in the stories about Abraham, Jacob, Daniel, and Jacob's son Joseph, among others. Early Christian literature is likewise full of dream references. For example, Tertullian writes, "Almost the greater part of mankind derive their knowledge of God from dreams."\* Augustine even developed a "theory of dreams." Expanding the operational definition of dreams to include such terms as *vision*, *trance*, and *being in the spirit*, there are more than seventy references to dream phenomena in the NRSV, and they involve children, women, and men.

Christmas reminds us that the incarnation comes to us as a gift. The promptings of God's spirit come to us as gracious parts of God's holiness and wholeness. Often we require the gift of discernment in order to receive this gift. Thus, we become stewards of the dreams that God sends us. Ironically, by following his dreams' directives, Joseph becomes a savior to the Savior.

In the end, Joseph prevailed on behalf of his family at the most practical level because he was willing to trust and heed the voice and direction of God. We will never be too modern for this gift. To steward a God-given dream is a remarkable task. Although it seems an awesome responsibility, our dreams erect a wide tent over the lives of other people. To manage or steward the dreams that God sends our way may certainly appear an intangible task, but to pursue the authentic dreams that God sends also provides concrete consequences.

## January 1—New Year [See Year C]

\*Tertullian, *De anima*, xlv.